Discussion Questions

By Lyde Cullen Sizer (Sarah Lawrence, History)

1. The first volume of Alcott’s best-selling novel was published three years after the Civil War ended, and was set during that time. What can we learn – if anything – about Alcott’s perspective on the home front and the War itself?

2. This is a domestic novel, exploring the time between childhood and adulthood, specifically for young women. What is Alcott suggesting about womanhood itself, and the process of becoming a woman? What are the most important character traits for an ideal “little woman”?

3. Given the separate spheres* ideology of the time, the central character here – Jo – is a bit of a rebel. Is this a rebellious book? What is Alcott saying – subtly and not so subtly – about that convention?

4. Louisa May Alcott’s perception of the novel – that it was “dull” – was not that of her audience (young women), who loved it. For money, Alcott (like Jo) wrote sensationalist short stories at the same time that she wrote this novel. What do you believe that Alcott is saying, here, about writing, especially about writing for women? What should it do? What should it not do?

5. The second half of Little Women was originally titled Good Wives. What – does it suggest – does it mean to be a “good wife”? What are the roles that wife and husband play in each couple (including “Marmee” or Margaret March and Robert March)?

*Separate spheres ideology, which dominated 19th century culture, was based on the presumption of “natural” differences between men and women. Men (ostensibly) were physically stronger, inured to the harsh back-and-forth of public life; women (ostensibly) were morally stronger, best suited for creating a haven in the home for children and husband to regroup. Public life would coarsen women; domestic life would emasculate men.

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