

## THE GOOD GIRL SYNDROME

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### INTRODUCTION

I begin by discussing the role of children's literature in socializing children into the norms of society. I then examine what is meant by the 'good girl syndrome'. The values and norms of certain classics, namely, *A Little Princess*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Little Women*, will be examined, in particular the manner in which the main female character is presented. These will be compared to the recent films of the books to see if the films too reflect patriarchal values and endorse the 'good girl syndrome'. Finally the implications of these books and films for girls today will be explored.

### THE ROLE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN SOCIETY

Society exists through the communication of significant symbols. People create their social reality which is as real as the natural physical reality. In primary socialization the individual becomes a member of society through the mediation of the objective world by significant others, for example parents. Through this mediation, the world which has been created and accepted by the section of society to which the child belongs, is internalized and becomes a meaningful and social reality. In order to exist, a society must share a common view of reality, one which has been legitimized and is passed on to their children through socialization (Berger and Luckman, 1967).

Literature reflects the significant values and norms of a culture. Although the relationship of literary patterns to the larger culture is complex and not clearly understood, it is assumed that these patterns reflect, in significant and meaningful ways, the attitudes and shared experiences in society (Albrecht, 1953). Children's literature has always been invested with strong moral and social values (McClelland, 1976) as it is an important means of socializing children to accept the dominant cultural norms and values.

Children's books reflect the society and social values of their time. The simplified manner in which children's books are written make these books a magnifying glass under which one can study the attitudes of a particular society at a particular time (Egoff, 1982; Hollindale, 1988; MacLeod 1975; Nimon 1988; O'Dell 1978). As MacLeod (1975:93) states:

*However little they may deal directly with social issues, they inevitably convey a good deal about prevailing social attitudes and problems. To be sure much of what they reveal is outside the conscious intention of their authors ... But social attitudes are so much part of the fabric of life in any era that it is impossible to exclude them from literary efforts.*

In fact, this reflection of values will often not be noticed by the reader because the world reflected in the books so closely mirrors the reader's world. This is a very powerful force in shaping behaviour as its persuasive force is hidden. By supporting tradition and inhibiting change, literature has a great potential impact on society (Sutherland, 1985).

An example of this is gender stereotyping. Until the 1960's the prevalent gender roles were accepted in society and this acceptance was reflected in children's books. Girls who did not accept the role were depicted as tomboys and this was accepted until they were of a certain age and then they were shown conforming to society's expectations. There is the example of Jo in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888). Jo's rebellion against society was accepted until she was an adult and then she is shown trying to conform to the traditional role of a woman. At no time was she encouraged to look for an alternative role to this traditional one. Since the 1960's this gender stereotyping has been questioned and many authors have made a conscious effort to reflect and promote new attitudes. Whereas previously the attitude of authors to gender stereotyping was one of acceptance, the new attitude is one of advocacy and will remain so until these new attitudes are generally accepted in society (Hoffman, 1984).

Children's literature is also used as a form of social control. Those in power select and publish works that affirm those values which they believe will result in a better society or maintain the status quo. Children's books are perceived as an important tool for controlling children's minds.

What children read is too important in its potential for society's good or ill to be made purely a matter of aesthetic considerations (Egoff, 1981). Children's books play an important role in maintaining the existing social structure by 'moulding future adults who will accept it' (Council on Interracial Books for Children 1976:2). Although books in themselves are not the cause of the ills in society, such as sexism, they help to condition people to accept the maintenance of these attitudes. They achieve this by encouraging children who read these books to think that this is the way things are.

Children's books reflect what different people at different times, who are members of various cultural groups and societies, think children ought to know and believe. They embody assumptions about the nature of childhood and the nature of the society with which the children must come to terms, particularly the beliefs and values that give meaning to experience. The values and assumptions contained in children's books will vary according to the cultural context in which they are written.

### **THE 'GOOD GIRL SYNDROME'**

The 'good girl syndrome' is an amalgam of various attitudes, norms and values which society generally attributes to a good girl and tries by various means to inculcate in young girls and women. Many of these so-called 'womanly' attributes are essential if men are to retain their dominant position in a patriarchal society. They also contrast with the values regarded as manly.

The 'good girl syndrome' focuses on the values of self-sacrifice and nurturing for a woman. If she wishes to find ultimate fulfilment, it will entail suppressing her own desires, ambitions and interests in order to nurture her husband, father, brothers and ultimately children. Her highest achievement is to care for others at whatever cost it may entail for herself personally. A woman's highest reward is to be loved and to spend her life in the service of others. The superiority of the male and the social systems that enforce these attitudes are never questioned. Aggression, individuality, and ambition are regarded as the male preserve and are not encouraged in female characters.

This character is often shown as rebelling against the patriarchal social system initially, but ultimately is made to see that the path to fulfilment as a woman entails the acceptance of her role as a nurturer. She is required to suppress her own desires and ambitions and find a 'meaningful' role within the patriarchal structures. The validity of these structures is never queried.

The essence of the 'good girl syndrome' is contained in the saying: 'Behind every successful man, is a woman'. The woman's place is behind the man not beside him, that is, she is both inferior and invisible. By suppressing herself she helps her man attain success but does not share in the lime-light that the success may bring. She is happy in having helped him and does not need the glory that success will bring.

## MYTH

Barthes (1972:117–142) contends that certain signs and symbols of mass culture serve a similar function to myth in primitive culture. These portrayals serve both to justify the ways of the sociocultural system to people, and to offer plausible structures for the apprehension of everyday life. Modern 'myth' naturalizes and thereby makes acceptable whatever is historical, ideological and artificial for a populace of 'myth consumers'. The power of myth rests on the interplay of structure and message. When a message is automatically implied in its metasignification, it becomes more subtle, subliminal and ultimately more effective at glossing over an intentional concept. In today's society, there are a range of texts of popular culture – television, radio, films – which are a source for maintaining ideological control and legitimacy. Institutions sustain a selective cultural tradition which conceals the ideological character of that selectivity; they present as natural a particular way of seeing the world and human nature and relationships.

The 'good girl' is presented at the deepest structural level as a mythological character, that is, she is a cultural archetype, a comprehensive representation of certain collective properties and aspirations (Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1979). The central character is tested by a variety of obstacles and overcomes them in an almost superhuman way by suppressing her natural

impulses and desires. Although the stories deal with her trials and tribulations in everyday life, at the deepest level the message of the story is the triumph of the central character who achieves happiness and fulfilment by becoming a 'good girl'.

### ***A LITTLE PRINCESS, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST AND LITTLE WOMEN***

I have chosen to discuss *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett published in 1905, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott published in 1867 as all three have recently been filmed. They all have in common the presentation of the central female character who is tested and has to overcome obstacles, and ultimately triumphs and finds fulfilment either in marriage (Jo in *Little Women* and Beauty in *Beauty and the Beast*) or riches (Sara in *A Little Princess* and Beauty in *Beauty and the Beast*). What is of concern is that in the films, surface elements may have been changed to conform with a new awareness of feminism but the deeper, more influential structures have not been changed so that the message to girls today remains unchanged.

### ***A LITTLE PRINCESS***

The main character in *A Little Princess* is Sara Crewe, a motherless little English girl in India who has an abnormally close relationship with her father. He calls her 'little missus' and treats her as a junior wife rather than as a daughter. She and her father 'were the dearest friends and lovers in the world' (Hodgeson, 1994:237). When she is nine years old she is sent off to boarding school where her doting father ensures that she has every possible luxury. From the beginning she is depicted as a gentle, nurturing girl who befriends the little scullery maid called Becky, a younger motherless girl, called Lottie, and a plump, rather stupid girl called Ermengarde who is very unhappy. She is superior to all of these characters but cares for them almost like a little mother.

Sara, an extremely imaginative little girl, pretends to be a princess. Part way through the book, the owner of the school, Miss Minchin, is informed

that Sara's father who has invested his money in a friend's diamond mine has died, leaving Sara penniless. Miss Minchin, who is the antithesis of Sara, heartlessly informs the child that she will now have to start working for her living, and move into one of the attic rooms. The horrors of being penniless and friendless in the Victorian period are vividly presented. However, Sara in spite of this tries to remain a true 'princess' and uses this as an imaginative refuge from her hardships as well as to help her always to behave as a princess. 'Whatever comes', she said, 'cannot alter one thing. If I am a princess in rags and tatters, I can be a princess inside. It would be easy to be a princess if I were dressed in cloth of gold, but it is a great deal more of a triumph to be one all the time when no one knows it' (Burnett, 1994:145). She bears hardship with stoic courage. Her poverty is alleviated by Ram Das, the male Indian servant of her father's friend. They live next door to Miss Minchin's school and Ram Das observes Sara's misery. In order to give his employer, who is ill, something to distract him they take various comforts to Sara's little attic room.

Her father's friend who has been gravely ill recovers both his health and money, and tracks Sara down. Sara is rewarded for her saintly good behaviour by being once again fabulously wealthy and the centre of attention. Miss Minchin is suitably punished by losing her star pupil and having her 'crimes' made known to other parents.

The story has the format of a fairy tale in which the main character is tested through hardship and is rewarded in the end. However, unlike male characters who overcome hardship through action and initiative, the female character overcomes hardship through endurance and courage in the face of adversity. She is ultimately rewarded with riches and a strong male protector who is happy to grant her every wish.

Miss Minchin, the only woman in the book with any real power, is portrayed as heartless and mercenary. The other women in the story who were kinder and more sympathetic to Sara's dilemma do not have the influence or resources to help her.

Sara is firstly given status by her father who is very wealthy. When he dies she has no male protector and loses her status. Sara has no control over events but is presented as a victim who is ultimately 'saved' by men. Even

charity offered to her in the form of sixpence is offered by a little boy. She ultimately has her status restored through her father's friend. The men in the story are shown to largely control the power and money and Sara is validated through them.

### ***A LITTLE PRINCESS: THE FILM***

The film of *A Little Princess* was released in 1996 by Time Warner Communications. This was a very loose adaptation. The film is set in New York and the historical period has been changed to that of the First World War. Sara's ability to fantasize (one of her strongest characteristics in the book) is largely watered down in the film. Her fantasy that she is a little princess is made that of her father who says 'all little girls are princesses'. This diminishes the meaning as in the book being a princess is used by Sara as a means of controlling her behaviour and ensuring that she always behaves like a princess. The film also changes the character of the little scullery maid to that of being a coloured girl, which gives the film racial overtones. The implication is that the child is treated poorly because of her colour and of course Sara rises above this petty racism. The stories which Sara is so good at creating are also turned into Indian stories with a strong romantic overtone, which gives the film a multicultural character not present in the book. Many of these aspects are an anachronism as the attitudes are out of keeping with the period being portrayed. The father in the film is not killed but suffers from amnesia and for some unexplained reason the English Government seizes his estate leaving Sara penniless. The gentleman living next door takes pity on the father and brings him to his house where he miraculously recovers his memory and recognizes Sara. He regains his estate and Sara and the coloured scullery maid become best friends and go home to England with him.

Miss Minchin somehow loses all her money as well as the school and becomes the assistant of a chimney sweep. Sara also encourages Amelia Minchin to run away and marry the milkman, a meaningless addition to the story.

The character of Sara is also changed. In the book Sara is a fanciful, almost perfect, motherly little girl whereas in the film she is a rather forceful and

independent American girl who never hesitates to assert herself and exemplifies the self-sufficiency and self-assurance admired by Americans. The imaginative magic which sustains her through the Victorian horrors of poverty is not present in the film, nor are the horrors of Sara's virtual starvation and cold convincingly depicted. Sara remains a healthy and glowing child right through the entire period of hardship. Her relationship with her father is also changed to a normal 20th century loving relationship.

The film is now politically correct: multi-racial and multi-cultural, with the main character a female. In the film although much changed Sara is still the 'good girl' but this time the good American girl. She is politically correct, assertive and independent. Although on the surface it appears that many of the paternalistic elements of the book have been changed these changes are very superficial. The underlying structure still reflects many chauvinistic and paternalistic elements. Women are represented as victims of circumstances who need to be rescued and validated by a man. Sara is again rescued by the male servant and the man next door and of course ultimately by her father. The coloured scullery maid is likewise rescued. Miss Minchin is now shown in the service of the little chimney sweep – a male of course who orders her around autocratically. Amelia, Miss Minchin's sister, is rescued by marrying the milkman and running away with him. The school is ultimately purchased by the next door neighbour so viewers are assured that the girls are now in good male hands. Even the stories which Sara makes up all now have a romantic theme – similar to Mills and Boon – whereby love triumphs over all and the woman is saved by the man.

Miss Minchin, the only female character with any power, is ultimately defeated and demeaned.

### **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST**

The story of *Beauty and the Beast* (Perrault and D'Aulnoy, 1991) is a classic fairy tale and contains elements common to many fairy stories: the mysterious lover, jealous sisters, and an enchanted castle where every wish is gratified. It is also a stereotypical love story in which a beautiful,

good young girl is sacrificed to save her father but finds love (and incidentally riches) in the end.

Fairy tales initially reflected lived experience, with a slant towards the tribulations of women, especially young women of marriageable age (Warner, 1995: xix). At the period (1756) when this story was first written by Beaumont many women were totally powerless and could be married off to strangers at a very young age. Stories of the 'Beauty and the Beast' type feature a husband to whom a young woman has been sacrificed at her father's wish (Warner, 1995:219). The story of Beauty and the Beast assumed a female audience who expected to be given away by their fathers to men who might strike them as monsters (ibid.:278). The story holds out the hope that although the bridegroom may appear to be a beast, underneath he may be a prince. At its heart is the issue of the character and purpose of marriage.

The version of *Beauty and the Beast* that I have used is that of Perrault and D'Aulnoy (1991) which is virtually identical to that of Beaumont. In the story a wealthy merchant loses all his money and is forced to go and live in the country with his six children. Beauty, the youngest daughter, 'was not only prettier than her sisters but very much nicer' (Perrault and D'Aulnoy, 1991:95). One of the merchant's ships comes in and he goes to meet it. On his way back he gets lost and he wanders into the Beast's castle where he finds food and shelter. The next day as he is about to leave he picks a rose which is all Beauty has asked him to bring back from his travels, in contrast to her sisters who have asked for jewels and clothes. This angers the Beast who tells him he must now die. The Beast allows him to return to say goodbye to his family and tells him that his life will be spared if one of his daughter's will give up her life instead. Beauty insists on going in his place. She has a dream in which she is told by a beautiful fairy: 'You have performed an act of goodness which will not go unrewarded' (Perrault and D'Aulnoy, 1991:108). She is treated kindly by the Beast and finally recognizes his worth behind his ugly appearance. She decides to accept the Beast's proposal of marriage as 'he is good and that makes up for all the rest' (Perrault and D'Aulnoy, 1991:109). She finds that he is an enchanted prince and is thus rewarded for her selflessness.

*Beauty and the Beast* is a tale of transformation in which the male lover

(the beast) is transformed from a mysterious and threatening figure who controls Beauty's fate, to her lover. There are many versions of Beauty and the Beast. In some versions the transformation in the beast is the result of Beauty's influence and goodness whilst in others Beauty recognizes the prince in the guise of a beast. If Beauty recognizes his goodness then she is the one who in fact changes, whereas if he is transformed by her beauty and goodness then she has influenced and redeemed him (Warner, 1995:290–94). Beauty's attraction to the beast before his transformation forms the basis of much pornography featuring rape and sadism (Warner, 1995:311) as this attraction implies that women love the bestial and violent side of man. This myth is still popular today.

Even though the story no longer reflects many women's experiences it has retained its power over the female imagination. *Beauty and the Beast*, like other fairy tales such as *Cinderella*, seems to have a timeless power to speak to women. This can be seen from the number of versions both in print and in other media that have been published. Hearne (1989:90) states that entries in the standard Library of Congress computerized holdings printout at that time were more than seven feet long. The myth of the central transformation of a powerful and bestial man lies at the heart of many romances. In this myth, woman has power through her submissiveness to the male authority figures (her father and the beast who becomes her husband). He is tamed by her beauty, kindness and self-sacrifice – qualities highly valued and endorsed in a patriarchal society. Whereas when this story was originally developed it had its roots in reality, today it is rooted and made acceptable to modern woman through appealing to a more deeply hidden reality. Woman, especially young girls, are still frequently socialized to believe that happiness will be found in the arms of a strong and dominating man.

### **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: THE FILM**

The film *Beauty and the Beast* was released by Walt Disney Productions in 1991 and is based on the fairy story of the same name. This film is more insidious than the film of *A Little Princess* as it purports to depict a liberated woman, namely Belle, and makes fun of male stereotypes in the form of Gaston.

Belle at the beginning of the film sings a song about the provincialness of the town and that she wants someone to rescue her. From the beginning it follows the same standard formula: she wants a male to free her, 'to take her away so she can submit to his desires, which she believes to be hers' (Zipes, 1994:46). Belle is exquisitely beautiful, feisty, and is not afraid to speak her mind. She also enjoys reading, which makes her an anomaly in the provincial village where she lives. However the books she reads are all romances and fairy tales, a fact which reflects a patronizing view of women. They may be fond of books but they are not intellectual. (Of course one must also take into account that the film is aimed at children who would be able to identify this type of book.) Belle's father is shorter than she is and presented as an unworldly and helpless inventor. He is almost childlike and Belle nurtures and mothers him.

Gaston, the male hero of the bumbling villagers, wishes to marry Belle. He epitomizes all the macho male stereotypes – he is stupid, handsome, athletic, a good hunter, and pursued by three blonde Barbie doll-type women who all swoon at the sight of him. His disrespect for books (and learning) is shown by his putting his dirty boots on Belle's book. In case one misses the point that he is a chauvinist pig he falls into a pond and reappears with a pig on his head. He proposes to Belle who of course refuses him.

Similarly to the book, the father is lost and his life threatened by the beast. Belle is called on to sacrifice herself for her father and for the salvation of the Beast. The Beast is the counterpart to the evil violent male Gaston. Although uncivilized he has an erotic power. Everything about him is big and powerful – his voice thunders, his anger roars and he fills the large area of his kingdom. His obvious power and strength are emphasized by Belle's delicate structure, her wisp of a waist, et cetera. He is made lovable rather than ferocious. In fact Gaston is the brutish male who gets his just deserts.

The Beast is tamed by the love and example of Belle. He makes the ultimate sacrifice of letting Belle go to see her father who is pining for her although this will probably mean his death. Belle is once more caught up in Gaston's scheming when he tries to persuade her to marry him by having her father put in a lunatic asylum. Finally Gaston leads the town people

in a war against the Beast in order to win Belle. The Beast wins, saving Belle from Gaston's clutches. He turns back into the prince and they marry. This is another cliché – men going to war because of a woman.

This film addresses stereotypes on a superficial level but not at the deeper level. Belle is a nurturer and her sacrifice is rewarded by marriage to the prince. She moves from the provincial village to the castle in the conventionally upwardly mobile style of the twentieth century fairy tale. The Beast is a more subtle stereotype – powerful and rich – who wins Beauty in the end after having been tamed by her.

*Beauty and the Beast* in the Disney film production maintains the mythic-ideological notion of patriarchal rule. As a commodity produced for global consumption, not only in the form of a film but in the form of consumable spinoffs, it induces us to think according to the traditional scripts of submission and domination. This script may appear to subvert the traditional fairy tale but at the deepest level it is about the taming of women (Zipes, 1994:47). The film above all has domesticated feminism itself (Warner, 1995:312).

## **LITTLE WOMEN**

The book *Little Women* was written by Louisa May Alcott in 1886. It is an interesting book. It is the story of four girls, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy, whose father is away at war. Their mother, called Marmee, is a strong women who encourages the girls to be independent and use their talents. The two older girls at the respective ages of 16 and 15 are already earning their living as a governess and companion respectively. Although this is partially necessary due to their reduced circumstances, the father having lost their money some time back, earning their own living and being independent is advocated by their mother. Jo has a talent for writing and is encouraged to nurture and use her talent.

The book is episodic in character but has a unifying theme in the quest of each sister to overcome her 'burden' in life and become a 'little woman'. Meg's besetting sin is vanity and she must learn to devote herself to her family and not wish for fine things. Jo is an adventurous and high-spirited

girl whose burden is her boyish nature and violent temper. In the course of the book she learns to control her temper, to reconcile herself to being a woman and learn the domesticity, poise and grace of a 'little woman'. Beth's faults are minimal and she is in fact almost the perfect 'little woman' from the beginning. She is shy and learns partly to overcome this fault by the time she dies. Amy the youngest is spoiled and indulged and vain about her looks. She must overcome her thoughtlessness and learn to help others (MacDonald, 1983:13).

The book is a story of the four girls growing up in a close loving family, and ends when they marry (except for Beth, who dies). The book endorses strong domestic values and the primacy of home and family are emphasized. Louisa Alcott was not a feminist. She thought that women were the primary domestic influence, the peacemakers who held families together and kept men on the right path (Avery, 1994:171). The girls are constantly encouraged to be 'little women' – to be patient, loving, and self-sacrificing. This is epitomized by gentle Beth who is always thinking of others and finds happiness not in adventurous games or going beyond the home but in mothering her dolls and cats. Her self-sacrifice and generosity towards the Hummels, an indigent German family, results in her catching scarlet fever which ultimately leads to her death. But she accepts her fate patiently and bravely, thinking of others to the end. Beth is too saintly to be real but is used as an inspiration and lesson to the other characters who are more demanding and selfish. She exemplifies the myth of the 'good girl syndrome'

Amy, the youngest, states that she will marry a wealthy man as she realizes that this is her only hope of escaping poverty. Although at the end she purports to marry Laurie, the wealthy boy next door, for love, their romance is never totally convincing. Amy also embodies many of the characteristics of the 'ideal woman'. She is a lady (unlike Jo) and always behaves and looks like one. She is caring and thoughtful and at times almost as saintly as Beth. When slighted by some wealthier girls at a fair she repays their insults by kindness and generosity. She is rewarded for this with a trip to Europe. Jo's self-reliance results in her losing her chance to go to Europe whereas Amy is given the opportunity in her place. Jo, when mourning the fact that Amy is to go to Europe instead of her, is told by her mother: 'I'm afraid it is partly your own fault, dear. When Aunt

spoke to me the other day, she regretted your blunt manners and too independent spirit' (Alcott 1983:290).

Meg too is very womanly and finds her ultimate fulfilment in marriage. Jo who is initially against marriage 'discovers how much improved her sister Meg was, how well she could talk, how much she knew about good womanly impulses, thoughts and feelings, how happy she was in husband and children ...' (Alcott, 1983:406).

Jo is the most interesting character. She is initially a tomboy and does not conform. She is a talented writer and an independent spirit who says what she thinks, which frequently gets her into trouble. She is great friends with Laurie, the boy next door, but refuses to marry him. Although she gives a number of reasons for refusing him, none of them are really convincing as their relationship is so vibrant and intimate that one expects them to marry. Jo however, cannot marry him as the good girl myth requires a woman to marry someone who can be her mentor and Laurie and Jo are equals. She refuses him and ultimately marries Friedrich Bhaer – a German professor. Bhaer's intellectual superiority is clearly established as well as his moral fibre.

In spite of the independence of the girls, the social structures which dictate their dependence are never seriously challenged. The emphasis throughout the book is on the importance of marriage if a woman is to achieve ultimate fulfilment. As Meg says to Jo, 'Marriage is needed to bring out the tender womanly half of your nature' (Alcott, 1983:406). The lack of real options for women is also never questioned. In spite of being talented, Jo needs a man to help her fulfil herself as a woman and her writing talents are put aside to run a boy's school where Friedrich Bhaer can look after their minds and spiritual well-being while Jo looks after their physical well-being. It reflects the reality of girls having to give up their dreams for 'worthy but subduing marriage' (Auerbach, 1983:466). It is interesting that Louisa May Alcott was forced by commercial pressures to end the book conventionally with the girls getting married (Auerbach, 1983:467).

### **LITTLE WOMEN: THE FILM**

The film of *Little Women* was made by Columbia Pictures Industries Inc. in

1994. The film does address many of the stereotypes of women especially through the character of Marmee. Whereas in the book Marmee's character is used to teach the girls how to be 'little women', in the film she questions assumptions and encourages them to explore alternatives. For example when the girls question Marmee as to why Laurie is able to 'do as he likes and no-one thinks the less of him', Marmee replies: 'For one practical reason: Laurie is a man – he can vote and hold property and pursue any profession he chooses so he is not so easily demeaned'.

She also tells Meg who has dressed up at Sally Gardner's coming out party that: 'If you feel your value lies in being merely decorative, I fear that someday you might find yourself believing that's all you really are.'

She tells Jo when Jo is feeling depressed after Amy leaves for Europe, 'You have so many extraordinary gifts. How can you expect to lead an ordinary life? Go and embrace your liberty and find a good use for your talent'.

The extraordinary bond between the four sisters is also beautifully depicted, showing that women can give each other strength and support. However when Amy asks Jo if she is upset about her marrying Laurie, she says: 'Jo you must tell me the truth as a sister which is a relation stronger than marriage'. This overstatement is not corroborated through the action of the film.

However, on a deeper level the film still endorses marriage as the ultimate aim for women. Amy, who at the beginning of the film states that she will never marry a poor man ends up by marrying Laurie. Her interpretation of the social reality that this is ultimately the only way that a woman can escape poverty, is endorsed at the deepest level. Laurie is after all the prize catch. Although Jo's independence is emphasized – her writing, and her leaving home to earn her keep are positive elements – these are counterbalanced by choosing the beautiful actress Winona Ryder to play plain Jo. It makes nonsense of her statement that she cannot marry Laurie because he needs someone beautiful and fashionable as a wife.

Laurie marries Amy with whom he has a protective relationship, as exemplified when he takes her to Aunt March to escape the scarlet fever. Jo

marries someone who can guide her, namely Professor Bhaer. His disapproval of her writing of romances and horror stories spurs her on to do something better and realize her true potential in writing the story of the March girls. Although his dominant role is weaker in the film than in the book, his superiority is clearly established in his disapproval of her first novel, in his richer book-learning, and his encouragement of Jo to express her opinion, for example when discussing women's voting rights. Although Jo's cleverness is indicated by the fact that she loves to read and writes stories this is undermined as it is always novels and romances.

The need for women to marry and have a protector is implicitly accepted in the film. No one ever questions the society and norms that offers no help to someone helpless, such as Mrs Hummel.

## CONCLUSION

The books which were written in previous centuries reflect attitudes and values that were common for those times. However, these books have been almost continuously in print since their first publication and are still read by many girls today. It is also a matter of concern that the films, which were all made in the last five years, still reflect and endorse chauvinist and paternalistic attitudes at a deeper level. In analysing these films it is important to understand the workings of mainstream popular culture. All these films were made in America by major studios. In the early 1980's a backlash against women's rights occurred in America and continued for the rest of the decade. Women's entries into higher paying jobs stalled, the number of women in appointed and political positions declined, the status of low-income women plunged drastically, child support from divorced husbands went down by 25 percent, the number of women seeking refuge in domestic shelters rose 100 percent and since the 70's, reported rapes virtually doubled and sex-related murders rose by 160 percent (D'Acci, 1994:154-155). Looking at the situation in South Africa, where child abuse, wife battering and rape seem to have become a national pastime, there can be no question of the seriousness of the problem here.

Media, particularly popular mass cultural media such as films and television

programs, need to critique structurally inequitable social and economic positions and not reinforce them by presenting them as an unalterable fact of life. This is essential if we are to empower young women to take their rightful place in life as equal partners with men. It is perhaps unfair to criticize these films for not achieving something that they did not set out to do. They are not feminist texts and did not set out to present a feminist position. However, they are texts presented for the mass consumption of young and impressionable children and will play a role in forming the attitudes and expectations of the world. They reflect and support many of the attitudes and values that sustain a patriarchal society. Woman's issues, such as male domination and control, are domesticated even though they are the result of social institutions. The rightness of these institutions is not brought into question. In fact the social structures and woman's inferior position in them are constantly reinforced through the subtext (D'Acci, 1994: 142–167). The necessity for a woman to be validated by a male is endorsed in all three films, either through marriage (*Little Women*, *Beauty and the Beast*) or having a male as a protector (*A Little Princess*). Marriage or love providing the ultimate fulfilment for a woman is also part of the subtext. Even in the relatively feminist movie of *Little Women*, Jo is never allowed seriously to consider alternatives. She needs to be domesticated, to give up her writing and become a wife and school teacher. The films also endorse a male perception of the importance of looks – all the female stars are beautiful, even Jo who in the book is plain, is portrayed by Winona Ryder, one of the most attractive box office stars at present.

Although the women in the films are all either interested in reading (Jo and Beauty) or creating stories (Sara and Jo) this talent is belittled in terms of the books they read or stories they write. They read romances and create romantic and sentimental stories. Women are obviously not allowed to be intellectual – another stereotype reinforced by these films.

As women we need to be concerned about these films and what they are saying to our daughters and sons. They are giving them a message about how the world is – what attitudes, aims and ambitions, and values they should have. They are saying to girls it is alright to be independent so long as you remember that you need to be appealing to men so you can be fulfilled through love and marriage. Marmee tells Meg in the film that looks aren't important, but the images contradict this – even a supposedly plain

character such as Jo in *Little Women* has to be played by a 'drop-dead gorgeous' star. The women are told that they should have a career but the film shows clearly that their real career will be marriage and nurturing and caring for. Finally the real message they convey is that power is in men's hands and the only way you can really win is to play their game – tame a rich and powerful man or marry money.

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This book explores the impact of patriarchy on women in past and present societies, and it specifically addresses the tenacity of patriarchal systems of thinking and behaviour. While paying close attention to cultural diversity among women, it aims at stressing the usefulness of tracing common patterns. The reader will perhaps be surprised to discover that there are many similarities between the way in which women are represented in the accounts of ancient historians and the stereotypical perceptions of women in the modern world of advertising. Each in their own way, the authors expose and attack a long history of stereotyping of women, from the ancient world through to contemporary South Africa. The distant perspective enables us to recognize the artificiality of such male constructions in a detached and fruitful way. The chapters in this book show in clear outlines that it does matter who is writing the histories and that an awareness of male-centred views of history (in books or in the schools) is of essential importance in formulating a correct understanding of the past. The positive message is that women can develop strategies of resistance. This can range from the rewriting of (male authored) dramatic scripts to songs of protest which are owned by the entire female community rather than by a particular individual.

This volume covers a wide spectrum of topics, including women in pagan and Christian Antiquity, the representation of women in literature and in advertising, the economic role of black women in rural South Africa, religious 'piety books' written by women enjoining submissiveness to male authority, the role of women in labour unions and in hospitals, and how women are achieving self-upliftment in the face of numerous obstacles. The diversity of topics provides eloquent testimony to what women's studies have to offer for the re-strategising of gender roles in the new South Africa.



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