

# EDUCATIONAL THEORIES OF LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

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LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, American authoress, occupies a very peculiar position indeed in the history of American literature. Her works are generally regarded as suitable only for adolescents, because they are popular with that age group. Yet when they were first published, her books were enjoyed by grown-ups, too. Miss Alcott's material is of the type which appeals very definitely to the young and to the sentimental, however. Her heroes and heroines are young ones in the main. In fact, those of her works which concentrated on adults have never enjoyed any lasting popularity. The answer, if an answer can be given, is that those stories dealing with youngsters were taken directly from life situations which Miss Alcott knew intimately.

Louisa May Alcott's life was not essentially a happy one. Her parents had married when neither was any longer young. Bronson Alcott was a transcendental philosopher who had no real idea of the practical responsibilities involved in marriage and raising a family. Abba, his wife, realized these pressing needs only too vividly. There were four girls—Anna, Louisa, Elizabeth, and May (or Abba)—and there might have been a good many more had Mrs. Alcott not refused. Bronson Alcott, the thinker, was no provider. His educational theories were unconventional enough to cause the closing of his successful Temple School in Boston. Daunted but not defeated, Bronson went to Philadelphia where, under the sponsorship of a Quaker, Reuben Haines, another school was opened. It was in Philadelphia that Louisa was born. Reuben Haines died suddenly, however, and with his death the now flourishing school collapsed. Once more the family moved. Bronson went to Europe, where he met an English transcendentalist named Lane. Returning to Concord, he brought this man and his son, William Lane, with him. Abba, already overburdened with the cares of a large family, received them for her husband's sake and for no other reason. The Alcotts were vegetarians, living largely on what Bronson himself raised. The winter that the Lanes spent with them was an unusually hard one; food was very scarce, and tempers were correspondingly short. There is even a possibility that Abba and Mr. Lane were enamoured of each other, a fact which certainly could not have improved the strained situation.

Matters were bound to arrive at a crisis—and they did. Lane advocated living in a non-familial society, which would have necessitated the separation of the Alcotts. Bronson decided to remain with his family, and Lane and his son departed.

The Alcotts moved many times during the first twenty years of Louisa's life. They lived at different times in Concord and in Boston, and in various houses. Bronson was not often with his family, travelling to the West on lecture tours every year. The Alcotts lived frugally, with much aid from Emerson. Louisa began to write early, although her work did not immediately become popular, nor was it of the type which earned her fame. She wrote what would be known to-day as "blood-and-thunder" stories. About this time her sister Elizabeth died. Louisa had already conceived of herself as a spinster who was to be independent herself and who would make her family independent as well. She would live alone and like it, and aid her family at the same time. Her failure to do this, coupled with Elizabeth's death, plunged her into a mood of deep depression. She even contemplated suicide. However, one Sunday she went to hear Theodore Parker preach, and his sermon, on women of her type, inspired her to carry on.

Soon after, Louisa went to Europe as travelling companion to an invalid young woman. On this trip she met a young Polish lad who was later to serve as the model for "Laurie" in the annals of the March family. Except for meeting Stanisla and visiting places she had dreamed of, the trip was disappointing because of the carping nature of her charge. She left Europe before the end of the trip and returned home to shoulder the responsibility of her family. Shortly after this she wrote and published *Little Women*, and the popularity and sale of the book exceeded her wildest hopes for it. Her earnings enabled her to pay off the many debts outstanding for the Alcotts. She was lionized by Boston society, which had hitherto merely patronized her. It was the Alcott talent materializing at last.

The years that followed were busy ones for Louisa. Her health was always bad, due to a fever contracted while she was a nurse in a Civil War hospital. Doctors of all sorts, from homeopathists to psychiatrists (although they weren't called that then), received a large portion of her income. But none of them could help her much. She needed rest, pure and simple—rest which she could not and did not get. Once more she travelled to Europe, this time in the congenial company of her youngest sister, May, and a friend. This trip was as suc

ful as the other had not been. However, she again terminated her travels betimes because of the sudden death of her brother-in-law, John Pratt. She kept on writing and supporting her family. Her public seemingly could not be satisfied and she was as much of a literary figure as ever. After her mother died, Louisa moved with her father, her sister Anna, and the two Pratt boys into the Thoreau house. She sent her sister May abroad to study art in Paris and Rome, and May never returned to America. She married a German, John Nieriker, although he was more than a few years younger than she, lived happily with him for several years, had a child, and died seven weeks after its birth. Lulu, the little girl, who had been named after Louisa, was given into the care of her aunt.

About this time, Bronson began to receive the attention and recognition which were his due. The octogenarian and his famous daughter were much in demand. However, at the death of his close friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson's health failed. He started a slow decline which continued for six years before he died. These final years were lonely and painful ones for Louisa. Finally, two days after the death of Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott died, never aware, though, of her father's decease. They were laid side by side when buried, near other renowned literary figures, Thoreau and Emerson.

Were Louisa May Alcott alive to-day, she would probably be classed by the mental hygienists as a manic-depressive type. Her character was one whose leading traits were devotion and ambition. She never knew love in a normal man-woman relationship. She idealized her mother a great deal, and held her ailing sister Elizabeth in sincere affection. She did not really understand her father until late in both their lives. Her attitude toward the other two sisters, Anna and May, was peculiar. So opposed was she to marriage that she blamed her sisters for having married. The relations between her and May, after the latter's marriage, were strained to a point almost beyond endurance, and May died before Louisa could really forgive.

Although her books stress the value of a stable home life, and the joys of a family, Louisa could never live much with her own. She continually took rooms in boarding-houses and hotels, contributing at the same time to the support of her family. Perhaps this lonely existence served to strengthen her sense of independence. When writing, she would, as she said,

. . . shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and "Fall into a vortex", as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace.

Her activity at such times was so intense and concentrated that other things did not concern her at all. She ate and slept very little. When this was over, she invariably suffered a period of depression like that she underwent at the time of her sister Elizabeth's death.

In appearance, Miss Alcott was like Jo in *Little Women*, *Little Men*, and *Jo's Boys*:

Fifteen-year old Jo was very tall, thin and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long thick hair was her one beauty; but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way. Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn't like it.

And later:

She was not at all handsome, but she had a merry sort of face, that never seemed to have forgotten certain childish ways and looks, any more than her voice and manner had; and these things, hard to describe but very plain to see and feel, made her a genial, comfortable kind of person, easy to get on with, and generally "jolly", as boys would say.

The sisters, Anna and Elizabeth and May, are also characters in *Little Women*:

Margaret [Anna], the eldest of the four, was sixteen and very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft brown hair, and white hands, of which she was rather vain.

Elizabeth—or Beth, as everyone called her—was a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression, which was seldom disturbed. Her father called her "Little Tranquility", and the name suited her excellently; for she seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved.

Amy [May], though the youngest, was a most important person,—in her own opinion at least. A regular snow-maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair, curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners.

Mrs. Alcott is Marmee, the all-wise, ideal mother of the March girls:

. . . a tall, motherly lady, with as "can-I-help-you" look about her which was truly delightful. She was not elegantly dressed, but a noble-looking woman, and the girls thought the gray cloak and unfashionable bonnet covered the most splendid mother in the world.

Actually Mrs. Alcott was not the ideal person that Marmee was. She was down-to-earth and practical, and had human failings over and above those which Marmee says she had, that is, a sharp tongue and temper, which were curbed only through the patient schooling of Mr. March.

Bronson Alcott, the transcendentalist and dreamer, was portrayed in the character of Mr. March. In *Little Women* Miss Alcott makes him a churchman, as she probably thought that profession was in keeping with the character of her father.

The war is over and Mr. March safely at home, busy with his books and the small parish which found in him a minister by nature as by grace—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, as naturally as sweet herbs draw bees, and as naturally he gave them the honey into which fifty years of hard experience had distilled no bitter drop. Earnest young men found the gray-headed scholar as young at heart as they; thoughtful or troubled women instinctively brought their sorrows to him sure of finding the gentlest sympathy, the wisest counsel; sinners told their sins to the pure-hearted old man, and were both rebuked and saved; 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."

No one is quite sure who was the model for Professor Bhaer. He seems to be a composite of Mr. Alcott and May's music teacher. However, of all the characters of Miss Alcott, he is at once the most unbelievable and the most lovable. He combines wisdom and youth—an irresistible mixture.

Laurie is the Polish lad, Ladislas Wisniewski, with perhaps a dash of William Lane, the pensive, dreamy boy, thrown in.

The twins, Daisy and Demi, of course are the Pratt children, with the exception that Daisy is a girl.

Louisa's educational ideas are surprisingly progressive for a woman of her time. In reality they are the ideas of Bronson Alcott, the educator. He opened and ran several schools, but Louisa was never one of his pupils. His was a democratic philosophy of education. Once he attracted notoriety by having a Negro child as one of his pupils. This lack of discrimination is reflected in the method of choosing the boys for Plumfield. The Bhaers took in boys who were homeless and alone. Nat and Dan were strays, and they were vastly improved and their lives guided aright by the correct treatment they received. Mr. Alcott's original way of teaching his small daughters the alphabet was described by Louisa:

Mr. Bhaer came in one evening to pause on the threshold of the study, astonished by the spectacle that met his eye. Prone upon the floor lay Mr. March, with his respectable legs in the air, and beside him, likewise prone, was Demi, trying to imitate the attitude with his own short scarlet-stockinged legs, both grovelers so seriously absorbed that they were unconscious of spectators, till Mr. Bhaer laughed his sonorous laugh and Jo cried out with a scandalized face,

"Father, father, here's the Professor!"

Down went the black legs and up came the gray head, as the preceptor said with undisturbed dignity,—

"Good evening, Mr. Bhaer. Excuse me for a moment; we are just finishing our lesson. Now, Demi, make the letter and tell its name."

This is progressive education, if anything is! Louisa May Alcott, the teacher, did not enjoy teaching at all. However, she transfers the joy that her father evidently had to her own character of Jo. She speaks of her tutoring adventures with a zest that it would otherwise be hard for the reader to comprehend. The school envisioned by the Alcott father and daughter took form in the shape of Plumfield:

Of course it was up-hill work at first, and Jo made queer mistakes, but the wise Professor steered her safely into calmer waters, and the most rampant ragamuffin was conquered in the end. How Jo did enjoy her "wilderness of boys", and poor, dear Aunt March would have lamented had she been there to see the sacred precincts of prim well-ordered Plumfield overrun with Toms, Dicks, and Harrys! There was a sort of poetic justice about it, after all, for the old lady had been the terror of the boys for miles around; and now the exiles feasted freely

on forbidden plums, kicked up the gravel with profane boots unreprieved, and played cricket in the big field where the irritable "cow with a crumpled horn" used to invite rash youths to come and be tossed. It became a sort of boys' paradise, and Laurie suggested that it should be called the Bhaer-garten, as a compliment to its master and appropriate to its inhabitants.

Later on, in *Jo's Boys*, the University is pictured as an ideal conception of what a university should be like. There art, music, literature and learning of all sorts held sway. The students were happy and intelligent, and the professors wise and patient. Youth reigned in the hearts, if not on the faces, of all, and all held a deep respect for glorious old age.

Other educational ideas are shown in *Little Men*. The Saturday-night pillow fights allowed the boys to release some of their surplus energy; there was ample provision for extra-curricular activities, with garden patches, clubs, museum, business, and so on. Each boy had a task to perform in the house, a very modern idea, when note is taken of the growing importance of the man in the home. Pupils could progress at their own pace in Mr. Bhaer's school, although he tried to keep the class going together. The teaching was kindly, as was the teacher. Punishment was wise. There is, for instance, the time that Nat had been caught in a white lie, and Mr. Bhaer made the culprit strike him on the hand with the ferrule. So great was the boy's admiration and love for his teacher that he could hardly do it, but when it was over he was practically cured of a bad habit. The boys were taught virtue, respect, obedience, brotherly love, kindness, trust, love for animals and honor. These lessons were not administered in the form of sermons or lectures but were pointed out in moments of everyday life—a real method of teaching, incidentally, that is effective because it touches the child closely.

In her program of education for girls, Miss Alcott showed clearly what were her views on woman's place. She described Daisy, the feminine type of woman, with care. However, it is into characters like Nan and Josie that her fire has gone. Louisa, of course, was an ardent member of women's movements toward the end of her life, and these characters merely serve to illustrate her ideas.

*Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom* are much more mechanical, as indeed are all the other works, than *Little Men* and *Little Women*. Here, Miss Alcott sets out not so much to tell a story as to preach. In *Eight Cousins* her opinions on health

are paraded—all sound ones, to be sure. Her other novels, *Under the Lilacs*, *Jack and Jill*, *An Old Fashioned Girl*, and *Jo's Boys*, are decidedly minor works, although they had a great popularity when they were published.

Miss Alcott's style is decidedly ordinary. In some spots her English is very bad. Somehow, though, the tone of her writing is uplifted and sweet, and one who was inclined to scoff on starting *Little Women* laughs and weeps along with the Marches, despite himself.

Herself essentially unhappy, Louisa May Alcott has nevertheless succeeded in brightening the lives of countless thousands of human beings all over the world.

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