

# Beyond The Bustle: Fashion As A Vehicle For Female Empowerment In Louisa May Alcott's "An Old-Fashioned Girl"

KANIMOZHI. K<sup>1</sup>, Dr. A. SELVARAJ<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English Annamalai  
University.

<sup>2</sup>Professor Department of English, Annamalai University.

## Abstract

Fashion emerges as a powerful metaphor in Louisa May Alcott's *An Old-Fashioned Girl* to represent the intricate interaction between social expectations and individual autonomy for women in Victorian America. Within the framework of Alcott's story, this study explored the role of dress in empowering women. During the Victorian period, there were significant changes in societal standards and gender roles due to events such as the American Civil War, the Second Industrial Revolution, and the Women's Suffrage Movement. This article examines how clothing choices in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott convey and challenge the dominant ideals of virtue and femininity through a study of her depiction of fashion. Polly Milton, the heroine of *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, experiences the sartorial environment of her era via the power of clothing to express who she is and what she stands for. As women's duties grew outside their homes, clothing became a means of expressing and navigating these changes. This dissertation delves into the intricate connection between clothing, Victorian-era social norms, and women's empowerment by exploring how Polly's wardrobe choices align with her journey towards self-determination and personal development. In the end, *An Old-Fashioned Girl* provides a fascinating perspective from which to examine how femininity changes over time, and how dress remains a cultural and political touchstone.

**Keywords:** Fashion, Female Empowerment, Gender Roles, Societal Expectations, Individual Agency, Women's Suffrage Movement, Civil War, Cultural Significance.

## Introduction

A fascinating look at femininity in the middle of the turbulent social and political climate of the Victorian period, "An Old-Fashioned Girl" by Louisa May Alcott (Alcott, 1869) is a must-read for any fan of Victorian literature. In a story that takes place during the American Civil War, the Second Industrial Revolution, and the Women's Suffrage Movement, Alcott painstakingly analyzed the nuances of gender roles and social expectations (Alcott, 1869).

The topic of fashion is at the heart of this analysis because it is both a symbol of social rank and a potent tool for women's emancipation (Alcott 1869).

Many major historical and cultural changes occurred during the Victorian period, which began in the early 1800s and continued until the 1900s (Cohen 2014). The time was characterized by fast industrialization, urbanization, and technological developments, which caused society to undergo major changes (Cohen, 2014).

As more people entered the middle class and could afford to dress to show off their social standing, the fashion industry flourished (Laver 1969). At the same time, the Women's Suffrage Movement fought for women's equality and autonomy in the workplace and politics (Flexner, 1959).

According to Reisen (2009), Louisa May Alcott rose to prominence in this context, providing insightful portrayals of women in Victorian America. The literary works of Louisa May Alcott, who was born in 1832, show a heightened awareness of women's plights and ambitions, shaped by the social and political currents of her day (Reisen, 2009).

"At the heart of Alcott's narrative lies the motif of fashion, which emerges as a central theme throughout the novel" (Alcott, ed. By describing clothes in great detail and paying close attention to them, Alcott emphasizes how clothing reflects one's identity and societal expectations (Alcott, 1869). By analyzing Polly's clothing choices, we may better understand the changing roles of women in Victorian society and the conflicts between tradition and modernity (Alcott, 1869).

## **Discussion**

### **Echoes of Tradition in a Changing World**

The contrast between rustic simplicity and urban luxury is central to Louisa May Alcott's "An Old-Fashioned Girl," as the traditionally dressed Polly travels from the countryside to a busy city. The Shaw family, the embodiment of metropolitan

refinement, sets the stage for Polly to critically examine her views on style, etiquette, and social standards.

Entering Shaw's home, Polly finds herself in a very different world than her own. Mr. Shaw, a frantic businessman, personifies the fast-paced nature of city life, while Mrs. Shaw, shown as pale and anxious, alludes to the stresses and worries that accompany city life. Fanny and Maud, their daughters, are the quintessential examples of the stylish elite; they both attended exclusive institutions that emphasized foreign languages rather than the more conventional English curriculum.

The Shaw family is quite contemporary, in sharp contrast to Grandma, who vestiges more traditional ideals and practices. Grandma, confined to her chamber with her ancient possessions, represents a time when domestic success and reverence for elders were more valued. At dinner, Polly and Grandma have exchanges that exemplify the generational divide between traditional and modern values. Grandma compliments Polly on her musical abilities and polite manners, which the Shaw sisters find strange.

Polly's first outings in city life are to the theatre, the pinnacle of chic Victorian amusement. As Polly observes in the stage performances, her initial fascination with the spectacle soon fades due to the pompous and crude content. Feeling out of place and discouraged, she compares city life's excesses to the refined rural upbringing.

Grandma consoles Polly in the moment of contemplation, seeing the conflict between traditional ideals and contemporary fashion. What she said, 'I think you are right, my dear, but you have lived in the country, and have not yet learnt that modesty has gone out of fashion' (AFOG 14), encapsulates the tension between Polly's rural upbringing and the evolving standards of urban society.

At these crossroads, Polly's path takes a dramatic turn, forcing her to balance her love of tradition with the reality of contemporary life. By placing readers in Polly's shoes, Alcott encourages them to contemplate the ever-evolving Victorian era and how ideas of propriety, respect, and modesty were continuously rethought in response to cultural changes and social demands.

Through Polly's journey through city life, we can see larger themes of self-discovery, community, and social transformation. Polly confronts issues of genuineness, conformity, and personal agency through her interactions with Grandma and the Shaw family; she finds resilience in her

unwavering commitment to traditional values in the face of a constantly changing world.

Within Fanny Shaw's chaotic universe, Polly's encounter with the "New Fashions" prompts self-reflection, shedding light on the obvious differences between the city elite's lavish but meaningless existence and her own humble but significant rural background. In sharp contrast to the purity and friendship of her siblings at home, Polly observes flirtations among teenagers as she walks through the corridors of Fanny's School. Going to a trendy ice cream parlour and brazenly flaunting your money and position is just one more way city life is shallow and promotes materialism above real relationships.

After leaving the comfort and familiarity of her childhood home, Polly finds herself lost in a world of "fashionable" clothing and frivolity, where outward appearances are more important than inner strength. In her childhood, the pride Polly attributes to her mother's lessons in excellent manners and behavior persists even when she considers the temptations of city life. Despite growing up in the Shaw family's "fashionable" milieu, Polly's recollections of her mother's teachings shine a light on the significance of honesty, decency, and family ties.

Polly takes comfort in the genuine and unpretentious values she learned as a child, where respect for one's elders and siblings is paramount, even as she struggles with the temptations of city life. The Shaw family prioritizes social prestige and climbs the social ladder above real relationships. Polly's "old-fashioned" ideals are in sharp contrast to the city's ubiquitous pretence and superficiality.

Polly does not give in to the empty glitz and glitter of the metropolitan elite, regardless of how much they entice her with their new French designs and trends. On the contrary, she finds contentment in the anti-trend delights of nature appreciation and simple pleasures, embracing the connections of the family that shape her life.

Grandma sees Polly's "old-fashioned" ways and gives her the benefit of the doubt when she celebrates Polly's youth, health, intellect, and humility as real fashion accessories—virtues that endure well beyond the fads of Victorian society. Grandma is a guiding light of truth and wisdom in Polly's life, showing her the importance of real connection, honesty, and simplicity in a world where everything is about show and no substance.

As Polly makes her way through the maze of city life, her story delves into important themes, such as identity,

belonging, and the age-old conflict between modernity and tradition. In a world where illusion and hollow glitz are all too common, Louisa M. Alcott uses her story to encourage readers to consider the lasting impact of being true to themselves, being honest, and loving one another.

### **Polly's Journey into Adulthood**

Fashion plays a significant role in Louisa May Alcott's "An Old-Fashioned Girl," influencing and testing Polly as she matures. Polly returns to the city six years after her first venture as a music teacher, carrying the lessons she learned while living in poverty for twenty years. Polly is living outside of society, in a rundown rented home, to pay for her brother's college tuition, even though she has just discovered peace and pleasure.

Working as a music instructor in a culture that often disregards women's achievements is a tough nut for Polly. As Polly's social status declines, we see how prejudice and sexism still exist, even in a democratic country like ours, and how women still face enormous challenges in achieving equality.

A sharp contrast to Polly's former privileged life is her presence at the "Swing Circle" conference, where women fight for equality and empowerment. Here, Polly meets the rich, "fashionable" women whose myopic views and shallowness highlight the hollowness of social norms and expectations. After seeing the "Sewing Circle" meeting for what it is—a ridiculous gathering that reveals the elite society's shallow values—Polly thinks about how important it is to have a purpose and principles to live by.

The genuine Polly comes through, even though she tries hard to fit in with society's trendy ways. Fanny is deeply in love with a gentleman named Mr. Sydney, but Polly's unwavering devotion to her ideas and ideals causes her to reject his marriage proposal. Instead of giving in to the pressure to conform, Polly stays true to herself and her principles, avoiding the trap of sacrificing who she is to fit in.

Polly becomes an inspiration for Fanny and everyone she meets because of her unwavering determination and strength. Tom, who at first ignores practical females in favour of trendier friends, eventually grows to admire Polly for her honesty, wisdom, and respect as a woman. Realizing the importance of traits that last beyond fads, he suddenly realized the foolishness of society's superficial standards.

As Tom aptly remarks, "Young men often laugh at the sensible girls whom they secretly respect, and affect to admire the silly ones whom they secretly despise, because

earnestness, intelligence and womanly dignity are not the fashion" (AFOG 89). Remaining loyal to one's convictions and ideals, rather than submitting to society's expectations, is the essence of Polly's journey, as summed up in this quote.

Authenticity, honesty, and self-respect are crucial in negotiating the intricacies of adulthood, as Polly's path reminds us powerfully. Encouraging those who read it, she defies societal norms and sticks steadfastly to her ideals, shining a light on the need for self-reflection in a world with superficiality and false glitter rule.

As Polly discovers contentment and joy in being herself and standing firm in the face of social pressures, it is her resiliency and character that ultimately bring her victory. Louisa May Alcott teaches readers a lesson that will never be out of date: the importance of being true to oneself, having integrity, and respecting one's dignity as one grows.

### **Conclusion**

The dress topic in "An Old-Fashioned Girl" by Louisa May Alcott shows Polly's path to maturity and the obstacles she faces along the way. The temptation to adapt to conventional norms and standards is strong, but Polly will not budge her dedication to honesty, integrity, and self-respect. As Polly faces the challenges of city life, she becomes an inspiration for courage and perseverance, and she makes readers question their own goals and values in a world with superficiality and empty glitter rule.

Polly is loyal to herself and refuses to compromise her principles to fit in, even as she faces the difficulties of making a livelihood and overcoming prejudice in society. Her defiance of societal trends is an inspiring example of the value of being loyal to one's beliefs and ideals, no matter how difficult the circumstances are.

Polly encourages everyone she meets to be authentic and strong in their beliefs, as she becomes an inspiration to Fanny and everyone else she meets throughout her path. Sincerity, intellect, and feminine dignity are traits that endure, not fad, as Tom astutely points out.

As Polly discovers contentment and joy in being herself and standing firm in the face of social pressures, it is her resiliency and character that ultimately brings her victory. Louisa May Alcott teaches readers a lesson that will never be out of date: the importance of being true to oneself, having integrity, and respecting one's dignity as one grows.

## References

- Abrams, M.H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Macmillan Publishers India Ltd.: U.P, 2013. Print.
- Alcott, Louisa May. *An Old-Fashioned Girl*. Roberts Brothers, 1869.
- Cohen, Michelle. *Fashion in the Victorian Era*. Greenwood, 2014.
- Flexner, Eleanor. *Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States*. Belknap Press, 1959.
- Laver, James. *The Concise History of Costume and Fashion*. Harry N. Abrams, 1969.
- Reisen, Harriet. *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*. Henry Holt and Co., 2009.