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Shaping an "Idea without hands": Bronson Alcott's educational theory brought to life in Little Women

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Shaping an “Idea without hands”: Bronson Alcott’s educational theory brought to life in *Little Women* 

by 

Jennifer Doke Kerns 

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of 

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABSTRACT</th>
<th>iv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. TEACHER, REFORMER, FATHER</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1. A Man of Change in a Changing Nation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Biographical Writings</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Alcott’s Educational Theory and the History of Progressive Education</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. THE FORMATION OF AN IDEA: ALCOTT’S EARLY LIFE AND INFLUENCES</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. Early Years</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. The Birth of a Philosophy</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4. ALCOTT’S EDUCATIONAL THEORY: THE TRANSCENDENTAL CLASSROOM</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1. Respect for each Child</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2. Comfort</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3. Revolutionary Methods</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4. Education as a Means of Spiritual Growth and Character Development</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5. ALCOTT THE TEACHER: A CAREER OF CONTROVERSY</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1. The Temple School</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 6. THE FATHER OF LITTLE WOMEN: AN UNINTENDED LEGACY

6.1. Bronson Alcott, Father and Teacher 49
6.2. Louisa and Little Women 51
6.3. Bronson Alcott’s Educational Theory as Portrayed by Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women 55
   6.3.1. Respect for the Child 57
   6.3.2. School as a Place of Comfort, Resembling Home 58
   6.3.3. Revolutionary Methods 60
   6.3.4. Education as a Means of Improving Moral Character 62
6.4 The Daughter’s Success Where the Father Had Failed 63

CHAPTER 7. ALCOTT’S PLACE IN THE MODERN CLASSROOM 65
7.1. Bronson Alcott: A Reformer for Yesterday and Today 65

BIBLIOGRAPHY 69

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 74
Bronson Alcott, an early American progressive education reformer and Transcendentalist philosopher, was a troubled genius who was far ahead of his time. His most controversial educational methods, such as encouraging self-reflection in children, abandoning corporal punishment, and using the Socratic method to inspire insightful conversation in the classroom, have since been accepted in modern education as sound pedagogical practice. But Alcott was a flawed man who often became far too emotionally invested in his own ideologies, unable to accept when other learned individuals came to conclusions that did not directly agree with his own. Often, his unchecked idealism became an obstacle that prevented the success of his own endeavors in education reform. This project seeks to examine Alcott’s influences and then identify the basic principles of his educational theory. Using the failure of Alcott’s Boston Temple School as an example, it will show that Alcott was unable to anticipate or appropriately respond to the criticism of his contemporaries. This lack of political finesse would leave Alcott exposed to his critics and their barbs and eventually lead to the end of this career as an educational reformer. His educational experiments would instead have to be focused on his own four daughters. One of those daughters, Louisa May Alcott, would grow up to be one of the most famous novelists in nineteenth century American letters. Despite Bronson Alcott’s lifetime of work spent crafting and expressing his ideas to whoever would listen, it would be Louisa’s novel *Little Women* that would prove the most effective—and by far, the most accepted—voice for Alcott’s pedagogical theories.
1.1. A Man of Change in a Changing Nation

In the nineteenth century, the issue of slavery almost ended an experiment in democracy called the United States. By the mid 1850s, the abolitionist movement was gaining momentum in many of the northern cities of the troubled country. The hearts and souls of the abolitionists were stirred by the plight of those still held in slavery; often just as compelling, though, were the stories of the inhumane treatment endured by those slaves who had fought their way to freedom in the North, only to be captured, beaten, and sent back to the region and the inhumane condition of the slave which they had risked their lives to escape. Many of America’s greatest minds of the time took note of these events, decrying the barbarism of the system in issues related to slavery. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the father of Transcendentalist thought in the United States, was moved to great anger upon reading the details of the Fugitive Slave Act, writing that night in his journal: “I will not obey it, by God!” (Shepard, Pedlar’s 272). Emerson would go on to write and speak passionately against slavery. But writing and speaking would only go so far; while the pen had led the battle in the abolitionist movement, the actions of men needed to follow this lead.

In May of 1854, Concord, Massachusetts found itself immersed in this moral question. A fugitive slave named Anthony Burns had been arrested and awaited trial. Just a few short years before, another fugitive in much the same situation was summarily tried and convicted in Concord’s courts and then sent back to Boston and back into
slavery (Matteson 216). In an attempt to keep Burns from sharing this other man’s fate, Concord’s antislavery Vigilance Committee took hurried action.

The decision was simple enough: Burns would have to be freed. All involved felt quite certain that Burns would lose this battle in court, so the only way to free him would be to circumvent the law (Matteson 216). Burns would have to be freed by force. The group decided that they would incite a riot and storm the courthouse where Burns was being held.

It was chaos. The group lacked organization and their attack failed utterly. Windows were smashed and some of the protesters made their way as far as the antechamber of the courthouse where there was a scuffle (Matteson 218). Someone drew a knife and one of the men defending the courthouse was fatally stabbed. As the group fell into disarray, they were easily pushed back into the streets, and armed guards created an impenetrable perimeter around the building to hold the rioting protesters at bay (Matteson 218).

Amos Bronson Alcott, a well-known Concord resident and a member of the Vigilance Committee, arrived just as the group was pushed out of the courthouse. When he learned about the death of the guard, Alcott would later recall, he was disheartened. In his opinion, “it was Burns’s friends who needed a martyr, not his captors” (Matteson 218). At this realization, Alcott steeled his resolve, straightened his shoulders, and began to walk towards the steps of the courthouse. Witnesses heard gunshots and the guards turned their eyes on Alcott, but he seemed oblivious to the danger. The defenders of the courthouse were so taken aback by his advance that they did not even respond. Alcott strolled right up the steps, through the battered doors, and made his way into the majestic
vaulted entryway of the Concord courthouse, completely ready to give his life for this idea of equality that he held so dear. Reaching the doors, he simply inquired, “Why are we not within?” (McCuskey 3).

Alcott wasn’t martyred that day. In fact, his heroic advance did nothing to win the freedom of the fugitive slave. Though his intention had been to force his way into the heart of the building to confront Burns’s captors, Alcott barely made it into courthouse at all. He was forced to leave the without the dramatic, climactic scene he had envisioned when he climbed those steps. Burns was later found guilty and sent back into slavery.

While this episode did little for Burns, it does much for those of us trying to understand the life of A. Bronson Alcott. This action—which was at the same time foolhardy and brave, heroic and futile—is a wonderful example of the contradictory nature of Alcott’s life and work. So often he stretched his hand out toward something exceptional, something perfect, but he could seldom reach it. Alcott biographer John Matteson asserts: “The moment inside the courthouse might have served as an emblem of much of Bronson Alcott’s career: admirably brave, thoroughly right-minded, and ultimately ineffectual in achieving his intentions” (218). But this view of the event is too narrow. It is likely that Alcott knew that the power in this action did not lie in what he could accomplish in the courthouse that night. Instead, the great power in this action was in what it would teach others. It would teach them to stand up for what was right, to be driven by morals even at the peril of one’s own life or reputation. This embodied the educational philosophy of A. Bronson Alcott, the extraordinary Transcendentalist teacher and thinker.
Alcott seemed to live by the motto of the Chesire Pestalozzian School: “Education’s All” (McCuskey 21). He felt that a soul’s best chance at developing moral character dwelt in education alone. “It was not the minister, but the schoolmaster, who was responsible for the development of character” (McCuskey 23). And through education, through the free exchange of ideas and the development of rational thought, humans have their best chance of bettering themselves. To him, education was a moral act of true equality, based on basic ideals that, while we now take them for granted, were at the time revolutionary: “One was that ‘men are by nature, equal’; and the other that men—or at least children—are also basically good” (McCuskey 22). To Alcott, education was the protector of democracy and a human being’s best chance of achieving self-actualization.

The recognition of the importance of education was not a new idea, even when Alcott embraced it the nineteenth century. Although countless thinkers have asserted these beliefs, few people have devoted so much of their lives to putting them into action. Alcott did just that, often to the detriment of his own fame and reputation. Alcott developed his own educational philosophy that incorporated revolutionary pedagogical methods, a true belief in the goodness and potential of all people and confidence that human nature was innately good.

Though there have been educational reformers who have recognized Alcott’s innovative ideas and insights into philosophy and education, far more still view Alcott with a chuckle, seeing him as a lucky observer who only attempted to imitate the
geniuses into whose midst he just happened to have fallen. But this cynical view of Alcott as an intellectual hanger-on whose biggest claim to fame was that he would eventually be known as the father of *Little Women* is inaccurate. Further examination of Alcott’s life and work reveals a man whose place in the American Renaissance cannot be so easily discarded. “Bronson Alcott held a unique position among the men whose basic beliefs caused them to be called Transcendentalists, for he was the ‘doer’ of the group” (McCuskey 2). This distinction provides an interesting contrast between Alcott and his contemporaries; rather than simply discussing and arguing his ideas, Alcott lived his life putting his ideas into action.

There has been much argument among historians of education as well as those who have studied the Transcendentalist movement regarding how best to characterize the value of Alcott’s intellectual contributions. What doomed Alcott’s effectiveness as a reformer was not an error in his ideas. Educators in the century that followed have instituted ideas much like his and have been celebrated as revolutionaries. So how do those of us who study Alcott’s work explain the deep suspicion, the scorn that many of his contemporaries felt for his work in educational reform? Some have argued that Alcott’s critics were too short-sighted to see his genius, while others feel Alcott was simply born a hundred years too early. But sometimes the fault lay a little closer to home. It was Bronson Alcott’s unchecked idealism, and sometimes his egotism, that would ultimately prove to nullify his message in the minds of critics. His inability to realistically address his own shortcomings and his unbending belief in his own genius tainted his ability to be an effective voice for his own ideas. His greatest strengths later
became his greatest weaknesses as his overzealous approach alienated him from the system that he sought improve. The pen would have to be taken up by another hand to effectively convey his ideas to a cynical and suspicious world.

The writing of his daughter Louisa May Alcott would provide the voice for his work that he had been unable to find himself. While many readers warmly embraced the ideas expressed in Louisa’s literary hit *Little Women*, few realized that what they were really embracing was the educational philosophy of A. Bronson Alcott.
2.1. Biographical Writings

A variety of biographies have been written about A. Bronson Alcott. Some of the most widely read and referenced biographies on Bronson Alcott and the Alcott family include, in order of publication: Dorothy McCuskey’s *Bronson Alcott: Teacher* (1940), Odell Shepard’s *Pedlar’s Progress: The Life of Bronson Alcott* (1968), and most recently, John Matteson’s award winning book, *Eden’s Outcasts* (2007). The attitudes of the authors toward Alcott as a subject, as well as the content on which each author chose to focus, vary greatly throughout these books.

McCuskey’s *Bronson Alcott, Teacher* might be the most exhaustive examination of his teaching styles and philosophies that is yet available. This volume, published in 1940, spends little time on the personal details of Alcott’s life, but instead devotes the vast majority of its pages to a thorough account of Alcott’s progress as an educator. The book begins by describing Alcott’s own education and discussing at length the possible influences on Alcott in terms of his educational theories, as well as his philosophical conclusions (McCuskey 8, 15-17). While she acknowledges a variety of Alcott’s influences, including Locke, Socrates, and Pestalozzi, McCuskey stresses the originality of Alcott’s ideas, seeming to argue against the view that Alcott’s transcendentalism was adopted after his admission into the ranks of American’s most prominent Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau (McCuskey 73).

From there McCuskey details Alcott’s growth as an educator, describing his start in small country schools, and eventually focusing on the Temple School in Boston,
Alcott’s most famous educational endeavor. Pulling widely from Alcott’s own *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* and his assistant Elizabeth Peabody’s *Record of a School*, McCuskey examines the pedagogical methods of Alcott, including his extraordinary commitment to character education. The account of the school’s eventual demise after the publication of *Record* and *Conversations* is an interesting examination of the culture of that time period; it also forces the reader to examine how modern society receives innovations in education.

McCuskey spends much of her book discussing how Alcott’s philosophy is mirrored in his educational practices, and she follows his career into his later days as the superintendent of Concord schools. Overall her treatment of Alcott is reverent; it is clear that McCuskey sees Alcott as a misunderstood innovator, and she asserts that modern educators have much to learn from his methods. However, there is only the occasional passing reference to the most famous Alcott, his daughter Louisa May. Although most of his biographers seem unwilling or unable to resist a lengthy examination of his daughter, for the most part McCuskey stays focused on the man rather than the child.

The biography by McCuskey is widely referenced and respected as an addition to the pool of research available on Alcott, but not all critics agreed with her conclusions. In his 1941 review of the work, Richard Peel sought not only to comment about McCuskey’s conclusions, but also to make a statement on his view of the educational system of his time. Peel asserts that most biographers of Bronson Alcott have fallen on extreme areas of the spectrum: they appear eager either to make Bronson out as a misunderstood saint or to vilify him as the personification of all that is wrong with progressive trends in education. The reviewer gives McCuskey credit for not falling into
these clichés, but he claims that she fails to shed any new light on Bronson’s significance in American education or in American “intellectual history” (Peel 165). Peel asserts, almost flippantly, that the renewed interest in Alcott’s ideas explain his Peel’s contemporaries’ renewed examination of progressive education (166-167).

Another compelling contribution to the body of literature on Bronson Alcott is Odell Shepard’s *Pedlar’s Progress* (1968). Though witty and irreverent at times, it is clear from Shepard’s tone that he has a soft place in his heart for Alcott. In addition to *Pedlar’s Progress*, Shepard also edited and released a collection entitled *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*. His work on Alcott has become essential when studying the life of the man.

Shepard examines the common paths in creating a biography, first looking deeply into the childhood of Alcott. This book goes further than others to emphasize the influence of Alcott’s childhood friend and cousin William Alcott, who would also become an educational pioneer (Shepard, *Pedlar’s* 77-79). Shepard devotes considerable time to Alcott’s youthful endeavor of peddling, a career that broadened Alcott’s view of the world, but also created the foundation of his life-long struggle to manage a dollar (Shepard, *Pedlar’s* 65). Shepard also gives much thought to the influence of William Russell, editor of the *American Journal of Education*. Russell was a staunch proponent of Alcott’s theories, many of which he helped Alcott publish in the *Journal* (Shepard, *Pedlar’s* 85).

Shepard strives to examine Alcott, his pedagogy, and his philosophy in a broad historical context, including issues related to slavery and the rights of women. He also situates Alcott and his ideas among some of the other more progressive movements of the
19th century. The story of Alcott House is a compelling one. This was an experimental school created in England by some progressives who had happened upon Alcott’s work and decided that this must be the best direction that education could take. One of the main proponents of this project was James Greaves, an Alcott supporter who dabbled in many new theories, including some that challenged the traditional structures of both society and family (Shepard, *Pedlar’s Progress* 329). Alcott’s tendency to be accepted by those with other controversial views was also apparent in his relationship with Charles Lane, his partner in the ill-fated Fruitlands communal living experiment. Lane espoused the dissolution of the traditional family unit, arguing that it only promoted human weakness and prejudice toward those unrelated. Shepard notes that Lane’s contempt for the traditional family may have come from his own experience: “Having made a miserable failure of his own first adventure in matrimony, Lane was at this time convinced that all such adventures should be discouraged” (Shepard, *Pedlar’s Progress* 346). Lane even requested that the closeness of the Alcott family was threatening to bring down Fruitlands; this was a laughable placement of blame considering how many other aspects of Fruitlands doomed it to failure. Stories like these leave the reader to wonder how Mrs. Alcott kept her patience with her husband and his groundbreaking friends throughout the years of their marriage.

Overall, Odell Shepard’s *Pedlar’s Progress* comes to much the same conclusion as that of McCuskey: A. Bronson Alcott was a misunderstood progressive who was too far ahead of his time to be appreciated by his own contemporaries. Still, Shepard seems more willing to point out—but quickly forgive—the flaws in the genius and the practice of this man.
The most recent addition to the biographical research on the Alcotts is John Matteson’s *Eden’s Outcasts*, the Pulitzer Prize winning 2007 biography that examines the lives of the Alcott family, focusing specifically on Bronson and Louisa May. The biography effectively places the Alcotts in an historical and social context, providing insight into the complexities and nuances of Concord, Massachusetts in its transcendental heyday.

As a source on Bronson Alcott, this book is invaluable. Matteson provides a thorough, if not skeptical, examination of his early years and influences before he attempted his often ill-fated endeavors in progressive education. While his educational theory is not examined in great detail, there is some discussion of previous thinkers who influenced Alcott’s pedagogical practices. The educational reformer and Zurich native Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was one of these (Matteson 26). The book examines his controversial Temple School in detail, first pointing out its brilliance before examining its shortcomings and its eventual fall into disgrace. Alcott himself was at the same time the school’s greatest asset and its greatest weakness. In the first of many times when Alcott’s often delusional idealism was the root of the failure of his grandest ideas, the pioneering teacher broached taboo issues with his students, asking them about the true nature of Jesus Christ and daring to answer questions about sex. The school was soon shut down. Matteson examines Alcott’s perseverance and continued dedication to his ideals of equality when in his next stint as a teacher he admitted a dark-skinned girl into his class. That school was forced to close when the rest of the students’ parents began to withdraw their children from Alcott’s supervision.
Matteson’s book looks at the early years of Alcott’s attempts to create his own revolutionary school, and then provides a detailed examination of the educational experiments that he conducted on his own four daughters as they grew. To do this, he relies heavily on the journals of the Alcotts, including those of Mrs. Abba Alcott and those of her young daughters. This intimate look into the lives of the Alcott family is compelling. According to Matteson, Alcott was far less than perfect as a parent and as a husband. The patience of his wife, Abba, must have been infinite. Time and time again Matteson recounts challenges in the life of the Alcotts—challenges often born of the unfettered idealism of this Transcendentalist husband—that would have tested the patience of the most faithful wife. The family seemed to be chronically in debt, Alcott’s early attempts at philosophical writing were often laughable in their pretentiousness, and his later attempt at communal living challenged the basic foundations of their family relationships. The conflict with Charles Lane, examined in detail in Odell Shepard’s Pedlar’s Progress, is examined even more thoroughly in Eden’s Outcasts. Alcott was eventually forced to make a choice: he could stay at Fruitlands and live out his ideals, but his family was leaving with or without him (Matteson 161).

The Alcotts’ experience at Fruitlands was just one of many episodes that Matteson carefully recounts throughout the course of the biography. In the second half of the biography, Matteson shifts his focus to Louisa, whose story of finding literary stardom is compelling. At the same time, we are allowed to see Alcott’s reactions to his daughter’s challenges and triumphs. The overall impression of Bronson Alcott is fluid over time. At the beginning, he seems like a cracked idealist whose little moments and insights of genius are overshadowed by the inability to temper his enthusiasm and
package it in a way that might have been more palatable to his contemporaries. Alcott seems to resign himself to the idea that his own role in this period of American Renaissance may simply be that of a biographer to his more famous friends, like Emerson and Thoreau, just a few of the Concord notables about whom Alcott later lectured and wrote profiles (295). But as time goes on he finds his place in his time. His ideas become more appreciated, and his idealism seems to have received a healthy dose of reality. Toward the end of his life, Bronson began publishing again, and many argue that these pieces are his most important contribution to Transcendentalist thought. Overall, Matteson’s biography treats Bronson Alcott as a bit of a clown, but mostly as little more than an interesting prelude to the life that Matteson seems to find more interesting: that of Louisa May Alcott.

Other Alcott biographical material has been written by authors with a wide variety of perspectives on the man. One of these biographies was published in 1893 by Franklin B. Sanborn, a close friend of Alcott’s, who may not have been the most objective biographer. In the introduction to his own work, Odell Shepard said of Sanborn’s Alcott biography: “Sanborn wrote a good book, but the impatience, not to say the arrogance, of his brilliant and overcrowded mind is evident in this book as in the rest of his always valuable, never quite dependable work” (xiii). Additional sources consulted include Frederick Dahlstrand’s 1945 book entitled *Amos Bronson Alcott: An Intellectual Biography* and Madelon BeDell’s 1980 contribution *The Alcotts: Biography of a Family*. Another source brief but interesting source about Alcott’s life is David Edgell’s “Bronson Alcott’s ‘Autobiographical Index’” which first appeared in the *New England Quarterly* in 1941. It consists of Alcott’s own notes detailing a period of his life spanning from
January 1842 to November 1844. This account is one of the only in Alcott’s own words that discusses the part of his life devoted to Fruitlands, his failed attempt at creating a utopian communal society (Edgell 705).

Susan Cheever’s 2006 book *American Bloomsbury* offers one of the more controversial accounts of the lives of Alcott and his fellow Transcendentalists. Although the subtitle of the book claims that the work is an examination of the lives of Louisa May Alcott, Emerson, Fuller, and Hawthorne, it offers an interesting portrayal of Bronson Alcott in the midst of his Transcendentalist set. Cheever is another writer who seems to view Bronson Alcott as little more than a joke when compared with his lofty friends. She points out that Hawthorne thought little of Alcott, and she paints Bronson Alcott as a burden that Abba and Louisa May Alcott had to bear (Cheever 13). Cheever revels in the more eccentric and sometimes ridiculous aspects of Alcott’s writings and personality, so much so that her book appears far too sensationalistic. In addition to her negative treatment of Alcott, Cheever portrays most of the members of the Transcendentalist Club as little more than scatterbrained, adulterous adolescents. This biography focuses on the most dramatic parts of their lives such as their love affairs and their personal failings while devoting far less time to their many accomplishments.

It is clear from the biographies examined here that there is a wide spectrum of thought regarding Bronson Alcott and the value of his work in education and Transcendentalism. However, all of these works illustrate that Alcott’s life provides a fascinating subject for further study. Although his biographers may argue for or against his importance in the formation of American thought, few can deny the compelling nature of his life story and his eccentric characteristics.
2.2. Alcott’s Educational Theory and the History of Progressive Education

To understand Alcott’s educational theories and their reception by his contemporaries, it is important to examine the historical context in which Alcott produced them. Although a complete study of the history of education in the nineteenth century lies outside the scope of this project, the part of that history that my research attempts to locate is the ideological environment in which Alcott attempted to reform education. One source that attempts to create such a context is “History of Education” by Bernard Mehl, published in 1961. While this article provides a broad overview about education in the United States, it is an even more invaluable source of research on the history of education. Mehl looks at the approaches of past historians, including the assumptions and biases that each researcher brought to this past work of describing the educational trends in America over the past two hundred years. He notes that many researchers have come at their topics with firmly held biases, trying only to prove and reinforce the assumptions that they already held. Such an approach, he notes, will take a researcher’s view of the topic at hand: “An authentic tradition is not discovered when the search for it is directed by present biases of the historian” (Mehl 13). Mehl points out specifically that many of those who have written critically about the early progressive trends in education have done so while trying to justify the downfall of such progressive theories (11-12). Bronson Alcott is mentioned only briefly in this article during the discussion of problems with the “pragmatic” approach to the study of the history of education (Mehl 10). The article names Alcott as a pioneer in progressive education and effectively situates Alcott in a context of educational trends of his century.
In researching Bronson Alcott, one cannot ignore the frequent references to the work of European educational theorist and reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Austin Aikins’ “Pestalozzi Scenes and Memorials” (1906) describes Pestalozzi’s impact on nineteenth century educational theory as extremely far reaching. This educational revolutionary promoted the idea that education was for everyone, including the common and the poor (Aikins 124). Pestalozzi’s moral conclusions were almost completely in line with those of Alcott; it is no wonder that the young New England schoolmaster would be so drawn to the theories of this Swiss reformer.

The wealth of articles available on early American education gives readers a sense of the educational environment that Alcott was trying to create. One of these is Martin Bickman’s “From Emerson to Dewey: The fate of freedom in American education” (1994). This article, which provides an overview of the work of progressive educational reformers in nineteenth century America, notes the dichotomy between what education should be and what it is. Bickman points to Emerson and Alcott as exemplars of what is possible in education, while also noting how society rejected their enlightened ideas almost outright. Louis Fuller adds to the examination of early educational reform in “Main Currents in Progressivist American Education” (1957), an article that attempts to “trace issues and circumstances that have helped develop . . . traditions of progressivism in education” (33).

Marjorie Steim’s “Beginnings of Modern Education: Bronson Alcott” attempts to define Bronson Alcott’s place in the history of American education by asserting that Alcott “completely remodeled the ordinary method of instruction, patterning his after Jesus, Plato, and Pythagoras with direct teacher-student communication” (8). The author
also places “Alcott’s ideas of self-reliance and his method of teaching” in a context with the ideas of his fellow Transcendentalists (Steim 9). She goes on to note that even today, many of Alcott’s ideas could be called progressive (Steim 9).

In *Transcendental Curriculum: or, Bronson Alcott’s Library* (1984), Kenneth Walter Cameron examines the works that Alcott had available to him in his early years and well beyond. It is a telling inventory of possible influences on Alcott’s theories of philosophy and education, making reference to works by Locke, William Russell, and Pestalozzi.

In his attempts to reform educational practice, Alcott greatly offended many of his contemporaries. Alcott’s own book *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* brought about his downfall. His accounts of the topics he broached with his children outraged parents and community leaders alike. Larry Carlson’s 1988 article “‘Those Pure Pages of Yours’: Bronson Alcott’s *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*” begins by sharing examples of the often vitriolic responses of many nineteenth century American critics to *Conversations*. Carlson explains that ideas put forth in *Conversations*, as well as other ideas of the Transcendentalists, were viewed by many Bostonians at best to be absurd, while others went so far as to call them outright heretical. Joseph T. Buckingham, a writer for the *Boston Courier*, “asserted that Alcott’s *Conversations* was a ‘more indecent and obscene book (we say nothing of its absurdity) than any other one we ever saw exposed to sale on a bookseller’s counter’” (Carlson 454).

Much of this criticism stemmed from the transcripts included in *Conversations* which detailed the Socratic method of instruction Alcott incorporated into his school. But it was the subjects, not the methods, that sparked the outrage. Topics of discussion
with the students included the nature of Christ’s divinity as well as the origin of babies. These controversial subjects were viewed as inappropriate for such young students, and within months of these scorching reviews, Temple School was forced to close its doors.

Even in the midst of this overwhelming criticism, some friends came to Alcott’s defense. Emerson risked his reputation to “have a defense printed in the Courier, arguing that the book ‘as a whole, is pervaded with original thought and sincere piety’” (Carlson 454). Elizabeth Peabody, Alcott’s assistant at the school, also submitted a lengthy defense (Carlson 454–455). Carlson’s article goes on, however, to detail and actually reprint the letter of support that meant the most to Alcott. It was from Reverend William Henry Furness, a well-respected graduate of Harvard Divinity who had “distinguished himself as a writer of religious works, as an abolitionist, and as a promoter of German literature and culture” (Carlson 455). Furness’s letter explained that he hardly gave heed to what the critics were saying because it did not particularly surprise him. He dismissed the small-minded critics by saying, “The longer I live the more fixed is my opinion that the world of men is divided into those with eyes and those without, with various degrees within the two” (Carlson 458). While there were small qualifications in Furness’s letter of support, Alcott was reassured that “he was neither heretical nor insane” (Carlson 460). Unfortunately, these kind words did little for the fate of Temple School, which was shut down only a year later, leaving Alcott to assume the role of the misunderstood genius, the martyr (Carlson 460).

Though progressive education has gained wide acceptance in the United States today, there is still much debate about the direction in which education should be going. These discussions occasionally invoke the name of A. Bronson Alcott as an early
innovator whose time may finally have come. “Light-ness of Being in the Primary Classroom: Inviting conversations of depth across educational communities” (2006) by Darlene Witte-Townsend and Anne E. Hill shows the influence of early pedagogical progressives such as Bronson Alcott. These researchers stress the importance of following instinct in the classroom and connecting with children on a personal level. In examining modern changes in education such as No Child Left Behind (The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2002), the authors see an example of the worst direction that educators could be going (Witte-Townsend & Hill 374). By encouraging teachers to rely on standardized tests rather than the connections that are made with students, such legislation is only driving the humanity out of the classroom. They assert that, “When teachers’ words are prescribed and they are made to feel that their primary role is to prepare children to pass exams instead of engage them in learning, the acceptable and expected range of response from the children is also preprinted between the lines” (Witte-Townsend & Hill 374). According to Witte-Townsend and Hill, if our exams become our main focus in the classroom, educators will be squandering great potential for creativity and critical thinking in our students.

The authors point to Bronson Alcott’s Conversations as an effective example of a teacher working hard to connect to students and to teach them on an intellectual and a spiritual level: “Alcott’s conversations were based on his assumption that children could know what was outside themselves . . . participat[ing] in an ever-extending line of inquiry, curious and full of wonder. . .” (Witte-Townsend & Hill 384). Witte-Townsend and Hill call upon ideals that could easily have been espoused by Alcott and many of his Transcendentalist friends: “Together, let us find the will to recognize a wider range of
human sensibilities within the classroom and all that can mean. Let us not allow ourselves to believe that teachers or children should be content with anything less” (388). Ideas such as these could easily have belonged to Alcott.

Other modern educational theorists have been critical of Alcott. Ronald Swartz, in the 1985 essay “On Why Self-Government Failed at Bronson Alcott’s Temple School,” examines Alcott’s theories of classroom management. According to Swartz, Alcott did not really allow students to make decisions for themselves, but instead almost tricked them into adopting the policies that Alcott himself found acceptable. Swartz asserts that egotism drove Bronson Alcott and that the love of his own ideas might have tainted his objectivity in his work.

This project also considers how Alcott’s ideas were conveyed through the writings of his daughter, Louisa May Alcott, in her famous novel Little Women. Although this connection has drawn little critical attention, this book both directly and indirectly presents the educational ideas of Bronson Alcott, and does so arguably more effectively than the man himself. An essay “The Real Plumfield” (1929) by Mabel Flick Altstetter compares the fictional Plumfield school of Little Women and Alcott’s Boston Temple School, which was its inspiration. Mary Jane Drummond’s “Comparisons in Early Years Education: History, Fact, and Fiction” (2000) uses Plumfield as an example of a school that incorporates an effective teaching methodology, noting that while the school is a creation of Louisa May Alcott, it is firmly based in the theories of her father. Susan Laird’s “Who Cares About Girls? Rethinking the Meaning of Teaching” (1995) examines the teaching methods that are more subtly placed throughout Little Women, particularly the teachings of Marmee, the matriarch of the March family. Further
speculation of what it was like to grow up as the daughter of Bronson Alcott is available in the piece by Karen Halttunen entitled “The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott.”

The body of research discussed in the previous pages provides a sound foundation for this project. The essay examining nineteenth century education offers insights that are particularly effective in situating Alcott among his contemporaries. Works examining the more modern view of Alcott also help to establish his importance in educational reform, while also highlighting the continued criticism of some of his methods. Although there have not been many writers looking at the link between Alcott’s educational theory and *Little Women*, the literature available raises many interesting questions about the legacy of this unusual American thinker.
CHAPTER 3. THE FORMATION OF AN IDEA: ALCOTT’S EARLY LIFE AND INFLUENCES

3.1 Early Years

Rural Spindle Hill in Wolcott, Connecticut, might not be the kind of place where one would expect to find an educational reformer and Transcendentalist philosopher. It was not as modern as Boston, nor was it as fashionable as nearby New Haven (Shepard, Pedlar’s 5). In fact, when Amos Bronson Alcott was born there in 1799, Wolcott still showed many signs of its recent pioneer past (Shepard, Pedlar’s 3). Nevertheless, Alcott’s early years working and playing on the countryside of Spindle Hill shaped the reformer and the man that he would become. Years of mediocre schooling in less than comfortable conditions laid the groundwork for the ventures in educational reform that Americans would embark upon throughout the rest of his life.

Bronson Alcott’s imagination and love of learning were sparked in an environment that did little to encourage imaginative thought or complex thinking. Alcott scholar Dorothy McCuskey described a one-room schoolhouse that lacked almost every creature comfort that a student could desire; students spent their days sitting along backless wooden benches and, should the need arise, the students did not even have a restroom.

No trees sheltered it from the beating sun of summer, nor from the winds that blustered across the hilltop in winter. . . . The deep fireplace with a four foot chimney would accommodate an eighth of a cord of wood at a
time and commonly burned about a cord a week. This caused great 
suffering from the intense heat in the front, and from cold backs in the 
loosely-boarded rear of the room. . . . When a [window] was broken, a hat 
or scarf was commandeered to fill the opening. (McCuskey 8)

Such an environment would be hard enough on the teacher, but to expect children to 
reach their full potentials in conditions like these would be extremely unrealistic.

Although the physical environment was often an obstacle to the learning process, 
the same can also be said for the teachers themselves. At the time, country school 
teachers were not required to have a college education, and in many cases, the teacher’s 
only credential or qualification was his or her friendship or familial relation to one of the 
town committee members (Matteson 17). Teachers were paid whatever wage the town 
was willing to scrape together, which was a paltry sum in an environment where formal 
education seemed to be a luxury. Pay for teachers depended on many variables, 
including gender. Beginning, female teachers could often make less than a dollar a week, 
while experienced, male “master” teachers could earn as much as eleven dollars a week 
(McCuskey 8). Teachers would “board round,” staying with whoever was willing to take 
them in for the duration of their stay (McCuskey 8). Teaching methods at the time 
focused on rote memorization and corporeal punishment, seemingly “devised to produce 
the least possible reward for the greatest expenditure of effort” (Shepard, Pedlar’s 9).

If the pedagogical methods may have lacked enthusiasm or originality, the 
schoolmasters’ continued invention in the area of discipline certainly did not. It was not 
uncommon to find an unruly student “’sitting on nothing,’ their backs against the wall; or 
with a forefinger, ‘holding down a nail in the floor’ in a painful stooping position”
Although he was almost never the recipient of these cruel and unusual methods of classroom management, the observation of these practices must have made an impression. In his teaching career and in his parenting, Alcott often went out of his way to avoid corporeal punishment, feeling that the rod would most definitely spoil the child.

During these years, Alcott was taught to read and write utilizing works such as the catechism, the New Testament, and Caleb Bingham’s *American Preceptor*; much of the content was expected to be committed to memory (Shepard, *Pedlar’s 9*). These texts were designed to provide not only a practical education in literacy, but also represented the early form of character education. In their study of these religiously based works, students learned how to behave and what to believe in a strictly dogmatic fashion. Alcott’s later dismissal of dogmas of whatever sort, including religion, may be a direct response to the fact that critical thinking and evaluation of materials such as these were not encouraged during his own formative years.

Alcott was not alone in his academic endeavors; as a companion, he had his serious cousin William Andrus Alcott, who was just a year older than Bronson and lived down the road. As an adult, William would also devote much of his life to educational reform. As a boy, William shared Bronson’s love of books and all things intellectual in nature. Because Spindle Hill was not the most convenient community for a pair of bookish boys to find themselves, the boys eventually pooled all of their available books (and those of a few relatives who were willing to humor them) and created their own small library of which Bronson and William were the only subscribers (Shepard, *Pedlar’s 33*).
Bronson and William were drawn to books and new ideas, but one book in particular would be particularly influential to Bronson over the years. John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* is an allegorical story of one man’s trip through temptation and into eventual salvation. According to McCuskey, “This was a book that struck home. Bronson and William read it, re-read it, copied it out, dramatized it; and, in short, lived it” (11). For the rest of his life, Bronson returned to this book again and again to find personal spiritual strength. Beyond that, Alcott would go on to use this book repeatedly in his own classroom to foster discussion of moral matters, and in later years, it would become a central piece of literature in the Alcott home and in the lives of his four daughters. Repeated references to Bunyan’s book can be found throughout Louisa May Alcott’s own journals and writing.

Nevertheless, the examination of Bronson’s later philosophies and theological views reveal traces of why the future educator held *Pilgrim’s Progress* so closely to his heart. Alcott biographer John Matteson finds irony in the fact that Alcott was so enamored with a work of literature that promoted a strict dogmatic approach to religion and spirituality:

> Curiously, however, although Bunyan’s allegory was pivotally responsible for shaping Bronson’s ideas of right conduct, it failed to impress on him the point that its author undoubtedly considered the most fundamental of all: the necessity of embracing the doctrines of Christianity. Bronson was essentially immune to the arguments of orthodoxy. (20)
Instead, Alcott seemed to pull what he needed from the story, choosing to focus on the protagonist’s journey of self-improvement rather than the strict religious implications of the story.

Young Alcott loved school at a time when school was much more difficult to love. No matter how uncomfortable and imperfect the conditions, biographer Odell Shepard points out there was just something about the classroom environment that transfixed Alcott: “He liked to watch the master trim and mend goose quills, rule the foolscap with his leaden plummet, and set copy—‘Avoid alluring company’—for the writing exercise. He liked to manufacture his own ink before leaving for school, steeping maple and oak bark in indigo and alum” (9). As Alcott grew and spent more of his days toiling away on his father’s farm, he realized that teaching suited him much better than farming. Bronson felt rather certain that he would not be fulfilled simply following in his father’s footsteps (Shepard 10).

Alcott would have just one chance at a formal education, and that opportunity could have changed the course of his life. When he was thirteen, Alcott was invited to live with his uncle, Dr. Tillotson Bronson, and attend the Episcopal Academy. The experience, however, did not go well. Although young Bronson had worked so hard to expand his horizons and broaden his vision of the world outside Spindle Hill, there was still too much Spindle Hill inside of him. Alcott did not fit in with these boys who were much more sophisticated than he, and within a month he went home, despondent. This lack of formal education would be something that Alcott would at times later regret, and constituted one of his greatest shortcomings in the eyes of many of his later critics (Matteson 21).
Though he would dabble in other occupations, even going so far as to become a traveling salesman for a brief period in his younger years, the inclination toward education was established early in Bronson. His cousin William would hear the same calling, and together they would begin to see past the limitations of their contemporary schools and envision what schools had the potential to be. Spindle Hill may be an uncommon place to breed such progressive ideas, but nevertheless, this “virus of reform” infected the Alcott boys (Shepard, *Pedlar’s* 12).

3.2. The Birth of a Philosophy

Alcott’s theories about education and Transcendentalist moral philosophy were molded by his study of many great minds, including Socrates, Plato, and Locke. The words of Locke, in particular, confirmed Alcott’s view that each individual held an innate value, and that each man should have the right to determine his own destiny, free of the oppressive hand of king or creed. These Enlightenment ideas sat well with Alcott, who was already well on his way to developing his own brand of Transcendentalist thought. While the work of these philosophers had a formative effect on the development of Alcott’s educational theory and practice, even more influential was his study of the contemporary educational reformers, including Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, a European progressive educator who shaped education at that time (Matteson 26). Pestalozzi was a controversial proponent of education for the poor and a great believer in the innocence and value of children.
Pestalozzi’s significant contribution to education offered a range of techniques which could be used by any teacher. His methods included the reduction of a complex subject to its elements and his “object” lessons; or, more profoundly, as an approach affirming children’s innate goodness and seeking to develop their potential through an education in love without punishment or competition (Latham 59). This revolutionary approach to instruction and interaction with children contradicted the more accepted educational theory of the time. Alcott certainly remembered his own early education, which emphasized corporeal punishment and rote memorization. It was a method designed to instill discipline and permissiveness in the classroom. Pestalozzi’s innovations in instruction must have been greatly refreshing to Bronson as he developed his own educational methods. But what must have struck even closer to Bronson’s heart was Pestalozzi’s view of the innocence and potential of the child. “No longer born into the corruption of original sin with a will to be broken by a rod that was not spared, the child was now seen both as a symbol of innocence and as a person whose nature needed to be fostered in love rather than repressed by religious or social systems” (Latham 59).

Alcott’s educational philosophy embraced this optimistic and loving view of the state of the young soul, and all other aspects of his pedagogy are built from this surprisingly controversial idea. Alcott became one of the first American teachers to mount an aggressive challenge to an educational and social system that viewed childhood as an illness to be cured. Prominent theologian and American thinker Jonathan Edwards, only decades before, had claimed that children are “‘young vipers, and are definitely more hateful than vipers’ in the site of God” (qtd. in Shepard, Pedlar’s 81). When Alcott looked at a child, he did not see a viper; he saw a soul (McCuskey 162).
Although Pestalozzi may have shaped the foundation of Alcott’s educational theory, many of the educational reformers of his own time played an even more important role, supporting and influencing Alcott while he molded and modified his own tendencies and intuitive beliefs about educating children into an actual pedagogical method. Perhaps even most influential was Alcott’s relationship with William Russell, an American progressive educator and the editor of the *American Journal of Education*. Alcott was impressed with Russell, feeling that he had found a kindred spirit, one whose “mind is free from all those narrow prejudices, and arbitrary forms, which destroy the natural simplicity and frankness of the human heart” (ABAN, “William Russell). Biographer Dorothy McCuskey asserts that Alcott’s association with Russell was one of the main formative influences on the construction of Alcott’s ideas: “All things, but chiefly these three—[careful observations on] his daughter Anna, his friend William Russell, and great books—combined to make Alcott a transcendental thinker” (61). Russell’s educational journal would also be instrumental in allowing Alcott to begin sharing his ideas on educational theory and needed educational reform.

Finally, any examination of Alcott’s philosophies about education and related matters must take into account the ideas of his closest friend and supporter, Ralph Waldo Emerson. One of most respected writers and thinkers in early American letters, Emerson is considered to be the father of American Transcendentalist thought. While some have assumed that through association with such a mind, Alcott chiefly served as a disciple of Emerson, nothing could be further from the truth. By the time that Alcott first heard Emerson speak as a Unitarian pastor in 1828, Alcott’s ideas had largely taken shape
(Shepard 126). In fact, some have wondered how much influence Alcott may have had on the famous philosopher in the early years of his career.

What part Alcott and his school played in the formulation of Emerson’s theories is something that can never be “proven.” It can, however, be pointed out that Bronson Alcott returned to Boston in 1834 with his transcendental philosophy quite well developed. His mind, large and absorbing, had included in its thought the parts of all systems and creeds that were attractive to him. . . At the very least, Bronson Alcott. . . must have been profoundly stimulating to Ralph Waldo Emerson. (McCuskey 91-92)

This is an interesting perspective on the intellectual relationship between the two men; one could only assume that each of these men—who were both passionately devoted to their own philosophies and drawn to each other’s views—would have a reciprocal intellectual effect on one another.

However much Alcott provided Emerson, Emerson provided at least as much in return. Often when critics attacked Alcott’s ideas, Emerson stood up for his friend, writing once after a particularly harsh lashing of Alcott’s writings by the critics: “I hate to have all the little dogs barking at you, for you have something better to do than to attend them” (qtd. in Matteson 81). “Only Emerson, of this age, knows me” (Shepard, Pedlar’s 197) Alcott mused in one of his journals. In fact, it would be Emerson’s support, both spiritual and monetary, that would in many cases allow Alcott to pursue his ideas.

Bronson Alcott was a complex man, and his ideas were just as complex; therefore, it is no surprise that he would draw from such a broad range of experiences,
books, and even friends when developing his views. The significance of this time in his life is noted by biographers: “From these crucial years . . . Alcott emerged with a transcendental philosophy sufficiently clear in his mind that he was able to work out its implications for education and to found a school to carry them out” (McCuskey 76).

With his theoretical foundations in place, Alcott embarked on his most extensive foray into education: The Temple School.
Bronson Alcott brought a vast range of philosophical and pedagogical ideas to education. Influenced by thinkers like Socrates and Locke, as well as education reformers like Pestalozzi and William Russell, it is difficult to compress his practices in education into a few clear principles. To be broad, one could assert that “[the] motto, ‘Education’s All’ gives a clue to two basic beliefs that underlie Alcott’s teaching. One was that ‘men are by nature, equal’; and the other, that men—or at least children—are also basically good” (McCuskey 22). These are ideas that we continue to espouse in education, even though many of our schools—perhaps because of poor socio-economic conditions or faulty educational policies—fail to create an educational environment that truly adheres to these ideas. Moreover, to say that education is the cure to all of society’s ills means that other institutions that we have traditionally looked to for deliverance—like religion, for instance—are not the cure. Just as this was a controversial idea that would bring Alcott much criticism from some of his contemporaries, this assertion is often met with just as much skepticism today. While ideals such as these are widely preached and professed, if not always practiced, in modern times, they have “more than once shaken the world to bloody conflict” (McCuskey 22).

While these ideas provide the framework and the ideological basis for all of Alcott’s work in education, his theory of education can be divided into four more specific principles: (1) the effective teacher will respect the child as an individual and as a person with innate rights; (2) the school should be a place of comfort for the student, greatly
resembling a nurturing and supportive home environment; (3) antiquated instructional methods should be abandoned for newer, more student-centered methods that more directly engaged the students; and (4) the purpose of education is to help students reach their full potential not only intellectually, but also in their development of character.

4.1. Respect for Each Child

Alcott grew up in a Calvinistic environment that looked at children as beings who were tainted by original sin and therefore born corrupt in mind and spirit. This wickedness had to be controlled and eventually forced from them through an education that encouraged passiveness and submission on the part of the student. Alcott felt strongly that this was simply not right.

He thought that all children were created equal, in terms of moral and intellectual potential, and that circumstantial contingencies (which education might overcome) were responsible for inequalities in achievement. His educational theory, which stressed the organic growth of children and their close relation to their natural and social environments, was carefully conceived and surprisingly modern (ABAN, “Education”).

Although ideas such as these were so controversial in his own environment, fortunately modern education has embraced this more charitable view of the child.

This belief that all students should be treated with dignity and respect is a natural precursor to his strong feels against using corporeal punishment as a means of disciplinary intervention in the classroom. Alcott was one of many educators of his
time—another was his close friend and fellow Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau—who parted with the dominant thought that physical punishment was a necessary element of the classroom setting. Without it, many schoolmasters of the time believed that the teachers would lose control of the classroom and the students.

Alcott disagreed. He truly believed that students would learn better in an environment free of violence of this sort. When his contemporaries heard of his methods, many assumed that his classroom would lack order, but this was not the case. The A. Bronson Alcott Network notes that, “Although he had a reputation for discarding all discipline for spontaneity, Alcott carefully organized the classroom and required full attention and good behavior on the part of the pupils at all times” (ABAN, “Education”). This showed that a classroom free of violence was not free of order.

Alcott believed that the students would be most successful in their education if they took ownership of their classroom. Theorists note that he “assumed that children were able to govern their own learning because he thought that all human beings were born with the god given gift to know and discover truths” (Swartz 90). This meant that students even had an active role in making disciplinary decisions within the classroom. As Fenner and Fishburn note, “Discipline at the school was a form of self-government, though not called that. Those who misbehaved were usually punished, on prescription from the rest of the children, by being excluded from the attractive and challenging group activities” (60). This idea of student self-government was revolutionary. For example: Alcott tried to develop a “common conscience” in the children by having all the students participate in the selection of punishments for individuals. Sometimes, the whole class was punished for the behavior of one
individual. He refused to strike children, and on occasion he went so far as to have the misbehaving individual strike him to demonstrate the social effects of individual misbehavior. (ABAN, “Education”)

This approach to classroom management allowed the student to feel as though he or she was part of a larger group and that he or she had some control over what happened in the classroom, rather than being at the mercy of an overbearing schoolmaster.

His aversion to corporeal punishment forced Alcott to be creative in his classroom management techniques, since many of these students had never known a form of discipline that did not involve some kind of physical punishment. Fenner and Fishburn note Alcott had strong feelings about striking a child in his care: “Bronson had written in his journal. . . ‘I do not believe in corporeal punishment except as a corrective for deep-seated habits’” (60). His respect for the child also required that an offending student must agree to the fairness of a punishment before it was administered (Matteson 58).

4.2. Comfort

Like Pestalozzi, Alcott felt that the ideal school would resemble a tranquil home environment (McCuskey 34). Because so much of a student’s early education is acquired at home in the company of his or her parents, it would only be logical that the continuation of such an environment would be ideal for learning. This modeling of the classroom after the home environment led Alcott to decide that the best classes would be taught by two teachers, one male and one female, just like parents in a home (Matteson 56).
In addition to creating an emotionally comfortable environment to maximize student success, Alcott believed that the students should be physically comfortable as well. Perhaps this idea found its root in Alcott’s own memories of his childhood school, which contained hard, backless benches on which the students would sit for hours without a break. Alcott also dismissed the idea that a classroom had to have such a Spartan environment; Alcott’s Temple School in Boston was the embodiment of this new view of the educational environment. In this classroom, students sat in comfortable chairs at ornate desks. They could observe art on the walls or the busts of various renowned thinkers scattered throughout the room on shelves and mantles (Matteson 56). Alcott felt strongly that “[c]hildren would learn better if comfortable, and Alcott spent his own money to put more comfortable chairs and tables in his classrooms” (Fenner and Fishburn 58). He was sure that a pleasing environment would bring about better achievement from his students, and he was willing to put forth his own resources to create such an atmosphere.

Alcott also recognized the need for children to be active. While many saw inclination toward activity as a potential problem, Alcott saw it as another beautiful trait of the child that could be used in education. In his 1830 essay, “Observations on the Principles and Methods of Infant Instruction,” Alcott clearly states his belief that it is unnatural and contrary to a child’s nature to be denied exercise: “The child is essentially an active being. His chief enjoyment consists in the free and natural exercise of his material frame” (Harding 5). In all of his schools, Alcott put these ideas into action. “The children played games and took exercises, while other schools curbed all restlessness and activity” (Fenner and Fishburn 58). Alcott believed that the teacher was
working against the true nature of childhood to discard this need for physical activity on a regular basis.

4.3. Revolutionary Methods

Alcott rejected the pedagogical methods that filled his own childhood and instead embraced a new approach that forced students to take a more active role in their learning. His students would not spend the hours upon hours that he had spent simply committing books to memory and writing lines over and over. Instead, he talked to them about things that they understood, about their feelings about their loved ones, and about their own understanding of the world around them. According to Latham, Alcott “taught without rote learning of books and tried to draw out what was innate in the child” (67). This reformer even incorporated his understanding of the students’ need for activity by taking them outdoors for lessons, including a geography lesson that began in the school yard, where they learned to map, survey, and critically analyze the plot of land on which they played every day (Fenner and Fishburn 59).

4.4. Education as a Means of Spiritual Growth and Character Development

Finally, Alcott believed that one of the most important goals of education is to help students reach their full potential not only by developing their intellect, but also their character. Conversely, Alcott believed that the students’ intellectual growth and development could improve their character. This constituted the core of what education was all about for Alcott, and it is arguably the most profound aspect of his work. In her biography, McCuskey asserts that, “Alcott was striving with these children to awaken
their consciences, to give them faith in their spiritual natures, but he was doing more than that. He wanted them to know themselves that they might be better *social beings*” (86). His awareness of the importance of educating the whole child was extremely revolutionary.

Perhaps this reformer was born a century too early, for this idea which fed the fires of his critics has since become a hallmark of the progressive education movement (Harding xvi). Viewed in this light, education is more than a tool to prepare students for jobs; instead, it is a means of empowering students with the skills of critical thinking and self-reflection that will enable them to work toward their full potential, and perhaps even set them on the road toward what Maslow would have called self-actualization. This should be the goal of all education.

Alcott’s conception of self-discovery was grounded in the Transcendentalist faith that examination of one’s conscience would bring true knowledge and thereby produce ultimate human concordance with the Common Conscience, or Oversoul, or Truth, or God—whatever term one might prefer for designating the spiritual animus which pervaded all matter. In Alcott’s hands, such theories translated themselves into having students keep journals, organizing conversations based on Socratic dialogues, and appealing to the group conscience for determining disciplinary policies. (Duck 211)

This focus on self-reflection is still prevalent in education today; teachers realize that for a student to be truly engaged in his or her own learning, he or she must be able to reflect on the process.
Alcott relied heavily upon his Transcendentalist beliefs, affirming that children were born knowing right from wrong, and that it was the adult’s duty to bring forth the child’s innate goodness. Alcott asked children questions about God, life, and morality that were designed to help them find the answers within.

His pedagogical philosophy stressed the emotional and physical, as well as the intellectual development of children. He believed that learning was the result of dialogue between teacher and student. All the schools he established eventually failed, however, in part because of his “radical” educational theories—theories that do not seem so radical today. (ABAN, “Education”)

In fact, the current trend toward a more student-centered classroom that recognizes the students’ various intelligences shows a resurgence of ideas that could easily be found in Alcott’s pedagogical theory.

Alcott's form of moral instruction used Socratic dialogue by which Alcott posed a series of leading questions to help the students make moral distinctions and come to right conclusions. As Duck notes, “The basic technical emphasis was on interaction of teacher and pupils—a kind of Socratic dialogue which Alcott called ‘conversations’—in an effort to produce self-directed learners. In other words, conversation as a guide to self-analysis was employed to help youngsters reach self actualization” (212).

Although this method proved most effective for Alcott in the classroom, it had a disastrous effect on his career and his reputation in educational circles. These methods, painstakingly documented by Alcott’s assistant and fellow progressive education reformer, Elizabeth Peabody, were later published in her book Record of a School:
Exemplifying the general principles of spiritual culture. While this book was met with controversy, Alcott’s own account of the teaching at the Temple School was even more shocking to his contemporaries. *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* recounted these Socratic dialogues in great detail, with no apologies for the content explored by teacher or students. (This controversy will be discussed in greater detail in later sections of this work.)

One of the traits of Alcott’s version of the Socratic method was that he allowed the students to lead the direction of the conversations. Swartz points out the novelty of such a practice at that time, noting that, “This unconventional schoolmaster did not make an effort to control the content of the discussions he had with the students at the Temple School; on their way to discovering Alcott’s wonderful truths students were allowed to entertain a vast variety of ideas that most traditional teachers and religious leaders considered to be outrageous” (93). Alcott allowed students to discuss questions about the nature of humanity, the concept of original sin, and the divinity of Jesus Christ—all topics that were not seen as appropriate fare for conversations with the young and impressionable. Alcott saw these conversations as extraordinarily successful and felt deeply that he had discovered a method that would revolutionize education in his own time and shape the educational trends of the future. The public’s reception of these ideas and methods, however, was not at all what Alcott expected. The publication of *Conversations* would be the first in a series of events that would put an end to Alcott’s dreams of educational reform—at least temporarily—and almost ruin his own spirit in the process. “He was, he wrote, ‘an Idea without hands’” (Matteson 83).
CHAPTER 5. ALCOTT THE TEACHER: A CAREER OF CONTROVERSY

5.1. The Temple School

Bronson Alcott’s career as a teacher began in 1823, just before his twenty-fourth birthday. This was not his first chosen profession; Alcott spent a number of years before this as a traveling peddler, selling his wares throughout the southeastern United States. That career, however, required a good head for money, something that Alcott would markedly lack throughout much of his life (Dahlstrand 222-223). Teaching was a better fit for Alcott, though in making this choice he had obviously given up his desires for any substantial material wealth. “He cannot have [taken up teaching] with a view to financial or social advancement, for schoolmasters in rural Connecticut generally enjoyed no more comfort or prestige than Washington Irving’s Ichabod Crane” (Matteson 26). But it was a good fit for young Alcott from the start. He believed that through education, a person can become better.

Alcott taught off and on in Connecticut in the early years, occasionally taking time off to recover from recurring illnesses that still plagued him from his years of travel (Shepard, Pedlar’s 75-76). These years in Cheshire would the only time that he would teach in his home state (Shepard, Pedlar’s 76). His experience in Connecticut, however, foreshadowed all of his later work, for even then, his schools evoked controversy.

Bronson’s schools . . . attracted wide attention; but much of it was hostile and even belligerent. In districts where no one had ever given teaching a second thought, where everyone tacitly assumed that the schoolmaster’s task was simply to beat the three R’s well into the children . . . this young
man made trouble. His pupils came home with the most amazing and
alarming tales of what their teacher had said. He seemed to believe that
children, even the youngest, had minds of their own, and should be
couraged to use them. He had even been known to talk about their souls
and to meddle with their morals—the parents’ exclusive prerogative.

(Shepard, *Pedlar’s* 77)

Alcott dismissed those who did not agree with him. Confident in his belief that he was
ushering in a new era of teacher-student interaction, Alcott proceeded with his unusual
approach.

The episode in Alcott’s career that was most noteworthy is without a doubt his
time in Boston, when he created and instituted the Temple School. After having his ideas
so vehemently rejected in the country schools, perhaps Alcott expected a more liberal
reception in Boston. “No time is ideal for revolutionary experiments, but Boston, in
1834, was as good as any” (McCuskey 83). Housed in a four-story building that had
served as a Masonic Temple (Matteson 57), the very atmosphere of the Temple School
conveyed new ideas and reform. The students took their places at comfortable desks and
partook of daily exercise and art instruction.

He was joined in this endeavor by Elizabeth Peabody, herself a progressive
educational reformer. Peabody was the perfect person for the job, with an educational
philosophy that was extremely similar to that of Alcott: “She was intent on ‘educating
children morally and spiritually as well as intellectually from the first.’ It was, she knew,
‘the vocation for which [she] had been educated from childhood’” (Matteson 55). With
such similar approaches to education, it is no wonder that the two came to work together.
Here Alcott created the perfect environment in which he could prove all of his educational theories. He was in a progressive city, working with others who shared his ideals. “Curious intellectuals came to the school in a steady stream” (Matteson 59). And his students were enthusiastic subjects in this grand experiment. “Alcott also used to talk to the children about their own moral qualities. They talked a great deal about conscience, and about how one heard its voice, and about obedience, love, and faith. People were shocked at the idea of little children analyzing themselves, supposing it would produce egotism” (McCuskey 89-90).

The Temple School invited students to learn in ways that they had never done so in the past. Spelling and vocabulary lessons became symbolic lessons in morals and ethics. “Alcott gave his students a deep understanding of the metaphoric power of language. On the subject of symbols and parables, he told Elizabeth Peabody, “I could not teach without [them]” (Matteson 60). In addition to metaphor and other imaginative teaching techniques, Alcott utilized what would be his most famous—or perhaps, at the time, infamous—classroom method: the use of Socratic questioning to prompt complex dialogues between teacher and students, with the goal of inspiring some kind of spiritual or moral conclusion on the part of the students. McCuskey’s Bronson Alcott, Teacher recounts a great example of one of these exchanges:

The study of words, one of the favorite exercises, was carried on in Socratic fashion. Alcott would begin by asking for a definition of a word, say like “brute.”

“It’s a man who kills another man,” said one child.
“A man who beats his wife,” or “a man who has no love,” answered others.

But always a man, never a literal answer. Alcott tried the children a bit further. Referring to the illusion of a boy beating a dog, he asked, “Which is the brute, the boy, or the dog?”

“The boy,” answered a little girl gravely. (88).

Few topics seemed off limits in these conversations, and students were encouraged to look at complex issues of spirituality and morality, while examining and critiquing ideas that were accepted as dogma in all other parts of their lives. The public first became acquainted with the particulars of these methods when Peabody published her detailed account of the school and its methods, entitled Record of a School: Exemplifying the general principles of spiritual culture in 1835 (ABAN, “Peabody”). Because Peabody seemed aware that the general public may not understand the context of all of the conversation that went on in the school, her editing skills were kept sharp. Still, her account of the school’s activities was accurate and the spark of public interest in the school began.

If Peabody’s book ignited a spark of interest, the publication in 1836 of Alcott’s own account of the Socratic dialogue used at the school, Conversations with Children on the Gospels, lit an inferno. Though critics pointed to many passages in Conversations that offended or infuriated them, one in particular caused the most unease. This passage detailed the exchange that followed when Alcott “decided to use the story of the Virgin Mary as an opportunity to introduce his students to the mysteries of birth” (Matteson 77). Alcott, however, was smart enough not to enter into an explicit discussion of childbirth or
sexuality with these young people who lacked the experience and maturity to understand the complexities of these concepts.

Alcott’s intentions were pure. Although he did raise issues like conception and circumcision that a more prudent teacher would have left undisturbed, he referred to them only in a deeply respectful manner. When discussing birth with the children, he explained, “God draws a veil over these sacred events, and they ought never to be thought of except with reverence.” (Matteson 77)

While most of the content of this infamous conversation was rather tame, the part that would stand out to most of his critics, and to concerned parents in the community, came directly from the mouth of one of the children. He ventured forth the idea that “babies are made out of the ‘naughtiness. . . of other people’” (Matteson 77). Alcott’s readers were offended, to say the least. And the idea that children were being subjected to this kind of profane discussion was absolutely unacceptable.

This passing discussion of sex and childbirth alone might have been enough to destroy the Temple School, but add to it Alcott’s unconventional approach to religion and it was a recipe for disaster. Alcott himself had never accepted many of the more traditional, dogmatic approaches to religion.

Alcott’s experience of organized religion failed to bind him to its forms and dogmas. He never accepted the idea of Jesus as the Son of God. While he found himself “disposed to consider the author of the Christian system as a great and good and original man,” Alcott could not convince
himself to think of Jesus as anything other than a superb specimen of humanity. (Matteson 20)

This unconventional approach to religion was embraced by Alcott, who claimed that he never wanted to inflict his own ideas upon his students. Nevertheless, the act of questioning or simply looking critically at doctrines such as the divinity of Jesus Christ was a step too far for most of Alcott’s contemporary Bostonians. All this talk of the children’s Spirits and the like made the parents—and the area religious leaders—nervous. And so the drumbeat of oppression began to sound in Boston, with Alcott’s Temple School as its intended casualty.

It is unfortunate that Alcott could not have been content with the revolutionizing of education, or of philosophy, or even of both, without encroaching upon the precincts of the theologians. But to him, there was no such thing as education without Spirit, which the theologians claimed as their province. Like Horace Mann, Alcott found that orthodox religion was one of the chief opposers of educational reform. (McCuskey 99)

One by one, parents began to pull their students from Temple School, and what had been a great experiment of educational reform turned into an exercise in futility. Money was again a problem, and the school moved from its grand location at the top floor of the Masonic Temple into one of the darker, more cramped rooms downstairs (Matteson 83). As enrollment continued to dwindle, Alcott moved the school into his own home.

Ironically, it was Alcott’s inability to act against his own idealism that would be that last straw for the school. The showdown came over the admission of a young African American student, one of Alcott’s last acts as a schoolmaster. “History has little
to say about the parents of Susan Robinson—little more than that, in the first half of
1839, they asked to enroll their daughter in Alcott’s school, and they were black. Most
teachers of Alcott’s time would have dismissed the Robinsons out of hand. Alcott
welcomed Susan” (Matteson 84). When Alcott admitted Robinson to his school, the rest
of the parents withdrew their own children, leaving Alcott with only Robinson, his own
three daughters, and the daughter of fellow reformer William Russell as students
(Matteson 84). The school could not continue under these circumstances. “When he
closed his books and dismissed his class on June 22, 1839, his career as a schoolteacher
had come to an end” (Matteson 85).

Alcott’s story is a tragedy, and he is the perfect tragic hero. His ideas for
educational reform were extraordinary in his time, and his heart was passionately
dedicated to his work; but he, like other tragic heroes, had a fatal flaw. The idealism that
marked him as a great reformer, when left unchecked, would sometimes inspire within
him an almost arrogant disregard for those who disagreed with his approach. He believed
that if others did not see the genius in his work, it was because of their own intellectual
and spiritual shortcomings. He often dismissed ideas that did not coincide with his own,
and many have said that Alcott read not in search of new ideas, but only to confirm what
he already knew (Matteson 71). Alcott was always slow to assign blame to himself,
asserting once in a conversation with Henry James Sr. that “like Jesus, he had never
sinned. Astonished, James inquired whether Alcott had ever proclaimed, “I am the
Resurrection and the Life.’ ‘Yes, often,’ came the calm reply. James fired back, ‘And has
anyone ever believed you?’” (Matteson 92).
It is no wonder, then, that Alcott chose to see the failure of his reform as a
negative reflection of the society which he was trying to help rather than a shortcoming
of his own methods or philosophy. At the end of this episode of his life, Alcott headed to
Concord to find solace in a place that held many like-minded people, like Emerson, who
had been one of his few loyal supporters during the years of controversy surrounding the
Temple School. While he would never be a schoolmaster again, he still had ready pupils
in his own daughters. So Alcott tucked himself into Concord and focused all of his
efforts into cultivating a successful garden and creating four perfect little women.
6.1. Bronson Alcott, Father and Teacher

Bronson Alcott’s experience at the Temple School would sour him on educational reform for some time. When what was left of the school closed in 1840, Alcott brought his family to Concord, a place where he felt that he might be better appreciated (Matteson 85). There he settled in a town that was home to other Transcendentalist thinkers, principally Emerson, but also Thoreau, Fuller, and Hawthorne to name a few. And it was here that he changed his focus. While his reforms were still being experimented with in the British school Alcott House, Alcott knew that interest in his ideas here at home was minimal. He would no longer spend his time trying to reform the whole of the American educational system; instead, he would concentrate on creating the perfect education for his own daughters.

Alcott had always kept tremendously lengthy journals, even by the standards of his own time. When his first daughter, Anna, was born, he began keeping a detailed record of every aspect of her intellectual and spiritual development. While his journaling would become less diligent and more sporadic with his subsequent children, his intention with all of them was still the same; he wanted to be involved in every aspect of childrearing so that he might create the most spiritually and intellectually developed adults possible.

This was a rather exceptional approach to parenting for a nineteenth century father. Most fathers had little to do with the day-to-day experience of raising or even observing their children, especially their daughters. But Alcott, accepting his sonless
state with humility and not a little disappointment, had resigned himself to become the
conductor of an educational experiment that would deal with only females. Alcott
biographer Odell Shepard wrote that Alcott saw this time in his life as an opportunity to
prove all of his theories and reclaim, at least for himself, his role as an educational
reformer: “He had closed his school in complete failure, but his main task as a teacher
was just beginning. There were his four girls, and what he did with and for them would
be his supreme test of his educational theories and powers” (Shepard, Pedlar’s 218).

At first, Alcott planned to only supplement the education that his girls would receive from others. His oldest, Anna, was enrolled at Concord Academy, with Henry
David Thoreau and his brother John (Matteson 88). The younger girls were put into the
care of a woman who taught children at the home of Emerson. Alcott, notoriously
impatient with his girls’ teachers, eventually took complete charge of their educations.
Here he could put his most basic Pestalozzian educational theories to work. “A good
school, he felt, could never be more than an imitation of a good home. What need of any
school whatever if the home itself could be provided” (Shepard, Pedlar’s 214).

With his own girls, he continued his unique and progressive approach to
education. “Always determined to make learning imaginative, Bronson contorted his
body to represent letters of the alphabet for the edification of his daughters. With his
silvery voice, he read aloud from the Bible and The Pilgrim’s Progress. However, he
promptly withheld enjoyment if the girls had not faithfully prepared their lessons”
(Matteson 90). His was an instruction made up of extremes: the girls were encouraged
to let their thoughts flow in their journals, but the journals were subject to perusal by any
number of family members at a given time; the girls were encouraged to romp and play in
the yard in the woods that surrounded Orchard House, but they were expected to maintain strict control over their childish impulses of self-interest and boisterousness at all given times. It was an unusual upbringing, but even though the public would dismiss Bronson Alcott’s philosophy on education when he presented them in his own school, they would embrace these ideas when his daughter Louisa gave life and voice to them in her famous novel, *Little Women*.

6.2. Louisa and *Little Women*

Despite A. Bronson Alcott’s extensive forays into educational reform, his prolific writing, and his sometimes scandalous reputation in education, Louisa May Alcott is by far the most well known Alcott. Perhaps it is no surprise to most parents that Alcott’s most successful daughter was the one that caused him the most stress and anguish. “From her infancy. . . Bronson’s second daughter presented a major challenge to her father’s educational theories. In contrast to her docile sister Anna, whose temperament was much like her father’s, Louisa was demanding, noisy, and even violent” (Halttunen 235). Alcott spent much of his instructional time with his daughters specifically instructing Louisa to control her wilder impulses and more unladylike habits. Not surprisingly, Louisa and her father were almost constantly at odds; it is hard to live up to the expectations of a parent whose ultimate goal for his children is spiritual and moral perfection. As a grown woman looking back on those years of instruction at the hands of her idealistic father, Louisa wrote, “My father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child’s nature, as a flower blooms, rather than crammed it, like a Strasbourg goose, with more than it could digest” (ABAN, “Louisa May Alcott”).
The home environment created by Bronson Alcott and his wife, Abba, where the girls were encouraged to journal and then share their deepest thoughts with the rest of the family, was extraordinarily conducive to self-expression. It is little wonder that of Alcott’s four daughters, each of them identified themselves with artistic forms of expression such as painting, drama, writing, and music. Louisa found her voice in writing.

Louisa worked for years in other jobs to help supplement the income of her family and support herself as she waited for success with her pen. She even ventured into teaching, but found little pleasure in it: “Louisa . . . taught a school on Suffolk Street, which her father wistfully visited, wishing that he could have a school again. Louisa would gladly have given him hers. The vocation that he adored left her utterly cold. After teaching for two years, she reached the unabashed conclusion that she hated it” (Matteson 208).

After many years spent struggling to find success and recognition through her writing, success eventually came with the publication of *Little Women*. This famous children’s novel brought her fame as well as a financial security that she never before experienced. *Little Women* tells the story of the March family, a family that is clearly modeled after the Alcotts. The family consists of a bookish, Transcendentalist father, a strong-willed and wise mother, and four daughters. The most obvious parallels between the Alcotts and the Marches is apparent when looking at the daughters. The Alcott family consisted of four daughters, of which Louisa was the second, just as there were four March girls. Jo March, the main character of the novel, is clearly a characterization of Louisa herself, as she, too, is a second daughter, and Jo’s personality mirrors Louisa’s
almost exactly. The other March girls seem to also be modeled after Louisa’s three sisters, both physically and in personality. The third daughter in both the fictional and actual families is named Elizabeth, and both in life and in art, she suffers from illness and dies at a young age.

Numerous Alcott biographers take for granted the autobiographical nature of *Little Women*. Though it is easy to recognize the March girls as a clear portrayal of the Alcott girls, those less familiar with the inner workings of the Alcott family may not recognize that the matriarch of the March family, called Marmee, is also an obvious representation of Abba Alcott. This portrayal of the real Abba Alcott is accurate, even down to Abba’s struggle with what she would have seen as the demons of her own personality: “‘You think your temper is the worst in the world,’ says Marmee, the fictional [Abba] in *Little Women*, the her turbulent daughter, Jo (Louisa). ‘But mine used to be just like it . . .I’ve been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it’” (Bedell 75).

Reading *Little Women* with the actual Alcott family in mind, it is easy to feel some sympathy for poor Abba; while being a student and child of Bronson Alcott may have been demanding, being the spouse of such a man must have been downright maddening at times. But that father, that side of Bronson Alcott, is not as evident in Louisa’s most famous book. In fact, in *Little Women*, the father is completely absent for almost half of the novel, having enlisted in the Union army during the Civil War. Alcott family biographer Madeline Bedell offers an interesting explanation for the fictional father’s absence at the beginning of the story. She argues that Alcott’s head was so far up in the clouds as he was absorbed in his idealist, Transcendentalist thought, that he often
was truly absent from the daily inner workings of the family. In *Little Women*, it is Marmee that around whom most of life’s little lessons and discoveries are made. Bedell points specifically to a scene early in the novel where Marmee comes home after a day of service in the community:

There is no father present at this family reunion, for his daughter, the author, had put him out of the book, far away at war. In the novel, it is an historical conflict, the Civil War, where the father, Reverend March has gone to serve as a chaplain to the Union Army. Yet in real life, it was also an historical war, not less so because the father’s battle was being fought within himself, alone and solitary, outside the family’s charmed circle.

(298-299)

While Bedell may see this scene as evidence of Alcott’s diminished importance in the daily life of the family, it can also be argued that this emphasis on the important educational role of the mother is simply Alcott’s own Pestalozzian ideas showing forth in his daughter’s writing.

Still, the father presented in *Little Women* is a character of few faults. In many ways, perhaps because she was so aware of the public’s criticism of her father and perhaps even in defense of him, the patriarch is the least prevalent character in the March family. And while Bronson Alcott and his fictional counterpart Mr. March, espouse many of the same values and ideas, Mr. March’s methods of conveying those ideas is much more subtle. “Unlike Bronson, [Mr. March] is a man of few words, remaining virtually barricaded in his study for the duration of the novel” (Matteson 342).
It is not that Louisa did not find fault in her father; much of her journaling as well as her satirical writing *Transcendental Wild Oats* express a frustration with a man who seems at times like a moral tyrant, and at other times like a child, himself in need of instruction. However, it is one thing to criticize one’s own family, while having someone else criticize the family is something else entirely. Perhaps Louisa wanted to present the best of her father to a world that had so clearly worked to point out his failures.

Not only is the family based on fact, but the March family’s condition was a portrayal of Louisa’s own experience. The Marchs’ constant battle with poverty also echoed the experience of growing up Alcott. Bronson Alcott’s head was often too far into his grand ideas to bother with more worldly subjects like amassing wealth, or even paying the rent. Emerson’s generosity saved the family from dire consequences more than once. In *Little Women*, the family’s financial situation was a result of Mr. March’s generosity with less deserving friends, an interesting idea when compared to the Alcott’s situation.

6.3. Bronson Alcott’s Educational Theory as Portrayed by Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*

*Little Women* was an instant popular and commercial success, selling thousands of copies when part one of the novel was published in 1868 (Matteson 353). The public clamored for more and the author was more than happy to oblige. This novel became a fixture of the literature of the time, its popularity comparable to that of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. When the public embraced *Little Women*, it was also embracing a basic understanding of the philosophical and pedagogical principles of A.
Bronson Alcott, which are apparent throughout the book in the daily life of the March family. “If Bronson, in the form of Mr. March is barely present in the overt action of *Little Women*, he is spiritually omnipresent” (Matteson 344).

Although *Little Women*’s protagonist, Jo, is undoubtedly based on Louisa herself, the author assigned a career to her heroine that she herself had rejected. Jo and her transcendental philosopher husband Professor Bhaer found happiness in the creation of a school called Plumfield. While the daily workings of Plumfield are laid out in more detail in Louisa’s lesser known sequel, *Little Men*, most readers were exposed to the beginnings of the fictional school in *Little Women*.

Louisa felt that Plumfield was based on the educational theories of her father and not purely a creation of her own. After many readers wrote her letters, asking if the school was real, Louisa even suggested to Elizabeth Peabody that she should republish *Record of a School* (the 1836 account of Alcott’s ill-fated Boston Temple School) so that another generation of Americans could see where this educational model found its roots. “‘I cannot,’ wrote Miss Alcott, ‘consent to receive the thanks and commendation due another, for the daughter only plays a grateful part of herald to the wise and beautiful truths of a father’” (Altstetter 348). Although Plumfield is so clearly modeled after Alcott’s Temple School, the discussion of the nature of education in *Little Women* was by no means confined to scenes that involved Plumfield. The accounts of Jo’s childhood and day-to-day life at Orchard House are an even more in depth and effective presentation of Bronson Alcott’s educational philosophies.

The four basic principles of Alcott’s pedagogical approach identified earlier in this paper bear repeating: (1) the importance of respecting the child as an individual; (2)
the school should be a place of comfort for the student; (3) antiquated instructional methods should be abandoned for newer, more innovative methods that engage the student; and (4) the purpose of education is to help students grow both intellectually and morally. *Little Women* provides the reader with a template upon which each of these principles is put into action, and the result is one of the most loved novels in American literature.

6.3.1. Respect for the Child

Alcott felt that no one was as close to innate goodness and divinity as was the child. This was a rather extraordinary conclusion for a man who was raised in a Calvinist environment which viewed children as little seeds of evil that needed to be forced into submission (Filler 34). Alcott’s dislike of corporeal punishment was a major theme in his theory of education, a theory that was built upon the importance of respecting the child. Alcott felt that physical punishment did little to curb improper behavior, and perhaps even encouraged violence in children (Fenner and Fishburn 60). When Louisa was a child, Alcott used corporeal punishment sparingly, saving it for only the most serious of offences. Often, he instead relied on more unusual methods of punishment; for instance, on one occasion, when the girls were fighting among themselves, instead of punishing the girls directly for their behavior, he instead imparted a punishment upon himself, depriving himself of his dinner (Matteson 65). This must have made quite an impression on Louisa, for the girls were mortified at the thought of being the reason for their father’s perceived discomfort.
Louisa May Alcott addresses the issue of corporal punishment in one of the most memorable scenes in Part 1 of *Little Women*. In this scene, the youngest March daughter, Amy, is struck by the teacher at school and forced to stand in shame at the front of the class: “During the next fifteen minutes that followed, the proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot. To others, it might seem a ludicrous or trivial affair, but to her it was a hard experience, for during the twelve years of her life she had been governed by love alone, and a blow of that sort had never touched her before” (75-76).

It is Marmee that is forced to react to this event, as Mr. March is still away fighting in the Civil War. While no great philosophy is articulated in this scene, Marmee’s feelings on the issue are clear in her actions as she asks Jo to deliver a note to the teacher, announcing that Amy will no longer be attending his school. Marmee does later, however, make her feelings on the matter extraordinarily clear when she states: “I don’t believe in corporal punishment, especially for girls” (L. Alcott 76). This act of removing Amy from the offending school mirrors Alcott’s own conclusion that his own children could best be educated at home, by his own methods (Shepard, Pedlar’s 218). This implied a failing in the current educational system, a system that Alcott had tried so hard to reform.

6.3.2. School as a Place of Comfort, Resembling Home

Alcott felt strongly that students should be comfortable at school. Often he spent his own meager salary on comfortable desks and chairs for his students, believing they would be more able to reach their potentials if they were comfortable in the
classroom environment. Louisa takes on this idea when Jo first proposes creating a school at Plumfield, the old mansion that was left to her by her “sharp-tongued” miserly Aunt March (L. Alcott 530). “I want to open a school for little lads—a good, happy, homelike school,” Jo pronounces and then goes on to explain why the comfort provided in the old mansion would make it the perfect place to educate children (L. Alcott 531).

Jo’s desire for a “homelike” school is also extremely telling, for this was one of Alcott’s main aims in his own classrooms. She declares that she wants to take in wayward boys, boys who have had little guidance: “I should so like to be a mother to them!” (L. Alcott 531). She then goes on to note that she has already had the experience of guiding a lost boy on the path toward self-improvement; did the March family not take their lonely, idle, neighbor Laurie under their wings when he was a young man, only to have him grow into a successful and prosperous young man?

Although Jo expresses her own appreciation for the parallel between the roles of mother and teacher, this belief is much more soundly expressed throughout the book in the character Marmee, who in the absence of her husband, is the household’s main spiritual teacher, deeply involved in the moral development of her children. This is a vastly Pestalozzian idea (Laird 89), but one that was embraced by Alcott when he worked hard in his own schools to create a classroom environment that closely mimicked the child’s home setting. Alcott believed that the mother was the child’s first teacher; therefore, the child’s true education began long before the years of formal education. In the March family, it seems that the lessons learned from that first teacher, often far exceeded those of the schoolmaster, both in import to daily life and to the growth of the
soul. Some examples of Marmee’s lessons for her girls will be examined here in the discussion of the Alcott’s last educational principles.

6.3.3. Revolutionary Methods

Examples of Alcott's abandonment of mundane teaching practices in favor of creative practices are scattered throughout *Little Women*. Marmee, for instance, frequently teaches the girls through metaphor, drawing connections between their own experiences and the moral lessons which she feels are so important to the spiritual and intellectual development of her children.

Early in the novel, the four girls are commiserating, mourning their poverty and lack of social station, when a letter from their father arrives. Mr. March’s letter does not dwell on the fact that he is far from home on Christmas, facing imminent danger on the front lines of the Civil War, where he is a chaplain in the Union Army. Instead, it talks of his love for his wife and daughters, and his hopes that they are all working hard on bettering themselves. After reading this letter, the girls are ashamed of themselves, having realized that their worries are trivial in comparison with those of their father and others who are far less fortunate (L. Alcott 8-10). To help the girls obtain some perspective and avoid self-pity, Marmee challenges the girls to take up their own “burdens” just as the hero Christian had in *Pilgrim’s Progress* and to undergo their own journey toward salvation, which is, in this case, self-betterment (L. Alcott 11). This use of the famous moral tale that was such a shaping force in Bronson Alcott’s own life is an effective example of a teacher using a literary work as a metaphor for life. Educational theorist Elizabeth Laird writes of this scene: “I . . . contend that Marmee’s interaction
with her daughters in this scene constitutes a clear case of teaching” (89); in other words, this was an educational act, not just an act of socialization on the part of the mother. Once again, this reflects Alcott’s agreement with Pestalozzi’s idea that the mother is the child’s first—and often best—teacher.

Not all of Louisa’s accounts of these unusual teaching methods were quite so lofty. When an adult Jo is visited at Orchard House by her suitor, Professor Bhaer, upon entering the parlor to present the professor to her father, a much more entertaining example of alternative teaching style is actively being practiced—namely, the use of one’s body to imitate and therefore learn the shapes of letters. This was a method that Alcott had used successfully with his own daughters.

Mr. Bhaer came in one evening to pause on the threshold of the study, astonished by the spectacle that met his eye. Prone upon the floor lay Mr. March, with his respectable legs in the air, and beside him, likewise prone, was Demi, trying to imitate the attitude with his own short, scarlet-stockinged legs, both grovelers so seriously absorbed that they were unconscious of the spectators, till Mr. Bhaer laughed his sonorous laugh, and Jo cried out, with a scandalized face, “Father, Father, here’s the professor!” (L. Alcott 513-514)

Episodes like these provide great amusement to the readers of Little Women, but are perhaps even more entertaining to those who recognize how much they are rooted in fact.

Of all his teaching practices, Alcott was most well known for his use of the Socratic method in the classroom, a method that allowed him to engage his students in elaborate dialogues on topics or intellectual or spiritual importance. Louisa May Alcott
acknowledges her father’s favorite teaching tool during her discussion of Plumfield, when, after hearing Jo present her progressive ideas for the perfect school, Mr. March is enthused because he “welcomed the thought of a chance for trying out the Socratic method of education on modern youth (531). This passage may be her most direct acknowledgement of the specific pedagogical methods of her father.

6.3.4. Education as a Means of Improving Moral Character

Alcott believed that children would come to correct moral conclusions if they were encouraged to examine their own moral natures. Many of his critics thought that this idea was ludicrous, that children were not capable of such complex thought, and that it might lead to egotism in children to have them spending so much time thinking about themselves. But Louisa showed that children are indeed capable of such complex moral thinking and understanding and that self reflection improved character rather than diminished it.

In Little Women, the March girls are repeatedly forced to grapple with their inner demons, knowing that they could only reach their full potential when those demons were conquered. Marmee responds by reminding the girls that in these difficult times they are already learning the lessons they need to be better people, but they just have to be able to identify these lessons in their own lives. She goes on to share a “sermon” with the girls, which consists of little more than the stories that the girls have already shared about their own disappointments and perceived injustices of the day. The girls are delighted, with the oldest, Meg, declaring, “Now, Marmee, that is very cunning of you to turn our own
stories against us” (L. Alcott 49). Marmee’s moral lessons are directly applicable to the girls’ lives and experiences, and therefore, more relevant to them.

Although Louisa attributes this method of teaching through the use of parables to Marmee, in her own childhood, it was Bronson Alcott who frequently taught the girls in this manner. “He also pointed out to his daughters the allegorical significance of mundane events in their young lives. When Louisa and Anna squabbled over a rocking chair, or when they competed for a pretty picture, Bronson seized the occasion to give them allegorical lessons of self-denial” (Halttunen 236). This is exactly the kind of moralizing that Louisa assigns to the mother in Little Women, though the inspiration is undoubtedly Bronson Alcott.

6.4 The Daughter’s Success Where the Father Had Failed

Few felt more passionately about their own ideas and philosophy than A. Bronson Alcott. Perhaps that was why his was such an affected and ineffective voice for his own message of educational reform. Louisa was better able to give voice to Alcott’s ideas in her own writing than Alcott was in his. The reason for this is clear: Louisa presented these ideas as a foregone conclusion, as the only way that she knew to raise and educate children. Her presentation of these ideas lacked the egotism for which Alcott was so infamous when trying to explain his own ideas and philosophies. Louisa presented Alcott’s educational theories in their simplest, most basic nature, where they were untainted by the politics of running a school, and the emotion and pride of one who believes that his ideas can reform an entire educational system. Alcott was habitually unable to find fault in his own work, and his regard for his own genius was not widely
shared. Perhaps Louisa, having spent so many years as a pupil of her father, was better able to critically interpret the basic foundations of her father’s theories and then put them into action, although in a fictional setting, far more effectively than the man himself. Regardless of why the daughter was so much more effective where the father had failed, Louisa, the daughter that he had once called a demon, would be the greatest known—and appreciated—part of his own legacy. “No child who had sat in his classroom or at his table had ever acted in a public fashion to carry on the work of conscience and creativity Bronson had begun. None, that is, until Louisa, the one who had once seemed least of all to embody or even to understand his principles” (Matteson 355). This rebellious daughter would give voice to Alcott’s principles more effectively than his lifetime of work had allowed him to do himself.
7.1. Bronson Alcott: A Reformer for Yesterday and Today

Bronson Alcott may be one of the most overlooked contributors to progressive educational thought in the United States. He believed strongly that every child held vast potential deep within himself, and that his role as a teacher was simply to help that child realize that potential. Alcott rejected the prevailing views of his time, views that portrayed children as little more than animals whose natural energy needed to be stamped out and controlled. Instead, this revolutionary teacher chose to harness that energy, that raw nature, and use it to help children develop both intellectually and physically. He went so far as to challenge young people to be metacognitive, forcing them to think about how they think. Alcott felt it was important that students should be self-reflective, able to examine the conclusions to which they came, and how they came to those conclusions. He inspired students with complex spiritual and intellectual questions that might challenge the brightest adults. And in his classroom, students flourished.

Outside of his classroom, however, the attitude toward his work was much different. Some of his critics used words like “blasphemous,” “absurd,” and “obscene” (Carlson 454), implying that what Alcott was doing was somehow deviant or perverse. But the shortcoming was their own, not the teacher’s. “Bronson Alcott’s greatest difficulty was that he was a century ahead of his time. Only a few of his more perceptive contemporaries recognized his value” (Harding xvi). Even more, some modern educational theorists have counted Alcott as one of an outstanding group of early educational reformers that have shaped the educational environment of today by
“articulat[ing] a philosophy and a praxis of active, student-centered learning, confident in the mind’s ability to construct meaning in every act” (Bickman 385).

Many of the main principles of Alcott’s educational theory—like the need to respect each child as an individual, the importance of comfort and exercise in education, and the need to help even the youngest students learn to make right moral decisions—are widely accepted in modern educational theory. Even within his own lifetime, in the twilight of his life, Alcott would begin to see his own ideals being put into action.

“Everywhere he went, he found methods having much in common with those he had introduced so long ago in the little Connecticut villages. Speaking to the teachers, Alcott commended friendly atmospheres and teaching that was adapted to the needs of individual pupils” (McCuskey 145).

While those are more general principles, some more specific examples of Alcott’s methods are now commonplace in the twenty-first century schools. “[M]any of Alcott’s original methods are established principles in the school systems of today. In time, almost all his theories, in one form or another, made their way into mainstream education” (ABAN, “Life of Bronson Alcott”). For instance, character education is now a major component of elementary education. Schools have spent millions of dollars and thousands of hours trying to institute programs aimed toward accomplishing exactly what Alcott did in his own classrooms: teaching students to make right moral decisions based on their own consciences and their own experience.

Even Alcott’s famous Socratic method, the basis of the Conversations that his contemporaries found so scandalous, have once again found their place in modern classrooms throughout the United States.
Teaching reformers claiming to present new ideas that are really old ones, very similar to what Alcott tried to do in his own schools. “The ideal of ‘interactive teaching’ is largely classical insofar as it reflects the influence of their consultations with analytical philosophers, whose claimed ‘standard sense’ of teaching is explicitly Socratic in origin.” (Laird 82)

In essence, several current trends of reform in education, including student-centered learning and multiple intelligences, are based in the same methods that Alcott had already instituted years before.

Educational theorists Darlene L. Witte-Townsend and Anne E. Hill praise Bronson Alcott’s *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* as a wonderful example of a method of teaching that allows the students to pull from themselves what they already knows, enabling them to make the profoundest of discoveries (384). They feel that Bronson Alcott is still a revolutionary, and that he should be an inspiration to modern teachers. In their view, the teaching profession would benefit from adopting some of Alcott’s idealism in the classroom: “Together, let us find the will to recognize a wider range of human sensibilities within the classroom and all that can mean. Let us not allow ourselves to believe that teachers or children should be content with anything less” (Witte-Townsend & Hill 388).

But this man was not without fault. Bronson Alcott was often a man of contradictions, asking complete humility from others, while his own egotism most certainly contributed to the chilly reception of many of his ideas. One of his aims in education was to create complex thinkers, children with open minds who could use those minds to form new ideas and come to new conclusions, yet he himself found it
impossible to understand why others did not come to the same conclusions that he did. Perhaps this is why his daughter Louisa, through her series of novels dealing both directly and indirectly with education, was better able to tell the story of what it was to be the student of Bronson Alcott. Her novel, *Little Women*, captivated a nation of children and parents alike. This story was a thinly veiled memoir of what it was like to grow up with Bronson Alcott for a father and a teacher. So to accept and admire *Little Women* is to indirectly accept and admire the pedagogical theory of Bronson Alcott.

It is safe to say Alcott never expected that his most troublesome daughter would be the key to his legacy; indeed, one can imagine that he envisioned a day within his own lifetime when his revolutionary ideas in education and childrearing would be celebrated. Through his prolific journaling and philosophical writing, Bronson Alcott tried for much of his life to convey his ideas to an unreceptive public. “His life had been more aspiration than achievement—for him the time was not ready—but he had written philosophically: ‘Our pursuits are our prayers; our ideas, our gods. And the more persistent our endeavors to realize these, the less distant they seem’” (Fenner & Fishburn 64). Though his pursuits may not have been fruitful in his own lifetime and his ideas were often met with scorn by his contemporaries, twenty-first century educators now recognize the promise in Bronson Alcott’s revolutionary approach to education and his belief in the importance of each and every child.
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