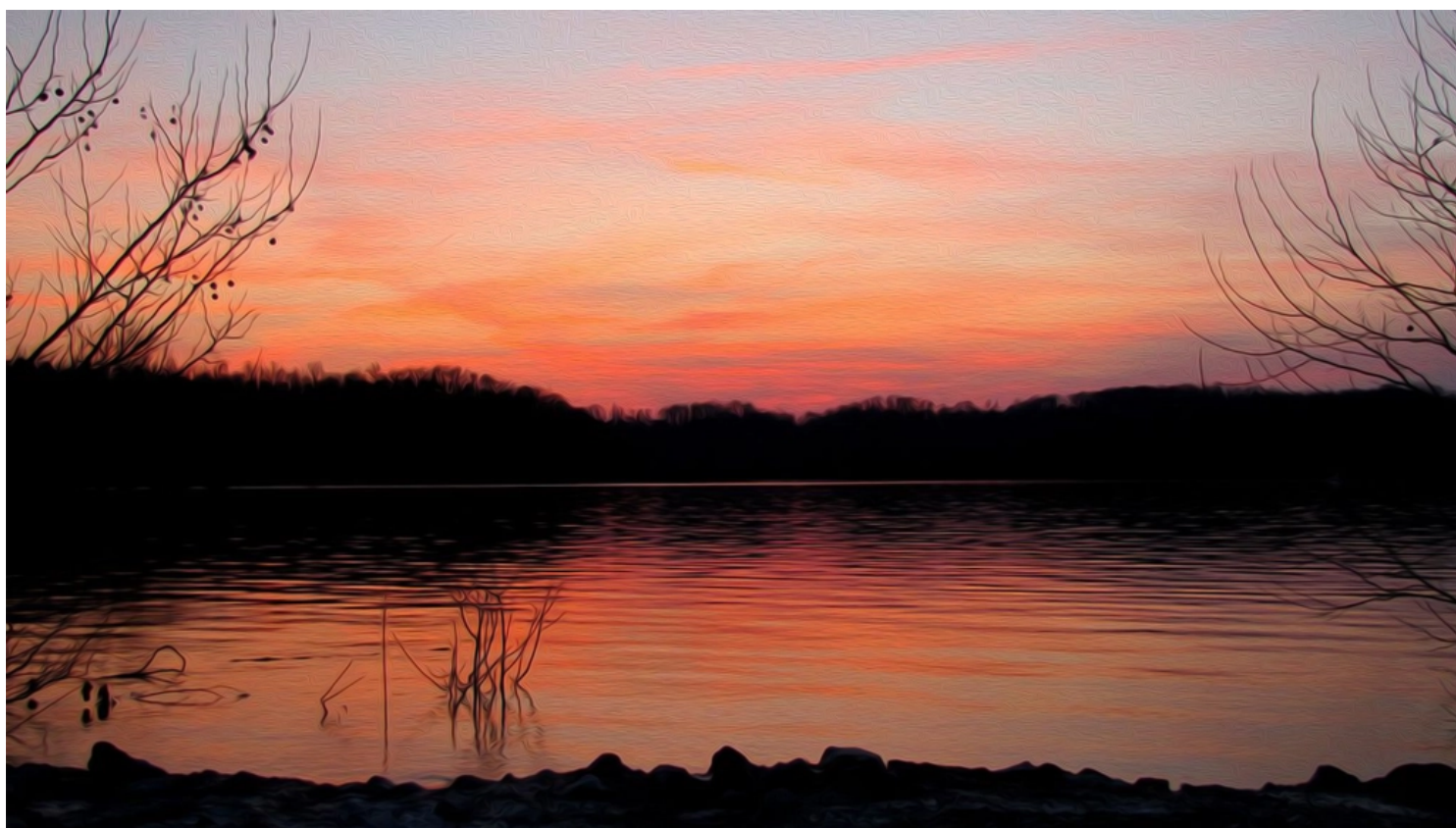




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Louisa May Alcott's Transcendentalism



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Modern-day society is fascinated with the idea of happiness. How can it be achieved? Countless self-help books have been published on the subject in the last few years. As it turns out, twenty-first century thinkers are not the only ones to have pondered this question. Indeed, nineteenth century transcendentalist thinkers not only attempted to achieve happiness, but anticipated many scientifically-approved methods for

≡ *improving life. Louisa May Alcott's ideas of happiness are expressed in two of her novels: the enduring Little Women and lesser-known An Old-Fashioned Girl.*

THE RECENT New York Times bestselling book *Happier* (2007) by Tal Ben-Shahar has been lauded by readers and psychologists for expressing cutting-edge scientific research on how to be happy and fulfilled. The study of happiness, otherwise known as “positive psychology,” has found that helping others, immersing ourselves in meaningful work, and practicing gratitude will ultimately make us all happier. Scientific thought hasn't always agreed with this claim. Decades ago, the prevailing belief was that happiness came from material success, health, status, pleasure, and power. But there was a small enclave of influential writers who disagreed: The Transcendentalists. They claimed that happiness came from working hard in service to others and developing your personal spirituality. Ben-Shahar (n.d.) directly quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson in *Happier*, saying “It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself”.

Author Louisa May Alcott wrote during the peak of the transcendental movement. Her enduring children's stories, such as *Little Women* (2004a) and *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1996), clearly contain transcendental influences and lessons from her father Bronson Alcott and others. But Louisa offers her own version of Transcendentalism, one which combines the then-seemingly competing ideas of spiritual development and pragmatism. Her philosophy was built on what worked, and centuries later, science has finally caught up with her observations.

Transcendentalists generally held to several key tenets: first, that human beings are inherently good and pure. Through proper education, nutrition, and hard work, people can return to the pure state of being. Second, that nature was the ultimate mediator and expression of God. Most transcendentalists were unitarians, rejecting the idea of the trinity in favor of one God who was present all around: in every good thing, person, flower, leaf, and change of weather. The best way to experience God was by finding him in nature. Third, transcendentalists valued individualism and self-reliance. Conformity, in their eyes, was the worst possible course of action. Being true to oneself was the highest goal. Self-discovery and reflection, then, was very important – hence the volumes of journals and essays produced by the transcendentalists at the time (Goodman, 2018).

Louisa May Alcott was serendipitously surrounded by the greatest thinkers of her time and transcendentalism in general. Her father, Bronson Alcott, showed her an idealistic and ultimately unworkable version of the movement. One of Bronson's essays showcases his idealistic notions by discussing the person of Jesus, and how the ideal of Jesus' humanness must be brought forth. “It is the mission of this Age, to revive his Idea, give it currency, and reinstate it in the faith of men. By its

fructifying agency, it is to fructify our common nature, and reproduce its like...it is to reproduce Perfect Men" (Alcott 2000, 170).

Throughout Louisa's childhood, Bronson pursued philosophical ideas by establishing the Temple School where he sought to teach children according to his transcendental ideas. His goal was to teach students to "learn to feel rightly, to think rightly, and to act rightly" (Alcott 2000, 58). The Temple School, like most of Bronson's experiments, ultimately failed due to lack of parental support. Some of Bronson's ideas were too much for parents to handle (Alcott 2000, 80). He was simply not practical enough to make his ideals last.

Soon after the closing of the Temple School, the family moved to a farmstead to establish a utopian society dubbed Fruitlands. There, they attempted to live off the land, follow a strict vegetarian diet, and more fully implement the ideas that Bronson deemed important (Matteson 2007, 126). Fruitlands was a terrible failure. The Alcotts were subjected to backbreaking work but barely survived the winter. After a little less than a year on the homestead, they left (Matteson 2007, 163). Although Louisa had seen her father's transcendentalist projects fail, she still believed in the philosophy as much as he did, and blamed the setbacks on poor planning and execution. In her books, she would correct his mistakes.

It was after this that they moved to Concord, Massachusetts – the hub of transcendentalism. Poet and essayist Henry David Thoreau lived down the street, Ralph Waldo Emerson was close by, and Nathaniel Hawthorne often visited. Louisa frequented the library of Emerson and learned about nature from Thoreau. Bronson was close friends with Emerson for over forty-five years (Matteson, 2007, 6).

Biographer John Matteson notes the uniqueness of Louisa's situation, and expands on it: "It was far from the rule for a mother of four children to work outside the home, but, from time to time, Louisa's mother did. It was also uncommon for a father of that time to take a strong interest in educating his daughters, but Bronson Alcott's desire to give his girls the perfect education was, for him, a consuming obsession. And it is rare indeed for a family of any era to involve itself in almost every conceivable movement of social reform: from vegetarianism to communal living and from abolition to women's rights, the Alcotts got involved. In their activism as well as their personal circumstances, the Alcotts were anything but ordinary" (Matteson 2016, 28). Louisa was immersed in transcendentalism. She lived and breathed it, heroicized its leaders, and was the subject of its experiments.

Louisa's mother Abba was as radical as her husband in terms of her belief in the values of transcendentalism and the need of social reform. "My life is one of daily protest against the oppressions of abuses of Society," she wrote to her brother, Samuel May (Matteson 2007, 212). She became mentor and provider for many "lost girls, abused wives, friendless children, and weak or wicked men" (Matteson 2007, 212). She was a strong advocate of women's suffrage, and it was her lifelong dream to

te. But after Fruitlands and the Temple School, Abba had gone through much at the hands of Bronson. She had less interest in a complete ideology and more in what practical tools transcendentalism offered to achieve happiness. It was her attitude of cheerful perseverance that inspired Louisa most of all. “Two of Abba’s favorite maxims were: ‘Love your duty and you will be happy’ and ‘Hope, and Keep busy,’ an instruction she tucked into Louisa’s journal in 1845 and which the March sisters adopt as their motto in a moment of family crisis in *Little Women*” (McFall 2018).

Abba wrote in a letter to Elizabeth Peabody, “If trial and friction make strong and bright, I shall be strength and brilliancy personified, in the next state of existence, for my spirit has been through all sorts of graduated furnaces in this last one... [I will] rise to the occasion...” (Alcott 2012, 72). The idealistic notions of Bronson sounded good until they were put into action. *Fruitlands was a failure. The Temple School too radical.* Abba wanted a more practical philosophy, saying “Give me one day of practical philosophy; it is worth a century of speculation and discussion...” (Alcott 2012, 114).

Louisa saw the implications of an overly-idealistic philosophy. Anne Boyd notes “Alcott has mixed emotions about Transcendentalism. Intrigued and inspired by the ideal of self-reliance, she still knew from first-hand experience that ‘self-reliance really meant reliance on others and required the self-sacrifice of family members’” (Wester 2005, 16). However, Louisa still wanted more: she wanted a way to tie Abba’s tools together. Like Bronson, she wanted a philosophy, but unlike him, she insisted on one that worked.

This drew her to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s theories and ideas, as they presented a more complete way of living out the transcendental philosophy. Her journals illustrate her love for his philosophies, calling him “the man who has helped me most by his life, his books, his society” (Wester 2005, 17). As put by Bethany Wester, this appreciation for Emerson’s ideas “tended to draw her ‘away from her father’ and more toward Emerson’s more practical, although masculine, form of Transcendental thought” (Wester 2005, 17).

Emerson’s essay says “love, and you shall be loved. All love is mathematically just, as much as the two sides of an algebraic equation. The good man has absolute good, which like fire turns everything to its own nature, so that you cannot do him any harm; but as the royal armies sent against Napoleon, when he approached cast down their colors and from enemies became friends, so disasters of all kinds, as sickness, offence, poverty, prove benefactors” (Emerson 2013). Emerson writes of the “Law of Compensation,” which is the idea that doing good works brings happiness and satisfaction into your own life. This idea appealed greatly to Louisa, and is evident through her writings.

But perhaps most telling are Emerson’s comments on putting ideas into action during his address to the “American Scholar.” He says, “The mind now thinks; now acts; and each fit reproduces the other. When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are

no longer apprehended, and books are a weariness, he has always the resource to live. Character is higher than intellect . . . A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think” (Emerson 2000, 204). These words could easily be Louisa’s life motto; in moments of discontentment or despair, she turned to work. Emerson continues, “I hear therefore with joy whatever is beginning to be said of the dignity and necessity of labor to every citizen. There is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade, for learned as well as for unlearned hands” (Emerson 2000, 204).



Louisa lived through the idealized experiments of Bronson and his cohorts. She had watched her mother be the workhorse of Fruitlands and the constant bridge between Bronson’s ideas and their family’s survival. She valued the ideas of transcendentalism, but valued still more the practical method of applying them. This was more akin to Emerson’s ideas than Bronson’s; and also tied in her own experiences.

To her, self-reliance and self-reform were the fruit of work. Self-reform was the active method of becoming self-reliant, and work would provide both values. Louisa herself was something of a workaholic, and understandably so – she nearly single-handedly kept her family financially afloat when she was old enough, and was able to provide a comfortable retirement for her mother and pay back her family’s debts (Matteson 2007,

388).

This value of hard work as the path to meaning and self-reliance, and ultimately, happiness, is evident throughout Louisa’s works of fiction. It’s woven into her novels and outright argued in many places. She uses children’s’ stories as the platform to improve upon the transcendental ideas ingrained into her and focus on their true outcome, that of happiness. Specifically, *Little Women* and *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, published within a year and a half of one another, showcase Alcott’s ability to translate transcendentalism into a children’s novel without losing the integrity of either subject matter.

The circumstances surrounding the creation and publication of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, her first published novel, were unique. At first, Alcott didn’t even want to write such an insufferable girls’ story, as she “never liked girls or knew many” (Alcott 2004b, 413). Girl’s fiction, like the *Elsie Dinsmore* series of the time expressed Christian ideas such as being persecuted for doing right, or forgiveness in the face of an enemy, or obedience to authority (Finley 2012). Alcott wanted something that felt more real, and she drew on a lifetime of transcendental experiences to create it. She

ended up with a thinly-veiled autobiography that largely drew from Abba's wisdom and Bronson's child-rearing methods, with Louisa's own methods for good measure. But for the second half of *Little Women*, often known as *Happy Wives*, Louisa was more intentional – and it shows. The themes she inserted in the first half of the book become more deliberate and drawn out in the second half, from subversions of gender roles to independent womanhood to education.

An Old-Fashioned Girl was published after Louisa's rise to fame with *Little Women*. Now, she had a platform and ambition to match it. Never one for preachy essays or even political activism (she left that to the Margaret Fullers and John Browns of the world), she turned to her writing to make a statement. Louisa had to pay the bills. But she also had things to say.

Louisa invited her readers simply to feel as she felt through her writing. A reader who understood and believed Alcott's message accepted transcendentalism, even if they didn't know the term. Her writing is a form of literary activism, promoting progressive ideas about women's rights, gender roles, and the best and most healthy way to live (Lenahan 2012, 28). Alcott's writing is full of people experiencing happiness by changing their emotions rather than changing the world around them – the basic message of anti-intellectual transcendentalism.

The first chapter of *Little Women* opens with Jo, the main character, lamenting that “Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents” (Alcott 2004a, 11). The rest of the sisters proceed to air their personal grievances, complaining that they wish their father was home from war, or that they didn't have to work, or that they could have luxuries like the other girls. Marmee proposed an antidote: on Christmas morning, the girls wake up to find little “guidebooks” under their pillows, records of “the best life ever lived” – most likely a New Testament. But soon after that, they are asked to put into practice the high-minded ideals written in those pages.

There is a poor family, the Hummels, who Mrs. March finds have no food for Christmas morning. She asks the March sisters to give them their food, and they agree. The result of this labor of love is, surprisingly, happiness. “That was a very happy breakfast, though they didn't get any of it; and when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were not in all the city four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts, and contented themselves with bread and milk on Christmas morning” (Alcott 2004a, 23). This is the paradox throughout the rest of the story: that in giving of their time and effort to others, they find themselves more fulfilled than before.

This lesson is compounded as the story follows John Bunyan's allegory “Pilgrim's Progress”, with each girl being presented with specific “burdens,” and chapters following them learning to bear their burdens and face their trials. Jo's burden is her temper; she faces it when her anger causes Amy to come to harm. Meg's burden is her vanity, and she learns her lesson while living a lavish lifestyle away from

Home and finding it empty. Beth's burden is her passivity and fear, which she conquers to thank Mr. Laurence for a gift. Amy's burden is her desire to be likable.

Following this "Pilgrim's Progress" allegory, Mrs. March tells her daughters: "Then let me advise you to take up your little burdens again; for though they seem heavy sometimes, they are good for us, and lighten as we learn to carry them. Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for every one; it keeps us from ennui and mischief; is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion" (Alcott 2004, 99). From a transcendentalist point of view, Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory about pursuing ideals through hard work. Christian labors along the path to get to the celestial city with a large burden on his back – but as he approaches the city, his burden becomes lighter. Alcott's allusion to this allegory in her work fulfills the tenets of the transcendental movement. Hard work allows one to be self-reliant, fulfill individual passions, and diverge from the culture and society at large all at the same time. It was the remedy for selfishness and envy, greed and anger, and, like Christian's burden, the girls' burdens lightened over time.

Work was valued less because of the physical changes it caused and more because of the spiritual value of the act. The remedy for discontentment was not to conform to the world and chase wealth, but rather to look within and find gratitude, improving oneself in order to be worthy of the gifts of life. As put by Hayley Miller Lenehan, "the key to happiness in Alcott's books is doing meaningful and rewarding work, whether or not it is a financial necessity" (Lenehan 2012, 67). One of Abba's favorite maxims echoes this, counseling those who hear it to "Love your duty and you will be happy" (McFall 2018).

Marmee, who is modeled after Abba Alcott, instructs the March sisters to "think over your blessings, and be grateful" when they are discontented (Alcott 2004a, 43). She tells a parable-like story in which the characters learned that "money couldn't keep shame and sorrow out of rich people's houses...another that though she was poor, she was a great deal happier with her youth, health, and good spirits, than a certain fretful, feeble old lady, who couldn't enjoy her comforts; a third, that, disagreeable as it was to help get dinner, it was harder still to have to go begging for it; and the fourth, that even carnelian rings were not so valuable as good behavior" (Alcott 2004a, 43). The girls learned to be grateful, and thereby find purpose even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (n.d) builds on these ideas of purpose and gratitude as ways to become self-reliant as well as fulfilled. Alcott's most beloved heroine, Jo, embodies this idea of self-reliance. In *Little Women*, Jo takes up writing to provide for herself. She ultimately leaves home and travels to New York to work as a governess for two small children and write sensation stories for the local newspaper. Alcott could be writing a transcendental essay when she analyzes the effects of wealth and hard work: "Wealth is certainly a most desirable thing, but poverty has its sunny side, and one of the sweet uses of adversity, is the genuine satisfaction which comes from hearty work of head or hand;

and to the inspiration of the world. Jo enjoyed a taste of this satisfaction, and ceased to envy richer girls, taking great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her own wants, and need ask no one for a penny (Alcott 2004a, 215).

Transcendentalist views held that people were inherently good, and as a result society was corrupting. Following current trends is problematic, and does not allow for a person to be properly independent, or happy. Becoming self-reliant is the key to this problem. Emerson writes, “But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time” (Emerson, n.d.). Emerson believed that following current trends was detrimental, and instead calls people to “live in the present” by living values that transcend fashion and trend.

Alcott expands on this Emersonian idea throughout *An Old-Fashioned Girl*. She contrasts Polly Milton, the main character, with the Shaw family. Polly is from the countryside, and visits the Shaws, an upper-class family in the city. During her time living with the Shaws, she has experiences that reveal a new side of the world. Polly finds she is in a “new world,” where the “manners and customs were so different from the simple ways at home that she felt like a stranger in a strange land” (Alcott 1996, 33).

She goes to the theater, follows Fanny to a girls’ school, and attends parties. Polly enjoys the theater – up until the point where girls rush onto stage to dance suggestively in tiny costumes, making Polly feel ashamed for them (Alcott 1996, 15). At school, the girls overlook her as they gossip as if they were twenty instead of twelve; at the parties, Fanny Shaw galivants with the “big boys” and then begs Polly to keep her secret. Each of these situations ends with a conversation or reflection where Polly contrasts her own upbringing with what she’s experienced, finding that her “old-fashioned ways,” which are decidedly against the trend, are more wholesome and satisfying in the end.

Ultimately, Polly finds she is happier as a result of being individual and not conforming to society. However, along the way she is greatly misunderstood. She is taken for a naive country girl, not a “true lady,” and even a “rampant woman’s rights reformer.” Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” also discusses the trouble and triumph of being misunderstood. “Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood” (Emerson n.d.). Through the character of Polly, Alcott also promotes being misunderstood as a badge of honor. Her characters are misunderstood as they endeavor to become better versions of themselves, and eventually act as examples for those around them.

Alcott consistently pits rich against poor and “traditional” values against newfangled trends to communicate to the reader that conformity can be devastating. This idea is echoed in Thoreau’s famous

essay “Walden.” “Richness is a hindrance to the good life – Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind” (Thoreau 1995). To Alcott, the vice of wealth is not only in its materialism, but in how it removes agency and purpose from the lives of the wealthy. Fanny Shaw is the personification of this problem.

Fanny seems to have all a girl would need to be happy – nice clothes, a trendy circle of friends, and plenty of parties to attend. But, she feels discontented and disposable. Alcott paints her as a character whose wealth has removed her dignity by taking away the need for her to work or produce anything of value. She has become “so tired of everybody and everything” (Alcott 1996, 151).

Polly stands in direct contrast to this, as she is full of purpose and drive and independence. She must work as a music teacher to make her living, and she surrounds herself with other women who work as well. She tells Fanny that whenever things worry her, her course of action is to “catch up a broom and sweep, or wash hard, or walk, or go at something with all my might, and I usually find that by the time I get through the worry is gone, or I’ve got courage enough to bear it without grumbling” (Alcott 1996, 151).

Fanny can do these things, but there is “no need of it.” In a moment of foreshadowing, Polly advises that “a little poverty would do you good, Fan; just enough necessity to keep you busy until you find how good work is” (Alcott 1996, 151). Doing work that is needed, and being needed yourself, is a key component of a happy and fulfilling life – and also a tenet of transcendentalism.

The idea that poverty is helpful in developing self-reliance was indeed divergent from the culture at the time Alcott wrote. She herself knew the sweet fruit of completing work that sustained herself and her family, and this idea was very important to her as well as transcendentalism.

Upper-class character Fanny Shaw learns this lesson, as she is brought by Polly Milton into a circle of poor, yet self-sufficient, working women. Alcott juxtaposes Fanny’s feeling of listlessness with a group of self-reliant, industrious women to show the result of hard work. “They were girls still, full of spirits fun, and youth; but below the light-heartedness each cherished a purpose, which seemed to ennoble her womanhood, to give her a certain power, a sustaining satisfaction, a daily stimulus, that led her on to daily effort, and in time to some success in circumstance or character, which was worth all the patience, hope, and labor of her life” (Alcott 1996, 244).

Alcott views this sense of purpose as more valuable than any number of “fashionable” clothes or luxury items. Without purpose, Alcott believes, a lavish lifestyle amounts to nothing. The rich families in *Little Women* and *An Old-Fashioned Girl* are not often happy families – yet the Marchs and Polly Milton, despite their poverty, are happy.

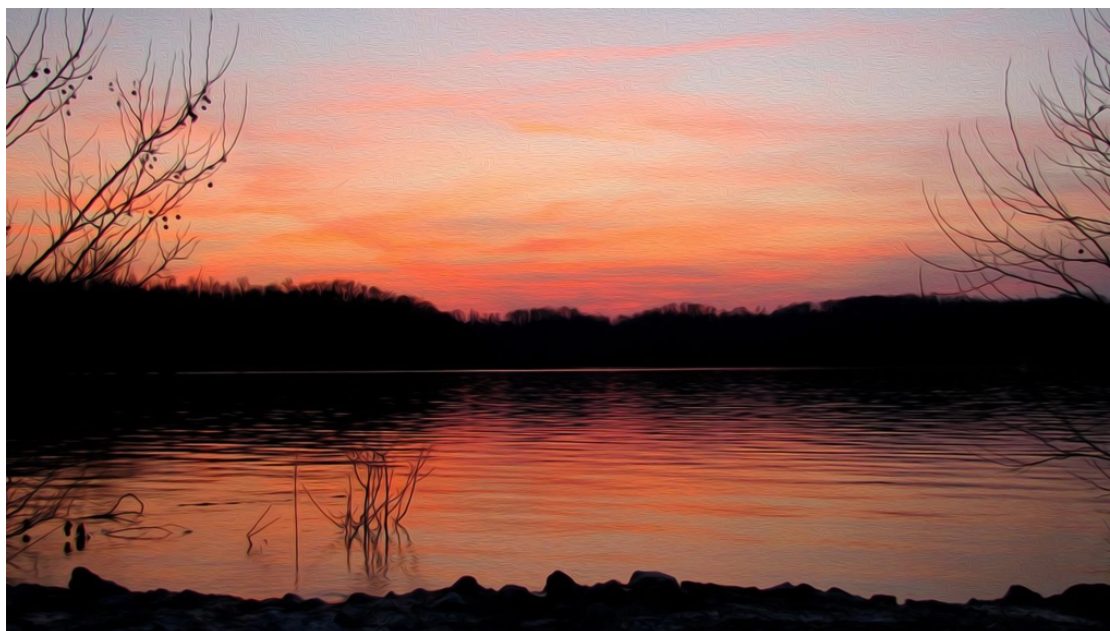
≡ This comes to fruition after the Shaw family loses their money. Fanny Shaw “shouldered the new burden, feeling that at last necessity had given her what she had long needed, something to do” (Alcott 1996, 286). Over time, the work that Fanny accomplishes improves her by making her more aware of the important things in life, and less engrossed in temporary and meaningless pleasures.

The transformation of character Tom Shaw follows this trend. Tom is the love interest for Polly, and the older brother of Fanny Shaw. Tom begins the story as a “dandy,” and rather impetuous and impulsive. Polly returns to the family to find him engaged to Trix, a woman of the world in every sense. However, after the Shaw family falls from power through a business deal gone bad, Tom must decide what to do. He is left with a mountain of debt after his wild escapades at college. He goes West to perform some nondescript labor – and comes back purified and perfected, a much better man (Alcott 1996, 336).

Work is the antidote to an unhappy spirit, as Alcott determines nearer the beginning of the novel. Miss Mills, a “brisk little lady” who owns the house where Polly lives, provides an example of loving one’s duty: “But Polly didn’t get a chance to be miserable very long, for as she went upstairs feeling like the most injured girl in the world, she caught a glimpse of Miss Mills, sewing away with such a bright face that she couldn’t resist stopping for a word or two” (Alcott 1996, 162).

Miss Mills sees that Polly is unhappy and provides the antidote: hard work for those around her. This does Polly more good than complaining or wishing her situation was different. This is acknowledged in the next paragraphs. “Not till long afterward did Polly see how much good this little effort had done her, for the first small sacrifice of this sort leads the way to others, and a single hand’s turn given heartily to the world’s great work helps one amazingly with one’s own small tasks. Polly found this out as her life slowly grew easier and brighter, and the beautiful law of compensation gave her better purposes and pleasures than any she had lost” (Alcott 1996, 207). Alcott uses the medium of story to effectively translate a transcendental philosophy of hard work, duty, and personal development into a heartwarming lesson that permeates the minds of readers.

Alcott repeatedly emphasizes obtaining happiness through work. In Louisa’s essay “Happy Women,” directed to single women searching for meaning in their lives apart from husband and family, she writes “The world is full of work, needing all the heads, hearts, and hands we can bring to do it.... Be true to yourselves; cherish whatever talent you possess, and in using it faithfully for the good of others you will most assuredly find happiness for yourself, and make of life no failure, but a beautiful success” (quoted in Eiselein and Phillips 2004, 35). Work is presented time and time again throughout *An Old-Fashioned Girl* and *Little Women* as the remedy for sadness, despair, or discontent.



Today's world needs Alcott's messages more than ever. Even 150 years after the publication of *Little Women*, our society still struggles with meaning, fulfillment, and achieving happiness. We strive to find our "dream" and follow it with a passion, creating a societal landscape filled with individuals walking alone. Alcott's transcendentalism calls us to turn to ourselves in a different way: in order to find gratitude, self-reliance and inner strength, that we might help those around us and provide service.

Louisa's books are more realistic than Bronson's heady notions, and even more so than Emerson's essays. Scholar Bethany S. Wester writes "G.K. Chesterton asserted that Louisa May Alcott 'had anticipated realism by twenty to thirty years' . . . yet reality did not quench, but rather enhanced, the Transcendentalist spirit that her father and Emerson had instilled in her because the challenges she faced as a woman seeking self-reliance trumped the obstacles these men faced..." (Wester 2005, 18). Alcott latched onto the most important and fundamental aspect of Transcendentalism: happiness, and ran with it full-steam ahead. Children – and adults – reading Alcott today are not only encountering a charming, wholesome family story. They are encountering nuanced ideas of how to better the world around them, and ultimately, themselves. These are timeless lessons that extend far beyond the transcendental movement into modern thought.

Over a century later, mainstream psychology has finally caught up. There is a large body of scientific evidence agreeing that happiness is a side-effect of self-reliance and hard work for something bigger than yourself – and rejecting the idea that happiness is caused by material gain or status. Like a true transcendentalist, Alcott surpassed the logical, formal essay in favor of the emotional, intuitive novel, and communicated the same ideas as modern-day psychology. And as a result, her ideas will linger in the hearts, as well as the minds, of those who read them. ~



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