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"Emerson Remained My Master": The Influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on Louisa May Alcott's Thought and Writing in *Little Women*

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**“Emerson Remained My Master”: The Influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on
Louisa May Alcott’s Thought and Writing in *Little Women***

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Introduction

I remember my mom reading to me every night before I went to bed. When I was younger it was picture books, but as I grew up, she began to read me longer books. At age eight, she read me my first novel: *Little Women*. I was enthralled by the story and looked forward to bedtime every night because I wanted to know what was going to happen to the March sisters next. The times I spent with my mom reading *Little Women* are memories I hold close, and it is a childhood experience that many young girls share going all the way back to the book's publication in 1868. The novel was popular in the 19th century while Louisa May Alcott was alive and has not gone out of print in the 155 years since, allowing several generations of girls to experience and cherish its story.

Little Women quickly gained popularity on a local and eventually national scale. The book was the first of Alcott's writings that gained national recognition and was her most successful published work, accumulating more revenue than any of her other books. Proceeding *Little Women* was a second part to the novel, *Good Wives*, now commonly published as part of the original book, as well as two sequels, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*.

Louisa May Alcott was unique. She was known in her hometown of Concord, Massachusetts as a strange woman, not adhering to the traditional gender roles of the 19th Century. Raised by transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott was able to express herself through her writing and her strange habits, encouraged by her family and community to do so as the transcendentalists were ahead of their time with their feminist beliefs. Alcott, for example, enjoyed running and was encouraged to do so by her father, and she ran around Concord Center in her skirt. By her late twenties, she was the breadwinner of the family, her books' successes paying for the needs of her father, mother, and sisters. She adored reading and

writing; being surrounded by her father's transcendentalist peers allowed her to learn from the master authors of the 19th Century. One of the authors that had the most influence on Alcott and with whom she spent the most time was Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Alcott treasured Emerson's writing, particularly his poetry. She would spend hours in his library reading his work, as well as discussing the books he allowed her to borrow. Alcott's first published work *Flower Fables* was inspired by the stories Alcott would tell to Emerson's daughters when she watched them. Starting from the beginning of her career, each one of her works reflects the influence of Emerson's writing and mentorship. In particular, her most famous and most successful work, *Little Women*, heavily reflects her relationship with Emerson and the influence of his writing style.

In this thesis, I will argue that *Little Women* was heavily influenced by Alcott's mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson's influence impacted Alcott's life and writing in two main ways. First, growing up in Concord, surrounded by the influence of well-known Transcendentalist writers and under the mentorship of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alcott was heavily influenced by his work and the ideals of the transcendentalist movement. The ideas of Transcendentalism that Emerson made popular and wrote about in his pieces such as "Nature" and speeches like "Women" and "The American Scholar" appear in *Little Women*. Second, Alcott was also heavily influenced by Emerson's writing style, predominantly from his poetry, which appears in her writing in the novel. *Little Women* was the best performing work of Alcott's career after she had spent many years studying under Emerson. The novel was ahead of its time in its representation of women and feminism based on Emerson's ideals that Alcott put into her own words, and these themes continue to stay relevant today. In what follows, I will explore both types of influence.

Chapter I: The Concord Effect: Concord's Writers and the Impact of Their Environment

In this chapter, I will explain the significance of the environment in Concord, Massachusetts during the 19th century. Concord was the hub for transcendentalist philosophy and literature and many of the most prominent names in the movement spent time living or working there. The exposure to the plethora of transcendentalist scholars as well as the community that was built around the nature of Concord—such as Walden Pond—made it the perfect environment for the growth of literature during Alcott and Emerson's time.

The environment in Concord, Massachusetts in the 19th century was special. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Alcotts are revered as some of the greatest writers of American literature, and all of them lived and worked in Concord during this period. There was something remarkable and unique about living in Concord at this time, as it was able to produce and foster the growth of each of these great writers. Emerson convinced the Alcotts and Fuller to move to Concord because of this special quality (Scott). After Henry David Thoreau's passing, his friend and fellow Concord writer Ellery Channing wrote much about him, questioning this Concordian lifestyle to which he, as well as Emerson and the Alcotts, ascribed. He asks, ““Why did he care so much about being a writer?... Something peculiar, I judge”” (qtd. in Scott). What was this element present in Concord in the 19th century that fostered this environment? The focus on writing as an act of introspection and as a necessary act of human life was a part of this special intellectual collective present in Concord.

Writing was a way for these authors to process the world around them and share the importance of this act of self-reflection with their audiences. Apart from its significance in the Revolutionary War, Concord is most known for its writers. On this prolific community, author Mark Scott remarks, “Emerson writes, his wife writes, his children write; Thoreau writes, his

mother and sisters write; Alcott writes, her father and mother write, her two sisters write... and Channing writes, wondering why Thoreau cares so much about being a writer” (Scott). Writing was a necessary aspect of the lives of Concordians during this time period especially because of the significance of philosophical transformation and scholarship taking place. The writers Scott mentions strongly encouraged their children to write in order to grow spiritually, aid in their self-discernment and development, and hone their writing skills. Poetry, as well as the novel and narrative writing, were forms that were most popular, and Emerson and Bronson Alcott encouraged their children to begin exploring writing for this purpose from a young age.

The community of Concord writers was integral to the success of their writing, both on an interpersonal, local level, and on a deeper level with the success that these writers’ works gained on a national and international scale. They were writing with and for each other. Thoreau particularly was known for writing for his peers and for the people in Concord. Scott explains, “He knew his audience well; after all, he was no hermit, and his nearest neighbor lived only a mile away—a long distance to us, but not a man who might walk twenty miles in a day, as Thoreau and Emerson did, but who walked daily in any case” (Scott). Thoreau knew his audience, having close relationships with his peers and neighbors in Concord, allowing him to gain an understanding of their lives on a more personal level. This allowed him to write works that both stayed true to his own experiences but also the collective experiences of those in Concord. The collaboration that took place between these writers undeniably contributed to the success of their work. The ideas that were being discussed amongst these writers were universal concepts, speaking not just to the people in Concord but also resonating with people on a national scale.

Concord was similar to many other places at the time in principle, but the collective that took root there made it stand out. Scott explains, “Concord’s writers are thought to have lived... in ‘complete withdrawal from the busy life of the community.’ Yet, for ten years, Emerson acted as a one-man Chamber of Commerce, coaxing writers and thinkers like Margaret Fuller and Bronson Alcott to come and live in Concord” (Scott). Though these writers were not secluded from society, they were still able to develop a thriving community that supported each other in the development of their writing, as well as putting Concord on the map on a national scale. It was not that these individuals participated in typical daily activities and had jobs and typical family lives that made their community unique; it was that they had this cross-town collaboration that was obviously necessary to the success of their work. The connection to a strong creative community network rather than total seclusion for individual writers also speaks to the ability of Emerson and Alcott to engage with ideas ahead of their time; the deep engagement in the town of Concord demonstrates the way that these writers came into contact with new dynamic ideas.

Ellery Channing hones in on this special quality Concord had in his writing about Thoreau. He summarizes, “The ‘something peculiar’ here is the misprision of like minds, a continual occurrence between friends and lovers and a continuous one among experts, most notably economists, theologians, philosophers and poets—writers all of them” (Scott). Unity of creation was a prevalent theme in New England Transcendentalism; the majority of these writers ascribed to this idea, which was obvious in the way that they interacted with one another in Concord.

New England Transcendentalism was founded in Concord between the mid-1830s and mid-1840s in the decades following the War of 1812. This war fought against the British resulted in a boost of national patriotism and newfound confidence in the U.S. after its independence less

than forty years before (Hickey). As a result of this, the movement was demographically elite and primarily white, as most of the main figures were from the upper classes. The movement affected literature, religion, philosophy, and social thought. It was progressive at the time in its openness to women, as this was the first movement in America since its recent founding to include the voices of prominent women, as well as touching upon select feminist issues.

Likewise, it was also the first movement in America to center youth voices and to be claimed by younger generations. Young people were able to reinvent what they wanted their world to look like without using the basis of the traditions of their elders; they wanted to differ from the British model and the older American models and instead wanted something new (Buell). This encouragement of creativity allowed the writers during this period to experiment with new models of writing that had not yet been explored because people were generally more open to new ideas.

Emerson was one of the movement's most famous scholars. Its focus was on the essential unity of all creation—in opposition to the belief in the trinity from traditional Christianity—as well as the goodness of humanity and the ability of each person to reason to their own insights instead of taking everything believed by the masses to be true. Emerson took the ideas of German philosophers who were also challenging commonly believed religious ideals and with his own insights created what is today known as New England, or American, Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism challenged the typical societal norms of the 19th century, which could be seen as younger generations challenged the long-held beliefs of the older generations. For example, Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott, took his transcendental beliefs so far that he took his family, accompanied by close friends, to live in a transcendentalist commune in Harvard, Massachusetts called Fruitlands. The Alcotts challenged the societal standards of the

time, and life on Fruitlands was unique and seen as strange. As Transcendentalism places a focus on women's rights, the women living at Fruitlands were not forced to do the chores that women were typically forced to do in their households. Though Alcott's experiment with the commune at Fruitlands was unsuccessful, it demonstrates the commitment that the transcendentalists had in pushing back against the status quo and beliefs held by older generations.

At the beginning of his journey into Transcendentalism, Emerson gave many speeches in Massachusetts explaining the ideas of the movement. One of the most famous speeches of this period was known as "The Divinity School Address" in 1838 which he delivered at Harvard Divinity School. Emerson explained in this address that his experience with Christianity was that their evidence was weak and that they had a skewed perception of religion (Goodman). Emerson felt compelled and empowered to voice these ideas because of the pushback against traditional religious and philosophical beliefs happening among transcendentalists at the time.

The reception of Emerson's harsh criticism of religion was not positive from the public or his fellow writers at first. Discussing the way Emerson was received by his contemporaries, one author states, "The Concord writers of this 'age of reform' could be described, in our current vocabulary, as co-dependent, passive-aggressive, grandiose, insecure, defensive, neurotic control freaks... they were 'extortionate critics'; they were 'victims of expression'" (Scott). Due to their eccentricity and their distaste for adhering to social norms and standards of literature during this time, the transcendentalist writers were at first seen as strange outsiders to the community. Although they had a negative impression initially, Emerson, his peers, and the writers he influenced were at the beginning of the shift in philosophy, theology, and particularly literature that occurred in the 19th century in America which sparked the American Renaissance.

Chapter II: Louisa May Alcott's Writing Journey

In this chapter, I will consider Louisa May Alcott's life in Concord and the people who influenced her work. Louisa May Alcott grew up in a family of writers and in the company of many transcendentalist authors who were her father's peers. Her relationship with her family, in particular her father, gave her a basis for the progressive transcendentalist ideals on which she later based her philosophies. Though her father was impactful on her life and writing, Ralph Waldo Emerson's influence on Alcott was arguably the most significant.

Alcott's Upbringing and Relationship With Her Father

Alcott was born to be a Transcendentalist, being raised by a mother who was deeply committed to the movement, and a father, Bronson Alcott, who was one of its leaders. Every part of the Alcott children's upbringing had transcendentalist connections. From a young age, their parents required them to keep journals that they would share as a family at dinner time every night, and in which their mother would write responses to the entries and poems they had written (Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House). Alcott developed a love of writing and of knowledge from a young age which was fostered by her parents.

Bronson Alcott was known in his own right before the fame that came with Louisa May Alcott's successful writing career. He is most well known for founding the Concord School of Philosophy which he ran out of the barn behind the Orchard House, the name the Alcotts gave their home. This school hosted many lectures from famous transcendentalist philosophers and writers. Bronson Alcott did, however, gain more traction in his career, particularly in reference to the Concord School of Philosophy, because of his daughter's later success with *Little Women*.

The philosophies of her father, though sometimes outlandish in the ways in which he acted upon them, were sound and rubbed off on Alcott. It is clear in her writing, particularly

Little Women and in the way that she operated day-to-day, that she was a feminist. Alcott did many things that were not stereotypical for women at the time, such as running around Concord in her skirts and dresses (Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House). Alcott was also the first woman to vote in Concord. Her father supported her feminist beliefs when she was growing up, and his feminism impacted how he brought her up. It is said of Bronson Alcott that, "Alcott was arguably the most feminist-minded of the male Transcendentalists... he both publicly and privately supported the woman's rights cause as well as praised the talents of intellectual women" (Wayne 142). Although it was not widely accepted for women to do so in the early 19th century, Bronson Alcott's transcendentalist philosophies encouraged him to support his daughters in writing daily and taking school lessons. It was also Bronson Alcott who built Louisa May Alcott's writing desk in her room, specifically positioned at the window facing the road, so passersby could see that she had her own desk, which was also uncommon for women at the time (Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House). Alcott had an inclination for writing and activism from a young age, and her father's encouragement helped her to develop these skills.

Bronson Alcott was deemed the most feminist-minded of the male Transcendentalists, due to both his actions and his writings on feminine influence. What is more, he praised Emerson for similar attitudes:

The company of intellectual women has a certain freshness and zest one seldom tastes from intercourse with cultivated men... The best of Emerson's intellect comes out in its feminine traits, and were he not as stimulating to me as a woman, and as racy as I should not care to see and know him intimately nor often (Wayne 142).

Bronson Alcott admired the traits he deems as “feminine” in this journal entry, and though partially said in jest about his friend, he makes it clear that he admires these feminine qualities, as he demonstrates his appreciation for Emerson specifically because of his “feminine traits.”

Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson

As can be sensed by Bronson Alcott’s journal entry, Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson were both friends and colleagues. In “Sheltering Tree: A Story of the Friendship of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Amos Bronson Alcott,” Hubert Hoeltje, an early twentieth-century scholar devoted to the study of New England authors, describes the dynamics present between the two men:

Almost at first meeting Emerson and Alcott made the heartening discovery that they were to be fellow travelers and friends. Each already knew the passwords Plato and Coleridge... On the other hand there could be little room for rivalry. Obviously Emerson’s instrument was his pen and it was soon settled for a long time to come that Alcott’s was his tongue (qtd. in Rusk 43).

Bronson Alcott and Emerson immediately had an intellectual connection, and as both men ascribed to the Transcendentalist philosophy and dedicated their lives and careers to following it, they and their families became very close.

As mentioned above, Bronson Alcott never achieved as much fame and monetary success as his daughter; the same was true in comparison to Emerson. Hoeltje says, “For the most part... it was Emerson who dominated the friendship. He was impressive, not only as an example of the intuitive mind at work, but for his exceptional artistic power, and he promptly became Alcott’s chief critic and guide” (qtd. in Rusk 44). Though the two writers were fiercely dedicated to Transcendentalism and their love of writing, Emerson’s speeches and poetry were more

well-known than Bronson Alcott's and had a greater impact on more people. Due to the success of his work, Emerson was also able to support Bronson Alcott in more ways than intellectually. It was Emerson who convinced him to move to Concord in the first place, and Emerson ended up paying for a significant amount of the house and property that would later become the Orchard House and the Concord School of Philosophy for the Alcott family (Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House). Emerson was a strong supporter and mentor of Bronson Alcott and their relationship was how Louisa May Alcott was first introduced to Emerson.

Alcott's Mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson

Though her father's presence in her life was formative to her upbringing and love of writing, Emerson eventually became the "chief critic and guide" in Louisa May Alcott's life. Alcott attributed to Emerson the development of her writing from something she enjoyed to something she took more seriously. In the journals that she kept religiously throughout her life, first out of obligation to her parents and then developing into her life's mission, Alcott often wrote about Emerson and the influence he had on her personally and intellectually. In one entry, she wrote about a turning point in her writing at age fifteen, attributing it to Emerson:

My romantic period began at fifteen, when I fell to writing poetry... About that time, in browsing over Mr. Emerson's library, I found Goethe's "Correspondence With A Child," and at once was fired with a desire to be a Bettine, making my father's friend my Goethe. So I wrote letters to him, but never sent them... Not till many years later did I tell *my* Goethe of this early romance and the part he played in it. He was much amused, and begged for his letters, kindly saying he felt honored to be so worshipped. The letters were burnt long ago, but Emerson remained my 'Master' while he lived, doing more for me, – as for many others, –

than he knew, by the simple beauty of his life, the truth and wisdom of his books... (qtd. in Dow Cheney 57-58).

Alcott was enamored by Emerson and admired his poetry, his speeches, and the conversations they shared. The inspiration and mentorship Emerson gave to Alcott at this point in her life in particular made a significant impact on her writing, as she refers to him as her “Master,” emphasizing the enormous impact he had on her life.

Of all his many writings, Emerson’s poetry was especially important to Alcott. In her journals, she writes, “Made a resolution to read fewer novels, and those only of the best. List of books I like: – ... Emerson’s Poems.” (qtd. in Dow Cheney 68). Among other authors such as Thomas Carlyle, John Milton, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Emerson’s poems made the cut of “those only of the best” that Alcott spent her time consuming. In reference to her poetry in particular, Jennifer Gurley, an Emerson scholar at Le Moyne College, notes the influences of Emerson’s poetry on Alcott’s. “[W]hat we find in Alcott is a unique Transcendentalist artist with a sense of devotion based in Emersonian individualism that offers an alternative to sentimentalism” (Gurley 199). Although Alcott’s poetry is not what earned her the fame that *Little Women* did, her early poetry influenced her later writing, and the Emersonian presence influenced those later works as well.

Alcott’s relationship with Emerson influenced not only the way that she wrote, but also in many other ways as well. For example, Alcott’s first book, *Flower Fables*, was published with inspiration from Emerson and his daughters. Ednah Dow Cheney, a prominent feminist figure in the Transcendentalist movement, edited and helped to publish Alcott’s journals the year after her death in 1888. Regarding Alcott’s first book she writes, “She had always written poems, plays, and stories for her own and her friends’ pleasure, and now she gathered up some tales she had

written for Mr. Emerson's daughter and published them under the name 'Flower Fables'" (Dow Cheney 76). She also writes on Alcott's relationship with Emerson's daughters, explaining, "She naturally thought of teaching as her work, and had for a short time a little school in the barn for Mr. Emerson's children and others" (Dow Cheney 52). Although these connections to Emerson and his family do not correspond directly with her writing itself, they illustrate the significance that this relationship had on the course of Alcott's career. If Emerson and his family had not been such a presence in Alcott's life, there would have been no inspiration for *Flower Fables*, and thus no inspiration for her later works either.

Chapter III: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Widespread Influence

In this chapter, I will be discussing Ralph Waldo Emerson's immense impact on both literature and philosophy and how this influence particularly affected Louisa May Alcott. Emerson was one of the most influential and groundbreaking authors of the mid-19th century, and his influence carried across Concord, as well as across the United States. Emerson was at the helm of the Transcendentalist movement and helped to make its message more mainstream, not simply confined to his peers in Concord. Emerson was the first writer to take the ideas of Transcendentalism that were rooted in Kant's Transcendental Idealism and turn them into what is now American Transcendentalism, making it more accessible through his essays, speeches, and poetry. Louisa May Alcott was one of Emerson's many proteges, adoring his mentorship and incorporating his writing style and ideas into her own. Under the mentorship of Emerson, Alcott's writing developed tremendously, and traces of Emerson can be seen within her writing.

Transcendentalism in Emerson's Writings

Although I explained American Transcendentalism in more detail in Chapter One, it is important to point out, in particular, the Emersonian aspects involved in its founding. Robert Richardson, an American historian and biographer, writes in an introduction to a collection of Emerson's speeches and poems about this "Emersonian individualism" that influenced the American Transcendentalist movement:

American Transcendentalism takes its name from Kant's Transcendental Idealism. It can also be thought of as American Idealism, but neither label satisfactorily suggests the strength of thought or the practical accessibility of the movement that is personified and centered in Emerson. Emersonian individualism is a protest against social conformity, but not against society. It is a protest on behalf of the

autonomous, unalienated human being... Emerson's self-reliant individual is a person who understands that his own consciousness is his only window on the world, a person who is interested in self-rule— in autarchy not anarchy, a person who acknowledges his equality, and his necessary connection, with others (Richardson 4-5).

Emerson's focus on the individual and the importance of self-reliance were themes that appeared in all of his works. He believed that in order to grow as thinkers and as human beings, the individual must take on their own unique experience of the world and form their own opinions, not simply taking the philosophies of others as truth. This belief in particular appears in Alcott's writing journey as well as in *Little Women*.

Emerson's Unique Ideas

One of Emerson's most famous and impactful speeches was given in 1837, entitled "The American Scholar." This speech in particular speaks to one of Emerson's core philosophical beliefs of self-reliance and independence of thought and also speaks to Alcott's interpretation of Emerson's writing. In this speech, Emerson explains that all people are influenced by external forces, but it is necessary that they take the ideas of the great authors they read and use them as inspiration for their own ideas. Emerson says:

As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought, that shall be as efficient, in all respects, to a remote posterity, as to contemporaries, or rather to the second age... On the other part, instead of being its own seer, let it receive from another mind its truth, though it were in torrents of light, without periods of solitude, inquest, and self-recovery,

and a fatal disservice is done. Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence (The American Scholar 87).

Emerson does not write off the great authors of history nor suggest his readers take what the authors say as the ultimate truth, but instead urges true scholars to read them in order to gain insight and experience. For Emerson, the most important part of the equation is the personal consideration that leads to finding one's own truth, not the reading itself.

In this essay, Emerson also discusses the concept of “Man Thinking,” in contrast to someone who simply regurgitates the ideas of someone else. He explains that Man Thinking is the person that has the ability to take into account the ideas of other authors but also come up with their own original ideas. On this he says, “They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. But genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates” (The American Scholar 88). In order to create, Emerson says that, while reading great authors from the past, one must be looking forward to the future in order to find their own unique ideas.

On this idea, Richardson explains Emerson’s core desires. “At the bottom, the power of the individual to seize his own life and the creative power of nature are the same power: this is Emerson’s most important religious insight” (Richardson 11). Richardson emphasizes the significance of having control over one’s own life for Emerson; the concept of Man Thinking and the ability to create genius based on original ideas is a theme that Emerson also discusses in his essay “Self-Reliance.”

In all of his speeches and writings, Emerson emphasizes the importance and necessity of individual thought and the significance of being able to think originally. While he acknowledges the importance of taking into account the ideas of others, according to Emerson, it is most

important to be “self-reliant” and be able to make decisions based on one’s own thinking. In his essay “Self-Reliance,” Emerson focuses on this concept from the opening lines of the piece, saying, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,— that is genius” (Self-Reliance 151). He goes on to explain that it is common practice for people to imitate the ideas of others in an effort to be relatable; however, when an author writes about the ideas that they come up with on their own, void of influence, it is most relatable. He explains that both for the self and for the writer and their audience, the emphasis on individuality and originality is necessary.

Emerson explains that conformity is the norm, and the self-reliance he emphasizes is not. He says, “The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs” (Self-Reliance 153). This is necessary to understanding the significance of Emerson’s message in “Self-Reliance,” as well as to understanding Emerson’s key motivations as Richardson explains. In order to be the most fully developed and intelligent thinker from Emerson’s perspective, one must not conform to social norms or standards in any way and must instead be able to think for themselves and find their motivations internally instead of externally.

Emerson’s Changing Opinions on Feminism

Feminism played an important role in Alcott’s life and in the lives of the characters in *Little Women*. It is necessary to consider Emerson’s response to the feminist movements going on in Concord during the 19th century and the ways in which Emerson responded to them over time. Emerson was supportive of feminism and the women’s rights movements, particularly those locally to him in Massachusetts, and his support grew stronger over time as he met more female writers and women at the helm of the suffrage movement.

Emerson gave a speech on the issue of women's rights entitled "Woman" in 1855. This speech reflects his naive, limited view of women's demands and their right to equality. He explains how he believes that women have a role secondary to men, and though they have a right to vote, they are not equal. Emerson says:

Plato said, Women are the same as men in faculty, only less in degree. But the general voice of mankind has agreed that they have their own strength; that women are strong by sentiment; that the same mental height which their husbands attain by toil, they attain by sympathy with their husbands. Man is the will, and Woman the sentiment. In this ship of humanity, Will is the rudder, and Sentiment the sail: when Woman affects to steer, the rudder is only a masked sail. When women engage in any art or trade, it is usually as a resource, not as a primary object ("Woman").

He goes on to say that "...if a woman demands votes, offices and political equality with men...it must not be refused" ("Woman"). Although he does acknowledge the necessity of giving women the right to vote, his perspective on feminism is quite conservative in comparison to Alcott's.

In a later speech in 1869, Emerson's perspective on feminism and the demands made by women at the time made an obvious shift. In this speech when discussing the right to vote, Emerson says, "It is idle to refuse them a vote on the ground of incompetency. I wish our masculine voting were so good that we had any right to doubt their equal discretion. They could not easily give worse votes, I think, than we do" ("Discours Manqué Woman"). Instead of simply agreeing that women should have the right to vote because they demand it, as stated in his previous speeches on the subject, Emerson in this speech explains that women have "equal discretion" to men, and should not be regarded as incompetent voters. Instead of the passive

stance on women's rights issues that he took previously, in his 1869 speech, it is clear that Emerson's stance on the subject had matured.

Emerson's opinions on the question of women's rights developed over the course of his life. Len Gougeon, Professor of English at the University of Scranton and former president of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society, summarizes this change in Emerson's opinion. He says, "While there are some similarities between the 1869 address and the 1855 'Woman,' it is obvious that Emerson's position on the Woman Question had changed significantly. One of the most striking differences between this and the earlier address is the total lack of qualification regarding women's right to full participation in the political process. Emerson leaves no doubt that women, even the best women, want and deserve the right to vote" (Gougeon 590).

Emerson's belief that the individual must break from the chains of societal constructs and instead must form their own opinions on truth relates directly to the women's rights movements of the 19th century. Over the course of the ten years between Emerson's public speeches on the movement, he realized this belief's applicability to the "woman question." It is evident that he realized that it is not just men who are endowed with the responsibility to be self-reliant and take hold of their own lives, but the same goes for women as well.

Chapter IV: Little Women's Direct Relationship to the Writings of Emerson

In this chapter, I will demonstrate the direct products of Emerson's influence on Alcott's writing, particularly in her most famous work, *Little Women*. Through both the themes of feminism and self-reliance that the main character represents and the writing style Alcott implements throughout the novel, Emerson's impact on *Little Women* cannot be overlooked.

The Personality of Jo March

The first way in which Emerson's impact can be seen in the novel is through the character of Jo March. Jo, the female protagonist and narrator of *Little Women*, is made up of many Emersonian influences. She pushes back against traditional gender roles, cutting her hair short and protesting being "ladylike," is the main breadwinner of her family, and speaks out on injustices against women. The reason these influences are so significant is because Jo can be seen as a direct representation of Alcott within the novel. The story of *Little Women* closely follows the life of Alcott, describing her sisters, mother, and father, as well as detailing the story behind how *Little Women* was written. By putting these Emersonian influences into the character of Jo, it shows that Alcott sees herself as a reflection of Emerson as well.

Jo speaks out against traditional gender roles as Emerson also did. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Emerson advocated in speeches like "Woman" that women should be able to advocate for the rights they desire. In *Little Women*, Jo says:

"I'm not [a young lady]! And if turning up my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty," cried Jo, pulling off her net, and shaking down a chestnut mane. "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners! I can't get over my

disappointment in not being a boy. And it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!" (*Little Women* 5).

Alcott's development of her opinion on feminism is present in this opinion too, however. Emerson was an advocate for the rights of women and supported Alcott in her endeavors of being a writer instead of a homemaker, but he would have never taken the opinion as far as to say women should not do these things. Alcott's unique voice and opinions are present in addition to the voice of Emerson within the novel.

Jo also speaks about disliking the feeling of being tied down or tied to others in the novel, which is reminiscent of Emerson's similar distaste for not being able to be independent. As explained in Chapter Two, Emerson explains that self-reliance is a rare characteristic, but it is imperative that people strive to be "nonconformists" in this way and utilize this independence. Emerson strongly emphasizes in this essay that, in order to be truly happy, one must solely rely on themselves and be completely self-reliant, not putting their success or happiness on the shoulders of others. Jo expresses a similar distaste in the novel when explaining her desire for independence. She says, "I don't like favors, they oppress and make me feel like a slave. I'd rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent" (*Little Women* 285). Emerson's ideas in "Self-Reliance" are reflected within the character of Jo, who wants to do only what makes her happy and not conform to what other people believe she should do.

Jo is a complete non-conformist, especially when put beside her sisters. Meg is a woman who marries and has children at a socially acceptable age; Beth is soft-spoken and quietly plays her piano in the background, not drawing much attention to herself; Amy fits similar characteristics of a girl during the 19th century, constantly discussing her desires for a

companion and her love of fancy things. Jo's mother brings up this comparison between her and her sisters when breaking the news to Jo that her aunt will no longer be taking her on a trip to France, but rather will be taking her sister, Amy. Her mother says:

I'm afraid it's partly your own fault, dear. When Aunt spoke to me the other day, she regretted your blunt manners and too independent spirit, and here she writes, as if quoting something you had said—"I planned at first to ask Jo, but as 'favors burden her', and she 'hates French', I think I won't venture to invite her. Amy is more docile, will make a good companion for Flo, and receive gratefully any help the trip may give her. (*Little Women* 294-295).

While her sisters are rewarded externally for fitting into the mold of what a young woman should be doing, Jo continues to lead her life the way she desires, letting go of the trip to France or the friendship of Laurie, who confesses his love for her but is rejected when Jo explains she does not want to marry. Jo's commitment to the Emersonian pursuit of what is good and the way that the rules of society are bent are especially obvious in these scenes but present in every decision she makes throughout the book.

The Use of Poetry in Little Women

Alcott was inspired by Emerson in the themes she explored in *Little Women* as previously discussed, but she was also inspired by Emerson's poetry which also made its way into the novel. As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, Alcott named Emerson's poetry as one of her favorite pieces of literature that she found most worthwhile to read. In her novel, Alcott includes two full poems, one at the beginning and one at the end, and their Emersonian influence can be seen in their form and content. Though many poets were inspired by Emerson during the 19th Century, thus most of the poetry followed a similar form, it is certain that the reason Alcott's poetry also

falls into this category is because of Emerson's influence; as previously discussed, she made it clear in her journals that Emerson's poetry inspired her most.

The first poem that appears in *Little Women* is entitled "Anniversary Ode." This poem was Jo's contribution to the "Pickwick Portfolio," a weekly newspaper created by the March sisters for their "P.C. club" meetings, which consisted of them discussing their admiration of Dickens and reading the newspaper contributions they all wrote in the personas of the different characters. The poem describes the March sisters, all described under their personas they take on in the P.C. club.

We all are here in perfect health,
 None gone from our small band:
 Again we see each well-known face,
 And press each friendly hand.
 Our Pickwick, always at his post,
 With reverence we greet,
 As, spectacles on nose, he reads
 Our well-filled weekly sheet.
 The year is gone, we still unite
 To joke and laugh and read,
 And tread the path of literature
 That doth to glory lead.
 Long may our paper prosper well,
 Our club unbroken be,

And coming years their blessings pour

On the useful, gay 'P. C.' (*Little Women* 96).

“Anniversary Ode,” though its themes are not as introspective as are typical of Emerson’s poetry, reflects Emerson’s style. In particular, this poem is reminiscent of Emerson’s “Ode to Beauty.” In the first stanza of his poem, Emerson writes in a quatrain, an ABCB rhyme scheme, in which Alcott also writes “Anniversary Ode.”

Who gave thee, O Beauty,
 The keys of this breast,—
 Too credulous lover
 Of blest and unblest?
 Say, when in lapsed ages
 Thee knew I of old;
 Or what was the service
 For which I was sold?
 When first my eyes saw thee,
 I found me thy thrall,
 By magical drawings,
 Sweet tyrant of all! (“Ode to Beauty”).

Emerson wrote both “Ode to Beauty” as well as “Ode Inscribed to William H. Channing” within a year of each other in the 1840s, which was around the time that Alcott was beginning to be exposed to his poetry and writing. The journal entry previously mentioned where she claimed Emerson to be her “Master” was written when she was fifteen years old, which would have been a few years after the writing of these poems. This makes it plausible that Alcott’s love of

Emerson's poetry included these poems and stuck with her when she wrote *Little Women* in her later years.

Although "Anniversary Ode" does not reference nature as Emerson's poetry did, specifically "Ode to Beauty," it does reflect a similar tone. If Alcott were to be directly imitating Emerson's poetry in her novel, the poems would have all been in reference to nature, as that was a key characteristic of Emerson's writing. However, the fact that Alcott reflected a similar style and tone to Emerson but changed the subject matter demonstrates how she was able to take his ideas and turn them into something new with her own influence. Alcott took into consideration the Emersonian principle of Man Thinking, taking the ideas of her "Master" and mentor, Emerson, and turning them into something new. Under Emerson's criteria, this would qualify Alcott's writing as being successful and unique, not simply copying the ideas of other great writers before her, which he criticizes.

The second poem in *Little Women* is at the end of the novel and is longer and more introspective than the first more upbeat poem. "In the Garret" is a poem Jo wrote that gets published in a newspaper. Her eventual love interest, Mr. Bhaer, finds the poem printed in the newspaper and tells Jo at the end of the novel that it is partially because of the poem that he decided to go after her. "In the Garret" is more Emersonian than the first poem in the novel, as nature is explicitly referenced and Alcott's tone and word choice are more similar to Emerson's than in the first poem. Each stanza ends with a version of "In the falling summer rain," bringing each stanza back to nature. The first stanza of the poem reads:

Four little chests all in a row,
 Dim with dust, and worn by time,
 All fashioned and filled, long ago,

By children now in their prime.
Four little keys hung side by side,
With faded ribbons, brave and gay
When fastened there, with childish pride,
Long ago, on a rainy day.
Four little names, one on each lid,
Carved out by a boyish hand,
And underneath there lieth hid
Histories of the happy band
Once playing here, and pausing oft
To hear the sweet refrain,
That came and went on the roof aloft,
In the falling summer rain. (*Little Women* 454)

Though Emerson did not believe that poetry should be focused on topics such as familial love as Alcott did, it is an Emersonian approach to take the ideas of one author and use them as inspiration for one's own creation. As Jo grows as a writer and a person throughout the novel, the character being a fictional representation of Alcott too, her writing style develops as she grows up, just as Alcott's did. By the end of the novel, the character of Jo—and thus Alcott herself as well—was able to turn what she had learned into her own ideas instead of writing a poem that simply reflects the ideas of another author such as Emerson.

Conclusion and Areas for Continuing Research

Ralph Waldo Emerson's influence on Louisa May Alcott is clear, particularly in *Little Women* in its representation of women and the "self-reliant" mentality Alcott gave to the female characters in the novel. Alcott was able to gain these insights from her mentorship under Emerson, the founder of the ideas of self-reliance and of the role of the scholar and writer in society, and more particularly in the New England Transcendentalist community in Concord to which they both belonged. It was not Emerson necessarily that brought Alcott to success, but it was his philosophies and writing that inspired her to create her own legacy. Emerson would say that it is necessary for good writers to have mentors and for them to read great work, but only for leisure and to draw inspiration. Alcott was a great student of Emerson, taking inspiration from his philosophies and developing them into her own philosophies that are present within *Little Women*.

Though it may seem that Alcott may have taken too much of an influence from Emerson, going against his belief that one must only use their own mind for their ideas instead of being influenced by others, it is necessary to consider their relationship. As explained in Chapter One, during the time Alcott was growing up and developing her writing skills, Concord was a melting pot for writers looking to gain new perspectives and learn from other great writers. Emerson was a central figure and inspiration in her life, as she saw his influence on her father's work and also admired him for the mentorship he gave her. Emerson gave Alcott a springboard into her successful career as a writer by giving her both the mentorship that aided her writing and the inspiration for her to continue to grow. As demonstrated in Chapter Four, Alcott did not simply regurgitate the ideas of Emerson, but developed them into her own ideas, making them more feminist and more straight forward. The character of Jo March is an obvious reflection of Alcott

herself, and Alcott uses the character of Jo to explain many of the transcendentalist ideas that she learned from Emerson. It was Emerson who empowered her to do so.

If I were to continue my research in this area of study, I would first like to focus on Henry David Thoreau's influence on Louisa May Alcott's life. In a similar way to Emerson, Thoreau had a mentorship with Alcott as well. Some scholars and fans of *Little Women* believe that Friedrich Bhaer, the German professor Jo ends up marrying, is meant to represent Thoreau, in a similar way to how Laurie is supposedly representative of Emerson. Thoreau also being so connected to the beginnings of the Transcendentalist movement in Concord and being so closely tied to Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson, it is inevitable that Alcott was also influenced by his writing and philosophy.

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