

Louisa May Alcott Presentation

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Louisa May Alcott (November 29, 1832-March 6, 1888), 2nd of 4 daughters, was an American novelist and poet best known as the author of the novel *Little Women*. Raised in New England, by her transcendentalist parents, Abigail May and Amos Bronson Alcott, she also grew up among many of the well-known intellectuals and Unitarians of the day: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau.

Before we can go further with Louisa's life, you should probably know something of her two earliest influences, her parents:

Abigail May Alcott was born in 1800. Her great aunt was Dorothy Quincy, who married John Hancock, the first signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Abigail, or "Abba" as she was called worked energetically for various causes, especially those that helped the poor or furthered the causes of abolition, women's rights, and temperance. Louisa said of her mother's time as a social worker in Boston that "... she always did what came to her in the way of duty and charity, and let comfort suffer for love's sake."

Amos Bronson Alcott had the same birthday as his daughter, November 29. Born in 1799, educator, philosopher, utopian visionary, he ran the progressive Temple School in Boston, founded the Fruitlands community in Harvard, and was a leader of the Transcendentalists.

"Transcendentalism" was a term coined for a movement of New England writers and thinkers in the 1830s. They believed that people are born good, that they possess a power called intuition, and that they can come closer to God through nature.

Abigail met Amos Bronson Alcott, that schoolteacher with radical ideas, while visiting her brother, Samuel J. May, a minister in Brooklyn, Connecticut, the first Unitarian minister in the state. Mr. Alcott was attracted to Abba's Unitarian faith and began to attend Unitarian churches regularly, most frequently at the Federal Street Church to listen to William Ellery Channing. Abba's family feared—rightly—that Bronson had little notion of how to support a family, but the young people were not deterred. They were married in 1830, at King's Chapel in Boston.

Abba May Alcott would later serve as the beloved prototype for "Marmee" of *Little Women*. To her four daughters, both in fact and fiction, she was, according to Louisa, "the most splendid mother in world," who devoted herself to each one, encouraging their talents and giving them practical rules by which to live."

While Louisa's mother served as a grounded nurturer, her father showed how far ideas could fly: Mr. Alcott believed that all knowledge and moral guidance springs from inner sources and it is the teacher's role to help these unfold in a beneficial way. In 1836 he became a founding member of the Transcendental Club with Ralph Waldo Emerson. He also founded Temple school from 1834 - 1841

There he introduced art, music, nature study, and physical education to his classes at a time when these subjects were not commonly taught.

26-year-old Unitarian Margaret Fuller was a teacher during 1836-37;. However, the school was not well received.

Influential conservative Unitarian Andrews Norton, a vocal opponent of Transcendentalism, derided Alcott's ideas as one-third blasphemy, one-third obscenity, and the rest nonsense.

Many parents also did not understand Alcott's innovative methods and withdrew their children from his school upon learning pupils received sexual education courses and shared classroom space with an African American girl. This forced Bronson to close the school down and became one example of many times he had trouble finding stable income. Because of this, his family

moved over 20 times in 30 years.

Undeterred, Bronson continued to write and share his ideas. Essential values instilled in his children from an early age were self-reliance and the ideals of duty, self-sacrifice, compassion, and charity. In 1847, the family even served as station masters on the Underground Railroad, when they housed a fugitive slave for one week.

Bronson did find success in his later years. From 1859 through 1864, he was Superintendent of Schools in Concord and also conducted lecture tours in the Midwest where his presentations on educational reform and Transcendentalism brought much recognition to himself and fellow friends, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Besides her parents, Louisa also grew up close to her three sisters:

Anna Bronson Alcott, the first of the four daughters.

She fit best into the ideal of "Victorian Womanhood" as a dutiful daughter and eventually, a model wife and mother.

Anna was the inspiration for "Meg March" in *Little Women*, with her real-life wedding to John Bridge Pratt forming the basis for the fictional marriage of Meg and John.

Quiet and shy, Elizabeth Alcott was the third sister. Named after Elizabeth Peabody who had assisted Mr. Alcott in the founding of Temple School. Lizzie was prone to "hiding her feelings in silence," while her journals provide few clues to her inner life.

The fullest portrait of Elizabeth is found in *Little Women*, where she was portrayed as the gentle "Beth March." The book is a tribute to the sister Louisa called "my better self":

Elizabeth contracted scarlet fever and like her fictional counterpart, Lizzie recovered, but died two years later of another illness.

Abigail May Alcott, the youngest of the Alcott daughters.

Like "Amy March" in *Little Women*, May was a blue-eyed golden haired girl who loved beauty and all things artistic and elegant. "She is so graceful and pretty and loves beauty so much, it is hard for her to be poor and wear other people's ugly things," Louisa described

May had also long-exhibited a talent for drawing and painting. In 1878, she married a Swiss businessman. They resided near Paris and in 1879, May gave birth to a daughter she named Louisa May, in honor of her sister (and later nicknamed "Lulu"). Tragically, May died seven weeks after the baby was born and Louisa took over the care of Lulu in Concord, MA. She even wrote stories for her, Lulu's library.

And now we come to Louisa: 2nd in line, she lived in a home with three sisters and two progressive parents all sharing ideas and their lives together. As the resident tomboy Louisa often felt she did not fit in "No boy could be my friend till I had beaten him in a race," she claimed, "and no girl if she refused to climb trees, leap fences ..."

She had a fiery and passionate personality, attracted to adventure and danger, and imaginative, turbulent, brilliant ideas. A contemporary of hers, Clara Gowing described Louisa as a strange combination of kindness, shyness, and daring, full of energy and perseverance.

However, Louisa rarely felt alone. Her family was close knit, they had to be with such unstable income and constant moving around. As for school, the girls were mostly educated at home. Their early education included lessons from Henry David Thoreau, but they received the majority of schooling from their father.

They even learned their first letters through charades by forming them with their bodies. "I" was created by standing straight and tall; "X" was made by stretching out both arms and legs. Another example of manipulative teachers use today, but was unheard of then.

"I never went to school," Louisa wrote, "except to my father so we had lessons each morning in the study. And very happy hours they were to us, for my father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child's nature as a flower blooms, rather than crammed it with more than it could digest. I never liked arithmetic nor grammar . . . but reading, writing, composition, history, and geography I enjoyed, as well as the stories read to us with a skill his own."

Self-expression was also highly valued and cultivated, including journal keeping for the whole family.

Louisa often wrote about their poverty or her quick temper that often got her into trouble:

"If only I kept all the promises I make, I should be the best girl in the world. But I don't, and so I am very bad."

Louisa also wrote about going on runs, Once again challenging the social norms of the time.

Despite her interests in athletics, nature, and acting, writing became her main passion. She had a rich imagination and her stories often became the basis of melodramas that she and her sisters would act out for friends. Louisa preferred to play the "lurid" parts in these plays --"the villains, ghosts, bandits."

At the age of ten, Louisa's family, now under the influence of Bronson Alcott's friends Charles Lane and Henry Wright, moved to Harvard, Massachusetts. On a hillside farm they planned to establish a model community, making use of no animal products or labor except, as Abigail Alcott observed, for that of women.

Bronson founded Fruitlands in the 1840s with the intention of escaping the evils of the world — especially money-based economy — "through pure living and high thinking". They would eat no eggs or meat. Milk, considered property of the cow, was off limits. They wore only linen clothing, since wool came from sheep and cotton was produced with the labor of people enslaved at the time.

Louisa seemed to have enjoyed herself at Fruitlands. One of her journal entries describe hours of play spent running up and down hills, gathering nuts and berries:

"I ran in the wind and pretended to be a horse, and had a lovely time in the woods with Anna and Lizzie. We were fairies, and made gowns and paper wings. I "fied" the highest of all.

Abba and her small daughters still struggled to keep the farm going while the men went about the countryside philosophizing. In a few months quarrels erupted, and winter weather saw the end of the experiment. The only lasting product of Fruitlands are Louisa's journal entries and a book, "Transcendental Wild Oats."

After the collapse of Fruitlands, the family remained in Harvard for a year, without work, deeply in debt, and prospects bleak.

Fortunately, in 1845 Abba's inheritance was made available and, with Emerson's help, the Alcotts bought an old house and moved back to Concord. At their new home, "Hillside," the family farmed and, frequently visiting the famous cabin at Walden Pond, formed a lasting friendship with Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau called Mr. Alcott "the last of the great philosophers"

This was a relatively happy period preserved in the first chapters of Little Women.

Abba and her daughters thrived in their new environment. It was at Hillside that Louisa started developing her writing skills, highly influenced by many of the people you see on the screen.

Yet by age 15, still troubled by the poverty plaguing her family, Louisa vowed that she "will do something by and by. Don't care what, teach, sew, act, write, anything to help the family; and I'll be rich and famous and happy before I die, see if I won't!"

Confronting a society that offered little opportunity to women seeking employment, Louisa had to

stay persistent: "... I will make a battering-ram of my head and make my way through this rough and tumble world." Whether as a teacher, seamstress, governess, or household servant, for many years Louisa did any work she could find while her mother took on social work among the Irish immigrants, one of the first social workers in Boston. Due to all of these pressures, writing became a creative and emotional outlet for Louisa.

Her career as an author began with poetry and short stories that appeared in popular magazines. She first became a published writer at 19, when a women's magazine printed one of her poems. using a pen name—Flora Fairfield—rather than her real name.

In 1854, when she was 22, her first book, *Flower Fables*, was published under her real name. This book had been written for Ellen Emerson, whose father she greatly admired. Flower fables were tales of fairies and woodland creatures with morals on how one should be kind, patient and gentle. Each story has a title such as the Frost king or Eva's visit to fairyland.

In 1855 Louisa wrote in her journal

My book came out; and people began to think
that topsy-turvy Louisa would amount to
something after all ...

Over the next few years more literary influences came in as she read Shakespeare, Milton, Goeth, Charlotte Bronte, and George Sand.

Her first novel, "The Rival Painters, A Tale of Rome" earned \$5. It tells the tale of Guido who falls in love with Madeline. She must choose between him, a poor painter of beauty, or a wealthy count. She chooses beauty.

Louisa then wrote another essay, "How I Went Out to Service." Publisher James T. Fields rejected this piece and advised her: "Stick to your teaching, Miss Alcott. You can't write." Disheartened but determined, Louisa continued to write, gradually learning how to produce what would sell.

Victorian audiences were growing tired of religious texts. They wanted to be entertained with stories they could relate to or escape in.

In the mid-1860s, Louisa wrote passionate, fiery novels and sensational stories under the name A. M. Barnard. Among these are *Behind a Mask*, *A Long Fatal Love Chase* and *Pauline's Passion and Punishment*. Her protagonists for these books are strong and smart, yet often use manipulation to gain power and rise through the ranks at any cost.

Louisa also wrote about cross-dressers, spies, revenge, and drugs. These sensational, melodramatic works are strikingly different than the more wholesomeness captured in *Little Women*, and she didn't advertise her former writing as her own after *Little Women* became popular.

Here's an example from *Pauline's passion and punishment*. Pauline knows she may harm others in her pursuit of revenge, but carries out her actions regardless.

To and fro, like a wild creature in its cage, paced that handsome woman, with bent head, locked hands, and restless steps. Some mental storm, swift and sudden as a tempest of the tropics, had swept over her and left its marks behind.

Pauline, for the first time, owned the peril of the task she had set herself, saw the dangerous power she possessed, and felt the buried passion faintly moving in its grave. with feminine skill she stripped the glove from the hand he had touched and dropped it disdainfully as if unworthy of its place.

In these early years, Louisa also "got religion," as she later put it. Running in the Concord woods early one fall morning, she stopped to see the sunshine over the meadows. "A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there," she wrote in her journal, "with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of

nearness all my life."

Louisa later discovered Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker who offered her practical as well as spiritual support. In 1881 Louisa even wrote a preface to a new edition of the Prayers of Theodore Parker.

Louisa May Alcott's biographer, Ednah Cheney, writes the following about Louisa's religion:

"Louisa Alcott's was a truly religious soul; she always lived in the consciousness of a Higher Power sustaining and blessing her, whose presence was revealed to her through Nature, through the inspired words of great thinkers and the deep experiences of her own heart. . . . But for outward forms and rites of religion she cared little; her home was sacred to her, and she found her best life there. She loved Theodore Parker, and found great strength and help from his preaching."

Alcott also liked to hear Unitarian Cyrus Bartol preach and enjoyed the company of Unitarian John Turner Sargent and his Radical Club, but despite so much Unitarian influence in her life, she never became a member of any particular congregation.

We're now up to when the Civil War broke out and Louisa was eager to do her part. "I became an Abolitionist at an early age," she wrote, "and my greatest pride is in the fact that I lived to know the brave men and women who did so much for the cause, and that I had a very small share in the war."

Alcott's "small share" was a month's service during the winter of 1862-63 as a nurse at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown, Virginia. However typhoid pneumonia forced her home. Her health was permanently damaged by the fever and by the mercury doctors prescribed.

After a gradual recovery she was able to write "Hospital Sketches," published in 1863. a fictionalized account of her experiences as a wartime nurse.

Here's an excerpt:

out of several stretchers, each with its legless, armless, or desperately wounded occupant, entering my ward, admonished me that I was there to work, not to wonder or weep; so I corked up my feelings, and returned to the path of duty, which was rather "a hard road to travel" just then. round the great stove was gathered the dreariest group I ever saw—ragged, gaunt and pale, with bloody bandages untouched since put on days before; many bundled up in blankets, coats being lost or useless; and all wearing that disheartened look which proclaimed defeat.

The war's end marked the beginning of a new phase in Louisa's career. She accepted the editorship of a children's magazine, Merry's Museum, and became its major contributor.

By this time in her life Louisa had established herself as a serious author so we can properly analyze her work. We find several themes: self-reliance, duty, charity, self-sacrifice and patience. Revenge was often in her thrillers, as well as morality, choosing good over evil, beauty over money. We also see the theme of power. The power of choice, to be a well behaved, good person who worked to better society, the power that one could make a living on her own, especially through the character of Jo March in Little Women.

Louisa's writing can also be characterized as either Transcendental ideas, children's lit, sensational fiction and/or realism, a style extending from the end of the Civil War to the turn of the century. Realism focused on the moral dilemmas and anxieties of the times. This often involved Social reform, anti slavery, suffrage, women's rights, education, and the rights of Native Americans.

In "my contraband" Louisa addresses the evils of slavery while many of her other works often deal with the plight and issues women faced in mid century 1800s America. In her novel, *Work*, Louisa criticizes the gender restricted occupations open to women, while championing for them to make

their own way through the world.

Work opens with Christie declaring her independence:

"AUNT BETSEY, there's going to be a new Declaration of Independence. . . , I'm going to take care of myself, and not be a burden any longer. Uncle wishes me out of the way; thinks I ought to go, and, sooner or later, will tell me so. I don't intend to wait for that, but, like the people in fairy tales, travel away into the world and seek my fortune. I know I can find it."

And, for Louisa she started her own declaration of independence. Publisher Thomas Niles asked Louisa to write a book for girls, in mid-July of 1868 she finished Part 1 of *Little Women* for fall publication. At the age of 35, the 492 pages of *Little Women* were dashed off in less than three months at the desk her father built for her in Orchard House. The novel is largely based on the coming of age stories of Louisa and her sisters, with many of the domestic experiences inspired by events that actually took place at Orchard House.

The book, in which the four girls all have unique identities, set a mark for female individualism in the 1860s. The women were at the centre of the book and were fully formed characters who grappled with their own choices, most notably the main character: "Jo March," - a free-thinking, independent, flawed person rather than the idealized stereotype prevalent in children's fiction.

Virtually overnight, *Little Women* was a phenomenal success.

In 1869 Alcott happily wrote in her journal: "Paid up all the debts...thank the Lord!" She followed *Little Women's* success: *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870); *Aunt Jo's Scrap Bag*. (1872-82); *Little Men* (1871); *Rose in Bloom* (1876); and *Jo's Boys* (1886).

So famous had she become that her fans began to visit her: One month, Louisa had a hundred strangers knocking on the door of Orchard House. Because she didn't like the attention, she sometimes pretended to be a servant, hoping to trick fans into leaving her alone.

You can visit the home she wrote *Little Women* in, at 399 Lexington Road in Concord.

There have been no major changes to the house so many modern-day visitors to comment that, "A visit to Orchard House is like a walk through the book!"

After the success of *Little Women*, Louisa wanted to do more serious fiction, but children's books flowed from her pen for the rest of her life because their sales supported her family. "Twenty years ago," she wrote in her journal in 1872, "I resolved to make the family independent if I could. At forty that is done. Debts all paid, and we have enough to be comfortable. It has cost me my health, perhaps; but as I still live, there is more for me to do, I suppose."

While her surviving sisters married, Louisa remained single throughout her life. She explained her "spinsterhood" in an interview "I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul put into a woman's body ... because I have not fallen in love, never once the least bit with any man."

In her later years Alcott continued to give her energy to social reforms, women's rights and temperance. She attended the Women's Congress of 1875 in Syracuse, New York, and contributed to Lucy Stone's *Woman's Journal* and went door-to-door in Massachusetts to encourage women to vote.

"I like to help women help themselves, as that is, in my opinion, the best way to settle the woman question. Whatever we can do and do well we have a right to, and I don't think any one will deny us. "I Was the first woman to register my name as a voter. Drove about and drummed up women to my suffrage meeting. So hard to move people out of the old ruts."

Yes, In 1879, Louisa registered to vote in a local election, becoming the first woman in Concord to do so. Although met with resistance, she cast ballots in a 1880 town meeting with 19 other

women.

Except for a European tour in 1870 and a few trips to New York, Louisa spent the last two decades of her life in Boston and Concord, caring for parents.

Louisa suffered chronic health problems herself in her last years, including vertigo. She attributed her illness to mercury poisoning from medicine she had received during the Civil War. Recent analysis suggests that her chronic health problems may have been associated with lupus.

"Why can't people use their brains without breaking down?" she once asked, "yet the girl of 15 found herself a woman of 50 with her dream realized, her duty done, her reward far greater than she deserved."

On March 1, 1888, Louisa visited her father for the last time. "I am going up," he said. "Come with me." Bronson Alcott died on March 4, and Louisa May Alcott on March 6 of a stroke at age 55 in Boston. She is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, near Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau, on a hillside now known as "Authors' Ridge".

Louisa May Alcott, famed author, fighter for rights, free thinker, wrote far more than children's stories, inspired girls and women to be independent and chase their dreams despite all the obstacles.

In *Little Women*, Louisa, through her character Jo, observed that "I've got the key to my castle in the air, but whether I can unlock the door remains to be seen." I think we've seen that she unlocked many closed doors for future generations to walk through.