

# Analysis of Little Women from the Perspective of Western Humanism

Songni Zhang

Xi'an Peihua University, Xi'an 710125, China

**Abstract.** Louisa May Alcott is considered to be an excellent children's story writer. Her book, *Little Women*, is considered as a classic and has been very popular for years. This novel describes the four sisters' growing experiences and their marriage. The story touches the depth of readers with its exquisite narration as well as its sincere feelings, which enables it to be a resplendent pearl in American literary history. The author of this thesis will analyze this novel from perspective of Western Humanism. Through this study, the author aims to highlight that humanism is not a theory which common people can't reach; instead, it can be shining on the ordinary people like the characters in *Little Women*. Meanwhile, the author expects the new and overall interpretation on *Little Women* can be accepted by ordinary people. Hopefully, they can advance and enrich those thoughts in the Western Humanism.

**Keywords:** Western Humanism; *Little Women*; Ideology.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Background of the Study

*Little Women* is a novel written by American female writer Louisa May Alcott. It was originally published in two volumes in 1868 and 1869. The first volume was written rapidly over several months at the request of Alcott's publisher and greeted with an immediate commercial and critical success. Readers were attracted by the story and demanded to know more about the characters. Therefore, Alcott quickly completed a second volume, which was also a great success. The two volumes were issued in 1880 in a single work entitled *Little Women*.

### 1.2 The Significance of the Study

*Little Women* has been being a splendid pearl in American Literature. It is modeled on the real life, mainly telling the growing process of the four March sisters and their mother's guide to their growth. The whole book highlights the spirits of kindness, benevolence and pursuit of the perfect virtue, singing praises of family ethics and the harmony of neighborhood.

The author of this thesis decided to highlight the most valuable and practical ideology-Western Humanism to analyze this novel. Through this study, the author aims to provide readers with an innovative and comprehensive perspective to give insight into this world classic. Meanwhile, the author expects those ordinary people who are like the characters in the novel can truly understand the essence of Western Humanism, furthermore, carry it forward.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 A Brief Introduction of *Little Women*

*Little Women* was translated into more than ten languages and became one of books in great demand. Meanwhile, it was adapted to plays, movies, TV series, which attract great attention of audience.

#### 2.1.1 About the Author

Louisa May Alcott was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania on November 29, 1832. She and her three sisters were educated by their father and raised by their mother. When she was 22, her first book *Flower Fables* was published. A milestone along her literary path was *Hospital Sketches* (1863) based on the letters she had written home from her post as a nurse during the Civil War. The publication of

Little Women was greeted with an immediate success, which surprised both Alcott and her publisher. Alcott later recalled that she did not think she could write a successful book for girls. However, the fact is she did.

### **2.1.2 The Main Plots of Little Women**

Little Women is set in the Civil War of America and developed around a family--the Marches. This family is settled in a new neighborhood, living a genteel poverty. The father, Mr. March serves in the army as a minister during the Civil War. The mother, Mrs. March is at home with her four daughters. She is industrious, considerate, caring and especially good at guiding and educating her children. The four daughters are Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. Meg is a beautiful girl who is responsible and prudent; Jo is a Tomboy who is frank but a little impulsive and quick to anger; Beth is a little musician, is quiet, peaceful and caring, never complaining; Amy is the youngest one, a charming artist with blond curls. With the help of their mother, the four girls conduct themselves and develop their different potentials.

## **2.2 The Key Thought of Western Humanism**

In many books and documents, Western Humanism is regarded as an outcome of Renaissance. This popular view originates from two historical facts: one is it was only in Renaissance that humanism gained its outstanding position and honorable reputation; the other is humanism was so prevailing in Renaissance that it became the theoretical feature of that time. Therefore, people often put humanism and Renaissance into one body, but actually they confuse the meaning of humanism.

### **2.2.1 Interpretation of Western Humanism**

Humanism is not a very ancient word. In 150 B.C., humanism was the slogan of successors of Greek civilization. It is the ideology of man-orientation in ancient Greek which initiates people should improve them and change the world that pushes the later humanistic trend to move forward and develop continuously. In spite of the different spellings of humanism in its developing process, all the spellings never break away with the root "man", obviously, which is the most critical element of humanism.

### **2.2.2 The Core Thought of Western Humanism**

Although Western Humanism has gone through a long developing process, it is still not a system of philosophy. It is an on-going argument where scholars often raise different views nowadays as they did in the past. No matter what new views those scholars raise in different periods, or no matter what humanism is inclined to in different periods, anti-Christianity, liberalism or romanticism, the most important characteristics of humanism that never changes.

The core thought of humanism is "human first", which lays emphasis on respecting the value, dignity, development of potential and thought of human. These thoughts are easily to be said but hard to be done. However, they are put into practice naturally and easily by the ordinary characters in the novel-Little Women.

## **3. Little Women from the Perspective of Western Humanism**

### **3.1 Ideology of Education**

There are kinds of ways to care about human's personality, maintain human's dignity, and fulfill human's value. Among those ways is educating which takes up the first position. Humanistic education is an approach to education. The central theme of humanism is the potential ability and creativity. These capabilities need waking up and further developing. Education is the mean to achieve this purpose. Humanists think it is education that liberates human from the natural and wild condition and finally find themselves.

In Little Women, the education that is filled with humanism is everywhere in their daily life. Mr. March and Mrs. March employ a variety of means to love their children, to help each individual to

grow mentally and physically and finally lead them to reach self-actualization and fulfillment of their own value.

### **3.1.1 Love Education in Little Women**

Childhood is the most important period in the whole life journey which decides a person's thought, value and cognition to the world. In *Little Women*, both Mr. March and Mrs. March are excellent educators who have great influences on the formation of their children's personality.

“Give them all my dear love and a kiss. Tell them I think of them by day, pray for them by night, and find my best comfort in their affection at all times. A year seems very long to wait before I see them, but remind them that while we wait us may all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted.” (Louisa May Alcott, 2004:38)

These words work in educating the four girls. They are all reflecting on themselves. This love education is everywhere in *Little Women*. The profound and full-bodied emotional power it gives off unfolds pure and holy love of human nature before the reader's eyes. This love is the most genuine education which further promotes other human natures to reach a higher level.

### **3.1.2 Life Quality with Literature and Art**

Literature is not philosophy or religion and it provides theories for human spirit. When we are lost in spirit or low in mood at some time, literature is always the light for our soul. Through reading, we can perceive life, light the faith for survival and seek for the living goal of ourselves.

“Crinkle, crinkle, 'tittle 'tar, and it had become a household custom, for the mother was a born singer. The first sound in the morning was her voice as she went about the house singing like a lark, and the last sound at night was the same cheery sound, for the girls never grew too old for that familiar lullaby.” (Louisa May Alcott, 2004:17)

Under the infection of music, the four girls are growing in a joyful and harmonious atmosphere. All of the girls are fond of reading so that they all become more and more educational, decent, graceful and elegant with gradual growth. Their nice manners gain reputation for the Marches.

## **3.2 Ideology of Religion**

Humanism revealed knowledge, morality and the supernatural. One of the earliest forerunners of contemporary chartered humanist organizations was the Humanistic Religious Association formed in 1853 in London. This early group was democratically organized, with male and female members participating in the election of the leadership and promoted knowledge of the sciences, philosophy, and the arts. Religious humanism is an integration of humanist ethical philosophy with religious rituals and beliefs that center on human needs, interests, and abilities. In *Little Women*, it seems that the religious ideology is not prominent. As a matter of fact, it is the thought source of the leading characters-Mrs. March and her four daughters, running through the whole story.

## **3.3 Ideology of Human Orientation**

Humanism centered with human does not only focus on the development of people, but also respect the nature and the basic needs as an individual, such as upholding the value of human, cherishing the personality and creativity of human, emphasizing the freedom and equality of human.

## **4. Conclusion**

The humanistic ideology is the essence of western ideological system. It has permeated into every field of social life. This thesis takes the famous novel *Little Women* as the study object, goes deep into the humanistic ideology implied in this novel. The author has revealed the profound humanistic ideology in *Little Women* through the educating ideology, religious ideology, the ideology of people orientation and the ideology of freedom and equality. All these ideologies are centered with human, serve human and push the development of human. Finally they can enable the nature of human to be improved and finally reach a relative perfect state. Through this study, the author hopes readers can read and interpret this novel from a new and comprehensive perspective. Furthermore, the author

hopes through the analysis in this thesis the readers can give insight into Western Humanism and how it is practiced among the common people like the characters in *Little Women*.

## **References**

- [1]. Louisa May Alcott. *Little Women* [M]. Beijing: Penguin, 2004.
- [2]. Matteson, John. *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father* [M]. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.
- [3]. Murry, William. "Why I Am a Religious Humanist". *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century* [M]. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2007.
- [4]. Nicholas Mann. *The Origins of Humanism* [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- [5]. Wikipedia. *Little Women*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little Women](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Women).