A March of Complexities: Louisa May Alcott's Conflicted Response to Transcendentalism in Little Women

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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Date
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Purpose of Study:

In my thesis, "A March of Complexities: Louisa May Alcott's Conflicted Response to Transcendentalism" in Little Women, I explore Louisa May Alcott's both admiration for and frustration with her father Bronson Alcott's transcendentalism. I provide textual evidence that her response to this transcendentalism exists within her novel, Little Women. I provide evidence from Louisa May Alcott's journals and letters to show that her public and private response to transcendentalism was consistently conflicted. I also examine Louisa May Alcott's feminism in depth and compare and contrast it with the feminism of Bronson Alcott and show how that comparison and familial tension informs both Louisa May Alcott's response to Bronson Alcott's philosophy and the text of Little Women.

Procedure:

In addition to exploring Little Women, and Louisa May Alcott's journals and letters, I have explored two of her other novels, Moods, and Work, and show how these novels, written both before and after Little Women, show Louisa May Alcott to be a passionate supporter of women's rights. I show how her feminism was ignited by Bronson Alcott and also explore the ways in which Louisa Alcott critiques her father's unknowing adherence to nineteenth-century patriarchy. I examine the time the Alcotts spent in Fruitlands, the vegan spiritual community started by Bronson Alcott, and the ways in which that experience informed her experience of transcendentalism and is present in the pages of Little Women. I also provide the historical context of Bronson Alcott's place in transcendentalism, explore his pedagogy, and take a close look at his major work, Conversations with Children on the Gospels.

Findings:

During the course of my Little Women scholarship for this thesis I have made discoveries regarding why Louisa May Alcott chose the name of March for the family in Little Women that was so much like her own family. I have also discovered why Louisa May Alcott may have chosen to have the characters of Laurie and Amy marry. The two seem to have little in common and the match has puzzled readers throughout the years. I also made a discovery regarding why Louisa Alcott chooses to have Pip the pet bird die due to neglect. This tragedy is incongruous with the way that animals are adored throughout the text. Louisa Alcott's response to Bronson Alcott's transcendentalism inform all of these discoveries about the text of Little Women.
Conclusions:

I conclude that Louisa May Alcott was both publicly and privately conflicted in her response to Bronson Alcott's transcendentalism and that that conflict informs the text of Little Women with a spirited tension that contributes to the novel's continued relevancy to readers.

Chair:
Signature

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

A March of Complexities: Louisa May Alcott's Conflcited Response to Transcendentalism in *Little Women*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. A Transcendental Pilgrim: Bronson Alcott and His Journey Through Transcendentalism</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Between Praise and Criticism: Louisa May Alcott's Experience of Transcendentalism</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Transcendental Tension: A Debate Between Father and Daughter</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A March of Complexities: Louisa May Alcott's Conflicted Response to Transcendentalism in *Little Women*

**Introduction**

Louisa May Alcott was raised by transcendentalist parents, Amos Bronson and Abigail May Alcott and grew up among the founders of transcendentalism. Transcendentalism played a huge part in her life and she would adopt many of the philosophy's values as her own. However, she often found transcendentalism to be problematic in the real world where bills needed to be paid and children and households needed attention. Her conflicted emotions regarding the philosophy which was central to her father's life can be found in her writing, particularly, *Little Women*, about a family much like her own.

She often played with Ralph Waldo Emerson's children and her first published book, *Flower Fables*, was a book of stories that she had written for Emerson's daughter, Ellen. ¹ Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Lydia Maria Child were close friends of the Alcotts and the Alcott family also lived next door to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Bronson Alcott was connected with the transcendentalist community Brook Farm and formed his own utopian community, Fruitlands which Louisa lived at with her family when she was ten years old. Fruitlands was even more spiritually ambitious than Brook Farm with participants eschewing food and clothing produced both by slave labor and from the labor and slaughter of animals.² Abigail Alcott admired her husband greatly and was, in her own right, an advocate of transcendentalism and social justice. During the Civil War, Louisa Alcott wrote a letter describing her parents' activities. "Father writing & (sic) talking," Mother singing "among her pots & pans," feeding and clothing" all the
beggars that come along," sewing " for the soldiers" delivering lectures on Anti slavery and Peace (sic) wherever she goes."

Louisa Alcott experienced both the benefits and challenges of growing up as a child of transcendentalists. She embraced many of the causes that her parents believed in such as abolition and women's suffrage. She was also deeply affected by the transcendentalist beliefs of experiencing God through nature, honoring one's own truth and the importance of individuality and the self. However, she also experienced poverty and instability as a result of her father's determination to live according to his spiritual beliefs. Bronson Alcott's ideals often left him without employment to support his family. His Temple School closed after he refused to rescind his decision to admit an African-American child as a student and angry parents withdrew their children. Laurie Morrow, in her essay "Philosopher's Daughter" writes of the complete consistency between Bronson Alcott's words and his actions. "Though Bronson's idealism is easy for the cynical to mock, he was, nonetheless, a man who remained firm in his principles even in duress, and who articulated his Christianity in deed as well as word." He often lectured on transcendentalism and vegetarianism but unlike his friend Emerson, he was not often successful in being paid for his talks. After returning from a trip to the Western United States, his daughter, May, asked "Did people pay you?" Bronson Alcott pulled $1.00 out of his wallet. "Only that! My overcoat was stolen and I had to buy a shawl. Many promises were not kept and traveling is costly but I have opened the way and another year shall do better." Though the Alcott family's finances were usually precarious, they regularly embraced those in need. "Our poor little home had much love and happiness in it, and was a shelter for lost girls, abused wives, friendless children, and weak or wicked
men. Father and Mother have no money to give, but gave them time, sympathy, help, and if blessings would make them rich, they would be millionaires. This is practical Christianity.

In her journals and letters, Louisa Alcott alternately admires her father for his ideals and expresses frustration at the unrelenting financial hardship his ideals have thrust upon the Alcott family. She refers frequently to the Alcotts as "the Pathetic family" and to the family finances as "the Alcott Sinking Fund". While she maintained an excellent relationship with her father throughout both of their lives, she did not shy away from open criticism of his shortcomings. In a letter home to the Alcott family, when she was away working, she wrote, "To Father I shall send....some paper; then he will be happy, and can keep on with the beloved diaries though the heavens fall."  

All of these familial complexities regarding the way Bronson Alcott's transcendentalist philosophy played out in the life of the Alcott family found their way into the text of Little Women. In fact, it is this complexity that is at the heart of Little Women. Just beneath the surface of the domestic adventures of the March sisters, Little Women simmers. Louisa Alcott's best known text simmers and sometimes seethes with frustration at the juxtaposition between the desire to live a spiritual life and the reality of having to pay bills for basic necessities. The additional juxtaposition of who gets to be spiritual and who gets to pay the bills also explodes beneath the surface of the text and informs Little Women with a spirited tension. It is this tension that gives the book an edge that belies its domestic façade and keeps readers coming back for more. Since its first printing in 1868, Little Women has never been out of print. The honesty of the human struggle beneath the surface of domestic harmony keeps both general readers and
scholars coming back to *Little Women* with recognition and fascination again and again. As Ellen Shapiro writes in a 1987 edition of the book, "No one reads *Little Women* just once."¹²

In Chapter One, "A Transcendental Pilgrim: Bronson Alcott and His Journey Through Transcendentalism" Bronson's Alcott's connection to the transcendentalist movement is explored. In this chapter, I take a close look at Louisa May Alcott's father through the lens of the transcendentalist movement as well as through the eyes of the Alcott family and touch on his appearance as Mr. March in *Little Women*. I explore his transcendental philosophy and how that philosophy affected his parenting and his pedagogy. I have provided glimpses of that pedagogy by including excerpts of his major work, *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*, which highlight his Socratic conversations with children as well as many of his transcendentalist beliefs. I also look at the way in which he was regarded by other transcendentalists, particularly Emerson, and his history with the movement. As Morrow wrote, Bronson Alcott's beliefs and actions were completely consistent and I look specifically what his beliefs were and how they affected his family and other areas of his life including his career.

The Fruitlands experience is explored in depth in this chapter as this communal living experiment was a pivotal point in Bronson Alcott's life and in the life of the Alcott family. In this community, Bronson Alcott hoped to be able to live out his spiritual ideals in a Utopia of his own creation with other spiritual pilgrims. In many ways, this community was Bronson Alcott's life dream and was to be a shining example to the world of the progressive ideals that were central to his life. I explore the ways in which these ideals were implemented by Bronson Alcott and British transcendentalist Charles
Lane and the ways in which Abigail Alcott and Louisa May Alcott and her sisters were affected by this time in this spiritual community.

In Chapter Two, "Between Praise and Criticism: Louisa May Alcott's Experience of Transcendentalism," I examine the specific ways in which Louisa Alcott was affected by Bronson Alcott's philosophy. I explore the ways in which the progressive values that Louisa Alcott was raised with affected her life and the juxtaposition of those ideals with those of the larger nineteenth century society. Louisa Alcott's feminism is explored in depth and compared and contrasted to the feminism of Bronson Alcott and looked at through the lens of the gender roles in the Alcott family and again compared to the larger society of which Louisa Alcott was connected. Louisa May Alcott's creativity and her gift for writing are also explored within the context of these progressive ideals and the ways in which those ideals were displayed in the Alcott family. Louisa Alcott was a great admirer of Emerson and I offer a glimpse into the source of that admiration by providing excerpts of her journal writings.

I also look at these transcendental and gender issues in the Alcott home and provide connections and analysis to the ways in which they show up in both the characters and plot of Little Women. These connections will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Three, "Transcendental Tension: A Debate Between Father and Daughter."

In the third and final chapter of the thesis, I look closely at the text of Little Women and explore the ways in which Bronson Alcott's transcendentalism affected Louisa Alcott's best known text. I offer examples of areas of the text that point to ideals of Bronson Alcott's and Louisa Alcott's response to those ideals within the text.
to pay the bills in a nineteenth century society with few opportunities for women. All of these issues which Louisa Alcott faced found their way into the text of Little Women and informed it with a multifaceted and layered way at looking at the March family and their adventures amidst the backdrop of a genteel Victorian society. In Little Women, Louisa Alcott subverts the image of that Victorian society, allowing readers then and now to see the flaws amidst its charm. This subversion stands in the way of Little Women ever being a text which romanticizes modern readers with a longing for a simpler time. Louisa Alcott shows the March sisters dealing with poverty, death, war, and lack of opportunities for women, hardly simple issues then or now. Under the surface of the novel, she also offers readers a insider's glimpse into ideals of transcendentalism and refuses to give a clear advocacy or negation of the movement but instead offers a complex critique of the movement's highest ideals and shows how those ideals might affect a family and the larger society.
End Notes

5. Morrow.
Chapter One

A Transcendental Pilgrim: Bronson Alcott and His Journey Through Transcendentalism

While Bronson Alcott may not have been the best known transcendentalist, he was often regarded as the most truly transcendental. He was known by his family, friends, peers and others to live completely according to his beliefs, often losing teaching jobs for his innovative methods including his refusal to include corporeal punishment as part of any curriculum which he taught. He also rejected rote memorization, preferring instead to have Socratic conversations with the children on a variety of topics including the Gospels.\textsuperscript{13} His pedagogy also included art, music, dance, nature study, physical education, and field trips.\textsuperscript{14} He advocated vegetarianism and by all accounts actually adhered to veganism, (although the term was not coined until 1944)\textsuperscript{15} eschewing all products made from the labor and suffering of animals. A cousin of Abigail Alcott visited the Alcotts in Concord and noted that she was bringing her own meat "in case my wayward stomach should crave it." She noted that during her visit that the Alcotts ate no meat, butter or cheese.\textsuperscript{16} Bronson Alcott was an also a passionate abolitionist and did not believe in wearing cotton since it was produced by slave labor.

His daughters were mostly educated at home with Bronson Alcott as their teacher. As he did in his schools, he encouraged creativity with his own children and the girls often wrote and performed their own plays as part of their assignments. Bronson Alcott also stressed the importance of keeping journals, a practice he had done almost daily since he was a child. Bronson encouraged each of the Alcotts to share their journals with one another to foster communication.\textsuperscript{17} In many of Louisa Alcott's childhood journal entries are comments from either Bronson or Abigail Alcott, encouraging Louisa to always do
her best and giving her specifics on how to improve. In some ways this practice may have opened the lines of communication, but this method of sharing journals also created a sense of tension in which one's private emotions were subject to moral scrutiny by other family members in the continuing journey toward spiritual perfection. Abigail Alcott, while a participant in this practice, often rebelled against it, and was known to remove with scissors part of her husband's journal that had references to her. 18

Bronson Alcott was at the center of the very beginnings of transcendentalism. While he was not at the first meeting of the Transcendentalist Club, he did attend the second, held at the home of George Ripley, September 19, 1836. 19 He was involved in everything transcendental from then on and in true transcendentalist fashion pursued the philosophy on his own path, a path which often but not always included his friends, Emerson, and Thoreau. In fact, Emerson was inspired by Alcott and that inspiration led Emerson to often lend mostly unrequested financial assistance to the Alcotts, who were perpetually struggling. According to Odell Shepard, editor of Bronson Alcott's journals, Emerson and many others were great admirers of Bronson Alcott.

We have remembered that he lived on the bounty of others, but we have not considered why so many sensible persons were glad to contribute to his support. We have not forgotten that Emerson paid Alcott's way to England, but we have hardly asked why he thought Alcott worth sending there. 20

Bronson Alcott was known by family, friends and associates as an optimist and generally remained so despite a variety of setbacks and personal tragedy. His cheerful disposition contributed to his gift for teaching. Louisa Alcott wrote of Bronson Alcott's
pedagogy, "My father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child's
nature, as a flower blooms..." By all accounts, Bronson Alcott had a gift for teaching
and saw it as one of his most important spiritual callings. In the introduction to The
Journals of Bronson Alcott, Odell Shepard wrote about Bronson's teaching.

He held that true teaching- by which he never meant
mere instruction -involves an ascent to a common
spiritual level. Far more socially minded than Emerson,
who said that 'we descend to meet' he believed that for
all true meeting of the minds we must rise above dispute
and fact-peddling to the heights of Spirit on which we
realize that we are one. Good teaching was therefore a
sharing of mind with mind. It was a process in which
all those concerned were engaged in recollecting what,
in some sense, they already knew.

Bronson Alcott's method of teaching by unfolding or drawing out what was
inherently divine within each child was extremely innovative for the nineteenth century
and would likely be considered very progressive by twenty-first century standards. He
was greatly respected in his pedagogy by other transcendentalists and progressive
thinkers. Louisa Alcott and her sisters were educated in this innovative way with Bronson
Alcott and although she gently pokes fun at the practice in Chapter Forty-Five of Little
Women, "Daisy and Demi," (discussed more in Chapter Three, "Transcendental Tension:
a Debate Between Father and Daughter") Bronson's gift for teaching is the area of his life
where Louisa Alcott seemed to most consistently concur with her father. She often
favorably commented on her father's gift for teaching in her journals at the same time that
she wrote of her frustration at his inability to earn a living. Her creativity for writing
stories and writing and producing plays as well as her love for acting was unfolded under
her father's teaching at a time when few women were so seriously encouraged in creative endeavors. Bronson Alcott's method of teaching by unfolding is best understood by reading his *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*, a book which documents a series of classroom discussions that Bronson Alcott held with his students. Below is an excerpt from one of these conversations:

Edward J.: Mr. Alcott, what is the use of responding in church?
Mr. Alcott: Cannot you tell?
Edward J.: No; I never knew.
Josiah: Oh! Mr. Alcott!
Mr. Alcott: Well, Josiah, do you know?
Josiah: Why, Edward! is (sic) it not just like a mother's telling her child the words? The child wants to pray; it don't know how to express its real thoughts, as we often say to Mr. Alcott here; and the mother says words and the child repeats after her the words.
Edward J: Yes, but I don't see what good it does.
Josiah: What! if (sic) the mother says the words, and the child repeats them- really wants to and feels them- really wants the things that are prayed for.- can't you see that is does some good?
Edward J: It teaches the word-prayer- it is not the prayer.
Josiah: Yet it must be the real prayer, and the real prayer must have some words.
But, Mr. Alcott, I think it would be a great deal better, if at church, everybody prayed for themselves. I don't see why one person should pray for all the rest. Why could not the minister pray for himself, and the people pray for themselves? and (sic) why should all not communicate their thoughts? Why should not all be preachers?...Mr. Alcott, I think Sunday ought to come oftener.
Mr. Alcott: Our hearts can make all time Sunday.
Josiah: Why, then nothing could be done! There must be week-days, I know- some weekdays; I said Sunday oftener. 23
In reading, the above passage, one sees that the children talk much more than does the teacher, unheard of in the nineteenth-century and still unique today. Bronson Alcott maintained that children possessed an innate wisdom and divinity and that adults needed to help children access that inner core through conversation and other creative approaches such as music, drama, and dance. Bronson Alcott believed that adults had as much or more to learn from children as children did from adults. In her book, Bronson Alcott, Teacher, Dorothy McCuskey writes of Bronson Alcott's goal in this unfolding process. "For he believed that from these children- their divine institutions unsullied by the world- he might learn of the nature of God."24

Bronson Alcott's conversational teaching style is shown in his daughter, Louisa's novel, Little Women where Bronson makes an appearance as Mr. March. The March patriarch's conversation with his grandson, Demi is remarkably similar to the conversations recorded in Conversations with Children on the Gospels. Similarities between the novel and the Alcott family will be addressed more in Chapter Three, "Transcendental Tension: a Debate Between Father and Daughter".

Bronson Alcott dreamed of putting his educational theories along with his other Transcendental concepts into practice with other like-minded thinkers. His trip to England, where some British transcendentalists had named a school after him, put him in contact with Charles Lane and the two began discussing ideas for living out Bronson's dream.

Bronson Alcott with, British transcendentalist, Lane, started the Utopian Community, Fruitlands, in 1843.25 Bronson Alcott had high hopes for Fruitlands which he believed would be a beacon for other spiritual seekers. Bronson was unprepared for the tensions
that would develop between Lane and other community members, but particularly between Lane and Bronson Alcott's own family. The Alcott women saw Lane as a dictator and Bronson often had to act as diplomat while these varying degrees of tensions became more pronounced as the months progressed. By nature a peacemaker, Bronson Alcott found that many of his own ideas were sacrificed to keeping the ever more tenuous peace. Marjorie Worthington in her book, Miss Alcott of Concord, writes that some of Lane's ideas were destined for failure.

He overpersuaded Mr. Alcott, ... to adopt impossible methods of working Fruitlands as a farm... Bronson Alcott was a good farmer, even his most critical neighbors in Concord would have admitted that. With all his (Bronson's) eagerness for innovations, he must have known that plowing under the crops as they ripened was a process that resulted in a lack of available food.26

Ironically, while Fruitlands was to be a shining example to the world of how to live as individualist in community with other individualists, it was in Fruitlands that Bronson Alcott's strong individualism gave way. While Bronson Alcott was the visionary, Lane held the resources necessary for the dream of Fruitlands to continue. As with the farming issues, Bronson Alcott found himself conceding many of his cherished ideals to allow his dream of Utopia to exist. As Lane became more and more domineering and more community members left Fruitlands, Louisa Alcott saw for the first time, at ten years old, that her father's idealism could not hold firm in a world where that idealism would constantly need to be renegotiated. The Fruitlands experience is invoked in Little Women, in the chapter titled "Experiments," which will be addressed in chapter three of this thesis.
Lane's attempts to wrestle leadership of Fruitlands away from Bronson Alcott resulted in the exponentially increasing tension in the community and came to a turning point when he advised Bronson Alcott to leave his wife and daughters and become a Shaker. Bronson discussed the idea with Abigail and his daughters. The discussion is referred to in Louisa May Alcott's journal entry of December 10, 1843. "In the eve father and mother and Anna and I had a long talk. I was very unhappy, and we all cried. Anna and I cried in bed, and I prayed God to keep us all together."27

Bronson Alcott ultimately decided not to leave his family and this request of Lane's proved to be the end of the Alcott-Lane partnership, although Bronson Alcott held no ill will toward Charles Lane and continued correspondence with him for many years. Throughout the time in Fruitlands, the Alcotts had seen less of Emerson who attempted to be supportive of the endeavor but had been skeptical of its success from the beginning. He visited the community in the summer but the remote location, another disappointment of Bronson Alcott's, who had envisioned his transcendentalist friends visiting Fruitlands often, was a barrier to many in the winter months. After Emerson's summer visit, he noted in his journal, "The sun and evening sky do not look calmer than Alcott and his family at Fruitlands. They seem to have arrived at the fact- to have got rid of the show and to be serene...They look well in July: we shall see them in December..."28

Bronson Alcott attempted to take Emerson's writing on "Self Reliance" to a new level with the Fruitlands experience. In Bronson Alcott's vision, each individual would pursue his own truth and the community would not be reliant on the materialistic larger society for any commodity. They were to grow and harvest their own food and make their own clothing. Emerson may not have envisioned his own beliefs taken to quite the level that
Bronson Alcott attempted or he may have recognized the strategical errors in the attempt at the utopian community with such as the poorly planned farming or the lack of provisions for the winter. In any case, Bronson Alcott's attempt to live out transcendentalism and Emerson's skepticism about the experiment did nothing to hinder the friendship between the two men who continued their mutual devotion throughout both of their lives.

While Bronson's vision of Fruitlands included seekers similar to his transcendentalist friends, the reality was that Fruitlands tended to draw pilgrims who pushed the envelope on progressive thinking and did little to further the goals of the community. With individuality and following one's own truth the highest values of Fruitlands, neither Bronson Alcott nor Lane felt that they could reign in any of this unrestrained individuality. Brother Bower was one such seeker, ahead of his time in his adherence to a raw food diet and who also believed clothing to hinder his spiritual growth. Bronson Alcott was able to persuade Bower to try out his nudist principles only while sleeping. Another member of the community listened to his higher calling by climbing trees and shouting and some other members professed the use of profanity in greeting their fellow community members as part of their spiritual discipline. Again, Louisa Alcott saw from a young age that there were flaws in her father's philosophy and began to recognize that uncompromising individual freedom often did not work in community with others.

She also began to see that Fruitlands showed the flaws in her father's feminism. Despite Bronson Alcott's belief in gender equality and his insistence on women and men wearing gender neutral linen tunics, Fruitlands was patriarchal in practice. Abigail Alcott did all of the cooking, laundry, sewing, and cleaning for the community and as Louisa
Alcott described in "Transcendental Wild Oats", a fictional essay about the Fruitlands experience, was known to bring in the crops as well while the men went out lecturing on transcendentalism and vegetarianism. When a visitor to the community asked "Are there any beasts of burden on the place?", Abigail Alcott replied, "Only one woman!" Abigail Alcott's rebellious exclamation is one that Louisa May Alcott included in "Transcendental Wild Oats", showing the discrepancy between labor roles for men and women. Kim Wells writes of this discrepancy in her master's thesis, *Louisa May Alcott and the Roles of a Lifetime*. "Alcott illustrates that the esotericism of male philosophy is at least partially responsible for adding burdens to women's lives. While men can seek freedom to intellectualize, women are forced to bear each new whim patiently, and yet they must be relied upon to come to the family's rescue when these whims fail". At Fruitlands, Louisa Alcott discovered that while Bronson Alcott professed not to judge anyone's capabilities by their gender and despite his sincere devotion to the cause of women's rights, he was unaware of his own participation in nineteenth-century patriarchal hegemony. As Abigail Alcott became more outspoken about being overworked, even Lane conceded that she needed assistance, but neither he nor Bronson Alcott thought of pitching in and helping her themselves.

Eventually, the lack of resources and by now boiling tension intersected and Lane responded by leaving with his son to join the Shaker community. At that point only the Alcotts and a man named Joseph Palmer were left at Fruitlands. Palmer was an active member of the community and did much of the farming work. He bought the land from Lane but declined Lane's offer to begin yet another spiritual community. However, he continued to operate the farm for more than twenty years with his wife and freely
welcomed anyone who wished to join them with a simmering pot of vegetarian soup.  
"In his odd way, Joseph Palmer continued the essential goodness which was the basis of 
the Fruitlands experiment," wrote Worthington. Bronson Alcott was devastated by the 
failure of his dream and fell into complete despair. Abigail Alcott rented a couple of 
rooms from a family in Harvard and the Alcotts soon left the place Louisa Alcott would 
refer to in "Transcendental Wild Oats" as Apple Slump. As she witnessed her father's 
devastation, and her mother's rescue and relief efforts, Louisa Alcott again saw that 
Bronson's ideals could not hold firm and that her mother's practicality often saved the 
family from homelessness and kept them together.

While Fruitlands is generally referred to as a failure, in many ways the attempt at 
spiritual community living had far reaching effects. William Henry Harrison, director of 
the Fruitlands Museum in 1957 wrote:

though an economic failure, Fruitlands was not necessarily a spiritual one. Here was a marked departure from all 
other schemes of communal living, for it was Alcott's central conviction that all effective and enduring changes 
in society must originate 'within the individual and work outwards.'

Fruitlands' impact lies in its influence more than a century later on the spiritual and 
vegetarian communes of the 1960's and in the intentional living communities of today 
and in today's vegan movement. The Fruitlands experiment has inspired many throughout 
the past century to embrace non-violence and harmony with others in both communal and 
individual pursuits and to reject the hegemony of materialism. Throughout her life, 
Louisa Alcott recognized that while she continually saw the flaws inherent in her father's
idealism, that people were often drawn to Bronson Alcott because of that same idealism and that many progressive thinkers of her own time, including Mary Baker Eddy, were inspired and encouraged by him. 36

After leaving Fruitlands, Bronson Alcott continued his lectures and conversations and became superintendent of schools in Concord in 1859, a position which he held until 1865.37 In July of 1853, he realized a long held dream when he opened his School of Philosophy. The school began in his Orchard House study and was so successful that a separate building was erected to house the school next to Orchard House. The school attracted students from all over the United States, some of which had attended Bronson Alcott's lectures on his tours of the Western United States. Louisa Alcott was typically supportive of her father's school and as with his other projects, she was also typically conflicted about the idea of spending so much time in discussion rather than action. She wrote in her journal in August of 1879 about her frustration with her father and his students focus on all talk and no action. "...speculation seems such a waste of time when there is so much real work crying to be done. Why discuss the Unknowable (sic) till our poor are fed & (sic) the wicked saved?"38

Bronson Alcott's school of philosophy continued to be successful until his death in 1888 at age 88 39 and he continued to be at the center of progressive thinking. He wrote in his journal in 1880 that the Unitarians no longer claimed him."...It is agreed that I am sufficiently orthodox to be claimed no longer by the Unitarians, either of the conservative or the radical type; but Emerson's faith appears to remain a debatable question still. It will be a difficult matter to classify either of us."40
Though more than a century has passed since Bronson Alcott wrote those words, his journal entry remains essentially true. It is a difficult matter to classify him. He was a Transcendentalist, an educator, an abolitionist, a vegetarian, a loving and involved spouse and parent as well as the father of one of America's best known writers. He was successful in living on his own terms and in his own way. Bronson Alcott not only preached but practiced all that he believed. Bronson Alcott is the most difficult individual to classify in a difficult to classify movement. Perhaps in this way, he has earned the title of the most transcendental transcendentalist. Louisa May Alcott was the daughter of this progressive thinker whose beliefs and actions were far ahead of the nineteenth century in which he lived. All of her life, Louisa Alcott straddled the gap between her liberal upbringing and the conservative thinking of the larger society. How does the second generation of progressive thinkers incorporate their parents teaching and values? Do they adopt these ideas and practices as their own and continue the legacy or do they reject these ideas as impractical and foolish? Louisa Alcott grappled with these questions and her conflicted response to them throughout her life. In Chapter Two, "Between Praise and Criticism: Louisa May Alcott's Experience with Transcendentalism" these issues will be addressed in more depth.
   <http:www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/alcott/>
20. Shepard, xvii.
22. Shepard, xxv
23. Alcott, 97, 98, 99
25. Shepard, xxxix.
26. Worthington, 26, 27, 38
29. Worthington, 38.
30. Worthington, 32.
32. Worthington, 26
33. Worthington, 28.
35. Worthington, 41.
Chapter Two
Between Praise and Criticism: Louisa May Alcott's Experience of Transcendentalism

As Bronson Alcott's daughter, Louisa May Alcott grew up in the center of transcendentalism and the movement impacted her life in a myriad of ways. Because both of her parents valued equality for women, Louisa Alcott was raised in a more egalitarian home than many young women in the nineteenth century. Bronson and Abigail Alcott raised their four daughters to be independent thinkers and to pursue their individual interests. Bronson Alcott was passionate not only about his spiritual beliefs but also about abolition, vegetarianism and equality for women. Katharine Halttunen writes of Bronson's progressive and influential view of women's rights, in her essay "The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott" "...Margaret Fuller became transformed by Bronson's feminism." Bronson Alcott was equally vocal about educational reform and at the time of Louisa's birth had converted from a Lockean view of child-rearing in which children were thought of as a blank slate to one which was more in keeping with his transcendentalism, that children were inherently divine and parents and educators should focus on unfolding their inner divinity. As discussed in Chapter One, "A Transcendental Pilgrim: Bronson Alcott and His Journey Through Transcendentalism," the unfolding process involved Socratic style questioning as opposed to rote memorization as well as music, drama, and dance. Bronson Alcott was an involved father and spent much time with his daughters, putting his educational theories into practice. Halttunen writes of Bronson's parenting style. "...when Anna and Louisa were very young, he spent many evenings with them in the nursery, encouraging them to perform fables and fairy tales they knew complete with music and dancing."
Abigail Alcott was equally influential in her daughters' lives. She was as progressive as her husband but with a more practical bent. She worked outside the home, for a time, when it was uncommon for women to do so as she needed the paycheck to pay for basic necessities for her family. The offer of work that she received from the South End Friendly Society was also social justice work which was dear to her heart. In this position, Abigail Alcott investigated cases of need and allocated assistance. She also added her own emphasis to the work. She developed a section of the agency which acted as an employment service for female domestic workers. The workers were mainly Irish immigrants who were regularly exploited. She particularly enjoyed this work since it was livelihood which also matched her desire to help others and she wished that she could give her services voluntarily rather than having to work for money. While Abigail Alcott believed strongly in equal rights for women, she was also affected by the values of the larger society. While volunteer work was seen as acceptable and even noble for married woman, working outside the home was unusual for women with husbands and children and was often considered demeaning. Like her daughter, Louisa Alcott, Abigail Alcott straddled the gap between the beliefs and practices of the Alcott home and those of the larger Victorian society. While she passionately believed in women's right to work for pay, she often had conflicting emotions about having to do so herself.

Louisa Alcott was encouraged by her parents to pursue her interest in writing as her sisters were encouraged in their individual interests in music and art. She writes of such parental support of daughters' artistic expression in *Little Women*. Jo writes whenever she is moved to do so and her family refrains from interfering with her creativity. "This cap (worn when writing) was a beacon to the inquiring eyes of her family, who during
these periods kept their distance, merely popping in their heads semi-occasionally, to ask, with interest "'Does genius burn, Jo?'". In her journal, Louisa Alcott describes her family's encouragement while she wrote her first novel. "'Mother wandered and out with cordial cups of tea, worried because I couldn't eat. Father thought it fine, and brought his reddest apples and hardest cider for my Pegasus to feed upon." Alcott grew up in an unconventional nineteenth century home where women's creativity was both valued and encouraged. Alcott, in writing about a fictional family who also models egalitarian creativity, both validates and inspires her female readers in their own creative exploration. In his essay, "Reading a Feminist Romance: Literary Critics and Little Women" Gregory Eiselein writes of the ways in which Louisa Alcott's progressive upbringing shows up in the text of Little Women, "...Alcott's thinking about men, women, gender, and sexuality strikes me as remarkably progressive. As critics have long understood, Jo's (and Laurie's) gender identity hardly conforms to essentialist ideas about sex.". As shown by her character development in Little Women, Louisa Alcott adopted her parents' ideas about equality for both sexes but offered her own twist on them. In Little Women, she not only advocates for the gender equality with which she was raised but shows the tensions inherent in that struggle for equality and the ways in which male-female relationships are informed by that tension.

Louisa Alcott admired her father's idealism and put into action many of her parents' lessons by becoming an ardent abolitionist in her own right as well as a feminist actively supportive of women's suffrage and women's equality in general. "The Alcotts had supported female suffrage from the very beginning, and Alcott sent greetings to the American Woman's Suffrage Convention and served as delegate to the Women's
Congress at Syracuse the year she published Work," writes Jean Fagin Yellin in her essay. "From Success to Experience: Louisa May Alcott's Work.\textsuperscript{48} Louisa Alcott was also the first woman to register to vote in Concord, Mass. for a local school board election.\textsuperscript{49} In 1881, after Louisa Alcott had revised her novel, Moods, for a second publication, she included a letter to her publisher, encouraging him to also publish Mrs. Robinson's, History of the Suffrage Movement, and requesting his support for women's equality. "Do you scorn the whole thing? Better not, for we are going to win in time, and the friend of literary ladies ought to be the friend of women generally."\textsuperscript{50} While Louisa Alcott was conflicted in her response to many aspects of Bronson Alcott's transcendentalism, she had no conflict in supporting feminism. While Bronson Alcott believed in the need for women's equality and supported efforts toward that goal, for Louisa Alcott the fight for woman's rights was more urgent. She was born into a society, based on values of freedom and democracy, which failed to consider her a full citizen. Because of her gender, until that school board election in Concord, she was not allowed to vote. Women had very few rights in property or marriage during Louisa Alcott's time which may have prompted her essay on single women titled "The Happy Women".

Louisa Alcott consistently examined issues of gender inequity in her writing including but not limited to Little Women. Feminist issues can be supported by themes, character development and plot in most if not all of her novels as well as in her many published essays. Her most openly feminist novel is Work, first published in 1873. In the novel, the protagonist, Christie, echoes the Declaration of Sentiments, proclaiming, "There's going to be a new Declaration of Independence."\textsuperscript{51} Christie goes on to demand her right to meaningful work and an independent life of her own creation. In Little Women, the
March women run the household and work outside the home, all while supporting each other's dreams and sharing each other's heartaches. In Work, Louisa Alcott expands on this theme by ending the novel with Christy living in a supportive community of unrelated women. They are family by choice, possibly a nod to Bronson Alcott's attempt at utopian community. Her feminism, like her character Christy, has full voice and agency in this novel and Louisa Alcott does not hesitate to point out the flaws of a patriarchal society. Her novel Moods also reflects Louisa Alcott's feminism. In the novel, she refers to marriage as "spiritual slavery." The novel demonstrates- and Alcott's letters reiterate- that no woman should marry a man for any reason other than love. But if she does so, upon discovering her folly, she should not be forced by society's laws or more subtly by its expectations to remain his wife," writes Helen R. Deese in her essay, "Louisa May Alcott's Moods: a New Archival Discovery." Louisa Alcott briefly considered marrying someone she did not love in order to better assist her family so understood first-hand how women's limited opportunities could impact such a personal decision.

She has Amy grapple with this issue in Little Women as she contemplates marrying Fred as a practical solution to perpetual financial struggle (320). While Amy appears to be regularly trivialized in the novel for her conformity to societal norms, on a deeper level Amy is shown as an unapologetic realist who refuses to pretend that life for women in the nineteenth century is any different than it is. Yes, pickled limes can be social capital, getting paid for your work is a good thing and sometimes women are compelled to marry for money. In possibly the most discouraging speech of the novel, Louisa Alcott has Amy vow to give up her art after her tour of Europe. Amy tells Laurie that after
seeing all of wonders of Europe that she "felt too insignificant to live, and gave up all my foolish hopes in despair" (319). When Laurie, who is consistently supportive of the March women's art, implores her to change her mind and reminds her of her talent, Amy's response is again disturbing. "...talent isn't genius and no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great or nothing. I won't be a common-dauber, so I don't intend to try any more "(319). In this passage, Louisa Alcott shows the grim reality that patriarchal hegemony has shut women out of any real artistic opportunity and that women are excluded even from artistic expression. Amy will never be able to support herself by her art and no one other than her own Bohemian family will ever take her art seriously.

Louisa Alcott shows her readers that the death of Amy's art is a tragedy with the strong language that she uses in the passage. The words " too insignificant to live" are incredibly powerful and disturbing. As a nineteenth-century female, Amy has been deemed by society as " insignificant." She has no right to vote to even begin to change the laws which fail to protect her. While Jo is seen rebelling against the patriarchy from the opening chapter of Little Women as she complains about her future filled with having to wear long gowns and behave like a china doll, Amy as the realist does not rebel. She conforms to the dictates of society and attempts to make peace with her sacrifice though the act of giving up her creativity has her in "despair." When Laurie asks what Amy will do without her art, she replies, "Polish up my other talents and be an ornament to society, if I get the chance" (319). Amy, with her devotion to fashion, is the only March sister that Louisa Alcott could have used to say this line which openly accuses the patriarchal Victorian society of robbing this woman of her creativity and trivializes her as simply "an ornament to society." Jo has rejected fashion throughout the novel, Beth rarely leaves the
house so does not participate in society and Meg is not cynical enough for such a speech to be believable. In this passage Amy's conformity is every bit as strong of a response to nineteenth-century sexism as Jo's rebellion. Amy's conformity is subversive. She appears to go along with what is expected of her by society but her pointed words show that Amy is seething with anger at the patriarchal injustice of her world and is fully aware that her resignation as an artist is a tragedy, for Amy and for all female artists.

Like Jo, Louisa Alcott often openly rebelled against nineteenth-century sexism but within her own egalitarian home, her energy often centered on perpetual financial struggle of her family. This struggle was a constant aspect of Louisa Alcott's life and one of the aspects of her father's transcendentalism with which she was most frustrated. Bronson Alcott's economic strategy of living primarily on faith, often left Louisa Alcott anxious about the family's well-being. She confided this concern in her journal when she was twelve years old. "More people coming to live with us; I wish we could be together, and no one else. I don't see who is to clothe and feed us all, when we are so poor now." By the time that Louisa Alcott was eighteen, she had progressed beyond worrying about who would provide for the Alcott family and had begun providing for them herself. She took on the traditional male role of family provider which was accepted as normal in the Alcott home but incongruous with the larger nineteenth century society. Louisa Alcott saw that her father's feminism only held as far as the doors of the Alcott home as her job searches generally resulted in traditional female domestic work. She also discovered that his idealistic feminism was often as much a hindrance as a benefit to her as she longed to have more time to write and less time in labor intensive subservience. She worked as a governess, teacher, seamstress, domestic servant and Civil War nurse while still finding
time to write and sell stories to newspapers. At varying times, she felt both pride and frustration in her role as family provider. In her 1858 journal at age 25, she wrote, "Went to Boston on my usual hunt for employment, as I am not needed at home and seem to be the only bread-winner just now." 56 Though she contributed to various progressive causes and charities for the poor and orphaned throughout her life, in contrast to Bronson Alcott's emphasis of putting spiritual needs first, she made taking care of her family's physical needs her first priority. When the publisher of "Hospital Sketches", her experiences as a Civil War nurse, asked if she wanted to contribute a percentage of the book's sales to charity, she declined. "I too am sure that 'he who giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord' & and on that principle devote time and earnings to the care of my father and mother, for one possesses no gift for money making & (sic) the other is now too old to work any longer for those who are happy and able to work for her." 57

As frustrated as Louisa Alcott often was with her father's idealism, she was a great admirer of Emerson. Throughout her journal she refers to Emerson as "the god of my idolatry" 58 and she notes with gratitude his frequent contributions to her family.

Father had four talks at Emerson's, good people came, and he enjoyed them much; made $30. R.W.E. probably put in $20. He has a sweet way of bestowing gifts on the table under a book or behind a candle-stick, when he thinks Father wants a little money, and no one will help him earn. 59

At Emerson's death, she writes in her journal, "Our best and greatest American gone" 60

Louisa Alcott's novel, Moods, published in 1864, is named for a line in Emerson's essay "Experience": "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads and as we pass through
them they prove to be many colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows us only what lies in its own focus.\textsuperscript{61} While she was regularly frustrated with the idealism of transcendentalism, particularly as played out in the Alcott home, she was reverential in her admiration for the movement's founder. For Louisa Alcott, Emerson embodied the best of transcendentalism. He was successful in being paid for his lectures and could pay his bills without assistance. He shared what he had but not so much that he put his family in jeopardy. In the patriarchy of the nineteenth century, Emerson, while still progressive, appeared as more of a traditional father figure than Bronson Alcott.

While the gender norms of the time were subverted in the Alcott home with women working to support the family and the father fulfilling the matriarchal role of spiritual center, Louisa Alcott, though a feminist, was fully grounded in the real world of her time. She may have longed for a family where instead of working to support her father, her father worked to support her. She wrote in her journal of her continual frustration with having to work at a variety of jobs while she longed to simply have uninterrupted time to write. "Hate to visit people who ask me to help amuse others, and often longed for a crust in a garret with freedom and a pen. I never knew before what insolent things a hostess can do, nor what false positions poverty can push one into."\textsuperscript{62} Louisa Alcott found herself straddling two worlds as she struggled to take on the traditional male role of supporting her family without the opportunities given to men for jobs that paid well. She shows this juxtaposition of values of a progressive family versus the values of the larger society in \textit{Little Women}. At a gathering with some of Laurie's English friends, Meg speaks of working as a governess. At the shocked reaction of Miss Kate that Meg is a working woman, Meg regrets being so forthcoming. John Brooke defends Meg, saying,
"Young ladies in America love independence as much as their ancestors did, and are admired and respected for supporting themselves." Miss Kate responds "in a patronizing tone that hurt Meg's pride, and made her work seem not only more distasteful, but degrading" (108). This passage shows the frustration of women being caught between two worlds, one, a subculture such as the March (and the Alcott) home in which women's work is valued and completely normal to the larger societal one in which it is as Alcott wrote, "degrading." Interestingly, Louisa Alcott chooses Meg as the sister to represent this straddling of two worlds since Meg is one of the most domestic of the March sisters and the one who is the novel's charmingly flawed role model for the Cult of Domesticity. Louisa Alcott may have perceived that readers could more easily accept these feelings of humiliation and degradation about working for a living in Meg rather than in the character of Jo who repeatedly says that she wishes she were born a boy, with all of the opportunities accessible to that gender.

Stuck in a seemingly endless parade of menial jobs, Louisa Alcott straddled yet another world in being a struggling writer in a patriarchy which offered little value to women's writing. She was often compelled to use gender neutral pen names, such as A.M. Barnard, in publishing her most fiery novels and stories. This practice is also shown slightly skewed in Little Women when Jo submits her most lurid stories to a publisher and uses no name at all (275). By not allowing Jo to give her name to her stories of lust, betrayal and violence, Louisa Alcott is showing that even the March sister with the most voice and agency holds back aspects of herself which do not conform to the societal construct of genteel nineteenth century womanhood. This holding back may be due as much to the March parents' emphasis on living a spiritually centered life as it does
on the sexism of the times. The Marches, who all focused their reading on Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan, had little appreciation for sensation stories. However, Jo was aware of the world outside of the March home and constantly expressed frustration with its sexism. She may have realized that a sensation story with a female byline may not be accepted for publication.

While Jo is thrilled to be published and to be earning much needed money for her stories, she hesitates to show her stories to Professor Bhaer, who she marries later in the novel, for fear of his disapproval. He does indeed disapprove and comments on the lack of morality in one of her tales, apparently without knowing its author. "I do not like to think that good young girls should see such things. They are made pleasant to some, but I would rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash" (280). Mr. March also encourages Jo to write for the greater good rather than simply writing for pay after she has won a newspaper contest. "You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind the money" (215). Louisa Alcott shows gender tension in these differing views of morality in literature throughout the novel with Amy's response to Mr. March as the most vocal when she exclaims "I think the money is the best part of it" (215). Amy's assertion points to varying levels of Louisa Alcott's response to the patriarchal hegemony of her society, and even to her own progressive father. Amy's response to the situation also represents the female position of needing to be centered in the reality of the physical world, where one needs money to survive rather than the spiritually superior, but ultimately powerless, positions of the novel's central patriarchal figures. Both Louisa Alcott and Jo March had to circumvent the patriarchy to find ways to support themselves and their families while refusing to give up their creativity. In both cases, their sensation
stories paid much needed bills. Jo's sisters enjoyed the stories and celebrated that Jo was paid for them. "'It's very good,'" said Amy critically." "Oh my Jo, I am so proud!"" was Beth's response to her sister's success (125). At the same time that the women in the novel were congratulating Jo, the male characters offered gentle admonishments and encouraged Jo to use her gifts more judiciously. Ann B. Murphy in her essay, "The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in Little Women" addresses this gender inequity. "It is through Jo that we are compelled to question the painfully limited choices available to women artists."64

Louisa Alcott understood that men were often as much causalities of societal gender constructs as women. She portrays Laurie as young man with a passion for music who is despondent over his grandfather's insistence that he give up his creative pursuits and join him in business. While he appears to mourn the loss of Jo as a love interest, he is instead mourning the loss of his own creativity. In fact, it is her need to write that Jo gives as her reason for rejecting him which is suspect since Laurie has always been supportive of Jo's writing. Instead of grieving the loss of Jo, Laurie is grieving the loss of his own artistic self, the price he must pay to be accepted as a responsible male in society. Jo is consistent in her rejection of gender conformity and soon after meeting Laurie she hears that his grandfather does not want him to pursue his music. She is outraged by the ridiculousness of conformity to unjust gender roles for women or men. "'How silly!' " said Jo. "'Let him be a musician, if he wants to and not plague his life sending him out to college, when he hates to go' " (47). Interestingly, Mr. Laurence had rejected his son (Laurie's father) for marrying a musician. Marmee tells her daughters about Laurie's mother. "'The lady was good and lovely and accomplished, but he (Mr. Laurence) did not like her, and never
saw his son after he married' "(46). Marmee goes on to tell the March sisters that Laurie's parents both died when he was a small child. With this complex Laurence family history, Louisa Alcott shows that insistence on rigid gender roles and refusal to allow creativity to flourish can lead to isolation and even death. Laurie's parents, Mr. Laurence, and Laurie himself were each painfully isolated by Mr. Laurence's decision to reject his son for marrying a woman who refused to give up her art. Mr. Laurence is still so angry at this woman that he will not allow Laurie to pursue his own interest in music. Marmee continues the Laurence tale. "'...his (Laurie's) skill (in music) reminds him (Mr.Laurence) of the woman he did not like,...'" (47). Particularly in this line, Louisa Alcott shows that by not allowing women acceptance as artists, society harms not just women but men as well. Laurie is as much a causality of patriarchal hegemony as Amy which may explain why Louisa Alcott chose to have them marry when they otherwise seem to have little in common.

Bronson Alcott rejected the notion of gender conformity and insisted on following his own creative and spiritual path. In bucking the societal norm, he became both an inspiration and a source of frustration to Louisa Alcott. She was inspired by his encouragement of her creativity and by the expanded gender roles of the Alcott home. Her talent for writing was encouraged and her passion for feminism was ignited by her father's philosophy. However, the juxtaposition of the progressive Alcott home with that of the patriarchal nineteenth century society was a difficult one for Louisa Alcott to straddle. And straddle it she must since as her many journal entries confirm, she saw herself as the only family member with the ability to pay the bills. While Bronson Alcott encouraged Louisa Alcott's creativity, he gave her no financial support to pursue her art
and in fact appeared not to mind having her support his own creative pursuits. All of these gender tensions found their way into the pages of *Little Women*, informing it with a continually fresh look at both familial and societal gender complexities.
43. Halttunen, 235.
44. Worthington, 59, 60.
45. Alcott, Louisa May. Little Women. New York: dilithium Press, Ltd., Children's Classics Division, 1987, 212. Further references to Little Women will be parenthetical within the text.
46. Myerson, Shealy, Stern. The Journals of Louisa May Alcott, 103
49. Morrow, 249.
54. Worthington, 96.
57. Myerson, Shealy, Stern. The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott, xxv.
61. Deese, Helen, 441, 442
64. Murphy, Ann B. "The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in Little Women, Signs, 15.3 (1990), 565
Chapter Three

Transcendental Tension: A Debate Between Father and Daughter

Little Women has never been considered a transcendentalist novel and is rarely thought of as having been inspired by transcendentalism. The novel, first published in 1868, occurred a generation after transcendentalism's moment in America's philosophical spotlight. After Little Women, Louisa May Alcott was well-established as a writer of children's books, rather than a writer known for writing on either spiritual or philosophical issues. However, Louisa May Alcott was Bronson Alcott's daughter. She was raised as an abolitionist, a feminist, a vegetarian. At ten years old, she lived in a spiritual, vegan commune. Her family's closest friends included Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Lydia Child. Her family was at the center of transcendentalism and transcendentalism at the center of her family life. How could she not respond in her writing to such a powerful factor in her life? Louisa Alcott's often conflicted response to transcendentalism was evident in her journals and letters, discussed throughout this thesis, and her first novel Moods, first published in 1864, is generally thought to be the most reflective of transcendentalism. In the novel, the heroine, Sylvia Yule, marries the wrong man after thinking the man she loves is engaged to another. A lover's triangle ensues with much romance and drama. Yule's true love, Adam Warwick, is based on Thoreau and describes himself as "...a man untamed by any law but that of my own will." Sarah Elbert writes in the introduction to the 1991 publication of Moods that the passionate plot is actually a device for addressing the larger issues of women's rights in and out of marriage, and the search for one's true self juxtaposed with one's social self.
When she showed the completed novel to her father, Bronson Alcott exclaimed, "Emerson must see this. Where did you get your metaphysics?"

While on the surface, Little Women is the least likely novel to find a discussion on the benefits and problems of transcendentalism, just below the surface of the genteel domesticity of nineteenth-century family life, Louisa Alcott's response to Bronson Alcott's transcendentalism simmers and occasionally comes to a boil. As in her journals and letters her response is conflicted, sometimes honoring transcendentalism and the creativity and individuality central to its philosophy and sometimes criticizing it and even ridiculing it for its failure to deal with practical realities.

In Chapter Four, "Burdens," Louisa Alcott describes each of the sisters as having unique interests. Jo has a passion for writing, Amy for painting and drawing, and Beth for music. Meg and Beth best exemplify the Cult of True Womanhood belief system of the time, both seemingly achieving peace and fulfillment through their domesticity.

While Meg works as a governess, one senses that her true nature lies within the sphere of this Cult of Domesticity, although in chapter twenty-eight, "Domestic Experiences" Louisa Alcott shows the flaws inherent in that belief system. She also shows the misunderstanding and confusion that result from using only domesticity as a source of perceived power and fulfillment as Meg strives for domestic bliss but often finds her own wants and needs to be in conflict with her vision of a happy home. Louisa Alcott begins the chapter with describing that like other young married women, Meg strives to have a perfect home that will be a peaceful refuge for her husband. Louisa Alcott's description of Meg's vision is pointedly tongue-in-cheek, "John should find home a paradise; he should always see a smiling face, should fare sumptuously, should never know the loss of a
button" (218). She appears at the beginning of the sentence to elevate the importance of women's domesticity by inviting readers to share in Meg's vision for her home as Utopia and then ridicules this same vision with the image of John having such a peaceful existence in his home that he never knows the loss of something so trivial as a button.

Interestingly enough, this technique of Alcott's works as well today as it did when Little Women was first published. Women in the twenty-first century are still dealing with the image of home as Utopian sanctuary, a belief system recently renewed by the intense interest in home renovation television shows. An entire channel, Home and Garden Television, is marketed to women with this same hook of familial happiness through domestic Utopia. Louisa Alcott goes on to describe how the attempt to achieve her self-worth through perfect domesticity has left Meg exhausted and angry. "She was too tired, sometimes, even to smile" (218). At the beginning of their marriage, in striving for her own empowerment through her role as domestic leader, Meg confidently tells her spouse that he should "feel free" to bring dinner guests home at anytime without warning. In the ensuing domestic drama, Louisa Alcott uses humor to show how John's "freedom" leaves both Meg and John imprisoned by misunderstanding and resentment. As in "Transcendental Wild Oats," Louisa Alcott's sometimes sharp and sometimes gentle humor illustrate her advocacy for interdependence between the sexes. John takes Meg at her word and invites a co-worker home for dinner where he finds his wife depleted and frustrated from her attempts at jelly-making, possibly the most arcane of domestic skills. Meg demands John's assistance most emphatically. "Do come and help me or I shall die!" (220). When Meg finds out that John has taken her at her word and brought someone home to dinner she lectures him on his bad timing and lack of warning. "'A man to
dinner and everything in a mess! John Brooke, how could you do such a thing?...You ought to have sent word, or told me this morning, and you ought to have remembered how busy I was' " (220). With Meg's impassioned speech, Louisa Alcott demands that domestic work be understood as difficult and undervalued and also demands the renegotiation of housework that is shared between both sexes. As Meg emphatically tells John that she will not be making anyone dinner, her simmering unhappiness with her domestic arrangement comes to a full rolling boil. "'Take that Scott up to mother's, and tell him I'm away, sick, dead- anything. I won't see him, and you two can laugh at me and my jelly as much as you like; you won't have anything else here;' " (221). The couple renegotiate their domestic life and Mr. Scott is later invited to dinner "by special invitation" (223). With this conclusion of marital harmony achieved through renegotiation and interdependence, Louisa Alcott makes a strong case for feminism as the path to fulfillment for both women and men.

In the March home as in that of the Alcotts, equality between the sexes was a standard believed and practiced by both parents. Both of the March parents value each girl's individuality and encourage their artistic and personal growth, very transcendental concepts in practice and particularly progressive for nineteenth-century parents of daughters. Morrow writes of this same progressiveness in the Alcott home. "Bronson and Abigail raised their girls according to his philosophy, which allowed for more freedom and high spirits than was conventional in mid-nineteenth century America, especially for girls."68

Louisa Alcott again reflects her progressive and transcendental upbringing in Chapter Seven of Little Women, "Amy's Valley of Humiliation." The scene in which Amy is
struck by her teacher and then publicly humiliated by being made to stand in front of the class is poignant and provides a compelling argument against corporal punishment. "For the first time in her life she had been struck; and the disgrace, in her eyes, was as deep as if he had knocked her down...During the fifteen minutes that followed, the proud and sensitive little girl suffered a pain which she never forgot" (56). Louisa Alcott goes on to describe Marmee's response to the injustice which is to promptly remove Amy from the school with the comment to her daughters that she disagrees with corporal punishment (57). Jo responds that the teacher should be arrested. Although Mr. March is unable to respond to this situation due to his stint as a chaplain in the Civil War, both of the women's responses reflect the mores of the Alcott home in which Bronson Alcott was himself dismissed from schools for his refusal to participate in corporeal punishment.

Another way that Louisa Alcott was positively impacted by transcendentalism was in her experience of nature. She wrote in her journal that Emerson's essays helped her to understand "God and Nature" 69 and in the introduction to The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott, Madeleine B. Stern notes that Thoreau delighted in showing her the beauty of the plants, birds, and insects native to Massachusetts. "It was he who told her to understand that a cobweb was a handkerchief dropped by a fairy."70 Alcott's appreciation of nature is yet another way that her family's transcendentalism is shown throughout Little Women. One example is seen in Chapter Twelve, "Camp Laurence," when the March sisters trek into the woods, each with a creative endeavor. Jo knits and reads aloud, Meg sews, Beth sorts pine cones for a later art project, and Amy sketches the ferns. From their vantage point on the hill they look down into a picturesque and faraway place, which appears as a Utopia where they dreamed of living in the future. "The
heavens glowed with the splendor of an autumn sunset. Gold and purple clouds lay of the hill-tops; and rising high into the ruddy light were slivery white peaks, that shone like the airy spires of some Celestial City" (115). Each of the March girls and Laurie go on to describe their own personal utopia, filled with the passions and delights of each individual. This idea of envisioning a perfect, pristine Utopia where each person can pursue their individual calling is reflective of the transcendentalism which Bronson Alcott sought to live, both within and outside of Fruitlands. This Utopia passage is both beautiful and inspiring and yet Louisa Alcott seemed to find the experience of living in Bronson Alcott's vision of Utopia spiritually uplifting but practically problematic. In "Transcendental Wild Oats", she wrote of this Utopian complexity.

Reform conventions of all sorts were haunted by these brethren who said many wise things and did many foolish ones. Unfortunately, these wanderings interfered with their harvest at home: but the rule was to do what the spirit moved, so they left their crops to Providence and went a-reaping in wider and, let us hope, more fruitful fields than their own. 71

In case any reader should miss that Louisa Alcott is in fact writing about her experience at Fruitlands, she specifies this clearly with the last line in the above quote: "more fruitful fields than their own". Fruitlands was not fruitful either in terms of crops nor in terms of successfully modeling a new way to living and her conclusion is that the rule to do what the spirit moved contributed to this lack of fruit. The word rule is particularly interesting since it seems to contradict the very ideals of the freedom and individuality that Bronson Alcott was seeking. The Fruitlands members desired to move
away from the conformist rules of society but in fact members found the new rules to be every bit as inflexible as those of the larger society. In her choice of the word rule in this instance, Louisa Alcott is saying that this uncompromising individuality was a rule that ultimately got in the way of the community's potential fruitfulness. She comments satirically further in the essay of the juxtaposition of the spiritual and the material and who gets to play which role, again showing the sexism inherent in the operation of Fruitlands. "About the time the grain was ready to house, some call of the Oversoul wafted all the men away." In the essay, Louisa Alcott describes the failure of the community by writing, "The world was not ready for Utopia yet..." 73

The Fruitlands experience left Louisa Alcott with both an admiration for and a frustration with idealists like her father who forgo their families' physical needs in pursuit of spiritual quests. Chapter Eleven of Little Women is aptly titled, "Experiments" and examines this balance between the spiritual and the practical, between the higher calling of one's truth and the necessity of work to maintain a household. The chapter works in a uniquely dualistic way, showing both the necessity of interdependence of members for the common good and showing how the often overlooked and undervalued domestic work of women is necessary to society's survival.

The chapter opens with the beginning of summer and each of the sisters is looking forward to time off from work and school. Each describes what she wishes to do on her vacation "...now I'm going to rest and revel to my heart's content," Meg says (89). Jo says that she plans to read in the apple tree, Beth wants to learn new songs, and Amy to "play all the time and rest." Marmee grants permission to try their "experiment" for one week and each girl pursues her own interests, leaving Marmee and housekeeper/friend,
Hannah, to tend to domestic chores. Marmee approves of the experiment as she thinks the week will give her daughters a lesson in the importance of balance. "I think by Saturday night you will find that all play and no work is as bad as all work and no play" (90). The experiment begins with each March sister pursuing her own calling while the home gradually slips into disarray, except for "Marmee's Corner" (90). In this chapter, Louisa Alcott shows both the flaws in a society, such as Fruitlands, based on the premise that each member's individual truth is more important than the society as a whole. As she does in chapter twenty-eight, Louisa Alcott that housework, usually relegated to women, is vital to the survival of the community.

As the experiment unfolds, Louisa Alcott shows the importance of the often unrecognized labor of women by the quickly unraveling order of the March home. "...Meg did not appear till ten o'clock; her solitary breakfast did not taste nice, and the room seemed lonely and untidy; for Jo had not filled the vases, Beth had not dusted, and Amy's books lay scattered about" (90). Marmee decides to let the experiment continue to its logical conclusion by pleading exhaustion and staying in her room and encouraging Hannah to take a day off. The narrator's commentary, "It was astonishing what a peculiar and uncomfortable state of things was produced by the 'resting and reveling' process" (90). The comment is particularly interesting when one looks at the Fruitlands experience and how truly uncomfortable the community members became (with very little food, resources or protection from the cold) after a season in which members were encouraged to pursue their individual interests and creativity, with much time for "resting and reveling." Indeed in Little Women, the girls' delayed attempts at housekeeping fail, leaving all of the participants with renewed appreciation for those who make home
comfortable for others, especially remembering Hannah's assertion that "Housekeeping ain't no joke." Hannah's statement reminds the sisters and the readers that women's domestic work is to be taken seriously, that in fact, both home and in a larger sense, society depend upon this unpaid and unacknowledged work for its very survival. Without this unpaid labor, society as described in the chapter would fall into complete disarray.

The chapter also emphasizes the marriage between the spiritual and the physical aspects of life and shows that for some to live spiritually depends upon others meeting the practical needs of food, shelter and mundane household chores. In fact, in the one somber incident of the chapter, pet bird, Pip, dies as a result of not being fed. Alcott slips in this tragedy, woven expertly in with the more comedic aspects of the chapter to show both that the survival of society and it members involves more than individual freedom, that members must make basic and necessary efforts to care for one another, that our very lives depend upon these efforts. Pip's death is an interesting twist to the chapter considering that sparing animals from harm was one of Bronson Alcott's highest ideals. In fact, the incident is incongruent with the adoring way in which animals are treated in the rest of the novel. By having Pip die through neglect, Louisa Alcott makes her strongest point of the chapter, that neglecting to physically care for those you are responsible for can result in unintended cruelty and even death. Louisa Alcott concludes her point by having Jo comment on the tragedy, "...Pip has had the worst of the experiment" (93). While Bronson Alcott was experimenting with a new way to live in Utopia, his wife and children often had "the worst of the experiment" though he never intended them harm. Louisa Alcott uses Pip's story to show that uncompromising individual freedom can literally lead to death and can be so devastating that it can harm
those that one most seeks to protect. Louisa Alcott uses Pip as a pointed example of the flaws in Bronson Alcott's attempt at Utopia.

"Experiments" clearly explores the problems connected with living in a transcendental utopia and of negotiating individual freedom. Marmee speaks to her daughters about the experiment at the week's end. "I wanted you to see how the comfort of all depends on each doing her share faithfully. While Hannah and I did your work, you got on pretty well, though I don't think you were happy or amiable; so I thought as a little lesson, I would show you what happens when everyone thinks only of herself" (96). On a dual level, Louisa Alcott also uses Pip's death to show that domestic work is crucial to our very survival and in this way, demands that society be restructured to value women's domestic work. She also shows that even within the sphere of home that Bronson's Alcott's idealism cannot hold firm, that spiritual pursuits must come after the basic practical concerns have been met.

The aptly titled "Experiments" chapter is multifaceted and operates on yet another level. While Louisa Alcott demands that women's domestic work be valued, a seething resentment concerning women's limitation to the domestic sphere is woven intricately throughout the chapter. All of the girls show a yearning to escape from the drudgery of their domestic chores. Even Beth, shown as the sister with the closest ties to home, longs for an expanded sense of agency. "I want to learn some new songs..."(89). Beth's new song could be read as a new way of living, apart from the hub of domesticity in the home. Alcott also expertly subverts the Cult of Domesticity by showing its strongest candidate in the novel, Meg, as longing for freedom from subservience. "I've been routed up early all winter, and had to spend my days working for other people; so now I'm going to rest
and revel to my heart's content" (89). Jo is consistent in her longing for more time for an intellectual life. "I've laid in a heap of books, and I'm going to improve my shining hours reading on my perch" (89). Amy, regularly trivialized in the novel for subscribing to the culturally accepted superficial female spheres of beauty and fashion, simply wants to rest. In Amy's desire for rest, Alcott is also showing a need for "rest" from fashion and beauty as the only acceptable public spheres for women. Sarah Elbert in her essay, "Reading Little Women," writes of Alcott's commentary on fashion throughout the text. "Fashion provides a counterpoint to feminism in Little Women. Jo's strong sense of self is established in part by her rejection of fashion, which she perceives as a sign of dependency and sexual stereotyping."74 The chapter's title, "Experiments" is particularly appropriate in its call for society to experiment with both respecting women's domestic work and allowing women a legitimate space in the public sphere. While this was Louisa Alcott's experience in her own home, even in her own progressive upbringing, she witnessed and experienced the ways in which the patriarchy determined women's roles. In Fruitlands, while the men were free to leave to the community to lecture as the spirit moved them, her mother was tied to "home" by the needs of her children and expected to fulfill the domestic responsibilities. In fact, the title also acknowledges society's sexism in its identification of women's agency as experimental and confirms Alcott's assertion that women's autonomy is far from the norm in the nineteenth century.

In a variety of ways, "Experiments" shows both the lasting effect that her time at Fruitlands had on Louisa Alcott and her conflicted feelings about her father's transcendentalism and the way that it affected her family. Claudia Durst Johnson writes of Louisa's inner conflict with Bronson's Alcott's philosophy in her critical essay,
"Transcendental Wild Oats or the Cost of an Idea." "The sketch is an attack on phallocentric transcendentalism, rooted in the abstract and the theoretical: philosophy, idealism, and earth denial." Johnson further examines the idea that Louisa Alcott both admired her father and yet was often frustrated with the idealism that was central to his life. Louisa Alcott wrote "Transcendental Wild Oats" as a potential first chapter to a biography of Bronson Alcott. She never attempted another chapter and wrote in a letter than she had never understood "his philosophy." Johnson examines Louisa Alcott's conflicted feelings about Bronson Alcott.

There is every indication that Louisa failed for a time to grasp the full magnitude of her own subversion of her father. Although "Transcendental Wild Oats" is clearly an attack on Bronson Alcott, it would be rash and inaccurate to argue that Louisa intended to ridicule him so bitterly. Her journal entries at the time she first conceived of the idea of a biography of Bronson show concern for him at the very time she was seeing 'Transcendental Wild Oats' into print. Her state of mind implies that she never intended to demean him.

Louisa Alcott wrote Little Women five years earlier than her satirical essay on Fruitlands so it is not surprising that her conflicts about transcendentalism surfaced in this novel about a family so much like her own. Both Louisa Alcott's journal entries and letters reflect the life-long conflict that she had with Bronson Alcott's transcendentalism. Johnson correctly states that in Louisa Alcott's most personal writing in her journal, she writes of her admiration for him at the same time that she criticizes him publicly in "Transcendental Wild Oats." Her compliments and criticism were often so intertwined in both her private and public writing that in a letter to her father she alternately honors him
for his work in philosophy and in the next paragraph criticizes him by noting that she is the only Alcott able to support herself.

...I love to see your name first among the lecturers, to hear it kindly spoken of in the papers and inquired about by good people here, - to say nothing of the delight and pride I take in seeing you at last filling the place you are so fitted for, and which you have waited so long and patiently. If the New Yorkers raise a statue to the modern Plato, it will be a wise and highly creditable action... Things go smoothly and I think I shall come out right and prove that though an Alcott, I can support myself. 78

As in many family connections, Louisa Alcott's relationship with her father is complex and her writing about him and particularly her writing about "his philosophy" reflects that complexity.

This inner conflict lends an edge and a depth to Little Women that belies its domestic façade. This conflict, which juxtaposes the spiritual and physical realms of life, lends an unprecedented tension to this novel geared toward young, female readers. The characters of the March sisters embody this juxtaposition by being flawed and yet sincerely and continually working toward spiritual perfection. Their devotion to the allegorical novel, Pilgrim's Progress and desire to emulate the novel's hero, Christian, throughout Little Women, best shows this march toward spiritual perfection. Pilgrim's Progress was also a life-long favorite of Bronson Alcott's and he credited the book with keeping him out of factories and into philosophy. He encouraged each of his daughters to read it and refer to it as an inspirational resource. 79 In fact, the family's name, March, is indicative of this
unceasing striving for perfection as well as implying that this spiritual striving is a journey that Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy are expected to undertake, moving forward in step with Mr. March's spiritual values as the only real path to self-realization.

In Chapter Twenty-Four, "Gossip," Louisa Alcott offers a description of Mr. March that could easily be a description of Bronson Alcott.

...a quiet, studious man, rich in the wisdom that is better than learning, the charity which calls all mankind 'brother', the piety that blossoms into character, making it august and lovely....These attributes, in spite of poverty and the strict integrity which shut him out from the more worldly successes, attracted to him many admirable persons,...gifted men found a companion in him, ambitious men caught glimpses of nobler ambitions than their own; and even worldlings confessed that his beliefs were beautiful and true although they "wouldn't pay" (191).

With this favorable description of the March patriarch, Louisa seems to offer both a tribute to Bronson Alcott and to separate herself from him. For as noble and spiritually perfect as his Transcendental quest was, in truth it didn't pay and Louisa Alcott was determined to forge her own path. She was determined to do this in a way that did pay, not for the personal greed that Bronson Alcott was so opposed to but a way that would feed and clothe her family without the crippling debt and financial instability with which she was raised.

Louisa Alcott uses a similar technique to illustrate both her admiration for and frustration with her father's practice of transcendentalism in Chapter Forty-five, "Daisy
and Demi." In the chapter, Mr. March is seen having a philosophic conversation with his grandson, Demi.

What makes my legs go, Dranpa? asked the young philosopher, surveying those active portions of his frame with a meditative air, while resting after a go-to-bed frolic one night. It's your little mind, Demi, replied the sage, stroking the yellow head respectfully. What is a little mine? It is something which makes your body move, as the springs made the wheels go in my watch when I showed it to you (364).

The conversation continues at considerable length and when Marmee asks if the conversation is not too advanced for a young child, Mr. March replies, "If he is old enough to ask the questions, he is old enough to receive true answers. I am not putting thoughts into his head but helping him unfold those already there" (364). In this passage, Louisa Alcott both elevates and pokes fun at her father's transcendentalism. While she honors his pedagogical methods much as she often complimented them in life, she has Marmee, always the voice of reason in Little Women, question his actions and actually has the women in the household laughing, however gently, at the novel's patriarch. Again, Louisa Alcott uses humor to point to the gender division in her father's transcendentalism.

Louisa Alcott's conflicted transcendentalism is also shown in Chapter Twenty-seven, "Literary Lessons." Jo has finished her novel and gives it to her family to read. Each of the family members offers comments and suggestions. "Her father liked the metaphysical streak which had unconsciously got into it; so that was allowed to remain, though she had her doubts about it" (216). This sentence clearly shows that Jo admires
her father and has been more affected than even she realizes by his spiritual idealism. The fact that Jo "had her doubts about it" shows her ambivalence about that same spiritual idealism. The inclusion of this sentence in Little Women indicates that Louisa Alcott was similarly conflicted about Bronson Alcott's transcendentalism. And yet, the sentence also suggests that despite her frequent frustrations with her family's Bohemian existence, that Louisa Alcott could not separate herself from the transcendentalist values with which she was raised. Transcendentalism found a place in the March family whose encouragement of individuality, contemplation with nature, and visions of Utopia blended with Louisa Alcott's emphasis on the importance of work and responsibility. Overall, the Marchs are a happy family and far from dysfunctional, are actually unconventionally and uniquely functional. Morrow notes that the same could be said of the Alcotts. " No matter what financial difficulties they faced, the Alcotts remained devoted to each other and fundamentally happy. "

Little Women is a multifaceted novel of great depth, intertwining charming domestic adventures and familial devotion with an undercurrent of yearning and frustration. The yearning for Utopia as well as the frustration with the impracticalities of such yearning inform the novel with a tension that remains relevant to readers centuries after the novel was written. The tension between Bronson Alcott's idealism and Louisa Alcott's practicality gives the novel an edge and a depth that makes the novel continually significant. The spirited debate between father and daughter on whose world view should take precedence make this one of the most intriguing novels of all time. To classify this novel as simply a sentimental tale is to miss the point of Little Women entirely. In Little Women, Louisa May Alcott takes on complex issues of her time including the lack of
opportunities for women, the complexities and tensions of family life and of the struggle to live spiritually while remaining practically grounded, all issues which are still important to readers of both sexes and all ages. Before her first novel, Moods, was published Louisa Alcott wrote in her journal that she had worried about having revealed too much of herself in the book. Emerson encouraged her by saying: "...what is true for your own private heart is true for others." In response to his advice, Louisa Alcott wrote: "...so I wrote from my own life and experience and hope it may suit some one (sic) & at least do no harm." Though on the surface, Little Women is a novel grounded in practical domesticity, beneath that layer is a novel full of the contradiction between spiritual ideals and physical demands, a story which intertwines spiritual and material yearning, a novel that acknowledges the desire to search for Utopia, be it ever so impractical.
End Notes

70. Myerson, Shealy, Stern, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, xix
73. Alcott, Louisa May, *Transcendental Wild Oats*.
76. Myerson, Shealy, Stern, *Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, 251
77. Johnson.
80. Morrow.
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