

# ***Performing Childhood in Louisa May Alcott's An Old-Fashioned Girl (1869)***

## ***La representación de la infancia en An Old-Fashioned Girl de Louisa May Alcott (1869)***

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### **Resumen**

La infancia es una etapa fascinante de la vida y un fenómeno, sobre todo en lo que se refiere a su representación en constante cambio dentro del campo de la literatura infantil. Varios investigadores se han planteado preguntas sobre la intrincada relación entre el escritor adulto y el público al que se dirige, los niños, cuestionando si la caligrafía adulta incorpora una imagen deseada e idealizada de los niños. La era victoriana suele ser anunciada como la «época dorada» de la literatura infantil, y *An Old-Fashioned Girl* de Louisa May Alcott se destaca como un texto clave de este período. En este artículo, exploraré la representación de la infancia en esta novela seminal, centrándose específicamente en el aspecto performativo de la infancia. La primera sección examinará las diferencias socioeconómicas entre los dos protagonistas, revelando sus distintos hábitos en relación con sus intereses, educación y vestimenta. La segunda sección comparará las disparidades de género entre los personajes masculinos y femeninos y analizará las expectativas masculinas impuestas a las mujeres en su entorno. La última sección se centrará en el valor de la ética laboral e indagará si la estabilidad financiera garantiza la realización emocional. A través de estos análisis, el artículo sostiene que la novela de Alcott transmite una visión idealizada de la infancia, reflejando las perspectivas de la autora sobre las cualidades de una niña «deseada».

**Palabras clave:** Literatura infantil, época Victoriana, *An Old Fashioned Girl*, infancia, rural, opulencia.

### **Abstract**

Childhood is a fascinating stage of life and a phenomenon, not least in its evolving depiction in children's literature. Various scholars have raised questions about the intricate relationship between the adult author and their intended child audience, questioning whether the adult penmanship incorporates a desired and idealized image of children. The Victorian era is often heralded as the «Golden age» of children's literature, with Louisa May Alcott's *An Old-Fashioned Girl* standing out as a key text from this period. In this article, I will explore the depiction of childhood in this seminal novel by specifically focusing on the performative aspect of childhood.

The first section will examine the socioeconomic differences between the two protagonists, by focusing on their differing habits in terms of interests, education and clothing. Section two will be dedicated to comparing the gender disparities between the male and female characters and discuss the male expectations imposed on women in their environment. The last section addresses the value of work ethic and explores whether financial stability ensures emotional fulfilment. Through these analyses, the article argues that Alcott's novel conveys an idealized vision of childhood, reflecting the author's perspectives on the qualities of a «desired» child.

**Keywords:** Children's literature, Victorian era, *An Old Fashioned Girl*, childhood, rural, opulent.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Childhood, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is «the state of being a child; the stage of life or period during which one is a child from birth to puberty».<sup>1</sup> It is a word associated with certain feelings or traits, often evoking innocence, imagination and mischievousness, but sometimes even disobedience, squareness and stubbornness. Regardless of those semantic associations, the stage of childhood is a moment of life which certainly all adults have experienced. An inevitable stage of the lifecycle which differs greatly from individual to individual depending on their geographical location, gender or social class, as well as on the time period in which they lived. The view, and more specifically, the idea of childhood, has developed dramatically throughout the years and time periods. Aristotle, the Greek society and its educational institutions viewed children as inconvenient creatures, morally unskilled and selfish<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, Catholics shared these beliefs about children and their behavior, with the exception of Jesus as a child<sup>3</sup> and some other saints. It would not be until the mid-eighteenth century that the view of children would start to alter largely because of Rousseau's work *Émile ou De l'éducation (Émile, or On education)*<sup>4</sup>. Its publication in 1762 meant a shift as to how children were perceived, correlating more closely to the modern perception of children - little creatures who are full of life, creative and energetic. Likewise, the ideas of innocence and vulnerability were introduced, and, since then, they have equally remained key components of the traditional view of childhood.

<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, Childhood (OED). (n.d.). *Oxford English Dictionary*. from <<https://www.nypl.org/research/collections/articles-databases/oxford-english-dictionary-oed>>

<sup>2</sup> See Giouli KOROBILI's *Aristotle. On Youth and Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration 1-6. With Translation, Introduction and Interpretation*, Cham, Springer, 2022, and Mark GOLDEN's *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015 (1990).

<sup>3</sup> See Paula S. FASS's *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood: In History and Society*, New York, Macmillan Reference USA, 2004 and Robert CABELL's *Past and Present Treatment of Roman Catholic Children in Scotland, by the Board of Supervision for Relief of the Poor; Unveiled by the Late Return to an Order of the House of Lords, and Other Document*, London, Williams & Norgate, 1863.

<sup>4</sup> J. J. Rousseau's *Émile ou de L'Éducation*, Amsterdam, Chez Jean Néulme, 1762.

Stepping into the Victorian era, dating from 1837-1901, children faced rather different circumstances, naturally, depending on their location and social class<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, many children were victims of harsh living conditions for there were numerous orphans, both rich and poor, as a result of their parents' dying from common diseases such as cholera and typhus<sup>6</sup>, and mothers dying in childbirth. The Victorian era was marked by the British empire and colonialism growing stronger, the industrial revolution creating a shift in labor, as well as a revolution within the culture and arts, not least within the field of children's literature<sup>7</sup>. Children were especially portrayed as innocent, curious and purified creatures and frequently storytelling was focused on orphans. Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*<sup>8</sup> and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*<sup>9</sup> are examples of novels in which the protagonists are orphans. Literature serves as a form of historical source and insight, as it provides the reader with the mere pleasure of diving into the world of storytelling. Specifically, children's stories typically provide a window through which to look into the realm of creativity and imagination. The theme of childhood is fascinating and its portrayal during the Victorian era has come to be known as the «golden age» of its genre, providing a literary canon of works<sup>10</sup>. Many of these works are still being widely read by both children and scholars. Lewis Carroll's tale *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*<sup>11</sup> and J.M. Barrie's mischievous story of *Peter Pan*<sup>12</sup> are two examples.

In exploring the realms of Victorian children's literature, we encounter various means of depicting the child, or rather the idea of the child. Not only do the novels reflect the societal norms and values of the time, but they also offer insight into the transitioning perceptions of childhood. Numerous scholars have burrowed into this field, such as Kimberley Reynolds in her work *Children's Literature: From the Fin de Siècle to the New Millennium* (2012)<sup>13</sup>, Philippe Ariès in *Centuries of Childhood* (1996)<sup>14</sup>, Collin Heywood in *A History of Childhood: Children*

<sup>5</sup> Judith FLANDERS, *Inside the Victorian Home: A portrait of domestic life in Victorian England*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Sergio TAPIA, «The Victorian Orphan», *Victorian orphans*. (n.d.). URL: <<https://utminers.utep.edu/aburkhartsmeier/Victorian%20Orphans.htm>>

<sup>7</sup> Laura PETERS, *Orphan texts: Victorian orphans, culture and empire*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Charles DICKENS's *Oliver Twist*, Cambridge, Riverside Press, 1874.

<sup>9</sup> Mark TWAIN's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Hartford, The American Publishing Company, 1881.

<sup>10</sup> Oxford English Dictionary «Childhood» (OED), *Oxford English Dictionary*, (n.d.), URL: <<https://www.nypl.org/research/collections/articles-databases/oxford-english-dictionary-oed>>

<sup>11</sup> Lewis CARROLL's tale *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1898.

<sup>12</sup> James Matthew BARRIE & May Clarisa Gillington BYRON, *Peter Pan & Wendy*, London, Charles Scribner's Sons.

<sup>13</sup> Kimberley REYNOLDS, *Children's Literature: From the Fin de Siècle to the New Millennium*, Horndon: Northcote, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Philippe ARIÈS, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, New York Pimlico, 1996 (Vintage Books, 1962).

and *Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (2017)<sup>15</sup> and James Marten in *The History of Childhood: A Very Short Introduction* (2018)<sup>16</sup>, seeking to analyze further elements and themes of the depiction of Victorian childhood specifically. Among them, British author and researcher Fiona McCulloch provides a unique viewpoint on the multifaceted perspectives of twentieth century children's literature. In her publication *The Fictional Role of Childhood in Victorian and Early Twentieth-Century Children's Literature* (2004)<sup>17</sup>, she delves into the realm of childhood literature, analyzing works in an insightful and substantial manner, categorizing them into various sections. McCulloch is distinct in her approach to children's literature, for she offers a comprehensive examination of both societal and cultural aspects of works. Her framework offers a nuanced and methodological lens, classifying seven distinct approaches to childhood literature. The different approaches include constructing childhood, misrepresentations of childhood, performing childhood, protecting innocence, purifying childhood, Edenic childhood and lastly, desiring innocence.

In addition to offering a thorough analytical approach, in her research McCulloch concentrates on the intricate link that exists in children's literature between the adult narrator and the young character. For instance, she contends that «children's literature, being literature, is first and foremost an adult fantasy»<sup>18</sup>. Equally, she discusses the idea of childhood being depicted as an «ideological manifestation» within British culture during the Victorian era and explains that it was embraced as the epitome of innocence, an aspect earlier mentioned as being of high importance during that era<sup>19</sup>. Drawing upon studies from other childhood scholars such as Jaqueline Rose (*The Case of Peter Pan: Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, 1994)<sup>20</sup>, McCulloch discusses the almost absurd aspect of adult narrators writing children's books, highlighting the inevitable factor of the narrator constructing a desired image of the child, where for example the trait of innocence can be found. The penmanship of the adult undoubtedly raises questions about the relationship between the writer and the intended audience, in this case children and, naturally, the performative aspect of childhood becomes a relevant reflection of the books under study.

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<sup>15</sup> Collin HEYWOOD in *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*, Medford (MA), Polity Press, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> James MARTEN, *The History of Childhood: A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Fiona MCCULLOCH, *The fictional role of childhood in Victorian and early twentieth century children's literature*, Lewiston, N.Y, Edwin Mellen Press, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> MCCULLOCH, *The fictional role of childhood in Victorian and early twentieth century children's literature*, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> MCCULLOCH, *The fictional role of childhood in Victorian and early twentieth century children's literature*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Jaqueline ROSE, *The Case of Peter Pan: Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

Alcott's novel, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*<sup>21</sup> was written in the year 1869. It gears around fourteen-year-old Polly, who visits her friend Fanny, who lives a lavish and opulent life in the city of Boston, a life that is utterly different from hers –since she comes from the countryside where she lives in an «unfashionable» and simple manner. Upon arrival at her friend's house, Polly is baffled by the cosmopolitan lifestyle, the way of dressing and other general habits of the Shaw family. At times, she feels displaced and uncomfortable in this environment, and even receives remarks about her sense of clothing or customs that are considered odd, or even unsophisticated, by Fanny and her opulent friends. Despite their differences, Polly and Fanny form an amiable and deep relationship and Polly remains true to her values and manners during her stay with the Shaw family.

## 2. THE SIMPLICITY OF COUNTRY LIFE VS. THE OPULENCE OF CITY LIFE

The title of the book is referenced right away, and the reader can see how Polly and Fanny's class identities differ from one another. «Fanny went to a fashionable school, where the young ladies were so busy with their French, German, and Italian, that there was no time for good English»<sup>22</sup>. Here, Fanny is described as attending a «fashionable» school which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, can be defined as «observant of or following the fashion; dressing or behaving in conformity with the standard of elegance current in upper-class society»<sup>23</sup>, and thereby indirectly suggesting that Polly attends a school of a different kind —namely, an unfashionable school located in a rural area. Similarly, Fanny's superior education is reinforced by mentioning the teaching of Modern Languages, in contrast to Polly, who appears to merely be studying English.

During the late 19th century, French was viewed as an exclusive language, generally accessible to the aristocracy and its being mentioned in the novel establishes a clear socioeconomic difference between Polly and Fanny<sup>24</sup>. Additionally, Polly's «good English» equally suggests her perceived superiority of the English language, and that the introduction of Modern Languages teaching would possibly decrease the status or knowledge of English. Furthermore, the sentence «I should be afraid, if all the girls dress as finely as you do and know as much»<sup>25</sup> uttered by Polly upon her arrival, suggests that the contrasting education

<sup>21</sup> Louisa May ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, London, Mills & Boon, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Oxford English Dictionary «Fashionable», *Oxford English Dictionary*, (n.d.), URL: <<https://www.oed.com/?tl=true>>

<sup>24</sup> Amanda GOODRICH «Understanding a language of “aristocracy”, 1700–1850», *The Historical Journal*, 56/2, (2013), pp. 369–98. DOI: 10.1017/s0018246x12000635

<sup>25</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 4.

and upbringings may result in an exclusion, both in terms of intellectuality and physical appearance; two factors that are deeply affected by one's socioeconomic class<sup>26</sup>.

Moreover, the contrasts between Polly's childhood and Fanny's respectively are omnipresent; equally concerning their general manners, habits and even their sense of fashion. Apart from considerations upon the more evident differences regarding education and its connection to social class, the novel englobes reflections about childhood, specifically, and the idea of a child versus a young lady.

"How different?" asked Polly again, for she liked to understand things.

"Well, you dress like a little girl, for one thing."

"I am a little girl; so why shouldn't I?"...

"You are fourteen; and we consider ourselves young ladies at that age" continued Fanny<sup>27</sup>.

Here, a clear contrast is established in terms of how Polly and Fanny reflect upon their age and childhood; Polly still views herself as a child, while Fanny already considers herself a young lady. This theme is addressed further by Fanny's grandmother, Madame Shaw, while conversing with Polly, «we were little folks till eighteen or so; worked and studied, dressed and played, like children...»<sup>28</sup>. Not only does this reveal, naturally, the customs of the grandmother, but it equally reinforces the old-fashioned manners and beliefs that Polly shares; namely permitting the stage of childhood to last longer, and not feeling rushed to enter adulthood. Furthermore, this aspect of Polly's seems not only to be greatly approved of by other adults in her environment, but equally encouraged and endorsed by them.

"Do you really think I look nice?" and Polly's face brightened,  
for she valued the old lady's opinion very much.

"Yes, my dear; you look just as I like to see a child of your age look"<sup>29</sup>.

The grandmother refers to Polly as a «child» in this instance, rather than using the phrase «young lady», which Fanny employs to describe herself, and illustrates the contrasting views in terms of perception of girlhood as well as attire. Later in the novel, in the *Six Years Afterward* chapter of the book, Fanny and Polly re-connect at the age of twenty and exchange reflections on their shared pasts and present. In relation to this, Polly's physical appearance is commented upon. «The freedom of her childhood gave to Polly that good gift, health, and every movement was full of the vigor, grace, and ease, which nothing else

<sup>26</sup> Michael KRAUS et al, «Signs of social class: The experience of economic inequality in Everyday Life». *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12/3, 2017, pp. 422–35, DOI: 10.1177/1745691616673192.

<sup>27</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 57.

can so surely bestow»<sup>30</sup>. On another occasion, Polly's extended childhood is presented as something that not only allowed her to fully appreciate it during her younger years, but it is also implied to have had a long-term impact on her health and appearance, suggesting that one's childhood has significant long-term consequences. Finally, it is important to remember that a person's clothes naturally affect their freedom and movement; Polly has been able to play and move around as a child should, because of her modest wardrobe.

Aside from clothing, Polly shows other interests when it comes to another essential aspect of childhood; namely playing. When Polly converses with Fanny's younger sister Maud, the little sister exclaims «I'm tired of evwything, 'cause my toys are all bwoke, and my dolls are all sick...»<sup>31</sup>. Firstly, this excerpt reveals the wealthy lifestyle of the Shaw family, for children who had access to sophisticated toys, and especially beautiful dolls, came almost exclusively from rich households during the Victorian era.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it reveals the somewhat spoiled manners of six-year-old Maud as it suggests that she needs toys to play with or satisfy her needs, hinting at a lack of imagination, perhaps caused by the abundance of toys and choices. Following this comment, Polly responds by suggesting cutting the existing clothes on the dolls and then remodel them, whereupon Maud responds «"Yes; I love to cut." And Maud's face brightened; for destructiveness is one of the earliest traits of childhood»<sup>33</sup>. Here, Alcott directly addresses childhood, and the extract suggests that Polly's playfulness, and child-like manners have a positive impact on her and that, through embracing her age, she prolongs and enjoys her childhood to a higher extent. Similarly, Polly does not show any signs of shame related to playing with dolls and she even rejects Fanny's remark about the shame that should be associated with doll-playing, «I ain't ashamed, for it keeps Maud happy, and will please my sister Kitty; and I think sewing is better than prinking or reading silly novels»<sup>34</sup>. Polly also responds slightly defiantly, pointing out that «reading silly novels» is not nearly as entertaining as doll-playing, demonstrating the differing interests of the two girls.

### 3. THE PREVAILING GENDER ROLES

Alcott is swift with embedding many topics in the novel's first chapter, among them the perceived gender differences between the characters. «If I was the president, I'd make a law to shut up all boys till they were grown; for they certainly are the most provoking toads in the world»,

<sup>30</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> For more information about access to toys during the Victorian era, see <https://victorianchildren.org/victorian-toys-and-victorian-games/>.

<sup>33</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 24.

is a quote from Fanny from the second page of the book, referring to her brother Tom<sup>35</sup>. As the novel proceeds, the «traditional» sibling relationship that Fanny and Tom share is exposed in a rather stereotypical manner in terms of gender, and Tom is depicted as egocentric, provoking and even slightly arrogant. «He occasionally refreshed himself by teasing her, to see how she'd stand it, and caused Polly much anguish of spirit, for she never knew where he would take her next»<sup>36</sup>. Here, Tom is portrayed as unreliable and teasing, causing a sense of unease for Polly. In connection to this, Polly reflects upon his behavior, «she often wondered why his mother didn't pet him as she did the girls; why his father ordered him about as if he was born rebel, and took so little interest in his only son»<sup>37</sup>. Mrs. Shaw shows her daughters Maud and Fanny greater maternal presence, but she does not devote the same level of attention or affection to her son Tom – especially not physical affection. This is further reinforced with the following excerpt «for boys seldom have confidences of this sort except with their mothers, and Mrs. Shaw had never found the key to her son's heart»<sup>38</sup>. The last part of the sentence suggests both a physical and, above all, an emotional distance that Mrs. Shaw has with her son, revealing a distant mother-son relationship that lacks confidence and transparency<sup>39</sup>.

Furthermore, apart from lacking a nurturing mother figure, Tom is portrayed in a rather archetypal way regarding his vulnerability and strength. After having hurt his head and upon resting on the sofa, «he set his teeth, clenched his hands, lay quite still and bore it like a man»<sup>40</sup>. Here, the excerpt «bore it like a man» suggests that men are both emotionally and physically strong, and that Tom's injury is appropriately handled by essentially ignoring the pain, hinting at how men are perceived and, more specifically, at how their pain is supposed to be tackled. Moreover, the head of the family, Mr. Shaw, is equally portrayed in a way which reveals the gender roles of the Victorian era; depicting an absent father figure who does not have a loving or close relationship with his children, and who likewise has various expectations of the female figures around him. «Mr. Shaw had been so busy getting rich, that he had not found time to teach his children to love him... »<sup>41</sup>. This reveals a rather stereotypical reality of the Victorian era, the one in which the males are the hard-working breadwinners, while the females stay at home to take care of the household and the children<sup>42</sup>. Further, Mr. Shaw is very fond of Polly and her old-fashioned manners and is depict-

<sup>35</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth LANGLAND, «Patriarchal Ideology and Marginal Motherhood in Victorian Novels by Women», *Studies in the Novel*, 19/3, 1987, pp 381-94.

<sup>40</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 25.

<sup>42</sup> Leonore DAVIDOFF's «Class and gender in Victorian England: The diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick». *Feminist Studies*, 5/1, 1979, pp 86-141, DOI: 10.2307/3177552.



ed as having a closer relationship with her than with his own children. «Coming home late, he liked to see a curly, brown head watching at the window; to find his slippers ready, his paper in its place, and a pair of willing feet, eager to wait upon him. “I wish my Fanny was more like her”»<sup>43</sup>. Not only does this extract reveal the affection Mr. Shaw feels for Polly, but it shows an affection and sense of proximity appearing even stronger than the one he experiences with his own children. Likewise, the excerpt hints at how he expects to be received after a day of work; his slippers being placed correctly in their place, the newspaper placed in its usual place. The reader infers that these actions are all expected to be dealt with; by women or girls in his environment, before Mr. Shaw returns home from work.

#### 4. THE VALUE AND UNDERSTANDING OF WORK ETHIC

In addition to tackling issues of socioeconomic class, the mannerisms that follow, and gender disparities, *An Old-Fashioned Girl* also imparts the universal lesson of the importance of a strong work ethic and of understanding the value of money. Despite Polly often being depicted as somewhat childish in relation to Fanny, both in terms of clothing and interests, she does appear to be more mature and reflective regarding the value of money and work. In chapter three, Fanny suggests that Polly should buy a new pair of bronze boots.

“There’s one thing you must have, and that is, bronze boots,” said Fan, impressively.

“Why must I, when I’ve got enough without?”

“Because it’s the fashion to have them, and you can’t be finished off properly without. I’m going to get a pair, and so must you”<sup>44</sup>.

This extract reveals Fanny’s unconcerned relationship toward money as well as it shows her alienation toward material goods; she judges it justifiable to buy a brand-new pair of boots merely because «it’s the fashion to have them». This also implies that Fanny has a consumerist mindset, as it would take a substantial amount of money to continuously purchase items that are in style. Following this comment, Polly tells her that she has brought ten dollars, money meant to be spent on presents for her family. Nevertheless, she proceeds to buy the boots, and it is one of the very few instances when she appears to feel peer-pressured by Fanny, to adapt to her lavish lifestyle, but quickly afterwards regrets her decision when she comes home and sees the lonely one-dollar bill in her purse. «I’ll go and ask grandma what I can do; for I’ve got to make something for everyone, I must begin

<sup>43</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 22.

right away, or I shan't get done»<sup>45</sup>. Here, Polly's regret is evident; she feels self-centered for letting herself buy a gift meant for her enjoyment and then chooses to make handcrafted presents for her family to compensate for her impulsive purchase. This extract reveals Polly's and Fanny's contrasting views and perceptions of money; another spontaneous and unconsidered spending goes unnoticed by Fanny, because she has the means to spend, while Polly has a sensation of regret and the need to compensate for her spending.

Besides the established economic disparities between Polly and Fanny in terms of understanding and sharing the value of money, there is also a discrepancy regarding the general view of work ethic. In chapter three, entitled *Polly's troubles*, she starts to reflect upon her stay at the Shaw's place, feeling «like a stranger in a strange land» and accounts for her boredom that is caused by not doing anything proper and productive other than «lounge and gossip and dress»<sup>46</sup>. She continues her reflections, «she was much impressed by the luxuries all about her, enjoyed them, wished she owned them, and wondered why the Shaws were not a happier family»<sup>47</sup>. This last sentence suggests that Polly cannot understand why the Shaw family, enjoying that high economical privilege, seem, nevertheless, to be unhappy or unfulfilled. She perceives that their economical and material privileges create a luxurious facete of a happy and gratified life, however the family lacks the emotional presence and ties with one another.

The Shaw's family's lack of employment and their emotional detachment from one another may be interpreted as evidence of their lack of a grater meaning and purpose in life. Also, Polly's views force the reader to consider whether wealth inevitably leads to happiness, implying that it does not. Lastly, in connection to this thought, Polly utters that she «felt like a little wood-bird shut up in a gilded cage», entailing that she feels confined in an atmosphere where the opulent surface carries greater weight and importance than the deeper emotional fulfillment and freedom. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, «gilded cage» is defined as «a luxurious but restrictive environment or situation»; an environment in which Polly appears to be residing<sup>48</sup>.

## 5. CONCLUSION

After exploring the portrayal of childhood in *An-Old-Fashioned Girl*, it becomes evident that the novel offers rich and multifaceted perspectives on childhood. By conducting

<sup>45</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> ALCOTT, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Oxford English Dictionary «Gilded Cage», *Oxford English Dictionary*, (n.d.). URL <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=gilded%20cage&tl=true>.

a thorough examination of the work concerning gender roles, socioeconomic factors, and aspects more relevant to children, like play and imagination, the novel offers valuable and captivating insights into the Victorian era and its values.

Alcott's 1869 novel *An-Old-Fashioned Girl*, through Polly Milton's visit to her wealthy friend Fanny, presents us with a childhood reflective of socioeconomic and educational differences. Polly's adult surroundings continually value and endorse her old-fashioned manners, typically associated with juvenile behavior, drawing upon a sense of nostalgia as well as encouraging the idea of «letting children be children».

At times, the reader gets the impression that the two main characters, Polly and Fanny, are depicted in a rather stereotypical and even, occasionally, exaggerated way; Polly is portrayed as the poorer girl from the countryside with a strong work ethic, in contrast to Fanny who studies French, gossips, and buys the newest pair of bronze boots because it is the latest fashion. This might be read as an attempt by the author, Louisa May Alcott, to impose the varied impacts of social class inequalities, or could equally be viewed as moral guidance to be truthfully sensible. In a similar vein, the novel challenges the notion that material possessions and wealth guarantees happiness. This relates to the previously discussed idea that the adult penmanship unavoidably projects a desired image of a child, in this case the image of the old-fashioned and juvenile Polly, at the same time as the author more or less inadvertently incorporates messages and lessons into her writing. There are disparities in terms of gender roles, however they are presented in a somewhat clichéd way; Mr. Shaw being the distant breadwinner and Tom being the provocative and purportedly strong character. On one side, Polly emphasizes the value of emotional fulfilment and purpose rather than material goods, which Fanny, on the other side, is mainly interested in.

The novel has been categorized into a specific perspective on childhood using Fiona McCulloch's concepts as she categorises them in her book *The fictional role of childhood in Victorian and early twentieth-century children's literature*. The character of Polly, an old-fashioned rural girl with a strong work ethic, is rather performative, and as such, *An Old-Fashioned Girl* has been viewed through McCulloch's lens of performing childhood.

The portrayal of childhood in literature remains a very interesting and current topic, especially due to the constantly shifting perspective on children and their role and significance in society. Since children's novels are consistently written by the adult narrator, this necessitates additional wariness and analysis concerning how the children and their behavior are depicted, as the narrator will unconsciously incorporate or impose a desired image of the child. In that sense, there is still a lot of research to be done in this field. It is also critical to preserve the interest in previous literature for children by establishing, for instance, required reading of classical children's novels in schools, given the constant threat of digitalization within education, potentially decreasing the reading habits of children. This is necessary because classical children's novels, especially nineteenth-century ones, such as

*An Old-Fashioned Girl*, convey the idea that childhood is a time marked by enchantment, imagination and personal development.

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