Spiritual Independence in Finley's Elsie Dinsmore Series, Alcott's Little Women Series and Wilder's Little House Series

Rebekka Anna Mehl

Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons, Practical Theology Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/438
Spiritual Independence in Finley’s Elsie Dinsmore Series, Alcott’s Little Women Series and Wilder’s Little House Series

by

Rebekka Anna Mehl

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Comparative Religion
Advisor: Brian Wilson, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 2011
Spiritual Independence in Finley’s Elsie Dinsmore Series, Alcott’s Little Women Series and Wilder’s Little House Series

Rebekka Anna Mehl, Ph.D

Western Michigan University, 2011

This project bridges the academic fields of comparative religion and children’s literature by examining depictions of religious experience in children’s literature. I specifically discuss how female religious experience and morality are depicted in three single-author series for girls set between 1850 and 1900—the Elsie Dinsmore series by Martha Finley, the Little Women series by Louisa May Alcott and the Little House series by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

I examine the moral principles of honesty and obedience, longsuffering contentment and industriousness and how they can come together to contribute to the development of a sensitive conscience which can encourage a sense of spiritual independence. The development of spiritual independence is an important aspect of both the Elsie Dinsmore series and the Little House series. Sometimes, however, the focus on honesty and obedience, longsuffering contentment and industriousness do not encourage the growth of spiritual independence. The Little Women series does not develop the same concept of independence and reform-thinking. Despite Alcott’s acknowledgement and support of the progressive movements of the 19th-century, the characters in the Little Women series do not generally reflect a sense of spiritual independence and reform thinking.
Although the close relationship between the progressive movements of the 19th century with religious ideology has occasionally been noted in adult literature and culture, it has frequently been overlooked in children’s literature. I am arguing that girls and women who are encouraged to be spiritually independent learn to make decisions which allow them greater freedom. They learn not to be afraid to think for themselves which encourages reform thinking and contributes to social change. This pattern shows, at least in part, the link between evangelical thinking and the progressive movements of the 19th century and highlights that conservative religious belief can encourage reform ideology.
Copyright by
Rebekka Anna Mehl
2011
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking God for the strength to follow through on this project and my degree. May this work and all of my future endeavors honor You.

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Gwen Athene Tarbox, my children’s literature advisor and mentor, for both her critical eye and her moral support. I am certain that without her encouragement I could not have completed this project. I would also like to thank my religion advisor, Dr. Brian Wilson, who has worked with me for many years to bring my academic career to this level, and Dr. Timothy Light, whose keen insight has been such a tremendous asset to my academic work.

I would also like to thank my family—my husband, Andy, and my son, Jakob, for loving me despite my occasional neglect of them. My mother, Cheyenne Hoffmann-Conant, is both my chief proofreader and my chief cheerleader. Her hours of reading and babysitting have been incredibly valuable assets in my complicated life. Patricia Mehl, my mother-in-law, has also dedicated long hours of care—to both me and my son. Knowing I have such an amazing family loving and supporting me has made an incredible difference in my life.

Rebekka Anna Mehl
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. ii

CHAPTER

I. Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1

  Relationship between Children’s Literature, Cultural Attitudes towards Women and Religion ........................................................................................................ 3

  *Helps Over Hard Places*—Gendered Contrast in Moral Development .................................................... 16

  From Moral Virtue to Sensitive Conscience to Spiritual Independence .................................................. 22

  Cultural Context in the Golden Age of Children’s Literature ......................................................... 23

  Chapter Outline ........................................................................................................... 26

II. Our Bias, Ourselves—The Elsie Dinsmore Series ......................................................... 29

  Honesty and Obedience ............................................................................................... 33

  Longsuffering Contentment ......................................................................................... 47

  Industriousness ........................................................................................................... 55

  Spiritual Independence ............................................................................................... 58

  Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 64

III. A Feminine Critique—The Little Women Series .......................................................... 68

  Honesty and Obedience ............................................................................................... 71

  Longsuffering Contentment ......................................................................................... 82

  Industriousness ........................................................................................................... 96
Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

Spiritual Independence ..............................................................106

Conclusions and Comparisons: Finley’s and Alcott’s Approaches to
Education and Marriage ............................................................118

IV. Reformation from Within—The Little House Series ..................124

Honesty and Obedience ...............................................................127

Longsuffering Contentment .........................................................134

Industriousness ...........................................................................143

Spiritual Independence ...............................................................151

Conclusion .................................................................................158

V. Conclusion: Will the Real Reformer Please Stand Up? ..............162

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...........................................................................175
Chapter I: Introduction

Both the scholarly study of comparative religion and the study of children’s literature are complicated and often misunderstood fields of academic inquiry and, compared to other disciplines, they are both relatively young. My research proposes to bridge the two fields, examining depictions of religious experience in children’s literature. Specifically I would like to discuss how the female religious experience is depicted in three single-author series for girls set between 1850 and 1900. This is a transitional period in the history of children’s literature, as well as American history. As Sarah Wadsworth writes, during this time “authors [were] striving to offer new forms of literary expression to young people—imaginative fantasy stories, realistic stories for girls, humorous and irreverent stories for boys—as well as new ways of imagining childhood and adolescence.”¹ The transitional nature of the culture in this period of American history resulted in a set of opposing forces simultaneously pushing and pulling on artists. Martha Banta’s book *Imaging American Women* notes that the “types” of American women at that time were diverse “to the point of potential self-contradiction.”² I would argue this pattern can be noted across American culture and seeps into children’s literature. Many of the books produced very intentionally tie into the cultural expectations on girls and women (marriage, child-rearing, domesticity). However, they also raise new questions about a girl’s right to stand up and follow her own conscience and will. Conflicting cultural forces encouraged the production of children’s literature that was often superficially conservative but also potentially subversive.

The question becomes—from where does this pattern of increasing independence of mind and spirit for women come? Is it simply a logical outgrowth of changing cultural values or are there specific ideas that significantly contributed to the sensitive female conscience and eventually an increasing sense of spiritual independence for girls and women? I would argue that we can trace the roots of spiritual independence, at least in part, to religious faith. Although scholars frequently assume that religion is an inherently conservative political and social force, evidence suggests that religious movements, even theologically conservative religious movements, can contribute to reform-thinking that challenges normative social values.

My work will discuss the nature and development of spiritual independence for girls and women. I am examining how the authors of girls’ fiction enter the cultural discussion of women’s sphere. They do not necessarily directly challenge women’s placement in the domestic sphere. Instead they discuss how the glorification of women as religious and moral bastions in society also offers women a platform for reform and change. I will highlight some specific moral virtues and note how they can function both as liberating ideals that allow girls and women a voice and as constricting principles that tame naturally reform-oriented personalities. My research indicates that some texts that have been rejected by modern academics as morally restrictive, sentimental and oppressive, actually offered female protagonists – and by extension young readers – the opportunity to exert independence.

There is an interesting relationship between the development of children’s literature and shifting cultural attitudes toward women. What could be seen as parallel developmental patterns periodically merge in discussion of religion and morality. In
order to highlight the cultural shift towards depictions of spiritual independence for girls and women in children's literature, I will first discuss early American cultural patterns regarding both the development of children's literature and women's spiritual development, specifically highlighting the unique junction point of religious and moral growth.

Relationship between Children's Literature, Cultural Attitudes towards Women and Religion

The history of children's literature in America began with the Puritans, whose focus on individual religious experience and biblical familiarity encouraged high levels of literacy among children. Reading became a critical component of a child's upbringing. Literature created for children during this time focused on religious experience. Puritan theology also directed attention to death and hell as realities with which individuals must come to terms. Children were not an exception to this rule. As James Janeway wrote, children needed to be reminded that "they are not too little to die; they are not too little to go to hell."³ Coping with one's mortality was an essential part of Puritan life.

The relationship between religious education and literature for children is intricate. Many scholars argue that children's literature, in its earliest forms, grew out of attempts to teach children about religion as well as teaching children to read. Literacy and education were considered extremely important to the Puritans because of their

religious aims. Education for Puritans functioned similar to education among the Evangelicals in England. As Paul Sangster observes “[e]ducation . . . battles with human depravity, and seeks to cure it.” The earliest literature that Puritan children read was, undoubtedly, the Bible. In fact schools sometimes considered the ability to read the Psalter a pre-requisite to education. A child had to learn to read it in the home before he/she could begin a basic education. Other texts, for example catechisms and alphabet books or primers, frequently reference Biblical stories and assume a rubric of basic Biblical and Christian theological knowledge (even in children). However children’s literature was not limited to the Bible. Other texts were created to encourage children in their growth. According to the New Haven Code of 1655 education in New England was helpful only inasmuch as it was used to help people “‘to understand the main grounds and principles of Christian Religion necessary to salvation.’” The relationship between education, literature and religion were outlined repeatedly in the guidelines established by the government for the education of children. They reflect how the Puritans saw an intimate connection between a life of faith (religion) and a life well led (morality).

Generally Puritans held women and men to similar standards. Both were expected to be faithful (both to God and spouse) and hardworking. Piety and frugality were critical in the development of both spiritual and material wealth. Although motherhood is usually understood to be an important aspect of a woman’s life experience,

---

8 Stewart, *A History of Religious Education*, 84
during the colonial period motherhood was not idealized as it would come to be during the 19th century. During the colonial period motherhood was an assumed part of most women’s lives. Women and men were considered partners in child-rearing. Both parents were present in the home and were considered critical to the instruction and guidance of children. Women were seen as the “help-meet” of their husbands in every aspect of their lives (including child-rearing). Women’s roles as mothers were not focused on their relationships with their children, as much as on their relationships with their husbands. Instead of honoring the role of mother, Puritan literature and sermons frequently bemoaned the deficiencies of mothers. One English Puritan, whose works were well known in the colonies, even argued that it was the greatest trial of childhood to have to honor one’s mother in spite of her many feminine inadequacies (particularly for boys). Motherhood was so integrated into women’s life experience that it neither required nor warranted idealization.

Puritan belief in depraved childhood meant that early infancy was simply a time to be survived so that a child could reach adulthood and have a conversion experience. Religious education was important, but the fallen state of humanity meant there was little hope in working with young children. They were taught the appropriate doctrine so that when they grew older they would be prepared for God to work in them. Many scholars’ research has shown that following the initial arrival and settlement of the New England colonies, religious education began to decline. This was probably a reflection of a

10 Ibid., 62.
11 Ibid., 60.
12 Ibid., 63.
13 Ibid., 64. Although this argument about the role of motherhood in women’s lives may seem counter-intuitive, Ruth Bolch’s Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650-1800 offers significant support for her assertion. Recognition of earlier attitudes toward motherhood further highlights the cultural shift toward a focus on motherhood as the fundamental female experience.
decrease in the education level of most colonists, as well as a decrease in religious fervor. Religion was still an important part of the educating process; however it was no longer the central focal point.\textsuperscript{14} There were still many religious texts and catechisms for children being produced. During the late colonial and early republican period the primers were changed. They became less overtly religious. One example can be seen in the New England Primer. The phrase ""Proud Korah's troop, Was swallowed up"" became ""Tis youth's delight, To fly their Kite.""\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore evidence shows that the focus of religious education was shifting away from theology and toward morality. The pattern that began appearing among the early colonists continued in this new generation.

Following the Revolutionary war one of the most important cultural developments was the establishment of religious tolerance and the disestablishment of the church. Some areas, like New England, struggled more with the transition than areas where the established church was never terribly successful, like the southern colonies. Gradually all areas saw changes in laws requiring the religious education of children and legislation that connected schools to religious education. In his review of religious education in Connecticut George Stewart, Jr. observes that schools did not improve immediately following the severance of church and state. He discusses an essay written in 1846 by Rev. Noah Porter, Jr. that outlines the many problems with the new common or public school system. Porter argues that the schools are not anti-religious because most people in Connecticut have no problem with schools using hymns and prayers to help instill a public morality.\textsuperscript{16} Although there was no formal system of religious education used in the public schools, the Bible continued to be an important tool in the education of

\textsuperscript{14} Stewart, \textit{A History of Religious Education}, 193.
\textsuperscript{15} Paul Leicester Ford, \textit{The New England Primer}, as qtd. in Stewart, \textit{A History of Religious Education}, 205.
\textsuperscript{16} Stewart, \textit{A History of Religious Education}, 264.
children and the moral education of children continued to be a critical aspect of a child’s education.\textsuperscript{17} While vestiges of generic Christian ideals remained in American public schools until the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the formalized sectarian connection between general education and religious education began to change radically with the disestablishment of the church.

Religion and morality were critically important foci for children’s literature (and education) well into the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Until, and one might argue well beyond, the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century the literature that was created for children (and is frequently rejected as “didactic” and “sentimental” by twenty-first century scholars of children’s literature) attempted to teach children what it meant to be a good person.\textsuperscript{18} After the American Revolutionary War children’s stories dealt less overtly with religious themes and theology and began focusing on a generic system of Christian Republican ideals. The intention was to train children to be contributing citizens of the republic. One aspect of these generic ideals was very specific expectations placed on male and female children. Cultural changes, and the shift away from agrarian lifestyles, further increased the discrepancy between the public lives of men and the domestic lives of women.

Any discussion of children and childhood in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century must contain some examination of the concept of Republican Motherhood. The Revolutionary war marked a time in which values and ideals were changing. Ruth Bloch argues that “[t]hroughout the Revolutionary period, virtue was the most valued quality defining individual commitment

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 274.

\textsuperscript{18}Although our definition of what makes a person “good” has changed, I would argue that the nature of children’s literature has not. Certainly it can, and should be entertaining. However, many people today would argue that it is essential that children’s books be “tolerant” and “diverse” as well as creative and clever. The focus on watchwords of our culture, like tolerance and diversity, is no different in its goal of teaching important cultural values than the children’s literature of earlier eras. Of course it is easy to assume that our cultural goals, like creating tolerant and accepting children, are “good”, while “old-fashioned” ideas about creating religiously faithful and industrious children are not.
to the American republican cause." Although early in the Revolutionary period the only exclusively female acts of patriotism were essentially passive, women were increasingly viewed as critical and active elements in the war. Women’s new roles, including financial and material well-being of the family and home, strongly affected how women viewed themselves. Women increasingly believed that they were active and contributing members of society. However, though their new role was active, it was distinctively limited to the domestic sphere. The changing concept of morality imbued women with the virtuous ideals of “piety, benevolence and self-discipline” and women were obliged to embrace motherhood and to teach their children those ideals.

The other sphere of influence for women was through marriage. A woman’s virtue was viewed to be a personal treasure and a powerful weapon; one that should be wielded in the creation and defense of an independent republic. A woman’s chastity gave her great power over any potential suitors, and American men were told that they would not only benefit personally from love and marriage, but that their virtuous marriages would build up the ideal American citizenship. This concept marks the transition from virtue being regarded as something that works for the collective good to virtue being regarded as something that works for personal happiness. While men were working for personal happiness, women were encouraged to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Bloch summarizes well when she writes

> The Revolution had in effect accelerated a long-term cultural process.... A transition in the meanings of virtue, associated with changes in ideas about sex difference, meant that women and the emotions became increasingly

---

19 Bloch, *Gender and Morality*, 139.
20 Ibid., 143.
22 Bloch, *Gender and Morality*, 143.
associated with moral activity, while men and reason became more exclusively associated with the utilitarian pursuit of self-interest. By the end of the eighteenth century, most people were beginning to believe that these were complementary contributions to the common good.23

There are several factors that were important in the transition from help-meet to Republican mother. Understanding the changing views of children and their development is critical to understanding the changing cultural patterns of this period. Multiple philosophers and thinkers affected how people viewed childhood. Rousseau’s Émile highlights many of the changes in perspective about rearing children. Though his text is called a “treatise on education” in reality it serves as a guide in child-rearing (albeit a highly idealistic guide). He discusses the upbringing of his hypothetical Émile from his early infancy until adulthood. His ideas about child-rearing include allowing children, who are different from adults, to spend time and energy in being children. He argues that children should be allowed to run and play, and that they fundamentally need to be allowed to enjoy learning. Anytime learning becomes a chore instead of a joy it will undermine the child’s future learning experiences. It is also important to understand that Rousseau saw his own work as an argument against any tendency to reduce the natural joy and excitement of childhood. These arguments of Rousseau highlight the changes in parenting and educating beginning in the late 18th century and really coming into effect in the early 19th century. Many began to view children as a unique part of society. They were seen as different. They were not merely unfinished adults, but people with their own unique interests and ideas. Of course it was always understood that children would become adults, but there was a growing acceptance of childhood as a time to play and be creative, not just a time to practice the behaviors valued in adult citizens.

23 Ibid., 151.
It is fascinating to note that Rousseau’s desire to give children greater freedom to
discover the world for themselves does not seem to extend to female children. The last
chapter of his book, titled “The Education of Woman” discusses the upbringing of
Émile’s hypothetical wife, Sophie. Sophie is not given the same benefits and advantages
of her male counterpart. Although Rousseau argues that it is a woman’s nature to be
weak and submissive, he spends much time discussing how to discourage any
development of strength and willfulness in girls. While he allows her a certain limited
freedom in early childhood, he argues that it must constantly be reined in by loving
parents (especially mothers). The education of girls during the 19th century reflects these
ideas about the development of girls into women. Although boys are offered great
freedom for self-discovery and personal insight, girls are not. Early childhood is
generally a period of freedom, but as girls draw closer to adolescence their freedom
becomes severely limited. “All the reflections of women which are not immediately
connected with their duties ought to be directed to the study of men and to the pleasure-
giving knowledge which has only taste for its object.”24 Women’s only interests should
be in fulfilling their womanly work and in using their “precocious intellect” to make their
fathers/husbands happy. This pattern is noteworthy, not only in Rousseau’s work, but
also to serve as a plumb line from which to measure the development of women’s roles in
children’s literature.

Horace Bushnell is another thinker whose work highlighted shifting ideas about
childhood and womanhood. Bushnell placed tremendous importance on the rearing of
children. His own life experiences, including the centrality of his mother, strongly

affected his ideology and theology. He argues for the inherent spirituality of women, which Mark Edwards, in his article “‘My God and My Good Mother’: The Irony of Horace Bushnell’s Gendered Republic,” connects to his relationship with his mother.

Bushnell discusses his connection between his mother and God:

My mother’s loving instinct was from God, and God was in love to me first therefore; which love was deeper than hers, and more protracted. Long years ago she vanished, but God stays by me still, embracing me, in my gray hairs, as tenderly and carefully as she did in my infancy, and giving to me as my joy and the principal glory of my life that he lets me know him, and helps me, with real confidence, to call him my Father.25

Although in his discussions of child-rearing he suggests that both parents are critically important in raising children, the separation of male and female spheres is an important aspect of his ideology. This influential theologian encouraged the domestication of women and the elevation of the idealized mother.

As a result of these shifting philosophical and theological ideals, infancy was increasingly understood to be an important part of childhood. Women, because of their unique ability to breastfeed, spent a great deal of time with their children during these early, vulnerable months and years. As a result of the shift from agricultural to industrial society, which required an increase in men’s time away from home, fathers were spending less time with their children. A concurrent decrease in women’s domestic economic contributions, resulting from the increased availability of certain goods (textiles, etc.), gave women more time to focus on their children. It is interesting to note that with this decrease in economic contribution, some thinkers argued that women’s real “rights” in American society were the right to influence society through the rearing of

children. This required that women hold themselves to the highest moral and religious standards. While the Puritan period saw a focus on the deficiencies of mothers, the 19th century saw an increased focus on the ways women were uniquely suited to be mothers. Increasingly women were seen as capable of meeting higher moral and religious standards than their husbands. As Mark Edwards writes “[t]he only member of Victorian society capable of Christianizing it—women—were denied positions of authority out of the mistaken greater good.” Nonetheless some have argued that this increase in the understanding of women’s moral capacity eventually contributed to the early women’s movement, while the “contraction” of women’s sphere almost exclusively to motherhood created the ideological background for the continued oppression of women.

The centrality of motherhood in women’s experience, however, is not the only issue to be considered in discussion of Republican Motherhood. This change in parental roles would also affect children’s lives. They were increasingly and almost exclusively dependent on their mother’s instruction for their moral, religious and early intellectual development. These mothers focused on their children because they believed (and it was generally true) that their children were their only voice in society. Mothers increasingly chose gentle, tender instruction over strict discipline. Affectionate traits were understood to develop the independent “republican” children that the nation required. It became more and more important that children be properly educated, specifically regarding moral development. As Anne Scott MacLeod writes “[a]ll Americans of the period agreed that

---

26 One of the remaining economic outlets for women was writing children’s literature. The same heightened moral and religious standards for women put them in the unique position to “mother” through the creation of children’s literature.
27 Bloch, Gender and Morality, 72-73.
29 Bloch, Gender and Morality, 76-77.
a high level of individual morality was indispensable if the promise of the nation’s future was to be fulfilled.\footnote{31} Although the strict sternness of the preceding era had faded, the idyllic concept of a carefree, fun childhood had not yet developed. Generally children were no longer considered inherently evil, but they were considered highly malleable. It was felt that this precious brief period of moral vulnerability must be utilized. The opportunity to influence the future generation should not be wasted on play and entertainment.\footnote{32} MacLeod argues that the ideals and morals taught to children (specifically through children’s literature) are direct counterpoints to the prevailing social changes of the time. As society grew more individualistic and competitive children were encouraged to be selfless and to learn to be content with what they had. Children’s literature of this time was “written to teach, and specifically, to teach morality.”\footnote{33}

It is important to note that although many middle class parents were attempting to inculcate their children with a very distinct set of moral values, they were treating children with great “human dignity” and “respect.”\footnote{34} These parents believed that their children mattered, and the choices they made were important. They felt that the future of the young nation lay in the hands of these children and that the development of a child’s moral compass was one of the most critical factors in America’s future.

Ultimately the goal in child rearing was not the creation of unthinking obedient automatons, but the development of a sensitive nature. Individual conscience was considered vitally important in the development of a child’s moral character. It was not enough for a child to obey out of fear; instead they needed to obey because it was the

\footnotesize{31} Anne Scott MacLeod. \textit{American Childhood: Essays on Children’s Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries} (Athens, GA.: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 89.
\footnotesize{32} Ibid., 94.
\footnotesize{33} Ibid., 89.
\footnotesize{34} Ibid., 97-98.
right thing to do. In fact, it could be argued that this development of an independent nature combined with a sensitive conscience is the most unique characteristic of American childhood in the 19th century. While some developing characteristics were the same for boys and girls, some differed radically. As mentioned in my earlier discussion of changing concepts of virtue in the republic, men and women were given conflicting messages. Men were not only allowed, but also encouraged, to focus on personal profit. Women, on the other hand, were encouraged to focus on the greater good, specifically through the domestic sphere and child-rearing. This is pertinent not only to the mothers in this time of republican motherhood, but to their daughters and sons as well.

Although the early 19th century saw a conservative backlash against the cultural changes of materialism and industrialization, relatively quickly authors of boys' literature recognized the adventurous nature of these societal changes. Authors of girls' literature, however, retained in their texts the conservative, domesticated feeling of early 19th-century children's literature.

The use of literature for children, even entertaining literature for children, is often pragmatically didactic. The intention of the literature is to teach children what is and is not acceptable in society. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that literature for children during the Puritan period discusses and represents the ideal characteristics of Puritans. Those ideals include purity, humility and piety. Both male and female children were encouraged to embody those characteristics. As American culture changed, during and

35 Ibid., 138-139. Although she does not argue this outright, it is the logical development of her arguments.
after the American Revolutionary War, so did the concept of the ideal citizen.\textsuperscript{36} The new ideals included being hard-working and loyal. Although these characteristics were similar for boys and girls, a new division between the two developed. Increasingly there was a focus on the behavior of people rather than on the heart of a person (hard-working instead of humble, loyalty to a cause instead of piety, etc). This was especially true of boys and men, as their actions were believed to matter most.

This gap between the ideals for boys and girls continues to widen during and after the Civil War. While it continues to be important that a girl be humble, pure and pious, these characteristics become progressively less important for boys and men. They are increasingly judged by their actions, instead of their intentions. It is interesting to note that the ideals for girls are frozen in time, while the ideals for boys are changing. Perhaps this is a contributing factor in the rise of the cult of womanhood.\textsuperscript{37} The stagnation of female character allowed for its exaggeration and glorification. The piety and purity of Puritanism becomes the “inherent female nature” of Victorian America. Although girls are no more inherently pious or pure than boys, because society tells girls they are, they become so (or attempt to become so).

As a result of the cultural shifts from established churches during the colonial period to religious tolerance during the republican period, involvement in voluntary religious societies became a typical part of life in the early 19th century. Sunday schools

\textsuperscript{36} Barbara Leslie Epstein discusses a similar pattern in her book \textit{The Politics of Domesticity}. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1981). In the 18th century there is a similarity in the conversion experiences of men and women. By the 19th century there is a growing divide between how men and women describe conversion, as well as a shift in patterns of church involvement. Epstein argues this is because while gender differences were assumed in the 18th century, women were gaining a greater voice (at least in religious matters) by the 19th century. I, on the other hand, would argue that the change in men’s cultural ideals, and the stagnation of women’s cultural ideals, lead to a change in men’s religious experiences, while women’s religious focus was, if anything, an exaggeration of its previous form.

were one such organization that grew to be an essential tool in the religious education of both children and adults.\textsuperscript{38} The production of Sunday school literature was one popular option for writers to make money in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Mary Lystad argues, in her book \textit{From Dr. Mather to Dr. Seuss: Two Hundred Years of American Books for Children}, that as a result many books "were written by educators in order to enhance [Sunday school] curriculum or, in the case of some novelists, to escape from it."\textsuperscript{39}

Some of this literature also offers an opportunity to examine the differences between religious lessons for boys and religious lessons for girls. An examination of some of this Sunday school literature aids in the discussion of religious ideals for children. Comparing two pieces of Sunday school literature: \textit{Helps Over Hard Places: Stories for Boys} and \textit{Helps Over Hard Places: Stories for Girls} both by Lynde Palmer and published in 1862, highlights both important attitudes towards boys and girls and the central moral issues for children. Examining the patterns of moral guidance and identifying the critical and relevant moral virtues, especially for girls, serve as the basis for my own discussion of moral development and spiritual independence.

\textit{Helps Over Hard Places—Gendered Contrast in Moral Development}

In the introduction to the text \textit{Helps Over Hard Places: Stories for Boys} Palmer explains that he is writing the text to encourage boys in their spiritual journey. As in a physical journey, a spiritual journey is much easier when the wise (and not so wise) who have come before leave record of their journeys. This collection of stories is really a

\textsuperscript{38} Stewart, \textit{A History of Religious Education}, 316-345. He discusses at length in this section the development of the Sunday School movement.

\textsuperscript{39} Mary Lystad, \textit{From Dr. Mather to Dr. Seuss: 200 Years of American Books for Children}. (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing, 1980), 87.
guide to help boys avoid the very worst traps and dangers on this treacherous road. The book includes 22 chapters and a great variety of stories. There are, however, several themes that can be identified throughout. The primary themes that I have identified are long-suffering contentment and the development of sincere submission. The minor themes that are touched upon include humility, anger management, charity, kind speech and political issues.

The category of long-suffering contentment includes discussion of patience, forgiveness, trusting God and gratitude. The first chapter of the book is the story of a young man who is falsely accused of sabotaging his teacher’s desk. He must overcome his anger and forgive the real perpetrator for not coming forward. The chapter ends when the young man dies saving the perpetrator’s life. The chapter concludes with a young boy’s comment: “I believe that God has made him an angel, excelling in strength”\(^\text{40}\). Thus the book continues, assigning “masculine characteristics” to spiritual virtues.

The second category includes honesty and obedience. These topics are considered central to the development of a spiritually healthy boy. Again, “masculine” characteristics are repeatedly connected with these virtues. Honesty is brave because “[t]here is nothing so mean and despicable as to tell a lie. It is so cowardly to sell the truth for a little transient ease and self-indulgence”\(^\text{41}\). Honesty and obedience are repeatedly illustrated as leading to happiness, peace and especially material well-being. The combination of theses qualities implies not only obedience and honesty, but that boys must, in the case that they make a mistake, do whatever is necessary to make it right\(^\text{42}\).


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., “Chapter XV: Willie’s Angel”.

17
the few cases that directly call for self-sacrifice on the part of a boy, it is because he must make amends for his mistakes.\textsuperscript{43}

The minor categories represent the themes that appear, but not as frequently as the themes of long-suffering contentment and the development of sincere submission. The theme of humility is an example of a theme that seems to underlie many of the stories. Generally, boys who are full of pride are humbled. Sometimes external circumstances force them to reconsider their prideful ways\textsuperscript{44}, and other times their own behavior illustrates their need for change\textsuperscript{45}.

Anger management is another interesting category. Although it not as common as some other themes, it is considered very serious in the places where it occurs. The final two chapters of the book focus on not only long-suffering contentment, but actively battling the angry feelings. In fact, this chapter offers a fascinating contrast between masculine and feminine behavior. Bob and Daisy are a brother and sister who have been orphaned and live with their aunt and uncle (and very evil cousin). Although they are tormented and taunted, especially regarding their faith and their “saintly” ways, they hold firm and work to be good Christians. The second of the two chapters opens with a discussion of what it means to be in the King’s Army. For boys it requires that they “stand firm, and fight down all those wicked feelings—come out like a man into the front ranks, and stand the fire.”\textsuperscript{46} Girls, on the other hand, function as baggage handlers ("‘bearing one another’s burdens’—you know")\textsuperscript{47} or flag-bearers. Bob advises Daisy: “you must be so gentle and forgiving, and patient, and loving, that when any one looks at

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., “Chapter X: Tom’s Trial”
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., “Chapter XVIII: Disobedient Harry”.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., “Chapter V: The Cheerful Giver”.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 214.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 214.
you, they will read something as plain as print on a banner” and according to Bob, Daisy’s banner reads “‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’” This offers us a brilliant insight into the difference between boys and girls, and an excellent transition to the book written specifically for girls.

In the introduction for his book for girls, Palmer specifically references his book for boys. The introduction follows the same journey metaphor as the boys’ book, but with one small caveat. When girls are stuck, trapped and overwhelmed, Christ will come and help them. He does not make this reference in the introduction to the boys’ book, which highlights an ongoing theme in the girls’ book—attitudes instead of action.

The primary themes are sometimes very similar to those found in the boys’ book. The theme of long-suffering contentment is even more central to the girls’ book. The sub-theme of self-sacrifice is extremely important. Girls are expected to repeatedly sacrifice their own desires and their own time to make others happy. Unlike the boys’ book, where self-sacrifice is linked to obedience, in the girls’ book, young women must sacrifice their own wishes, even when it is not requested of them. For example, in “Chapter XIII: Little Cross-Bearers,” there is a contrast between two daughters who have been given permission to go on a picnic, even though their mother is ill. The first daughter puts her own wants first. The second stays home and takes care of her siblings. The first daughter “came home very cross that night. She knew she had been selfish and nothing had gone right all day.” But, of course, the second daughter is quite content—she worked hard and made her mother (and God) very happy.

\[\text{Ibid., 214-15.}\]
\[\text{Lynde Palmer, } \textit{Helps Over Hard Places: Stories for Girls} \textit{ (Boston: American Tract Society, 1862), 134.}\]
Self-sacrifice is not limited to the sacrifice of one’s time. In another story a girl sacrifices walking with the crowd in order to accompany a young man who is slower.\textsuperscript{50} Several other stories include material sacrifices.\textsuperscript{51} It is important to note that these sacrifices are not demanded, but given voluntarily. The girls are not simply being obedient, but are following their consciences.

The development of honesty and obedience is also important in the girls’ book. However, direct obedience does not play the same role in the girls’ book. Although there are a few cases of disobedience,\textsuperscript{52} it is generally assumed that girls will be obedient and honest. In the places where this theme appears it is under the guise of unrequested helpfulness. Girls should seek out and meet even the unspoken requests of the people in their lives.

One important, but more minor theme, in the Sunday School literature for girls are the lessons in industriousness. Laziness and day-dreaming, themes never discussed in the boys’ book, are frequently discussed. This is a very interesting theme that appears repeatedly in the novels I will be discussing. Clearly the issue of industriousness was considered as important to Finley, Alcott and Wilder as it was to Lynde Palmer.

Another very important theme in the girls’ Sunday School literature is that looks can be deceiving. This theme appears in many of the stories. The author assumes that appearance is a great preoccupation for young girls. He instructs them not to be fooled by their own or someone else’s good looks. A beautiful girl can become quite hideous when she is cruel or selfish, but “the plainest face in the world looks pretty when a

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., “Chapter VIII: Walking in Love.”
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., “Chapter XXI: Christie Bell’s Stockings” and “Chapter XXII: Little Clare.”
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., “Chapter I: The Little School-Girl’s Story” and “Chapter IV: Princess Pearlypat.”
beautiful soul shines through.” Whether ugly as a result of old age or a physical deformity or nature, people need to be appreciated for their true internal beauty. Although Palmer considered this an important lesson for girls, Finley, Alcott and Wilder discuss this issue very seldom. When the issue is discussed it is considered an aspect of patience or contentment, rather than as a theme in and of itself.

There are several minor themes in the girls’ book as well. One of the most interesting is a warning against interpreting God’s rules. It appears in both humorous and serious stories, but the moral seems to be that girls must be wary of their own interpretations of scripture. In one story a young girl unwittingly torments her cousin through her misinterpretation of the Golden Rule. In another, two girls pound on the door of a tomb, waiting to be let into heaven. The boys’ book contains no equivalent stories. In fact, there is an interesting contrast between one of the boys’ stories and one of the girls’ stories. In the boys’ book “Chapter V: The Cheerful Giver” includes the story of several children who brag about how they would help a beggar who came to their door. When the beggar appears, so do the children’s real attitudes. Some of the children are generous and kind, others are selfish and cruel. The “beggar” turns out to be “Cousin Joe”, who is testing the children. In the girls’ book “Chapter I: The Little School-Girl’s Story” includes a similar story of a beggar coming to the door. However, instead of being a lesson in generosity and humility, it is a story of disobedience. When the children open the door the beggar turns out to be a robber who tries to steal their silver. It

53 Ibid., 168. Italics in original.
54 Ibid., “Chapter V: Old Barney’s Mask.”
55 Ibid., “Chapter VIII: Walking in Love.”
56 Ibid., “Chapter VI: The Garden of the Beloved.”
57 Ibid., “Chapter III: Prue’s Golden Rule.”
58 Ibid., “Chapter XXIII: Knocking at the Door of Heaven.”
is interesting to note that the children in the boys’ book are not only allowed, but encouraged to make their own choices in helping others. In the girls’ book the children are confined to the preset limits of their parents’ ideals. This pattern is very interesting. I will discuss this theme as the development of spiritual independence. Unlike Palmer, Finley, Alcott and Wilder generally consider girls, especially as they get older, perfectly capable of spiritual and moral decision making. There is some variance in the novelists’ approaches to spiritual independence which I will further discuss in each chapter.

From Moral Virtue to Sensitive Conscience to Spiritual Independence

Discussion of Palmer’s Sunday School literature has highlighted several themes of religious virtue I would like to examine within Finley, Alcott, and Wilder’s series. I have identified the development of a sensitive conscience, through long-suffering contentment, including discussion of forgiveness and self-sacrifice, as well as the importance of developing honest obedience. These categories are not unrelated. One will note that the two virtues—long-suffering contentment and honest obedience—work together to create what I call the “sensitive conscience.” Children (especially girls) are not only taught to be patient, content, honest and obedient. Girls’ consciences function differently than boys. They must be patient, content, obedient and honest, but more importantly, they must be attuned to the unspoken needs of others. Their consciences should not only be sensitive, but hyper-sensitive. They are taught to read human reaction and anticipate moral issues. Although many would consider independence and obedience to be opposites, I would like to challenge that assumption. Despite Lynde’s depiction of girls’ inability to make independent decisions or interpretations, some of the novelists I
examine allow girls’ hypersensitive morality to be used as a tool for independent
decision-making.

I will also examine the theme of industriousness. It is widely discussed in 19th-
century children’s literature; however I would argue that industriousness is more than a
societal obligation. It can also be seen to contribute to the development of the sensitive
conscience. Some authors seem to see hard work as contributing to personal value and
worth, while others view it simply as obligatory to the family well-being.

Finally I will be addressing the theme of spiritual independence, which focuses on
girls’ ability to make moral decisions and to interpret God’s rules for themselves. I am
deliberately approaching this concept as a contradiction of Palmer’s warning against this
type of thinking for girls. Spiritual independence is essentially an outgrowth of the
development of the sensitive conscience. The other virtues, long-suffering contentment,
honest obedience and industriousness, can contribute to the development of not only
spiritual maturity, but spiritual independence. Although Palmer rejects this behavior for
girls, some of the authors I discuss clearly view this as a critical aspect of a woman’s
spiritual journey. However, others seem to assume, along with Palmer, that girls should
simply accept parental understanding of spiritual and moral issues.

Cultural Context in the Golden Age of Children’s Literature

In order to understand the background of 19th and early 20th-century girls’ series,
it must be recognized that during and following the Civil War (the period during which
these books were being produced), the nature of children’s literature continued to change.
There are several important patterns that developed during this time period, which is
often called the “Golden Age of Children’s Literature.” Children’s literature became less
didactic and more fantasy focused during this time. Formal education, not just literacy,
became an important part of children’s lives. Authors of literature for children changed
their approach to childhood. Instead of attempting to refocus creative energy into
becoming better adults, authors reveled in what they considered to be the creativity and
fantasy of childhood. They began to idealize childhood, not just as a transition to
adulthood, but as a lifestyle focused on fantasy and innocence. Much of the literature
created during this time, for example—*Alice in Wonderland*, *Wizard of Oz* and *Winnie
the Pooh*, focused on ever-young children who played in mythical worlds of creativity.

The golden age of children’s literature also saw an increase in the discrepancies
between ideals for boys and girls. Boys were encouraged to be adventuresome and free;
girls were encouraged to be obedient and docile. The most radical change is not in
attitudes toward girls, as is often assumed, but in attitudes towards boys. Before this time
all children were expected to be obedient and industrious. It was not the girls’ supervised
transition from childhood to adulthood, as seen in Elsie Dinsmore and Jo March, that was
different; it was boys’ unsupervised childhood free-for-all, epitomized by Tom Sawyer
and Huck Finn, that was a radical alternative to pre-golden age literature for children. It
should be noted that it was not the attitude of adults towards children that was changing,
it was the attitude of adults towards boys.

Additionally, the end of the nineteenth century was an important period of
transition from the Republican Motherhood of the early 19th century to the New Woman
of the early 20th century. Martha Banta notes that culturally America was “at impasse”,
“wedged in between two generations.” As discontentment with the changing cultural patterns of American life grew, some authors of children’s literature, especially literature for girls, reflected back on past, romanticized views of children and child-rearing. However, regardless of the conservative nature of the surface patterns, it is important to peer deeper into the nature of the characters in these books. It is remarkable how they reflect the sensitive and independent nature so carefully nurtured during the early 19th century. Cultural observers have noted the development of the “‘intensely personalized American conscience.’”

Martha Banta, in her book *Imaging American Women*, argues that one of the unique qualities of female types in the transitional period at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century is the nature of the female “will.” Despite the complexity of the different types and sub-types of the “American Girl,” her will and her exertion of her will is consistent. Women are arguing, and society may slowly be accepting, that in some way, woman’s will is her own.

I would argue that the development of a sensitive conscience and spiritual independence in children’s literature contributed to shifting cultural patterns—specifically the women’s movement. When children (including girls) are not only allowed, but encouraged, to follow their own consciences (even as they are carefully developed by their parents) they are also encouraged to think independently. What is noteworthy is that their sensitive consciences and spiritual independence did not always

lead them to the conclusions their parents believed were best. When girls were taught to make right choices they were also enabled to shift what the “right” decision really was.

Chapter Outline

My first chapter focuses on the Elsie Dinsmore series. The first book in the series was published in 1867 and the last book that I will discuss was published in 1877. This series has faced tremendous criticism; however, I would like to examine the series not as a relic of sentimental fiction, but as an example of the relationship between moral development and spiritual independence. There are six primary sections in the chapter. The chapter begins with an introduction, which includes a review of much of the critical literature written regarding the Elsie Dinsmore series and my contrasting approach to the series. Then I continue with a section titled “Honesty/Obedience” which discusses how honesty and obedience encourage the development of strength of character throughout the Elsie Dinsmore series. I will also discuss, in a chapter named “Longsuffering Contentment,” how Finley depicts the development of a sense of purpose through her characters’ experiences of suffering and struggle. In the section “Industriousness” I argue that industriousness contributes to the characters’ sense of self-worth. Then, in “Spiritual Independence” I focus on the development of independent spiritual decision-making in the Elsie Dinsmore books, which I relate to the manifestation of the previous virtues. My conclusion reviews any discussion of progressive movements—the women’s movement, temperance and abolition—that is found in the books.
The second chapter focuses on the Little Women series which is made up of 3 books published between 1868 and 1886. I begin with an introduction that briefly reviews some of critical literature regarding the Little Women books. There has been extensive analysis of the series, so I focus on relevant literature, which either discusses the gender issues in the series, or the relationship between Alcott’s Little Women series and progressive era movements. My research has taken a unique examination of Alcott’s series, specifically in contrast to the Elsie Dinsmore books. The section “Honesty/Obedience” examines the many examples of honesty and obedience in the series. I have found that Alcott relates the practice of honesty and obedience to family honor and material gain. In “Longsuffering Contentment” I highlight how suffering functions to draw family and community together, but also can function to dampen the ardent spirits of many reform-oriented characters. “Industriousness” is an examination of industry as a familial obligation and as a balm to numb the pain during difficult times. The section titled “Spiritual Independence” examines spiritual independence and spiritual maturity throughout the series. Although there are isolated cases of spiritual independence, generally characters are encouraged to limit their decision-making to be in line with parental and societal ideals. The final concluding section “Conclusions and Comparisons: Finley’s and Alcott’s Approaches to Education and Marriage” discusses depictions of progressive era movements in Alcott’s books. However, I am not arguing for a direct relationship between spiritual independence and the rhetoric of the women’s movement or other progressive movements. I am actually arguing that spiritual independence was designed to teach girls and women that they have valid ideas and worldviews and that their concerted effort can and will lead to reform. So I follow the

62 Little Women was originally published in two parts in 1868 and 1869.
review of progressive era movements in the Little Women books with a comparison of how the Little Women books and the Elsie Dinsmore books discuss marriage and the education of women. I think that despite surface support for the women’s movement in Alcott’s series, Finley’s series offers grounds for a serious reconsideration of traditional ideology regarding women’s roles in family and society.

The final chapter focuses on the Little House series written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, with original publication dates from 1932 to 1943. Although the books were written much later than the Little Women series and the Elsie Dinsmore series, they are set during the same time. They depict the same transitional period in American history. This chapter focuses on the same virtues. “Honesty/Obedience” highlights the life-saving, life-changing merits of honesty and obedience in the lives of characters, as well as a sense of moral ambiguity regarding blind obedience. Then, in “Longsuffering contentment” I discuss how Wilder uses suffering to strengthen character. In “Industriousness” I examine the relationship between industriousness and success in Wilder’s books. The section “Spiritual Independence” reviews Wilder’s depictions of spiritual independence and the relationship to religious virtue. The conclusion section highlights Wilder’s discussion of progressive era movements, but also her depictions of marriage and the education of women.

I hope this project will emphasize the danger in approaching cultural artifacts, like children’s literature, with preconceived notions of their cultural, political and religious implications. My intention is to allow the real reformers—those women who have learned that they can change the world—a venue in which they can “stand up.”

---

63 The final book in the series, The First Four Years, was not published until 1971. I will discuss this issue more thoroughly in the introduction to the chapter “Reformation from Within: The Little House Series.”
Chapter II: Our Bias, Ourselves—The Elsie Dinsmore Series

The Elsie Dinsmore series has faced opposition since the first book was released. The books are very didactic, which leaves many critics wondering what makes the Elsie Dinsmore books so alluring. Early critics find fault with Finley’s preoccupation with the melancholy elements of life. As early as 1896, Agnes Repplier criticizes many different stories of her time, including the Elsie books, for being too serious and depressing. This kind of criticism highlights the shift in children’s literature away from realism toward fantasy fiction. Repplier argues that realistic fiction offers too many examples of sick mothers, disabled children, absentee fathers and bullying to be beneficial to children. In 1909 Ruth Suckow discusses the religious faith of the title character as insight into the theology of Martha Finley herself. She only briefly acknowledges any of Elsie’s ability to stand up for herself and she completely fails to incorporate these incidents into her discussion. They serve only as her curt acknowledgement that perhaps there is more to the story than “how fundamentalism came to Dixie.” Although there are many statements that emphasize the problems with the texts, G.B. Stern summarizes well when she describes the books as “savage, neurotic realism.” She goes on to write, and most of her co-critics agree that the books are rife with “Freud-has-a-word-for-it” issues. There are quite a variety of interpretations of those complexes, but most seem to agree that Finley was a very lonely old maid who wrote all her sexual tension into her books for children.

---

67 Ibid., 52.
At the same time, some of the critics admit to loving the books. Stern, who so openly acknowledges the Freudian complexes of the author and her characters, also admits to owning every one of the 28 volumes and to reading and re-reading them on a regular basis. She insists that they satisfy a yearning in her “psychical metabolism which the so-called modern fiction of 1936 cannot wholly lull or compensate.”

Jacqueline Jackson and Philip Kendall have written an entire article about “What Makes a Bad Book Good,” which uses Elsie Dinsmore as its only example. The authors discuss children’s somewhat incomprehensible love of the series. They conclude that Martha Finley has produced “an idealistically Christian, sadomasochistic, incestuous-erotic work for children, which in spite of its being a thoroughly bad book, gives Elsie Dinsmore its compelling and abiding power, which elevates it to the supreme height of a great bad classic.”

It seems that the Elsie Dinsmore series is the series that critics love to hate. Critics are perplexed by not only children’s love of the books, but even their own. I would argue that though the books may not have the literary quality of many classics, they have constant action and great conflict. They also offer an interesting interpretation of religious belief that is both morally and spiritually independent.

The first scholar to provide a detailed analysis of the series was Janet E. Brown in her thesis titled “The Saga of Elsie Dinsmore,” published in 1945. Although the thesis is thoughtful and well-written, it only briefly discusses how religion functions in the book. Much of her discussion focuses on the theology of the author, instead of the cultural ramifications of religiosity of the characters. She, like Suckow, focuses on the fierce Protestantism of the author, rather than the function of that theology in the lives of the

---

68 Ibid., 54-55.
characters. The same critics who search for Freudian psychology and nuances of Protestant theology fail to recognize the deeper appeal of female characters who choose morality as form of rebellion. Pam Hardman argues in her article, “Elsie Dinsmore and the Training of a Victorian Child,” that Elsie is, in fact, more powerless than she first appears. The author claims that Elsie does not convert her father to Christianity, but he converts her to a form of moral materialism that creates a safe combination of right moral action in an increasingly industrialized nation. Hardman fails to recognize Elsie’s powerful Christian influence, not only over her father, but over countless other characters throughout the series.

The racism of the Elsie books, both the original and modern revised editions, is the focus of *Renewed but not Redeemed: Revising Elsie Dinsmore* by Diane Carver Sekeres. Her critique is both valid and insightful. She believes that the inherent racism of the books must not be ignored. The books, even the modern revisions, do not sufficiently address the issue of slavery and racism in the South. She warns against the use of *Elsie Dinsmore* as a piece of historical fiction, since the books were never intended to be an insight into the Civil War South, but was written as contemporary fiction, set in a “mythical” South. The theme of racism and the use of Elsie books as historical fiction is continued in Marla Harris’ “‘A History Not Then Taught in History Books’: (Re)Writing Reconstruction in Historical Fiction for Children and Young Adults.” She also dislikes the books and their revisions. She believes that since the books were written contemporaneously with Reconstruction Finley had a disadvantage relative to modern authors. She did not have “the advantage of hindsight that allows [modern scholars] to

---

assess more accurately the social and political significance of Reconstruction and to place it in historical perspective as the precursor to the modern Civil Rights Movement.”

There are some modern scholars who discuss other elements of the Elsie series. In her article “‘Dying Between Two Laws’: Girl Heroines, Their Gods, and Their Fathers in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the *Elsie Dinsmore* series,” Helen Michie identifies Elsie’s marriage to Travilla as a critical act of rebellion against her father’s dominance and also recognizes the matriarchal nature of the series—which centers completely and exclusively on Elsie as the “principle of generation and reiteration upon which the series is based.”

Jackie E. Stallcup’s recent article, “Stamping the Coin of Character: Elsie Dinsmore and the Power of Christian Wealth,” reviews the cultural relevance of the books, discussing Elsie’s powerful position, especially in relationship to her wealth. While I find both of these articles insightful, I would like to seriously consider the power Elsie finds in her religious faith.

Many scholars today assume that anything with a label like “evangelical” or “sentimental,” both of which have been liberally applied to the Elsie Dinsmore books, cannot be forward-thinking. However, some thinkers are challenging this assumption. Stallcup argues that “[t]hroughout the Elsie series, Finley uses Christian discourse as a specific mode of power, first for Elsie as a child in her battles with her father and later for Elsie as a mother, raising her children into full Christian adulthood.” Christian ideology, specifically the development of certain Christian ideals, encourages the concept

71 Maria Harris, “‘A History Not Then Taught in History Books’: (Re)Writing Reconstruction in Historical Fiction for Children and Young Adults.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30, no. 1 (January 2006): 115.


of freedom and independence in these books. My research indicates that this is an important aspect of the Elsie Dinsmore series. I will be examining how three moral principles—honesty/obedience, longsuffering contentment and industriousness—function in the Elsie Dinsmore series and I will be highlighting how the emphasis on these concepts encourages the development of spiritual independence. Although the series contains 28 books, I will only be examining the first six books in the series. There are many reasons for this decision, but the most compelling for me is that the author herself felt the series completed at six. In her introduction to the sixth book she announces to her readers that “[w]ith this volume, bringing the story of Elsie and her children down to the present time, the series closes.” These six books, Elsie Dinsmore, Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands, Elsie’s Girlhood, Elsie’s Womanhood, Elsie’s Motherhood and Elsie’s Children, cover the childhoods of both Elsie and her children. These six offer plenty of evidence for my argument and allow the scope of the series to be comparable with the Little Women series and the Little House series.

Honesty and Obedience

[Elsie] was very truthful, both in word and deed, very strict in her observance of the Sabbath—though the rest of the family were by no means particular in that respect—very diligent in her studies, respectful to superiors, and kind to inferiors and equals.75

Honesty and obedience are two character traits that are central to childhood development in the Elsie Dinsmore series. Honesty and obedience create strength of character which contributes to spiritual independence. The first book begins with Elsie struggling to find a place in her grandfather’s home. Her mother has died and her father

---

75 Martha Finley, Elsie Dinsmore, (Nashville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2000), 34.
is “away.” No one particularly likes Elsie and her aunts and uncles treat her poorly. She struggles daily to live a life of faith, in spite of the “utter disregard of the family . . . for the teachings of God’s word.”\textsuperscript{76} She has no one willing to speak on her behalf, and her meekness, the natural result of her piety, allows the others to mistreat her at their leisure. The incident which opens Elsie’s saga illustrates her long-suffering nature and her integrity. When offered the opportunity to receive a reward if she is dishonest, she refuses to hide the truth. She is almost painfully honest. The more she is resented and mistreated by those around her, the more she turns inward and seeks comfort in her relationship with God. Her only Christian role models until this point have been servants and slaves.

Although it is frequently argued that Elsie’s relationship with her father is one of the most compelling aspects of the book, it is interesting to note that \textit{Elsie Dinsmore} does not begin with the return of her father. It begins with Elsie’s introduction to Rose Allison, a friend of her Aunt Adelaide. Rose is a very devout Christian and she offers Elsie only the third Christian example in her life. Rose is the first person Elsie ever meets who shares both her social status and her faith. The importance of this meeting and its effects on Elsie can hardly be overstated. When Rose proposes to Elsie that they love one another for Christ’s sake Elsie replies “‘[w]ill you love me? Oh, how glad I am! . . . I have nobody to love me but my poor old mammy.’”\textsuperscript{77} Although Elsie is a motherless child, Rose Allison mothers her spiritually while she is with the family. Rose leaves after a winter with the Dinsmore family, but her influence continues throughout

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 18.
the rest of the novels. Finley pays homage to the Republican mother of early 19th-century literature in the figures of Rose Allison, Chloe and Mrs. Murray, without losing the vulnerability and sensitivity created by Elsie’s position.

Elsie’s complete truthfulness is applauded by Rose Allison. Rose is the first character seen to defend Elsie’s high principles. Elsie clearly has developed a very sensitive conscience. Although some might argue that her principles are innate, Finley’s text suggests that the stubbornness is innate, but its manifestation is unique. Her willingness to stand up for her Christian principles is a combination of her Dinsmore will and her evangelical ideals. Although she is generally meek and humble, she becomes fiercely independent and refuses to dishonor her conscience when her principles are challenged. This is first noted by Aunt Adelaide, but becomes a growing theme throughout the first two books.

Rose’s departure at the end of her visit is very difficult for Elsie. It is a bitter loss to the young girl. However, more disappointment is imminent. Despite Rose’s prediction that “he could not help loving her, if he could only see her,” the return of Elsie’s father brings only further heartbreak. Upon his arrival her father “coldly kisses her lips” and accuses her of making him “feel old.” She is deeply disappointed in his lack of affection and attention. Although he refuses to show her any affection, he does eventually decide to take over management of his young daughter. He commands and

---

78 It is also significant that eventually Rose does become Elsie’s mother when she marries Elsie’s newly converted father. However that does not occur until later in the series.
79 Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore*, 22.
80 Ibid., 43.
81 Ibid., 22.
82 Ibid., 60.
rebukes with great liberty, though seldom acknowledging her complete and willing obedience.

Finley’s concept of obedience is highly developed in the figure of Elsie. Obedience is necessary, but Elsie’s real obedience obligation is to her own conscience. She is obliged to obey her elders (not just her father but her grandmother and grandfather as well), but only when her obedience does not conflict with her principles. Although the family sees Elsie’s willing obedience to her father as an opportunity to mock Elsie’s principles, when her father finally notes her utter devotion to him, it begins to soften his heart. He slowly warms to his daughter, though her total obedience is still required. He frequently reprimands her for behavior without explaining himself. On one occasion he forbids her from going through the meadow. When she asks “why?” he replies “Because I forbid it . . . That is quite enough for you to know. All you have to do is to obey, and you need never ask me why when I give you an order.” On another occasion he demands to know why she has not eaten the bread and water he sent her. He sees her explanation (she isn’t hungry) as willfulness and stubbornness. He demands that she eat every crumb from her plate. Even when his own stubbornness is highlighted by another character (usually Aunt Adelaide) he is too proud to admit fault.

Her generally implicit and complete obedience is set up as a foil to her disobedience to her father over questions of principle. Although Elsie’s strict piety is mentioned early in the book, the first real issue over a matter of principle comes when she refuses to tell a fairytale to Enna (her father’s very young sister) on the Sabbath. Her grandfather and step-grandmother attempt to force her to humor the little girl, but she still

---

83 Ibid., 77.
84 Ibid., 88.
85 Ibid., 176-179.
refuses. Her father forces her to apologize to her grandfather, but does not force her to
tell the story. However, he warns her

“You need never set up your will, or your opinion of right and wrong, against mine, Elsie, for I shall not allow it. I don’t altogether like some of those strict notions you have got into your head, and I give you fair warning, that should they ever come into collision with my wishes and commands, they will have to be given up”. 86

This warning offers the first sense of foreboding at the impending battle of wills. Elsie’s father warns her not to hold too tightly to her principles. In her heart Elsie knows that she will, at some point, be forced to disobey her earthly father in order to obey her heavenly Father. Finley emphasizes that Elsie’s allegiance is to her own principles, before even her father.

Within a few pages, Elsie will find cause to set her will against her father’s will. He insists that she play a secular song for an audience on the Sabbath. When she refuses he commands her to sit at the piano until she is willing to play—“‘though it should be until tomorrow morning.’”87 For hours Elsie remains at the piano without food or water. Eventually she passes out and smacks her head on the piano as she falls. Her unconsciousness offers her father the opportunity to reflect on how much he loves his young daughter. Her brush with death causes her no great sorrow, for she feels she is prepared to die. However, it does cause her to reflect on her father’s unbelieving heart and she is full of sadness that her father is not a Christian. Although some critics have interpreted this scene to be melodramatic, Finley is actually portraying a powerful expression of spiritual independence in this young girl, who exerts her own sense of right and wrong against her father for the first time.

86 Ibid., 213.
87 Ibid., 223.
Finley again highlights her nuanced concept of obedience later in *Elsie Dinsmore*. Elsie’s father has returned from a business trip and brought her tremendous and beautiful gifts. He wants her to wear them to church on Sunday. She considers whether or not it will be a distraction to her during worship. He tells her that he believes her willful nature is improving. This causes her to reflect on whether she is really being less scrupulous in following God’s will. “Was it indeed true that she was losing her tenderness of conscience?” Her father’s “compliment” causes her to feel so sorrowful and repentant that she is not distracted by her clothes the following day. She is able, in good conscience, to obey her heavenly Father as well as her earthly father.

Finley continues her discussion of the nature of obedience in the second book in the Elsie Dinsmore Series, *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands*. Elsie’s conscience comes into conflict with her father’s will relatively quickly. When her father, who is ill, asks her to read him a secular book on the Sabbath Elsie refuses. The argument grows to be radically disproportionate to the initial issue when her father demands that she “promise implicit obedience in the future.” Elsie insists that her obedience is always obedience to her conscience, not her father. She obeys her father because it is also obedience to her own conscience. However, Finley carefully highlights that Elsie’s obedience is to her principles, not her father. Elsie cannot promise implicit obedience, for her father occasionally commands her to violate her principles. There is no resolution to the argument until Elsie’s father converts. As Elsie lies on her deathbed, her father finally recognizes the error of his ways and becomes a Christian. Finely depicts the conversion of Horace Dinsmore as a typical evangelical conversion but with a unique twist. He

---

88 Ibid., 256.
repents of his sin, against his daughter and against God, and, although he briefly believes she has died, she is, in fact, spared. His conversion is the fulfillment of Elsie’s own spiritual yearning.

This incident provides a fascinating look at the nature of obedience and honesty in literature for children. Elsie’s behavior is disobedient. She is unwilling to concede to her father’s wishes. The child, who regularly tattles on herself for forgetting one of her father’s many ridiculous commands, is the same child who stubbornly and obstinately refuses her sick father’s whim, when it is not in line with her own conscience. The irony is intentional and overt. Finley, in a way that is typical of changing attitudes in the mid to late 19th century, poses the question to her readers—does one make decisions based on someone else’s ideas of right and wrong, or has one developed his or her own keen sense of what God wants him or her to do?

Finley illustrates that obedience to parents is critical, but not absolute. Elsie repeatedly explains that she loves her father and is willing to obey him when he does not ask her to disobey her conscience. She offers scriptural support for her decision to disobey her father—“We ought to obey God rather than men.”90 The author makes clear that the obedience is to Elsie’s interpretation of God’s law. When it is pointed out that many Christian preachers would not have felt that reading such material is a violation of the Sabbath, Elsie is adamant that she is answerable only to her conscience.91 Finley argues, like some reform-oriented evangelical women of her day, that Christian women

---

90 Ibid., 104.
91 Ibid., 81.
answer only to God for their choices.\textsuperscript{92} Elsie’s spiritual independence is built through the strength of character which results from her obedience to her own conscience.

*Elsie’s Girlhood* marks the beginning of a new chapter in Elsie’s life. At the end of *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands* her father becomes a Christian and the primary conflict changes. As Elsie engages the world around her, she must apply her Christian principles in her relationship with others. Elsie deems total honesty with her father to be extremely important. However, she also continues to develop her sense of independence. While she considers total honesty important in discussion of her own behavior, she is loathe to “tell tales” of others’ misbehavior. When she refuses to loan money to her uncle Arthur, who has problems with alcohol and gambling, he verbally abuses and threatens her. However, she chooses not to report this incident to her father.\textsuperscript{93} Finley illustrates how Elsie continues to show volition in her relationships.

It is important to recognize that Elsie is essentially a very obedient child. Finley certainly places great importance on children’s obedience to their parents. Although as a young child Elsie trusts her mind and her capacity to make morally upright choices without supervision, she realizes she is not an adult and she does not trust her heart to make emotionally mature decisions. She follows her father’s decisions, abiding by them to the best of her ability. She is still capable of making moral choices (not telling her father of Arthur’s threats) but still not capable of completely knowing and understanding the consequences of obeying her own heart rather than her conscience.

\textsuperscript{92} Gwen Athene Tarbox, *The Clubwomen’s Daughters: Collectivist Impulses in Progressive-era Girls’ Fiction*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000). 18. Tarbox is pointing out Julia Foote’s independent nature—this is seen most clearly in her insistence that preaching is not only her right, but her calling. She argues, much as Elsie does, that she answers primarily to God—”man’s opinion weighed nothing with me, for my commission was from heaven, and my reward was with the Most High.”—as qtd. In Tarbox, 18.

Finley illustrates this principle through one of Elsie’s courtships, which stems out of a summer visit to distant relatives. Elsie goes to Ohio to visit with Aunt Wealthy, one of her father’s aunts. Elsie’s uncle Arthur, enraged by Elsie’s unwillingness to loan him money, plans to pay off his debt by arranging for his friend to marry a rich heiress, Elsie. Arthur sends Tom to Ohio to meet and woo Elsie. Elsie falls in love with Jackson (whom she knows as Bromly Egerton). However, when he proposes and tries to convince her to elope, she follows her conscience and refuses to run away. Her father finds out about Jackson’s true identity and demands that Elsie “give him up . . . at once and forever.” Elsie is heartbroken. She believes in Egerton and wants her father to be wrong. Nonetheless, she obeys her father. She cuts off all communication with Egerton. Egerton persists in his pursuit of her but Elsie’s devotion to her father outweighs her love for Egerton and she refuses his advances. Eventually she realizes that her father is right about Jackson/Egerton and she finally understands her father’s decision and is grateful for her own conscience’s leading.

Finley illustrates that although Elsie obeys her father’s insistence that she separate from Jackson/Egerton, she continues to follow her conscience when true love finally arrives. She realizes that she is in love with her father’s friend Edward Travilla. Helena Michie, in her article “‘Dying Between Two Laws’: Girl Heroines, Their Gods, and Their Fathers in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Elsie Dinsmore series” argues that Elsie’s choice of Edward Travilla is “an imaginative act of revenge and subversion.” Finley is clearly arguing that Elsie does have ultimate control, even of her heart. She must answer to her

94 Ibid., 158-164.
95 Ibid., 249.
96 Ibid., 320-327.
97 Ibid., 332-333.
98 Michie, “‘Dying Between Two Laws,’” 198.
conscience, even when it conflicts with her heart, but she has developed the strength of character to be spiritually independent, even in such an important matter. Elsie’s Womanhood begins with the announcement of Elsie and Edward’s engagement. Although Mr. Travilla is not the man with whom Mr. Dinsmore imagined his daughter would fall in love, Travilla is a morally upright Christian man, who has demonstrated his devotion to Elsie repeatedly. Except for the age difference Mr. Dinsmore has no grounds for disapproval. Once Elsie confirms her love for Edward her father reluctantly consents to the marriage.

Finley continues her nuanced discussion of obedience. During Elsie’s engagement there is one incident which highlights her deeply held beliefs about honesty and obedience. While sitting in the garden one day she is confronted by Tom Jackson. She quickly rejects him and tries to send him away, but he pulls out a pistol and threatens to shoot her unless she promises not to marry Travilla. She refuses to make the promise, and he finally relents, as long as she promises not to tell anyone about their meeting for 24 hours. She agrees. Despite the duress, Elsie fulfills her promise and waits 24 hours to tell her father and her fiancé about the threats. Although she could violate her promise not to tell, Elsie keeps her word. Once again Finley illustrates Elsie’s character and conscience in her independent decision.

One of the most interesting passages in the discussion of obedience in Elsie’s Womanhood (and perhaps the entire series) is during her honeymoon at Viamede (Elsie’s plantation inherited from her mother). Elsie and her new husband are talking and she is anxious to show him around the plantation. He thinks she should rest instead and she comments that since she promised to obey in her wedding vows, she would.
“Hush, hush!” he said flushing. “I meant to have that left out. And did I not tell you you were to have your own way that night and ever after? You’ve already done enough obeying to last you a lifetime.” . . . “How will you obey when I give you no orders? . . . I’m your husband, your friend, your protector, your lover, but not your master.”

It is very clear not only from this passage but from others throughout the series that Travilla believes in Elsie’s independence.

This incident offers some very interesting insight into the author’s ideas about obedience and marriage. Although some may argue that Horace Dinsmore as the ideal male in the series, I think Edward Travilla is depicted as the ideal man (husband). From his first meeting with Elsie when she is eight, he has a tremendous insight into her personality and her sensitive nature. Even her little friends recognize how likable and funny Mr. Travilla is. Edward Travilla is Elsie’s defender long before her father takes up his right to the position. On more than one occasion he recognizes her virtues and defends them to her father. During her childhood he refers to her as “my little friend.” He is deeply and completely devoted to her. Elsie understands that Edward is special in his regard for her. When asked why she would marry someone almost as old as her own father she replies, “I have grown so sick of silly, brainless fops, who expect women neither to talk any kind of sense nor understand it!” She recognizes that he appreciates a thinking woman who knows her own mind.

Finley continues Elsie’s story after her marriage. Elsie is to be a wife and a mother, but she is also a Christian woman fulfilling her call in the world. Despite, or

---

100 Pam Hardman argues in her article “The Steward of her Soul: Elsie Dinsmore and the Training of a Victorian Child” that Horace Dinsmore is the ideal Victorian man, embodying both “muscular Christianity” and late 19th-century parenting ideals.
102 Finley, *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands*, 11.
103 Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore*, 69 and 225. See also *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands*, 107.
104 Finley, *Elsie’s Womanhood*, 12.
perhaps as a result of, the cultural challenges, including encounters with the KKK, and familial challenges, including the resentment of the aunts to whom she had been most generous, Elsie grows stronger in her faith. She resists any attempts to curb her hospitality, whether to Southern relatives or new Northern transplants. Finley clearly recognizes the problems of Elsie’s unique situation, but she uses those problems as an opportunity to demonstrate how Christian morality can attempt to change the cultural norms.

Finley further illustrates Elsie’s obedience to her own conscience when her first child is born. Her father comes to see her and tells her that he hopes her daughter is as good as she was. This opens a discussion of parenting technique. Elsie’s father says,

“I governed you too much. It would probably have ruined a less amiable temper, a less loving heart, than yours. It is well for parents to be sometimes a little blind to trivial faults. And I was so strict, so stern, so arbitrary, so severe. My dear, be more lenient to your child. But of course she will never find sternness in either you or her father.”

Elsie acknowledges that she and Edward have already discussed the issue and decided that their parenting style would be different from her father’s parenting style.

Finley’s portrayal of Elsie’s obedience continues in Elsie’s Motherhood. The book opens with the celebration of Elsie and Edward’s tenth wedding anniversary. They celebrate with a small party of friends. Elsie illustrates her continued sense of obedience in her treatment of her children. Despite the cultural expectation that Elsie will remain with her guests and leave her children to be cared for by a servant, Elsie attends to her own children. Her duty as a mother takes precedence over almost any other commitment.

---

105 Finley, Elsie’s Motherhood, 37.
106 Finley, Elsie’s Womanhood, 199.
or obligation. Although she is criticized for being a “slave” to her children,\textsuperscript{107} she continues to make them her central priority.

Elsie’s decisions regarding obedience are not the only examples of obedience discussed. There are also other incidents of morally complex dis/obedience. This book is set in the South immediately following the Civil War. Much of the book centers on the difficulties of many in the South and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Finley highlights how bitterness and anger have caused people to lash out. One of Elsie’s cousins becomes involved in the KKK and later, through discussions with Elsie, Edward and Horace, changes his mind. His mother forbids him to quit, but he insists that he was duped into joining and owes no obligation of membership. Since he took an oath to do the organization no harm he does not turn anyone over to the police but he also refuses to take part in their midnight raids. This illustrates again how the issue of obedience can sometimes be morally complicated but can also build strength of character.

One of the results of the individualized concept of moral decision-making is the development of a sense of personal responsibility.\textsuperscript{108} One must not only make his or her decision, but must take responsibility for the consequences. \textit{Elsie’s Children} highlights that as children grow older, they must make more of their own choices. Early in the book Elsie’s oldest daughter has a tooth ache. The tooth needs to be extracted, but the girl is terrified of the dentist. Instead of insisting that she go, Elsie reasons with her daughter, but ultimately allows her to decide for herself.\textsuperscript{109}

Finley continues to demonstrate the responsibility to conscience as the next generation comes of age. More and more important decisions must be made, not least of

\textsuperscript{107} Finley, \textit{Elsie’s Motherhood}, 24.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{109} Finley, \textit{Elsie’s Children}, 40.
all regarding marriage. There are several incidents which highlight questions of obedience and honesty. When two cousins of Elsie travel for the summer, their mother attempts to marry them off. She is frustrated when one of her daughters (Isadore) refuses to dance and flirt. She supports her other daughter’s desire to marry for money. Although Isadore is technically disobedient, she is following her Christian conscience. Once again Finley clearly demonstrates that obedience to conscience builds the strength of character necessary to spiritual independence.

The idea of marrying for money comes up repeatedly. Women were particularly vulnerable to the hardships of poverty and were dependent upon marriage as their only access to economic power. Since some of Elsie’s relations lost all their money in the war, the girls must find good matches or be left poor. Elsie’s daughters reject this kind of thinking for “their mother had taught them that to give the hand without the heart was folly and sin.” A continuation of the theme of integrity in marriage is evidenced in the fact that their father, Edward, holds any young man seeking to court his daughters to the same standard of moral purity to which he holds his daughters. This is an interesting turn on the theme of equal rights (and obligations?). Although it is considered preposterous by the other characters in the novel and it seems that the girls may never find suitable mates, the standard remains. Finley’s implication is that marrying for money is not an acceptable assertion of power. Instead she is encouraging a faith and values based exertion of female power.

110 Although Elsie inherits property directly, marriage generally makes women particularly vulnerable.
111 Epstein, Politics of Domesticity, 67-87.
112 Finley, Elsie’s Children, 225.
113 Ibid., 258-259.
Both *Elsie’s Motherhood* and *Elsie’s Children* conclude by highlighting the relationship between personal decision-making and obedience. The author’s argument has come full circle. Just as Elsie had to choose to obey God as a young girl, her children will need to learn to obey God as well. Usually that corresponds with parental obedience, but sometimes a person must simply make his or her own decision. Perhaps the author summarizes her own thoughts best when she has Edward tell his young son—"'Men have no more right to do as they please than boys. They must obey God. If His will is theirs, they may do as they please, just as you may if it is your pleasure to be good and obedient.'"  

**Longsuffering Contentment**

In spite of all her trials and vexations, little Elsie was the happiest person in the family, for she had in her heart that peace which the world can neither give nor take away, that joy which the Savior give to His own, and no man taketh from them.  

Longsuffering highlights the importance of patience and self-sacrifice in the Christian life. Certainly the Elsie Dinsmore series focuses on the idea of suffering, but always with a sense of purpose. Through the experiences of Elsie and her family, Finley illustrates how suffering can help define the purpose of one’s life and find spiritual independence. It is important to note that suffering in 19th-century Christianity was viewed as a pathway to growth and positive change. Suffering was seen as an opportunity to improve life—both the present life here on earth and the future life in heaven. Finley clearly argues for the centrality and importance of suffering in Elsie’s life. Elsie’s suffering begins in the first book. She is mistreated by her father’s family

---

114 Finley, *Elsie’s Motherhood*, 315.  
115 Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore*, 35.
who resent her presence and her principles. She struggles to keep her temper, and struggles with her anger. However, Elsie also works hard to return kindness for evil. Even after her young uncle Arthur teases her and causes her to falter in her lessons, she buys him a toy that he wants. She refuses to let his meanness affect her generosity.\textsuperscript{116}

There are many incidents that cause Elsie great suffering in \textit{Elsie Dinsmore}. Rose’s departure causes her terrible suffering. Before Rose leaves she says to Elsie “‘I know, dear little one, that you have peculiar trials, and that you often feel the want of sympathy and love, but you may always find them in Jesus.’”\textsuperscript{117} Elsie’s comfort in her trials is that none of her suffering is in vain. The homecoming of Elsie’s much-awaited father brings only further suffering. He despises her beliefs and is extremely strict with her.\textsuperscript{118} Her only comfort comes in turning to God. Over and over again as she and her father struggle to get to know one another Elsie finds herself crying and turning to God for comfort. Rose’s departure and her father’s arrival both cause her terrible suffering. She mourns for her lost mother figure and for the father who refuses to love her. However, it is Elsie’s ability to find contentment in spite of this suffering that is quite remarkable.

Another incident vividly illustrates the depths of Elsie’s contentment. Elsie and her father, along with her aunts Lora, Adelaide and Enna, are almost killed when the driver loses control of the horses during a carriage ride. Everyone is terrified, but “Elsie alone preserved a cheerful serenity. She had built her house upon the rock, and knew that it would stand. Her destiny was in her Heavenly Father’s hands, and she was content to leave it there. Even death had no terrors to the simple unquestioning faith of the little

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 38-40.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 57.
child who had put her trust in Jesus.”119 Unlike her aunts, and even her father, Elsie was not afraid. No suffering or fear could separate her from God. Finley wants to demonstrate the contrast between this useless suffering of Elsie’s aunts and father, which offers no clarity of purpose, and Elsie’s later suffering, which will help her to grow in her own sense of purpose and spiritual independence.

Elsie’s father admires her ability and desire to suffer without complaint and forgive without bitterness. When her uncle Arthur pushes her down a hill and she is seriously injured, she wants more than anything to be able to forgive him.120 She sees her ability to forgive as a sign of her spiritual maturity. The more she is able to endure, the more she grows in her faith.

Finley continues to illustrate the beneficial aspects of suffering in Elsie’s struggles with her father. Although their battle of wills results in greater suffering than Elsie has ever known before, she also recognizes the time as a period of serious spiritual growth. Her mammy convinces her however that Jesus “would help her to bear every trial, and in His own good time, remove it.”121 She feels her suffering is increased because her father had come to love her and show her affection, and now she must try to live without it.122 She struggles to understand why she is being made to suffer, but eventually decides that the time she had been spending with her father, and her preoccupation with earning his affection had drawn her away from God. The new state of affairs, however, offers her ample time to read her Bible and pray.123

---

119 Ibid., 146.
120 Finley, Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands, 56-57.
121 Ibid., 84.
122 Ibid., 94.
123 Ibid., 98-99.
When her father takes away her letters from Miss Rose and forbids her to write or receive any more Elsie is inwardly furious. She is obedient, though she resents his interference with her correspondence.\textsuperscript{124} When he offers complete restoration if she will only promise to obey him always and implicitly, she is sorely tempted to let go of her principles. But she does not. She holds firm in her belief and is once again banished from her father’s presence.\textsuperscript{125} She finds comfort in the encouragement of her fellow Christians\textsuperscript{126} as well as from scripture\textsuperscript{127} and prayer.\textsuperscript{128} The narrator compares her to a martyr, for she suffers unjustly.\textsuperscript{129} Later, as her suffering increases, Elsie models herself after Christ—wanting to “yield a perfect submission to her heavenly Father’s will, and to endure with patience and meekness whatever trial He might see fit to appoint her.”\textsuperscript{130} Elsie finds strength in her belief that she is suffering for some greater purpose. Ultimately she hopes that the strength of her faith will draw her father to Christ.\textsuperscript{131} Eventually, after a serious illness and near death experience, the strength of her faith does draw her father to God, and he becomes a Christian.\textsuperscript{132} Her suffering, as severe as it was, was not without purpose. Her deepest heart’s desire is granted through her suffering.\textsuperscript{133}

\textit{Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands} is really the pinnacle of Elsie’s suffering. After her father becomes a Christian her life is much happier. Although there are trials to be sustained in \textit{Elsie’s Girlhood}, there are none that compare to her earlier struggles. Nonetheless, her struggles once again serve a purpose—they highlight her goals in

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 97 and 126.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 189.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 160-164.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 242.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 60.
searching for a spouse. Mere affection and pity, as she feels for her crippled childhood friend, Herbert, is not sufficient. His subsequent death grieves Elsie, but she realizes that her feelings of compassion would not have been enough to sustain a marriage.

Passionate emotion, as she feels for Jackson/Egerton, is also insufficient in her search for a marriage partner. His later behavior illustrates how misguided those feelings can be. Instead of searching based on emotional response Elsie must find a balanced relationship of give and take that includes love and a shared set of values. Finally she is able to find the love of Edward Travilla and accept his marriage proposal. Her suffering equips her with the proper tools and perspective to find a suitable mate. Finley demonstrates how one important life decision can only be made with the clarity offered through experiences of suffering.

Elsie also suffers through both the loss of her mother-in-law and the illness of her daughter. Elsie grieves for the loss of her mother-in-law, who shares both Elsie’s religious faith and her love of Edward. From their first meeting when Elsie is a little girl Mrs. Travilla is a comfort to Elsie.\(^{134}\) Throughout her trials with her father, Mrs. Travilla encourages Elsie and helps her to understand how God works through times of terrible suffering.\(^{135}\) So the loss of a woman so dear to her heart is a terrible blow for Elsie. Nonetheless, Elsie’s mourning is offset by her knowledge that Mrs. Travilla is in heaven with Jesus. It is a great comfort to Elsie and her husband in their time of tremendous loss.\(^{136}\)

While the family is in Europe, Elsie’s first child, wee Elsie, gets deathly ill. The whole family mourns and grieves for the little girl. Her mother nurses her child day and

\(^{134}\) Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore*, 81.
\(^{135}\) Finley, *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands*, 159 and 193
\(^{136}\) Finley, *Elsie’s Womanhood*, 215.
night, praying for her healing and resigning herself to losing her little girl, trusting that God’s will would be done. Wee Elsie is severely ill, but she slowly recovers. The family is spared the loss.\textsuperscript{137} However, even this suffering is not without purpose. It prepares their hearts for a later trial in the loss of another child.

One source of suffering for Elsie and her family is the Civil War. Although they are not actually in the United States, they watch and wait as their families and friends suffer and struggle—sending their husbands and children to fight and die on opposite sides of the battle-field. Elsie and her family struggle because they clearly understand both sides of the debate and know that the war is going to be long and horrible.\textsuperscript{138} The family’s return to the United States is a sad one. They mourn for the many men lost, both their Northern friends and their Southern relatives.\textsuperscript{139} However, the war also offers Elsie ample opportunity to illustrate her Christian principles, through her generosity, her kindness and her ability to turn the other cheek. She helps her suffering loved ones, by rebuilding homes and reestablishing households.

With the growth of Elsie’s children the focus often shifts away from Elsie and onto her children. Finley uses the parenting of Elsie and Edward to offer both an implicit critique of Mr. Dinsmore’s parenting, and to offer further illustrations of the relationship between longsuffering patience and understanding one’s purpose. Although Elsie attempts to teach her children the same lessons in humility, self-sacrifice and obedience that her father taught her, she shows her children far more grace than her father ever showed her. One of the most important lessons is in forgiveness. Elsie teaches her children that they must forgive those who wrong them and return good for evil. When

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 250-253.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 226-237.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 305-320.
they learn to show this kind of patience and grace, then they will be able to find true happiness. Elsie begins her lessons to her children with her own example. When she returns to her native land she shows tremendous forbearance and generosity in dealing with her relatives (many have lost everything). Regardless of their selfishness and ingratitude Elsie shows only love and generosity.\textsuperscript{140} Finley again uses Elsie to illustrate the nature of forgiveness and generosity when she stumbles on the cruel governess of her youth. She helps each member of the family. Miss Day (now Mrs. Gibson) finds that through attentive medical care her health is recovered. Her daughter also receives medical attention (for her eyes) and her son is bailed out of jail. The two children are sent out West with everything they need to make their way in the world.\textsuperscript{141}

Finley continues to illustrate the purposive nature of suffering in the lives of Elsie’s children. Whether their young second cousins coerce them into disobedience or intentionally frighten them by jumping out of a closet in Ku Klux Klan robes, Elsie encourages her children to forgive and be gracious, even when it is not easy\textsuperscript{142}. Of course, the purpose of their suffering is illustrated when through their offer of forgiveness they win the hearts of their young cousins.\textsuperscript{143} Later, when their second cousin Molly is injured in a terrible accident they are asked whether or not they are willing to bring her along to the shore. Their mother explains that they will have to sometimes sacrifice their own desires in order to entertain Molly. Nonetheless, they willingly attend to Molly.\textsuperscript{144} Later, when Elsie’s Aunt Enna and Grandpa Dinsmore are injured in a terrible carriage accident, the children must sacrifice their most valuable treasure—their mother. She is

\textsuperscript{140} Finley, \textit{Elsie’s Motherhood}, 13.
\textsuperscript{141} Finley, \textit{Elsie’s Children}, 95-96.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 39, 98, 106-107.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 97-113.
the only one available to nurse Aunt Enna back to health. This is a great hardship for her children as well as Elsie, but even in this difficult time Elsie recognizes that “the lesson in self-denial for the sake of others might prove more than compensation.” Her children rise to the occasion, especially her daughter Elsie, and once it becomes clear that Aunt Enna will never fully recover, they willingly accept her children, Molly and Dick, into their family.

One of Finley’s most poignant examples of longsuffering contentment is Elsie’s adopted daughter. In spite of her horrible accident and the fact that she is crippled from the waist down, she eventually learns contentment. Once Elsie makes it clear to Molly that she is neither useless nor a burden, but can contribute to the world in a variety of ways, Molly’s depression turns around. She sets goals for herself and meets them. Eventually she realizes that though there are great disadvantages to her situation, she also much more blessed than many others in this world. As a result of her condition, Molly finds her purpose in life—writing and translation. Finley further illustrates that suffering, even intense suffering, can be a powerful tool in clarifying life’s purpose.

Finley also argues that children can be a tremendous source of suffering. The greatest occasion for suffering for both Elsie and her children is the loss of their dear daughter and sister, Lily. Always a sickly child, her health deteriorates over time until, at the age of seven, she goes to heaven—“Lily was never spoken of as lost or as dead. She had only gone before to the happy land where they all were journeying.” The faith of the Christian means that death holds no power over them. Ultimately Lily’s death, like

145 Ibid., 124.
146 Ibid., 136-138.
147 Ibid., 239.
148 Ibid., 187.
all suffering, is for a purpose. Not only is Lily in heaven, but her death illustrates the fleeting nature of life and the importance of living for God. Even living children can be a source of suffering. The series ends with the matching of Elsie’s oldest daughter for marriage. Elsie mourns for the loss of her daughter, but is joyful for her daughter’s happiness. She reflects on her own engagement and marriage and realizes how she has grown through the sorrows and difficulties. She realizes that suffering has a purpose when it creates vulnerability and growth in the human heart.\(^{149}\)

**Industriousness**

[Elsie] had an eager and growing thirst for knowledge, and was an apt scholar, whom anyone with the least love for the profession might have delighted in teaching.\(^{150}\)

Another theme throughout the series is the emphasis on being industrious. The Sunday School literature of the time highlights the importance of industriousness in children, which is really an extension of the early American Protestant work ethic. Finley illustrates through the work of Elsie and her children that industriousness can be used to create a sense of self-worth and fulfillment, which contribute to spiritual independence. Early in the series Elsie illustrates the importance she places on industriousness when she creates Rose Allison’s goodbye present, a small beaded purse. Although her step-grandmother belittles her work, Elsie knows that it is more precious because it is homemade. Rose recognizes this—“It is beautiful in itself, but I shall value it ten times more because it is a gift, and the work of your own dear little hands.”\(^{151}\)

\(^{149}\) Finley, *Elsie’s Children*, 287-288.
\(^{150}\) Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore*, 285.
\(^{151}\) Ibid., 52.
Elsie’s father recognizes the importance when he responds to the positive report of his daughter’s education with “I am glad to see she is industrious and well-behaved, for I wish her to grow up an intelligent and amiable woman.” Mr. Travilla gives Elsie the gift of a thimble “to encourage you in industry.” These men recognize that teaching Elsie to be industrious will encourage her sense of fulfillment, as well as her own value.

In *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands* Elsie travels North with her father. During her visit with friends she repeatedly emphasizes that, vacation or not, she must do some work—both physical and mental. Even when her little friend questions her need for work, she argues that her father believes that work makes play more enjoyable, and she believes he’s right. *Elsie’s Girlhood* continues to emphasize the importance that Elsie’s father places on industriousness. He tells her that he want her to be “very useful in the church and the world.” Elsie loves to study, not only because of the importance her father places on her intellectual development, but also for her own enjoyment. One of her friends finds her “‘buried alive in her books!’” and calls her “‘a perfect paragon of industry.’”

As Elsie grows older her industry becomes a duty and responsibility. When she comes of age her father begins to explain her wealth to her. She protests, wanting him to take care of things. He tells her that her wealth

“... is one of the talents that God has given you, and I think you ought, at least for the present, to keep the principal and decide for yourself what shall be done with interest. You are old enough now to do so, and I hope

---

152 Ibid., 164-164.
153 Ibid., 310.
154 Finley, *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands*, 302-308.
156 Ibid., 65.
do not wish to shirk the responsibility, since God, in his good providence, has laid it upon you."\(^{157}\)

She must understand and utilize her own wealth, to the best of her abilities. Her willingness to work with her finances contributes not only to her material independence, but to the sense that she has the ability and right to make her own decisions.

Elsie’s responsibilities are not limited to her financial obligations. Once she is married and has children, Elsie and Edward’s primary duty is to raise their children “‘for usefulness here and glory hereafter.’”\(^{158}\) Much of the remainder of the series focuses on this duty and Elsie’s ability to find value in the hard work of parenting. Finley continues to illustrate how spiritual independence is linked to the self-worth that develops from industriousness. *Elsie’s Motherhood* highlights both Elsie’s sacrifices on behalf of her children and her children’s advancement and growth. There is an underlying assumption that the mother’s dedication to her children furthers their development. Elsie functions as their tutor, even though they could afford to hire someone.\(^{159}\) Therefore her children come to love learning and the acquisition of knowledge.\(^{160}\) Their mother understands her love of work and study to be a fulfillment of her life in Christ, and teaches her children to see work in that same light.\(^{161}\) For example, Elsie must teach one of her daughters the lesson of perseverance. Violet loves to begin projects, but fails to follow through. So her mother teaches her moderation. Each day some measure of progress should occur. Rather than jumping in with both feet, slowly but surely work toward a goal.\(^{162}\) Elsie

---

\(^{158}\) Ibid., 272.
\(^{159}\) Finley, *Elsie’s Motherhood*, 29.
\(^{160}\) Ibid., 269.
\(^{161}\) Ibid., 249.
\(^{162}\) Finley, *Elsie’s Children*, 82-83.
knows that incomplete work will leave her feeling useless and without a sense of her own ability to contribute to the world.

Elsie is careful not to teach her children, especially her daughters, that marriage is their primary goal. If they choose to marry they must be extremely careful in their choice of mate. Marriage is no laughing matter, but a serious covenant, sworn before God.\(^{163}\) Instead of focusing on marriage, Elsie’s children learn the importance of education and being able to support themselves.\(^{164}\) Even though Elsie and Edward are wealthy, it is critical that their children be well-educated and well-rounded.\(^{165}\) Their Christian responsibility is not only to do good work, but to teach their children to do good work as well. The narrator summarizes:

[The] lesson—that industry is commanded, idleness forbidden—was one which Elsie had ever been careful to instill into the minds of her children from their earliest infancy. Nor was it enough, she taught them, that they should be doing something. They must be usefully employed, remembering that they were but stewards who must one day give an account to the Lord of all they had done with the talents entrusted to them.\(^{166}\)

Elsie’s children are taught the same lesson that Elsie learned—industriousness creates a sense of fulfillment and self-worth that no amount of money can buy.

**Spiritual Independence**

And young as Elsie was, she had already a very lovely and well-developed Christian character. Though not a remarkably precocious child in other respects, she seemed to have very clear and correct view on almost every subject connected with her duty to God and her neighbor.\(^{167}\)

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 238.
\(^{164}\) Ibid., 236.
\(^{165}\) Ibid., 137.
\(^{166}\) Ibid., 149.
\(^{167}\) Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore*, 34.
Elsie’s journey to spiritual independence is a fascinating variation on an earlier theme in literature. The pious child as Elsie appears in Finley’s work is not a new theme. Throughout the 18th century, and well into the 19th century, literature for children was generally inhabited by children whose profound piety seems beyond our contemporary comprehension. These children often lived only short lives, but their ability to speak on behalf of God himself and directly into the hearts of both the other children and the adults in their lives is quite fascinating. Harriett Beecher Stowe’s Little Eva is a wonderful example. Her piety and capacity to touch and change the hearts and lives around her is famous. Finley’s Elsie shares the same deep sense of piety and an ability to change lives. Unlike Stowe and many of her contemporaries, however Finley did something new with Elsie. Unlike her earlier counterparts pious Elsie survives to adulthood. Elsie’s morality is not a preparation for death, but a preparation for living a complete and fulfilling life. Honesty and obedience contributed to Elsie’s strength of character. Longsuffering contentment showed the meaning and purpose through growth. Industriousness created an understanding of her value and self-worth. These character traits combined to encourage a sense of spiritual independence in Elsie, and later in her children.

Elsie shows great independence in her consideration of spiritual themes. Even at the beginning of the series Elsie can be found studying God’s word, both alone and with other people. Although she yearns to commune with fellow Christians, her studies are no less valid because she does them alone. Finley makes it clear that spiritual seeking combined with her innate stubborn nature gives Elsie the desire to obey her conscience.

---

168 Ibid., 16 and 29.
regardless of the consequences. Her obedience strengthens her character and allows her to exert her spiritual independence.

Elsie often quotes scripture from memory and it is frequently remarked that she has a very thorough knowledge of the Bible.\textsuperscript{169} When challenged to defend her views, she is quite capable of offering scriptural explanations for her beliefs and her actions.\textsuperscript{170} Elsie is very active in her faith, and she converts many people throughout the series (both directly and indirectly). Following a near death experience her Aunt Lora asks her about her calm demeanor. She carefully explains her faith and how to become a Christian. Aunt Lora becomes a Christian.\textsuperscript{171} This is the first of many people who ask Elsie about her contentment despite life’s trials and then convert under her careful tutelage.

Elsie’s strict discipline regarding the observation of the Sabbath creates great trouble in her life. Although she is fastidiously obedient to her father in everything else, she trusts her own judgment in these spiritual matters. Even though her father accuses her of being “morbidly conscientious”\textsuperscript{172} and insists that she is too young to make up her own mind, she refuses to violate her conscience.\textsuperscript{173} Elsie’s spiritual independence and her father’s equally strong will come head to head in \textit{Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands}. Her father rages at one point that Elsie believes that she is “wiser and more capable of interpreting the Bible, and deciding question of right and wrong, than [her] father.”\textsuperscript{174} He is determined to break her obstinate spirit. However Elsie is equally determined to

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 236-241.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 148-150.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 257.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 201-213.
\textsuperscript{174} Finley, \textit{Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands}, 140.
stand up for what she believes is right. It is her serious illness and her father’s conversion that end the stand-off.\textsuperscript{175}

Horace Dinsmore is not Elsie’s only convert in \textit{Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands}.\textsuperscript{176} Both a slave woman named Dinah and Elsie’s Aunt Adelaide convert to Christianity with Elsie’s help. Dinah is very sick and Elsie comes to read to her from the Bible. She explains the Gospel story and Dinah’s heart is moved to accept Christ. Elsie’s Aunt Adelaide converts after her fiancé dies shortly before they are to be married. She grieves tremendously and Elsie is her only confidante in her trial. Her family is unsympathetic and they leave her alone to mourn. Through her great sorrow she comes to accept the Christian faith, as her fiancé already had.\textsuperscript{177} Elsie’s conversions continue in \textit{Elsie’s Girlhood}. Before her friend Herbert proposes to Elsie he tells her that she was the instrument God used to teach him to bring his troubles to God.\textsuperscript{178} Elsie also “converts” Bromly Egerton, but his conversion is only part of his scheme to woo Elsie. Nonetheless, Elsie is strong enough in character to reprimand Egerton when he suggests it is acceptable to waste one’s life on stupid risks and reckless thrills.\textsuperscript{179} Despite her strong feelings for Egerton, she rejects his proposal until he seeks her father’s approval.\textsuperscript{180} She obeys her conscience, even when it conflicts with her heart.\textsuperscript{181} Later,
in deciding to marry Edward Travilla, she follows when her heart and her conscience lead her in the same direction, even though her father expresses doubt at her decision.\textsuperscript{182}

Becoming an adult and beginning a family bring new challenges and decisions. Finley illustrates this in \textit{Elsie's Womanhood}. When Elsie finally comes of age and receives her mother’s fortune she must make decisions about using her money and property. When she goes to her plantation in Louisiana she immediately attempts to meet not only the physical and emotional needs of her people, but their spiritual needs as well. She personally preaches the gospel to them.\textsuperscript{183} When Elsie and Edward are married they establish a home together. “They were an eminently Christian household, carefully instructing their dependents in the things pertaining to godliness, urging them to faith in Jesus evidenced by good works.”\textsuperscript{184} Finley demonstrates the spiritual independence of Elsie through her independence from her husband. They do Christian ministry together, but Elsie also ministers separately from her husband. She chooses to bless those who curse her and teaches her children to do the same.\textsuperscript{185} She follows her own instincts about parenting, regardless of the criticism of those around her.\textsuperscript{186} Elsie bravely faces off against the Ku Klux Klan when they attack her home.\textsuperscript{187} However she also leaps at the opportunity to not only convert a young man who attacked her and her family as a KKK member, but also to take care of his family after his death.\textsuperscript{188}

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 362-363.
\textsuperscript{183} Finley, \textit{Elsie's Womanhood}, 78-80.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 194.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 345. See also \textit{Elsie's Motherhood}, 113.
\textsuperscript{186} Finley, \textit{Elsie's Motherhood}, 24.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 180-181.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 226-240.
Elsie’s example of spiritual independence reflects in the lives of her children. In *Elsie’s Children* the book’s namesakes begin to show their own spiritual independence. They, too, must learn to make wise choices, especially regarding their faith. Their beliefs are challenged from a variety of perspectives. Little Elsie is challenged when her mother’s cousin Molly is angry at God for allowing her to be injured. She answers Molly’s questions and seeks out answers to her own.\(^{189}\) Violet is challenged on two fronts—by secularism and by Roman Catholicism. She struggles for appropriate responses and when she still feels dissatisfied she turns to the scriptures and her parents for answers.\(^{190}\) She defends her faith, and with the help of her mother, eventually leads Isadore to Christ.\(^{191}\) The entire family is challenged by the culture around them. They have a strict moral code that requires moral purity for both men and women.

> “The rule [of purity] should be as strict for men as for women. The sin that makes a woman an outcast from decent society should receive the same condemnation when committed by a man. A woman should require the same absolute moral purity in the man she marries as men do in the women they choose for their wives.”\(^{192}\)

Finley highlights the importance of religious belief in the demonstration of independence. The cultural clash causes conflict and tension on more than one occasion.\(^{193}\) Both little Elsie and Violet have to reject multiple suitors, just like their mother.

> Despite the fact that Elsie and her family are “rather puritanical,”\(^{194}\) or perhaps because of it, they are all very independent minded. They know what they believe and

\(^{189}\) Finley, *Elsie’s Children*, 110-112.
\(^{190}\) Ibid., 161-168.
\(^{191}\) Ibid., 193. It is interesting that despite the author’s clear dislike for the Roman Catholic Church she has Horace Dinsmore argue that there are certainly Christian believers within the Roman Catholic Church—106-107.
\(^{192}\) Ibid., 201.
\(^{193}\) Ibid., 206, 219-220, 222, 242-243 and 254-261.
\(^{194}\) Ibid., 205.
they are willing to stand up for their beliefs. To assume that theological conservatism implies weakness of character or lack of independent thinking and will is a great mistake. Resistance to a surrounding culture of moral depravity and corruption show tremendous strength of will. This is a primary characteristic of not only Elsie, but her daughters as well. This spiritual independence is built up through the strength of character that comes from honesty and obedience, the sense of purpose that develops through longsuffering contentment, and the feeling of fulfillment that grows out of industriousness.

Conclusion

The Elsie Dinsmore series offers a new opportunity to examine our cultural assumptions about both 19th-century evangelicalism and the modern “squeamish”ness with dealing with Christianity as a liberating and progressive system of thought. The books certainly are both evangelical and sentimental. However, they also offer an interesting look at how moral behavior can encourage independent thinking. The Elsie Dinsmore series highlights what some scholars are already trying to argue—that conservative religious beliefs were a source of inspiration and motivation in the progressive movements of the 19th century—including temperance, abolition and the women’s movement.

The books also support another progressive movement of the time—temperance. There are multiple references to the damage alcohol does to the family institution. One very interesting example is the story of Mrs. Gibson. Mrs. Gibson is Elsie’s former governess. When Elsie discovers her as a widow with two children, she tries to help

195 Stallcup, “Stamping the Coin,” 301.
them. Mrs. Gibson’s only living son is an alcoholic who struggles to break the habit.\footnote{\mbox{Finley,} \textit{Elsie’s Children,} 69-96. This is just one incident. The books repeatedly advocate complete abstinence from alcohol.} This is an important aspect of the collapse of the family structure, because the son is following his father’s example, and it is noteworthy that the family’s later success is linked to his rehabilitation. In some ways the Elsie Dinsmore books are even more progressive than others of their time. For example they discourage the use of tobacco for health reasons.\footnote{\mbox{Finley,} \textit{Elsie’s Motherhood,} 255-256.} In a time when few were willing to challenge such a prominent indulgence, the Elsie books acknowledge and promote the newest medical data available.

Although the racism of the texts is quite prominent, it is certainly significant that Elsie and her family are prominently and vehemently pro-Union and anti-KKK. The books also advocate the education of African Americans. Elsie and her husband not only have a schoolhouse for African Americans on their property, but they quickly rebuild it when it is destroyed by the KKK.\footnote{\mbox{Finley,} \textit{Elsie’s Motherhood,} 128 and 150.} It is actually one of the primary reasons their family is targeted by the KKK for attacks. Although modern sensibilities abhor the presence of any racism, Finley actually presents some progressive ideas about the treatment of African Americans.

The Elsie Dinsmore series never makes any direct statements about the women’s movement. However, it is important to note that female characters are seen as independent of their fathers or husbands. One example of Elsie’s independence is her use of her wealth for her own purposes. Once she becomes an adult she is entirely in control of her own money. Her father not only lets her, but actually insists that she take control
of her finances. She has a plantation and it is clear that it is hers to run. Her father sometimes advises her, but generally she is in charge of her monetary investments. When many of her friends and family lose their fortunes during the Civil War, Elsie is insistent on helping them. So, while there is no overt support for the women’s movement, clearly Elsie is an independent woman, not only spiritually, but materially as well.

Claudine Wirths, in her brief article “‘Ms.’ Elsie Dinsmore” calls Martha Finley a “closet feminist” who defended women’s rights and, in her later books, discusses many important historical women.

Temperance, abolition and the women’s movement were important progressive causes during the middle of the 19th century. Although the Elsie Dinsmore books may seem outdated to modern sensibilities, girls of that time were being encouraged to think progressively, not in spite of their religious beliefs, but as a result of them. Barbara Leslie Epstein argues in her book, The Politics of Domesticity, that “[w]ithin the women’s temperance movement of the last quarter of the century the vaguely defined, woman-oriented moral conservatism of the religious movement crystallized into a clearer political and social stance that combined moral conservatism with some feminist demands.” Finley is arguing for the same use of morality as a tool of reform and change.

This kind of analysis will be substantially bolstered through a comparison of other series set during the same time period. I feel a very natural comparison is with another important girls’ series of the time—the Little Women series. Both series follow the life of

---

200 Finley, Elsie’s Womanhood, 23-27. See Jackie E. Stallcup’s article “Stamping the Coin of Character: Elsie Dinsmore and the Power of Christian Wealth” for a much fuller discussion of this subject.
201 Finley, Elsie’s Womanhood, 347-350.
203 Epstein, Politics of Domesticity, 6.
a young woman from childhood, through adolescence and into the lives of her children. Both series were originally published within years of each other and were extremely popular with young girls. This leads to the question—how do the concepts of sensitive conscience and spiritual independence develop in the *Little Women* series?
Chapter III: A Feminine Critique—The Little Women Series

The *Little Women* series has served as a point of great interest, both as a popular series for generations of children and as a source of scholarly analysis and critique. There has been disagreement about the degree to which the series supports feminist ideals, but most scholars agree that the books, especially the later ones, use the common rhetoric of the women’s movement. Although many of the characters support progressive ideas in theory, does their behavior encourage the independent thinking and cultural reform required to change society? Opinions on this matter vary greatly as scholars approach the issue from different sides. The majority of the discussion focuses, as is the case with most series fiction, on the first book in the series—*Little Women*. An examination of some of the articles written will give an interesting overview of the subject of gender dynamics and reform ideology in the novels.

Some scholars challenge feminist critiques of *Little Women*. “Vital Signs at Play: Objects as Vessels of Mother-Daughter Discourse in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*” by Holly Virginia Blackford, uses psychoanalysis to examine how objects, like boots and gloves, function as symbols that both connect the girls to their mother, and enable them to transition into separation from their mother and each other. The author argues that it is not necessarily the objects themselves, but rather what they symbolize (heart-felt affection and hard work), that connects the family together. Blackford concludes that despite feminist critique, the book engages the complex and compelling transition from girlhood to adulthood, and offers approaches to functionally coping with female adolescence from the perspective of each of the March sisters.204

---

Other articles challenge the notion that the book is really all about female experience. Ken Parille argues, quite compellingly, that the male Laurie offers a fascinating counterpart to the female Jo. They both yearn to resist societal expectations, especially those defined by gender. Although many scholars assume that Laurie is free to be and to become whatever he wants, the story does not bear this out. In fact, Laurie faces the same call to submission and self-denial faced by Jo. Both must sacrifice their artistic dreams in order to successfully reach adulthood. The author argues that “Little Women remains relevant to us as a story of how both boys and girls confront cultural limitations.”

Stephanie Foote in her article “Resentful Little Women: Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott” offers an alternative analysis in her argument that the book is not really as much about gender, as it is about class negotiations. Concepts of class and status were becoming very complicated in the middle of the nineteenth century, and there is little doubt that the March family is thrust into the complex world of being poor gentlewomen. Ultimately the author argues that though the domestication of the female characters is generally criticized, it is actually the family that creates a safe haven from the economic and other class complexities surrounding them.

Although the majority of the critics discuss only Little Women, there are sources that also highlight gender discussion in Little Men and Jo’s Boys. These books, especially Little Men, focus primarily on male characters, which compels critics to take a broader view of gender dynamics with the series. Jo’s Boys includes a discussion of the

---

women's movement and the female characters in the book, though they are somewhat one dimensional, are offered new opportunities. Gregory Eiselein, in his article, “Modernity and Louisa May Alcott's Jo's Boys,” discusses how Alcott conflates the women's movement, especially a sense of increasing freedom for women, with the technological advancements of modernity. He argues that modernity brought with it not only technological developments, but certain concomitant emotional “detachments” that contributed in large part to Alcott's increasing sense of freedom for women.207

Another way Alcott attempts to be on the forefront of cultural engagement is in her discussion of abolitionism. Although there are very few direct references to abolitionism or slavery, Karen Sands-O'Connor argues that the cultural expectations when she was writing precluded her from including direct references. With the Civil War just having ended, many Americans were eager to put those terrible times behind them. So Alcott was forced to use more subtle inclusions of her abolitionist ideals. Sands-O'Connor argues that Alcott uses abolitionist sentiment as a plumb-line of virtue. Those who line up appropriately are successful (Amy). Those who fail to line up find themselves in misfortune (Jo). Amy is ultimately successful—in receiving her opportunity to travel in Europe, and later in her marriage to Laurie—because of her willingness to work on behalf of the freedmen. Laurie is the other character who is associated with abolitionist virtues, and therefore rewarded with Amy—and a happy marriage. Sands-O'Connor argues that Jo does not find a similar happiness until she and

---

her professor admit an African-American student into their new school. Her alignment with abolitionist ideals permits her to finally achieve happiness. 208

I am contributing to and challenging some of these earlier discussions by examining how religious ideals shaped the sensitive consciences of children throughout the series. This sensitive conscience presented opportunities for characters (even female characters) to express their spiritual independence and voice. However, having already examined the Elsie Dinsmore series, I have observed that spiritual independence, especially for female characters, is not illustrated as vividly in the Little Women books as it is in the Elsie Dinsmore series. I will focus on analysis of the same three moral principles—honesty/obedience, longsuffering contentment and industry—and how those principles do or do not develop a unique sense of spiritual independence in Alcott’s series. In these books honesty and obedience function to encourage material gain and the defense of family honor. Longsuffering contentment draws people together into community, but it also dampens the ardent spirit of many characters. Industry functions both as a familial duty and requirement and also as a comfort in difficult times. Although the moral principles are present, they serve to foster spiritual maturity that fails to question the societal norms.

Honesty and Obedience

“[H]elp all you can, be obedient, and keep happy safe at home.” 209

As I have already noted, honesty and obedience are critically important to understanding the development of the sensitive conscience in the Elsie Dinsmore. They

begin the process of developing Elsie and her children’s sensitive consciences in important ways. The strength of character that Elsie builds through her lessons in obedience to her conscience is fundamental in guiding her sense of independence and that which she passes on to her children. However, in the Little Women books, honesty and obedience are important principles but they function very differently. Although Finley links the development of strong character with obedience and honesty, Alcott focuses on the material gain and family honor which result from the encouragement of obedience and honesty.

In the first book, *Little Women*, the theme of obedience and honesty is highlighted by the actions of Jo and her sisters as well as through the advice of their mother. Unlike the Elsie Dinsmore books which focus only on Elsie, *Little Women* focuses on the upbringing and behavior of four girls. Alcott follows a common practice in 19th and early 20th-century girls’ fiction by using multiple protagonists in an attempt to reach a broader audience. Each girl has her own struggle and strengths. Meg, the oldest March daughter, is a loving and tender girl who struggles with her vanity and her desire to be wealthy. Jo is the next oldest child. Her vibrancy and spirit bring life and energy to the March family. However, her anger and independent nature are depicted as negative traits which must be quenched, or at least well-managed. Beth, the third March girl, is a quiet and pious child, but her shyness is viewed as a characteristic that inhibits her ability to grow and mature properly. The youngest March girl is Amy, whose artistic spirit inspires her family, but her selfishness and conceit must be controlled so that she can become a true gentlewoman.
The theme of obedience is frequently highlighted through the behavior of Amy. Like Stephanie Foote suggests in her article "Resentful Little Women: Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott" I would argue that, although Jo has generally been the focus of scholarly criticism about Little Women, Amy is actually the locus around which much of the action takes place.²¹⁰ There are several incidents which highlight Amy’s battle with obedience. One of the earliest situations occurs when Amy, the only March girl attending school, gets into trouble with her teacher. Her disgrace begins with her desire to be popular and fit in. All the girls at school are buying and eating pickled limes, and Amy yearns to belong. She borrows the money from her sisters and brings the contraband pickled limes to school. One of her classmates tells the teacher that she has them, and she is required to dispose of them. When he accuses her of holding back, she exclaims “‘I never lie, sir.’”²¹¹ She is completely obedient to his punishment, even though it seems harsh and unfair. Her disobedience to the rules of the classroom leads to her great disgrace. Amy claims that worse than the punishment is knowing “‘I shall have to tell at home, and they will be so disappointed in me!’”²¹² Alcott depicts Amy’s disobedience to her teacher as a disgrace to the family honor.

The compassion of her family allows Amy to grow indignant, and when her mother removes her from the school Amy decides she has been wronged. Her mother is quick to inform Amy that “I don’t approve of corporal punishment . . . [but you] deserved some punishment for disobedience.”²¹³ It is an important lesson for Amy, and
the first step in dealing with her ego. Although Amy is a gifted child, she must learn that “conceit spoils the finest genius.”

On other occasions Alcott portrays Amy’s obedience as much more critical to the family well-being. When Beth falls seriously ill, Amy is to be sent to Aunt March’s house. Amy refuses, and since her mother is gone, the sisters struggle to manage her. When Laurie (the neighbor boy and family friend) finds Amy weeping on the couch he convinces her that obedience is the best course. It is interesting to note, however, that he convinces her with promises of “gallivanting” and “go[ing] to the theater.” He offers her material gain in exchange for her willing obedience.

During her time at Aunt March’s, Amy again struggles with obedience. Once again it is the promise of material things which convinces her that obedience is the wisest course. She is talking with Aunt March’s servant, Esther, when it comes to light that Aunt March will give her a turquoise ring if she behaves nicely. “From that day she was a model of obedience.” Her good behavior is linked to the promise of material gain. Unlike Elsie, whose main battles with obedience are against the familial authorities in her life, Amy’s battle is with herself and her own selfish desires. However, her obedience is regularly rewarded by pandering to her selfish desires. The material gain as a reward for Amy’s obedience only continues throughout the rest of the book.

Alcott uses several incidents in the second part of Little Women to illustrate how well Amy has learned the lesson of obedience. When she is given the opportunity to work in a community fair to raise money for charity, she jumps at the chance. She is excited to work the art table and put out some of her own works. At the last minute she is

---

214 Ibid., 74.
215 Ibid., 178.
216 Ibid., 191.
sent off to work on flowers with the little girls. She is sorely disappointed. Nonetheless she proves herself the better woman by doing her very best at the job she is given. She struggles to reign in her resentment, but manages well and her grace and magnanimity make her family and friends proud.\(^{217}\) As a result of her improved behavior and gracious attitude, Amy once again receives material gain when she is asked to go abroad with relatives. Her sister Jo, who is not as graceful or kind as Amy, is furious. She is older, but the relatives wish to bring Amy because she “is more docile, will make a good companion . . . , and receive gratefully any help the trip may give her.”\(^{218}\) Alcott uses this occasion to illustrate the importance of learning self-sacrifice and humility in both action and attitude.

Amy’s example is arguably the most poignant lesson in obedience and honesty offered in *Little Women*. However, Alcott also uses Jo’s and Meg’s lessons in obedience and honesty to highlight how critical honesty and obedience are, especially to family honor. One example of this is how Alcott highlights Jo’s struggles to be honest and obedient to her upbringing. During an extended trip to New York, Jo’s desire to make money by selling her writing is so strong that she begins writing sensational literature in order to get published. Knowing that her parents would disapprove of selling her principles for money, she decides not to tell them.\(^{219}\) Her dishonesty haunts her, and she wishes “that Father and Mother hadn’t been so particular about such things.”\(^{220}\) Nonetheless, a discussion with her good friend Friedrich Bhaer clarifies the dangers of producing and reading sensational literature and confirms Jo’s own moral sense, so she

\(^{217}\) Ibid., 293-300  
\(^{218}\) Ibid., 301.  
\(^{219}\) Ibid., 339-340.  
\(^{220}\) Ibid., 347.
stops her sensational writing. Jo’s insistence on remaining anonymous and her decision not to “tell them at home” highlight that she is afraid of dishonoring her family with her work. Although financial gain is not the result of her obedience to her conscience, her family honor is certainly an important aspect of Jo’s decision.

Meg also has struggles with honesty and obedience. Her greatest trial is her poverty, and when given the opportunity to live the good life she jumps at it. During her visit with a friend Meg not only allows herself to be dressed and primped to such an extent that she is hardly recognizable, she also tells Laurie, “I’m not Meg tonight, I’m a ‘doll’ who does all sorts of crazy things.” She begs Laurie not to tell her family, insisting that she will confess to all her bad behavior, but in her own way. Meg also allows the people around her to tell lies about her and her family. However, Laurie’s disapproval and her own pain are sufficient punishment. She realizes that her dishonesty and disobedience have gained her nothing materially, and have cost her family honor.

Alcott clearly links both material gain and family honor to obedience and honesty. When the March girls are young, there seems to be a more direct link to material gain. With time the girls come to understand the nuances of behavior and consequence. Although honesty and obedience may not always bring immediate gain, Amy illustrates that the long term result of such conscientious behavior is not only maintaining the family honor, but material wealth as well.

Alcott’s next book in the series, Little Men, offers an interesting counterpoint to Little Women. Although the primary characters in Little Men are male, these books

---

221 Ibid., 346–348.  
222 Ibid., 339–340.  
223 Ibid., 93.  
224 Ibid., 96.  
225 Ibid., 94.
continued to be popular with young girls. Alcott also includes a few female characters to balance the masculine emphasis of the book. It is difficult to know Alcott’s rationale in using male characters to reach her female readers. Perhaps she was continuing Jo’s obsession with boys in her story. Perhaps she simply felt she could not tell her story by continuing to focus on female characters. Regardless I will continue my analysis through the male characters, for they are Alcott’s focal point. By the beginning of *Little Men*, Amy and Jo have also settled down and married. Amy married Laurie and Jo marries Friedrich Bhaer and begins a school for boys. The lessons in obedience and honesty in this book focus heavily on Jo’s motley crew of boys. The most prominent lesson in honesty and obedience weaves its way through the book. One of the young boys that the school accepts, Nat, is an orphan from the streets. Nat has learned to make his way through the world by whatever means necessary. When he starts at the school he struggles to tell the truth. His dishonesty always served him well on the streets, but at Plumfield school it brings him nothing but disgrace and distrust. Nat loves the school and his “parents”, Mr. and Mrs. Bhaer, but it is not enough to break his lying habit. Finally Mr. Bhaer implements a unique form of punishment. When Nat lies, he must ferule his beloved instructor. Nat is terrified at the thought of striking Mr. Bhaer, and minds his tongue for a while. Eventually, however, he lies to avoid trouble, and when he is found out he must dole out the punishment. He disgraces not only himself, but the

---

226 Although in my discussion of *Little Women* I generally used the first names of characters, I will generally be using “Mr. Bhaer and Mrs. Jo” or “Father and Mother Bhaer” to refer to Friedrich and Jo Bhaer in my discussion of *Little Men* and *Jo’s Boys* because this is more consistent with the author’s usage.

227 Ferule—This is a form of punishment in which the punisher slaps the hand of the punished with a piece of wood. Mr. Bhaer is insisting that instead of punishing Nat, Nat will have to punish him.

whole Plumfield “family”. Alcott clearly links the young boy’s behavior to the disgrace of the entire school.

Far worse than any punishment, however is that Nat’s friends no longer trust him. When money goes missing he is accused. Mr. Bhaer candidly tells Nat, “‘your old fault makes us more ready to doubt you than we should be if we could trust you as we do some of the boys, who never fib.’” Nat struggles under the assumption that he is both a thief and a liar. He loses materially when the business partnership with Tommy Bangs is dissolved. His good friend Dan eventually tries to clear Nat’s name by confessing. However, he too is innocent. Eventually both boys are exonerated, but the lesson stands: “Honesty and honor had a new meaning now; a good name was more precious than gold; for, once lost, money could not buy it back.”

Jack is the young thief whose behavior causes so much trouble. His guardian uncle is a businessman who regularly cheats his customers. Although Jack has some talents and skills, he misuses them and takes advantage of other people. He must learn the hard lesson that honor and honesty are valuable virtues. He finally admits in a letter that he is the thief and runs away. His uncle forces him to return to Plumfield and Mr. Bhaer has a serious discussion with him, encouraging him to make things right. Jack “decided to buy up a little integrity, even at a high price, and secure the respect of his playmates, though it was not a salable article.”

---

229 Ibid., 202-222.  
230 Ibid., 212-213.  
231 Ibid., 222.  
232 Ibid., 240.
The lesson in honesty and integrity is confirmed after the death of John Brooke, Meg’s husband and the father of two of the Plumfield children. The children are talking about what made John Brooke a great man:

“Uncle John once had a place in the office of a man who cheated, and when this man wanted uncle to help him do it, uncle wouldn’t though he was offered a big salary. The man was angry and said, ‘You will never get on in this business with such strict principles,’ and uncle answered back, ‘I never will try to get on without them,’ and left the place for a much harder and poorer one.”

Again Alcott recognizes the relationship between material gain and honesty. Although the gain might not be immediate, Alcott argues, eventually the world will recognize and honor the morally upright. This is consistent even through John Brooke, who loses out financially in the short term, eventually makes enough money to support his family without debt and to save money for the future. Even the children recognize the greatness of this simple, quiet man who worked hard to be honest and upright in all things. These are the types of examples set by the adults in the lives of Plumfield children. And these lessons are taken to heart. John Brooke’s son Demi, only ten years old, “entered into his inheritance—the memory of a wise and tender father, the legacy of an honest man.”

Alcott does not discuss the issue of female obedience and honesty in *Little Men*. Her female characters generally avoid the traps of dishonesty and disobedience. Alcott only includes two female schoolmates in Jo’s school. Daisy, daughter of Meg, is the stereotypical quiet, obedient and submissive female. She loves all things maidenly,

---

233 Ibid., 285-286.
234 Ibid., 287.
235 Ibid., 290.
including cooking, sewing and keeping house. The author makes clear that no one limits Daisy, but that she limits herself to those things which she is capable of fulfilling. “Daisy knew nothing about woman’s rights; she quietly took all she wanted, and no one denied her claim, because she did not undertake what she could not carry out, but unconsciously used the all-powerful right of her own influence to win from others any privilege for which she had proved her fitness.” The other female character, Nan, is the complete opposite of Daisy. She is bold and brassy, “with the spirit of a rampant reformer.” She does not wait for anything, but seizes every chance to prove herself to the boys around her. Alcott divides girls and women into two categories—feminine women and reform women. One of the most critical distinctions in the entire series is that unlike Finley, whose work encourages girls to hold fast to their principles, Alcott’s series focuses on conforming the reform-oriented girls to better fit cultural norms.

Perhaps Mrs. Jo best summarizes her goals for Plumfield and the boys and girls who go to their school: “‘I only want to give these children a home in which they can be taught the few simple things which will help to make life less hard to them when they go out to fight their battles in the world. Honesty, courage, industry, faith in God, their fellow creatures, and themselves; that is all I try for.’” In *Little Men* Alcott clearly continues to link honesty and obedience with family honor and occasionally material gain.

In the book *Jo’s Boys* Alcott continues the stories of these young men and women into adulthood. The lessons in honesty and integrity learned in *Little Men* are applied in

---

236 Ibid, 226.
237 Ibid., 225.
238 Ibid., 225.
239 Ibid., 328.
Jo’s Boys. Alcott particularly focuses on Dan, one of the most troubled young men from Plumfield. Dan struggles to find his place and make his way in the world, but Jo is confident that "Dan will find his place at last... He may never do anything great, or get rich; but if the wild boy makes an honest man, I’m satisfied." Dan struggles with honesty and obedience throughout the book. Early in the book Dan returns to Plumfield with a small fortune. Alcott is careful to argue that he has earned his money honestly, though he refuses to return to speculating because it feels "too much like gambling." As the book progresses, Dan returns to his wild ways and, when his temper eventually results in a prison sentence, he gives a false name and refuses to request help from home. Alcott clearly depicts the tragic consequences of disobeying one’s conscience. However, Dan, though given the opportunity to attempt to escape, serves his time honestly. When he does return home, he confesses freely to Mother and Father Bhaer, though he asks that the story not be shared with the rest.

Dan is not the only one of “Jo’s boys” to take these lessons in honesty to heart. When Nat is sent to Germany to perfect his skill with the violin he also faces many temptations. He enjoys the freedom and allows people to assume that he is both socially and financially wealthier than he really is. Although he is not overtly dishonest, his sin of omission is just as dangerous. The repercussions of his sins quickly catch up to him, and being “too honest to be reckless,” he makes things right, buckles down and focuses on his work. His dishonesty leads to great material loss, and it is only through

241 Ibid., 59.
242 Ibid., 192.
243 Ibid., 298-299. It is interesting to note that the shame does not come from the crime, but from the punishment—see page 316.
244 Ibid., 199.
245 Ibid., 195-206.
tremendous work that he is able to make things right. Nat must make things right, in large part to defend the family honor. Meg is reluctant to allow her daughter Daisy to marry Nat. When she finally gives Daisy and Nat permission to marry it is a testament to the Plumfield family honor that even this child of the street can be made honorable.

These lessons, though painful, teach the young men the lessons Jo yearns to teach them. She knows that life choices must prove the lessons learned at home. ""Experience is [the] best teacher." 246 Her lessons in honesty take root and her boys refuse to allow other sins to be exacerbated by dishonesty. Alcott portrays the mistakes and foibles of youth, but her depiction of the response to the conscience’s call to obedience and honesty highlights the many ways these principles contribute to material gain and a defense of the family honor.

Once again Alcott fails to address issues of obedience and honesty in her female characters. Although her female characters are somewhat more fully developed in Jo’s Boys, they are still relatively flat characters who fail to dynamically engage the questions of honesty and obedience. Alcott continues her polarization of female characters with the feminine Bess and the reformer Josie. These girls are regularly contrasted, and Alcott never encourages Bess to be more reform-oriented, but instead attempts to curb the reform energy of Josie.

Longsuffering Contentment

“So they agreed to stop complaining, to enjoy the blessings already possessed, and try to deserve them, lest they should be taken away

246 Ibid., 12.
entirely, instead of increased; and I believe they were never disappointed or sorry."

Long-suffering contentment is a very important theme in the Little Women series. Alcott clearly articulates the importance and centrality of community. Sarah Laird argues, in her article, “Who Cares about Girls? Rethinking the Meaning of Teaching,” that Marmee teaches her girls how to survive hardship with contentment. “Marmee makes this move from painful feeling to playful thinking about ‘the longing for goodness and happiness’ (LW, p. 31) with her daughters to ‘care for’ them as they encounter ‘evils’ such as pain, separation, and helplessness.” However she also argues that Marmee is leading them “through honestly felt efforts at self-definition.” I disagree with the connection between Marmee’s attempts to teach them how to deal with suffering and the efforts at self-definition. The girls’ primary lesson in their suffering experiences is the growing intimacy of family, not self-definition. In Little Women each of the four March girls struggles to find contentment, despite difficult circumstances. Unlike Elsie Dinsmore, where suffering encourages a sense of purpose, suffering in Little Women generally functions to create vulnerability which grows community, but can dampen an ardent spirit.

Alcott uses Meg’s struggle with vanity to highlight the importance of longsuffering contentment. Meg is the oldest of the March girls and her discontentment lies in the family’s financial struggles. She yearns to have the material things that she feels she and her sisters deserve. She is vain and hates having to work for a living. Of

---

247 Alcott, Little Women, 51.
249 Ibid., 89.
250 Alcott, Little Women, 18.
the children, Meg best remembers when the family was wealthier. Her job as the
 governess for a wealthy family only increases her sense of discontentment.\textsuperscript{251} One of
Meg’s first lessons in contentment is that all that glitters is not gold. While spending
time with wealthy acquaintances Meg feels “without understanding why, that [the people
she is visiting] were not particularly cultivated or intelligent people, and that all their
gilding could not quite conceal the ordinary material of which they were made.”\textsuperscript{252}
Learning that money cannot buy true refinement and sophistication is a valuable lesson
for Meg. The people were not bad or cruel, simply ordinary. Unlike Finley, Alcott does
not use this incident to encourage a sense of purpose in Meg. Meg’s “castle in the air”
remains—she says, “‘I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things—
nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am
to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need work
a bit. How I should enjoy it!’”\textsuperscript{253} The only moderating addendum to her fantasy life is,
“‘I wouldn’t be idle, but do good, and make everyone love me dearly.’”\textsuperscript{254} This fantasy
will create even greater problems in her adult life.

Meg’s discontentment with poverty rears its head again after she is married. Her
dissatisfaction not only makes her unhappy, but leads her into other sins (like deceit).
Her sins haunt her, making her feel hunted and remorseful.\textsuperscript{255} She suffers, not because
her husband is upset, but because she knows it is her discontentment, not her reckless
spending, which makes him unhappy.\textsuperscript{256} Meg learns that when someone loves and is

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., 43-44.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid., 275.
\textsuperscript{256} Ibid., 277.
loved her feelings affect those who care for her. Living in community creates vulnerability. In fact Alcott directly links Meg’s discovery of contentment to the extension of Meg’s family and community through the birth of her twins.\textsuperscript{257}

Amy also struggles with contentment. She knows that selfishness is one of her primary flaws.\textsuperscript{258} Throughout the book Amy struggles to overcome her discontentment. Her first lesson in selflessness comes when Beth gets sick. Although she does not want to stay with Aunt March, she finally resigns herself to making less work and trouble for her sisters. She stays with Aunt March and learns a great deal about herself. It is an important time of growth and development for her. She learns her lessons so well that her father notes, upon his return, that “she has learned to think of other people more and of herself less, and has decided to try and mold her character as carefully as she molds her little clay creatures.”\textsuperscript{259} Amy still must learn not to put on airs. She is generous, but sometimes her generosity backfires. When she invites her entire drawing class to her house for a party she insists that her family pretend to be wealthier than they are. She borrows fancy carriages and buys expensive food. As a result of all of her pretension, she is devastated when only one classmate actually comes. Although she shows grace and kindness to the friend who arrives, she feels dispirited and discouraged.\textsuperscript{260} Alcott links Amy’s discontentment with her family’s situation to her eventual disappointment.

Alcott, whom most critics link with her character Jo, offers some interesting expressions of discontentment through Jo. Early in \textit{Little Women} Jo exclaims, “I can’t

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 278.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., 258-259.
get over my disappointment in not being a boy." This theme is actually present throughout the books and is a constant struggle for Jo. She struggles against the confines of womanhood and is regularly reprimanded for her boyish ways. Well into the story she still uses masculine terms to describe herself. Beth advises Jo: “So you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls.” This is a piece of advice that Jo will soon wish she had obeyed. However, Jo struggles on, bucking every attempt to reign in her personality. Her discontentment is the cause of one of her greatest disappointments. On one occasion, when she is feeling particularly brash and brassy, she boldly exclaims to her aunts “I hate to be patronized . . . I don’t like favors, they oppress me and make me feel like a slave.” As a result, her aunts choose not to burden her with their favors and send Amy to Europe instead. Jo mourns tremendously for her lost opportunity, and the suffering is a primary factor in discouraging her spiritedness.

Although Jo is becoming more “ladylike,” she is still very independent in spirit. When preparing to send Jo to New York to teach and write her mother says: “You I leave to enjoy your liberty till you tire of it, for only then will you find that there is something sweeter.” Knowing better than to suffocate Jo’s spirit, her mother and father give her great freedom to find herself. During her time in New York Jo continues to learn lessons in contentment. While Jo already is earning money teaching, she desires to have more than enough. Much like Meg she is tired of poverty and wants money, not just for

---

261 Ibid., 13.
262 Ibid., 154-155.
263 Ibid., 314.
264 Ibid., 13.
265 Ibid., 291.
266 Ibid., 301-302.
267 Ibid., 322.
herself, but for her family. Though her motives are pure, her methods are not and she
finds herself writing and publishing "bad trash." She earns a little money, but knows
that what she is doing is wrong. Her friend, Friedrich Bhaer, helps provide clarity in her
moral dilemma. Much has been said about the interesting relationship between Jo March
and the much older Friedrich Bhaer. It is certainly interesting that it is only after re-
reading her stories through "the Professor's mental or moral spectacles" that Jo finally
decides that she will stop writing sensational fiction. Although she is clearly ashamed
of the work before Friedrich's comments about their danger, she argues that they are only
"silly." Alcott makes the link between the judgment of Friedrich and the judgment of
Jo's parents relatively clear. Friedrich Bhaer steps in and helps Jo realize her folly and
she corrects it. Eventually she gains appreciation for the principles her parents instilled
in her "which may seem like prison walls to impatient youth, but which will prove sure
foundations to build character upon in womanhood." Although she writes no great
novel, Jo enjoys her time in New York. She fails to realize it, but she has met her future
husband, and she finally learns to be content. In a letter home she writes "'I felt as if I
was getting on a little in spite of my many failures; for I'm cheerful all the time now,
work with a will, and take more interest in other people than I used to, which is
satisfactory.'" Once again Alcott connects the development of contentment to the
growth of community through vulnerability and the dampening of a character's ardent
spirit.

---

268 Ibid., 345.
269 Ibid., 346.
270 Ibid., 345
271 Ibid., 347.
272 Ibid., 335.
Alcott makes it clear that Jo must learn contentment despite challenges, for there are more challenges to come. When she returns home her dear friend Laurie proposes. She had left partially in an attempt to discourage Laurie’s affections, because, although she loves him as a brother, there is no spark of romantic love for Laurie in her heart. She must refuse him, even if it breaks both of their hearts. She says to him "'I could kill myself if it would go any good!'"\(^{273}\) Her heart mourns for her friend, even though she is the cause of his heartbreak and she goes “slowly home, feeling as though she had murdered some innocent thing, and buried it under the leaves.”\(^{274}\) Laurie flees for Europe and Jo stays home, ready to face even greater struggles.

Jo’s next struggle involves her sister Beth. Although Beth has been sainted by all who read *Little Women* and she is very pious, she still struggles with her fate. Beth is the most delicate of the March girls. She suffers through a nearly fatal bout of scarlet fever with little complaint. It is during this time that

> Jo, living in the darkened room, with that suffering little sister always before her eyes and that pathetic voice sounding in her ears, learned to see the beauty and the sweetness of Beth’s nature, to feel how deep and tender a place she filled in all hearts, and to acknowledge the worth 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.\(^{275}\)

Beth sets a tremendous example of longsuffering contentment for her sisters. Nonetheless, her health never fully recovers. She suffers with physical pain for years, and even when it fades she struggles with her own “sick fancy” that she will not survive to leave home or marry.\(^{276}\) She never tells anyone, until her death seems imminent. Then

---

\(^{273}\) Ibid., 352.  
\(^{274}\) Ibid., 355.  
\(^{275}\) Ibid., 182.  
\(^{276}\) Ibid., 361.
she confesses her struggles to her sister Jo. "She could not say, 'I'm glad to go,' for life was very sweet to her; she could only sob out, 'I try to be willing,' while she held fast to Jo." This is no easy burden for Beth to bear and she does struggle against it. She must repeatedly resign herself to her early death.

Alcott uses Beth in several ways. First Beth pays homage to the pious child of earlier children's literature. Alcott, like Finley, echoes the earlier stories of the relationship between piety and death. However, whereas Finley challenges this stereotype, allowing Elsie to reach adulthood and raise her own children, Alcott's Beth is another "Little Eva." Alcott fails to challenge the assumption that piety leads to death. Alcott also uses Beth as a tool to change Jo. Jo's personality is transformed by her sister's example and death. Beth's last months are marked by both joyous times full of grace and beauty, as well as bitter times full of tears and frustration. Beth dies peacefully, after directing Jo to take care of mother and father. With this heart-wrenching loss Jo finally "renounced her old ambition, pledged herself to a new and better one, acknowledging the poverty of other desires, and feeling the blessed solace of a belief in the immortality of love." This highlights both how suffering creates a sense of community, but also how it dampens Jo's ardent zest for life and zeal to be independent. In fact Beth's example of longsuffering contentment is linked to the greatest spirit dampening experience of all—death.

Alcott uses Jo's grief and continued suffering to draw Jo into a new relationship. She will find that her loneliness with Beth's death not only strengthens her relationship with her parents, but eventually also pushes her into Friedrich Bhaer's loving and waiting

277 Ibid., 363.
278 Ibid., 404.
arms.\textsuperscript{279} Once again the connection between Friedrich Bhaer and her parents seems clear. Jo falls in love with Friedrich and they are married. Suffering leads Jo into an even larger circle of community. Alcott directly connects the concept of suffering and self-sacrifice to the growth (both physically and emotionally) of community. She highlights that although suffering can suppress a fiery spirit, it can also grow human relationships. This is illustrated when the book ends and Jo’s contentment comes full circle. Though Jo must resign herself to never being a boy, she surrounds herself with “a wilderness of boys” in the school she and her husband start.\textsuperscript{280} Although her spirit is dampened, it is certainly not extinguished and her family community is extended beyond her wildest dreams.

\textit{Little Men} focuses primarily on male adolescence, thus the concept of longsuffering contentment is handled differently. Alcott focuses more on the actions of the boys than on their attitudes. However, the community building, but spirit dampening effects of longsuffering contentment remain important. There is a certain amount of long suffering and self-denial required of Mr. and Mrs. Bhaer when raising a large “family” of boys.\textsuperscript{281} Mrs. Jo has great struggles with these boys, especially Dan. Though she is hopeful, both she and Mr. Bhaer know that taking on such a challenging boy will “cost us something.”\textsuperscript{282} The rebellious boy causes them much heartbreak and requires great patience. When he becomes too unruly for their school, they send him to another school. Dan runs away, and eventually returns to them. Although he doubts what kind of welcome he will receive, they offer him open arms.\textsuperscript{283} Their welcome of him proves their love, and he starts working to make them proud instead of disappointing them.

\textsuperscript{279} Ibid., 423.  
\textsuperscript{280} Ibid., 464.  
\textsuperscript{281} Alcott, \textit{Little Men}, 42-46.  
\textsuperscript{282} Ibid., 86.  
\textsuperscript{283} Ibid., 139-142.
They also work to show him both material and emotional benefits to ""a duty cheerfully performed."" Naturally Dan's demons are not so easily overcome. He develops outlets for his rebellious nature and temper, but will struggle with anger well into adulthood. Through the suffering of Mr. and Mrs. Bhaer, Dan is drawn deeper into the community. However, the societal restraints require a softening of his fiery nature.

Dan is not the only boy who both learns longsuffering and teaches it. Nat suffers much because of his own sins, but also because of the suspicion brought on by those sins. When he is wrongly accused of stealing, he suffers tremendously at the hands of the other boys. Although forbidden to do so, the boys taunt him. His life becomes so difficult that he exclaims, "'If I had any place to go to, I'd run away, though I do love Plumfield dearly.'" However, his suffering also deepens his relationship with both Daisy, who firmly believes in his innocence, and Dan, who is a deeply loyal friend. In a desire to free his friend from his miseries, Dan leads everyone to believe he is guilty of the charge for which Nat has been blamed. Dan suffers, much as Nat had. He lives in disgrace. When the truth finally becomes clear, that neither boy is guilty, everyone at Plumfield is relieved. It draws them closer as a community, though it serves to chasten the spirit of both Nat and Dan. Not only do the boys themselves suffer, but Jo and the professor suffer as well. They struggle between a just punishment and showing grace. They are disappointed by the turn of events, and are afraid that Dan's suffering will divide the community, instead of drawing them together. Ultimately, however, all of the suffering draws them closer into community.

---

284 Ibid., 149.
285 Ibid., 246.
286 Ibid., 211.
287 Ibid., 220-222.
288 Ibid., 206-222.
The Plumfield community includes two or three girls as well as all of the boys. Alcott makes it clear that it is not only the boys who learn patience at Plumfield. Although the girls are greatly outnumbered by their male counterparts, they too learn many lessons. Nan is a girl with a strong will and a great spirit. She demands to be allowed to do everything the boys do. Alcott highlights how learning contentment and patience dampen a vibrant spirit, for “Mrs. Bhaer sympathized with [Nan], but tried to curb her frantic desire for entire liberty, showing her that she must wait a little, learn self-control and be ready to use her freedom before she asked for it.” Mrs. Bhaer works hard to temper Nan’s spirit and draw her into the community. When Nan wants to join a club founded by the older boys, she is rejected from membership. So, upon the wise advice of Mrs. Bhaer, Nan and Daisy form their own club. Eventually the older boys realize that the other children are having great fun eating and playing. The two clubs decide to co-mingle the groups, with each group allowing the attendance of the other club’s members. Through this and other valuable experiences Nan learns if she deprives the young men of her company, they will overcome their reticence to include her. Though her spirit is never completely dampened, she learns healthy outlets for her reformer’s energy.

Even Bess, the delicate daughter of Laurie and Amy, must learn to sacrifice her own comfort for the sake of the less fortunate. Billy is a special needs child living at Plumfield. When Bess comes to visit, he enjoys watching her intently. Though it makes her uncomfortable, she allows it, because she knows that he is special and she should

289 Ibid., 225.
290 Ibid., 225.
291 Ibid., 128-136.
sacrifice her own desires for the sake of his. When she prepares to leave she consoles him with a kiss.

All of the Plumfield family must learn patience. When asked how she wants to improve her character it is Mrs. Bhaer’s request that her heart be enriched with ever increasing patience in dealing with her boys and their troubles. Her “boys” follow suit, each earnestly seeking to improve his (or her) character with self-denial, generosity or industry. Although Plumfield is a happy place, Alcott makes it clear that it is not exempt from suffering and struggle. Each child (and adult) must learn to accept some suffering and choose to grow from it. Otherwise bitterness and anger will develop out of their discontentment. Alcott illustrates how long suffering contentment draws their community closer together, but also dampens the spirits of the children at Plumfield. It is difficult to find examples of how the children find a sense of purpose through their suffering.

*Jo’s Boys* illustrates the results of the careful development of character and morality in *Little Men*. Each of Jo’s boys (and girls) that grows to adulthood must learn how to live in the world. Early in the book Dan comes home to Plumfield full of plans and ideas. Mrs. Jo advises him to follow his heart, but reminds him that “it is so much better to work for others than for one’s self alone.” Neither realizes at the time that it will be many years before Dan can follow her advice. When he leaves home, Dan continues to struggle with his temper and as result finds himself in prison. He suffers

---

292 Ibid., 195.
293 Ibid., 200.
294 Ibid., 44-45.
greatly in prison, especially emotionally and spiritually. He is still tormented by his rebellious spirit and he longs to be free. Dan finally decides to suffer through his sentence and then try to redeem himself in the eyes of his friends. After his release from prison Dan does not return to Plumfield, but instead works in the mines. Through a tremendous act of bravery and self-sacrifice he saves the lives of many men during the collapse of a mine shaft. He is seriously injured and is returned home to recover. His suffering and self-sacrifice work as two powerful forces in the development of his character. Eventually both serve to dampen his ardent spirit but also draw him into community, first at Plumfield and later among the Native Americans.

Emil, Mr. Bhaer’s nephew, must also learn longsuffering. He is nautically inclined and, as soon as he is of age, sails away to find his fortune. He is an incredibly conscientious sailor and when he becomes an officer he carefully attends to both the sailors under him and the women on board. Through Emil’s bravery, Captain Hardy is saved from death during a shipwreck, and Emil’s strength of character protects those on board his lifeboat until they are saved. Emil suffers both mentally and physically. However, his struggles draw him closer to the captain and his family and eventually Emil marries the captain’s daughter. Once again Alcott shows how the suffering of Emil connects him more intimately with those around him.

Emil and his shipmates are not the only ones who suffer as a result of the shipwreck and Emil is not the only one to learn a lesson in patience. Emil’s loved ones do not know that he survived the shipwreck. All mourn his loss, but Emil’s favorite

---

296 Ibid., 183-193.
298 Ibid., 104-105.
299 Ibid., 174-175.
cousin Josie is especially stricken. Although she is very dramatic, both literally and figuratively, Josie’s sorrow is not. She wilts under the weight of her sorrow and must learn to “be like the self-sacrificing heroines she loved to act.” After news of Emil’s survival arrives at Plumfield Josie quickly recovers “with the shadow of past sorrow to tone down her former vivacity and show that she had learned a lesson in trying to act well her part on the real stage, where all have to take their share in the great drama of life.” Her sorrow dampens her spirit and draws her closer to the family around her. Josie’s experiences do not give her a sense of purpose, or even reinforce the calling she feels. Instead they clearly serve to tone down her bold nature.

It is only here, in the final book of the trilogy, where Alcott can be seen illustrating for her readers how suffering and patience can show young women how to find purpose. Although learning patience in suffering is critical, it is perhaps more important for women, especially, to learn contentment in ordinary life. Jo’s Boys contains an entire chapter dedicated to this theme of maidenly contentment. The sisters establish a sewing circle where they gather weekly to enjoy “a wise mixture of cooks and chemistry, table linen and theology, prosaic duties and good poetry.” The March girls discuss with these young students the merits of an education and career as well as the art of finding contentment in their domestic work as well. Both kinds of work are critically important to women, and Alcott clearly states that the women do not need to “waste time worrying about their sphere, but make it wherever duty calls them.” It is interesting to contrast this scene at the end of the series with the chapter, “Castles in the Air,” from

---

300 Ibid., 225. Italics in original.
301 Ibid., 226. Italics in original.
302 Ibid., 247.
303 Ibid., 258.
Little Women. The March girls are evenly divided between grand worldly dreams (Jo and Amy) and domestic dreams (Beth and Meg). Alcott clearly intends women to feel as though their options are open and available to them, but that the domestic cannot be completely abandoned for the sake of worldly living. Both the young March girls and the college girls articulate a varied and encouraging perspective on womanhood and women’s choices. I would argue that this chapter offers the single example in either Little Men or Jo’s Boys where Alcott encourages the perspectives of many different types of women. She highlights that women, regardless of temperament, personality or economic status, should understand and fight for their principles.

It is interesting to note that in Jo’s Boys the most reform minded character, Nan, is one who seems to suffer very little. Tommy Bangs pursues her, but her rejection of him causes him far more suffering than it does herself. She gains no sense of purpose through suffering. Her drive to achieve and reform is more inborn than created. She is also more independent than many other characters. Suffering draws people together, but it also serves to dampen the ardent spirit. Unlike the Elsie Dinsmore books, where suffering seems to create a sense of purpose, suffering in the Little Women series serves to draw people into community through their vulnerability, but also to diminish the sense of drive and ambition already present in the main characters.

Industriousness

[Mr. and Mrs. March] believ[ed] that they could not begin too early to cultivate energy, industry and independence."

304 Alcott, Little Women, 43.
Alcott clearly depicts industriousness as an essential character trait, not merely in theory, but practically as well. The March girls began working at a young age and worked hard to provide for themselves and the ones they loved. Hard work has several purposes in the Little Women books. It fosters community by illustrating the abundance of God’s provision when each person contributes. It also serves as a soothing and comforting balm in difficult times. In Little Men and Jo’s Boys hard work is qualified not only by degree, but by kind. Mrs. Bhaer is careful to foster a balance of physical and mental labor in all of the children under her care.

Little Women opens with a discussion of the March girls’ hard work and the rewards and gifts each feels she deserves. Each girl explains her own work and why she feels it is more challenging than the others’ work. Even saintly Beth complains that her work dries her hands and makes it difficult to play the piano. However, their pity party quickly turns into an object lesson in self-sacrifice, first on their mother’s behalf, and later on behalf of a family even poorer than themselves. Each girl decides to give up her own desires in order to provide something for their mother’s Christmas.

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” said Beth, “let’s each get her something for Christmas, and not get anything for ourselves.” “That’s like you, dear! What will we get?” exclaimed Jo. Everyone thought soberly for a minute, then Meg announced, as if the idea were suggested by her own pretty hands, “I shall give her a nice pair of gloves.” “Army shoes, best to be had,” cried Jo. “Some handkerchiefs, all hemmed,” said Beth. “I’ll get a little bottle of cologne. She likes it and it won’t cost much, so I’ll have some left to buy my pencils,” added Amy.305

Alcott illustrates the growth of the family intimacy through mutual sharing of the rewards of hard work.

305 Ibid., 14.
Later the girls, with their mother’s permission, decide to experiment with laziness. When summer arrives, and they have a break from their regular work they request to be released from all their duties. Their mother agrees, but comments that by the week’s end “you will find that all play and no work is as bad as all work and no play.” Of course they think that Marmee is mistaken, and for a few days they revel in their freedom. Relatively quickly they realize that too much free time is as overwhelming as too much work. They find that days without work are long and tedious. The last day of their experiment is particularly challenging. Marmee leaves them to take care of themselves, and they realize that they have much to learn about taking care of themselves and each other. Their mother was hoping to teach them that their comfortable lives depend on each person doing her fair share. Their experiment ends with their mother’s recommendation that they “[h]ave regular hours for work and play, make each day both useful and pleasant, and prove that you understand the worth of time by employing it well. Then youth will be delightful, old age will bring few regrets, and life become a beautiful success, in spite of poverty.” Here Alcott very naturally illustrates how community develops out of hard work.

Alcott depicts industry as a uniquely American character trait. Foreigners do not appreciate the workers’ lot in life. However, in America workers are appreciated for their industriousness. Meg comments that she is glad she lives in America because “I don’t like my work, but I get a good deal of satisfaction out of it after all...” Nicholas Johnson, in his article “Kennst du das Land?: Learning the Language of Landscape in Little Women,” argues that Alcott uses this in her attempt to inculcate American

---

306 Ibid., 112.  
307 Ibid., 121.  
308 Ibid., 136.
patriotism. He further outlines the way the March girls adopt and adjust European ideas of landscape, beauty and imagery into their own specifically female, American context. The girls find that their idealization of European ideas is gently but firmly dismantled throughout the book, until the final scene of the book illustrates the book’s “complicated patriotism that tacitly utilizes European traditions, only to assert American exceptionality.”

Alcott also directly links industry to spiritual matters. One afternoon the sisters and Laurie find themselves discussing the future and their spiritual fate. It is Beth’s nature to be industrious and pious, so all of them assume that Beth will be in heaven. However Jo claims that she will have to work hard her whole life and probably still not get in. She has so many spiritual struggles that she doubts her own ability to overcome her demons and find heaven. The spirituality of work is seen even more clearly in the idea of work as a coping technique. When the March girls discover that their father is seriously ill they find that “work is a blessed solace” and “panacea for most afflictions.” It helps them to pass the time waiting for letters from mother. In one of Jo’s letters to her mother she includes a poem extolling the soothing and spiritual effects of work:

A SONG FROM THE SUDS.

Queen of my tub, I merrily sing,
While the white foam rises high;
And sturdily wash and rinse and wring,
And fasten the clothes to dry;

---

309 Nicholas Johnson. “Kennst du das Land?: Learning the Language of Landscape in Little Women.” Children’s Literature 34, (2006): 51. The concept of American industriousness has a long history, and is still an important idea in American culture. The comparison with abstract “foreigners” is relatively common in 19th-century literature, and still occurs in both American thinking and writing.

310 Alcott, Little Women, 143.

311 Ibid., 166.

312 Ibid., 160.
Then out in the free fresh air they swing,
    Under the sunny sky.

I wish we could wash from our hearts and souls
    The stains of the week away,
And let water and air by their magic make
    Ourselves as pure as they;
Then on the earth there would be indeed
    A glorious washing-day!

Along the path of a useful life,
    Will heartsease ever bloom;
The busy mind has no time to think
    Of sorrow or care or gloom;
And anxious thoughts may be swept away,
    As we bravely wield a broom.

I am glad a task to me is given,
    To labor at day by day;
For it brings me health and strength and hope,
    And I cheerfully learn to say,—
"Head, you may think, Heart you may feel,
    But, Hand, you shall work alway!"313

The girls struggle with their father’s illness, but they have found a soothing balm to draw
them closer to God.

    Jo takes this lesson in industriousness to heart. When she leaves home to work in
the city, she not only attends to her own teaching, but she writes and learns lessons as
well. In her acknowledgment of her growth during this time she writes that she “work[s]
with a will.”314 She continues to work and write, both on behalf of herself and those she
loves. She saves money to send Beth to the sea.315 When Beth falls ill Jo nurses her316

313 Ibid., 171.
314 Ibid., 335.
315 Ibid., 360.
316 Ibid., 400-401.
and when Beth dies and Jo’s parents need her in their time of mourning she works to care for them.317

Jo is not the only March girl to take these life lessons in industriousness seriously. Meg starts her own little family and works hard to meet her husband’s needs. When the children arrive she finds herself so focused on her children that she neglects both herself and her husband. Upon her mother’s advice she begins to find a balance of work and pleasure. Meg learns that “a woman’s happiest kingdom is home, her highest honor the art of ruling it not as a queen, but a wise wife and mother.”318

Beth works hard her whole life. Even on her deathbed she is known for her industry and generosity. Alcott illustrates again the relationship between piety and industriousness in the character of Beth. Through this passage it is clear that Beth’s industriousness helps her to leave her mark on the world she is preparing to leave. She is touching young lives, even as she is giving up her own.

The feeble fingers were never idle, and one of her pleasures was to make little things for the schoolchildren daily passing to and fro—to drop a pair of mittens from her window for a pair of purple hands, a needlebook for some small mother of many dolls, penwipers for young penmen toiling through forests of pothooks, scrapbooks for picture-loving eyes and all manner of pleasant devices, till the reluctant climbers up the ladder of learning found their way strewn with flowers, as it were, and came to regard the gentle giver as a sort of fairy godmother, who sat above there, and showered down gifts miraculously suited to their tastes and needs.319

Beth’s industriousness is not only helpful and inspiring to strangers, but to her dear sister Jo as well.320 After Beth is gone, Jo must depend on Beth’s example for the strength to continue working for others in her lonely life.

---

317 Ibid., 417-423.
318 Ibid., 386.
319 Ibid., 400-401.
320 Ibid., 402-404.
Even Amy, destined to marry rich and live the good life, hates laziness and commits herself to working hard. When Laurie comes to visit her in Nice, she tells him point blank that she “despises him” and thinks he is “faulty, lazy and miserable.” This hurts him terribly and causes an extended period of reflection. Although he has suffered a great loss in his first love, she forces him to reassess his life and decide what kind of man he really wants to be. Later, after Amy and Laurie get married, they decide that they want to be most generous with those people who work hard, but are still poor. They want to exert themselves and their extensive fortune on behalf of those “poor gentle folks” who “fare badly, because they won’t ask, and people don’t dare to offer charity.” So they resolve to spend their money and their time helping those who work hard.

Industry is a highly valuable character trait in the March family. It is encouraged by Mr. and Mrs. March and later appreciated and exemplified by each of the girls. The girls also go on to encourage industry in their children. Little Men illustrates continuing lessons on the virtue of industry. Mrs. Bhaer herself is not exempt from continuing to be industrious. When dealing with Dan she knows that she will have to work hard to turn him into a contributing member of society. Nor is it just Dan that she yearns to teach and help. Mrs. Bhaer tells Nat that her goal is for all the boys “to learn how to help themselves and be useful men.”

Alcott focuses on the creation of not only useful men, but useful women as well. It is interesting to note, especially since the Sunday School literature examined in the introduction focuses specifically on industry as an important character trait for girls, that

---

321 Ibid., 393-394.
322 Ibid., 442.
323 Alcott, Little Men, 142.
324 Ibid., 18.
when the Plumfield children are asked what good behavior they want to foster the only child who asks for help being industrious is a girl—Mrs. Jo’s niece, Daisy. Later, when Daisy finds that she is excluded from the boys’ games, Aunt Jo creates a new game just for her. The game is called Pattypans and involves learning to cook and bake at a small stove that is just her size. Jo teaches her valuable lessons in women’s work and Daisy has her own fun game to play. It is not simply work that is important, but practical useful work. Once Daisy begins working hard in her little kitchen, the other children are drawn to her and her food. Alcott again depicts industriousness as a duty that creates community and interdependence.

When Nan moves into Plumfield she must learn to focus her abundant energy into productive work. She struggles to find a positive outlet for her ideas, until Mr. Bhaer challenges the young students to see who works hardest at his or her school work. Nan, when given a goal, “showed them that girls could do most things as well as boys, and some things better.” Later, once she finds a life passion (medicine) there is no stopping the ambitious and motivated young woman. Despite her intellectual capacities, Nan is also encouraged to be industrious in womanly skills as well. When Nan refuses to sew for herself, Mrs. Bhaer teaches her to sew for others. Although “needlework is not a fashionable accomplishment,” all the little girls in Jo’s charge will learn to do it. There is an important balance of study and physical labor that must be sought.

---

325 Ibid., 62-81.
326 Ibid., 77
327 Ibid., 110.
328 Ibid., 225-228.
329 Ibid., 197-198.
Alcott refuses to limit laziness to female children. The Plumfield boys also struggle with laziness. When Rob and Ted are given rights to a certain nut tree, they are responsible to bring in the harvest. They eventually fall behind in their work, and the squirrels decide to take in the harvest. This means that when the boys finally get around to looking for nuts, they not only have to bring in the nuts, but they have to fight off the squirrels. Eventually Rob and Ted win the day, but they learn that if they are not willing to do the work, someone else will be glad to take the fruit off their hands. Rob and Ted, as well as the other boys, are all rewarded for their industry on Thanksgiving Day. As they sit at a table heavy laden with food, each one realizes he or she has contributed to the abundant feast. "Nearly everyone had contributed to the feast, so the dinner was a peculiarly interesting one to the eaters of it." They proudly declare how they have helped to provide for the ones they love so much. Alcott depicts the loving community created by many industrious people working for each other.

Late in the book Mrs. Bhaer tells the story of a young man who loves to study and learn. His mother is widowed and he lets her work so that he can study. As her health declines the young man must learn to work not just at school, but for his home and family as well. This is the balance that is sought at Plumfield. The children must learn to balance study, physical work and play. *Jo’s Boys* continues the story of the Plumfield children. Jo again acknowledges that “[i]f our children are good and useful, we should be satisfied,” though she yearns for them to be “brilliant and successful” as well.

---

330 Ibid., 273-276.
331 Ibid., 315.
332 Ibid., 315-316.
333 Ibid., 306.
334 Alcott, *Jo’s Boys*, 12.
The March girls continue to work hard, as Amy proves that women don’t have to give up their passions and talents in order to be good wives and mothers.\textsuperscript{335} Nonetheless, certain vocations seem to be a call to singleness, at least for women. Nan declares that “my profession will make me a useful, happy, and independent spinster.”\textsuperscript{336} Though hard work is still emphasized, it is the sense of balance of work that seems most critical, especially in the lives of women. The young college women who gather around the March sisters still learn the importance of education in both scholarly and domestic fields.\textsuperscript{337}

The young men also felt the relationship between finding a calling and industrious work. Each of the boys searched for and discovered a settled place to work. Some took much longer than others, but each would find his place in the world. Nat struggled when he was sent to Germany to study music and hone his skill. He enjoyed the high life of a single young man. Eventually he learned difficult lessons about the nature of hard work and study. He stopped his luxurious lifestyle and buckled down to study and practice.\textsuperscript{338} His work pays off through musical advancement and promotion. He also reaps the fruit of his labor when he finally returns home to his dearest Daisy and the two are once again united.\textsuperscript{339}

Dan finally finds his calling among the Native Americans where he works and eventually dies defending them.\textsuperscript{340} Demi settles into a position at a publishing house and eventually marries the studious and beautiful Alice Heath.\textsuperscript{341} Each of the other boys goes
into whatever business he is called, knowing that hard work and honesty are the best tools of any trade. Alcott regards industriousness as a critical duty that draws people together, but must be carefully balanced between physical and mental labor. Unlike Finley, who depicts industriousness creating a unique and individual sense of self-worth, Alcott depicts industriousness as both human duty and a community creating influence.

Spiritual Independence

"My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning and may be many, but you can overcome and outlive them all if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father as you do that of your earthly one."\(^{342}\)

The characteristics of honesty and obedience, longsuffering contentment and industriousness can come together and create a sense of spiritual independence. Finley illustrates how Elsie and her children learn to become independent thinking. The strength of character, sense of purpose and sense of self-worth that develops through these moral principles function to build the individual independence that is so fundamental to creating real reform. Children must be taught how to challenge societal norms in order to generate new and innovative thinking. The act of developing moral principles and supporting those principles despite outside pressure is a critical arena of development for children who will act to reform their societies. However, the March girls and their children do not seem to develop the same sense of spiritual independence. Although the same moral principles are encouraged, they foster very different characteristics. They often work together to create a sense of community and togetherness, but they also dampen the ardent spirit and force the reform-minded to either change, or withdraw from

\(^{342}\) Alcott, *Little Women*, 84.
the larger community. Unlike Finley, who encourages reform thinking in those not naturally independent in spirit, Alcott attempts to rein in the independent spirit where it develops naturally. Teaching restraint is certainly a valuable lesson that many young people need to learn. However, this lesson does not encourage reform thinking or challenge societal norms.

The acquisition of a sense of spiritual independence is an interesting aspect of the upbringing of the March girls. The beginning of the book marks a transitional time when each of the girls receives a Bible of her own to read and study. They commit to reading each day and letting the words and thoughts inspire them to do good throughout the day.\(^{343}\) In many ways it seems the beginning of their lives is marked not by their births, but by their acknowledgement of themselves as spiritual beings. Certainly Alcott recognizes spiritual maturity as essential to full human development. She regularly notes how her characters progress in their spiritual journeys. However, she rarely allows or acknowledges the fuller development of spiritual maturity into spiritual independence.

The spiritual development of the March girls cannot be discussed without an acknowledgement of the parallels with John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. This book is so fundamental to the structure and storyline of *Little Women* that some scholars argue that the books they receive on Christmas morning are copies of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, not the Bible. However, I would argue that the evidence clearly suggests that these different colored books are Bibles. When Jo is discussing their adventures in imitating Bunyan’s character Christian she exclaims that “We ought to have our roll of directions, like Christian. What shall we do about that?” Marmee responds “Look under your pillows

\(^{343}\) Ibid., 21-22.
Christmas morning, and you will find your guidebook.” There can be no doubt that Bunyan meant the Bible as the “roll of directions” and that Marmee continues the reference in her gift to her daughters. These books appear repeatedly as the girls seek to become spiritually independent children of God. When real trouble comes, the girls know where to turn—“the little books were full of help and comfort.”

Alcott uses the girls’ different temperaments to demonstrate a variety of ways in which she felt young women needed to confront their failings and develop a sense of spiritual self. Each of the girls faces her own demons. They battle, like Christian in Bunyan’s classic, and systematically defeat or at least reign in their different failures. Meg is an interesting case, for “[i]n spite of her small vanities, Margaret had a sweet and pious nature.” When the sisters and Laurie sit in the countryside considering their futures, Meg is the first to connect their future happiness with their heavenly destination. Nonetheless, Meg has her struggles. As the oldest, the other girls look up to her. She is a beautiful woman, and battles her vanity throughout Little Women. When “Meg goes to Vanity Fair,” the experience is, as the title implies, Meg’s great confrontation with her vanity. She struggles to become the master of her constant sense of discontentment. Her time with wealthy friends teaches her that contentment cannot be bought. It is a state of mind, over which she alone has control. Although her vanity and discontentment periodically get the better of her even after this occasion, she never again struggles with knowing she should be happy, only with actually making her heart

344 Ibid., 19. I would argue there is other evidence throughout the book to indicate that these books are Bibles.
345 Ibid., 166.
346 Ibid. 21.
347 Ibid., 143.
348 Ibid., 86-100.
understand. Her sense of spiritual maturity comes when she finally acknowledges her power over her family and their happiness. Meg does demonstrate some spiritual independence when she defies Aunt March and society’s insistence that she “ought to marry well” and “make a rich match.” However, her spiritual freedom is tempered by her humbling experiences and the dampening of her spirit. She makes no decisions outside the parameters of her parents’ instruction, and her life closely parallels Marmee’s life.

Jo continually struggles with her own sense of rebellion and independence. Her primary fault is her temper, which frequently get her into trouble. When Jo’s refusal to forgive her sister Amy almost causes Amy to drown, Jo decides she must learn to master her temper. Her mother tells her to turn to God:

“The more you love and trust Him, the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will depend on human power and wisdom. His love and care never tire or change, can never be taken from you, but may become the source of lifelong peace, happiness, and strength. Believe this heartily, and go to God with all your little cares, and hopes, and sins, and sorrows, as freely and confidingly as you come to your mother.”

This is advice that Jo never forgets and attempts to follow the rest of her life. However, her mother does not leave the life lesson at these words alone. She watches her daughter, and when the time is right writes her a letter that commends her anger management. Marmee knows that Jo probably feels that no one sees how hard she works. So she encourages Jo to keep her “resolution”. Marmee comments that her Bible cover is well-worn and she is clearly turning to “the Friend whose help you daily ask.”

349 Ibid., 267-280 and 376-386.
350 Ibid., 379 and 385-386.
351 Ibid., 76-85.
352 Ibid., 84-85.
353 Ibid., 123.
Although Jo seems to have learned to manage her temper, her struggles to discover her own spiritual independence continue. During her time in New York she begins publishing sensational literature. For a while she revels in the idea of earning money. Eventually, however, her better judgment and Friedrich Bhaer convince her that no amount of money is worth producing "trash." Nonetheless she thinks "I almost wish I hadn’t any conscience, it’s so inconvenient. If I didn’t care about doing right, and didn’t feel uncomfortable when doing wrong, I should get on capitally." In this case she is convicted by her sense of what her parents or Professor Bhaer would think of her work. Soon she will have to make a life changing decision all on her own.

When Laurie proposes Jo must reject his proposal, despite his arguments that "[e]everyone expects it. Grandpa has set his heart upon it, your people like it, and I can’t get on without you." It took tremendous strength to disappoint not only her best friend, but her family as well. But she knew her own heart, and with an impressive display of character, made her own choice. Here Jo illustrates a tremendous sense of independence. Alcott clearly recognizes a link between strength of character (which Jo earns through obedience to her principles in New York) and spiritual independence. However, this not as fully developed in Jo or her sisters as it is in Elsie Dinsmore. Throughout the rest of Little Women obedience and honesty are much more clearly and frequently linked to family honor and material gain than to strength of character.

Alcott directly links Beth’s death to Jo’s continuing maturity. Jo continues to mature spiritually when she gives up her freedom to nurse her sister Beth and then to take care of her parents after Beth’s death. These are not easy choices to make, for they

---

355 Ibid., 347.
356 Ibid., 354.
require a great deal of self-sacrifice, especially for rebellious, freedom-loving Jo.\textsuperscript{357} Time passes and Jo grows in both domestic skill and self-abnegation. Her destiny is not to be all loneliness and self-sacrifice, for Friedrich Bhaer comes and proposes to her. Jo realizes that she loves him and is now ready to make a home together with him. Alcott definitively connects Jo’s challenges to her willingness to marry Friedrich.\textsuperscript{358} Together they will create a unique home and family. Their school for boys is an opportunity for them to help raise boys, not only to physical and mental maturity, but to spiritual maturity as well. Again there are minor parallels to Elsie’s sense of purpose learned through longsuffering contentment. However, Alcott fails to fully articulate the relationship between suffering and purpose.

Amy’s journey to spiritual independence is less tumultuous than Jo’s journey. Amy makes great strides in her sense of self and development of her spiritual side when she is sent away to stay with Aunt March during Beth’s first illness. At first she struggles with loneliness and frustration. Eventually, with the help of Aunt March’s servant, Esther, Amy sets up a small closet, where she can go daily to pray and read her “little book.” Amy misses her mother’s guidance, but does her best to be good and patient.\textsuperscript{359} When her mother returns Amy shows her the little closet and Marmee is proud of Amy’s commitment to spend quiet time praying and reading every day. \textquote{There are a good many hard times in this life of ours, but we can always bear them if we ask help in the right way. I think my little girl is learning this.}\textsuperscript{360}

\textsuperscript{357} Ibid., 417-421.  
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 419.  
\textsuperscript{359} Ibid., 188-195.  
\textsuperscript{360} Ibid., 197.
Like Jo, Amy’s life sometimes parallels the spiritual development in the Elsie series. Amy is given many opportunities to show her strength of character and independence of spirit. When she is given the chance to work for charitable cause, she accepts. When the jealousy of friends disappoints her hopes in displaying and selling her art, she handles it with tremendous grace.\footnote{Ibid., 293-302.} When her gracious spirit earns her the opportunity to travel abroad, she willingly throws herself into the world, ready to handle any challenge that comes her way.\footnote{Ibid., 303-312.} However, Alcott again fails to fully develop Amy into a spiritually independent woman who challenges societal expectations. Although she is certain that given the opportunity to marry rich she will accept,\footnote{Ibid., 311-312 and 392-393.} she rejects her wealthy suitor when the time comes.\footnote{Ibid., 410-411.} She has come to believe that “she didn’t care to be a queen of society now half so much as she did to be a lovable woman.”\footnote{Ibid., 411.} In fact, she learns to love Laurie, and through their marriage she becomes both a queen of society and a lovable woman. However it is noteworthy that Amy does marry money, though it is someone she also loves.

The last of the March girls is by no means exempt from the spiritual journeying of her sisters. Beth has her own unique set of struggles. Although she is saintly and pious, she struggles with her shyness. She overcomes this struggle when her gratitude finally outweighs her strong sense of self-preservation. She is given such a tremendous gift that she feels she must confront the giver with the respectful and affectionate “thank you” that he deserves.\footnote{Ibid., 63-68.} Beth also struggles to submit to God’s will, especially regarding her
health and death. She clearly wrestles with God over her impending death. She yearns to live and work for those she loves, and finally admits to Jo that she is struggling. Beth gets weaker and weaker, but

[w]ith the wreck of her frail body, Beth’s soul grew strong, and though she said little, those about her felt that she was ready, saw that the first pilgrim called was likewise the fittest, and waited with her on shore, trying to see the Shining Ones coming to receive her when she crossed the river.

On her deathbed Beth tells Jo that her greatest fear is that her life had been meaningless, and that she would leave only sadness and despair when she died. Jo calms her fears and shows her the many positive influences she has had. Beth dies knowing that if she helped no one else, her sister Jo is a better, stronger pilgrim because of Beth’s influence.

Alcott continues Beth’s legacy of influence through Jo in Little Men. The Bhaers’ “school flourished, and manners and morals were insinuated, without the pupils exactly knowing how it was done.” Mr. and Mrs. Bhaer worked very hard to teach the children under their charge the difference between right and wrong. They intentionally fostered specific morals, including perseverance, steadiness, good temper, industry, wisdom, patience, generosity and self-denial. These principals outlined the basic elements toward becoming spiritually mature.

The figure of Jesus Christ plays prominently in the development of spiritual maturity in the boys of Plumfield. Since there has been much analysis of how Jesus Christ is depicted and understood at different points in history, it is important to note that Alcott focuses on several aspects of the Christ figure. She highlights his “humanness”

---

367 Ibid., 313 and 320.
368 Ibid., 360-364.
369 Ibid., 401.
370 Ibid., 402-402.
371 Alcott, Little Men, 13.
and his love of the poor and downtrodden, while also focusing on the nature of Jesus’
sacrifice on behalf of each individual. The humanness and love of the poor is seen when
Demi explains Jesus’ life to Nat. Demi teaches Nat about Jesus’ human nature and that
he lived and died in poverty. He also explains that Jesus was kind to those in need as
well as to children. Mrs. Bhaer, who often refers to her boys as gardens in need of a
gardener, claims that Nat’s garden “was already sown with the best of all seed by the
little missionary in the nightgown.” Morals and manners are not taught for their own
sake, but to encourage the growth of spirituality and a relationship with God—“the best
of all seed.” Later, when Nat struggles with his dishonesty, he finds Mr. Bhaer becomes
a Christ figure, suffering on his behalf. Alcott clearly illustrates that Mr. Bhaer, the
earthly friend who was willing to bear pain for his sake really points to Jesus, Nat’s
“Friend in heaven.” Demi’s ministrations to the spiritually impoverished are not
limited to Nat. When troublesome Dan returns to Plumfield, Demi agrees to help Dan
fight his demons. They decide to periodically meet and discuss how Dan can
productively battle his temper and foul mouth. As Mrs. Bhaer says to Dan, “Demi will
unconsciously strengthen your moral sense, [and] you will strengthen his common
sense.” Through this plan of mutual growth, Mrs. Bhaer feels certain that “Dan’s
salvation was assured.” This offers a clear demonstration of what Abigail Hamblen
calls Alcott’s “mixed religious world view.” According to Hamblen, Alcott was torn
between the transcendental idealism of her father and the practical religious orthodoxy of

372 Ibid., 49.
373 Ibid., 60-61.
374 Ibid., 237.
375 Ibid., 238.
her mother. Her work represents these battling forces in her too good to be true
characters, like Beth and Demi, and her sinner in need of a savior characters, like Jo and
Dan. However, all characters must have some growth in order to reach spiritual maturity.

Demi himself reaches a level of spiritual maturity when his father dies suddenly.
He mourns terribly for his lost father, but eventually his grief for his earthly father
deepens his love for his heavenly Father. He matures almost overnight. He decides to
take life more seriously—studying hard and trying to earn money for his family.
Although he is only ten years old Demi decides all on his own that the time has come for
him to start taking care of his family. Alcott illustrates the critical nature of morality in
reaching spiritual maturity, however there is little independence to be noted. The boys all
find that they are spiritually in agreement with those around them. Much like the March
girls, the boys struggle against themselves, but rarely against external forces.

The theme of spiritual maturity continues in Jo's Boys. Each of the Plumfield
boys and girls must reach their own level of spiritual maturity. Dan's spiritual struggle is
probably the most painful of the struggles. Although he valiantly battles his temper, it
gets the better of him well into adulthood. It is not until he winds up in prison that he is
finally pushed to a breaking point. Dan is ready to break out in rebellion when two small
things turn his heart around. The first is the little sermon of a woman visiting the prison.
She tells of two soldiers wounded in the arm during the war. One submits to have his
arm amputated, knowing it will save his life. The other refuses to have his arm
amputated and dies a horrible death. Her moral is that the prisoners also have to choose
between submitting to their punishment and living or rebelling against their punishment

---

377 Alcott, Little Men, 288.
378 Ibid., 290.
and perhaps dying a terrible death. Dan begins an internal battle. The death of his only friend in prison, and the dying man’s last words finally turn the tide toward good. His friend’s last words encourage Dan to be strong in spite of the terrible punishment. He thanks Dan for caring for him and pushes him to choose right instead of wrong.

Dan’s was a hard-won battle; but he would never have to fight so terrible a one again; for though enemies would still assail from within and from without, he had found the little guide-book that Christian carried in his bosom, and Love, Penitence, and Prayer, the three sweet sisters, had given him the armour which would keep him safe. He had not learned to wear it yet, and chafed against it, though he felt its value.

He finally returns home, having not only bettered his demons, but having shown himself a hero as well. After recovering both physically and emotionally, Dan leaves Plumfield again, this time to do “missionary work among the Indians.”

Dan faced his great Apollyon, but the other young people of Plumfield had their struggles as well. Before leaving for Europe, Mrs. Bhaer has a long talk with Nat. She warns him to be wary and careful to make wise choices. He appreciates her advice, but being young and fool-hardy he throws himself into a life of luxury. After months of decadent living in Germany, Nat runs out of money and friends and finds himself “floundering in the Slough of Despond, with no helping hand to pull him out.” When he receives word from his loved ones in America he finds that “Love, the dear Evangelist, had lifted him out of the slough and shown him the narrow gate, beyond

---

379 Alcott, Jo’s Boys, 188-191.  
380 Ibid., 191-192.  
381 Ibid., 229.  
382 Ibid., 297.  
383 Ibid., 99.  
384 Ibid., 202.
which deliverance lay.” He commits to redeem himself through hard work and humility. He is successful beyond his own dreams and finally returns home to take Daisy as his bride.

Alcott does not limit the discussion of spiritual maturity to her main characters. It is clear that Mrs. Bhaer hopes to teach spiritual independence even to the less dynamic boys like snobby Dolly and chubby Stuffy. When the boys, now college students, find themselves chatting alone at the tennis courts, Mrs. Bhaer finds that the opportunity has presented itself and she gives her temperance lecture. The boys take the lesson to heart, it seems, for “in their secret souls they thanked her for giving their boyish consciences a jog, and more than once afterward had cause to remember gratefully that half-hour in the tennis-court.”

Plumfield’s girls have their moments of spiritual maturity as well. Even the serious and scientific Nan finds herself asking God for “strength, courage and wisdom; for there was no one else to call upon.” She proves herself all the woman and doctor anyone could ask her to be when she administers painful treatment to one she loves dearly. Her heart nearly breaks, but she never shows her fear and manages to give effective treatment without drama. Like her male counterparts, Nan calls on God not when she is battling external, cultural forces, but when she is battling her own sense of inadequacy and fear.

---

385 Ibid., 203.
386 Ibid., 319.
387 Ibid., 245.
388 Ibid., 119.
389 Ibid., 120.
Rob, Nan’s patient, has the opportunity to reflect on his life. However he is not afraid, for he has “a very strong and simple piety to sustain and cheer him.”

Ted, his brother and the source of his injury, is also changed by the experience. Just as his mother realized how dangerous her temper can be when Amy is nearly drowned, Ted realizes the treacherous nature of his reckless spirit when his brother’s life is in danger. The lesson is well learned, for wild Teddy eventually becomes a famous clergyman.

Conclusions and Comparisons: Finley’s and Alcott’s Approaches to Education and Marriage

Spiritual maturity is an important aspect of each book in the Little Women series. All of the characteristics discussed highlight the significance of community, which is an important lesson. However, they are not used to encourage the independence of thinking required to challenge the normative cultural expectations. Although there are manifestations of spiritual independence in Little Women, neither Little Men nor Jo’s Boys illustrate a clear sense of spiritual independence. Marmee is careful to teach her girls not only to do good, but to do good by choice. Even when in difficult circumstances the girls recall Marmee’s call to listen to the voice of their good friend in Heaven and make the right decision. Generally, however, their “independent” decisions conform to the parental expectations. It is noteworthy that Alcott neglects to develop fully any dynamic female characters in either of her last two books. Despite the spiritual maturity and even independence depicted in the young women of Little Women, the young girls of Little Men and Jo’s Boys show little dynamic growth, especially in spiritual issues.

---

390 Ibid., 122.
391 Ibid., 128-129.
392 Ibid., 321.
Daisy, Nan, Josie and Bess show little interest in spiritual issues and their morality represses any independence of spirit, rather than encouraging it.

These books seem to support progressive movements. Temperance is articulated throughout the series. When Meg is married and the family is given a gift of wine, they do not serve it at the wedding. Instead they keep some for medicinal purposes and give the rest away. The March sisters also use the opportunity to encourage Laurie to commit to abstinence from alcohol.\textsuperscript{393} Later in the series, in \textit{Jo’s Boys}, Jo eventually convinces two of her most worldly boys to refrain from partaking in strong drink.\textsuperscript{394} During the same “lecture” she warns the boys about how they treat women. She advises them that most women “wish to be treated like reasonable beings, not dolls to flirt with.”\textsuperscript{395} The book is full of reform discussion—including support of the right to vote.\textsuperscript{396} Although Daisy dislikes the debate,\textsuperscript{397} all the young women (and most of the young men) desire more rights for women.

Although an examination of how a series deals directly with the women’s movement is helpful, it is not a summary of the book’s assessment of women and their role in the world. I believe that there are others ways that these novels reflect the spiritual independence of the female characters. Two ways this can be seen is through comparison of how the Elsie Dinsmore series and the Little Women series discuss the education of women as well as the novels’ discussion of marriage and finding a mate.

The Elsie Dinsmore books illustrate how religion can and has been used to encourage independence and new thinking. Despite the undoubtedly evangelical nature

\textsuperscript{393} Alcott, \textit{Little Women}, 247-248.
\textsuperscript{394} Alcott, \textit{Jo’s Boys}, 240-241.
\textsuperscript{395} Ibid., 239.
\textsuperscript{396} Ibid., 92-96.
\textsuperscript{397} Ibid., 69.
of the books they overtly encourage the education of women regardless of wealth or even
disability. Elsie, the young heiress, is encouraged to work hard in her studies. Later her
children are likewise pushed to work hard academically. When young Molly, crippled
from the waist down, feels she is useless and destined to be a burden on her family, Elsie
convinces her that the only thing preventing her success is her own attitude. If she wants
to be educated and eventually support herself, Elsie will work to make sure that she has
that opportunity. Even outsiders recognize the family’s drive to educate their children.
Although the children, especially the girls, will probably never need to support
themselves, they are educated as though they will. The education of women was
important aspect of the women’s movement, and a very important element of the spiritual
independence developed in the Elsie Dinsmore series.

The Little Women books are supportive of the education of women in word, if not
by example. At the beginning of Little Women the only one of the March girls in school
is Amy. However, circumstances soon require that she is removed from school. Little
Men focuses primarily on the male students, although it is made clear that the girls are in
school with the boys, and that Nan, at least, studies as well as the boys. Although the
books seem generally supportive of the education of women, Mrs. Jo often bemoans the
loss of domestic skill as the cost of women’s education. She argues that she will teach
“her girls” needlework, for “even if they give up the Latin, algebra, and half a dozen
ologies it is considered necessary for girls to muddle their poor brains over nowadays,”
they will have the skills that they actually need.398

398 Finley, Elsie’s Children, 136.
399 Ibid., 236-237.
400 Alcott, Little Men, 197-198.
Jo’s Boys supports the education of women, especially since Laurence College is a co-educational institution. Although this college is central to the storyline, the only college educated women in the book are Nan and later Demi’s bride-to-be, Alice. Daisy is the domestic “type” who is naturally womanly and requires no formal education. Alcott is very stereotypical in her depictions of her primary female characters. Girls and women who enjoy the womanly arts are quiet, shy and submissive (Meg, Beth, Daisy). Tomboys are loud and boisterous and are the only girls who need an education or will have a career (Jo, Nan, Josie). There is no room for a woman who enjoys sewing and wants to know algebra.

The contrast between Finley’s and Alcott’s views on marriage offers another interesting facet of female life. Below are two quotes from the series.

“To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman, and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience.”

Elsie was not bringing up her daughters to consider marriage the chief end of woman. She had, indeed, said scarcely anything on the subject till her eldest was of an age to begin to mix a little in general society. Then, she talked quietly and seriously to them of the duties and responsibilities of the married state and the vast importance of making a wise choice in selecting a partner for life.”

The contrast of these two quotes, the first from Little Women and the second from Elsie’s Children, highlights the different attitudes of the two series towards women and their primary purpose in life. Marmee tells her daughters that being chosen (passive) by a man is the “best” and “sweetest” experience in life. Elsie, on the other hand, explains the challenges and hardships of marriage and speaks explicitly about her daughters choosing

---

401 Alcott, Little Women, 99.
402 Finley, Elsie’s Children, 238.
(active), rather than being chosen. Based on these examples, one would never imagine that *Little Women* is the “feminist” novel.

Furthermore, the spouses chosen by the different characters also illustrate how the authors understand the marriage decision. Elsie chooses for her spouse a man who is friends with her father, but has a very different approach to life. Edward Travilla strongly disagrees with many of the decisions his friend Horace Dinsmore has made. This is especially true of Horace’s child-rearing practices. Horace questions Elsie’s choice of Edward Travilla as her husband. Edward is morally upright and loves Elsie, which makes him a suitable mate. However the age difference leads to questions and occasionally mockery by her friends and family.

The March girls all marry according to their parental expectations. They do not challenge their parent’s ideas about what is best for them. Jo actually marries a man that is so similar to her own father that descriptions of them sometimes make it difficult to know about whom the author is writing. Both men are intellectually astute and avid teachers. Jo’s father is Demi’s earliest and primary teacher, who “cultivated the little mind with the tender wisdom of a modern Pythagoras.” Mr. March feels strongly that “If [Demi] is old enough to ask the question he is old enough to receive true answers.” Friedrich Bhaer has the same philosophical and tutorial bent. He is a professor by training and teaches lessons in New York, somewhere in “the West” and later at Plumfield. It might be difficult to know which man is having “Socratic conversations” with “precocious pupil[s]” and which one finds himself “talking

---

404 Alcott, *Little Women*, 446.
405 Ibid., 445.
philosophy with a Frenchman." Jo’s husband essentially serves as a substitute for her own parents, which, it could be argued, actually stunts the development of full spiritual independence. She is never really forced to make independent decisions.

Although Alcott supports progressive movements in theory, I would argue that moral teachings advocated throughout the book seldom serve to encourage the spiritual independence that could really promote reform thinking. Her characters generally make decisions based on parental and societal expectations. Those who challenge the cultural norms find that their ardent spirits must be tempered and restrained through difficult and painful lessons. Instead of challenging the cultural expectations, Alcott encourages the use of morality as a tool of oppression, rather than a tool of spiritual independence.

Having examined both the *Elsie Dinsmore* series and the *Little Women* series, I will now examine how another series deals with this concept of spiritual independence. The *Little House* series, written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, is set during the same period as the other two series. Wilder grew up during the late 19th century, the setting of both the *Elsie* books and the *Little Women* books. Her semi-autobiographical books set up an interesting point of comparison to the other series. How does Wilder depict the development of spiritual independence during the late 19th century and how is it related to Laura’s spiritual independence in her books?

---

406 Ibid., 327.
Chapter IV: Reformation from Within—The Little House Series

Laura Ingalls Wilder’s series of Little House books offer an interesting point of comparison with the Elsie Dinsmore series and the Little Women series. Hindsight certainly offered Wilder some sense of the cultural and spiritual direction of American society, but her books also portray the cultural and spiritual values reflective of 19th-century America. Though written more than 60 years later than the other two series, Wilder’s books are set during the middle and end of the 19th century. Wilder’s semi-autobiographical series describes the memories of a pioneer child as well as a child raised in the United States at the end of the 19th century. Wilder is in a very unique position, relative to Finley and Alcott. Although the series is set during the same time period at the end of the 19th century, the cultural experiences of the Ingalls family actually reflect the colonial/pioneer experience of earlier generations. There is an interesting dynamic created when the most recent author is discussing a culture that is historic to the earlier authors. Wilder’s books portray the same moral principles as Finley and Alcott’s books, but Wilder highlights how those principles are necessary to familial and individual survival. For Finley and Alcott daily survival is not the primary concern. They deal with social questions and nuances that are often recognized and occasionally discarded by Wilder. For example, in The Long Winter when Wilder highlights Laura’s contributions to farm labor Ma argues that despite her cultural misgivings (“She did not like to see women working in the fields. Only foreigners did that. Ma and her girls were Americans, above doing men’s work.”408), Laura’s work is necessary to familial survival.

407 Although I will explain this more thoroughly, I use “Wilder” to refer to the author Laura Ingalls Wilder and “Laura” to refer to the fictional character created by Wilder.
This aspect of Wilder’s series will be further noted in my discussion of Wilder’s use of morality and religion to create spiritual independence.

Claudia Mills, in her article “From Obedience to Autonomy: Moral Growth in the Little House Books,” discusses the political parallels between Laura’s moral development and the growth of the United States. Her arguments clearly highlight Laura’s moral maturity; however, Mills omits mention of the religious aspect of Laura’s moral growth. It is critically important to recognize the religious aspects of cultural change. The secularization of American culture has allowed many to conclude that religion is culturally irrelevant. However, that has not historically been true in America, and I would argue that it still is not true in America or much of the rest of the world. Certainly, Wilder is less overt in her discussion of religious themes than were Finley and Alcott, but these themes are present in nearly every section of the series that concerns Laura’s maturation. One of the greatest contrasts between Wilder and her predecessors is that her religious ideology is more of an undercurrent than a prominent theme. Nevertheless, analysis of these texts indicates that religion was an important aspect of Laura’s moral development. Although Wilder seems to be echoing a 20th-century development in children’s literature which separates moral development from religious belief, I would argue that the books, albeit less overtly than other texts, do reflect the 19th-century relationship between religion and morality.

Much recent scholarship discussing the Little House books focuses on two areas—the treatment of Native Americans and the biographical concerns—including frequent discussions of the books as a collaboration between Laura Ingalls Wilder and
her daughter Rose Wilder Lane. However, since my research is most concerned with Wilder as the author of girls’ series fiction, I will focus on similar research from another scholar. Although many scholars discuss the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder and its affect on her writing, I have found that Ann Romines has extensively researched the structure of the series, the cultural implications of the series and the Wilder/Lane collaboration.

Romines addresses these issues in several articles and in the book *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder*. She discusses the patriarchal acceptance and challenges of Wilder’s writing, the material culture of the books, and Laura’s ability to find her own identity (or “plot”) through both career and family. Despite providing the most comprehensive critical view of Wilder’s series, Romines addresses neither Laura’s religious and moral upbringing nor its implications for the series or for late 19th-century culture in general.

The development of a sensitive conscience through the emphasis of obedience and honesty, longsuffering contentment and industriousness can be seen throughout Wilder’s series. I will highlight this pattern and focus on the development of spiritual

---

409 In “Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Kansas Indians,” Frances W. Kaye is particularly concerned with Wilder’s depictions of Native Americans and the historical veracity of her story. Wilder’s story is not only problematic, but some of her “facts” are patently false. Since Wilder was actually much younger than she portrays herself, her “memories” are actually the oral stories from other family members. Kaye argues that Wilder misinterprets and misrepresents the experiences of both settlers and Native Americans during this time period and feels that the stereotyping and the false depictions of the Native American experience allow readers to sense a kind of false humility in their mourning for the tragic (but inevitable) dispossession of Native Americans. The tragedy, Kaye concludes, is not that Wilder wrote this way, but that we continue to honor it. Although there are several authors who discuss the depictions of Native Americans in *Little House on the Prairie*, Kaye offers a full description of both the problems and the theoretical ramifications of those problems. See Frances W. Kaye, “Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Kansas Indians.” *Great Plains Quarterly* 20, no. 2, (2000): 123-140.


411 See chapter 3 of Romines, *Constructing the Little House*.

independence. It is important to acknowledge that the semi-autobiographical nature of these books can be problematic, so I wish to underscore that I draw a distinction in my analysis between Laura Ingalls Wilder, the author, and Laura Ingalls, the character in her books. Wilder includes only a fraction of her childhood experiences, which have been carefully edited. Certainly these works of fiction can and should be considered distinctive from the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder. She develops her characters uniquely and the thoughts and choices of those characters are shaped by the author’s imaginative reflections. My discussion of Laura and the Ingalls family is an analysis of the characters Wilder creates for her books. Since the book, *The First Four Years*, seems to be intended for an adult audience, it is not generally considered part of the series; however, because it continues Laura’s story and highlights the tremendous challenges of her early married years, I will be including it in my discussion.413

Honesty and Obedience

“There’s a good reason for what I tell you to do . . . and if you’ll do as you’re told, no harm will come to you.”414

Honesty and obedience are important concepts in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House series of books. Wilder depicts the pioneer existence of the Ingalls family and argues that in frontier life, honesty and obedience can be the difference between life and death. There are many occasions in which obedience literally saves lives and other occasions that illustrate how obedience can foster the intimacy of family relationships

413 Though it was not published during her lifetime, it is based on her notes. Since the book did not go through extensive revision as the other books did, the tone is somewhat different. Nonetheless, it continues the series into the married years, which extends the comparison to both the Elsie Dinsmore series and the Little Women series.
that is essential in a frontier lifestyle. Wilder also focuses on the theme of moral ambiguity and uncertainty in decisions about honesty and obedience.

Wilder recognizes obedience as an important moral arena. Although incidents of life-saving acts of obedience are extremely prevalent in the series, I will highlight only a few. The constant risk of death, even for children, distinguishes Wilder’s books from the Elsie Dinsmore and Little Women books. In the first book of the series, *Little House in the Big Woods*, Ma and Laura encounter a black bear while doing the evening chores. Ma, realizing the danger, tells Laura to go into the house. Laura is afraid, but she immediately obeys her mother. Later Ma acknowledges Laura’s complete and immediate obedience and calls her “a good girl.”

Wilder illustrates the importance of obedience in what is literally a life and death situation. This theme reappears in *Little House on the Prairie* when the Ingalls family is traveling west in the wagon they must cross a river. They almost get swept away by the current. Ma tells the girls to lie down, and they obey immediately. Laura’s internalization of the lessons in the life and death nature of obedience is captured in her thought that “[i]f Pa had not known what to do, or if Ma had been too frightened to drive, or if Laura and Mary had been naughty and bothered her, then they all would have been lost.” Wilder again highlights that their obedience was not simply morally right; it saved lives. Wilder continues this theme in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. Pa takes Laura and Mary to the waterhole, but forbids them to return without him. Laura decides to disobey, but is stopped from actually going to the swimming hole by a badger in the path. When Laura returns home she confesses, even though she never actually goes to the swimming hole. Her intention to disobey is

---

415 Ibid., 106.
grounds enough for punishment. Pa decides that Laura cannot be trusted, and so she must be watched. She must spend all the next day in Ma’s sight. Ma stays indoors, and Laura has to stay indoors too. At the end of the day Laura concludes that “being good could never be as hard as being watched.” Ma firmly believes that if Laura had gone to the waterhole, she would have gone in because “[o]nce you begin being naughty, it is easier to go on and on, and sooner or later something dreadful happens.” Wilder not only discusses the importance of obedience in saving lives, but she also highlights the danger of a single act of disobedience because it can serve as a gateway into further deceit, disobedience and even death.

Wilder also uses honesty and obedience to highlight the importance of family life. On one occasion Laura’s sister Mary provokes her and Laura slaps Mary. Pa calls Laura to him and insists that regardless of what Mary did to provoke her, both girls know that they are never to strike each other. Her father tells her that Mary’s behavior is irrelevant, “[i]t is what I say that you must mind.” Wilder clearly argues that honesty and obedience are considered fundamental to a healthy and smooth running family. When Laura’s cousin Clarence is sent to the fields to work with his father, he is lazy and naughty. Clarence’s help is needed to benefit the entire family; however, he is not only unwilling to help, but his antics hinder the adults from getting their work done. His unwillingness to contribute to the family good is physically punished when he is steps on a hive of yellow jackets and nearly pays with his life. Pa’s response—“[i]t served the little liar right”—highlights the appropriate reaction to those who refuse to work on

---

418 Ibid., 35.
419 Wilder, Little House in the Big Woods, 184.
420 Ibid., 211.
behalf of the family. Wilder illustrates how both dishonesty and disobedience can fundamentally undermine the family dynamic.

Further, Wilder uses examples of dis/honesty as a tool in her discussion of moral ambiguity. Honesty appears as an important attribute that can be bound up in moral ambiguity in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. When Pa forbids Laura and Mary to slide down the straw stack, they decide to roll down it instead. Pa confronts them and they deny that they slid down the stack. Pa is outraged.

"Laura!" Pa’s voice was terrible. "Tell me again, DID YOU SLIDE DOWN THE STRAWSTACK?" "No, Pa," Laura answered again. She looked straight into Pa’s shocked eyes. She did not know why he looked like that... "We did not slide, Pa," Laura explained. "But we did roll down it." Pa got up quickly and went to the door and stood looking out. His back quivered... When Pa turned around, his face was stern but his eyes were twinking."[421]

When finally Laura explains their reasoning to Pa he is so relieved that they are not being intentionally dishonest that he does not punish them.

The moral ambiguity of honesty continues to be an important theme into the next book, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. Mary has lost her vision since the end of the last book, and Laura must "be eyes for Mary."[422] When Laura describes what she sees she often uses hyperbole and metaphor. Mary frequently reprimands Laura, telling her "[w]e should always be careful to say exactly what we mean."[423] When Laura describes a man and his horse riding into the sun and going "around the world," she doesn’t believe she is lying.[424] "What she had said was true, too. Somehow that moment when the beautiful,

---

423 Ibid., 58.
424 Ibid., 65.
free pony and the wild man rode into the sun would last forever."⁴²⁵ Though Wilder clearly distinguishes between poetic speech and intentional dishonesty, for the sake of family unity, Laura begins to be more careful about her use of hyperbolic speech.

Unlike Claudia Mills, who argues for a relatively linear pattern of moral growth that follows educational models of maturity, I find evidence that the moral ambiguity of obedience occurs quite frequently, and early, in the series. As early as Little House on the Prairie Laura questions Pa’s command to obey. When two Osage Indians come to the house while Pa is away, Mary and Laura are afraid, and they want to release their dog Jack so he can attack the strangers. They have a heated debate because Mary focuses on the fact that Pa had told them not to release Jack, but Laura is afraid for her family. Wilder uses the incident to emphasize that though the girls will eventually need to make their own decisions, they are not ready to do that yet. When Pa returns, Laura and Mary tell him of their moral dilemma. He explains that it would been very bad if Jack had bitten the men. "After this," he said, in a terrible voice, "you girls remember always to do as you’re told. Don’t you even think of disobeying me."⁴²⁶ Here, Wilder underscores the fact that Laura is already beginning to question authority and to consider making independent decisions. This is not Laura’s last bout with the moral ambiguity of obedience. In On the Banks of Plum Creek, Pa and Ma go to town and leave the girls alone for the afternoon. When a freak snowstorm comes up, Laura and Mary feel they should bring in firewood, but since they have been forbidden to go out into a snowstorm they again find themselves arguing about obedience versus disobedience. This time Laura’s insistence on disobedience is determined the smarter move and Laura and Mary

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 65.
⁴²⁶ Wilder, Little House on the Prairie, 145-146.
are not punished, "because they had been wise to bring in wood." It is critical to Wilder that life-saving disobedience is better than unwise obedience. This continues Laura’s reflective thinking. She is realizing that “[s]ometime soon they would be old enough not to make any mistakes, and then they could always decide what to do. They would not have to obey Pa and Ma any more.”

Wilder’s focus on Laura’s uncertainty in making her own decisions continues in *The Long Winter*. When Laura gets caught, along with her teacher and classmates, in an early snow storm, she is torn between her sense of obedience to her teacher and to her own sense of direction. She believes that the teacher is leading them the wrong way, and it is only because she follows her own instinct, at least a little, that she prevents the entire school from wandering blindly into the prairie in a blizzard. Wilder again illustrates that obedience can be just as dangerous as disobedience. Ultimately Wilder argues, Laura must decide for herself how to find the balance between her sense of duty to authority and her own conscience.

In *Little Town on the Prairie*, Laura has one of her most insightful moments in the discussion of obedience at a Fourth of July celebration.

She thought: Americans won’t obey any king on earth. Americans are free. That means they must obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do and there isn’t anyone else who has a right to give me orders.

This is a pivotal moment in Laura’s spiritual journey, as she realizes that no one else is responsible for her behavior. She must *choose* to be obedient to her parents, and

---

428 Ibid., 290-291.
ultimately, she must choose to be obedient to God, “for God’s law is the only thing that gives you a right to be free.”

Wilder makes a fascinating connection between the responsibility to do right and the freedom to make choices. Laura’s independence is directly linked to her faith in God and what she knows to be God’s law.

Wilder continues to focus on the balance between obedience to parents and obedience to conscience well into Laura’s young adulthood. At the beginning of *These Happy Golden Years*, Laura, at fifteen, has already entered the working world, yet she still defers respectfully to her parents’ wishes. When she is asked to help work in Miss Bell’s shop, she agrees, with the caveat of her mother’s willingness. Each of the teaching positions that she takes is dependent upon her parents’ approval. Nonetheless, when she feels that the difficult circumstances of one of her teaching positions would make her parents upset, she chooses not to tell them. When her parents voice their disapproval of her riding with Almanzo’s wild horses, she tells only about the horses’ good behavior, not the bad. Though Pa suspects she is being dishonest, she is careful to never say anything untruthful. Laura’s final discussion of obedience comes as she is preparing to wed Almanzo Wilder. She announces that she is not going to vow to obey him. He asks her if she is for women’s rights. “‘No,’ Laura replied. ‘I do not want to vote. But I cannot make a promise that I will not keep, and, Almanzo, even if I tried, I do not think I could obey anybody against my better judgment.’” He confirms that he would not want her to do anything against her better judgment. This is the culmination of

---

431 Ibid., 76.
433 Ibid., 82.
434 Ibid., 208.
435 Ibid., 269-270.
Wilder’s discussion of honesty and obedience and she makes it clear that obedience to conscience is more critical than obedience to any man (or woman).

**Longsuffering Contentment**

Pa and Ma and Mary and Laura and Baby Carrie were comfortable and happy there.\(^\text{436}\)

Wilder frequently highlights how longsuffering contentment and self-sacrifice are not just life lessons for the Ingalls family; they are a way of life. Pioneer life is difficult, and the only way to survive is by giving up one’s own selfish desires to the greater good. Laura learns from a young age not to be selfish, but, despite what is often a great struggle, to share and be satisfied. Wilder emphasizes that longsuffering contentment and self-sacrifice create incredible emotional strength and a fighting spirit in Laura, as well as enhancing her relationship with her family.

Wilder’s focus on the importance of self-sacrifice is evident from Laura’s earliest happy memories. When she receives a doll as a Christmas gift her mother says “Laura, aren’t you going to let the other girls hold your doll?” She meant, ‘Little girls must not be so selfish.’\(^\text{437}\) Although Laura wants to keep her doll to herself, she knows that it is right to share with her sister and cousins. On another occasion she fills her pocket so full of pretty pebbles that it rips out of her dress. Both of her parents scold her for her greediness,\(^\text{438}\) as her actions cause unhappiness for herself and more work for her mother. Laura’s lessons in contentment extend beyond material things. Laura, as an active little girl, struggles with the calm and quiet of Sundays. When she expresses her frustration,

\(^{437}\) Ibid., 77.
\(^{438}\) Ibid., 175.
Pa tells her the story of his father and what their Sundays were like. On Sundays the family spent the long afternoon sitting still studying catechism. No smiling, talking or laughing was permitted. Pa tells the girls that they "should be glad that it isn’t as hard to be good now as it was when Grandpa was a boy."439 Wilder emphasizes that suffering and learning contentment are central at any age, but also suggests a gendered sense of suffering in Ma’s statement that although Sundays were difficult for all children, “It was harder for little girls. Because they had to behave like ladies all the time, not only on Sundays.”440

These earliest lessons in contentment are simple, but they soon become more difficult. Wilder uses several incidents to illustrate the endurance and fighting spirit that come from self-sacrifice and longsuffering. Sometimes Laura’s self-sacrifice is for the improvement of the family. Little House on the Prairie begins when the family packs up all of their belongings and leaves the Big Woods behind. Their journey is an adventure, but eventually Mary and Laura grow bored sitting in the wagon all day. They yearn to run and play, and when Laura complains, Ma reprimands her.441 Laura is learning a critical lesson in endurance. This theme of boredom and discomfort in traveling is reiterated in By the Shores of Silver Lake. Even in simple things, Laura realizes, the sacrifices must be made, especially for Mary, who is now blind. Although Carrie is weak, she and Laura must both sacrifice for Mary. They sit on the ends of the benches to protect Mary from the jolts. They stay in the wagon instead of walking behind because they don’t want to leave Mary alone in the wagon.442 Wilder illustrates the hardships of

439 Ibid., 96.
440 Ibid., 96.
441 Wilder, Little House on the Prairie, 14-15.
442 Wilder, By the Shore of Silver Lake, 38-39.
becoming a young woman. Laura must accept not only the sacrifices she herself must make, but the sacrifices of those she loves. It is interesting that this shared sense of sacrifice creates a new camaraderie between Laura and Carrie. The relationship Laura had with Mary when they were younger has extended to include Carrie. The family bonds are strengthened through mutual sacrifice.

Laura’s comfort is not her only sacrifice for her family. In *On the Banks of Plum Creek* Laura is devastated that the horses, Pet and Patty, will be traded for oxen. Laura begs Pa not to trade the horses, but Pa explains that they must give up their horses in order to farm the land.\(^\text{443}\) Pa tells Laura “‘[w]e must do the best we can, Laura, and not grumble. What must be done is best done cheerfully.’”\(^\text{444}\) Laura realizes she must sacrifice her own desire in order to improve the family situation. Later in the book, Laura and Mary both give up their own Christmas gifts so that Pa can buy a new team of horses. Ma explains to them that Santa Claus is the result of unselfishness. Anytime someone does something unselfish, it is Santa Claus. Laura asks “‘[I]f everybody wanted everybody else to be happy, all the time, then it would be Christmas all the time?’”\(^\text{445}\) Ma confirms Laura’s reasoning and then Ma asks both girls to forgo their own Christmas wishes in order to fulfill Pa’s wishes. It is a difficult sacrifice but they agree. Still Laura struggles and adds to her nightly prayers that God will “‘please make me only glad about the Christmas horses, for ever’n’ever amen again.’”\(^\text{446}\) This incident is reminiscent of Alcott’s depiction of the March girls forgoing their own Christmas comforts on behalf of

\(^{444}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{445}\) Ibid., 86.
\(^{446}\) Ibid., 87.
their mother. Both authors highlight the fundamentally self-sacrificial nature of family life.

Laura’s lessons in giving up her own desires for the improvement of the family are only the beginning of the self-sacrificial process. There are also several occasions when Laura has to give up her own safety to take care of her family. In *Little House on the Prairie*, after the Native Americans come to their home and Laura and Mary decide to leave Jack the dog tied up, they must also decide between staying with Jack, where they are safe, or going inside to help Ma. Finally they decide to give up their own safety to be with Ma and Carrie.447 Wilder emphasizes how Laura’s experiences with self-sacrifice have instilled in her a fighting spirit to defend her family. Laura again puts her own life at risk to save Mary and Carrie from a fire. When their chimney catches fire and Ma goes out to fight the fire, Laura does not panic. When fire comes inside the house, she saves her sisters’ lives and protects their home.448 Once again, Laura’s fighting spirit rises to the surface in a time of crisis. It is not only her desires that Laura must sacrifice for the family good. Sometimes she puts her own life on the line. When the neighbor’s cattle get into the haystacks she beats them with a stick until they run away, almost trampling her in the process.449 Laura literally fights to protect her family. Pa confirms that she did the right thing defending the family and the farm.

Wilder also highlights how the entire family sometimes suffers together. These occasions serve to draw them closer as a family and encourage their fighting spirit. *On the Banks of Plum Creek* is full of difficult times for Laura’s family. When the grasshoppers come, they lose all their potential income. They have debt from the new

448 Ibid., 201-204.
449 Ibid., 70-72.
house and Pa must travel to find work to pay their debt. The family seems lonely and vulnerable without Pa. During his second season of travel the family must fight off a prairie fire that threatens to consume the hay and the house. They also harvest the potatoes and turnips, which are the only crops to survive the second year of grasshoppers. Mary and Laura must work hard to help Ma while Pa is away. Once again Wilder illustrates how the hard-won lessons in self-sacrifice are put to the test when the family fights and endures, despite tremendous hardship. Wilder illustrates that in spite of the family’s struggles, they are strong and united. The book ends with the family reunited and happy, knowing that whatever happens they will face it together. Likewise in The Long Winter the Ingalls family suffers from terrible hardship. They suffer with cold and hunger. Although they have money to buy supplies, the constant blizzards prevent the trains from bringing in fresh supplies. They struggle not because of poverty, but because of circumstance. They work hard to learn good lessons from their struggles. When they receive a surprise of papers and stories from Reverend Alden they agree to wait until Christmas to read them. “‘It will help us to learn self-denial,’” Mary says. Although reluctant, Laura concedes that Mary is right. It will also serve as their Christmas present to themselves, since the difficult circumstances preclude any great gift giving. Wilder again illustrates how self-sacrificial behavior encourages emotional strength and family unity and the discussion of self-sacrifice when Almanzo Wilder and Cap Garland set out on their dangerous treasure hunt for wheat. Laura and Mary discuss whether or not it is acceptable to pray for them. Mary argues that as long as they don’t ask for anything for themselves, it is good for them to pray for the safety of the two men, if it is God’s will.

450 Wilder, On the Banks of Plum Creek, 268-275.
451 Wilder, The Long Winter, 175.
452 Ibid., 175.
Laura thinks it should be God’s will, since the men are willing to sacrifice their safety and well-being to fight on behalf of their community.  

One of the greatest and most difficult sacrifices Laura will have to make begins in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. Ma has always wanted one of her girls to teach school. All of them had assumed it would be Mary, but since Mary has lost her sight, it will have to be Laura. Laura hates the idea of teaching school, but “[s]he could not disappoint Ma.”

Laura’s call to teaching was not the only call to self-sacrifice that Mary’s blindness would bring into Laura’s life. When Laura learns that there are colleges for the blind she realizes that her teaching will not only fulfill Ma’s dream for her daughters but also supply the money for Mary’s college education as well. Laura finds that “she would be glad to work hard and go without anything she wanted herself, so that Mary could go to college.”

This is not a fleeting fancy. When Ma, Laura and Carrie work hard to provide room and board for the men arriving to build the new town, it is with the intention of saving the money to help send Mary to college.

Laura continues to struggle with the idea of being a school teacher. In *The Long Winter* Laura dreads going to school because it is a symbol of her call to teach school. Nonetheless, she is determined to face her fear and to become a successful teacher, because Mary is blind, Ma wants a teacher, and Pa says they must always be brave.

Wilder again highlights Laura’s emotional strength and fighting spirit through her willingness to sacrifice on behalf of her family. Later she discovers that Mary’s goodness contributes to her desire to teach school. “She thought, ‘Mary is going to

---

453 Ibid., 291.
454 Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 127.
455 Ibid., 219.
456 Ibid., 243.
college, no matter how hard I have to work to send her.'”

Mary’s good attitude also inspires a change in Laura. When Laura complains about the winter darkness, Mary responds that she is not bothered by the darkness. Laura feels guilty for complaining about the temporary darkness of a winter night, when Mary lives in a world of perpetual black.

Wilder’s portrayal of the importance of self-sacrifice continues in *Little Town on the Prairie*. After the long hard winter, Laura is grateful to be free to work and live on the homestead. So when Pa asks her if she wants to work for pay in town, her heart’s desire is to stay with Ma and the other girls on the claim. However, she knows she can earn good money toward Mary’s college education, and with Ma and Pa’s permission she begins working in town. Wilder argues that doing what is right is not always the same as following your heart’s desire. Laura’s job in town offers a particularly interesting example, since the family dynamic of her employer is so different from her own family. The members of the Clancy family argue and yell, which makes Laura very uncomfortable. Nonetheless, she eventually realizes that every family functions in its own way. The strength of character learned through her self-sacrifice makes future sacrifice more bearable. This discussion of the Clancy family at the beginning of the book is especially significant since the book ends with her acceptance of another job that will require even more patience with another family’s dynamic.

Laura’s inner turmoil over the question of becoming a teacher comes to a head when she is offered her first teaching position. She wants to earn the money, but she

---

458 Ibid., 129.
459 Ibid., 145.
461 Ibid., 40-46.
dreads being so far away from her family. Nonetheless, she accepts the position so that she can earn money to keep Mary in school and perhaps bring Mary home to visit over the summer. Accepting the job is only the first sacrifice Laura’s first teaching position will cost her. These Happy Golden Years opens with Laura’s arrival in the Brewster home, where she will be staying while she teaches school. Her welcome is not particularly warm. Mrs. Brewster is a very unhappy woman. The household is tense and unpleasant. Laura tries to be helpful and friendly, but all of her advances are rebutted. Laura realizes that as much as she had dreaded teaching school, nothing could be worse than staying in that house with Mrs. Brewster.\textsuperscript{462} When Laura goes home to visit, her sister Carrie asks, “‘[d]o you dreadfully hate to teach school?’”\textsuperscript{463} Laura confesses that she does, but also emphasizes to Carrie that they need to appreciate the family and the home that they have. Wilder highlights that it is the change in family situation even more than the teaching situation that makes Laura so uncomfortable. Laura’s relationship with the Brewster family during her first teaching experience deeply challenges her sense of family and stability. Essentially Wilder argues that Mrs. Brewster’s inability to sacrifice on behalf of her family is destroying both the family and herself.

Wilder uses Mrs. Brewster as an antithesis to underscore the sacrifices made by both Laura and Ma. Laura is willing to do what she does not want to for the well being of the family. After the Brewster school is over and Laura receives her pay, her father tells her that he’s proud of her for finishing the school, even though he knows it was unpleasant. Laura gives all the money to Pa, so that they can bring Mary home. She says

\textsuperscript{462} These Happy Golden Years, 13.
\textsuperscript{463} Ibid., 36.
“I was only teaching school for Mary.” When Mary comes home Laura feels that seeing the positive happy changes in Mary make all of her hard work and suffering worthwhile. Laura continues teaching school and sacrificing her income to make her family, and especially Mary, happy and comfortable.

Recognizing Ma’s sacrifices is another important part of Laura’s emotional and spiritual growth. As Laura and Ma are making all of Mary’s new clothes for college Laura suddenly realizes that her mother hates sewing as much as she does. Ma never tells her that she hates sewing, but she can see the tension and frustration in her face. Furthermore Ma understands and explains the struggles of life. One day, when Laura is bemoaning the loss of the oat crop, Ma tells her that “[t]his earthly life is a battle . . . If it isn’t one thing to contend with, it’s another. It always has been so, and it always will be. The sooner you make up your mind to that, the better off you are, and the more thankful for your pleasures.” Laura’s mother gives her the best advice in dealing with the struggles and pain of this world. Wilder uses a fighting analogy to illustrate how much suffering and struggle there is in life. The emotional strength and fight earned throughout Laura’s childhood and early womanhood are her greatest tools in the inevitable challenges of life.

The culmination of Wilder’s discussion of longsuffering contentment occurs in *These Happy Golden Years* and *The First Four Years* which discuss Laura’s courtship and marriage to Almanzo Wilder. When the time comes for them to be married, Almanzo asks Laura if she wants a big wedding. She reflects on his reasoning, and

---

464 Ibid., 99.
465 Ibid., 126.
466 Ibid., 153.
467 Ibid., 90.
468 Ibid., 89.
realizes that neither Almanzo nor Pa have the resources to pay for a large church wedding. So she agrees to a quick marriage by the local preacher. She gives up a fancy wedding, but gains a husband and home of her own. After Laura agrees “to be married suddenly,” she quickly finds herself a new bride thrust into a new home and a new life. There are many challenges in their life together. Laura’s pregnancies are difficult. She is sick and struggles to get through each day. Later, Laura and Almanzo get seriously ill with diphtheria. When Almanzo struggles with paralysis after the illness, Laura must work even harder. “But she didn’t mind doing it all, for Manly was recovering the use of his hands and feet.” After four years of farming they find themselves in debt and having suffered great losses. Laura realizes “[i]t would be a fight to win out in this business of farming, but strangely she felt her spirit rising for the struggle.” This is the very occasion for which Laura’s suffering has prepared her. Her fighting spirit rises and she find the endurance and willingness to fight on behalf of her family which are the greatest outgrowth of Laura’s lessons in suffering and self-sacrifice.

**Industriousness**

Wash on Monday, Iron on Tuesday, Mend on Wednesday, Churn on Thursday, Clean on Friday, Bake on Saturday, Rest on Sunday.  

Wilder depicts hard work as a way of life for pioneers. Self-reliance requires that every family member contribute as much as possible. She depicts this clearly in the saga of the Ingalls family. Industriousness was so integrated into life that there was no question of its importance. This is a reflection of Wilder’s aforementioned survival

---

470 Ibid., 91.  
471 Ibid., 133.  
approach. Even from a young age the Ingalls girls learned how to work hard. Wilder highlights two kinds of industry—domestic and scholastic. Both types of industry help Laura to fulfill her moral obligations. Wilder’s discussion of industriousness begins with the domestic work seen in *Little House in the Big Woods* in which Laura spends a great deal of time describing the changing seasons and the corresponding work. Laura describes fall as “great fun. There was so much work to do, so many good things to eat, so many new things to see.” There was no sense that work was a burden. Work creates a sense of joy and a sense of leading a valuable life. When the family leaves the big woods and moves out onto the prairie in *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura’s help is even more important. Her parents were careful to recognize her work and praise her for it. Pa tells her she is “a fine little helper!” Wilder makes it clear that even at a very young age, Laura’s work is valuable. Laura continues to be Pa’s helper in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. When Ma complains about sleeping on the floor in her own home, Pa and Laura go the creek and find willow poles on which to put the beds. They bring joy to Ma through their hard work and Pa again recognizes Laura as his special helper. Wilder illustrates that Laura’s hard work allows her to be obedient, not only to the word of Pa’s rules, but to the spirit of family building and strength.

In their home on Plum Creek, Laura and Mary become old enough to have real work and real responsibilities. When the family gets a milk cow in payment for Pa’s labor, the girls must tend the cow. They bring her out with the neighbor’s cattle and bring her home again in the evening. When the big oxen are not working with Pa, the

---

473 Ibid., 221.
girls must also bring them out with the other cattle. Wilder highlights that the girls are valuable and valued members of the household economy. The new chores and work load also highlight the differences between Laura and Mary. When the plums are ripe, the girls must go down every day and pick plums. Mary accuses Laura: "You just play around while I work." But Laura explains her sister's behavior. "Mary was cross because she would rather sew or read than pick plums. But Laura hated to sit still; she liked picking plums." Wilder illustrates that each girl, regardless of her natural inclination, must do her fair share of the work.

In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura continues to learn lessons in industriousness. When spring comes, and the new town is being erected, the family finds there is suddenly more work than they have ever known before. With a constant influx of new settlers, and no hotel, the family takes boarders. They work hard, and they earn money for every meal and every bed. "Laura did not care how many dishes she washed, nor how sleepy and tired she was. Pa and Ma were getting rich, and she was helping." Wilder connects Laura's hard work to the improving condition of her family. Only through hard work can Laura help send Mary to college, which she sees as a moral obligation.

In fact, Wilder emphasizes that the family need is a more significant aspect of work than even cultural expectation. In *The Long Winter*, Laura offers to help Pa make hay. Mary and Carrie offer to fill her place at home, and Laura is able to help Pa bring in

---

476 Ibid., 45-51.
477 Ibid., 64.
478 Ibid., 64.
479 Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 240.
large quantities of hay. Laura works so hard that her whole body hurts. Although the family is unaware at the time, the hay that they are harvesting will be critical to the family’s survival through the long winter. Laura must continue in other types of work as well. Once the long winter arrives, the family faces many trials. All through the winter they grind wheat in a coffee grinder and twist hay to keep the fire burning. Every day is the same—long and tedious. Cold, darkness and hunger will all eventually haunt the family. They struggle when the small pleasures of life are taken away. But Ma’s attitude and gratitude are sufficient substitute. “Work comes before pleasure,” Ma always said. She smiled her gentle smile for Laura and Carrie and said now, ‘My girls have helped me do a good day’s work,’ and they were rewarded.” Their mother’s kind acknowledgment of their work confirms the importance and values of their contribution. The book ends with a song that glorifies the benefits of hard work.

“Do you think that by sitting and sighing
You’ll ever obtain all you want?
It’s cowards alone that are crying
And foolishly saying, ‘I can’t!’
It is only by plodding and striving
And laboring up the steep hill
Of life, that you’ll ever be thriving
Which you’ll do if you’ve only the will.”

This verse highlights the importance of industry to Wilder’s thought. Learning to work hard is a fundamental aspect of Laura’s moral development.

Wilder illustrates that work only increases with age. Laura’s pattern of hard work continues in *Little Town on the Prairie*. This book essentially highlights how both domestic and scholastic work can become work for pay. Laura’s work ethic literally

---

481 Ibid., 173.
482 Ibid., 333.

146
“pays off” as she reaches adulthood. The book begins when Laura takes a job working for a seamstress in town. Although sewing is not her favorite work, she works hard and impresses her mistress.\textsuperscript{483} However, work outside the home does not preclude from her domestic obligations. Not only does Laura help with the household chores, but after she finishes her sewing in town she begins sewing for Mary’s college wardrobe. When she finishes sewing for Mary she helps Pa with the hay. Then it is time for Mary to leave for college. While Pa and Ma take her to Iowa, Laura is responsible for the family and the home. Laura wants to utilize the time during Ma’s absence to surprise her by doing the fall cleaning. They manage to complete the task, but Laura realizes again how much her mother does and well she keeps house.\textsuperscript{484}

A different kind of work is introduced to Laura and Mary in \textit{On the Banks of Plum Creek}—school. The family intentionally moved close to town so that the girls could go to school. Laura and Mary find that being in school is very different from being at home. Both Laura, who hates sitting still, and Mary, who hates being away from home, find that they enjoy school.\textsuperscript{485} Pa is careful to tell them what a special opportunity school is for them: “[I]t isn’t everybody that gets a chance to learn to read and write and cipher.”\textsuperscript{486}

The significance of an education only increases when the family decides that Laura must become a teacher. She sometimes struggles with the idea of school, but never with the learning itself. In \textit{Little Town on the Prairie} Laura has her first struggle with school work. Laura must work hard, especially if she wants to earn her teacher’s

\textsuperscript{483} Wilder, \textit{Little Town on the Prairie}, 45-46.
\textsuperscript{484} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{485} Wilder, \textit{On the Banks of Plum Creek}, 150.
\textsuperscript{486} Ibid., 138.
certificate as Ma wishes. When the winter and spring festivities in town distract her from her studies, she feels guilty. Her mother tries to serve as her conscience, but even her voice is drowned out by the knock at the door, inviting Laura to a party.\textsuperscript{487} When the end of the semester comes, and Laura’s grades are lower than she had hoped, she realizes that “there must be no more self-indulgence.”\textsuperscript{488} She buckles down, especially when Ma tells her “you may be well prepared to teach school and still not be a school teacher, but if you were not prepared, it’s certain that you won’t be.”\textsuperscript{489} Wilder illustrates that hard work is morally necessary. Without hard work Laura will be unable to fulfill her other moral obligations. Laura takes the lesson to heart. She studies all summer and the following year is at the top of her class. As a result she is asked to take a prominent role in the school exhibition.\textsuperscript{490} Laura takes her role in the program very seriously. She spends every evening preparing and studying. All of the hard work she has sown reaps a greater reward that she could have imagined. Not only is her presentation of American history in front of the whole town successful, but her recitation is so good that she is offered her first teaching position.

Laura leaves to begin teaching her first school in These Happy Golden Years. As he takes her to the Brewster settlement Pa discusses the situation with Laura.

“Well, Laura! You are a schoolteacher now! We knew you would be, didn’t we? Though we didn’t expect it so soon.” “Do you think I can, Pa?” Laura answered. “Suppose . . . just suppose . . . the children won’t mind me when they see how little I am.” “Of course you can,” Pa assured her. “You’ve never failed yet at anything you tried to do, have you?” “Well, no,” Laura admitted. “But I . . . I never tried to teach school.” “You’ve tackled every job that ever came your way,” Pa said. “You’ve never shirked, and you always stuck to it till you did what you set out to

\textsuperscript{487} Wilder, Little Town on the Prairie, 237.
\textsuperscript{488} Ibid., 262.
\textsuperscript{489} Ibid., 266.
\textsuperscript{490} Ibid., 273.
do. Success gets to be a habit, like anything else a fellow keeps on doing.\textsuperscript{491}

This last line summarizes Pa’s conclusions about Laura’s abilities and skills. If she works with determination, she can succeed. Laura reflects on her father’s words, noting that based upon her life circumstances and upbringing, “she had always kept on trying; she had always had to.”\textsuperscript{492} Even during her first teaching term she continues to study. Her hard-working example shows her most stubborn student, Clarence, the value of industriousness. When questioned about his rapid advancement Clarence tells Laura, “[i]f you can study at night, I can.”\textsuperscript{493} From her first job outside the home to her first teaching position, Laura again realizes the tremendous importance of hard work. Wilder illustrates that Laura’s upbringing has created a valuable, contributing member of society. Laura never works hard for the sake of working hard. She works to contribute to her family and community.

When she returns home Laura finds that she can no longer be idle. As comfortable as home life is, she feels she needs to be working—at school and in a job.\textsuperscript{494} Even when Mary comes home for one of her precious visits, Laura feels compelled to be working for pay. Pa tells her “[t]hat is the way it is, once you begin to earn.”\textsuperscript{495} She simply cannot escape the sense of duty that drives her to earn her own way, “to repay [Pa and Ma] all it had cost to provide for her since she was a baby.”\textsuperscript{496} When Laura gives Pa the money from her last term of teaching school he tells her that she has done more than her fair share to contribute to the household. She finds the compliment leaves her heart

\textsuperscript{491} These Happy Golden Years, 2-3. Italics mine.
\textsuperscript{492} Ibid., 3
\textsuperscript{493} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{494} Ibid., 99-101.
\textsuperscript{495} Ibid., 134.
\textsuperscript{496} Wilder, Little Town on the Prairie, 48.
"brimming with contentment."\textsuperscript{497} Wilder again connects work to a sense of being valuable and a sense of joy.

Wilder introduces a third aspect of industriousness in \textit{By the Shores of Silver Lake}. When Laura and her cousin find out that a young friend, still only thirteen, has recently been married they discuss the ramifications for her life. Not only will she not get to play anymore, but she is suddenly responsible for a home and family. Laura explains ""I’d like my own house and I like babies, and I wouldn’t mind the work, but I don’t want to be so responsible. I’d rather let Ma be responsible for a long time yet.""\textsuperscript{498} This is a new aspect of life for Laura. Since Mary lost her sight, Laura has had to become more responsible. She must look out for her sisters and help her mother. Still the prospect of being completely responsible is too much for her. Laura works hard when the family moves to Silver Lake. When Pa works for the railroad she must help Ma get all of the housework done, including chores, like milking, that Pa used to do. When Pa takes Laura to see the railroaders working, she asks him how the railroad came to be. He tells her that bright ideas and hard work can make almost anything happen. He reiterates the family’s belief that hard work is a fundamental characteristic in living a successful and joy-filled life.\textsuperscript{499} Interestingly, when Laura returns from her curiosity satisfying excursion, her sister Mary accuses her of being idle.

When Laura marries and moves into her own home in \textit{The First Four Years}, she finds that ""doing work alone [is] very different from helping Ma.""\textsuperscript{500} Even her first dinner in her new home requires hard work. It is harvest time, and she must cook for the

\textsuperscript{497} Wilder, \textit{These Happy Golden Years}, 245.

\textsuperscript{498} Wilder, \textit{By the Shores of Silver Lake}, 50.

\textsuperscript{499} Ibid., 106.

\textsuperscript{500} Wilder, \textit{The First Four Years}, 29.
threshers helping Almanzo. Even when she is nearly incapacitated with illness from her pregnancy, she drags herself through the house to get the work done. The greatest struggle for Laura is not the workload, however, but as she predicted, the sense of responsibility. She worries about the debt they accrue and how to spend their money wisely. When the first four years of their married life draw to a close, Laura asks Almanzo and herself whether their life as farmers had been successful. She concludes that if it has not been so far, she must continue working until it is. If she cannot pioneer west as her heart longs to, she will pioneer into the future believing “it is better farther on”—only instead of farther on in space, it was farther on in time, over the horizon of the years ahead instead of the far horizon of the west.”

Wilder irrevocably connects hard work to success and value. If their family is not successful, then they must simply work harder.

**Spiritual Independence**

Why (she thought), when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn’t anyone else who has a right to give me orders. I will have to make myself be good.

Wilder values the development of spiritual independence. Although Wilder clearly depicts the Ingalls girls’ moral development, responsible decision making is even more important. Wilder connects spiritual independence to sensitive conscience developed in the moral principles of honesty/obedience, longsuffering contentment and industriousness. The lessons learned through these moral principles—the personal reliability learned through honesty and obedience, the emotional strength and fighting

---

501 Ibid., 46-47.
502 Ibid., 133.
503 Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 76.
spirit learned through longsuffering contentment and the sense of joy and personal value learned through industriousness—contribute not only to a sense of right and wrong, but an independent ability to consider spiritual issues and make moral choices.

Wilder frequently illustrates the contemplative nature of her protagonist through her spiritual reflections. In *Little House on the Prairie* when the Ingalls family dog, Jack, presumably, drowns in the river Laura asks “Jack has gone to heaven, hasn’t he? He was such a good dog, can’t he go to heaven?” Ma didn’t know what to answer, but Pa said: ‘Yes, Laura, he can. God that doesn’t forget the sparrows won’t leave a good dog like Jack out in the cold.’” Wilder connects Laura’s suffering at the loss of her beloved Jack with the searching questions of early spiritual independence. This is further illustrated in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* when Laura attends church for the first time. Laura has mixed feelings about church. She resents the Sunday School teacher for telling stories she already knows and setting such low standards for scripture memorization. However, she enjoys talking to Reverend Alden and having Sunday lessons to discuss. She does not want her spiritual thinking limited by the inane Sunday School teacher. She wants the challenges of Reverend Alden’s teaching.

Wilder highlights other aspects of Laura’s spiritual development in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. Laura begins to wrestle with her own anger when she becomes enemies with Nellie Oleson, a mean and domineering girl in Laura’s new school. Laura resents Nellie’s superiority complex. Nonetheless, Laura “knew she must forgive Nellie, or she would never be an angel. She thought hard about the pictures of angels in the big paper-

---

covered Bible at home.” Her parents don’t know about her feelings about Nellie, but even without their counsel Laura knows that her feelings are wrong. Her sensitive conscience tells her that her anger is problematic. Laura’s struggle with Nellie is not over. In *Little Town on the Prairie* Laura’s struggle with anger continues when she discovers that Nellie Oleson has moved to town. Laura’s behavior reflects her bitterness which encourages Nellie to tell lies and spread rumors about Laura. Laura gets into trouble at school and is afraid that she will not be allowed to return to school. Her anger could force Mary to return early from college, if Laura cannot teach and earn money to keep her there. Nonetheless, she “did not really repent . . . She felt hard and hot as burning coal.”

It is not until her angry words cause problems for her family, that she finally realizes the danger of an anger that can crush not only her own dreams, but her family’s dreams as well.

Wilder continues Laura’s journey to spiritual independence in *By the Shores of Silver Lake* begins. This is truly a turning point in Laura’s life. She has become a contributing member of the family. Pa must leave to go west, Mary has been blinded by the fever, and the other girls are too young to help. Laura and Ma must do the work and care for the family. Laura is no longer merely a child, but a young woman:

Laura knew then that she was not a little girl anymore. Now she was alone; she must take care of herself. When you must do that, then you do it and you are grown up. Laura was not very big, but she was almost thirteen years old, and no one was there to depend on. Pa and Jack had gone, and Ma needed help to take care of Mary and the little girls, and somehow to get them all safely to the west on a train.

---

506 Ibid., 246.  
Wilder illustrates Laura’s newfound maturity through the expression of Laura’s own independent set of ideas and opinions. One night Pa tells the story of a shopkeeper and paymaster in a neighboring railroad camp who is threatened and hung until he agrees to pay each man what he believes is owed him. Laura is outraged that the man gave in. She thinks he should have stood his ground, even unto death. Ma believes he made the right decision—"Better a live dog than a dead lion." Wilder confirms that Laura has earned the right, because of her reliability, her emotional strength and her sense of value, to have her own moral independence.

During their first winter living by Silver Lake Reverend Alden visits them. He decides to have a prayer meeting in the Ingalls’ home:

They all knelt down by their chairs, and Reverend Alden asked God, Who knew their hearts and their secret thoughts, to look down on them there, and to forgive their sins and help them to do right. A quietness was in the room while he spoke. Laura felt as if she were hot, dry, dusty grass parching in a drought, and the quietness was a cool and gentle rain falling on her. It was truly refreshment. Everything was simple now that she felt so cool and strong...

Laura finds spiritual growth comes along with her emotional and physical maturity. The moral lessons she has learned, and continues to learn, confirm her sense of spiritual well-being. Wilder illustrates the relationship between Laura’s morality and her independent spirit in The Long Winter. Once it is confirmed that the trains are not coming until spring, the Ingalls family realizes that there are very difficult times ahead. Pa hugs Laura which confirms for her that she is "old enough now to stand by him and Ma in hard times." It is an important realization. As the winter trudges on, Laura is worn down

---

509 Ibid., 121.  
510 Ibid., 219.  
511 Wilder, The Long Winter, 223.  
154
until Pa tells her that they cannot let the blizzards defeat them. She feels "a warmth inside her. It was very small but it was strong. It was steady, like a tiny light in the dark, and it burned very low but no winds could make it flicker because it would not give up." Her fighting spirit, earned through long suffering, serves her well during this incredibly challenging time.

Wilder continues the development of Laura's spiritual independence in *The Long Winter* when Pa and Laura have a discussion about freedom, God and the human conscience. Pa tells Laura that human beings are free and that God takes care of them if they do right. "He gives us a conscience and brains to know what’s right. But He leaves it to us to do as we please. That’s the difference between us and everything else in creation." Laura is learning that her spiritual independence is a gift from God, but one of which she must take care. Once again Wilder emphasizes that spiritual independence is result of moral uprightness.

Laura’s spiritual reflections continue in *Little Town on the Prairie*. As Mary is preparing to leave for college she and Laura reflect on their shared childhood. Laura admits that she resented Mary’s goodness and Mary confesses that her “goodness” was really self-righteous pride. They discuss the struggles inherent in living a good life:

"I don’t believe we ought to think so much about ourselves, about whether we are bad or good," Mary explained. "But, my goodness! How can anybody be good without thinking about it?" Laura demanded. "I don’t know, I guess we couldn’t," Mary admitted. "I don’t know how to say what I mean very well. But—it isn’t so much thinking, as—as just knowing. Just being sure of the goodness of God."

---

512 Ibid., 310.
513 Ibid., 13.
Laura concludes that Mary has a special assurance of God’s love and goodness. Wilder continues to focus on the relationship between God, faith and independence through Laura’s reflections. On the Fourth of July Laura realizes that “God is America’s King.”515 Americans don’t answer to a monarch or a dictator—they answer only to their own consciences and God’s law. “The laws of Nature and Nature’s God endow you with a right to life and liberty. Then you have to keep the laws of God, for God’s law is the only thing that gives you a right to be free.”516 This is a critical step in Laura’s journey to spiritual independence. Her faith, she decides, endows her with the right to make her own choices. Once again, Wilder directly links Laura’s independence with her morality. Laura’s certainty of both God’s goodness and God’s absolute power confirms her responsibility to make independent decisions based on her own sense of right and wrong.

In Little Town on the Prairie Wilder demonstrates that despite Laura’s religious experiences, she does have issues with the church, especially the pastor in De Smet, Reverend Brown. Laura had a deep affection for their previous pastor—Reverend Alden—but Reverend Brown is very different. His style is “fire and brimstone” not the cool refreshment characteristic of Reverend Alden’s sermons. When the town holds revival meetings the family feels obliged to attend, for, as Nellie Oleson says, “people who don’t go to revival meetings are atheists!”517 The meetings are disturbing to Laura, who dislikes the uproar. She cannot help but feel that Reverend Brown’s preaching is stirring up “something dark and frightening.”518 As he continues preaching, Laura actually imagines that Reverend Brown is the Devil. Wilder is clear that Laura makes

515 Ibid., 75.
516 Ibid., 76. Italics mine.
517 Wilder, Little Town on the Prairie, 274. Italics in original.
518 Ibid., 277.
this assessment separate from her parents. They confirm her sense of the excessive nature of Reverend Brown’s revivals, but she independently senses that the revivals are not all they seem. Wilder makes it clear that Laura decides, separate from the social expectation and even from parental insight, that the revivals are not her style of spirituality.

*These Happy Golden Years* focuses on the development of Laura and Almanzo’s relationship, which poses a potential challenge for Laura’s development of consciously independent spiritual identity. As they grow closer, Almanzo makes observations about Laura. At one point he asks her if she is “independent.” Laura does see herself as an independent person. She is not afraid to make her own decisions. Her independent spirit only seems to further encourage Almanzo’s already active pursuit.

Laura’s parents are also beginning to trust Laura’s choices. When an off-the-cuff remark of Ma’s leads Laura to suspect that Ma does not want her to go riding with Almanzo, Ma tells her “‘[y]ou must use your own judgment, Laura.” Perhaps the most interesting exchange between Laura and her parents is about her engagement to Almanzo. When her parents see the ring on Laura’s finger, they tell her that they are happy, as long as she is sure she wants to marry him. “‘Sometimes I think it is the horses you care for, more than their master,’ Ma said gently. ‘I couldn’t have one without the other,’ Laura answered shakily. Then Ma smiled at her, Pa cleared his throat gruffly and Laura knew they understood what she was too shy to say.” Wilder highlights that Laura’s parents no longer challenge her decisions. Her upbringing has prepared her to make the important decisions without supervision.

---

519 Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 168.
520 Ibid., 187.
521 Ibid., 216.
Conclusion

The Little House series offers a fascinating opportunity to look back at the late 19th century through an early 20th-century lens. Perhaps what is most interesting is Wilder’s consistency with her 19th-century counterparts in that she focuses on the development of a sensitive conscience and the way it lays the groundwork for a young girl’s spiritual independence. The Little House books demonstrate how 19th-century ideals played out in the mind of a child as she grew into a young woman. Wilder records the progression of Laura’s sensitive conscience and the critical transition to adult decision-making that develops via a sense of spiritual independence.

From reading the books, it is difficult to assess Wilder’s understanding of the progressive movements manifest in the latter half of the 19th century. Certainly the family supported the temperance movement. They were vehemently opposed to the use of alcohol. In fact, the discussion of liquor leads to one of Caroline Ingalls’ only statements suggesting her political ideology. When Laura witnesses the antics of two drunk men while working in town, Ma says “‘I begin to believe that if there isn’t a stop put to the liquor traffic, women must bestir themselves and have something to say about it.’”522 This is a tremendous insight into the relationship between the temperance movement and the women’s movement, as well as illustrating that while the Ingalls family focused primarily on day-to-day existence through pioneering and farming, they were not exempt from the discussions of their time. It is interesting to compare this comment of Ma’s with Laura’s assessment of the women’s movement. When Laura refuses to vow to obey Almanzo at their wedding, Almanzo asks her “‘[a]re you for

522 Wilder, Little Town on the Prairie, 55.
woman’s rights, like Eliza?’ ‘No,’ Laura replied, ‘I do not want to vote.’”

However, her refusal to obey against her conscience certainly verifies that she believes women are independent of male authority, especially in spiritual matters.

Having discussed other expressions of female independence in the Elsie Dinsmore books and the Little Women series, I would like to examine Wilder’s discussion of the education of women, as well as Wilder’s concept of marriage. The Ingalls family, especially Ma, put a strong emphasis on education. She believed her girls should be given every opportunity to get an education, even if they were settling the West. Although Laura receives only a high school education, her sister Mary is sent to a college for the blind. The family recognized her intelligence and drive and refused to hide her away. Instead they invested in Mary’s education. Mary understood their investment in her and planned to make a career in literature and writing. Similar to the Elsie Dinsmore books, a woman with a disability is, in fact, encouraged to get an education. Certainly education, especially for girls, is critically important in the Little House books. It is the only thing important enough to stop Pa’s relentless move west.

Unlike Marmee and Elsie, Ma Ingalls never really discusses marriage with her daughters. Laura is given tremendous freedom in her romantic pursuits. While Ma expresses disapproval at Laura’s choice, she also makes it clear that Laura is responsible for making her own decisions. Although Laura has multiple suitors, she makes her own choice. When Mary asks Laura why she wants to get married and leave home, Laura

---

523 Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 269.
524 Ibid., 136.
525 Wilder, *By the Shore of Silver Lake*, 126. This is just one of the places Pa tells Laura about the value of an education.
526 Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 170.
replies that she and Almanzo "'just seem to belong together.'" Clearly her decision to marry Almanzo (or even to marry at all) is her own to make. She has shown that she can earn her way in the world, and Pa is grateful for the contributions she has made to the household. It is assumed that Laura can be a career woman (teaching school and sewing in town) or she can get married. It is simply her decision to make.

Wilder demonstrates how morality is reflected in spiritual independence. Laura recognizes that her freedom has developed out of her ability to make right choices. Her sensitive conscience recognizes good and bad and allows her to make decisions independent of cultural expectation and parental guidance.

It is important to note that the Little House series, although set during the same time period as the Elsie Dinsmore and Little Women series, was actually written more than 50 years later. There was a tremendous shift in children's literature between 1867/68 (when Elsie Dinsmore and Little Women were published) and 1932 (when Little House in the Big Woods was published). Late in the 19th century much of children's literature still focused on religious instruction, but by the early 20th century there was a shift away from overtly religious themes. Mary Lystad discusses the shifts in focus for children's literature throughout different periods of American history. Between 1876 and 1915 there was a shift from 41% focus on religious instruction at the end of the 19th century to 17% focus by the beginning of the 20th century. Even where religious instruction appears it "was now less tied to formal relationships with God and more concerned with social relationships to others." From 1916 to 1955 there was a further shift away from the religion focus. Lystad writes that religion is discussed in 8% of

527 Ibid., 246.
528 Lystad, From Dr. Mather to Dr. Seuss, 119.
529 Ibid., 119.
books. However, she also writes that “in 10 percent of the books God is the source of satisfaction in life.”530 These are certainly important shifts in the focus of children’s literature. Reflective of these shifts, the Little House books are not as overt in their religious tones as the Elsie Dinsmore and Little Women books, although a close examination highlights how the series does deal with religion, morality and spirituality.

There have been many changes in how religion functions in literature for children. Although the tone of modern literature for children is less didactic in the traditional sense, children’s literature generally focuses on teaching the values and ideals of a specific culture during a specific time period. Although some of the approaches to religion and morality are different in the Little House books, which is reflective of the times in which they were written, the “spirit of independence” that Laura learns is noteworthy. Anita Clair Fellman remarks that Ma and Pa Ingalls “have made the acquisition of the discipline of work, determination to overcome hardships, and independence of spirit as painless as possible by embedding their teachings in an atmosphere of family warmth and comfort.”531 I would argue that this observation is important, but much deeper than is often assumed. Examination that extends beyond the superficial constraints of 20th-century children’s literature reveals an elevation of many 19th-century ideals—including the creation of a sensitive conscience and spiritual independence. Wilder’s writing finds a balance between the period in which she is writing and the period in which her books are set.

530 Ibid., 164.
Chapter V: Conclusion—Will the Real Reformer Please Stand Up?

Conservative religious faith and spirituality were important contributors to reform thinking and social change in the 19th century. Although critics have noted the connections between adult literature, protestant Christianity, and reform movements, I would like to suggest that the connection can also be drawn using children’s literature. As a genre children’s literature provides a vantage point from which to identify the thoughts and ideals considered important for the next generation—not only during childhood, but what was believed essential in entering adulthood. Authors who have paid homage to the importance of independent and reform thinking in their literature for adults sometimes revealed a different focus in their literature for children. Alcott was certainly one example of this type of author. Although she felt strongly about temperance, the women’s movement and abolition, her literature for children does little to encourage girls to stand up for the ideals represented by these movements. In fact, many modern critics of Alcott question the differences in her writing for children and her writing for adults. This differentiation is sometimes considered a valid reason for rejecting consideration of children’s literature as historically informative. I would argue that this is faulty reasoning. The ideals and values believed essential for children should be considered the most valued in a culture. Any principle not essential enough to be taught to children is not really essential to that community. If one primary outlet for reaching further generations is the training and education of children then what they are taught is what is central to a culture. When scholars fail to recognize this important principle, they feel

---

532 One critic who examines the difference between Alcott’s literature for children and her literature for adults is Keren Fite in her article “From Savage Passion to the Sweetness of Self-Control: Female Anger in Little Women and ‘Pauline’s Passion and Punishment.’” Women’s Writing: The Elizabethan to Victorian Period 14, no. 3 (2007): 435-448.
free to relegate children’s literature to the periphery of the humanities, which inevitably leaves vast areas of historical and cultural understanding overlooked and undervalued.

It is critical for scholars to recognize their bias against certain resources and ideologies. Although it has often been assumed that Elsie Dinsmore and its sequels can have nothing to contribute to the discussion of the rise of the women’s movement, it has most assuredly been ignored because of its evangelical and didactic style. Nonetheless, analysis of the content allows a deeper examination of the didactic and evangelical elements and closer consideration of how they actually function. There are certainly many other books, for both children and adults, which have been ignored or even ridiculed without an extensive consideration of the real principles of the text. Hopefully, this project will inspire a reconsideration of material that is often overlooked.

Frequently religion is ignored, especially in contemporary discussions of American cultural development. Without recognition of the influence and significance of religion, cultural consideration is inherently deficient. A failure to consider religion as an important over-arching and self-defining aspect of many cultures, as well as individuals, seems unwise. The secular bias of the Western world and academia in particular, has resulted in the shifting of religion to the margins of academic discussions. Only major disasters and culture clashes, like the events of September 11, 2001, seem to function to force people to reconsider disregarding such an important aspect of cultural and personal identity. These two often marginalized subjects – religion and children’s literature – merge in my discussion of the Elsie Dinsmore series, the Little Women series, and the Little House series. This interdisciplinary research is an attempt to rectify and to draw attention to the aforementioned issues in humanities research. This study highlights not
only the importance of children’s literature as a tool in cultural understanding, but also
the tremendous power of religion to be both conservative and reformatory, sometimes
simultaneously.

Wilder and Finley offer female characters who use their religious beliefs and
concomitant morality to become spiritually independent women. Laura, Elsie, and
Elsie’s daughters all demonstrate that morality is an important, even critical, dimension in
the development of spiritual independence. The close relationship between the
progressive movements of the 19th century with religious ideology has sometimes been
noted in studies of adult literature and culture; however, it has frequently been
overlooked in children’s literature. Girls and women who are encouraged to be
spiritually independent learn to make decisions which allow them greater freedom. They
learn to be unafraid to think for themselves. This pattern shows, at least in part, the link
between evangelical thinking and the progressive movements of the 19th century. Many
reformers saw no contradiction between their conservative religious beliefs and their
active participation in reform movements. Mark Edwards comments in his article ““My
God and My Good Mother’: The Irony of Horace Bushnell’s Gendered Republic” that the
liberal theologian Bushnell, who supported limiting the sphere of women to the domestic
realm, “was right to fear evangelical revivalism . . . because women were fleeing the
domestic cult to participate in the voluntary associations spawned by it.”\(^{533}\)

In my discussion of the Elsie Dinsmore series, I discuss the implications of moral
and religious experience for girls and women throughout the series. Obedience and
honesty function to encourage strength of character. Elsie's moral strength grows as she
chooses to obey her own conscience. Her daughters are also encouraged toward honesty

\(^{533}\) Edwards, ““My God and My Good Mother,”” 122.
and obedience, which strengthens their drive to challenge the culture around them, which they understand to be morally corrupt. Their obedience to conscience is extended into discussion of the right and responsibility of girls and women to make their own choices. In the Elsie Dinsmore books, it is clear that those choices include the extension of women's sphere to include education and career and the exertion of a woman's right to choose their own spouse.

Longsuffering contentment also enables women to focus their intention. The ability to recognize purpose even in suffering is an extremely important characteristic in reform movements. Women who see no point in struggling or suffering for a cause will have few opportunities to exert their ideas in American culture. On the other hand, girls and women who are taught that struggle and suffering can be to a specific purpose recognize the function of struggle as an important aspect of both individual and societal development. I would argue this is a fundamental component of reform orientation. The most obvious example from the Elsie Dinsmore series involves the conversion of her father in the second book, but is not the only instance of suffering for a specific purpose. Elsie's thwarted love affairs cause her suffering, but they also give her sufficient perspective to recognize a healthy, mutual love that results in a sustainable marriage. Finley makes it clear that suffering followed by reflection enables Elsie to exert independence in her choice of a mate.

Industriousness is another important aspect of Elsie and her daughter's moral upbringing. Despite Elsie's high social status, Finley depicts her as valuing industry and

---

534 Epstein in *The Politics of Domesticity* discusses how suffering played a role in the temperance movement. On page 102 she mentions the special honors given to women who had "suffered because of alcohol." On page 99 she also discusses how the opposition to the crusaders sometimes caused great suffering—the women were chased, mocked, threatened and occasionally injured in their attempts.
encouraging her daughters to do likewise. Elsie is shown to recognize that hard work is critical in developing personal self-worth. Certainly that sense of value encourages girls and women to have and develop their own lines of independent thinking, but on a purely practical level sustained effort is required to truly affect cultural change. Any discussion of abolition, temperance, or the women’s suffrage movement will highlight the hard work and ambition on both an individual and group level.

In the Elsie Dinsmore series Martha Finley uses the development of a sensitive conscience to foster a sense of spiritual independence, which opens doors to discussion of many issues of that day. As a result of the importance of religious faith to women’s life experiences and the 19th-century attitudes toward women’s morality, women increasingly found a voice in arenas that had previously been closed to them. Many scholars have discussed the shifting concepts of public sphere and private sphere, as well as shifting concepts of male and female spheres.535 The theoretical extension of the “domestic” sphere into the public realm encouraged women to use their supposed moral superiority to incite great social change. I would argue that Martha Finley was an important proponent of this ideology. Her female characters held sway over not only their own domestic situations, but those of others as well. Elsie illustrates this in her multiple cases of fostering and adopting the children of her ne’er-do-well relatives and acquaintances. However, Finley is also critical of political and social movements that she feels do more harm than good. Her characters’ support for the North and vehement opposition to the KKK illustrate her abolitionist and reform tendencies. The importance Finley places on the education of both male and female (but especially female) characters highlights her

support of the women’s movement. Her depictions of the ramifications of alcohol consumption leave no room to doubt her support of the temperance movement. From a modern perspective it is easy to be critical of her continued issues with race and female roles, however, from the perspective of her own time these views were not only religiously motivated, but also reform-oriented. I would argue that this observation is critical to my work. Judging by modern standards rather than contemporary 19th-century standards prevents recognition of the important ideas that made this series so popular.

In her Little Women series, Alcott also places tremendous emphasis on the principles of honesty and obedience. These principles highlight the importance of family honor and material gain. While family honor and material gain are not negative ideals, they do not encourage the same reform mentality that strength of character encourages. These ideals are family and individually focused with little recognition or attempt to affect the larger restrictive cultural norms.

Longsuffering contentment in Alcott’s books also fails to reflect reform ideals. The spirit dampening affects of suffering, in fact, discourage even the naturally occurring reform spirit of characters like Jo, Nan and Josie. The family focus of the series is certainly important, and was important to Alcott. This aspect of morality reappears in her discussion of industriousness. Suffering frequently draws the family or community together.

Alcott depicts family and community growth as important aspects of industriousness. Industry is not only important as a fundamental human duty; it also draws people together as they work toward a common goal and ideology. Although people must work hard in order to survive, when they work together they can accomplish
more and connect more deeply. This could definitely be seen to encourage reform thinking, although I do not believe Alcott develops this connection as fully as does Finley.

The Little Women series highlights the development of a sensitive conscience through the moral principles of honesty, obedience, longsuffering contentment and industriousness. Nonetheless, those principles only rarely reflect in any expression of spiritual independence. There are manifestations of spiritual independence in the March girls and their children, however they are much rarer than many critics have noted. The submission to people rather than moral principles leaves the characters unable to functionally express spiritually independent ideas.

Although spiritual independence is not fully developed in the Little Women series, Alcott very successfully illustrates the centrality and importance of community and family experience. The series is one that I personally enjoy, because Alcott’s depiction of female, especially sisterly, relationships is so insightful that there is little room to question her concept of female experience. She has an incredible ability to portray the nuanced and challenging female familial relationships. Alcott understands the dynamic of self-sacrificial relationships in building community. Her strength comes in her consideration of the complexities of communal living.

The Little House series offers an interesting balance between the development of spiritual independence and the growth of community. Anita Clair Fellman writes that the Little House books “celebrated the positive aspects of individualism and the production of individual virtue by the family.”\footnote{Fellman, \textit{Little House, Long Shadow}, 76.} Wilder’s treatment of honesty and obedience offers an interesting insight into the relationship between obedience to person and
obedience to principle. She highlights the transitional nature of Laura’s development and the importance of obedience to conscience. Wilder uses the life and death consequences of obedience to depict the challenges in reaching adulthood fully equipped to make independent decisions. Moreover, Wilder’s depiction of longsuffering contentment in drawing people together and encouraging a fighting spirit develops the connection between community and individual, independent thinking. Whereas Alcott fails to articulate this connection fully, Wilder shows how Laura as an individual develops a fighting spirit and simultaneously draws into and encourages the family good.

Industriousness functions in the Little House books similarly to Alcott’s depiction of it in the Little Women books. Hard work is generally considered a fundamental principle for moral development, especially as it draws people together and highlights the need for community as well as individuality. Ultimately, however, Wilder concludes, as Finley does, that industriousness will define personal value and success. It offers a structure and platform to develop morality and individual development.

Like Finley, Wilder focuses on the development of spiritual independence as a critical element of maturity and growth. Morality functions to not only create interdependence within the family unit, but enough independence of spirit to make important decisions, even in difficult situations. Although early in the series Wilder depicts obedience to people as most important, she does transition to a discussion of loyalty to moral principle and religious belief. Her work, reflective both of the time in which it was written and the time in which it is set, offers her a unique opportunity to consider the cultural changes that had occurred since her childhood. Perhaps with the
benefit of hindsight she could recognize the relationship between religious/moral growth and a sense of independence.

In important ways, Wilder’s books contextualize and summarize the other two authors’ books. Since Wilder describes a pioneer lifestyle, and both Finley and Alcott do not, Wilder’s texts portray a cultural experience that is generations previous to the other authors. The description of morality and religion as more than social expectations, but as survival tools contextualizes the developments seen in Finley and Alcott. The experiences of the theoretical ancestors of Finley and Alcott’s characters would have been more in line with the experiences of Wilder’s characters. Both the Dinsmore family and the March family are able to focus most of their energy on the nuances of social interaction that, while not completely irrelevant to Wilder, are at least secondary to the survival experience.

Since her series was written half a century later, Wilder adeptly manages to develop Laura’s sensitive conscience, while demonstrating the importance of family. She successfully finds a balance between the individual sense of conscience epitomized by Finley’s Elsie Dinsmore series, and the importance of community and family epitomized by Alcott’s Little Women. In fact, I would argue that Wilder’s book accomplishes alone, what the other two series accomplish together. Finley and Alcott’s series were published simultaneously and were both incredibly popular.\(^{537}\) I believe that these authors, whether intentionally or unintentionally, were in conversation with one another. The books would have shared an audience and many, perhaps most, girls would have read both series. The authors’ “conversation” extends beyond their different approaches to

---

\(^{537}\) See Janet E. Brown, *The Saga of Elsie Dinsmore: A Study in Nineteenth Century Sensibility*. Master’s Thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1945. She discusses Elsie Dinsmore’s publication numbers and refers to *Little Women* as “Elsie Dinsmore’s only rival.” 82.
religion and morality. It is fascinating that both series show their protagonists reading Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World*. This book is often considered a sentimental book of the same bent as the Elsie Dinsmore books. Although the book is certainly evangelical in both content and tone, it is obviously considered essential reading by both Alcott and Finley. Alcott regularly makes reference to a variety of different authors and books but when Jo is given free time she is found “reading and crying over *The Wide, Wide World*.” Finley, on the other hand, rarely mentions other authors by name or other books by title. However, she mentions the title and author of *The Wide, Wide World* by name. She also mentions that the book moves Elsie to tears, just as it did Jo. Alcott and Finley are clearly engaging Susan Warner and her text. Both Jo and Elsie connect emotionally with Ellen Montgomery (the protagonist of Warner’s book) and react to her story. I would argue that the conversation among children’s literature does not end with Alcott and Finley. This theme of inter-textual engagement among different pieces of children’s literature is certainly one that would be a fascinating avenue for further research.

None of the series present an extensive discussion of organized religion, although, as I have illustrated, personal faith and morality play a critical role. All three series discuss Sunday church attendance, but only the Little House series includes any direct discussion of the experience. This could be a result of the domestication of women and female experience, even religious experience, in the 19th-century. By the 1930’s, when Laura Ingalls Wilder begins writing her series, this domestication is less prevalent, perhaps as a result of series like Elsie Dinsmore. Wilder discusses the relationship

---

539 Finley, *Elsie’s Girlhood*, 60 and 69. It is also noteworthy that the book is a gift from Mr. Travilla and is deemed quite wholesome by both Mr. Travilla and Mr. Dinsmore.
between her faith, her morality and her church experiences more freely than her predecessors.

One very interesting aspect of the Elsie Dinsmore books, the Little Women books, and the Little House books, is that they do not end with the protagonists’ marriages. The stories continue and the women’s lives continue. I would argue that these series are not only made up of individual books about childhood and adolescence, but together they serve as a large scale reflection of a girl’s development well into adulthood. Claudia Mills argues regarding the Little House series that it functions as “one multivolumed novel,” and I would argue that the same could be said of the other two series. These series, in fact, go much further than a traditional Bildungsroman, into early married life and beyond. One of the constant criticisms of Bildungsromane is that they end with marriage (like fairytales). Some of the female Bildungsromane are considered insightful because marriage is not the end, but the beginning of the story. A similar pattern emerges in these series for girls. Not only is marriage not the end, it is also not the beginning. It is simply another rite of passage that changes, but does not define these characters. They are who they are before they get married. Much more compellingly, they remain the same person after they get married. In the introduction to the book, The Voyage In, the authors argue for a dynamic dual plot text. They insist that it is important to identify the subversive elements in plots that seem to uphold traditional societal expectations. They are specifically discussing the female Bildungsroman, though I would argue that these series are quite compelling in both their challenges to cultural norms and their vision of female existence before and beyond the marital experience.

---

Mills, “From Obedience to Autonomy,” 127.
Perhaps these kinds of series should acquire a new label—*bildungs seri en*. They are about coming of age, but they do not limit life’s experiences to adolescence. It is easier to understand Elsie’s transition to adulthood not only through understanding her adolescent experiences, but through a clearer understanding of her childhood experiences as well. It is also encouraging to young girls to understand that if they choose to marry, it need not serve as the end of their important life experiences. These women’s stories continue into marriage and childrearing. Essentially these series serve to counteract the detrimental effects of fairytales and traditional *bildungsromane*. These books challenged societal norms without being so subversive that they were avoided by their intended readers.

Although these series have sometimes been disparaged and frequently criticized, they are the much beloved series of many women’s childhoods. They have, arguably, helped inform the worldview and ideology of many young readers. Anecdotal discussion with women of different age groups highlights that some girls relate so strongly with these series that they occasionally consider the characters to be close friends and the experiences of the characters to be their own. Rarely do adults read books that suggest the same kind of influence.541 Children’s literature needs to be considered as an academic field replete with material for cultural analysis and understanding. Furthermore, reconsideration of material that is different from modern cultural norms is absolutely fundamental to the field. The scholarly study of religion is one area that challenges secular academia to fully consider the value and contribution of religious belief in not only negative, but also positive ways. My research recognizes the

relationship between the culture challenging reform-orientation of some children’s literature that also touts evangelical and religious ideology.
Bibliography


Harris, Marla. “‘A History Not Then Taught in History Books’: (Re)Writing Reconstruction in Historical Fiction for Children and Young Adults.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30, no. 1 (January 2006): 94-116.


