

## About This Volume

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Anne K. Phillips and Gregory Eiselein

In imagining and assembling *Critical Insights: Louisa May Alcott*, the editors have put students' interests first and foremost. The introductory essay, "On Louisa May Alcott," is inspired by actual questions asked by real students about Alcott and her works. The resources that conclude the volume also have been prepared with students in mind, including a chronology of her life, a list of her published works, and a forty-item bibliography that emphasizes the breadth of her work and the recent scholarly interest it is generating—as evidenced by the high number of entries published after 2000. As Beverly Lyon Clark has shown in connection with just one of Alcott's works, "scholarly respect for Alcott's work is accelerating: half of the pieces on *Little Women* currently indexed in the MLA online bibliography were published after 2000, twice the rate for the previous quarter century" (50).

Throughout the volume, readers will find top-notch scholarship on an impressive range of Alcott's works. Contributors include Alcott's Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer John Matteson, among several other leading figures in Alcott studies. The volume also benefits from the contributions of a number of up-and-coming Alcott scholars. All of the essays in this volume were crafted to be accessible, thought-provoking, and enjoyable. They should inspire readers to recognize the achievements of these critics, but also to draw on their concepts and approaches in creating original, additional scholarship. These essays should illuminate not only the specific Alcott texts addressed here but also her entire body of work.

A number of the essays in this volume position Alcott and her work in the context of nineteenth-century American literature. In "Lost in the Vortex: The Problem of Genius in the Fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott," Christopher Fahy focuses on how Hawthorne's and Alcott's ideas and works overlap, particularly regarding the concept of genius. Fahy argues that Hawthorne and

Alcott both “tried to justify the pursuit of authorship and make it socially acceptable through strategies such as the domestication of literature, the use of an aestheticized notion of the fortunate fall, and (for Alcott), the adoption of Margaret Fuller’s concept of celibate apprenticeship.”

Katie Kornacki focuses in “‘A Loving League of Sisters’: The Legacy of Margaret Fuller’s Boston Conversations in Alcott’s *Work*” on the ways that protagonist Christie Devon and her associates embody the ideals of education, self-reliance, vocation, and sorority emphasized by Margaret Fuller in the Conversations series that she conducted in Boston and at Sing-Sing prison. These characters also bear “close resemblance to the real-life work of a group of women who had collaborated with and known Fuller, through her Conversations or otherwise, and who, in 1868, had formed the New England Woman’s Club, of which Alcott herself had been an early member.”

Monika Elbert positions Alcott’s work within the context of authors from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Charlotte Brontë to Harriet Spofford and others whose works exemplify the Gothic. In “Divas, Drugs, and Desire on Alcott’s Gothic Stage,” Elbert acknowledges that “‘bad’ girls attracted [Alcott], whether they were governesses, adulteresses, or actresses.” Elbert assesses the strategies of these heroines in thrillers that Alcott published from the late 1850s through the 1870s, with particular attention to relevant theatrical settings. Ultimately, Elbert concludes, the Gothic genre offers Alcott’s female characters significant opportunities for liberation and emancipation.

Kristen B. Proehl argues in “Poverty and Social Critique in Postbellum America: *Little Women* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” that both Twain and Alcott depict scenes of poverty “in order to meditate upon cultural memory of the Civil War and examine the social issues of the Reconstruction era.” Twain, according to Proehl, “implies that poverty contributes to other social problems, such as racism, illiteracy, and mob violence. By contrast, Alcott focuses on poverty itself as a social problem and insists that the poor themselves are in need of sympathy.” Proehl’s analysis shows us that Alcott

sees a “parallel relationship between poverty and other forms of oppression, such as disability, sexism, and racial oppression.”

No consideration of Alcott in the context of literary peers (and competitors?) would be complete without some attention to the work of Henry James. Although Henry was younger than Louisa and initially had less experience as a writer, he never let that inexperience constrain him from critiquing her work. In “American Girls and American Literature: Louisa May Alcott ‘Talks Back’ to Henry James,” Christine Doyle traces the way that both authors famously focused on American girls in European as well as American settings, particularly in *Little Women* (1868–69) and *Daisy Miller* (1878). Doyle contends that “Alcott and James had radically different views of American womanhood—and, indeed, of American literature—and can be seen as being in dialogue with one another on both of those subjects for the last two decades of Alcott’s life.” Doyle demonstrates that Alcott continued throughout the final decade of her life to respond to and challenge James’ theories about the art and purpose of literature.

A pair of essays in this collection examine the need for complex critical approaches to Alcott and her original critical and cultural contexts. In “Feminist Alcott?,” Katherine Adams begins with her students’ conversations about Alcott’s support for women’s rights. Yet rather than judging her by our own twenty-first-century understandings of feminism, Adams shows us how Alcott’s novel *Work* (1873) encourages a kind of self-reflection about our feminist efforts that allows us to see that we are never able completely to escape the limitations of our own history and culture. Like *Work*’s protagonist Christie Devon, we are “not free *from* [our] culture,” but we are “free *to* act meaningfully within it.”

In “Looking for Louisa: Authors, Audiences, and Literatures in Alcott’s Critical Reception,” Amy M. Thomas provides us with another way of appreciating Alcott’s complexity and the significance of her work within its original historical and critical context. Thomas emphasizes that Alcott was a professional writer who worked in a wide variety of genres. Additionally, attitudes about the kinds of texts she produced have been in flux for decades,

resulting in her fluid status within the American literary canon. The most significant event in Alcott's reception, as Thomas explains, is the rediscovery and republication of Alcott's "thrillers" in the 1970s, which has prompted re-examination of all of her writings. "Which Alcott is 'real'?" Thomas asks, adding, "This is an exciting time to answer these questions because of the varied critical perspectives open to scholars and the increasing accessibility to all of Alcott's publications."

A third theme that runs throughout a number of the essays in this volume considers the American Civil War and its impact on Alcott and her career. In the volume's biographical essay, "'Happy Before I Die': The Strife and Success of Louisa May Alcott," which examines both the challenges that Alcott faced and the literary successes shaped by those challenges, Amy Harris-Aber touches on Alcott's service as a nurse during the war. Although her tour of duty was limited because she contracted typhoid fever after only a few weeks of nursing work, her experiences during the war led to significant and surprisingly immediate literary achievements.

John Matteson's essay, "'When Rude Hands Shake the Hive': Louisa May Alcott and the Transformation of America," aligns Alcott's life with America's history, suggesting that the two grew up together: "Just around the time when, as a young adult, Alcott felt as if her world were starting to fall apart, the country almost fell apart as well—and Alcott nearly sacrificed her life to keep it together." Like Harris-Aber, Matteson finds Alcott's war experience essential: "Though it nearly killed her, Alcott's nursing service also marked a decisive turning point in her career as a writer . . . [and] taught her to find excellent material for her writing within her lived experience."

Two additional essays attend to Alcott's war experience and the way that she represented that experience in subsequent writings. Emily Waples argues in "Alcott and the Work of Nursing" that on the one hand, nursing in the Civil War era was perceived to be "an exercise in feminine sentiment and sympathy." On the other hand, it was "prosaic and drudging labor: an extension of the often-taxing domestic duties typically assigned to nineteenth-century women." Unlike male writers such as Walt Whitman who depicted the work

of caring for the injured and dying, Alcott “critiques the gendered associations of ‘work’ in the nineteenth century, while simultaneously exposing women’s invisible labor in the domestic sphere.”

A. Waller Hastings also takes on the Civil War as setting in *Little Women* in “Louisa’s Civil War.” While critics have generally suggested that the war is merely the backdrop to the March sisters’ lives, Hastings wonders, “Is it possible that the presence of the Civil War in this novel in fact includes biography in a broader sense?” He concludes that it plays a far more prominent role, as evidenced by Alcott’s infusion of war and battle references throughout the novel. Further, Hastings traces the diverse ways that Alcott processed and perpetuated in *Little Women* the tone and themes she included in earlier, more explicitly war-focused writings such as *Hospital Sketches* (1863).

A trio of essays in this volume addresses Alcott’s lesser-studied novels for younger readers. In “Polly, Pygmalion, and the (Im)practicalities of an Independent Womanhood,” Marilyn Bloss Koester turns to *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1869), the novel Alcott published immediately after *Little Women*. Koester focuses on a single but significant chapter, “The Sunny Side,” where musician and teacher Polly Milton introduces her socialite friend Fanny Shaw to friends who are, respectively, a sculptor, an engraver, and a writer. Koester characterizes this episode as encapsulating a “world of subversive and creative femininity,” and she argues that Alcott is promoting progressive, alternative avenues for women, even though the novel as a whole might seem to espouse more conservative values. Assessing the significance of this vignette, Koester aligns Alcott’s depiction of this female artistic community with the increasing visibility of female artists during the later decades of the nineteenth century.

Antoinette M. Tadolini responds to critics’ assessments of Alcott’s first March sequel in “Violence and Confinement in *Little Men*.” Acknowledging the numerous depictions of violence, animal cruelty, destruction, and incarceration at the private school founded by Jo and her husband, Tadolini argues that “chaos and violence do exist, but they can be controlled and are survivable. Moreover,

negotiating the violence of childhood, characters are better prepared to face the challenges offered by the world beyond the gates of Plumfield.” Drawing on the theories of Bruno Bettelheim and Neil Gaiman, Tadolini suggests that the hardships encountered by Alcott’s child characters actually prepare them to cope more effectively with the lives they will lead beyond Plumfield’s borders.

Additionally, in “A Faith Truly Lived: Alcott’s Use of Biblical Allusion in *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom*,” Mo Li enters into the fray perpetuated by critics, students, and sometimes outraged Christian bloggers about Alcott’s spirituality and its manifestations in her fiction. Li shows that Alcott has infused these two novels with numerous allusions to the Bible. The allusions in child-friendly *Eight Cousins* tend to be whimsical, but in the sequel, *Rose in Bloom*, intended for young adults, they have a more serious tenor. This essay contextualizes Alcott’s use of the Bible within larger cultural trends, concluding that her approach is consistent with those trends but also distinctly unorthodox: “When incorporating the Bible in both texts, Alcott focuses less on its divine truth than on how it might guide readers’ earthly lives.”

In the volume’s concluding essay, Gregory Eiselein places Alcott in dialogue with an equally unorthodox artist from a much later era, Patti Smith. Drawing from Smith’s National Book Award-winning memoir *Just Kids* (2010) in addition to her legendary album *Horses* (1975) and other works, Eiselein demonstrates that Alcott’s writings profoundly impacted Smith’s world view. Further, consideration of Smith’s life and works provides new perspective on Alcott’s conceptions of gender, sexuality, and creativity. Both demonstrated “an intense and unabashed amateur energy” and a dedication to a passionate creative process. Considering these vanguard figures together, Eiselein builds a convincing, meaningful argument for Alcott’s status as a significant influence on the “godmother of punk” and as a voice who remains relevant to twenty-first century audiences.

The essays collected here address a range of works by Louisa May Alcott. Some focus on indisputably famous books but offer fresh insights about them. Conversely, others offer fresh and

tantalizing perspectives on lesser-known aspects of Alcott's career. Whatever readers' familiarity with Alcott's life and works, the essays commissioned for this volume offer diverse and original approaches to literary study, breadth and depth of literary and cultural history, and an invitation to take part in the ongoing critical conversation. The editors and contributors look forward to seeing how future generations of literary scholars build on the scholarship that comprises *Critical Insights: Louisa May Alcott*.

### **Works Cited**

Clark, Beverly Lyon. "The Critical Reception of *Little Women*." *Critical Insights: Little Women*. Ed. Gregory Eiselein and Anne K. Phillips. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2015. 41–53.

# “When Rude Hands Shake the Hive”: Louisa May Alcott and the Transformation of America

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John Matteson

The years that formed Louisa May Alcott also transformed her country. It grew as she grew. Just around the time when, as a young adult, Alcott felt as if her world were starting to fall apart, the country almost fell apart as well—and Alcott nearly sacrificed her life to help keep it together. Alcott learned much from her own extraordinary trials, and when, scarred and shattered, America struggled to pull itself back together, she was ready to supply a vision of how people could find strength in themselves and their families and discover ways to move forward.

When Louisa May Alcott was born, the American Union contained only twenty-four states, only two of which, Louisiana and Missouri, were wholly or partly west of the Mississippi River. The land that was later to comprise Texas, California, and a number of other states belonged to Mexico. The Pacific Northwest was claimed by Great Britain. The first regular passenger rail service in the United States had begun just two years earlier. And slavery was such an accepted part of the structure of wealth and power that every American president thus far had either owned slaves or had the last name of Adams. By the time Alcott published the first part of *Little Women* in 1868, the landscape of her nation had dramatically changed. Secession had broken the Union in two, and the Civil War had restored it. Not only had slavery been abolished, but the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution had extended the rights of citizenship to all native-born persons, regardless of color. The republic spanned the continent, and the following year would see the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. During Alcott’s first thirty-six years, the country transformed itself. And, at the end of that period, Alcott wrote a book that helped to transform American literature.

Understanding Alcott and comprehending American life in the nineteenth century can go hand in hand, but the relation between the two subjects should be approached with some caution. Thanks to the enduring popularity of *Little Women*, the March family, whom Alcott brought to life in that novel, may still be the best-known family, real or fictitious, of nineteenth-century America. Because the Marches are so well known, one may feel tempted to presume that they—as well as the real-life Alcotts who inspired them—were a more or less typical family for their period. But the Alcotts were almost as far from typicality as one can imagine. Few girls in Louisa May Alcott's time grew up with great writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne as family friends, but Louisa did. 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.

Because the Alcotts were so deeply engaged in all the major issues of their times, it is impossible to get to know them without learning a great deal about the nation in which they lived. To know Louisa May Alcott is also to understand the America that she knew so well. A place of both tremendous problems and amazing possibilities, it resembled Alcott herself.

When Alcott was born in 1832, America was changing its ideas about children and education, and her father was soon to be at the center of the transformation. In earlier generations, people regarded children as miniature adults. It seldom occurred to them that a child's mind was different from that of an adult, or that it needed to undergo various stages of development before it reached maturity. Many people also believed as a matter of religious faith that children were born wicked and required harsh discipline to be shaped into

proper citizens. Schools, therefore, tended to be unpleasant and even frightening places. Children sat on uncomfortable benches. They were expected to learn their lessons by heart, and questions and interpretations were discouraged. Furthermore, it was thought that a schoolmaster who did not beat his pupils for misbehavior or poor performance could not possibly be a good teacher. Bronson Alcott, himself a schoolteacher, openly rejected all of these notions. In 1834, when Louisa was a toddler, Bronson opened a school in Boston called the Temple School, so named because it occupied an upper floor in a Masonic temple. In place of stiff benches, Bronson brought in comfortable seats, and he decorated the room with maps, pictures, and busts of great thinkers. He taught, not through forced memorization, but by asking questions. He thought that children were innately good and that the true meaning of education was its literal one: the word comes from a Latin verb, *educare*, which means to draw out. Bronson Alcott wanted to bring the best nature of a pupil to the surface and to instill strong ethics as well as knowledge. He would not punish a student until he and the child agreed that punishment was reasonable. Once, when a pair of boys misbehaved, he told them that it was worse to inflict harm than to receive it and demanded that they strike *him*. Horrified, the boys dissolved into tears and, it is said, never misbehaved again (Peabody 24).

Bronson Alcott's progressive theories of teaching emerged indirectly from the theories of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who also believed that people were naturally good but were corrupted by society. Rousseau had observed, "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man" (37). But Bronson did Rousseau one better. He believed that when children were born, they were not merely good; they were very nearly divine. Deciding to raise his three eldest daughters in a way that would preserve that divinity, he tried to create the perfect environment for their nurture and kept detailed notebooks on their mental and moral development. Before he finally gave up his project, he had compiled more than 1,500 handwritten pages. He was, in a sense, America's first child psychologist, and he treated his observation of his daughters like a science of the soul.

## Chronology of Louisa May Alcott's Life\_\_\_\_\_

**1830** Abigail May and Amos Bronson Alcott marry in Boston.

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**1831** Anna Bronson Alcott, Abigail and Bronson's first daughter, is born.

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**1832** Louisa May Alcott, second daughter of Abigail and Bronson Alcott, is born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, on November 29.

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**1835** Third daughter, Elizabeth Sewall Alcott, is born. Bronson meets Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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**1840** Alcotts move to Concord. Fourth daughter, Abigail May Alcott, is born.

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**1843** Alcotts move to a utopian community known as Fruitlands. Louisa starts a journal and begins writing poems.

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**1844** Alcotts leave Fruitlands in January. By year's end, they return to Concord.

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**1845** With financial help from Emerson, Abigail purchases a house in Concord. Bronson names it "Hillside."

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**1846** Louisa gets her own room at Hillside, and she reads and writes often. Alcott girls produce their own dramatic performances in the barn.

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**1847** Encouraged by Emerson, Louisa begins reading Goethe, Carlyle, and Shakespeare.

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**1849** Alcott sisters begin to produce a family newspaper called *The Olive Leaf*.

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## Works by Louisa May Alcott

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### Selected Books

*Hospital Sketches* (1863)

*Moods* (1864. Rev. ed. 1882)

*Little Women, or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy* (1868–69)

*An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870)

*Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys* (1871)

*Work: A Story of Experience* (1873)

*Eight Cousins; or, The Aunt-Hill* (1875)

*Rose in Bloom: A Sequel to "Eight Cousins"* (1876)

*A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877)

*Under the Lilacs* (1878)

*Jack and Jill: A Village Story* (1880)

*Jo's Boys, and How They Turned Out: A Sequel to "Little Men"* (1886)

*A Long Fatal Love Chase* (1995)

*The Inheritance* (1997)

### Selected Collections

*Flower Fables* (1854)

*On Picket Duty, and Other Tales* (1864)

*Morning-Glories, and Other Stories* (1868)

*My Boys: Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* (1872)

*Shawl-Straps: Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* (1872)

*Cupid and Chow-Chow: Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* (1874)

*Silver Pitchers: And Independence, A Centennial Love Story* (1876)

*My Girls: Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* (1878)

*Jimmy's Cruise in the Pinafore: Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* (1879)

*An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving: Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* (1882)

*Proverb Stories* (1882, later retitled *Kitty's Class Day*)

*Spinning-Wheel Stories* (1884)