THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN L. M. ALCOTT'S NOVEL "LITTLE WOMEN"

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Annotatsiya. *Ushbu maqolada L. M. Olkottning "Kichik ayollar" romanining narrativ va janr xususiyatlari o'rganiladi. Tadqiqotda madaniy-tarixiy, biografik va strukturaviy metodlardan foydalaniladi. Kompozitsiyaning tayanch nuqtalari va xronotopning asosiy xususiyatlari aniqlanib, bosh qahramonlarning ichki evolyutsiyasi tahlil qilinadi. Maqolaning ilmiy yangiligi asarning narrativ modelini initsiatsiya romani kontekstida o'rganish bilan belgilanadi. Rojdestvo vaqtining alohida o'rni, uy makonining markaziy ahamiyati va syujetni shakllantiruvchi izlanish narrativi yoritiladi. Qahramonlarning xarakterlari tashqi dunyo ta'sirida o'zgaradi, biroq roman kompozitsiyasi, asosan, ularning ichki rivojlanishi, orzulariga erishishi va ichki salohiyatini ro'yobga chiqarish mantiqiga bo'ysunadi. Har bir qahramon boshdan kechiradigan asosiy sinovlar ko'rsatiladi. Roman voqealari qahramonlarning o'z nuqsonlari va kundalik hayot vasvasalarini yengib, axloqiy ideal sari bosib o'tadigan ramziy yo'li tasviriga asoslanishi haqida xulosa qilinadi.*

Kalit so'zlar: *initsiatsiya, ma'naviy shakllanish, o'smir qahramonlar.*

Аннотация. *В статье исследуются повествовательные и жанровые особенности романа Л. М. Олкотт «Маленькие женщины». Используются культурно-исторический, биографический и структурный методы. Выявляются опорные точки композиции и ключевые особенности хронотопа, рассматривается внутренняя эволюция главных героинь. Научная новизна статьи заключается в изучении повествовательной модели произведения в контексте романа инициации. Отмечаются особая роль рождественского времени, центральное значение пространства дома и сюжетообразующее повествование о поиске. Характеры героинь меняются под влиянием внешнего мира, однако композиция романа в целом подчинена логике их внутреннего развития, движения к осуществлению*

мечтаний и реализации внутреннего потенциала. Выделяются основные испытания каждой героини. Делается вывод о том, что событийная основа романа строится на описании их символического пути к нравственному идеалу через преодоление собственных недостатков и повседневных искушений.

Ключевые слова: *инициация, духовное становление, герои-подростки.*

Abstract*. This article explores the narrative and genre features of L.M. Alcott's novel Little Women. It employs cultural-historical, biographical, and structural methods. It identifies key points of composition and chronotopic features, and examines the protagonists' internal evolution. The article's scientific novelty lies in its examination of the work's narrative model within the context of the novel of initiation. It highlights the special role of Christmas, the key space of home, and the plot-forming narrative of quest. The main characters' personalities change under the influence of the outside world, but overall, the novel's architecture follows the logic of their internal evolution, their journey toward fulfilling their dreams and realizing their inner potential. Key trials for each heroine are highlighted. It is concluded that the novel's narrative is built on the description of their symbolic journey toward a moral ideal through overcoming their vices and the temptations of everyday life.*

Keywords: initiation, spiritual development, adolescent protagonists.

Introduction. One of the areas of contemporary literary criticism is identifying transformations within genre systems. Such changes are accompanied by the archaization of some genres and the revitalization of others. One of the most traditional types of novel—the Bildungsroman—is also undergoing change. In the 19th century, significant changes in its poetics occurred in most national literary traditions. German works of coming-of-age literature explore the spiritual development of the hero, striving for action for the good of others. French literature of the 19th century tells the story of a young man who strives for wealth and high social status, but suffers moral decline or even death. Russian literature introduces the image of the "superfluous man," who suffers failures in both his personal and social spheres. The English novel explores the moral trials of the protagonist, who finds himself in a situation where he must choose between good and evil. American writers explore themes of inner freedom and purity, expressing a disregard for convention and the naivety of the central characters' worldviews. The poetics of the coming-of-age novel in US literature is associated with an archaic rite of passage that reflects archetypal models of interaction

between the individual and society, which gives grounds to speak of such a subgenre as the initiation novel [1].

An important role in such works is played by the characters' ability to adapt to life and find their place in it. M. Twain (1835–1910) in his famous novels The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) addresses the type of teenage heroes, and L. M. Alcott (1832–1888) in Little Women (1868) depicts the inner world of young heroines. Protagonists in the works of American prose writers, as a rule, occupy a marginal position in society; their fate is linked to historical events they cannot influence, yet they prove themselves to be free and responsible individuals. The plot of initiation reveals the dialectic of the characters' souls and the complexity of their path.

Main part. In scholarship on American literature, studies that analyze the poetics of L. M. Alcott's novel are mainly associated with the biographical and cultural-historical context of the writer's work [2], [3], [4]. Domestic literary scholars pay attention to various aspects of the poetics of the work. A. O. Belova identifies genre-forming features of children's literature in the novel and analyzes the specifics of their representation [5]. I. A. Shishkova evaluates the creative contribution of the classic of American literature to the development of the socio-cultural life of the USA, considering the writer's innovative view on gender and family issues [6]. O. Yu. Polyakov and O. A. Polyakova examine the ethical and pedagogical concept of L. M. Alcott and the artistic means of its embodiment in the work under consideration [7].

L. M. Alcott's novel "Little Women" chronicles the coming-of-age of four March sisters: Margaret, Jo, Beth, and Amy. The narrative is autobiographical, drawing on the author's childhood memories. Alcott follows the established tradition of women's and educational literature in the United States. However, drawing on her own life experience allows the author to avoid schematism and moralizing: the book's main characters are based on real-life prototypes, members of the family of the renowned transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, the writer's father [8].

The commercial success of the first part of the book prompted the writer to create a sequel: "Good Wives" (1869), "Little Men" (1871), and "Jo's Boys" (1886). Literary scholars attribute the popularity of these works not only to the perfection of their composition and style, but also to the realism of their characters, which rarely reaches such a degree in American literature [9]. In the context of our study, the first part of the cycle is of particular importance, since it depicts

the moral development of the young heroines and the turning points of their adolescence, which become events of initiation for each.

The novel is synthetic in its genre structure, combining elements of the bildungsroman, the Christmas story, and the family saga. Of great importance is the reflection of secularized Protestant ideas, which are expressed in the characters' lofty moral ideals and moral principles. "The New Pilgrim's Progress" is embodied in the heroines' spiritual quests and the development of their inner worlds. Significantly, the narrative centers on a collective subject: the stories of the four sisters unfold simultaneously, depicting each one's maturation: the discovery of personal happiness, professional self-determination, and moral self-improvement.

The work presents a female form of initiation. The heroines share a common family history, but they possess distinct temperaments and inclinations, and they view their destiny differently. The narrative is built on the girls' symbolic journey toward moral perfection through overcoming their vices and the temptations of everyday life. A ring-shaped composition frames the narrative and marks the beginning and end of trials, separated by exactly one year: the work begins and ends with a description of the pre-Christmas period. The Christmas chronotope is presented as a time of miracles, hopes for a bright, happy future, and salvation. This is facilitated by the inclusion of traditional holiday tropes: gifts, family feasts, home theater performances, kind words, and good wishes for each other.

The reader meets the March sisters at a dramatic moment: the girls reflect on how the Civil War has changed their lives and how they should behave in these circumstances: “Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug. “It's so dreadful to be poor!” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress” [10, p. 3]. They feel lost and don't understand how to help adults and find their place in this difficult time for everyone. A significant episode is the reading aloud of their father's letter, whose image is idealized and has exclusively positive connotations.

After this, the girls decide to focus even more on working on themselves, each naming her shortcomings: “I am a selfish girl! But I'll truly try to be better, so he mayn't be disappointed in me by-and-by” [10, p. 7]. According to Amy, she will try not to be so selfish so as not to disappoint her parent. Meg notes that she pays too much attention to her appearance and is not hard-working enough: “I think too much of my looks and hate to work, but won't any more, if I can help it” [10, p. 7]. Jo promises to fulfill her duties and develop the qualities that are dear to her father: “I'll try and be what he loves to call me, 'a little woman,' and

not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else," said Jo" [10, p. 7]. Beth sees her goal as becoming the embodiment of what he values most by the time her father returns. Symbolically, the girl wipes away her tears with the blue army sock she is knitting: "Beth said nothing, but wiped away her tears with the blue army sock and began to knit with all her might, losing no time in doing the duty that lay nearest her, while she resolved in her quiet little soul to be all that Father hoped to find her when the year brought around the happy coming home" [10, p. 8]. Thus, the theme of war and the need for active participation and assistance to those involved in it are introduced into the narrative.

The mother invites her daughters to recall a childhood game of pilgrims on their way to the Celestial City. It is based on the allegory of the English writer and preacher John Bunyan, "The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come" (1678–1688), which was especially revered in the writer's family. In it, the protagonist, Christian, journeys to the Celestial City, burdened by the weight of his sins, and the path is difficult and thorny, but in the end he achieves his desired perfection. The same thing happens to the main characters. "The Pilgrim's Progress" serves as the plot and spiritual foundation of the narrative, and is referenced by the epigraph, chapter titles, and the girls' home game, which shows their path to moral perfection. According to the author's concept, for the "little women," each spiritual test throughout this year is a stage of maturation, and the finale, representing the apotheosis of family happiness, marks the realization of their life's purpose and the end of initiation.

As already noted, the first part of the cycle describes the daily life of a poor American family experiencing the hardships of the war between the North and the South. The heroines are between twelve and sixteen years old, their father serves as a chaplain in the Union army. The mother is presented as a kind, caring, and sensitive woman who instills in her daughters the Christian values of love, forgiveness, and meekness. Mrs. March's monologues formulate moral messages and laws of a harmonious life, with a key role assigned to overcoming egoism and cultivating altruism. In addition to the authenticity of the details and the multifaceted psychological characteristics, the novel presents a realistic concept of personality shaped by the environment; however, "the author considers the main thing not at all the adaptation of a person to the mores and customs of society, but his moral improvement" [11, p. 218].

The heroines' spiritual evolution is represented through their good deeds. A true Christmas miracle occurs in a poor family when the March sisters arrive like

angels, sharing their holiday breakfast, instead of which they themselves eat simple bread. According to the canon of the Christmas story, this act implies reward for selflessness and generosity. In L. M. Alcott's work, kindness is returned literally: the girls receive generous gifts from Mr. Laurence, who, having witnessed their kindness, sends a reward: "'Is it fairies?' asked Amy. 'It's Santa Claus,' said Beth." "All wrong. Old Mr. Laurence sent it," replied Mrs." [10, p. 398]. According to Mrs. March, this gift, although it was not presented by fairies or angels, could not be refused, since it has a sacred meaning: "I could not refuse, and so you have a little feast at night to make up for the bread-and-milk breakfast" [10, p. 398].

One of the key points of the composition of the work is Jo's decision to part with her luxurious locks so that the mother of the family could use the proceeds to go to the front to visit her husband (this plot situation was the basis for O. Henry's story "The Gift of the Magi"). This decision demonstrates such traits of the young heroine as Christian humility and a readiness for self-sacrifice: "It doesn't affect the fate of the nation.... It will be good for my vanity... I was wild to do something for Father" [10, p. 398]. Jo notes that although she cannot influence the fate of the nation, she can help her father, which also has undeniable significance and value.

The structure of the traditional Bildungsroman, such as Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, influenced the work. This is reflected in the fact that each episode contains a moral lesson, and the narrative is built on the transmission of Christian values and Enlightenment ideology (honest poverty, rationality, and service to others) [11]. The work is also imbued with elements of realism, as it touches on themes of poverty and social inequality, reflecting details of everyday life and significant historical and cultural events. The main characters' personalities change under the influence of the outside world, but overall, the novel's architecture is subordinated to the logic of their internal evolution, their movement toward the realization of their dreams and the realization of their inner potential: the girls' dreams come true, and they all find happiness. As already noted, the work represents a female version of spiritual development.

The narrative contains direct addresses from the narrator to the reader, as if establishing a dialogue with him: "As young readers like to know "how people look," we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters" [10, p. 4]. The appeal to the audience at the end of the work is noteworthy: "So grouped, the curtain falls upon Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Whether it ever rises again depends upon the reception given to the first act of the domestic drama

called Little Women" [10, p. 398]. The narrator informs that the continuation of the story depends on how readers perceive its first part. This feature will subsequently become one of the key features of the initiation novel, built on a close, even friendly, interaction between the narrator and the reader.

Each of the girls has unique personality traits. The portrait description of the older sister is noteworthy. Meg pays great attention to her appearance: "Oh, oh, oh! What have you done? I'm spoiled! I can't go! My hair, oh, my hair!" wailed Meg, looking with despair at the uneven frizzle on her forehead" [10, p. 26]. From the above quote, it follows that a seemingly insignificant episode when Jo spoils her hair before the ball becomes a cause for frustration and even despair.

The most multifaceted and contradictory character in the novel is Jo, whose prototype is the writer herself. She is described as strong, courageous, striving for self-development, an independent person with literary talent. In the novel, one of the ways to describe a character is through her characterization by other characters, which allows the author to express sympathy and at the same time irony towards the characters. This can be seen in the following dialogue between the sisters: "If Jo is a tomboy and Amy a goose, what am I, please?" asked Beth, ready to share the lecture. "You're a dear, and nothing else," answered Meg warmly" [10, p. 26]. The image of Jo is a collective image of a woman of the new era and expresses the ideas of freethinking and independence.

The embodiment of virtue in the work is Elizabeth (Beth), who is endowed with angelic traits. She possesses such qualities as meekness, kindness, and compliance: "Elizabeth, or Beth, as everyone called her, was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression which was seldom disturbed" [10, p. 26]. The heroine's inner peace and her calm beauty are emphasized.

The psychological portrait of the younger sister, Amy, is presented rather ambivalently. She is pretty and attractive, but can be capricious and stubborn. The heroine is described as follows: "Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person, in her own opinion at least pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners" [10, p. 26]. From the above quote, it follows that Amy positions herself as a significant person and her demeanor is comparable to that of a young lady.

Despite such different internal and external characteristics, spheres of interests (Jo's dreams of literature, Beth's of music, Amy's of painting, Meg's of well-being and family happiness), the sisters are united by kindness, nobility, willingness to help others, and a good education.

Caring for each other is expressed in the traditions observed in the family: each of the sisters tries to surround Mrs. March with attention and love: “The girls flew about, trying to make things comfortable, each in her own way” [10, p. 28]. The same ritual is the mother’s morning and evening song: “The first sound in the morning was her voice as she went about the house singing like a lark, and the last sound at night was the same cheery sound, for the girls never grew too old for that familiar lullaby” [10, p. 28]. It is emphasized that the girls will never become too old for the lullaby they know well, since it is the basis of their inner well-being, the family foundation.

The home is filled with spiritual activities: theatrical performances, reading, games, including literary bingo, demonstrating a special reverence for this art form. Besides the aforementioned Pilgrim game, the girls found the Pickwick Club, where they act out scenes from Charles Dickens's famous novel.

The topos of home plays a pivotal role in the novel's plot. It consists of such elements as a fire in the fireplace, a shared family dinner, and evening needlework. For the girls, this place becomes a space of warmth and comfort; they always feel safe and calm here. Mr. Laurence's house is described by the principle of antithesis: luxurious, yet soulless and deserted: "On the other side was a stately stone mansion, plainly betokening every sort of comfort and luxury. Yet it seemed a lonely, lifeless sort of house, for no children frolicked on the lawn, no motherly face ever smiled at the windows, and few people went in and out, except the old gentleman and his grandson" [10, p. 26]. The lifelessness of this space is emphasized, the only inhabitants of which are the elderly gentleman and his grandson.

Communicating with Laurie and considering his lack of maternal care, the heroines note that family warmth is a wealth and treasure they can share with their friend. A dichotomy emerges between material and spiritual values, the latter proving far more significant for the March family: "Rich or poor, we will keep together and be happy in one another" [10, p. 42].

Given that the novel's character system has its own specificity (a collective subject), the protagonists' initiations occur simultaneously. Each heroine experiences events in her life that become turning points in her maturation.

Jo learns her greatest lesson during a conflict with her younger sister, which results in the latter destroying her older sister's priceless manuscript in a fit of rage. Feeling annoyed and angry, Jo pushes Amy away and does not take her skating. The younger sister, not realizing that the ice is thin and dangerous, runs after Jo and nearly perishes when she ends up in the water: "the splash of water,

and a cry that made Jo's heart stand still with fear" [10, p. 266]. After this dramatic incident, the sisters reconcile. A frank and important conversation takes place between Jo and Mrs. March: Mama shares her experience: "we all have our temptations, some far greater than yours, and it often takes us all our lives to conquer them" [10, p. 266]. Jo realizes the need for self-control in expressing feelings and emotions: “It's my dreadful temper! I try to cure it; I think I have, and then it breaks out worse than ever” [10, p. 266].

For Meg, such an event is a ball, described in the chapter with the symbolic title "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair." The heroine finds herself in high society for the first time, but, out of a desire to please others, she betrays herself: "Perhaps Meg felt, without understanding why, that they were not particularly cultivated or intelligent people, and that all their gilding could not quite conceal the ordinary material of which they were made" [10, p. 283]. Meg realizes that people's outward appearance does not correspond to their inner world, and their behavior is unnatural.

A heavy burden falls on Beth. The girl, showing mercy and generosity, cares for a sick child and experiences a terrible ordeal: the baby dies in her arms: “I tried to warm its feet but it didn't stir, and I knew it was dead” [10, p. 343]. After this emotional shock, Beth falls ill, as the illness is transmitted to her. The heroine's maturation is revealed through the motifs of encounters with death and illness. Worries about her sister's health and worries about her become a test for all the heroines: “How dark the days seemed now, how sad and lonely the house, and how heavy were the hearts of the sisters as they worked and waited, while the shadow of death hovered over the once happy home!” [10, p. 388]. The girls change internally and undergo initiation through the comprehension of Christian love and compassion.

The chapter "Amy in the Valley of Humiliation" depicts Amy's coming of age. She is the only one of her sisters to attend school. It is here that her transition to another world is associated, one fraught with difficulties: "During the fifteen minutes that followed, the proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot" [10, p. 243]. Amy experiences physical punishment for the first time, after which Mrs. March decides to homeschool her daughter.

Thus, unfamiliar places are excluded from the novel's chronotopes, as they clash value-wise with the family's domestic world. This can be seen as the uniqueness of this work, as traditionally, initiation events involve exploring new spaces that test and challenge the protagonist. In Little Women, the center of gravity is the home: the heroines return there, and it is there that their major

realizations and spiritual transformations occur. The classic tripartite compositional structure, which implies a departure from the familiar world, is also absent from the work. The heroines' primary changes occur internally, and their home remains their abode.

Conclusion. The novel has religious and didactic features: each chapter includes moral generalizations, and the work has a happy ending, the quintessence of which is a spiritual hymn that marks the father's return. The epilogue depicts the happy marriage of one of the sisters. Christmas marks a turning point from misfortune to prosperity and symbolizes the path of human initiation, as this time is associated with spiritual transformation. The protagonists' high moral ideals are shaped by their father's profession as a priest, their mother's upbringing, and the intellectual atmosphere in which the girls grow up. The work explicitly presents a symbolic initiation for each of the heroines: through their journey of maturation and self-knowledge, they mature and develop their best qualities.

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