

TEACHING IN A DIFFERENT SENSE: ALCOTT'S MARMEE

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Most of you probably remember tomboyish, fifteen-year old Jo March better than you remember her mother Marmee in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. This bestselling "girls' book," which has never fallen out of print since first published in 1867-68,¹ and which occasionally has even been considered "subversive,"² dramatizes Jo's coming of age to found and run an experimental "home-like school" (*LW*, 303). But as a domestic curriculum in itself, the novel also dramatizes Marmee's childrearing practice with Jo and her sisters, sixteen-year-old Meg, thirteen-year-old Beth, and twelve-year-old Amy — perhaps intending that its young readers or their mothers should learn that practice's meaning and value, if not also a few of its characteristic methods and resources.

In the novel's first chapter, "Playing Pilgrims," Marmee reads her daughters a letter from her husband, Mr. March, then serving as a Civil War chaplain. He closes his letter reminding the girls to work hard, act lovingly toward their mother, "do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves" so that he "may be fonder and prouder than ever" of his "little women" (*LW*, 28). Mr. March's letter makes them tearful: Amy bemoans her selfishness, Meg scorns her vanity, Jo resolves to be less wild, and Beth just silently begins "to knit with all her might" (*LW*, 30). Herself a "tall" woman (*LW*, 26), not a "little" one, Marmee counters these grim effects: "Do you remember how you used to play *Pilgrim's Progress* when you were little things? Nothing delighted you more..." (*LW*, 30). Suggesting that "We are never too old" for such play, she observes that three of them have just named their own pilgrims' "burdens" to carry "in earnest" and then elicits from Beth an admission that "being afraid of people" is her own pilgrim's "bundle" (*LW*, 31).

As Nel Noddings might remark, Marmee makes this move from painful feeling to playful thinking about "the longing for goodness and happiness" (*LW*, 31) with her daughters to "care for" them as they encounter "evils" such as pain, separation, and helplessness.³ But Marmee obviously also aims for their *learning* to survive their "many troubles and mistakes" (*LW*, 31) by sharing their love for each other and, for their mutual comfort and cheer, taking a playful, self-expressive approach to the increasingly adult, sometimes unpleasant tasks before them. From the evening's task of making bedsheets for their lonely, short-tempered, and boring Aunt March, therefore, they set about making a game, by "dividing the long seams into four parts, and calling the quarters Europe, Asia, Africa, and America" and talking "about the different countries as they stitched their way through them" (*LW*, 31-32).

Undeniably, Mr. March's belligerent and paternalistic rhetoric, including the diminutive he assigns to his coming-of-age daughters, and the division between distant war labors and intimate domestic labors, to which only Jo objects, here do exemplify gender socialization: a hidden curriculum worthy of feminist critique and consciousness-raising that are difficult to imagine Marmee initiating.⁴ Underscoring this obvious point, I nonetheless contend that Marmee's interaction with her daughters in this scene constitutes a clear case of *teaching*. She intends them to learn something about living well through honestly felt efforts at self-definition, efforts which without her intervention they might not have undertaken on their own. Such aims distinguish Marmee's childrearing as worthy of the name "teaching." Whether or not her "manner" is rational, in the sense of engaging her daughters' reason, therefore does not concern me here, albeit precisely such a manner is essential to the analytic standard sense of teaching and sometimes even also appropriate to

Marmee's educational ends.⁵ For Marmee is teaching in a different sense from the standard analytic one thus defined: a sense now mystified by our failure to study it. In Marmee's case, what does the concept "teaching" mean?

BRINGING MARMEE INTO EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

However anomalous our field may make my claim that Marmee teaches her daughters,⁶ the claim does have noteworthy precedents in educational thought. In *Reclaiming a Conversation*, Jane Roland Martin has cited Mary Wollstonecraft, Catharine Beecher, and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who all argued that "mothers are teachers and, further, that the teaching mothers do is directed not just to the transmission of discrete skills such as tying shoelaces but to the development of values, principles, and habits."⁷ Contemporary philosophers of education have not yet taken this claim seriously. A philosopher of peace, Sara Ruddick, however, has constructed a concept of "maternal thinking," whose essential activities are protection, nurturance, and training.⁸ Whereas her conceptual analysis may well define maternal thought, its categorical divisions and the "training" concept's narrowness do not quite capture the explicitly educational aims that Audre Lorde has claimed central to her own childrearing practice as a Black lesbian mother: "This is what mothers teach — love, survival — that is, self-definition and letting go. For each of these, the ability to feel strongly and to recognize those feelings is central: how to feel love, how to neither discount fear nor be overwhelmed by it, how to enjoy feeling deeply...."⁹ Although such maternal teaching differs from teaching in the analytic standard sense, definitively "an activity directed at developing reasonable men,"¹⁰ books and academic journals in our field have not addressed such non-standard, but common-sense teaching claims either critically or constructively.

Where can we turn, then, for primary sources of educational thought about childrearing? Ruddick has identified women's literature, including Alcott's, as a major source of evidence that maternal thought does occur.¹¹ For, by all accounts, Marmee is Alcott's portrait of her own mother, Abba May, who once wrote that women should assert their right "to think, feel, and live individually...be something in yourself."¹² She read Pestalozzi, and her husband, the Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, wrote about Pestalozzi, even considering himself a disciple of that now almost forgotten philosopher of education. Bronson also wrote ponderous treatises idealizing Socrates and Jesus as teachers, and worked with Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller on an experimental effort at inter-racial co-education for children in Boston.¹³ Biographers cite Mr. March as Alcott's portrait of her father, who wrote one of the first published American diaries of child development, about Louisa and her elder sister.¹⁴

More than just a source of evidence that maternal thought exists, *Little Women* is itself a formulation of thought about a mother's teaching. Like her father, Louisa May Alcott was a schoolteacher, also one of Peabody's educational collaborators, and like her mother, she raised at least one child at home, albeit as an unmarried aunt. Thus her adult life no less than her unusual upbringing among New England's Transcendentalists offered ample provocation to think deeply about both schooling and childrearing. More than just an autobiographical account of Marmee's teaching, her fiction is an artfully structured, close critical study of characters and events in mid-nineteenth-century New England that compose different educative and miseducative notions of childrearing practice within certain kinds of homes and schools.

Instead of here undertaking the many possible sorts of critical inquiry about *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, Transcendentalist educational thought, the ethic of care, childrearing, motherhood's representation, or adolescent girls' development, I look forward to the challenging questions such wide-ranging studies may pose for me. Meanwhile I will examine Marmee's case of childrearing with another explicitly constructive aim. What might "teaching" mean in Marmee's case? Toward what achievement does her teaching definitively aim within her own fictional context of home childrearing? Having pursued such inquiry, we can ask whether teaching in this "different" *achievement* sense entails a correspondingly different *task* sense of teaching, or whether it yields

multiple senses of the teaching task.¹⁵ Rather than accept Marmee's case as a paradigm of maternal teaching without further inquiry, then, we will have to study cases from other cultural contexts, perhaps such as Carrie's in Ntozake Shange's *Betsey Brown*,¹⁶ which may be noteworthy for our philosophical understanding of teaching. Through such new inquiry, many complicated and perplexing questions will surely arise about the analytic standard sense of teaching and about this different teaching concept's possible value for contemporary educational thought and schooling policies and practices.

Little Women's detailed portrait of Marmee's childrearing gives abundant evidence which implicitly validates Lorde's general claim that "what mothers teach" is love and survival — even though one of Marmee's daughters, Beth, does not survive her girlhood, and another, Amy, never really overcomes her selfishness. Like any teaching, Marmee's is not always successful, but its practice is nonetheless defined by her conception of what its success should mean. The ends and means of her daughters' developing capacities and responsibilities for love and survival, the available human examples of success and failure at attempts to achieve those goods, and the many obstacles to their achievement form her subject matter — the material of that curriculum which she intends her daughters to learn through their own efforts. Thus the novel does depict Marmee holding her ever-tried temper as she teaches Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy to love not only themselves, each other, and herself but also their absent father, extended family, neighbors, and God. Meanwhile she deliberately teaches them to survive their "bundles," "burdens," and "scrapes" — ultimately even her own absence. Indeed the recurring figure of Marmee's absence from home functions conceptually in the novel, first as one of her most artful teaching strategies and later as a test of her teaching's success.

MARMEE'S TEACHING AND CURRICULUM

Marmee's conception of her teaching and curriculum reflects her knowledge "that experience was an excellent teacher, and when it was possible she left her children to learn alone the lessons which she would gladly have made easier, if they had not objected to taking advice as much as they did salts and senna" (*GW*, 34). Her curriculum for her daughters therefore includes the complex art of learning from experience to love and survive, come what may. In teaching this curriculum, however, Marmee does not irresponsibly wait for life-threatening crises to occur that will try her daughters' capacities and responsibilities for love and survival. She deliberately demonstrates to them the necessity of exercising such capacities and responsibilities even when their life is its most easygoing: during summer vacation.

The girls beg their mother to let them do nothing but what they like all summer long. Marmee consents to one experimental week of "all play and no work" such as they think they want. She helps her servant Hannah do "their neglected work" (*LW*, 153); allows the girls' messes to clutter the house, such that "nothing was neat and pleasant but 'Marmee's corner,' which looked as usual" (*LW*, 153); and otherwise keeps "the domestic machinery running smoothly" (*LW*, 154) until the experiment's last day, when she sees their increasing, vague discontent and decides to take the day off from mothering and housekeeping and do exactly as she pleases "so as to let the girls enjoy the full effect of the play system" (*LW*, 155). This final "full effect" leads them to "a strange sense of helplessness" and a sudden discovery that in order to have meals, guests, pets, and the environment their various individual amusements require, they must do not only their usual little chores, but also work that they do not even yet know how to do.

When Marmee returns from her day away, she asks the girls if they are satisfied with their experiment and want to try another week of it. Since Beth's pet canary has died, an unexpected guest has come for dinner, and Jo has prepared a flop of a grandiose dinner party, they admit that "it is better to have a few duties and live a little for others" (*LW*, 163). Marmee then suggests they might spend their summer vacation learning "good plain cooking" (*LW*, 163) and concludes her lesson by voicing a clear theoretical sense of what she has aimed to teach:

I wanted you to see how the comfort of all depends on each doing her share faithfully. While Hannah and I did your work you got on pretty well, though I don't think you were very happy or amiable; so I thought, as a little lesson, I would show you what happens when everyone thinks only of herself. Don't you feel that it is pleasanter to help one another, to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when it comes, and to bear and forbear, that home may be comfortable and lovely to us all? (LW, 164)

She furthermore explains that work “keeps us from *ennui* and mischief, is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion”(LW, 164). But she also cautions them against a life of all work and no play, urging them to make regular hours for each.

Marmee's curriculum in arts of love and survival, however, does include far more than the skills and values of cooking and other housekeeping chores. As if following recent advice from psychologists Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, “to break false images of perfection, to invite [girls'] most urgent questions into conversation, into relationship,”¹⁷ her curriculum takes the form of evening family rituals, by means of which she teaches them habits fundamental to the art of learning love and survival: sharing experiences with each other, thinking aloud about them in the retelling, risking and taking honest criticism, helping each other along with encouragement and praise, recognizing explicitly what each has learned through daily difficulties and triumphs, applying a playful and imaginative spirit to the hardest learning tasks of all: such as overcoming humiliation, disappointment, shyness, vanities, raging tempers, laziness, spitefulness, selfishness. As the girls grow older, such ritual events give way to their exercise of those learning habits on their own initiative, especially the habit of seeking and taking advice about problems and decisions affecting their own and others' love and survival. This change marks her daughters' growing capacity and responsibility for their own learning of her curriculum, central to any concept of her teaching achievement.

The core texts of her curriculum in love and spiritual survival are Christian. *The Pilgrim's Progress* provides the foundation — almost a developmental theory in itself — for her daughters' learning, which Marmee calls “playing pilgrims”: “the Slough of Despond,” “the Celestial City,” “the Valley of Humiliation,” and other names from the book are key phrases in their shared moral vocabulary, to describe their various experiences and emotional phases and states. Marmee also teaches her daughters to learn the habit of taking time alone with themselves each morning, to read in their (biblical) “guide-books.” She seizes upon special occasions (such as Christmas or an illness) and opportunities that arise (such as visits or invitations) to teach her daughters how to be both generous and poor with grace: to tend the needy and sick and make charitable sacrifices for their basic survival, to make do proudly without wealth and luxuries that others who are better off misrepresent as necessities, to endure without complaint the distasteful jobs which provide their means to live. Marmee's curriculum reflects her particular perception of life as unpredictable and often troubled, and love as a basic necessity for surviving its difficulties with dignity and joy. Accordingly, she teaches her daughters to marry for love or not at all rather than for money or position.

Against the potentially grim seriousness of her sacrificial Protestant regimen, the materials of Marmee's curriculum also include ritualistic gestures which, in becoming known to her daughters as part of her own affectionate character, make a repeated point of family love, good cheer, and personal pride as important habits of active self-expression: for example, always making sure they have “nice pocket-handkerchiefs” as they leave home or always standing at the window to watch them walk down the street each morning and affectionately waving at them just before they turn the corner. Thus Marmee's curriculum in love and survival takes shape not only from Bunyan's moral concepts like “the City of Destruction” and “Apollyon,” but most especially from Marmee's own feelings about herself and her daughters. Her thoughtfully constructed curriculum includes more than texts and mental or physical skills; it includes emotional skills, attitudes, dispositions, habits, and values, as well as body language that speaks to her daughters through the physical senses and from the heart.

MISEDUCATIVE CHILDREARING AND THE NEED FOR MARMEE'S TEACHING

Not all activities that mothers and other adults acting *in loco parentis* undertake in their custody, schooling, and upbringing of youngsters in *Little Women* can count as teaching in the sense that Marmee's practice often exemplifies. Many other adult characters in the novel practice childrearing without any clear intent to teach children anything about the value, meaning, or means of learning love and survival. Kind old Mr. Laurence coddles his lazy, orphaned grandson when his private tutor reports him truant from his lessons. Learned Mr. Davis publicly humiliates, and metes out corporal punishment to, his mischievous students in Amy's school. Haute-bourgeois Mrs. Moffatt hospitably socializes her daughter's girl-friends, including Meg, to a "very fashionable," narcissistic, doll-like femininity. And destitute Mrs. Hummel neglects to exercise any concern about Beth's and her own children's vulnerability to a lethal, contagious illness. Such commonplace cases of miseducative childrearing obviously present contrary cases of Marmee's teaching. Moreover, they demand and frustrate her own best teaching efforts in the interest of the children's learning not to be persuaded by coddling, humiliation, prissy feminine socialization, or ignorant neglect to shrink from making their best efforts to love and survive in an unpredictable, sometimes cruel world.

Other instances of miseducative childrearing in *Little Women* occur despite adults' clearly educative intent. Such events in the novel become miseducative because the childrearing adult overlooks the importance of teaching love when teaching survival, or else overlooks the importance of teaching survival when teaching love. For example, when Marmee takes the girls on a charity mission to the Hummels, for whom they sacrifice their Christmas breakfast, Mrs. Hummel is sick, but no instructive comments about the danger of contagion enter into Marmee's lesson in sacrificial charity toward others. Much later, when Marmee leaves home to tend Mr. March's sickbed in the war down south, Beth alone heeds Marmee's teaching and continues to make charity visits to the Hummels; ignorantly taking no precautions for her own health, she contracts scarlet fever from Mrs. Hummel's baby, who dies from the disease, and nearly dies from it herself. Since helping others is apparently Beth's only motivation for overcoming her shyness, Marmee's teaching about charity toward their indigent neighbors is obviously just what Beth needs to develop a stronger, less house-bound and introverted sense of self. But sadly, Marmee never teaches Beth to exercise precautions for her own survival, and Beth's illness only has the miseducative effect of making her more house-bound and fearful than ever.

By contrast, when Beth is sick, Amy must leave the March home to escape the same illness that nearly kills her sister. Aunt March takes Amy into her home and teaches her domestic skills and academic lessons important to her material survival as lady of a household:

She had to wash the cups every morning, and polish up the old-fashioned spoons, the fat silver tea-pot and the glasses, till they shone. Then she must dust the room, and what a trying job that was! Not a speck escaped Aunt March's eye, and all the furniture had claw legs, and much carving, which was never dusted to suit. Then Polly must be fed, the lap-dog combed, and a dozen trips upstairs and down, to get things, to deliver orders, for the old lady was very lame, and seldom left her big chair. After these tiresome labours, she must do her lessons, which was a daily trial of every virtue she possessed. Then she was allowed one hour for exercise or play.... Then patchwork or towels appeared, and Amy sewed with outward meekness and inward rebellion till dusk (*LW*, 257).

This loveless, servile domestic curriculum only intensifies Amy's characteristic self-centeredness when she might most effectively have been taught, and perhaps even have learned, to empathize with and generously cheer her troubled sisters, who were tending Beth's sickbed with serious fears for her life. Thus, Marmee's prolonged absence from home brings to light certain childrearing events which make clear that her daughters' growing capacity and responsibility for learning both love and survival are necessary to her teaching achievement. Neither love nor survival alone is a sufficient aim for the conception of achievement that distinguishes teaching in the different sense that Marmee's childrearing practice exemplifies.

A CONCEPT OF TEACHING FOR THE "SCHOOLROOM"?

What practical value might the teaching concept that I have found exemplified in Marmee's case hold for our thought about schooling? *Little Women's* final chapter, "Harvest Time," celebrates the fruits of Marmee's teaching — especially Jo's determination to practice such teaching herself in her own "happy, home-like school" for boys otherwise "going to ruin, for want of help at the right minute" (GW, 303). The practical particulars of Jo's teaching activities and curriculum may prove different from Marmee's, though conceived upon the same definitive sense of achievement: *children's growing capacity and responsibility for learning to love and to survive despite their conflicts, pains, and troubles, most especially their mothers' absence.*

For teaching defined by this sense of achievement can only claim to be reasonable insofar as its practice responds both to the particular children who must be engaged in learning love and survival and to the particular contexts of conflict, pain, and trouble in which they live. Jo's teaching activities and curriculum may differ from Marmee's in practice because, unlike Marmee, Jo is teaching wild boys like Tommy Bangs who "will smoke sweet-fern cigars under the bed-clothes, though he's set himself afire three times already" (GW, 313). Indeed, at this school, Jo teaches motherless boys and homeless boys; "slow boys and bashful boys; feeble boys and riotous boys; boys that lisped and boys that stuttered; one or two lame ones; and a merry little quadron, who could not be taken in elsewhere, but who was welcome to the 'Bhaer garten,' though some people predicted that his admission would ruin the school" (GW, 303). In *Little Women's* sequel, *Little Men*, Jo adds to her experiment in special education and (token) inter-racial education a new commitment to co-education, as well, placing yet another contextual demand upon her teaching practice.

Indebted to Marmee's understanding of teaching, Jo's "home-like school" could be a forgotten fictional precursor of Martin's "schoolhome," her new, experimental notion of a school that functions in the public world as a "moral equivalent of home."¹⁸ The schoolhome's "unifying" curriculum will be secular and have cultural breadth that both Marmee's Christian home and Jo's school lack, but its learning will definitively be "learning to live together,"¹⁹ just as learning from Marmee and Jo is. Moreover, just as Jo and her sisters at home learn about expressive culture by putting on plays and producing their own in-house newspaper, so do the students at Jo's school, and so will students at the schoolhome. Will the schoolhome also require a concept of teaching such as I have found exemplified in Marmee's case?

In the one classroom at Jo's school, her father and her husband are "trying the Socratic method of education on modern youth" (GW, 303), thus making clear that the theoretical foundation of Marmee's and Jo's teaching outside any classroom is not to be confused with theirs. Although Martin does not explicitly analyze her concept of the schoolhome's teaching, she does insist that the schoolhome must not enforce such "a public-private split" in its teachers' minds and actions.²⁰ She also recounts many teaching episodes, both real and imaginary, which make clear that the schoolhome's "object is to teach children to stand inside and keep in good repair a web of connection that includes all of us" and "to teach our young to treasure their own good red blood and that of everyone else."²¹ Surely the schoolhome's aimed-for teaching achievement does not contradict Marmee's; perhaps if Amy and Beth had had access to a schoolhome, they would not have dropped out and required home-schooling. Although the teaching achievement in Marmee's home, Jo's home-like school, Martin's schoolhome, and other homes (like Betsey Brown's) may have the same conceptual meaning, a meaning different from the analytic standard sense, teaching activities may still vary from case to case. As we begin to evaluate and elaborate upon Martin's schoolhome ideal, therefore, we will have to analyze the teaching activities entailed by a sense of teaching achievement shared with Marmee in various cases — perhaps thereby also revising our understanding of the teaching task.

- ¹ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Puffin Classics, 1868) and *Good Wives: Little Women, Part II* (London: Puffin Classics, 1869). Page references to each of the novel's two parts, still published separately in the U.K., will henceforth be noted parenthetically in the text, denoted by *LW* and *GW*, as appropriate.
- ² Alison Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grownups: Subversive Children's Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 13.
- ³ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: California, 1984), especially 30-37; also Nel Noddings, *Women and Evil* (Berkeley: California, 1989), ch. 4.
- ⁴ See Jane R. Martin, "What Should We Do With A Hidden Curriculum When We Find One?," *Curriculum Inquiry* (Fall 1976): 137-51.
- ⁵ Israel Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1960), 58.
- ⁶ Jane Roland Martin, "A Professorship and an Office of One's Own," unpublished address to the Philosophy of Education Society (Washington, DC, March 15, 1991).
- ⁷ Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven: Yale, 1985), 124-25.
- ⁸ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Philosophy of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).
- ⁹ Audre Lorde, "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 74.
- ¹⁰ Thomas F. Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 103.
- ¹¹ Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 225.
- ¹² Sarah Elbert, *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott and Little Women* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1984), 86.
- ¹³ Elbert, *A Hunger for Home*, 22; Martha Saxton, *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 78.
- ¹⁴ Sarah Elbert, *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott's Place in American Culture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 14, 23.
- ¹⁵ On the task/achievement distinction in analysis of a verb like "teach," see Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949), 130, 150, 152, 176.
- ¹⁶ Susan Laird, "The Concept of Teaching: *Betsy Brown* vs. Philosophy of Education?" *Philosophy of Education 1988*, ed. James Giarelli (Normal, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1989).
- ¹⁷ Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 230.
- ¹⁸ Susan Laird, "The Ideal of the Educated Teacher: 'Reclaiming a Conversation' with Louisa May Alcott," *Curriculum Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (fall 1991): 271-97; Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1992), 46.
- ¹⁹ Martin, *The Schoolhome*, chs. 2-3.
- ²⁰ Martin, 167-69.
- ²¹ Martin, 118-19.