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Buttons Like Berries

Needlework as Practical and Moral Education in Louisa May Alcott's Jack and Jill

LISA-ANNE BAUCH

Author, abolitionist, and feminist: Louisa May Alcott in an image taken when she was in her twenties
All photos used by permission of Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, courtesy of Jan Turnquist, unless otherwise noted

Now they were completing new dressing sacks, and had enjoyed this job very much, as each chose her own material, and suited her own taste in the making. Jill's was white, with tiny scarlet leaves all over it, trimmed with red braid and buttons so like checkerberries she was tempted to eat them. Molly's was gay, with bouquets of every sort of flower, scalloped all round, and adorned with six buttons, each of a different color, which she thought the last touch of elegance. Merry's, though the simplest, was the daintiest of the three, being pale blue, trimmed with delicate edging, and beautifully made. (From Jack and Jill: A Village Story*)*

Following the international success of *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott continued to write books for children, including my childhood favorite *Jack and Jill: A Village Story*, published in 1880. The book takes place in a quaint Vermont town and begins with a sledding accident in which sweethearts Jack Minot and Jane "Jill" Pecq are injured. The story follows their recovery, accompanied by their friends. As in *Little Women*, the young characters grow and develop, guided by wiser adults through the storms and scrapes of adolescence.

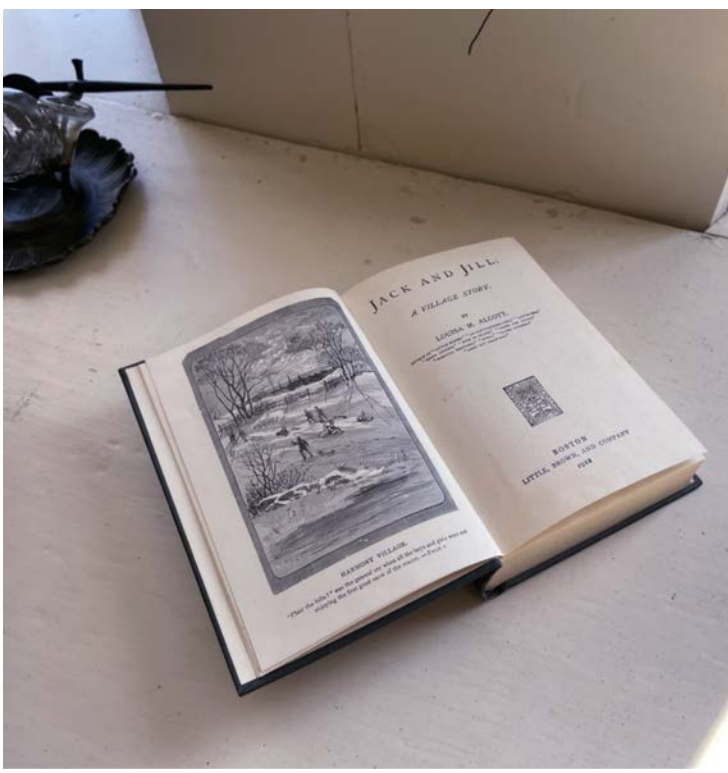
Alcott was skilled with her needle as well as her pen, and needlework of all kinds can be found in her writing—the most famous example being the March sisters knitting socks for soldiers in *Little Women*. But needlework education plays a particularly important role in *Jack and Jill* by setting the scene, advancing the plot, providing telling details, and outlining a moral arc for each female character.

Needlework in New England

With the rise of the middle class, the distinction between plain and "fancywork" grew. Middle-class women could hire domestic servants to do mundane tasks such as sewing, knitting, and darning. To have the leisure time and skill to pursue fancywork, such as lacemaking or beadwork, was a sign of wealth and social stature.

Working with more expensive materials was also a mark of distinction, although the Alcotts, being staunch abolitionists, boycotted cotton as the product of slave labor. The Nonotuck Silk Company of Florence, Massachusetts, urged customers "to carry Florence Knitting Silk to the summer resorts, there to be knit into stockings, while the knitter chats with friends on the hotel veranda."[1]

For working-class girls and women, mastering needlework skills had an economic advantage, allowing them to hire out as domestics or to earn extra money through piecework. In an era with no formal social safety net, disabled women made silk flowers or beaded purses to sell. They found a ready market in the charity fairs and fundraisers put on by women's groups as they banded together to address social issues such as temperance and women's suffrage.



This antique copy of *Jack and Jill* is pictured on the desk that Amos Bronson Alcott made for his daughter Louisa.

Louisa May Alcott's workbasket contains a pincushion and a fabric sewing notions kit that is inscribed on the cover with her name in ink.

Alcott uses needlework to set the backdrop for the story by including it as part of the everyday tasks of women and girls, including Jill and her best friends. The girls do their share of household knitting, sewing, and mending and are taught that neatness and skill are signs of good character. Each girl carries a workbasket, described in details that mirror her personality.

Jill, Merry, and Molly

Alcott uses needlework to set the backdrop for the story by including it as part of the everyday tasks of women and girls, including Jill and her best friends Merry Grant and Molly Bemis. The girls do their share of household knitting, sewing, and mending and are taught that neatness and skill are signs of good character. Each girl carries a workbasket, described in details that mirror her personality. Throughout the book Jill is associated with red, reflecting her spirit and impatience, so she is given a basket cheerfully decorated with "red worsted cherries." Merry is gentle and refined and longs to escape a mundane life on the family farm, but her workbasket is always full of socks to darn, courtesy of her three older brothers. Molly, described as careless and "harum-scarum," doesn't even know the location of her workbasket when it comes time to do her mending. She finally finds it "full of nuts, and her thimble down a hole in the shed-floor, where the cats had dropped it in their play."

Needle arts mentioned in *Jack and Jill* include sewing, mending, knitting, darning, beading, netting, tatting, quilting, and paper flower making. The novel maintains the distinction between plain and fancywork. Jill's mother, a poor widow, takes in sewing to make ends meet, as did Alcott herself before her literary success. Jack's wealthy mother, Mrs. Minot, hires Mrs. Pecq as her housekeeper and moves Jill into her home to recover from her spinal injury. There, Jill learns fancywork such as tatting, beading, and making paper flowers. Jill's mother is relieved to know that if Jill does not recover, she will be able to sell her handmade items to earn a living.

Needlework also plays an important role in the novel's female friendships. Jill and her friends make gifts for one another, spend social time working on projects, teach each other techniques, and contribute their talents to village activities, including costumes for plays and pageants. When Mrs. Minot treats Jill to a trip at a seaside resort, Jill expands her skills along with her social network, learning silk knotting from wealthy sisters whose father owns a silk factory.

As in *Little Women*, Jill and her friends embark on a journey of self-improvement. Alcott assigns each

girl a different type of needlework to accompany her narrative and moral arc. Over the course of the novel, the three girls improve their skills in a conscious attempt to overcome their faults.

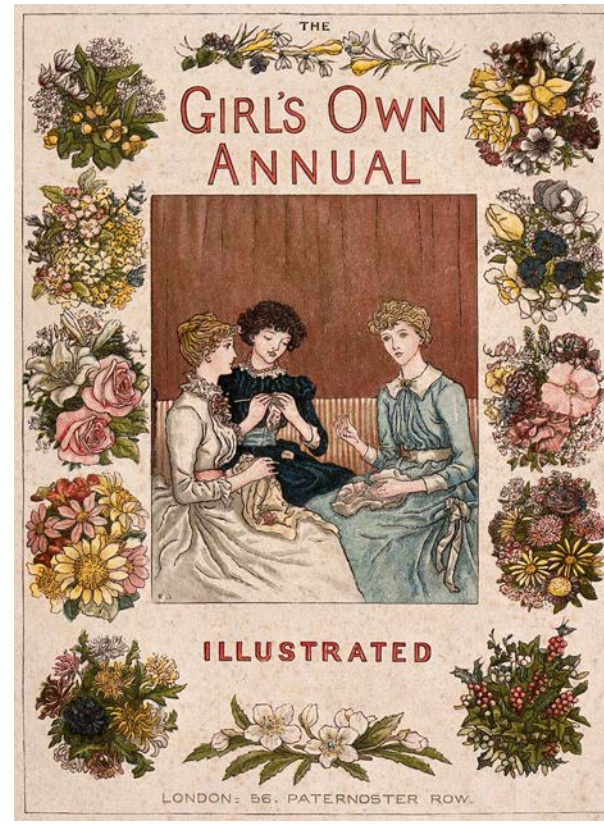
At the beginning of the book, Jill is brilliant but headstrong, goading Jack into taking a dangerous run on his sled, leading to the near-fatal accident. Through a long and painful recovery, she learns tatting, long considered a good fit for an invalid "being light and easy to hold, simple to do, and with very little strain on the eyes."[2] Through hours of practice, Jill also learns patience: "She found now that the weary months had not been wasted, and was very happy to discover in herself a new sort of strength and sweetness."

Meanwhile, romantic Merry tackles envy along with her darning. Initially, she longs for prettier surroundings than the family farm and loftier pursuits than endless chores. She determines to beautify her home through household arts: "'I will begin at once, and show them that I don't mean to shirk my duty, though I do want to be nice,' thought she." Despite setbacks (such as accidentally setting the curtains on fire), Merry perseveres, learning to complete her least favorite tasks first and even taking on her darning with a positive attitude. Gradually, she earns the respect of her strict mother, who allows her to add her "pretty things" to the farmhouse.

Molly, she of the lost workbasket, is my favorite character. Boisterous and full of fun, she enjoys outdoor pursuits, loves animals, and is followed everywhere by her little brother Boo. Unlike the other girls, Molly has no mother to mentor her, since hers died in childbirth. Her father is a successful mill owner who treats his children with benign neglect, while crotchety housekeeper Miss Bat does the bare minimum to feed and clothe them. "Molly had been a happy-go-lucky child," Alcott writes, "contented with her pets, her freedom, and little Boo to love; but now she was just beginning to see that they were not like other children, and to feel ashamed of it." Molly takes over the sewing and mending, with limited success at first. When she attempts to make Boo a new pair of pants, "she cut both sides for the same leg, so one was wrong side out. Fondly hoping no one would observe it, she sewed bright buttons wherever they could be put, and sent confiding Boo away in a pair of blue trousers, which were absurdly hunchy behind and buttony before." Like Jill and Merry, Molly perseveres, earning the praise of her father and even Miss Bat for her diligence and skill with her needle.

Progressive Education

In the final section of the book, Mrs. Minot establishes an alternative school in her home. Besides academics and regular exercise, the girls learn "various sorts of housework," for Mrs. Minot teaches subjects "which would be useful to them all their lives." In presenting her ideal school, Alcott brings to life the progressive educational theories promoted by her family, in which household skills were valued alongside intellectual, physical, and moral development. In "An Easy and Well-Ordered Way to Learn: Schooling at Home in Louisa May Alcott's *Eight Cousins* and *Jack and Jill*," Cathlin M. Davis writes



Three girls sit on a sofa with sewing and knitting needles in their hands. Color wood engraving attributed to E. Evans after Kate Greenaway. This magazine cover, published in the same time frame as *Jack and Jill*, shows that needlework was a part of social gatherings. *Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection*

that lessons in needle arts and household management "could be framed just in terms of learning a skill, but Alcott calls housekeeping an accomplishment; it is not just a matter of doing 'women's work.' It is important and worthy of attention."[3]

In the scene quoted at the beginning of this article, the girls discuss their lessons while sewing:

> *Though still very far from being perfect girls, each was slowly learning, in her own way, one of the three lessons all are better for knowing—that cheerfulness can change misfortune into love and friends; that in ordering one's self aright one helps others to do the same; and that the power of finding beauty in the humblest things makes home happy and life lovely.* ❖

"They had been making underclothes for themselves, and each had several neatly finished garments cut, fitted, and sewed by herself, and trimmed with the pretty tatting Jill made in such quantities while she lay on her sofa." The dressing sacks not only demonstrate the girls' hard-won skill, but also serve as vehicles of self-expression in their choices of colors, materials, and techniques—Jill's strength of spirit in the luscious red trimmings, Molly's exuberance in her riot of colors, and Merry's artistry in simple elegance.

As a girl, I loved this part of the book and longed to express myself with similar skill. As an adult, I appreciate the respect given by Alcott to the needle arts and the skillful way she uses them as a literary device. I hope readers are inspired by Jill, Merry, and Molly, for as Alcott writes:

Louisa May Alcott the Needleworker

Louisa May Alcott was a needleworker who stitched well and stitched often, as a look at her projects and her well-used sewing kit will attest. Some of her works, including a stunning bag that features an ornate satin-stitch monogram and the needlepoint Berlin work wall hanging shown here, are available to view at her home. Executive Director of Orchard House (Louisa May Alcott's home) Jan Turnquist says, "Louisa's beautiful needlework skill amazes me, as she was a busy best-selling author who wrote numerous books and short stories in addition to *Little Women*, all while raising her adopted niece and caring for her aging parents. These needlecraft items evoke powerful emotions because they allow an intimate look into her daily life. We are so fortunate to have them."

Orchard House is in Concord, Massachusetts. Learn more at LouisaMayAlcott.org.

This needlepoint wall hanging was stitched by Louisa May Alcott in a pattern and colors that were very popular at the time.

NOTES

1. Susan M. Strawn, *Knitting America: A Glorious Heritage from Warm Socks to High Art* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Voyageur Press, 2007), 32.

2. Bessie M. Attenborough, *The Craft of Tatting* (London: Bell & Hyman, 1972), 8.

3. Cathlin M. Davis, "An Easy and Well-Ordered Way to Learn: Schooling at Home in Louisa May Alcott's *Eight Cousins* and *Jack and Jill*," *Children's Literature in Education* 42, no. 4 (2011): 351.

RESOURCES

Alcott, Louisa May. *Jack and Jill: A Village Story*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880.

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