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7.1 Little Women

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This was my first time reading *Little Women* and needless to say it took me awhile to get through it. As you mentioned in your journal, I did find the book tedious or positively dreadful as some might say, to read and it took me a great while to become engaged and interested in the story. I felt that the language was quite difficult to understand at times but also surprising at how fitting most statements or descriptions could be to today's language. I would say that I didn't start to fully enjoy reading the book until the second half and it still took effort. In saying that, I can certainly see how this book is named a classic. The writing style, no matter how difficult to follow, is still cleverly done. The old style English is very fitting to the time that the story was written. As I mentioned earlier, I was amazed though how at times the language suited today quite well. The characters were certainly relatable, on many different levels and there were definitely universal themes presented throughout the story. The theme I chose to think about while reading *Little Women* was poverty vs. wealth. I felt that I could relate to this theme most, as even though we were considered middle class growing up, in my neighborhood it was the haves and the have-nots. I longed for things I could not possess and was drawn to this theme immediately with Jo saying "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents" (pg 1) as I often remember saying this with my older brother and younger sister.

It is clear that Alcott presents a very straightforward message about poverty and wealth through this novel. I feel that the main characters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy go through struggles and conflicts with this theme throughout the story, but never stray with what Alcott truly says about wealth. Alcott states her position clearly throughout the book, and quite nicely in Chapter 18. "Then it was that Margaret, sitting alone with tears dropping often on her work, felt how rich she had been in things more precious than any luxuries money could buy; in love, protection, peace and health, the real blessings of life." (pg 184) Through her characters, Alcott teaches the readers that poverty and wealth can be presented through money, and "money is a good and useful thing" (pg 204) but it cannot buy you happiness and it cannot make your troubles go away. Alcott helps readers to understand that a person can be far richer in personal qualities than the richest person on Earth.

Alcott does show the struggling aspect of poverty and wealth as well. Through the girls, hardships are faced and feelings are hurt through everyday real life situations. People long for what they cannot have. People are often judged by the material objects that they have, including the clothes on their backs. Students are teased and status does still have an effect on children and adults alike. There is always the notion that life would be easier if you could just be a little bit better off, but again Alcott helps to show that character in a person can provide for more wealth than money.

Within this theme, Alcott shows that there are many different levels. Poverty and wealth is not a clearly defined term, and children are not always born into what they have. It is mentioned that "Mr. March lost his property in trying to help an unfortunate friend..." (pg 36) and that the family was not always poor with money. We also learn that the girls have their individual garden plots in their yard and Hannah as their servant. We also learn of the Hummel's who are substantially less off than the Marches and start to put things in perspective. Alcott shows through this theme that things are not always as bad as they seem and that there are people that are worse off than you. It's almost easy to say that the Marches are middle class with having a maid and all, but from the time period it's hard to say it was true back then. Alcott also allows the readers to deduce that it doesn't matter how much money you have, you can always want something more. Money may or may not be able to buy it, but ultimately the best things in life are free.

I think Alcott did a fine job of representing the conventions of time in which *Little Women* was written. It was very relative. The girls were aware of what they had and what they didn't have. In this time period, status was a very definitive way of life and often you didn't marry outside of it. The girls represented their knowledge through their play *Operatic Tragedy*. In the play, Roderigo demands Zara's hand in marriage and 'Don Pedro refuses because he is not rich.' (pg 20) Also, the better off had carriages and the girls expressed their joy at being able to ride home in Laurie's carriage from the New Year's Eve ball. Another aspect which really helped to show the time of the book along with poverty and wealth is when Mrs. Moffat is speaking to Sally and the girls. Mrs. Moffat declares "Mrs. M. has laid her plans, I dare say, and will play her cards well, early as it is." (pg 87) It's also apparent when another says "Poor thing! she'd be so nice if she was only got up in style." (pg 87) Through this conversation we can see

how proposed marriages still might have been in order, or mother's trying to marry off their less fortunate daughters to rich men.

I also find this theme represented in the times of the novel through helping others in the community. I think nowadays, people just tend to look out for themselves. I certainly know that this isn't true of everyone, but this theme of being neighborly was heavily played out in the story, perhaps more representative of the time period. The Hummel's house was described as "A poor, bare, miserable room it was, with broken windows, no fire, ragged bed-clothes, a sick mother, wailing baby, and a group of pale, hungry children cuddled under one old quilt, trying to keep warm." (pg 15) 'In loving their neighbor more than themselves' (pg 16) the girls had the opportunity to also see how fortunate they were in health and wealth compared to others.

I think that Alcott also presented the theme of poverty and wealth in how much love and care was put into the things that the girls made. From their stockings to their bonnets to their slippers, the girls were aware of how important it was to do a proper job. Also, when Meg moved into her house with John, she still longed for things she could not have or afford, but was comforted in knowing that everything in her house had sentimental value and belonged to her family in one way or another. Alcott expresses that a home is not made based on how expensive the objects are that are put into it, rather the love that is used in making it a home. She also expresses through Meg that the 'household happiness did not come all at once, but John and Meg had found the key to it, and each year of married life taught them how to use it, unlocking the treasuries of real home-love and mutual helpfulness, which the poorest may possess, and the richest cannot buy.' (pg 399) It takes more than money to build a home, it takes patience, love, kindness, trust, respect and more, character traits that are taught and not bought in order to make a home and be happy. This is not only to married life, but with family and friends as well, and the notion that you stick through thick and thin with the person you are devoted to.

I think that this theme, poverty and wealth, and the way it was represented and treated throughout the book is very relevant to modern readers. There are still separate classes, and the better off thinking they are well off and above everyone else. I think that it's important to know that even though money makes the world go round, it doesn't make you happy. Ultimately it cannot buy you friends, the type of friends that truly care for you and love you and stick by your side. Money does not solve all your problems. Regardless of how well off, you should strive to

help others who are less fortunate for you. You should never sell yourself short and always do your utmost to succeed in life, to do what you are passionate about and what makes you happy. You should be grateful for what you have and to cherish your family. As Jo and Meg learned from the New Year's Eve party, you should enjoy yourselves despite what you have or don't have and make the most of things and life in general. As Jo learned when meeting Laurie again at the same party, you should not try to be someone you're not, regardless of status or money. As mentioned with Meg's job, "Poor Meg seldom complained, but a sense of injustice made her feel bitter toward every one sometimes, for she had not yet learned to know how rich she was in the blessings which alone can make life happy." (pg 37) We should not always go through life envying other people for what they have and what we cannot, because material objects don't make a person truly happy. Through *Little Women* and this particular theme, readers are reminded that even 'rich people have about as many worries as poor ones...' (pg 42) I think the story that Mrs. March told to the girls says it best. "Being sensible girls, they decided to try her advice, and soon were surprised to see how well off they were. One discovered that money couldn't keep shame and sorrow out of rich people's houses; another that though she was poor, she was a great deal happier with her youth, health, and good spirits, than a certain fretful, feeble old lady, who couldn't enjoy her comforts; a third, that, disagreeable as it was to help get dinner, it was harder still to have to go begging for it; and the fourth, that even carnelian rings were not so valuable as good behavior." (pg 44) This whole paragraph is relative to any youth, in any country in the world.

I think that this novel does have a lot to offer readers of today, but I wouldn't go so far as to say young readers. I feel that the language, style of writing and vocabulary would probably be better suited for readers 14 ages and up. I think a lot would go over the heads of readers any younger than that. I would say this story would prove to be very useful if read and discussed in and English Lit class in high school. It provides many universal themes represented through the story and would provide for great discussion in a class. I think a lot of readers would be able to relate to more than one element in this story. I know I was certainly able to. I could relate to the poverty vs. wealth theme, sibling rivalry, family duty vs. personal growth and then of course family being away at war. My brother is currently in Iraq at the moment, and I was certainly drawing in my own personal experiences and feelings when the girls would talk about how they missed their father. I could certainly understand how that aspect also brings strangers together

with a common thread. Last but not least, the chapter on Castles in the Air would offer a lot to readers. I think it is important for young adults to have a dream and to have an individual dream. It's important to know something about yourself and to have a goal for your future. It's also important to realize that things change, people change, and events in our life help to shift and shape our dreams. Life is uncertain, and with it comes the good and bad. *Little Women* does a great job in offering young adults a sincere take on life and an appreciation of what life's true blessings are.