

# Research on the Principles of Family Education in “Little Women”

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**Abstract**—Louisa May Alcott was an American famous female writer who wrote “Little Women” at the age of 35 under the request of the publisher to write “a book for girls”. The novel is actually an autobiography based on Louisa and her sisters’ adulthood in the context of the American Civil War. This article explores the principles about family education embodied in this novel, including eliminating traditional sermons, building a good atmosphere in family, setting good examples, cultivating children’s personality, and guiding the children to establish correct values. The study is conducted to provide some inspiration for modern families’ education in order to set a precious pattern for parents nowadays to use for reference.

**Keywords**—Louisa May Alcott; Little Women; Family education; Principles

## I. INTRODUCTION

Louisa May Alcott (1832 – 1888), an American famous female writer who wrote “Little Women” at the age of 35 under the request of the publisher to write “a book for girls”. The novel is autobiography based on Louisa and her sisters’ coming of age and the setting is American Civil War. The story describes March’s family life without father at home, which shows Mrs. March’s wisdom and capability of educating girls. In the following parts, I’d like to discuss the principles about family education embodied in this novel, including getting rid of traditional sermons, building a good atmosphere in family, setting good examples, cultivating children’s personality, and guiding the children to establish correct values. Hopefully it may shed some light on the modern family education in order to set a precious pattern for parents nowadays to imitate.

## II. ELIMINATING TRADITIONAL SERMONS

The most obvious problem in family education is that too much sermons are exposed to children. As we all know, all the parents are hoping their children to be promising and prosperous, however, most of the time they regard themselves as authority, often ordering or forcing their children to do something according to their will, blaming their children what they have done or telling them what are dos and what are don’t with tedious words that seem to be reasonable. The parents fancy that what they do will bring some changes of the kids, but it is always turned out to be a failure. As to the education for children, the parents should use effective methods rather

than use traditional sermon teaching method with many disadvantages. The disadvantages are as follows, firstly, teaching by traditional sermons will arise the betrayal and antipathy, the consequence of which is that the children will not do the right thing as the parents’ expectation, more worse, they purposely imitate some bad deeds and ideas originally existed. Secondly, too much sermons don’t function well, at the same time, the children’s imagination are fettered and the natural personalities are restrained as well.

The famous educational practitioner and theorist B•A•Cyxomjnhcknn said that any kind of educational phenomenon, the less the child feels the intention of the educator, the greater his educational effect. [1] Therefore, the tactical way of Implying rather than speaking is a good choice in this aspect. Chapter four burdens in the novel, after the family completed whole day’s work, they shared what happened in day together at night to add some fun to life. After Mrs. March shared the educational things she experienced in the day, the child begged to tell one more story. Joe said, “Mum, tell us another story that contains as much philosophy as the former one. I like to think about it afterward, if they are real and not too preachy.”[2]According to Joe’s words, we can draw a conclusion that children prefer the story that contains philosophical to traditional preach. Mrs. March knows well about the shortcomings of her children. Fours girls are not satisfied with what they have. After thinking for a while, she started to tell a story. Actually, it’s something about the girls rather than a story. Through this story, she told the children that they should have a thankful heart for the happiness they have own, and that they should keep in mind the happiness and be grateful, when they feel discontented. Mrs. March knows how to apply language to lead children to a right direction. Away from the traditional didactic way, in order to avoid a direct statement, she takes a roundabout way to transfer the meaning of a story into encouragement to children so that the children would follow her suggestions unconsciously and more easily. Besides, her special teaching method would also make the children clear about their own disadvantages and find a way to get rid of them by learning from the story. It’s a good way for children to accept their deficiencies gladly without any stress or burden. Mrs. March’s story can be described as killing two birds with one stone. Her story not only indirectly pointed out the shortcomings of the children but also gave them the direction of overcoming them. Once having finished the story,

Mrs. March got what she wanted. From Joe's words that she did not like empty reasoning but a true story; we can see that how deeply the children hate the traditional preaching. We all know that persuading education is an important method of education, but it should be targeted, avoid empty and abstract preaching. Therefore, in family education, parents should be good at grasping educational opportunity, create vivid educational situation, and use the typical examples and stories, combining the persuading guidance with the situational influence so that parents can educate the children gradually in order to help the children do the right things under the guidance of the adults.

### III. BUILDING A GOOD ATMOSPHERE IN FAMILY

With the speeding development of society, family education has an annoying problem. On the one hand, the parents are hoping their kids to be talents; on the other hand, the atmosphere is not beneficial to the growth of the children. The deeds of parents have great influence on kids, which is always beyond the imagination of the human beings. The personalities, behaviors and habits of many children resemble their parents, which demonstrates the point of view that parents are the models of children, esp. the behaviors and the ways of parents who are dealing with people affect the children unconsciously and gradually.

Mr. March had to leave his family members behind when his country needed him to serve. Under this kind of situation, girls at home are in a mess order. Yet, Mrs. March is very wise and capable, she not only shoulders the burden of the family very well, but also maintains and manages the life of family in good order, thus creating a healthy and harmonious family atmosphere, which is beneficial to girls growth in a great deal. Let us see how Mrs. March did that. Firstly, after the hard working of a whole day, she neither put her tiredness on her face nor complained of how exhausting the job was instead she kissed and greeted her kids. Next they had a dinner together happily, after dinner they enjoyed the activities made by children before going to bed, all of which conspicuously show that Mrs. March created a healthy environment for her kids. It's worthy of being mentioned that Mrs. March never blows up in front of her children. In chapter eight, Amy burned Jo's book, Jo was very angry, so when they went to skate, Jo's dreadful temper almost led to Amy's drowning. For that, Jo was very sorry, and she wanted to cure her dreadful temper and asked Mrs. March to help her. So Mrs. March told her experience. She said she was angry every day of her life, but with Mr. March's help, she tried not to show it. Mrs. March said every time when she became angry, she would try her best to control it, she told herself that she must try to practice all the virtues for she was their example. When someone scolded her, she was also angry but she folded her lips together and went out of the room sometimes, so she never quarreled with her father and her neighbors in front of her children. From these things, we can see what Mrs. March did builds set a good atmosphere for the children.

### IV. SETTING GOOD EXAMPLES

As a practical activity that accompanies human society, role model education plays an indispensable role in the evolution of human civilization [3]. So in family education, parents play a role of models. Their behavior has the most effective impact on the children than any other language education. Wanting their children to become what kind of person, parents should try to be that kind of person so as to set an example for their children. We always say the in family education, children's best teacher is their parents, so Parents' words and acts have a subtle influence on development of the children's character. Thus it's very crucial for parents to set a good example for the children in order to guide their children in a right direction.

In Chapter one of "Little Women", the father who was far away in the battlefield wrote a letter to her wife Mrs. March in order to remind the children of not idling away these difficult days while waiting their father's coming back home. He suggested that girls would behave well and diligently do what they can do, struggle forward bravely and overcome their deficiencies. We can perceive that the father March thinks that the so-called working is to be practical and brave to do whatever you can. Only in this way would you not waste life. In Chapter eleven, March sisters try to find happiness through daily activities, their dreams and fellows. When they do not do any productive labor, neglect housework, they will feel guilty and regretful. Under the guidance of their father and mother, they gradually learned the shining spots of their parents. Taking parents as an example, they tried their best to do what they should do in life and realized their own value by their industrious work. What's more, Mrs. March's kindness set an example for the children. In Chapter two of the novel, on Christmas morning, the children got up to see the Christmas gift from their Mum and came downstairs to thank her, but their mother was not at home. The servant of the family told the children that their mother went outside to help their poor neighbor. After coming back, Mother inspired the children to help their poor neighbor and the kids gave their own breakfast to Hummel without hesitation. Although they are cold and hungry, they are satisfied with what they have done. Kindness is the shining spot of the little Marches because Mrs. March's kind-hearted characteristics set a good example for the children. Of the four heroes, Beth who was crazy about music inherited her mother's characteristics. In the seventeenth chapter of the novel, mother went far away to see children's sick father and before leaving she asked the children to visit the Hummel family every day. A long period of time later, the children began to slack off. Only Beth insisted on taking care of the children of the Hummel family every day. Knowing that the kids were ill, Beth was so anxious that she asked other sisters to visit the Hummel but her sisters were busy with their own affairs and they didn't attach importance to Beth's request. Without any help, Beth had to look after the kids by herself. And because of this, Beth was infected by the scar Latina, and finally came to a tragic death. This shows that if parents want their children to come into being good personality, they should behave well and set a good example for the kids. Only with good personality, good moral character, highly-educated brain and kindness can parents have an invisible influence on their children.

## V. CULTIVATING CHILDREN'S PERSONALITY

As we all know, one person is different from another because of different personalities which result in their different outlooks about life and different attitudes towards life. Personality is generally influenced by three aspects: family education, school education and social influence. Among these, I think that family education is the most important one for children's early experience and has decisive influence on the form of their personalities. From the babyhood we are living abiding by many requirements from parents. Just because of this kind of education, we learn the morality in heart and make it a part of ourselves. The children do not have their independent personalities in their early years and they totally reflect the parents' spirits. Generally we can say that personality is greatly influenced by family education and remains fairly consistent throughout life.

In the novel "little women", we see four girls with different personalities: Meg who is responsible and kind; Jo is a tomboy with dream to become a writer; Beth who adores music and is virtuous, Amy is an artist who is innocent. The common features in the girls are kind, friendly and full of sympathy. All of their personalities are affected by family education. How to cultivate children's personalities? The first and most important, Parent's role is very important on children's personalities. Because of the special natural relationship between mother and children, mother takes a very important task in the family education. Mother understands her children more profoundly than father and is easy to become intimate friends with their children. Four girls in the novel always pour out things weighing on their minds to their mother and seek for their mother's help. Mrs. March also makes full use of her special role in the family to affect their children's personalities, her characters are kind, friendly and industrious, which affect the formation of the children's personalities.

## VI. GUIDING THE CHILDREN TO ESTABLISH CORRECT VALUES

The children should set up reasonable life values under the guidance of parents' values, as social awareness can pose the prevailing and manifest guided role to individuals and society. The right value exerts an encouraging role but the wrong value hinders the development of things. Parents should set up the correct values and play the leading roles of them. Family education is attributed to self-education, and in order to carry out the wise family education parents have to improve themselves comprehensively from the aspects of morality, civilization, educational ability etc. It is the urgent task without allowing delaying to improve the construction of family education, especially at the very beginning of establishment of market economy in which money is being given an important position, morality is being decayed and civilization is degrading.

Meg March, the eldest sister in the family, who has a small weakness of enjoying luxurious things. In the ninth chapter, Meg goes to Vanity Fair, the Moffat girls insist on dressing Meg in borrowed finery and play tricks on her. Meg foolishly believed that the splendid dress has a kind of charm that helps to draw attentions from some people and can gain respect from

them [4]. As a result, she was laughed at by the dowagers at the party due to her vanity. While coming back, she told the whole thing to her mother, who suggested her eloquently "that is perfectly natural, and quite harmless, if the liking does not become a passion and lead one to do foolish or un-maidenly things. Learn to know and value the praise which is worth having, and to excite the admiration of excellent people by being modest as well as pretty, Meg." [5] Mrs. March says these words to help Meg to be aware that the beauty of appearance is superficial; the inner beauty always surpasses the gorgeous appearance. When speaking of the value of marriage, she tells Meg that she doesn't want any of her daughters to marry for material comforts, Mrs. March utters profoundly that "My dear girls, I am ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world—marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes because love is wanting. Money is needful and precious thing, and when well used, a noble thing, but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace". [5] The nice value on money of Mrs. March's made the children understand that true love is more important than money and is worthy of being had. The values of money and marriage of Mrs. March have immense influence on her children which affects their decisions in their future life. When Meg grows up, she gets married to John who is not rich but kind-hearted instead of getting married with Laure who is handsome, better off and loves her so much. Her choice shows she is clear in mind that true love is more important than superficial and materials things. In the novel, the author describes combining with poor man as a heavy load on women in the nineteenth century. It is worth mentioning is that Mrs. March breaks through the traditional worldly belief educating the children not to enjoy the marriage only for materials. In the materialized society, the degrading morality is giving the way to money and fame, under the condition of that parents ought to build up good life and society values, which can lead the children to get rid of the superficiality of appearance and to know the significance of true love and inner beauty.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Family education plays a crucial role in the forming of children's personalities and different personalities can lead to different outlooks of life and attitudes towards marriage [6]. In "Little Women" good family education has shaped the March family four sisters laudable virtue, which has become a model for today's parents. A good family education should do as what March couple did: they use implication to teach girls rather than the traditional dull sermons; they create a good family atmosphere for children; they behave well to set a good example for children; they pay attention to girls' personality development and the formation of their values about money and marriage. All these above accomplishments are realized through Mrs. March. Firstly, she has infinite wisdom. Each lesson she teaches was not just telling to them, but demonstrating, and enforcing with kindness and with love. Secondly, she is very patient, never opposing Jo but always encourages her so as to make her grow positively. Thirdly, she has an exceptionally charitable nature and is always kind to

help others. On Christmas day, though the family is not rich, she would also like to share foods with poor people. For Mrs. March her noble personality has set a good example to her children and this is also the main reason why all her children have grown up into noble ladies. However, family education is not isolated; they are interrelated and unified system. Family education has rich content and complex process, although every family has different environments. In family education parents should be good at combining these principles together, then consider the family environment and fully apply them to fulfilling the glorious and arduous responsibility entrusted by history.

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