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Henry James, Louisa May Alcott, and the child

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Abstract

Among Henry James's early book reviews, there is only one dealing with literature for the young. James's opinion on Louisa May Alcott's *Eight Cousins* is negative, yet the review deals rather with the didactic outcome of the novel and not with its literary aspects. James's review is especially intriguing as it shows his attitude to matters which are definitely not the concern of his subsequent fiction – his approach to the upbringing of children.

Key words

Henry James, book reviews, Louisa May Alcott, children, children's literature

Henry James, Louisa May Alcott i dziecko

Abstrakt

Pośród recenzji literackich, które Henry James pisał w młodości, tylko jedna dotyczy literatury dziecięcej. James ostro krytykuje powieść Louisy May Alcott *Eight Cousins*, lecz jego negatywna opinia skiero-

wana jest raczej na dydaktyczne aspekty książki, a nie jej literacką wartość. Recenzja Jamesa jest tym bardziej intrygująca, że zajmuje się sprawą wychowania dzieci – czyli tematem, który w późniejszych dziełach tego autora się nie pojawi.

Słowa kluczowe

Henry James, recenzje literackie, Louisa May Alcott, dzieci, literatura dziecięca

Despite appearances, Henry James was not born middle-aged. Some evidence of this fact might emerge from biographical materials, perhaps even in a photograph or two, portraying a boy who later allegedly became the writer we now recognize – the writer whose best works appeared in his late middle age, works that could scare a student of literature more than Melville's *Moby Dick*. James's early writing is less formidable, and less respected at the same time. His first novel, *Watch and Ward* (1871), was deemed "an embarrassment to James's 'career,' best left forgotten, […] a failed work of art" (Henke 1995: 257). And this criticism is more or less in keeping with what critics (including James himself) have been saying about the book ever since it appeared. In this Pygmalion story, we have a picture of both a child and a woman, and yet neither is particularly well developed or memorable.

Yet even before he began publishing his own fiction, James published reviews of works by others, and in these he began to construct what might be seen as an aesthetic – one that began to lay down ground rules as to how to deal, for example, with characters very unlike himself: women and children. Interestingly, these early published pieces are book reviews – predominantly very severe – written for *North American Review* and *Nation*. Two of these reviews, unsigned, appeared as early as January 1865, when James was 21 years old (Davidson 2005: 11). The young James, still free from his own literary produc-

tions, and much before the time when he will suffer from critical condemnation himself, criticizes other fiction writers freely and with gusto. Many of the reviews written in the 1860s deal with fiction written by women, the fashionable then sentimentalists. Thus, Anne Moncure (Crane) Seemuller's first novel is "almost [...] worthless" (James 1984: 588) and "mortally dull", yet her second one is better because "not more than half that long" (1984: 595). Harriet Elizabeth (Prescott) Spofford's writing "is characterized by that venturesome, unprincipled literary spirit, defiant alike of wisdom and taste" (1984: 603). Elizabeth Stoddard's one book is "a thoroughly bad novel," while another is better, but "almost brutally crude," "feebly conceived," and "violently written" (1984: 614-615). Adeline Dutton Whitney receives a praise of entertaining a "fanciful theory of life," yet James modifies his praise, a few sentences later, deeming the theory "neither new nor very profound" (1984: 635). Rebecca Harding Davis's "intention has always been good, but the execution [...] monstrous." Davis's – and other women writers' – "lachrymose sentimentalism" appears to anger young James the most (1984: 221). Such a sentimental novel was also Louisa May Alcott's first, *Moods*, towards which James is, perhaps, slightly more positive, barely allowing himself to comment that its "author has been somewhat maligned" (1984: 189).

Today, Alcott is remembered predominantly as an author for young audiences. In the 1860s James is not interested in children – his attention at twenty-something is directed towards graver matters, and if children appear in his own writings then, they are not treated kindly. Significantly he observes in 1865 (Dutton review), "There are, of course, few things so charming as the innocence of childhood, just as there are few things as interesting as the experience of manhood" (James 1984: 637), dismissing the subject of childhood with his favor-

ite damning expressions – “innocent” and “charming”.[1] Understandably, for one familiar with sentimental writing of the times, James is peeved by “degradation of sentiment by making children responsible for it”; later, he famously exclaims: “Heaven defend us from the puerile!” (Whitney review; James 1984: 637). In *Hawthorne*, his subject’s “childish years” and “infantine career” are treated in passing (1984: 330), while “infant mind” is referred to with disdain (1984: 346). Women will be granted their point of view in James’s “middle phase” (Henke 1995: 279); likewise, James will look at a child more sympathetically only in his later years. Thus, James’s review of Alcott’s novel for children, *Eight Cousins* (1875) appears exceptional and intriguing. In the whole body of James’s “American writers” reviews, there is only this one piece that deals with literature expressly meant for the young. James treated Alcott’s tale for children with injustice, to be sure, but looking at the review with some care might give a clue to a larger strategy. James dismisses Alcott's work because he had an overall disdain for children’s literature and for children in general – an empyrean stance which, while understandable at this stage in his career, hints at a vague but possible desire to detach himself from his own childhood, or at least from his inner child. Interestingly, this desire diminished over time.

Before moving on to the discussion of the *Eight Cousins* review, it might be useful to look at some examples of James’s early and later juvenile characters. *What Maisie Knew* (1897), “The Turn of the Screw” (1898), and a few years earlier, “The Pupil” (1891) are the most familiar (and often – taught) texts in which children play central roles, carry complex personalities, and are treated with sympathy. However, there are less known, and at the same time more intriguing instances of James’s child characters or of their role in his fiction. In *The Awkward*

[1] In his 1879 biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne, James applies these words to his famous predecessor and thus wins the epithets of “condescension” and “patronization”, forever attached to his *Hawthorne*.

Age (1899), James expresses his old sentiments towards children, although in the following he gives an impression of being more funny than disapproving. Actually, the passage in which two gentlemen talk about a family of friends might be one of the funniest of James's rare instances of humor:

> "There are four children?" his friend went on.
>
> "The elder boy, whom you saw and who in his way is a wonder, the older girl, whom you must see, and two youngsters, male and female, whom you mustn't." [...]
>
> "You mean the youngsters are – unfortunate?"
>
> "No, they're only, like all the modern young, I think, mysteries, terrible little baffling mysteries." (James 1899)

James shies from such mysteries; there are other ones that interest him more. However, the humor of the above passage lies (mainly) not in the last sentence, but in the word "unfortunate" – after the dash. The reader imagines the gentle, elderly Mr. Longdon, inclining his head and lowering his voice, when the terrible suggestion that the family's youngest members are mentally or physically deformed, crosses his mind. But they are not deformed. They are just regular brats.

Children in James's early fiction appear seldom. A curious example is an 1869 story, "Gabrielle de Bergerac," which speaks of love between people from distant social classes – an aristocratic girl and her brother's tutor. The secondary narrator here is the brother, who seems a likable enough child-character, sympathetic to the plight of the lovers, and smart. However, even though he speaks of the times of his childhood, he is an old man now, and we cannot treat his voice as a perspective of a child. Much stranger is an 1867 story, "My Friend Bingham". It is not a good story, almost unnoticed by critics, and deemed "unconvincing" by one:

> Bingham is, so he thinks, a confirmed bachelor. While out hunting, he accidentally kills a little boy. He extends what comfort he can to the boy's widowed mother and eventually marries her.

> Though barely conceivable as an episode in a long narrative, this sequence of action is too brief to develop the qualities of character introduced as central in Bingham (McElderry 1949: 285).

McElderry speaks of the story as a whole, but it is the treatment of the child that is "unconvincing" – or worse – it chills and frightens at the same time. James is not interested in the child whom he makes a character – or rather a pretext – in this story; he passes lightly over the death of the boy, describes his mother's reaction as hysterical, almost an overreaction, and swiftly moves on to the problem of the adults, that is, a relation of the killer and the mother of the child (who eventually marry despite society's outrage). The boy's death is an incident of the plot, a mechanical device for the development of events. In "My Friend Bingham" we have first-person narration – the unnamed friend tells the story. Perhaps it is his perspective, then, that makes the tale disturbing – the man is not bothered by the tragedy, and the emotional reactions of the mother make him uncomfortable. James hides safely behind his narrator.

Yet three decades later, in *The Other House*, he returns to a similar theme; the death of a child reverberates in the later novel in a way that is disturbing and sinister. It is not an accidental killing: a little girl is destroyed by a mentally deranged, scheming woman. The crime goes unpunished, as the community (notably, the child's father) decides to shield the murderess; she pays merely with her banishment from the society. Jennifer L. Jenkins notices that "this solution in part speaks to the value of children in the community: [the murdered child] is merely a symbol" in the social games James deals with. As she observes further, "critics and most readers have found the ending of *The Other House* outrageous in its suspension of morality" (181). Additionally disturbing is the condescension with which James treats the one person who reacts strongly, who in fact shows her heightened emotions at the terrible news. In chapter XXXII of the novel, a young woman "wails", "sobs",

and “sways to and fro in her grief”, while the father of the child, speaking “quietly”, “gently”, “coldly”, and “lucidly” decides to protect the killer (James 1896). This resembles the scene from “My Friend Bingham” where the mother of the shot boy “moans” and “sobs” while the composed narrator tells the killer, “Keep your senses. It’s not your fault” (1999: 133). The composure of the males set against the emotionality of the females – the emotionality which is understandable, yet perceived as inferior – strikes the reader. That in James’s fiction “such domestic crimes are often treated as incidental and matter-of-fact” (Jenkins 166), serving simply as *incidents* of the plot, or as excuses for contrasting composure with emotionality is chilling indeed. In an attempt to explain James’s imperturbability, Anna De Basio recalls his reaction to a description of an actual murder: “Interestingly and somewhat disturbingly, James dwells on the aesthetic allure of the ‘perfect’ case as reconstructed by Roughhead”. In *The Other House*, it is the “narrative strategy” that matters, not the infanticide (De Basio 2011).

Of “juvenile literature” James speaks rarely, or with irony at best (1984: 331); “popular school books, story books, and other attempts to vulgarize human knowledge and adapt it to the infant mind” do not impress him (1984: 346). Thus, it is not surprising that Alcott’s *Eight Cousins: or, the Aunt Hill* disgusted him. More surprising is young James’s apparent concern with the work’s didacticism. His review for *Nation* (1875) appears very concerned with the bad influence such prose might have on a young person’s mind. Throughout the short article, James makes it clear that the novel is “a very ill-chosen sort of entertainment to set before children”. Alcott’s novel describes a year in life of an orphaned girl, Rose. Rose is thirteen years old when the novel starts. Her cousins, a merry group of boys, are of various ages; the oldest, and most important in the novel, are fifteen and seventeen. The novel is not about small children – the characters are adolescents, and this is the pre-

sumed audience for which Alcott writes.[2] Yet James insists that "infant readers" are the audience that grants her "vast" popularity (1984: 195). This is an example of James's well known condescension, implying in this case that he does not wish to see a difference between an infant and a teenager – for him, they are equally dull, as-yet-unformed specimens of humanity.

Yet neither the simplicity of the subject nor its lack of interest for the mature reader are those faults of the novel that James dwells upon. He appears more scandalized than bored. Alcott, in James's view, has simply a bad influence on the young generation. In this view James is not alone – other contemporary reviewers "blasted Alcott for denigrating the importance of adults in Rose's life" (Mills 1989: 74). This opinion might surprise the modern reader, as *Eight Cousins* is truly an innocent book – it shies from any risky topics such as erotic relations between the sexes; notably, there is not even a suggestion of any "puppy love" among the teenage characters.

Stranger is the fact that James clearly wishes to moralize – a critical activity from which *he* normally shies. The attitude which Alcott adopts while talking to her audience is one of the things that bother him: "Miss Alcott winks at the juvenile reader." He is right; indeed, "Miss Alcott seems to have a private understanding with the youngsters she depicts, at the expense of their pastors and masters" (1984: 196). Perhaps his concern will be easier to understand when we remember that Alcott was one of the first authors who truly wrote for children and teenagers, keeping in mind their specific needs for entertainment. Her *Little Women* (1868), a book playful and, if moralistic, then in a veiled way, meant for girls what *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) would mean for boys.[3] In any case,

[2] In reference to young adults or adolescents, Alcott in her novel uses the words "child" and "infants" only once, humorously.

[3] Shelden points out that "while Alcott has been excluded from the scholarly canon up to now in part because she was a writer of works for and

James's objections to the novel's moral influence reflect his "unprogressive" attitude: "the views expressed in [*Eight Cousins*] are hardly revolutionary, though they are set forth with a reformer's zeal; they seem typical for those of [its] time, indeed, for [its] century, at least as found in enlightened opinion of the day" (Mills 1989: 71). *Eight Cousins* actually depicts few pranks as daring as those of *Tom Sawyer*. Boy-characters make a lot of noise in the novel, but when they do something bad, they are duly condemned. Alcott's boys act Tom-Sawyer-like in church: "the dreadful things that were done during sermon-time will hardly be believed". For example,

> Charlie winked rapturously at her behind his mother's fan; […] George fell over a stool and dropped three books in his excitement; Will drew sailors and Chinamen on his clean cuffs, and displayed them, […] [and] Steve nearly upset the whole party by burning his nose with salts. (Alcott 1875)

The boys are later seriously chided for their irreverence. Alcott is even more serious when she talks of smoking tobacco – the boys are taught a lesson, and they stop.[4]

The reviewer apparently knows what is crucial for the proper rearing of the young: "What children want is the objective, as the philosophers say; it is good for them to feel that the people and things around them that appeal to their respect are beautiful and powerful specimens of what they seem to be"

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about young people, this is a characteristic she shares with many canonical American authors, most notably Cooper and Twain" (2006: 212).

[4] For the reader's amusement I will quote a passage from *Eight Cousins*, where, upon Rose's entering the room, one boy gets rid of his smoke while the other objects:

> Archie threw his cigar into the fire.
> 'What's that for?' asked Charlie.
> 'Gentlemen don't smoke before ladies.'
> 'True; but I'm not going to waste my weed,' and Prince poked his into the empty inkstand that served them for an ash tray (Alcott 1875: 75).

(James 1984: 196). It is a view that many traditional educationalists shared, but it sounds strange from James, who has repeatedly made it understood that children do not interest him. But in the piece on *Eight Cousins* he expresses the opinions of someone who is interested, and has a definite view about children's needs, behavior, and upbringing. So does Alcott in her novel. She is didactic and educational, and the models of education she presents actually come from a very sound, if experimental, source: her father, Bronson Alcott (Mills 2006: 113). In his early texts, James mentions educational methods once, approvingly; the example is his 1869 story, "Gabrielle de Bergerac". Alas, these are the methods of Jean Jacques Rousseau, of a hundred years before:

> In those days [...] there was a vast stir in men's notions of education, and a hundred theories afloat about the perfect teacher and the perfect pupil. Coquelin was a firm devotee of Jean Jacques, and very possibly applied some of his precepts to my own little person. But of his own nature Coquelin was incapable of anything that was not wise and gentle, and he had no need to learn humanity in books [...]. We took long walks, and he told me the names of the flowers and the various styles of the stars. (James 1999: 438)

Couqelin's methods are unusual for his times; Bronson Alcott also "espoused wildly unorthodox theories of education for the time, urging children to think for themselves, insisting that originality produced strength" (Hamlin 1981: 85). He was a frequent and respected visitor in James's parents' home, but his ideas, as presented in his daughter's novel, apparently did not appeal to James. Perhaps, uninterested after all, the writer never became familiar with these new models.

James dislikes Alcott's treatment of adults in the book. Most of them, with the exception of Rose's Uncle Alec, are playfully criticized. Each of Alcott's "several grotesque aunts" (1984: 195) represents a certain failure in respect to children's up-

bringing: one is morbidly religious, another too “fashionable”, while yet another believes blindly in the power of drugs. “Very likely”, says James, “many children are overdosed; but this is a poor matter to tell children stories about”. At one point in the novel, a learning-obsessed aunt is surprised by the young heroine’s knowledge; reciting what she has learned, the girl enjoys her triumph. James calls Rose’s response “a long, pert, snubbing speech” (1984: 196). Following this incident (that is, showing the mean aunt that Rose knows her lessons), Uncle Alec “dances a polka with her in jubilation. This episode has quite spoiled, for our fancy, both the uncle and the niece”, announces James in disgust (1984: 197). Yet “adult authority”, as Mills observes, plays the key role in the didacticism of *Eight Cousins*. Mills wonders that “contemporary reviewers, especially Henry James” objected to the minimal influence of adult characters in the novel (1989: 74). But James never says that elders do not play a vital role in *Eight Cousins*. What he finds objectionable is Alcott’s irreverent picture of the grown-up world.

The grown-up hero of *Eight Cousins* is this “big burly uncle, an honest seaman, addicted to riding a tilt at the shams of life. He finds his little niece encompassed with a great many of these, and Miss Alcott’s tale is chiefly devoted to relating how he plucked them successively away” (1984: 195). The above is true in more than one respect. By describing him ironically as “addicted to riding a tilt at the shams of life”, James probably means to mock the uncle, but Alcott is similarly ironic in her novel, even if her irony is meant to amuse, not mock; moreover, the description does justice to this character. Indeed, Alec’s role is to “pluck” the various errors made by nineteenth-century American parents. Yet the uncle, just like the aunts, is simplified for the young reader’s taste, and has attributes that would endear him to this audience (for example, siding with Rose against her aunts). And even if we accept James’s objection to the uncle’s lack of loyalty towards the other adults, that

is, being happy when his niece delivers the “snubbing speech” to her aunt, the critic’s heavy irony applied to Uncle Alec’s innocent if silly acts seems out of place in a review of a novel for the young: “When [Alec] comes to see his niece he descends to her room by the water spout; why not by the rope ladder at once?” (1984: 196). Perhaps Alcott devised the water spout descent because rope ladders had already been used many times in adventure fiction, but still she realized that for a young reader any such endeavors would be fascinating – the use of water-spouts, rope ladders, torn sheets – since we all, I believe, as teenagers in any historical period, dreamt of similar experiences.

What James seems to disregard is that the novel is clearly meant not only for the young, but for their guardians as well. (The most positive “aunt character” in the novel is the one who advocates good literature for children, and who obviously reads such literature before recommending it to her sons.) *Eight Cousins* is a multi-purpose crusade: for dress reform, healthy nutrition, and exercise; against the use of drugs, “tonics”, and tobacco; advocating democratic views and even the sisterhood of all women. While Alcott educates both the young and the old, James sees the novel as an example of a lesson in disrespectfulness towards the grownups: “Miss Alcott does not perhaps go so far as some of her fellow-chronicles of the nursery (in whom the tendency may be called nothing less than depraved), but she goes too far, in our opinion, for childish simplicity or parental equanimity”. Again, he ignores the fact of how old the protagonists really are, and with relish repeats the “nursery” epithet; at another place, Uncle Alec “is like a hero of the ‘Rochester’ school astray in the nursery” (1984: 196). This is actually a shocking image; Mr. Rochester, rebel in polite society, of extreme sexual attraction, would be highly improper in books for children. Yet that this “nursery” is peopled by adolescents up to seventeen years of age, who,

together with their parents, may benefit from the didacticism of the novel, escapes the reviewer's notice.

At the end of the review, James expresses sentiments befitting an aged grandfather: "What have become of the 'Rollo' books of our infancy and the delightful "Franconia" tales? If they are out of print, we strongly urge that they be republished, as an antidote to this unhappy amalgam of the novel and the story book" (1984: 197). He then proceeds to list the attributes of such literature: it was simple, adults were "all wise and comfortable," and the young ones were respectful. There were no ambiguities ("the child-world was not a world of questions"), and things had "the glow of fairy land upon them" (1984: 197). In this vein, while writing *Hawthorne* a few years later, James praised his subject for such "charming literary services that have been rendered to children". Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* and *The Wonder Book* have a "fairy-tale quality" that fulfills "the ideal of happiness of many American children [...] to lie upon the carpet and lose themselves" in this reading (1984: 417-418). James was such a child himself, if only [...] "[he] may trust [his] own early impressions of [Hawthorne's children's tales]." Alas, he has "been careful not to read them over, for [he] should be very sorry to risk disturbing in any degree a recollection of them that has been at rest since the appreciative period of life to which they are addressed" (1984: 417). Two conclusions appear inescapable: first, for outwardly sentimental reasons the author of Hawthorne's literary biography did not bother to conduct research into all of the available material, in this case did not re-read some of the texts he commented on. Second, if Hawthorne's tales appealed to him as a child, but could have lost their charm if he read them as an adult, then Alcott's book, if meant for children, could be simply impossible to appreciate for the grown-up James. Thus, his authoritative statement starting with "What children want is..." (1984: 196) sounds empty, if not contradictory to what he says elsewhere.

Coming back to his *Eight Cousins* review, there is a strange absence of style criticism there (in most of his other book reviews, the assessment of form is dutifully presented, and in the review of Alcott's *Moods*, the imagery is actually praised). James mentions the style of *Eight Cousins* – mostly in a negative context – but his opinions refer, again, to what is proper for children, and are not meant to condemn Alcott's style per se. At the beginning he calls her "extremely clever". Alcott "deals with the social questions of the child-world, and, like Thackeray and Trollope, she is a satirist." But this "constant ring of the style," "the smart satirical tone" is, for James, "unfortunate", improper in children's literature (1984: 195). Moreover, there is a problem with Rose's way of speaking: "Her conversation is salted with feminine humor of the period" (1984: 196). Again, James misses the point that Rose is fourteen, and that she imitates her older female relatives – of which, both the speech of the females and Rose's imitation, Alcott actually disapproves. He finishes the review with a comment that might pertain to the style: "in *Eight Cousins* there is no glow and no fairies; it is all prose, and to our sense rather vulgar prose" (1984: 197). Perhaps, "vulgar prose" refers to something other than style here, as another "crusade" of Alcott's is her insistence on the purity of language. When one of the boys protests that his mother will not allow him to read a Horatio Alger-like novel, he says: "They're bully books, and I'd like to know where's the harm". His mother answers promptly: "You have just shown us one of the chief evils, and that is slang" (Alcott 1875: 77-78). Alcott's novel is not a gem of polished form, and could not have been meant to be. Mills stresses that "all of Rose's aunts are plainly 'types'", and Alcott's "dialogue [...] is often transparently put forward to lay out theories, flesh out character, advance action, and so on" (1989: 74). Yet the style of the book is consistent with the basic rules of prose for teenagers: clear, with a large dose of simple irony, few long descriptions, and plenty of dialogue. Admitting that Alcott was

“extremely clever”, James indicated that she knew how to appeal to her audience. Yet the lack of any more serious analysis of form in his review appears to be a significant absence. For her style, Louisa May Alcott could have been praised – even with the reservation that it was simplified for children. James chose to praise her but little.

It is only after having read both *Eight Cousins* and James's review of it that a modern reader might feel the true injustice done to Alcott's work. James concentrates on the non-literary aspects of the novel: he criticizes its didactic outcome, and, connected with it, the types of characters which Alcott presents to her young readers. James is silent about the aspects of her book which might have appealed to a non-biased critic: the lively, realistic plot or the language, witty and proper for such literature. James's unfair treatment of Alcott might well mirror his own sense of having been unfairly treated as a child, diminished by the fame and notoriety of his father's guests, always in competition with an extremely clever older brother, and on top of all that, severely injured in some mysterious way when he was seventeen. Childhood, for James, both in the way others depict it and in the way he depicts it in his own fiction, is a delicate matter. Children suffer in ways that adults cannot understand. They take for wisdom things that maybe are not so wise. They are vulnerable and easily misled. Such a conception of childhood might be at the heart of James's objections to Alcott, and it might also inform some of his own later short stories. While James did not see children as merely small versions of adults, he did see them as being so complex and highly suggestible that any literature aimed at them – or literature about them – would need a very carefully attuned appreciation of its audience's (or subject's) sensitivities. Ultimately, the review appears to be less a critical assessment of Eight Cousins than an insight into what James thought children should be like. Even more importantly, the review hints at a nostalgia for his own childhood – when chil-

dren were good and happy, and the books for them had a magic glow. Many of us share the same memory.

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