

Domestic or Sentimental Fiction



1820-1865

- Refers to a type of novels that became extremely popular with women during the middle of the nineteenth century. The genre began with Catharine Sedgwick's *New-England Tale* (1822) and remained a dominant fictional type until after 1870

On 'Sentimental' fiction (1830-1870)

- Primary readership: educated , middle-class women (fiction by women to women).
Exception: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (national readership)
- Became an influential genre throughout most of the 19th century
- Authors were breadwinners of their families
- Writers concentrated in New England

Definition of the genre

- According to Nina Baym, the basic plot of the sentimental novel involves "the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world"

- Novels often share the pattern of ‘trials and triumph’ of a young heroine
- novels explore what Nina Baym calls the “philosophy of the ‘fortunate fall’” (sudden loss of fortune and of social status...)
- The pampered heroine is suddenly deprived of wealth and protection, and becomes friendless
- This state of deprivation awakens her to inner possibilities

Plots in the “sentimental novel” may contrast different types of female characters: the good and practical woman, the incompetent, ignorant and passive girl (often the character's mother is this type) and the "belle," who suffers from a defective education.

- Novels follow the Victorian belief that passions have to be controlled
- The heroine struggles for **self-mastery**, learning to conquer her own passions (Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 172)
- The plots "repeatedly identify immersion in feeling as one of the great temptations and dangers for a developing woman. They show that feeling must be controlled. . . ." (Baym).

- The heroine learns to balance society's demands for self-denial with her own desire for autonomy, like in *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott (1868-69)

- Frequent idealization of domestic ideology, but 'home' is perceived not as a physical space but as a network of human relations
- Novels involved social critique: a critique of a ruthless society organised on mercenary principles

Little Women

Jo as a new type of heroine spoke to changing standards of girlhood.



Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888)



Best known for her novel
Little Women (1868)....
But there is a hidden
writer behind the mask

Louisa May Alcott

- Born in Germantown, PA; grew up and lived mostly in Concord, MA
- Came from a family of social radicals:
- Grandfather was an abolitionist
- Father, Bronson, was a member of the transcendentalist movement and an educator whose school was closed down for admitting a black girl
- Mother, Abigail (Abba), was an activist for the poor
- Family briefly lived in transcendentalist Utopian community

- She grew up among many of the well-known intellectuals of the day. Nevertheless, her family suffered severe financial difficulties
- She worked to help her family, as a seamstress, laundress, woman's companion, governess, teacher, and as a nurse in the Civil War
- Based *Little Women* on her own childhood: her family was poor; she had three sisters; she began publishing to support her parents

Other works by L M Alcott

- *Hospital Sketches* (1863)
- Tales of sensation published under a pseudonym:
- “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” (1863)
- “V.V.: or, Plots and Counterplots” (1865)
- “Behind a Mask, or a Woman’s Power” (1866)

Bibliography

- Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction. A Guide to Novels by and about Women*, Cornell UP, 1978
- <http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/domestic.htm>