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# Preservation of the Family Unit in Adolescent Novels

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Preservation of the Family Unit in Adolescent Novels

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(TITLE)

BY

Mary M. Hutchings

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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## Abstract

This thesis discusses the development of the family story from the late nineteenth century to the present, beginning with What Katy Did as an example of the earlier moral story from which this genre grows. It then focuses on Little Women as the beginning of the modern family story and uses Jo from Little Women as the starting point to discuss the development of the female adolescent protagonist in these stories. And lastly, comparing Little Women to modern family life stories which began to appear about 1940, the thesis discusses changes in didacticism which have occurred since the late nineteenth century. (In the years between 1890 and 1940, stories with adolescent female protagonists focused mainly on the female alone, often as an orphan, rather than as part of a family.)

In the hundred years since What Katy Did appeared, codes of female behavior and family structure have changed extensively. However, the family story has not changed as much as might be expected. Modern families in these stories (like their real counterparts) deal with such crises as divorce, abandonment, and illegitimacy. No matter what the cause of the disruption, the message underlying these novels is that the family unit is worth preserving in some form.

Jo in Little Women became the prototype for the modern adolescent female in the family story. Jo is allowed to be

a tomboy, to make mistakes, to be a person. In stories like What Katy Did, however, tomboys who do not automatically conform to traditional female roles are forced to accept those roles or are punished until they do. The more modern characters, who follow in Jo's footsteps, are not perfect daughters, nor do they automatically become perfect mothers. They have strengths and weaknesses; they do not always know the right answer. But there is no implication that God gets even with them for their shortcomings as there is in What Katy Did.

As we move to the newer family stories, the family unit is still functional. In stories such as Vera and Bill Cleaver's Where the Lilies Bloom (1969) and Cynthia Voigt's Dacey's Song (1982), the importance of the family is clear. The preaching in these stories, however, is even less obvious than it was in Little Women. The value of the family is inherent in the novel, but the codes of behavior are not as strict. Proper behavior in the Victorian sense does not apply as much as the individual family's ability to determine what behavior best serves its needs. These families can no longer depend upon society to impose traditional codes of behavior. In their isolation they have to find answers for themselves. These books show the value of the family unit and endorse ways in which the families can remain functional in a world which provides little support for the family unit.

## Introduction

The family story in the second half of the nineteenth century perpetuated a heavily moralistic, even puritanical tone, and strictly enforced Victorian codes of behavior for female characters. Novels in this genre, of which What Katy Did by Susan Coolidge is an example, have not remained popular with modern readers mostly because the sermonic quality of the didacticism in these books no longer appeals to or seems appropriate for today's adolescents. The genre, however, has survived into this century. Some didacticism is still apparent, but it is more subtle and does not focus on traditional codes of behavior for females. The strong female adolescent protagonist who appears in the modern stories keeps her family together, holds many of the traditional values such as honesty and earning her own way, but is not bound by traditional codes of female propriety.

Shortly after the Civil War, Louisa May Alcott started a new trend in the family story genre with her novel Little Women. Jo March, the independent main character of Little Women, has become the prototype for the female adolescent protagonist who reappears in novels from the second half of this century. This female character is independent, determined, and capable of accomplishing her goals, one of which is the survival of the family unit of which she is a part.

While teaching the value of family life still remains the main purpose of these novels, there are differences in the handling of didacticism evident when we compare Coolidge to Alcott and both to such twentieth-century writers of family life novels as Lois Lenski, Mary Medearis, Bill and Vera Cleaver, and Cynthia Voigt. Didacticism is still apparent in these works, but it is more subtle and less restrictive than in the earlier novels thus allowing each family to adapt its behavior to its situation.



The role of the child in the family unit has been a part of children's reading in English since at least the fifteenth century when the courtesy books focused on proper behavior. By the mid-sixteenth century, the Puritans, who viewed the child as a young soul to save, focused on morals and religion, declaring fables, folktales and anything non-religious as ungodly and corrupting (Townsend 19). Cotton Mather promised damnation to children who disobeyed or were disrespectful to their parents in his tract "A Family Well Ordered, or An Essay to render Parents and Children Happy in one another" (Townsend 23). According to Townsend, the dominant book for children in colonial America was the New England Primer (22). The Primer was a combination ABC and catechism containing pictures, verses and woodcut illustrations. The verse for the letter A says "In Adam's fall / We sinned all"; the Primer also contains a dialogue between Christ, Youth, and the Devil in which the youth has waited too long to repent and is consigned by Christ to death and eternal damnation (Townsend 23).

By the middle of the eighteenth century, ideas about children were shifting. In 1693 John Locke published Thoughts Concerning Education in which he urged a gentler style of teaching based on the idea that children were born essentially innocent. He believed children could learn by playing games and pursuing enjoyable activities. His ideas influenced English writer-publisher John Newbery whose Little Pretty Pocket Book (1744) promises to make "Tommy a



good Boy and Polly a good Girl" and contains rules for parents for making children strong, healthy, virtuous, wise, and happy (Townsend 30). A pincushion for girls or, for boys, a ball which was red on one side and black on the other could be purchased with early editions of the book and used to help the child keep track of good and bad deeds by sticking pins in the appropriate side of the ball or pincushion. Polly and Tommy were to be entertained as well as instructed.

Novels which taught manners and morals but provided a story as well as, or instead of, a sermon continued to appear throughout the nineteenth century with such works as The Daisy Chain by Charlotte Yonge (1856). The women and girls in these domestic stories were expected to find comfort and satisfaction in the responsibilities of home, husband, children and religion. Susan Coolidge continues in this vein with What Katy Did (1872), which features Katy Carr, a tomboy in a proper New England family. In personality Katy is much like her predecessor, Jo March from Alcott's Little Women (1868). Much of the story deals with the difficulties Katy has accepting the usual female roles. However, Coolidge reverted to the formula for the traditional moral domestic story instead of following Alcott's lead in allowing her female protagonist to be an independent female. Thus Katy, unlike Jo March who is never forced into the mold of a proper Victorian female, is happy only when she has learned to accept her lot in life,

which includes giving up all her dreams and becoming the surrogate mother who keeps the family together.

Katy's problems are mainly in two areas. First she longs to do something important with her life: "... saving people's lives, like that girl in the book. Or perhaps I shall go and nurse in the hospital... or else I'll head a crusade ...I'll paint pictures, or sing, or make figures in marble" (23; ch. 1). But these half-formed adolescent plans can never come to fruition. Her second area of difficulty is obedience. The aunt who has taken over the care of the Carr children after their mother's death in a carriage accident expects unquestioning obedience to her very strict rules. Aunt Izzy, who has no children of her own, perceives her responsibility as forcing Katy to become a proper Victorian female. Katy, who is eleven when the book opens, chastizes herself for being unruly and tries hard to behave, but she really prefers playing out on the shed roof and swinging with the other children to darning socks and doing kitchen chores.

The culmination of the conflict occurs when Katy is summarily ordered not to swing for a whole day. Her aunt gives no explanation, even though she knows the swing is unsafe. Katy, willful and headstrong as usual, swings anyway. The result is a back injury which forces her to stay in bed for four years. Total bed rest is certainly a severe punishment for an active eleven year old. Coolidge gives the impression that God has justly punished Katy for

her disobedience. Katy works hard to become a model of forbearance and patience. She attempts to suppress totally any negative feelings about the situation.

Certainly there is nothing wrong with a child wishing to be as pleasant an invalid as possible, but Coolidge takes Katy a step farther. By the time Aunt Izzy dies and Katy has to assume control of the household, Katy has given up all her girlish dreams and has become a model of patience and kindness. In short she has become a martyr who is content to stay at home as long as necessary to care for the younger children thus allowing their doctor father to continue his work without a thought to the children's well-being.

One of the biggest differences between What Katy Did and Little Women (and the later stories) is in the area of what the girl has to go through before she is ready to take on the responsibility of the younger children. The idea of having an older sister care for younger children is not unusual even today. But the expectations for today's girls are different. Katy gives up her individuality; she becomes nothing more than a one dimensional model of a Victorian lady. Even the most charitable of modern readers would have to agree that she is too perfect to be appealing.

However, one of the reasons why modern readers still do find Little Women interesting is that Alcott has not set up her characters as perfect females. Elizabeth Janeway,

discussing the appeal of Little Women for modern audiences, says "Little Women does manipulate life, and life that is recognizable in human terms today" (254). Donelson points out that even though most books for girls at this time followed the Victorian guidelines for female behavior, "In some books there were subtle hints, and some not so subtle, that women had brains and feelings along with responsibilities" (56).

Part of the sense of reality in Little Women may be there because the characters are based on Alcott and her family. But there is also an obvious difference in tone and attitude between Coolidge's treatment of family life and Alcott's treatment of similar situations. Alcott does not hint that God will punish Jo or her sisters for their attempts to be independent, thinking females. The March girls learn their lessons by working through their problems with their mother's and siblings' support. Jo, in particular, becomes a strong, capable individual who can deal with whatever life has in store for her.

Like Katy Carr, Jo March is a tomboy who finds it difficult to live with the restrictions placed upon girls. Her hair is often messy; she tends to run rather than walk; her clothes are often dirty, torn or scorched. She is also somewhat a loner. In fact, her closest friend except for her sisters is Laurie, the boy next door, though she never sees him romantically even when he would like for her to. His friendship is too valuable to her. Above all, Jo is

both practical and caring. Because she does not allow herself to be hampered by social constraints as much as her sisters, she is able to get things done even though her solutions are not always proper or traditional.

When Mrs. March has to go to Washington to take care of her husband, who has become ill during his tour as a chaplain in the Civil War, money is tight as usual. So that her mother will not have to borrow so much money from the Laurences, Jo sells her hair to a wig maker for twenty-five dollars. In response to the hand wringing and wailing of her sisters when they see what she has done, she replies, "It doesn't affect the fate of the world. I'm satisfied, so please take the money and let's have supper" (150; ch. 15). Later that night when Meg finds Jo crying for her hair Jo says, "I'd do it again tomorrow, if I could. It's only the vain, selfish part of me that goes and cries in this silly way. I just made a little private moan for my one beauty" (152; ch. 15). Jo is able to do something practical and useful, but Alcott allows her enough vanity to miss what she thinks is the only pretty feature she has. Readers can identify with her little show of vanity while admiring her courage and willingness to help her family.

Jo's writing is another area where she deviates from the traditional female roles. Very likely, the descriptions of Jo screwing up her courage in Chapter 14 to take her work to the publisher the first time is based on



Alcott's own experience. The reader sees very clearly Jo's embarrassment at having to go to this dingy little office to deal with this man. But the reader also shares her pride when the family reads the story in the magazine later.

In Chapter 34, Jo deals with the problem of writing sensationalism for quick profits or writing something more worthwhile, such as children's literature. The money is to be used to take Beth to the mountains for a vacation. But after her conversations with Professor Bhaer, whom she looks upon as a mentor at this point, she finds she wants to write something worthwhile. Again the reader can see Alcott's personal experiences and theories on writing for children as Jo discovers that she cannot sell her children's stories because she cannot "depict all her naughty boys as being eaten by bears or tossed by mad bulls because they did not go to a particular sabbath school, nor all good infants who did go as rewarded by every kind of bliss, from gilded gingerbread to escorts of angels when they departed this life with psalms or sermons on their lisping tongues" (328; ch. 34). And so she gives up writing until she can write something honest.

As a sister and daughter Jo works hard to take care of the family. She does not have sole care of her sisters, but the reader could never doubt that if the girls were totally on their own, Jo would take charge and find a way to keep them together. Sometimes in her childish zeal she

tries to take responsibility for things she cannot control. In Chapter 20, Jo wishes she could marry Meg herself so that no one could take Meg away from them. In Chapter 32, she takes the job with the Kirks so that she will be away from Laurie because she believes Beth loves Laurie who claims to love Jo. And in Chapter 36 Jo is determined that Beth will get well: "Your tide must not turn so soon, nineteen is too young. I'll keep you in spite of everything; there must be ways, it can't be too late" (342). Even though Jo cannot solve all the problems for the family, her sincere desire to take care of the family is obvious. She does not shirk her responsibilities as she perceives them.

Even Jo's romance with Professor Bhaer is based on caring rather than passion. The romance develops slowly and gently, but it is based on sound principles. She respects and likes him; they share ideas and goals; they are able to communicate well with each other. The scene in Chapter 46 where Fritz proposes shows clearly not only their sense of commitment but also a touch of the absurd that makes Jo such an enjoyable character. The two of them are standing on a busy street in the pouring rain juggling an umbrella and several small packages:

It was certainly proposing under difficulties, for even if he desired to do so, Mr. Bhaer could not go down upon his knees, on account of the mud; neither could he offer Jo his hand, except



figuratively, for both were full; much less could he indulge in tender demonstrations in the open street, though he was near it; so the only way in which he could express his rapture was to look at her, with an expression which glorified his face to such a degree that there actually seemed to be little rainbows in the drops that sparkled on his beard. If he had not loved Jo very much, I don't think he could have done it then, for she looked far from lovely, with her skirts in a deplorable state, her rubber boots splashed to the ankle, and her bonnet a ruin. Fortunately, Mr. Bhaer considered Jo the most beautiful woman living, and she found him more 'Jove-like' than ever, though his hatbrim was quite limp with the little rills trickling thence upon his shoulders (for he held the umbrella all over Jo) and every finger of his gloves needed mending. (433)

In summing up Jo's character, Janeway says, "Jo is a tomboy but never a masculinized or lesbian figure. She is somehow an idealized 'New Woman', capable of male virtues but not, as the Victorians would have said, 'unsexed.' Or perhaps she is really archaic woman, re-created out of some New-World frontier necessity when patriarchy breaks down" (257).

Jo truly seems to have it all. In Chapter 47, she marries, has healthy sons, becomes the mistress of the

professor's school and generally has a productive life.

Alcott describes Jo's life:

Yes, Jo was a very happy woman there, in spite of hard work, much anxiety, and a perpetual racket. She enjoyed it heartily and found the applause of her boys more satisfying than any praise of the world, for now she told no stories except to her flock of enthusiastic believers and admirers. As the years went on, two little lads of her own came to increase her happiness—Rob, named for Grandpa, and Teddy, a happy-go-lucky baby, who seemed to have inherited his papa's sunshiny temper as well as his mother's lively spirit. How they ever grew up alive in that whirlpool of boys was a mystery to their grandma and aunts, but they flourished like dandelions in spring, and their rough nurses loved and served them well. (444)

Janeway concludes, "For this Victorian moral tract, sentimental and preachy, was written by a secret rebel against the order of the world and women's place in it, and all the girls who ever read it know it" (257).

According to Mary E. Shaner, "The American daily-life family story in the early twentieth century had few successors to Alcott" (36). There were female protagonists during this time, but many were orphans who did not function in a family context at all. Shaner dates the

beginning of the modern family story at 1940 (37). The female protagonists in these more modern stories willingly accept responsibility for the family, but are intelligent and resourceful enough to adapt their codes of behavior to fit their needs.

In 1942, Mary Medearis wrote Big Doc's Girl, the story of seventeen year old Mary Clayborne and her family who live in the back country of Arkansas. Mary Clayborne shares some personality traits with Jo March, the most noticeable of which is the willingness to accept responsibility for keeping the family together. Mary Clayborne, at age seventeen, finds herself in charge of her family when her mother is sent to a sanitarium and her father dies unexpectedly. The decisions facing Mary are not easy ones. Her brother wants to quit high school and get a job. There are seven and nine year old sisters still at home. Bill Sheehan wants to marry Mary, but that would mean moving to St. Louis. And Mary has always dreamed of attending a conservatory to study music. Additionally there is not much money since many of her father's patients paid their bills in produce and meat instead of cash.

Part of Mary's determination to deal with her family's problems comes from the encouragement she receives from her mother. Mrs. Clayborne is a calm, patient woman, much like Mrs. March, who encourages Mary to deal with the problems but doesn't try to force her to handle them in any particular way. She tells Mary she is sure to find an

answer but does not try to tell her what the answer is. Part of Mary's determination also comes from the fact that she has been part of a happy family. During the difficult times after her father's funeral, while her mother is still in the sanitarium, she frequently thinks of happier times, of the laughter, of her parents' love for each other and for the children. These memories help shore up her determination to provide for the family.

Ten year old Joanda Hutley, like Jo March and Mary Clayborne, assumes a great deal of responsibility for her family in Lois Lenski's novel Cotton in My Sack (1949). Lenski describes the changes that Joanda sees taking place in her family as they struggle with their lives as Arkansas sharecroppers:

But Joanda saw a new strength in her mother's face, and in her eyes a new dignity. The girl sensed a change-- that her mother was no longer a victim of circumstance, but was making a conscious effort to control her destiny and that of her family. She was no longer going to take things just as they came. From now on she was going to make things be different. (189; ch. 13)

What Joanda sees in her own family is the direct result of them making the move up from sharecropper to tenant farmer. Their improved financial status has also given them an improved self-concept. In order for these changes to take place, the whole family has to rethink their spending

habits. They have always been hard workers, but first Joanda and then the rest of the family come to realize that many of their hardships are the result of their inability to budget their money.

Mary Call Luther, the protagonist in Where the Lilies Bloom (1969) by Vera and Bill Cleaver, is fourteen as she faces the fact that her father is terminally ill and that upon his death she will be in charge of the family and their small farm in the hills of North Carolina. (Her mother has died four years earlier and her eighteen year old sister, Devola, is too simple-minded to take over managing the family.) Meditating about her father and his condition, she reveals her down-to-earth practicality this way:

He's let things beat him, Roy Luther has. The land, Kiser Pease, the poverty. Now he's old and sick and ready to die and when he does, this is what we'll inherit-- his defeat and all that goes with it.

Sometimes when I look at him I am stirred with an unholy anger. I think, God help me, Roy Luther, I don't want you dead and that's the truth. But since it's going to happen anyhow I wish it could hurry up and be over with for it's pulling us all to pieces and I need to get on with things and try to fix them around so that life will be easier for those of us who are left.



And I get scared and I think, but how am I going to do this? Who will show me how and who will help me?

And then I get madder and I say to myself, Aw quit your bellyaching. There's a way; all you have to do is find it. (17; ch. 1)

Like Jo, Mary Call sometimes comes up with practical help for her family that is neither traditional nor particularly feminine. When Kiser Pease, their thirty year old landlord who wants to marry Devola, is near death with pneumonia, Mary Call saves his life, but she is also shrewd enough to get him to sign over to her the deed to the house and land so they will have some place to live when her father dies without her sister Devola having to marry Kiser to give them a home. Later, when her father dies, she and her brother, Romey, bury him without telling anyone so that the county authorities won't send them to an orphanage or foster homes. Thinking about how grisly it is to be burying her own father, Mary Call decides she's tough enough to handle anything. She says, "And if anybody's got any better idea how I should handle this and all the other things left to me just let them come on and tell me about it but I don't hear anybody saying anything" (73; ch. 6).

Thirteen year old Dicey Tillerman in Dicey's Song by Cynthia Voigt (1983), her second book about the Tillerman children, has already overcome tremendous odds by getting her brothers and sister to their grandmother in Maryland

after their mother abandoned them in a shopping mall (The Homecoming, 1982). Dicey still feels the weight of many worries about her family: whether Maybeth is retarded, why James doesn't want people to know how smart he is, why Sammy gets in fights, whether her grandmother can afford to feed and clothe them, what kind of job she can get to help out. Maybeth, the younger sister, sums up Dicey's character by saying she's fine "as long as she knows what to do about things" (3; ch. 1). Grams asks Dicey what she does when there is nothing she can do about the situation. Dicey replies, "I dunno, I do something else" (3; ch. 1). Just like Jo and Mary and Mary Call, Dicey does not know how to quit. They keep worrying and working, and a solution eventually appears.

Jo, Mary, Mary Call, Dicey and Joanda also share the same sense of purpose and innate dignity. None of the families involved is wealthy, but all are hardworking. These female characters are often the catalyst which makes things happen for the families. Just as Jo bravely takes her work to the publisher, Mary Call takes her herbs and roots to the grocer and bargains for what her family needs. Her wildcrafting can support them modestly, and it is also something that even the smaller children and her simple-minded sister can do. Dicey Tillerman goes into the neighborhood grocery store and convinces Millie Tydings to hire her to do ordering and bookkeeping because Millie is such a poor reader that she has difficulty doing these



things that her husband had always done when he was alive. Mary Clayborne overcomes her disappointment about not being able to go to conservatory with this thought:

Where was my faith, that I thought a winter had to be bitter and empty, merely because a plan of mine has reached a stone wall? There were paths around stone walls. (84; ch. 9)

These characters all have the ability to find the paths around their particular stone walls.

Their dignity becomes evident in their dealings with people who are not part of the family. During the week in which the March girls experiment with having no assigned chores, an old busybody named Miss Crocker drops in unexpectedly for lunch. Jo has cooked haphazardly, using salt instead of sugar, letting the cream sour, and the meal is almost inedible. Knowing that Miss Crocker will go immediately and tell her friends about the awful meal she has eaten at the Marches, Jo is extremely embarrassed. She thinks about crying; she thinks about hiding under the table, but she does neither. She endures until Miss Crocker leaves, and then calmly suggests that they should go outside and attend to the burial of the pet canary which had died.

Dacey Tillerman has problems in two classes at school which relate directly to her family situation. In both cases she handles herself with dignity while dealing with tactless adults who do not understand her situation. In

home economics-- which she was forced to take in place of shop, which she really wanted to take-- Dicey plans out a menu of nutritious meals for a fraction of the allotted amount based on the meals she and the kids had eaten during the summer while they were trying to find their grandmother. Miss Eversleigh fails her and writes on the paper that no one could live for long on meals such as those. Dicey just looks at her without saying anything. She decides that she knows how to keep her family from starving and that is what is important. In her English class, Dicey finds herself accused of plagiarism because the essay she has written about her mother is so well done that Mr. Chappelle does not believe a student could have written it. Again Dicey decides not to argue or defend herself. She knows how well she did and that's enough for her.

In a similar situation Mary Call Luther and her sister Ima Dean react much the same way. Their nemesis, Mrs. Connell, pretends to be concerned about their welfare while obviously enjoying feeling superior to them. One day she gives them some candy that is so sticky and stale that it is inedible. As she gives the candy to them she makes a snide remark about how their daddy should be ashamed to let them come to town looking like rag pickers. They smile, say thank-you, take the candy and leave. On the way home Ima Dean throws it away because it's too nasty to eat. They know it's important not to anger Mrs. Connell because

she can make trouble for them with the authorities. Her opinion of them is not as important as their continuing to live together as a family.

One further trait which these characters share is their respect for education. Jo March obviously comes from an educated family. She has even read some Latin and Greek. Her education not only helps her get work, but also write well enough to publish her stories.

Even though Dicey has some difficulties with teachers, she continues to go to school and to do well in most classes. She is obviously extremely bright, and her grandmother would like her to go to college. Her brother James could probably be labeled "academically gifted." Between the two of them, they work out a program to help their sister Maybeth who is probably dyslexic. They know how to use the education they have.

Mary Call and Romey have to stay in school in order to keep the authorities from checking too closely into their home life. But there is never any indication that they seriously consider not going to school even though there is no one to make them go. In fact, Ima Dean is so unhappy because she is too young to go to school that Mary Call teaches her to read at home in the evenings. Mary Call's ability to read and use information makes it possible for them to start their wildcrafting business which is their main source of income.

Mary Clayborne comes from a well educated family too.

Her father is a doctor, and her mother has studied at a conservatory of music. As the money gets tighter after her father's death, both she and her brother have to face possible changes in their educational plans. Mary gives up her plans to attend the conservatory but can continue to study with a local professor. Not only is music important to her, but it also provides her first job as the organ teacher in the back woods. She manages to convince her brother not to drop out of high school. Their friend Bill Sheehan, who has just finished his medical training, then offers help so Little Doc can have his chance at medical school.

Joanda Hutley comes from the least educated family of the group discussed here. There are no books or other educational stimuli in the home at all. When Joanda brings home a library book, her mother tells the teacher that they send Joanda to school to learn lesson books not to read stories. However, Joanda and her brother attend the local one room school which has special split sessions to allow the children to pick cotton without missing school. Joanda turns out to have a talent for both reading and spelling. But it is not so much what she learns in her school lessons that affects the family as it is her experience with the outside world in general. Her teacher, Miss Fenton, is a very caring and tactful person, unlike the teachers Dicey has to deal with. She encourages Joanda to read; she washes Joanda's hair and curls it; she gives Joanda a

packet of flower seeds to plant outside their house.

Joanda begins to see that their way of life has led them into financial problems. Miss Fenton does not ever try to make Joanda ashamed of her family, but she does give her the tools to make her aware that there are other possible choices for her and her family.

These female protagonists, ranging in age from ten to eighteen, show many remarkable similarities. With the exception of Little Women, which still contains enough of the Victorian codes of behavior to be easily identifiable, it is difficult to guess which of the books was written in which decade of this century. None of these characters is the traditional hand-wringing, hysterical, helpless female. None of these girls is simpering or silly, and certainly none of them is spoiled or vain. Instead we have a group of intelligent, creative females who can and will do whatever they have to in order to keep their families together. These girls seem very real and very human. They sometimes wonder how long they will have to bear these burdens and why they have so little help. Sometimes they are cross and bossy with the younger children. Certainly they often seem arrogant to adults who are not involved in their situations. But they are survivors who are capable of taking what they want from their lives or attempting to change what they do not like about their lives.

Each of these adolescent female characters and their families provide lessons about life and examples of



behavior for young female readers. However, the didacticism in these stories is far different from that in Coolidge's What Katy Did. The main thrust in that story is molding Katy into a proper female who will preserve the family unit. That family stays together because Katy has learned the necessary codes of behavior before she takes over the care of the family. She has to be humbled both physically and mentally before she is allowed to take on the responsibility of the family. John Rowe Townsend in his essay "Didacticism in Modern Dress" says, "Years ago we threw the old didacticism (dowdy morality) out of the window; it has come back in at the door wearing modern dress (smart values) and we do not even recognize it" (56).

Certainly the morality in What Katy Did is so heavy-handed that modern readers do not find it enjoyable. The codes of behavior are more relaxed for Jo in Little Women. Part of that book's success is undoubtedly due to the fact that Jo sets some of her own standards of behavior. She never becomes as concerned about proper dress and polite social conversation as her sisters are. She remains plain-spoken and honest. Her relationships with people in her family and her friends the Laurences are much more important than the style of her dress. Her ability to maintain her bluntness, her honesty, and still care deeply about others is what allows her to function as the mainstay of the family.

In each of the stories discussed in this paper, one

major cause of family crisis is the breakdown of the patriarchal family structure. In each of these stories the father is either absent or non functional as the head of the family. Katy Carr's father is a busy physician, who upon the death of his wife, turns the rearing of the children over to an aunt. Mary Clayborne's father is also a physician, but his strong rapport with his children is cut off abruptly with his sudden death. Jo March's father serves as a chaplain during the Civil War; but even when he returns, he seems to have little effect on the family. Mary Call's father withdraws from the children after their mother's death and finally dies himself. Joanda Hutley's father attempts to be a good father to his children, but his lack of understanding of the causes of their poverty leads him to spend extravagantly and then have to watch his family nearly starve until their next "furnish" comes in. Dicey's mother had never been married to her father, and he had left them a long time ago. The situations in these families provide a scene where a strong child can develop into a family leader. The situations are timeless and unchanging. What has changed is the way the children are allowed to develop. The smart values, as Townsend calls them, do not have to be forced on these girls. It does not take a four year illness like Katy Carr's to ensure that they possess the necessary characteristics.

In the modern family story, the female protagonist has taken charge either before she realizes it or simply



because there is no one else to do it. If she is successful, it is because her personality allows her to focus on what is important to her and disregard everything else. Mary Clayborne is a good example. She takes over the day to day running of the household when her mother goes into the sanitarium because she is the oldest. Her brother, Little Doc, is only a year younger, but he already has a job besides going to school. The two little sisters are not prepared to take over their own care. So Mary takes over, thinking that her father will be there to give her support. But he dies suddenly. Since her mother is still too ill even to come to the funeral, Mary has no choice but to manage on her own. She is able to do so because she cares deeply for her brother and sisters and because she is both a capable and responsible young woman. Dealing with their assortment of problems is not an easy job. Little Doc supports her and helps when he can, but she shoulders most of the responsibility until her mother is able to resume the care of the younger children.

By then Mary's life has changed a great deal. She has decided that she really does not want to leave Arkansas and her family. She decides not to marry Bill and gives up the idea of going to a conservatory to study. She has a job teaching music in the hills and has met a young minister, John MacCreighton, who shares her love of the hill country and is willing to give her time to finish growing up. Mary's story ends with her realization that "What really

mattered was finding my own excuse for living-- knowing my excuse for living. To walk my own path, free, with an eye to see things as they are..." (189; ch. 21). Mary still doesn't know all the answers; her problems are not all solved, but she is finding her own way through life.

Dacey Tillerman has no choice either but to take over for her mother who abandoned them in a shopping center parking lot. Dacey has had some practice because she has already assumed a great deal of responsibility as her mother's mental illness progressed. But once Dacey gets the family to Gram's, she is still in charge. For one thing, their grandmother is a total stranger to them when they move in. She is rather eccentric to begin with, and it has been a long time since she has dealt with children. Dacey knows she and the kids will be a financial burden to her as well. One of Dacey's first acts is to get herself a job to help out. Her life becomes so focused on school, her job, the kids and Gram that she has little time for herself. Having been unable to trust people or to have friends for so long, Dacey is afraid at first even to try to make friends at school. Eventually Mina forces Dacey to notice her, and they become friends. She finds that it is possible to have friends and still keep up with her family responsibilities.

Mary Call Luther also has little choice about assuming responsibility for the family as her father withdraws more and more from them and finally dies. Mary Call's family is

probably the least cooperative of the group discussed here. The older sister, Devola, is rather simple and certainly neither practical nor forceful enough to take care of the family. The younger children think Mary Call is hateful and mean because she forces them to accept responsibility. The breakdown in paternalism is evident here in two ways. Not only does the father die, but he has asked Mary Call to promise not to allow Devola to marry Kiser Pease. Mary Call and her family are severely isolated both geographically and psychologically because of their situation. They cannot allow themselves to reach out to other people because of their fear that they will be sent to an orphanage or foster homes. They cannot turn to Kiser for help because of the promise to the father. Mary Call is not developing normally at all; she is being consumed by her family's problems for which she cannot find a solution. Finally when she visits Kiser in the hospital, in desperation, she asks Kiser to marry her to save the family. He, of course, refuses. And Mary Call begins a search for a cave in which they can live. Finally Devola and Kiser take matters into their own hands. Devola has matured during the winter and begins to realize that Mary Call cannot solve the family's problems single-handedly. When Devola and Kiser get married, it is difficult for Mary Call to accept that Kiser wants to help. She and Romey and Ima Dean continue to live in their own house (which Kiser has deeded to Devola) and work at their wildcrafting

business which prospers with a little help from Mr. Connell, the grocer to whom they sold their herbs and roots. Mary Call's problems are not all solved; her future is unclear. But she has learned that she can have friends and accept help occasionally. When some of the stress is gone and she is not forced to be so tough, she finds that she gets along better with Romey and Ima Dean too. And she and Kiser have a peaceful if somewhat wary truce.

Joanda Hutley's position as a family leader is not as clearly defined, partly because she is the youngest of this group of female protagonists at age ten. She is clearly the child on whom the family depends, however. When they run out of fuel and Mama and the baby are sick, it is Joanda who goes to Mrs. Shands to ask for help. When Mama has the heart attack, it is Joanda who stays at home to take care of her and baby Lolly. Her effect on the family structure is more subtle because both her parents are present if somewhat ineffective. Joanda's activities at school force both Joanda and her mother to see some ways in which their lives could be improved. The father has a dream to better his life, but is unable to carry it out because he has no idea how to go about saving money to get the things they need. Joanda's relationship with her teacher, Miss Fenton, the books that she brings home, the flowers that she plants help spur the mother into action to force the father to begin saving and working toward a tenancy rather than remaining a sharecropper.

Joanda is amazed first of all when she learns that Mr. and Mrs. Shands have money problems too. She has grown up in a family that believed that the land owners had no problems at all. That was her first lesson. She also learned from Miss Fenton that it is possible to have some choices in the way you live and that education is one way to find out about these choices. She accepts that the father she loves is flawed; he is not strong enough or wise enough to improve their lives without help and support from the Shands, from Mama, and from Uncle Shine. And perhaps most importantly, Joanda's understanding of the family's problems is increased when she becomes aware that her indulgence of Lolly is very similar to the way her father indulges the children when he has money. Their father always buys them toys and candy as long as the money lasts. Joanda finds herself treating little Lolly the same way; only Lolly has become so accustomed to Joanda buying for her that she is a very unpleasant little girl who demands presents every time they go to town. Joanda's brother Ricky finally points out to her that she is not doing Lolly any favors, and Joanda realizes that in trying to help Lolly have a happy childhood, she has really helped to make her discontent and irresponsible. But above all, she sees the possibility of improvement for her family. She realizes that the changes will not be easy, but with hard work, the family has a chance. Her story ends with these lines:



Joanda watched the setting sun as she had so many times before. She was strangely contented. For the first time she felt a deep sense of the meaning of life and of her part in it. Life would go on, bound up in cotton from year to year, changing a little but not much. (191; ch. 13)

Katherine Dalsimer, in her book Female Adolescence: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Works of Literature, gives a definition of adolescence which is particularly appropriate for the novels discussed here: "Adolescence is a period of widened possibilities and experimentation with alternatives, before the individual narrows the range of what is possible by making those commitments which will define adulthood" (5). Even in What Katy Did with its strong sense of punishment, Katy has some choices to face. The problem is that the modern reader feels that she was forced to choose the options she took. The structure of the moral domestic story provides her with few choices to begin with. The puritanical morality inherent in these stories demands that she become humble, submissive and patient; her four year convalescence provides ample time for her to mend her ways. She has to give up her dreams and hopes and become content with managing the household. Certainly Jo in Little Women shows much freer experimentation with the alternatives both in social situations and in career choices. Mary Clayborne in Big Doc's Girl makes

her commitment to Arkansas and her family by making a non-traditional choice to stay and teach music and perhaps have a relationship with the minister rather than marry the up-and-coming young doctor and move to the city. For Joanda Hutley in Cotton in My Sack, the awareness of alternatives is the most important thing she and her family learn.

Mary Call Luther in Where the Lilies Bloom and Dicey Tillerman in Dicey's Song face some alternatives that are really quite frightening. Donelson, in discussing young adult novels with rite of passage as the theme says these books are more than just repetitious case histories because "They communicate a sense of time and change, a sense of becoming something and catching glimpses of possibilities, some that are fearful, others that are awesome, odd, funny, perplexing, or wondrous" (15). There is a strong sense of alienation from society in these stories, particularly in Where the Lilies Bloom, that was not apparent in Little Women, What Katy Did, or Big Doc's Girl. Katy had few choices; Jo and Mary exercised some options, but remained fairly traditional in their overall life styles. Dicey has trouble relating to other people after spending so much time evading grownups and protecting her brothers and sister. But Mary Call's situation is so severe that she cannot have a normal relationship with anyone, not even her own brother and sisters. She has to learn to let her guard down, to trust and accept other people which is difficult



for her because she has had to make the decisions for the whole family without help or support from anyone for several months. Townsend describes Mary Call this way:

Fourteen year old Mary Call Luther in Where the Lilies Bloom (1969), struggles to hold together a parentless family of four, bosses everyone around, and is rewarded by being called mean and ugly; yet this resourceful, awful, splendid child is as much a heroine as any in fiction. (278)

Dacey learns basically the same lessons as Mary Call does, but even though her situation is also frightening, the sense of isolation is not as strong for her because she has her grandmother to turn to for support. Even though her grandmother expects Dacey to come up with solutions to many of their problems, she at least listens to Dacey and discusses options with her. She is understanding when Dacey wonders how long she will feel these responsibilities, but realistically assures her that she will feel them forever. Roseanne Donahue describes the books by Cynthia Voigt about the Tillerman family (The Homecoming, Dacey's Song, and Bullett) as stories which are "realistic and show moving journeys to mature relationships among families and between child and adult" (87).

In the family stories discussed in this paper, the maturation of the relationships among the family members and between children and adults is a major theme. Each novel focuses on an adolescent female and the choices she

has to make, but in this genre the reader never loses sight of the importance of the family as a unit. The importance of the family becomes one of the main lessons in these stories. These books give readers a cautious sense of optimism. These girls and their families do not have miraculous solutions to their problems, but they do survive and even become stronger personalities because of their situations. Certainly there are many of the so-called "problem novels" for children and young adults today which show the children coping with grim realities completely alone. But that is not the purpose of the family story. In each of the stories discussed here, the adolescent female finds that she does not function in total isolation. One of the hardest lessons for most of these characters is to learn to relate to people outside their families while still maintaining the family unit.

Learning to relate successfully to people outside the family is perhaps one of the "smart values" mentioned by Townsend earlier, but it is also a normal part of adolescent life. In a traditional family these relationships would be accomplished gradually and with guidance from parents. However, the modern family story does not attempt to portray ideal, traditional families which have two parents to help with the children's upbringing. Some of these girls have guidance from an adult part of the time and some do not have any. Mrs. March could be a model for a sympathetic, understanding parent who makes suggestions

and gives encouragement rather than giving orders. She helps Jo see that Meg can marry John and still be part of the family. She is there to help Jo deal with her doubts about becoming romantically involved with Laurie. Mrs. Clayborne is very like Mrs. March in the way she approaches advising her children, but because she is so far away in the sanitarium and so ill, she cannot always be there to support Mary. Grandmother Tillerman does not always relate well to other people herself; she expects Dicey to make many decisions on her own. But when it becomes obvious that they need contact outside the home, she invites Mr. Lingerle, first to help Maybeth with her music and later as a trusted family friend, and allows the boys to play with friends and allows Dicey to talk to Mina on the phone and to invite her over. Her support and encouragement make it easier for Dicey to begin to open up to other people. But the end of the story she has two friends, Mina and Jeff, which is at least a beginning.

Joanda Hutley has both a mother and a father, but they are too backward themselves to give her much advice about dealing with people outside the family. They are generally suspicious and distrustful of strangers. Mrs. Hutley is convinced at first that the teacher, Miss Fenton, is horrible because she washes, cuts and curls the girls' hair and gives them story books to read instead of lessons to memorize and gets the children to eat hot lunches at

reduced prices. Mr. Hutley is convinced that their landlord, Charlie Shands, has a huge amount of money but chooses not to help with Ricky's doctor bill when he is run over by the tractor. Aunt Lessie, the mother of two of the other children at the school, finally convinces Neva Hutley that Miss Fenton's ideas are good and that Joanda should go to school regularly. Joanda herself discovers why the Shands did not pay Ricky's doctor bill and that they have plenty of land but little available cash. Changes which benefit the whole family come slowly to the Hutley family, most of them because Joanda does have some contact with the outside world.

Mary Call Luther has no adult help. She is forced to treat Kiser as an enemy because she had promised her father to keep Kiser from marrying her sister Devola. She is able to get help for their wildcrafting from Mr. Connell, the grocer to whom they sell the roots and leaves they have collected. But because she is afraid the authorities will send them to foster homes, Mary Call tells no adult their true situation. Mary Call is obviously desperate by the end of the story. They are facing living in the woods in a cave when Devola finally steps in and marries Kiser anyway. Their immediate legal problems are over because Kiser and Devola can be their guardians, and they can keep the house they have been living in. But Mary Call has no friends even at school and little contact with any outsiders except the Connells. She and Kiser come to an understanding of

sorts; she does not want him taking care of them even if he is her brother-in-law. She finally agrees not to give him any trouble if he doesn't give her any. She does finally unbend enough to let Mr. Connell arrange a loan for them to get a machine to make pine ropes for Christmas wreaths and decorations. She has made a beginning, but human relations are not easy for her even at the end of the story; there are no miraculous answers.

William T. Moynihan says, "The characters of the earlier children's fiction all shared common values about their respective countries and human nature. But in the last half of the century, writers of fiction for children seem to share fewer values" (23-24). Katy Carr has a clear idea of what behavior is expected of her. Even Jo March knows what is expected of a female of her time; she chooses not to follow all the rules, but she does know them. However, the codes of behavior which limited a female to cooking, sewing and praying are not much use to characters such as Dicey Tillerman and Mary Call Luther. If they had followed the codes of behavior from What Katy Did, neither of their families would have survived. Being a proper Victorian lady does not help when you have to bury your father or when you have to find a regular job at age thirteen.

And yet, in many ways these characters do exemplify traditional values. All of them are honest; they neither cheat nor steal. They do not lie except in extreme



situations such as Mary Call covering up her father's death. They do not expect others to feel sorry for them or to solve their problems. They are all hardworking and try to live within their means, not wishing constantly for things they cannot afford and not hating those who have more than they do.

All of the characters discussed here have some job in addition to school work and responsibilities at home. Joanda picks cotton. Mary Call does wildcrafting. Dicey works in a grocery store. Mary Clayborne teaches piano. Even Jo March works as a governess, as a companion and as a writer. While none of these jobs is high-paying or prestigious, they are respectable, available to young people and help provide for the family. All of the characters share the money they make with their families; they are not selfish. Both Dicey and Joanda, for example, use their earnings to provide allowances and spending money for the younger children. Jo March intends to take Beth to the mountains for her health with the money she earns from her writing.

None of these characters wants to have to take charity, preferring to help themselves or do without except in emergencies. Joanda knows she does not want the Christmas goose Mrs. Shands gives them, but they have little else to eat. She finally has to go and ask for fuel because her mother and Lolly are sick. She refuses to go to school for a time because she knows her father cannot

afford to pay for the book she dropped in the mud. Mary Call and her family keep an itemized list of the things they eat at Kiser's while they nurse him through pneumonia so that he will not think they stole the food. Later, Mary Call refuses to let Kiser give her and Romey and Ima Dean food after he and Devola are married. Dicey and her grandmother did not want to take welfare; but even with Dicey working and James taking a paper route, Gram simply cannot support four children without help.

Above all, these characters believe and demonstrate to young readers that the family can survive today. These are not rebellious, spoiled teenagers who hate adults and their siblings. All of these characters have had less than perfect parents, but they still care for them and can even forgive them their faults. Joanda can accept that her father's ignorance caused many of their financial problems and that her mother is reluctant to accept some of the things she is learning in school. Dicey feels sadness more than hate for the father who abandoned them and the mother who is mentally ill. Mary Call finally gets to the point in Roy Luther's long illness where she wishes for it to be over, but she tries very hard to keep things as he wanted them to be. Mary Clayborne loves both of her parents dearly, but learns to cope with death and illness when she has to. Never do any of these characters think only of themselves; they are motivated by their sense of what is good for the family.

Mary Clayborne, like Jo March, is finally relieved of her responsibility at home so that she can move out on her own. And like Jo, she chooses to keep in close proximity to her family, even though the roads are so bad that she cannot get back home easily. Mary Call stays at home with the younger children, but Devola and Kiser are close by. Dicey and Joanda continue to live at home. In each, case from Little Women to the present, the family survives whatever crises befall them. And even as the girls begin to marry and move out, there is still a sense of family closeness.

The female protagonists of these stories do not fit the mold into which Katy Carr was forced. Sometimes their actions are unconventional to say the least. But these girls and their families find ways they can stay together as a family unit. Throughout its struggles each family gains strength from knowing that its members care about and will help each other. These female characters, with their determination and strong personalities, find ways to keep some of the basic traditional values, but are able to ignore or change codes of behavior that do not fit their situations. In each case the female protagonist concentrates on the family's immediate needs for food and shelter and does not worry too much about superfluous social conventions such as style of dress or etiquette. These females may seem tough or uncouth, but they and their families survive, which has to be more important than

observing the social niceties.

Even though there have been changes in the family life novel over the last hundred years, the focus of these novels has remained the same: survival of the family unit. Didacticism is still present in these stories, but it is more subtle in the twentieth century works than in the earlier works. The works from this century focus on what Townsend called "smart values", values that make sense because they provide the characters and their families a framework for getting along together and for dealing with people outside their immediate families. These values include honesty, caring for family members and accepting their strengths and weaknesses, making the most of educational opportunities. In addition, these modern families value hard work and their independence. Readers see in these works that the smart values are useful tools for making a satisfying life. These stories do not specifically preach any creed or doctrine, but the lessons are learned by realistic adolescent characters and are available for the reader to accept or reject as part of her own life. Even if the reader does not apply ideas from the stories to her own life, she is at least aware that there are some viable options available to families and that some families do successfully work through their problems.

These stories all teach the value of family life. However, in order for an adolescent character to take charge of the family, there must be a weakness in the

family structure to begin with. Sometimes this weakness is a void caused by death of a parent, the prolonged absence of a parent, or even by abandonment. None of the stories discussed in this paper have a strong patriarchal family; in fact, it is the death, absence, or weakness of the father which allows the female protagonists to take charge of the families. Some of the family units are guided by strong mother figures like Mrs. March or Mrs. Clayborne, but these characters are extremely benevolent and allow the girls a great deal of freedom. They provide guidance but are not dictatorial. Some of the family units have little adult help at all. However, the female adolescent protagonist, whether she has adult guidance or not, knows that the family must be kept together and does whatever she has to do to accomplish her goal.

How much choice the character has about her actions in keeping the family together and in her personal life is the major difference between the modern family story and the more traditional domestic story for girls. In the domestic story, the reader sees how the girl is forced to give up her dreams and accept her role as housekeeper and child-minder. In the more modern family stories, using Jo from Little Women as the beginning of the tradition, the girls can save their families without sacrificing their individuality and independence. These girls are not perfect; they do not have all the answers, and they have to work very hard for the solutions they do find.



Elizabeth Janeway's description of Jo March could sum up the characters of Mary Clayborne, Joanda Hutley, Mary Call Luther, and Dicey Tillerman as well. Each of these females is a character who makes reality "the dream of growing up into full humanity with all its potentialities instead of into limited femininity: of looking after oneself and pay one's way and doing effective work in the real world" (255).

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