WINNING ENTRY IN THE UPPER-LEVEL CATEGORY FOR 2019-2020

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ENGL 329

The Bloom of Solarpunk: An Exploration of Progressive Nostalgia Within Modern Culture Through the Lens of Classic Children’s Literature

Childhood is a time in which human lives are at once their most freeform and most structured. Having yet to absorb the complexities and responsibilities of the world in which they have found themselves, children are able to act on natural impulses without regard for the possible consequences. However, in response, the society around them attempts to shape these unconditioned minds to fit the rules it has deemed proper to abide by, so as to mitigate conflict and discord among its citizens. Many of the formative lessons given to children are delivered directly, with mixed results, from parents, teachers, and other figures of authority, in sermons, lectures, inspirational speeches, and admonishments. Other methods are more indirect: for example, relating the struggles of a thrilling protagonist in a novel to those of a young reader who contends (surprise, surprise) with very similar conflicts in their own life. The narrative then provides solutions to these struggles which guide both character and reader in the morally correct direction, influencing the developing mind in a far subtler manner than either carrot or stick can provide. Although some young readers may stray to the adult sections of libraries or bookstores and foil these attempts, one might, by attending to what literature a society is purposefully giving its children, gain insight into the values this society holds. Historically, as Western society has become more socially progressive, its children’s literature has shifted from reinforcing strict
conservative behaviour to supporting more leftist ideals of critical thinking, social equality, and diversity.

To borrow the words of American journalist Finley Dunne, the press should “[c]omfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Although intended for the news media industry, this quotation can provide an effective discursive framework for considering two kinds of fictional literature. For the purpose of this essay, the term ‘comfort literature’ will be used to refer to fiction that affirms and reinforces traditional, socially-conservative values, and, for ease of reading, ‘discomfort literature’ to refer to works of fiction that challenge and offer an alternative to these values. Adopting this overall framework as a means of analysis, this essay will examine the American classic *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott, as an example of ‘comfort’ literature, and *Pippi Longstocking*, by Astrid Lindgren, as ‘discomfort’ literature. Furthermore, the morals instilled by these texts will be placed on a spectrum and used to analyze an emerging theme in young adult culture, coined in a 2008 post on the *Republic of the Bees* blog as “solarpunk,” which combines an intriguing mix of both the ‘comfort’ and ‘discomfort’ aspects present in the above-mentioned classics (“From Steampunk to Solarpunk”).

*Little Women*, first published in America in 1868, follows four sisters (Jo, Beth, Meg, and Amy) growing up in Massachusetts during the mid 19th century. As is common in much of children’s literature at the time, the book evokes a strong sense of nostalgia for the classic American lifestyle and its traditional values, with its depiction of a close-knit family structure and a persevering spirit in the face of adversity. Although not a farming narrative like texts such as *Caddie Woodlawn* or *Farmer Boy*, *Little Women* also exhibits the strong pastoral atmosphere emblematic of what British children’s author Roger Lancelyn Green declared the “Golden Age” of children’s literature. Here, the experiences portrayed are linked more to leisure than necessity;
however, the inherent love for and need to inhabit the natural world is still present. These are not children who spend their free time browsing malls or binge-watching crime television on Netflix—rather, they picnic, go boating, and build secret clubhouses in the woods.

Originally a single installment, Little Women contains strong moralistic themes conventional to the time period. In the very first chapter, Mr. March, the sisters’ father, bids them “do their duty faithfully” and to “conquer themselves so beautifully…my little women” (Alcott 52). The girls subsequently name their “bosom enemies,” which they feel are the internal conflicts they must overcome: Amy declares herself a “selfish pig,” Meg that she “thinks too much of [her] looks, and hate[s] to work,” Jo is “rough and wild,” and Beth is “afraid of people” (52). The rest of the book follows their trials and tribulations growing up, and particularly their struggles against these perceived faults, to become perfect “little women”—that is, selfless, modest, hard-working, obedient, and charming wives.

Despite the clear objective of this training, the first book leaves only Meg betrothed, with her sisters’ futures still undetermined. Jo, in particular, whose character echoed Alcott’s own life, seemed set on the unconventional path of an unmarried writer, an implication Alcott appeared content to leave be. It was not to be, however, as Little Women was an instant hit, and after demands from the readership it was soon given a sequel. Sentiments from fans included a desire to see all the sisters married, and Alcott’s sequel Good Wives obliged, with all three surviving sisters finding a husband, settling down, and keeping house for their various spouses. While Alcott claimed she “didn’t dare refuse” the requests of her fans and so succumbed to their demands, she still subverted expectations by matching Jo with the older Mr. Bhaer rather than the character’s childhood friend, Laurie, a decision which prompted a “general groan of dismay among the young women of America” (Clark 18). Even this slight divergence from the
classic romance story upset fans, who felt Jo should have “consoled her boy instead of falling in love with the tedious Mr. Bhaer” (18).

Reviewers declared Alcott’s writing “agreeable and healthy food for young minds” (16). Why such a strong endorsement for the conservative narrative, when in a mere 35 years the feminist movements would begin to fiercely advocate women’s independence from such a restrictive lifestyle? Possibly the answer lies in timing. *Little Women* was published during its own societal transition period. During the “Reconstruction Era” following the Civil War, the U.S. was negotiating its relationship with the South and the recently enslaved African-American population. The second wave of the Industrial Revolution pushed an increase in urbanization and the beginning of consumer culture, cutting people off from familiar ways of living and connection with the land. As Judith Fetterley describes in her article “‘Little Women’: Alcott’s Civil War,” “much of the popularity of *Little Women*, then and now, derives from its embodiment of a cultural fantasy of the happy family” (6). Although issues concerning women’s rights were indeed beginning to rise to the surface of social awareness, exemplified by Alcott’s sentiments in her private writings, in her readership this was surpassed by a greater desire for security in the face of uncertainty. Beverly Clark’s *The Afterlife of “Little Women”* includes recorded letters from fans who often expressed appreciation for the relatability of the characters, and some especially noted the depiction of the sisters’ struggles as one of the realistic elements of the novel that particularly engaged them. One wrote that she was drawn to the family’s “grand aspirations, homely duties, mistakes, troubles, and ‘good times;’” another felt “this story [had] helped [them] a very great deal in leading a better and happier life;” and yet another that “it [showed] us how to persevere” (Clark 17). One astute reviewer, however, described the story as “a life which has no parallel on earth—that of a young woman in New England who shares the
fortunes of the people, while she has access also to the culture and opportunities of wealth” (18). Put simply, *Little Women* was in many ways a fairy-tale for its readers—one relatable enough that they could project themselves into the narrative and dream they, too, could find love and stability in such difficult times, if they only mastered themselves and followed the rules.

By the early 20th century, however, people had begun to adapt to the new lifestyles that had emerged. In fact, despite its downsides, industrialization revolutionized social structures a great deal. As food and clothing production left the home, the extent to which women had always contributed to the necessary work of the homelife became increasingly obvious. Furthermore, as more women were now employed to mass market their previously family-oriented skills, they were being paid wages for work that had previously been an assumed duty, and the wage gap made the unequal value of this work very apparent. As Ivy Pinchbeck explains, by the end of the 19th century, “women's work in these spheres, as has been shown, [was] not an altogether new thing; but it [was] new in the sense that it [was] now definitely based on education and training which [enabled] women to take their proper place in the affairs of the world…accompanied by new ideals of economic independence” (316). Particularly after the World Wars, during which women successfully ran factories while the male population fought abroad, the old inequalities could no longer be made to sound reasonable. Thus, the next wave of social change began.

Enter *Pippi Longstocking*. First published in 1944, Lindgren was still slightly ahead of her time, and *Pippi* was not an initial hit. However, the book became popular during the second wave of the feminist movement, following the success of woman’s suffrage and the public's increasing willingness to discuss systemic social inequalities. According to the book *Beyond Pippi Longstocking: Intermedial and International Aspects of Astrid Lindgren's Works*, “[t]he late 1960s and the 1970s was a stormy time when gusts of fresh air shook up stale ideas and
conventions…. It was a time when *Pippi Longstocking* and its sequels were discovered anew by progressive parents and educators and by critics in the US, and a time when the sales of the Pippi books increased” (Metcalf 21).

Whereas *Little Women* reinforced gender norms and social conventions, *Pippi* gleefully blew them out of the water. A supernaturally strong girl under zero adult supervision, Pippi’s character is completely independent, and successfully so. Revelling in adventure, marriage is certainly not on Pippi’s agenda; instead, she’s “going to be a pirate when she grows up” (Lindgren 160). Pippi celebrates the strange and unusual, spinning constant tales of the places and people she’s visited around the world. Although her stories are not always culturally sensitive—or truthful—there is no sense of fear or disgust in Pippi’s descriptions of foreign places and people. To her, alternate ways of life are fascinating and to be adopted, not avoided or reviled—she says she walks backward because she learned it in Egypt, and sleeps with her feet on the pillow because they do it in Guatemala. Trouble follows Pippi wherever she goes, yet she is more than capable of resolving it, and there is no apparent structure and no obvious restraints in Pippi’s life—she lives on a whim and does whatever she thinks will be the most enjoyable at the time. Positive reactions to *Pippi* hailed her as a “rollicking symbol of nonconformity,” and “the prime example of the anti-authoritarian book” (Metcalf 20, 22).

To summarize the above analysis and clarify the spectrum it provides: *Little Women* represents ‘comfort literature,’ which reinforces the rules of an established social order. ‘Comfort literature’ often values pastoral imagery, associated with an idealised ‘Golden Age’ in which people lived off the land and their own homemaking skills successfully, if not with ease. This literature features familial bonds, a sense of community, and strong moral principles, which provide a feeling of safety and order. While comfort narratives may include struggle,
readers are generally provided with a happy ending in which characters find fulfillment—that is, fulfillment acceptable to mainstream cultural ideas of success. Such literature is popular in times of crisis induced by outside forces, when uncertainty and changing social conventions have left a population feeling unmoored and in need of reassurance.

_Pippi Longstocking_, meanwhile, represents ‘discomfort literature,’ narratives which challenge the rules of an established social order and push for social change. ‘Discomfort literature’ does not have a specific setting; rather, it often favours adventure, discovery, and an interest in the new, not a reliance on the old. Characters in such narratives are bold and independent, defy constraint, and make up their own rules on how to behave. Unlike their counterparts in ‘comfort literature,’ such as rebellious Jo in _Little Women_, they are not punished for this defiance—rather, it is seen as healthy and righteous. ‘Discomfort literature’ is popular when a society has stagnated, and large segments of its population are rebelling against the rules and conventions of the old structure. This literature is an attempt to inspire new ideas, break boundaries, and give its readers a push towards a more challenging lifestyle.

Having identified these two categories, one may now ask the critical question: what literature is the modern youth of the 21st century consuming, and what does this say about the current cultural climate? Is it one in need of comfort, or discomfort? Before directly addressing this question, the problem of what constitutes ‘popular literature’ of the 21st century must first be solved. With prevalent market control by large publishing houses and bookstores, it is difficult to gauge what a readership might independently be gravitating towards, versus what the industry believes is a safe sell. Moreover, even if one were to disregard direct market manipulation, the sheer availability of diverse children’s literature is far greater than it was even a few decades ago. It is much easier for parents and specific communities to tailor their children’s reading lists
to their own personal beliefs, rather than remain beholden to a few books available for child audiences, as was the case when *Little Women* or even *Pippi* were published.

However, a platform does exist which (for the moment) remains relatively out of the control of corporate and personal censorship, one that many modern youth frequent more than a bookstore or library, and which stays relentlessly up to date on social trends. For the last two decades, that is, the Internet has provided a largely unregulated culture, producing content from and for those who use it. The following are several quoted posts from the popular blogging site *Tumblr*, which has a user demographic of primarily ages 14-22:

In this household we … [r]eject capitalism and learn to become self sufficient, not as individuals but as a group, a family that is based on mutual respect, love, boundaries and communication. We lend [each other] skills and favours, and we teach readily what we know. We care about the earth, we recycle, and we crush normativity and welcome diversity. (kr1g)

someday I WILL live in a little underground hill home and I WILL plant sunflowers on top of said hill and it WILL be everything I ever wanted!!!!!! (memesandmagik)

I wanna be the weird lady who lives in a small house and grows lavender and wears sundresses with straw hats and always has a book to recommend (anniethecat).

Wild how the more exposure you have to technology companies, the more appealing running into the forest becomes. Ted Kaczynski would not have seen the current state of silicon valley even in his worst nightmares. (artificial--stupidity)
Although the above descriptions do not use the word in their text, all were self-tagged by their authors with the term “solarpunk.” According to Rhys Williams, “solarpunk” can be described as “an emerging sub-genre of fantasy and science fiction broadly characterised by imagining sustainable futures after energy transition…. Notably, these are futures in which energy transition is not only a matter of technological innovation but also of changes in social relations and value systems” (6). Solarpunk has its roots in cyberpunk, a similar theoretical genre which also imagines a future of advanced technology. Cyberpunk, however, is often dystopic in nature—its imagined futures are run by corrupt corporations or governments, and technology is often used to control or deceive their citizens. In cyberpunk worlds, environmental issues are often exacerbated, with the natural world either completely eliminated or maintained only via technological manipulation. Popular cyberpunk stories include *Bladerunner* (1982), *The Matrix* (1999), and *The Terminator* (1984). In the narratives of such films, protagonists often rebel against the authority of their world, seeking independence and freedom in a system which discourages free thought—hence the suffix “punk,” which symbolises the antiestablishment morals these stories promote.

Solarpunk, meanwhile, imagines a future where clean energy solutions have been implemented to create a society of advanced technology working in harmony with the natural world. As described above, this society also values social peace, and envisions a world free of conflict and prejudice, where all human emotional and physical needs have been met. The “punk” aspect in this case refers not to a rebellion against the system of its own world, but rather the inherent dissonance of such values vis-a-vis the modern reality its readership currently inhabits. Solarpunk sees its narrative as a resistance to and an alternate path from the inevitability of cyberpunk, which is often predicted to be the outcome if current society continues on its path
of capitalist, environmentally-and-morally-blind ‘progress’. As it is a new genre, specific examples are hard to come by, but the stories of *Black Panther* (2018), *Treasure Planet* (2002), and almost any works by the Japanese animation company Studio Ghibli exemplify aspects of the solarpunk narrative.

Interestingly, the solarpunk genre blends many aspects of both ‘comfort’ and ‘discomfort’ literature as they have been described previously. Like *Little Women*, solarpunk values pastoral imagery and a down-to-earth, nature-based lifestyle. It promotes self-awareness, empathy, and emotional connection, values similar to those the March sisters learn to practice among themselves and their community. It is ‘comforting’ in its themes of home, family, safety, and prosperity. However, unlike *Little Women*, which was constricted by the conservative morals of its time, solarpunk also values equality, self-expression, and a breaking down of social class and gender roles. Its narrative advocates the active dismantling of oppressive systems by its followers; like *Pippi*, it dares to imagine a new world with completely different rules to the one its readership follows, one in which they are free from the toxicity of their current lives and able to ethically pursue real passions. It claims that true comfort can only be found if the system supporting it is a just one, that the current system does *not* satisfy these requirements, and thus ‘discomfort’ is necessary to accomplish the necessary social rehaul to make it so.

If one examines the current social climate, it becomes readily apparent why this blend of contradictory themes may be gaining popularity. As seen in the above social media posts, many of the younger generation are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the current social structure. A heightened awareness of environmental, political, and social turmoil has instilled restlessness in a population which easily sees the extent of the problems at hand but feels helpless to remedy them. In a recently published article by Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R.
Ellis, "Ecological Grief as a Mental Health Response to Climate Change-Related Loss,"

awareness of environmental changes was reportedly linked to

- a wide variety of acute and chronic mental health experiences, including: strong emotional responses, such as sadness, distress, despair, anger, fear, helplessness, hopelessness and stress…threats and disruptions to sense of place and place attachment; and loss of personal or cultural identity and ways of knowing. (275)

Furthermore, according to these authors, the “grief and associated anxiety and strong emotions linked to the anticipation of future losses will likely increase in prevalence and may particularly impact children and youth who are currently growing up with ‘doom and gloom’ narratives” (278).

In one way or another, all of the blog posts cited in this paper express an overall desire to return to a nature-based lifestyle and escape the demands of a capitalist society that emphasises monetary worth and devalues emotional connection, intimacy, community, and environmental stewardship. Although children in current Western society are in many ways ‘freer’ than the March sisters, they are also threatened by the looming consequences of their own society’s progress, as well as intimacy-starved by its encouragement of self-commodification. This generation is longing for comfort in the face of its problems; they want the sanctuary of home, family, and a simplified lifestyle. At the same time, they are also in revolt against the system which is denying them these comforts. They are ready to accept the discomfort of change to achieve their goals—yet rebellion against such an impersonalized society, by nature, requires sentimentality, a turning back to personal connection and practical groundedness rather than grandiose expansionism.
Solarpunk answers both these needs to rebel and to connect, with its focus on sustainability and community being completely antithetical to capitalism’s ideal of infinite expansion via cutthroat efficiency. In this case, the nostalgia for the classic pastoral scene of ‘comfort literature’ invoked by solarpunk is, by nature, progressive. At the same time, with its reliance on advanced technology and the social awareness of the 21st century, the utopia this nostalgia yearns for is not one purely constructed of the past, but also inherently tied to the future—one that will require an active embracing of discomfort to realise. Although created to address a world of fear and oppression, the world of solarpunk is one of hope. As such, it is a valuable vision to invoke when galvanizing the population towards social change, a process in which admonishments and threats often fall on deaf ears. It offers instead a way to teach a lesson by telling a story; one the readership can relate their struggles to, one that reassures them, and then offers solutions that will guide them in a better direction.

anniethecat. “I wanna be the weird…” *Tumblr*, 6 April 2018, 1:16 p.m.,


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