A Study of Louisa May Alcott
The Influences of Her Surroundings:
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and
Amos Bronson Alcott

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Introduction

In the town of Concord, Mass., four intelligent people lived, by chance or not, near each other at a time in the 19th century as if they were to achieve something great together. They were America's great philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, his disciple and an active thinker Henry David Thoreau, an idealist and educator Bronson Alcott, and his daughter and a writer Louisa May Alcott. This essay aims at demonstrating the influences on Louisa May Alcott of the three other people, as seen mostly in *Little Women*, her most famous autobiographical novel.

Four chapters are given to explain the elements that seem to construct Louisa's world, which are Simplicity, Unity, Vanity and Purity. Each of these elements seems to reflect part or all of the three people's ideas. Simplicity, Unity, and Purity may be the elements common among the four people, while Vanity may not. Vanity stands on the opposite side of Simplicity or Purity. However, its value seems early recognized by Emerson and highly appreciated by Louisa.

Louisa's journals, edited by Cheney, greatly help us understand *Little Women* and her world, because, as she says in one of the journals, "The [Alcott] children were always required to keep their journals regularly, and although there were open to the inspection of father and mother, they were frank, and really recorded their struggles and desires." (23) Nevertheless, it is disappointing that somehow few references to Thoreau appear in the books. Also, although some of her diaries were preserved and put in book form, Louisa admits others were burned—maybe not because they were boring but because Louisa wanted some of her true feelings hidden forever. Thus this fact does nothing but attract us to the relation between Louisa and Thoreau.

Any influences of the three must be discovered, for the close distance in actual life could denote their similarities in mind. Whether these questions can be proven or not, the following chapters would have the keys to the answer.

Chapter I. Simplicity

A strong and sweet scent that drifts in the world of *Little Women* may be the Simplicity of the March family. Their never-changing simple way of life appears to hold something essential. Certainly, they are not rich, and they are obliged to live a very frugal life in an unpretentious house. Yet the parents and the daughters, that is, all the March family come to understand the necessity of this simple life to learn life's true meanings. In fact, an easy, luxurious life is never described in the book, which could very probably have been achieved by the success of the promising young writer Jo. No, Louisa never writes such an easy-going story. Louisa sticks to Simplicity, and the concept seems to have several aspects in her novel. They are "simple living," "simple thinking," and "simple idealism," and I think they respectively reflect the thoughts of Thoreau, Emerson and Bronson Alcott, who were always with Louisa in her youth and must have had strong impacts on her.

i. Simple Living

As already mentioned, the poor March family leads an inconspicuous, quiet life. *Little Women* is thought to be based on the author's life itself. Her diary that records her girlhood tells that the Alcott family was so needy they had to spend days only with bread and water, no molasses or sugar.[1] Louisa, the grown-up Jo, says in her diary she is simple in her tastes. The four March girls with strong personalities utter in a simple manner their way of thinking in various scenes. For example, the narrator admires their simple dresses for a party. The shy Beth indicates her happiness lies simply in loving and being loved by her family. Nothing gorgeous attracts her at all.

At an early age, Louisa met Thoreau. In *Walden*, he says:

> Shall we always study to obtain more of these things, and not sometimes to be content with less? (33)

The words "these things" can be interpreted as convenient and luxurious things. He was a guide who introduced her to a "Fairyland,"[2] the natural world. From that moment, the young girl was ever bewitched by his magical guide, and it seems impossible to suppose that Louisa could live afterward without his effect. To our regret, there is no diary of Louisa left that clearly refers

[1] Louisa writes about the family's simple meals in her journal and it is also mentioned in her short account called "Transcendental Wild Oats" which talks of her poor girlhood days.

[2] Louisa called the world a "Fairyland," which was introduced by Thoreau. (Stern, 22)

to Thoreau. Still, the following verse makes us assume that Louisa must have sensed Thoreau's way of living and tried to adopt it as hers. Her journal says:

> But I'll be contented / With what I have got; / Of folly repented, / Then sweet is my lot. (46)

At that time around 1840, the Alcotts were facing difficulties. Louisa hoped to let her mother know about a wish for possessing a room of her own to enjoy singing and thinking, knowing that she cannot. The young Louisa keenly felt it was time not to be willful but to be good. Thus was the short poem produced.

Thoreau continues in *Walden*:

> Our life is frittered away by detail…. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand…. Simplify, simplify…. Our life is like… cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense. (88)

Thoreau takes a further step to simplicity; to be more precise, he suggests we should count our problems as little as possible. Emerson, Thoreau's master says:

> If we live truly, we shall see truly. (*Self-Reliance*, 157)

It thus seems that we cannot reach a higher spirit without the true living, in other words, the simple life. Living is the foundation of man; we accordingly should not neglect to endeavor for a better life. Moreover, simplifying connotes the best way to distinguish necessary from unnecessary things and to possess the sight for the natural law.

ii. Simple Thinking

When the word "simple" is applied to the mind, the state of "plain-minded" would be explicable. Emerson talks of metaphysics, on that ground, it gives a sort of an intelligent rule that is applicable. The rule has three points: focusing on your assignments, believing happiness is in yourself and going forward.

Directly one essential thought is found, it has to be followed without another idea at all. This might be Emerson's coherent belief. How then should "the essential" be proven? Hopefully, Chapter IV will be answering the question; thus the concept itself will be focused here. Emerson says in his essay *Self-Reliance*:

> Do that which is assigned you. (166)

What we must not do is naturally found in progress of doing what we must do. As a result it will bring the simple life which Thoreau insists on and the process itself builds up the spirit which

prefers simpler ways. Emerson pursues the singularity of thoughts and teaches its usage and effect in his essays, particularly in *Self-Reliance*. It can be said that Emerson and Louisa show that "the work" must be done and it is easy to find that work, for it usually lies right before our eyes. It is no wonder Jo devotes herself in daily housework.

Emerson also says:

> Accept the place the divine providence has found for you…. The secret of fortune is joy in our hands. (146, 163)

It is famous that Emerson and the Alcott family were keeping a good friendship. When Bronson Alcott could not find a job and the family was penniless, Emerson had the kindness to assist them with his coins and knowledge. Young Louisa knew well about his help and never forgot.[3] Thoreau also finds a secret on man's inside as well:

> A man must find his occasions in himself, it is true. (*Walden*, 109)

The upshot is that it depends on the state of mind whether the situation turns out to be good or bad, hopeful or unfavorable. Controlling our mind is in great need, and Jo also bespeaks it:

> Thank goodness, I can always find something funny to keep me up. (29)

In the chapter of "Burdens," the four sisters feel sorry for their own weakness and a thirst for dreams. Jo's merry jokes make the others laugh and help to blow away their despair. It may sound easy but it brings bright light to darkened hearts and faces. Once it is learned, it does work like magic for its owner whenever he wishes to use. Emerson says, "Accept the place," and it can be looked upon as realistic and persuasive because man has a tendency to blame the situation and to protect him from being accused. Under any circumstances, the very place one is standing on cannot belong to others but himself, for he alone singles out the delight and pleasure of it. In the case of the March family, Jo plays an important part. Without her, what would have become of the novel?

Emerson's essays, full of optimistic thoughts, appeal to the mass.

> Whenever a mind is simple and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away…. Life only avails, not the having lived. (*Self-Reliance*, 156, 158)

He was a philosopher who gives a great value on future rather than on past, and tomorrow rather than on yesterday. Jo March would agree with him, for she also likes new experiments and see what lies in the future. Her rule is kept at all times when the lively girl plays a game with her friends or plants some annual flowers in the garden. The new is intentionally thought to be more

[3] She calls him "an earthly Providence" in "Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson." (638)

profitable than the old. As is stated, being simple-minded has a great capacity to be open and is ready for any opinions to be laid before it. “A divine wisdom” may not appear without the simple mind. This is too complicated a thought for children to apprehend, notwithstanding. Therefore, she inspires its readers with Simple Thinking and Plain-mindedness because it can be assumed that she knows great philosophers’ ideas develop our mind and she must have been eager to tell how much good it does to ourselves.

iii. Simple Idealism

The other understanding of simplicity can be related with Idealism. The life of Bronson Alcott, who is surnamed as an “American Pestalozzi” will be a good example.[4] Bronson was such a decided man that many people frequently misunderstood him as a strange mystic. Yet he never compromised his ideal, which led him to success at last after many years. To maintain his ideal world, he needed to create a perfect vision with continuing efforts.

Emerson’s journals keep his impressions on Bronson here and there.

> He never cares for the pleasant side of things, but always truth and their origin he seeketh after. (Sealts Jr, 328)

Bronson consistently appeared to hold a noble ideal. “The pleasant side of things” in this case may refer to luxury which blind man’s eyes to see the necessary things. “Truth and their origin” could denote one basic rule existing in this whole world as both of the words are in singular form. Emerson also writes:

> In conversation, Alcott will meet no man who will take a superior tone… he lives in his moral perception,… He is cool, bland, urbane, yet with his eye fixed on the highest fact. (Plumstead, 346-347)

It would be natural he look wandering far from this reality because his educational utopia exists only in his mind. Thoreau’s journals preserve his correspondence with Bronson and he admits Bronson was a visionary and mystic:

> He is overlaid and concealed by a faith in the unseen and impracticable, habitually takes in the farthest star and nebula into his scheme. (Torrey I, 432)

Indeed, people in those days thought of Bronson as cold or insane as Thoreau feels he was “more intellect, less of the affections.” (Torrey I, 432) However, misunderstanding of others and their criticism could not drag him out of his world. So earnestly he searched for his world and

[4] Bronson studied on Pestalozzi about ten years before the birth of his first daughter. His influences and reflections are referred to in a book written by Mr. Usami.

never left it behind. The reason Emerson calls him "a wise man" or "He is a Man" might be because Bronson was not afraid of being misunderstood. After a long relation, Thoreau eventually understands Bronson's high thinking:

> He is broad and genial, but indefinite; some would say feeble; forever feeling about vainly in his speech and touching nothing. But this is a very negative account of him, for he thus suggests far more than the sharp and definite practical mind. The feelers of his thought diverge, — such is the breadth of their grasp. (Torrey V, 130)

He was a faithful Quaker and believed in the "inner light"; he in consequence connected the thought with education. His clear ideas never failed to "educate" the spirits out of man. When all is said and done, he was not just a teacher but an educator. Bronson held Temple School, which was open to any infants who wished to cultivate their knowledge. According to Thoreau, Bronson was:

> The most hospitable intellect, embracing high and low. For children how much that means. (Torrey I, 432)

Conducting pedagogy to young children was the only interest for the educator. Louisa explains it in her journal:

> … my father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child's nature, as a flower blooms, rather than crammed it. (29)

In the chapter "Daisy and Demi" the little ones learn alphabets and ask Mr. March many questions. Needless to say, it can be viewed as Bronson's lessons given to Louisa. His daughters were encouraged to make poems and dramas to see their development of creativity and language ability. Whenever the girls, Louisa in particular, used bad, unsophisticated words, father would often rebuke, have them look in the dictionary and feel ashamed themselves for the tongue. He even drew paintings himself if needed. He admired Socrates and often used dialogues. Louisa introduces many of the examples in the diary and here is one of them:

> Father asked us what was God's noblest work. Anna said *men*, but I said *babies*. Men are often bad; babies never are. (35)

Anna is the eldest and described as Meg in her novel. Louisa's intelligence is already seen in her answer. She was ten years old. After this question, the family had a long talk and Louisa felt better and cleared up. She must have been praised of her insight and proud of herself. As is seen in the chapter titled "Jo Meets Apollyon," Jo had to suffer and fight with her moods, that is, the enemy within. So did Louisa. Bronson tried to let her understand herself well with his own but

Socratic method. On top of that Bronson invited his intelligent and learned friends to give more lessons on botany, philosophy, music and every other subject. Emerson observes:

> I thought the experiment of engaging young children upon questions of taste and truth successful. A few striking things were said by them. I felt strongly as I watched the gradual dawn of a thought upon the minds of all that to truth is no age or season. It appears or it does not appear, and when child perceives it, he is no more a child; age, sex are nothing: we are all alike before the great Whole. (Sealts Jr, 175)

"Whole" might refer to Nature, for Emerson says Truth lies in Nature in his various essays. He must have been more convinced of the potential intelligence in infants and relate it to the intercourse with Nature. In front of Bronson, any children kept their hearts open so that he could hear what they really meant. None of them felt he was a hard, dreadful mystic as adults did. It was his only opportunity to realize his world to have a good time in frolics with children; thus he was so seriously absorbed.

Bronson was the man who stayed faithful to his ideal. He continued to face failure after failure, though it could not make him give up his ideal world. Bronson and some of his friends settled in a small town to realize their ideal world, which ought to bring a higher spirit to Man and was called "Fruitlands." Louisa's short story "Transcendental Wild Oats" represents this experiment. The little Louisa in actual life was not very happy, for her heart was missing someone when they moved:

> Louy could not help thinking that she would no longer see Mr. Emerson waking out under the stars. (Stern, 30)

Emerson did not join this project. Though he knew its wonderful concept, he truly predicted it would not go well, and it was verified shortly afterward. It was true. In the short account, Bronson and his wife Abba are introduced as follows:

> Here Abel Lamb[5], with the devoutest faith in the high ideal which was to him a living truth, desired to plant a Paradise, where Beauty, Virtue, Justice, and Love might live happily together, without the possibility of a serpent entering in… And here his wife, unconverted but faithful to the end, hoped, after many wanderings over the face of the earth, to find rest for herself and a home for her children. (12)

[5] Emerson says, "An enraged man is a lion. A lamb is innocence." (*Nature*, 15)

Louisa confesses in her journal it took much time to understand her father. She must have tried hard to describe him as much as she could. Also, there is a description in the story of many strange boarders subsiding at the Alcott's farm. It may reflect the fact that those people were actually welcomed by Bronson. Her journal says:

> Our poor little home had much love and happiness in it, and was a shelter for lost girls, abused wives, friendless children, and weak or wicked men. Father and Mother had no money to give, but gave them time, sympathy, help; and if blessings would make them rich, they would be millionaires. (68)

Jo in the last chapter also adopts many kids and takes care of them just like her father. His doctrines were acknowledged and conducted in some schools many years later and the realization of his world explains his simple idealism. His long-lasting fights and efforts may have exerted a favorable influence upon his daughters. The girls of the March family attract us with their dreams which seem up in the higher sky at first but after lots of struggles, they reach them. Especially it is well-depicted in Jo's authorship. Her talent and great efforts bring her a big success in the long run.

Chapter II. Unity

> The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage, at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. (*Walden*, 34)

Man's harmony with Nature is regarded as the common value among the four American authors discussed in this essay. Henry David Thoreau in particular devoted himself in researches into Nature and bewitched the others. In order to understand the true significance of Simplicity, experiences in the natural world and the viewpoint of unity would be indispensable. In brief, we should go back to a primitive life when people were living in the wildness. Nature hides secrets. Any of us have a chance to discover them if only we know some tips. Emerson explains it and Thoreau and Louisa demonstrate. There seem two ways for the discovery; that is perceptiveness and education.

i. Silent Intercourse

It was Emerson's favorite pastime to admire the rising sun, to take a stroll in the storm, and to think of this and that, walking under the stars and moonlight. He was actually inspired in the

woods and his observations and feelings were kept in his journals. He analyzes well the natural laws and most of his journal entries are used in his essays. Emerson's famous discourse *Nature* seems to ask a question, "Can you have intercourse with Nature?":

> The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference.…Its light flows into the mind evermore. (23, 17)

Emerson is indicative of a certain "light." Louisa would answer yes to the question above as she, at eleven, describes her impressions of the beautiful world lying before her eyes:

> All the trees were covered with ice, and it shone like diamonds or fairy palaces. (40-41)

Emerson says:

> … whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other. (*Nature*, 6)

This brings us to the consideration of how we catch the light, respond to Nature and accept her reply is the way to have intercourse with her.

In the meantime, Emerson would not have learned the deeper insights without Thoreau, in fact. Thoreau often visited Emerson and he enjoyed his company:

> My good Henry Thoreau made this else solitary afternoon sunny with his simplicity and clear perception. (Sealts Jr, 453)

The youth often invited the old man into the wonder of Nature and taught him to see the world with his own eyes. Emerson's journal entry speaks for his excitement:

> H.D.T. showed me the bush of mountain laurel, the first I have seen in Concord, the stem of pines and hemlock and oak almost gleamed like steel upon the excited eye. (Plumstead, 313)

Thoreau knew well about bushes and Emerson seemed to be bewitched by his magical guide. This impression must have been so strong that he mentions pines, hemlocks, oaks and many other plants in his writings. Talking about pines, Louisa also liked listening to them. At the age of twelve she writes in her diary that she went to the woods, sat and heard the pines sing for a long while. Even in *Little Women*, Louisa mentions the plant and calls it "the soft sigh." She seems to receive tenderness from pines. In the short account "Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson," says she:

> Many a gay revel has been held under the pines, whole schools taking possession of the poet's premises. (641)

With the consequence that "the poet's premises" spell Emerson's garden, pines may remind

her of Emerson and his comfort which helped her in many ways. To return to the subject, when Emerson was introduced to the beautiful world by Thoreau on his boat, he records it in detail in his journal:

> … all science, all history behind us and entered into Nature with one stroke of a paddle. Take care, good friend! I said, as I looked west into the sunset overhead and underneath, and he with his face toward me rowed towards it,… and stars came and said "Here we are," and began to cast such private and ineffable beams as to stop all conversation. These stars signify it and proffer it…. Yes, bright Inviters! I accept your eternal courtesy and will not mistake it for a bidding to a foolish banquet with men and women called rich and beautiful. (Plumstead, 454)

Emerson's ability to have intercourse with Nature can be seen in the description and his keen intuition enables him to feel its light from the first encounter. Also, it shows the friendship between Emerson and Thoreau. The youth's magic was so fascinating that it could attract not only Emerson but any people.

Thoreau would often take infants in the neighborhood into woods and walked introducing them to plants, berries and animals.[6] They also got into his boat and enjoyed the cruise as Emerson did. Louisa opened her eyes to watch the new world and for the first time observed cobwebs, squirrels, many kinds of flowers and berries. A few years later, she writes stories titled, "Flower Fables" or "Huckleberry." Over and above that, various animals show up in *Little Women*, and it expresses how Louisa took a careful look at living things, such as mice, squirrels, cats, crickets, ants, caterpillars, spiders, dragon-flies, and bees. It seems quite noisy. What makes it very curious is that Louisa's eyes follow small insects and animals which tend to be ignored or treated as vermin in the West. Her familiarity with those creatures is conceived in her expressions, such as "Amy chirped like a cricket," (9) "… enjoy the quiet and the society of a pet rat who lived nearby and did not mind her a particle. Jo had a game of romps with Scrabble [the rat's name by Jo]," (18-19) "an inquisitive daddy-long-legs," (88) "… all the little wood-people [squirrels and birds]… as if these were no strangers but old friends." (112) Furthermore, Beth is called "the Mouse" as she was "the pet of the family." (3) Ants and caterpillars are permitted to join lunch. Jo especially likes the rat Scrabble for she gives him the name and he is pleased and mourns at her reports. The most curious thing is the squirrel's interest in Laurie. Certainly,

[6] There is a picture book titled *Thoreau's Flute*, which describes how he guided Louisa and other kids into the woods.

Bronson and Emerson led Louisa to Nature and taught its beauty, yet they did not refer to small insects or animals. Louisa's mother always accepted her children's sufferings but was too busy to take care of other living things. There is one man who paid attention to the small sound which a mosquito makes or observed roles among mice and squirrels in the woods at Walden. Louisa must have been profoundly influenced by this nature-loving young man Thoreau and reflects on her experience in her work. What is more, Laurie very probably Thoreau in youth likes boating in the work and the sisters enjoy flower taking. When Louisa was young, she used to listen to the rain falling on the roof. Thoreau, too, describes the sound of rain in *Walden*. Though it may be a coincidence, I am of the opinion that the two had a common feeling and sense of nature all the same.

Louisa was born to be lively with Nature's invitation. She says her father's education always drew their attention to Nature and her beautiful forms and meanings, so his classes took place in the garden at times. All things considered, Bronson must have deeply admired the following belief of Emerson:

> A life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. (*Nature*, 20)

Her extraordinary energy let Louisa run wild, "learning of Nature what no books can teach." (Cheney, 30) She liked running and she feels she was a deer or horse in her previous life as Jo mourns "I wish I was a horse." (124) And there is an interesting fact that Emerson was the third guide who invited her to Nature, as written in "Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson":

> Often piling us into a bedecked hay-cart, he took us to berry, bathe, or picnic at Walden, making our day charming and memorable by showing us the places he loved; the wood-people Thoreau had introduced to him; or the wild flowers whose hidden homes he had discovered. (637)

ii. Faith

> In the woods, we return to reason and faith. (*Nature*, 6)

Emerson showed "the moral law radiates to the circumference" and the strongest that shine into man's eyes must be reason and faith. Reason may help when man is in hardships. Louisa, having spent much time in Nature, had several lessons there, preserved it all along when her family had to face the hard times, and grew strong-minded enough to stay as happy as she could. Her journal entry in 1850 says:

> The trials of life began about this time,… In summer we lived much as the

> birds did, on our fruit and bread and milk; the sun was our fire, the sky our roof, and Nature's plenty made us forget that such a thing as poverty existed. (58)

Seen in the light, faith may be recognized as a sort of religious feeling, for it has the force to cheer us up. Her early journal entry says:

> Something born of the lovely hour, a happy mood, and the unfolding aspirations of a child's soul seemed to bring me very near to God; and in the hush of that morning hour I always felt that I "got religion," as the phrase goes. A new and vital sense of His presence, tender and sustaining as a father's arms, came to me then, never to change through forty years of life's vicissitudes, but to grow stronger for the sharp discipline of poverty and pain, sorrow and success. (30)

As Emerson explains, there is some sacred light flowing in nature, and Louisa feels the sacredness. Besides, the feeling comes all of a sudden and man senses it with his intuition. It may be indefinable but certainly Louisa perceives it with her whole body. Her journal entries often begin with the phrases, "I ran into the woods," "played in the woods," "I played in the snow." However, she did not go to Nature just for fun but could learn from her to live her tough life. She also writes:

> I had an early run in the woods… I stopped at the end of the walk and saw the sunshine out over the wide "Virginia meadows." It seemed like going through a dark life or grave into heaven beyond. A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there, with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of nearness all my life. (45)

Emerson talks of the sun as follows:

> Few adult persons can see nature…. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. (*Nature*, 6)

Louisa is the one who feels the sun with her heart. On a different day, her journal depicts the beauty of the rising sun and it fits Emerson's idea.

> I remember running over the hills just at dawn one summer morning, and pausing to rest in the silent woods, saw, through an arch of trees, the sun rise over river, hill, and wide green meadows as I never saw it before. (30)

In Louisa's case, "the solemn feeling" shines into her heart. Why was she able to catch such a feeling? The answer may be found in Emerson's text in the same discourse:

> Every animal function… shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments. (23)

It can be said that the natural laws are open to man at all times and it depends on man if they are noticed and appreciated or not. The child is taken as the purest, for he can see the things as they are, know nothing at all. Emerson has admired extravagantly the purity of child, and declares children and savages are equal. Despite the wildness, the equality proves a simple mind which leads a simple and primeval life as Thoreau indicated. Emerson believes children are supposed to be able to make the best use of the natural environment. He writes in the beginning of his essay *Self-Reliance*:

> Cast the bantling on the rocks,/ Suckle him with the she-wolf's teat,/ Wintered with the hawk and fox,/ Power and speed be hands and feet. (145)

It is not about raising partially strong men but any ordinary men, because Emerson believes in man's potential wild ability. The harsh education seems a little familiar in *Little Women*. In the last chapter, Jo Bhaer tries as if she put Emerson's idea into practice when she releases her children in the garden.

> Jo never felt any anxiety when he [little Teddy] was whisked up into a tree by one lad, galloped off on the back of another, or supplied with sour russets by his indulgent papa, who labored under the Germanic delusion that babies could digest anything, from pickled cabbage to buttons, nails, and their own small shoes. (394)

It is quite close in point of the boldness and children here are provided with wild natural circumstance. Thoreau is one of the analyzers who respect the relation between infants and Nature. He says:

> Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men. (*Walden*, 92)

He has come to the conclusion that man cannot enjoy his life just because he misunderstands that he became "wiser by experience, that is, by failure." If we wish to restore the heart of a child, all we have to do is accept Thoreau's advice, that is, to start a simple life, leaving airs.

Chapter III. Vanity

Vanity resides in every man. The selection of its use shows who the person is. In the world,

the poor, the common, and the rich live. Man has a tendency to covet what he has not. It is often regarded as bad, because sometimes it produces an evil. Still, it also functions as encouragement. In *Little Women*, the March family releases a subtle good scent with their simple life. Suppose simplicity alone is described. It would give an empty impression without fragrance. Then, what is that essence? Perhaps, it could be the existence of the rich, such as the Moffats and the Kings. It is natural for every one to dream of something great which she does not have at the moment. In other words, vanity or envy is an emotion that most human beings find difficulty in parting with. Those two wealthy houses attract Meg most who longs for luxury. But when she actually enters such a world, she knows its real value, and what makes this novel popular is the new value, which elucidates the position of luxury.

i. Glittering as Gilded Gold

Vanity tends to be "not very good" when it goes too far. Emerson says:

> When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires --- the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise --- and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost. (*Nature*, 17)

As above-mentioned, the simplicity of mind and life is the definite rule to stay in a higher living. Any ideas that break this simplicity are against Emerson's intelligent law. "An interpreter of the will" may be thought of intuition within man which senses the natural world. Only with it we learn the natural law, in a nutshell, the laws for living. And so, it will not be exaggerating to say that losing such an interpreter is as losing our life and soul. In the novel, Meg the eldest and Amy the youngest have a thirst for wealth. It is recognized in descriptions where the two girls are envious of beautiful dresses and luxurious lives which they have not but other people have enjoyed. At the Moffats', Meg sees their indifference to culture, unsophisticated talks and lazy days. At the Kings', the inhabitants constantly complain and argue, in spite of their gorgeous house as their names suggest. Their state of living is completely opposite to what the March family find valuable. Right in front of the fine things, Meg has a serious thought about what is true happiness. Unlike Meg or other girls, Jo is never interested in feminine luxury. She does not care about how she looks or what other people think of her. Therefore, her eyes are sharp enough to see through vanity or airs which people wear. Louisa says in her diary:

> To R.W.E.[merson] I owe much of my education. May I be a worthy pupil of such

man! (104)[7]

Louisa has every respect for the philosopher. Emerson's works had been worshipped by this girl since she was fifteen and he stayed a master, but secretly. He was the man who also sees people's airs and hates them. Emerson declares he is not afraid of incoherence. However, when he finds truth his words and behavior had to perfectly match.

> A great man is coming to eat at my house. I do not wish to please him; I wish that he should wish to please me…. Let us hurl in the face of custom and trade and office,… a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the centre of things. (*Self-Reliance*, 153)

The example is based on his own life. Louisa writes of his braveness in "Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson":

> I have often seen him turn from distinguished guests, to say a wise or kindly word to some humble worshipper, sitting modestly in a corner, content merely to look and listen, and went away to cherish that memorable moment long and gratefully. (639)

He is known to be a man with a great love for solitude as well as for justice. The true sense alone enables man to turn away from the worldly power and to keep a warm and equal heart. Emerson appears to care about equality and thus the keen eloquent essay was written. Louisa is an heir to this idea. Jo hates cringe as much as vanity, and it is described in her speech in the chapter on "Calls." She prefers poor Tommy who is good and clever to Tudor who is the cousin to a lord.

> Envy is ignorance; imitation is suicide. (*Self-Reliance*, 146)

Emerson suggests that dresses, speeches, thoughts, any things that man borrows from others, will instantly destroy his existence. Viewed from this angle, decoration loses man's spiritual balance with its weight. Though it looks too simple, it is wise to cherish his spirit itself and develop it. Emerson knows:

> It is very hard to be simple enough to be good. (Sealts Jr, 409)

Of Jo's simple taste I already stated in Chapter I. It sometimes has an edge especially to Meg's airs. When she wears a hat aslant, Jo perceives it and says:

> It will fly off at the first puff. (99)

Jo might wish to blow vanity away from her sister. With Emerson's strong spiritual support,

[7] Louisa expresses great admiration for him also in "Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson."

Jo never gives in when it comes to unnecessary decoration, and let other people know about it in her own cheerful way. One night, Meg arrays herself in the plain gowns with a smart cap, and Jo says bluntly to her, "Poor folks shouldn't rig." It can be said that to Jo, not "the cap" but "the plain gown" has to be the center of attention. Jo—Louisa in her girlhood—shows no interest in such things as accessories for living, because she was not aware of outside but inside of man. She says about her wealthy aunt as follows:

> I don't envy her much, in spite of her money, for after all rich people have about as many worries as poor ones, I think. (33)

There seems to be another person who knew Meg's mind was taken over by gilding. Laurie lives in a mansion which is wonderfully decorated inside, but he feels as if in a prison, for what he needed was a little bit more of freedom. In the chapter titled "Meg goes to Vanity Fair," Meg clothes herself in beautiful dresses that belong to someone else, adorned with ornaments. Meg is happy until Laurie shows up and says, "I don't like fuss and feathers." Even though Meg knows he has the point, she feels ashamed of herself and offended. The young man is described as having the same taste as Jo. It may be presumed that there was a model for him in Louisa's plan. Laurie lives in a house with a statue of Plato and with an old man whose study is big and book-shelved. He is Italian-looking and speaks French and graduated from college with honor. Is it impossible to think of a man living under the extreme similar situation? The name Laurie seems to give a hint into the bargain. There must be hundreds of French names and Louisa could have thought of another one. "Laurie" can be spelled in different alphabets, such as Lorry or Rollie. Still, it had to be Laurie maybe because it slightly sounds similar to Henry and it contains the spelling of Thoreau. Furthermore, a roman-nosed youngster who has a French ancestor was actually living for a while with an old man who had numbers of books and respected Plato. The youth is Thoreau. He says in *Walden*:

> I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out the window in disgust. How, then, could I have a furnished house? I would rather sit in the open air, for no dust gathers on the grass, unless where man has broken ground. (34)

It is very much like Thoreau in respect of preferring a waste land than a mansion. "The furniture of my mind" may suggest man's humanity, and "dust" his defects or weaknesses. Thoreau indicates a certain catharsis, for dust is naturally born and appears everywhere. Meg is lucky to have such a strong and wise sister and a nature-loving friend. Without the abrasive of

those two, Meg would have rusted on her gilded self. It seems Louisa conveys the true meaning of "All is not gold that glitters."

ii. Shining as Stars

Light is effective in the darkness. The March family leads a simple life but never loses their hopes and dreams. Even Jo encourages her disappointed sisters with her unpromised and imagined success. This is not just a joke for the occasion but means Jo does not hate wealth itself. Emerson says:

> … a certain compensation balances every gift and every defect…. The same dualism underlies the nature and condition of man… Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good. (*Compensation*, 173)

Emerson was against evil vanity. Nevertheless, his balanced view indicates our evil side sometimes works for the good one. This may be Emerson's very original idea which is hardly seen in Thoreau or Bronson. Louisa's faithful worship of the philosopher led her to understand even this point, and the value is reflected in "Marmee." When Meg attends a party held at the Moffats', she behind her back happens to hear a gossip women in the high class will like. They talk of Meg and Laurie and believe her mother attempts to make her daughter rich. Meg feels furious at the false rumor afloat but she does not object. It is of interest because in her heart, Meg must have afflictions that she should not believe it but wishes a little that even the fragment of the talk could come true, not because of Laurie but because of the promised luxurious life. When she comes back home, she confesses it to Marmee. The readers will assume Marmee would be sorry for her poor daughter or be offended at the ignorant and talkative women. However, when Meg asks her if she has such plans like the rumor, Marmee replies:

> Yes, my dear, I have a great many. (78)

Marmee, unexpectedly to the readers, understands what the gossip means and even admits the rumor implies her wish. She is so realistic that she expresses man's true desire. She continues:

> I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected… I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience. It is natural to think of it, Meg…. My dear girls, I *am* ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world,… I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace. (78-79)

She makes this eloquent speech after Meg's confession and her audience is Meg and Jo. Louisa's realism is perfectly instilled in her words. It follows that forbidding all vanity is nonsense. True, Jo hates vanity and so does the author Louisa, especially in her early days. Yet as she grows up, she might come to be calm and generous enough to accept this negative-looking value, which is usually denied. It comes to this, in short, that it is, more or less, necessary to have good vanity in order to enrich our life. For as Emerson approves and says, "Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good."

Chapter IV. Purity

The additional charm about the novel is purity of the four sisters. They are poor but pure, and that is why they are loved by the world. When we take action, we will need to follow a certain voice. And then, what does the voice whisper to us and where does it come from? It can be thought it is the Heart, that is to say, to live as the heart leads. What could it signify? It would be appropriate to find the answer in Emerson's words:

> The only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it. (*Self-Reliance*, 148)

There appear to be several types of "constitution," for they differ, depending on persons. Each sister has her own constitution and its progress is beautifully seen toward the end. Here, let us see one by one.

i. Meg's Airs

Her vanity was already testified and she realizes its value. As the story goes, Meg strives to work particularly when she marries and becomes a wife. In the chapter titled "The First Wedding," we see her change. It would be conceivable that she would look adorable in a wonderful wedding dress and other flowery decorations. But such an expectation is easily betrayed. Louisa narrates:

> Meg looked very like a rose herself;… Neither silk, lace, nor orange-flowers would she have. "I don't want to look strange or fixed up to-day," she said…. "I wish to look and be my familiar self." (200)

This reminds us of Emerson's description of roses:

> Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or

> the blowing rose. These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. (*Self-Reliance*, 157)

Meg wishes to look as she is even at the memorable ceremony. She no longer needs to play a doll that is adorned with this and that or feathers or Moffat's dress. She is the rose proudly blooming in front of her people who never miss the true beauty in her, and it seems she finally says, "I am your Meg." A rich aunt comes to celebrate her nephew but she frowns to see the quiet wedding. She has much money but no taste for simplicity. Meg hears her complain and she reproves the chatter box for her old value:

> I'm not a show, aunty, and no one is coming to stare at me, to criticize my dress, or count the cost of my luncheon. I'm too happy to care what any one says or thinks, and I'm going to have my little wedding just as I like it. (202)

All of her sentences begin with the words, "I am," and they indicate her developed strong mind as Emerson has expected. He also says:

> My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should be glittering and unsteady. (*Self-Reliance*, 149)

Mr. Lawrence, who lives with Laurie and can be considered as Emerson, attends this wedding[8] and enjoys the simple moment to his heart content. Meg once longed for something "glittering" but now she on her own finds delight in "a lower strain of genuine and equal." She chooses to live as she is and does not have to care about being good-looking or "detail" as Thoreau said. She prefers blistered hands to beautiful ones with no wrinkles as she used to be proud of. Meg has made great progress and is getting ready for a new life with her partner.

ii. Jo's Moods

Louisa had a big problem in girlhood. The older she becomes, the more it bothers her. It was the bad temper as already mentioned. In a certain way, a bad temper might be a proof of her clear thoughts. It will turn out to be passion in sum if it works for good. Emerson says:

> the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. (*Self-Reliance*, 150)

[8] The wedding may be based on Anna's. As Mr. Lawrence did, Emerson also celebrates with a kiss. Louisa says, "I thought that honor would make even matrimony endurable, for he is the god of my idolatry, and has been for years." (122)

Emerson indicates it is easy to follow the world's opinions or keep his will in solitude but the most great and difficult is to keep the solitary mind in front of the mass. Jo seems to have the courage to act it out and does not mind her funny looking even though she could be thought as queer or boyish, however hard Meg tries to tell that is not sophisticated. Thoreau says:

> To him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, Persevere, even if the world call it doing evil, as it is most likely they will. (*Walden*, 70)

Jo's action is not evil but something the world definitely looks down on. Laurie sends her a big funny straw hat which is absolutely behind the times, yet she never gets discouraged but grows more passionate. She bravely wears it at a camp held by Laurie with some of his English friends. No wonder her sisters are against the idea, or the English people are surprised at the funny thing on her head. Suffice it to say that the hat represents her tight bond with Emerson and Thoreau whom she respects.

At the first encounter with Laurie, Jo tells him not to mind being bashful:

> Laurie wasn't offended at being accused of bashfulness; for there was so much good-will in Jo, it was impossible not to take her blunt speeches as kindly as they were meant. (40)

His brushed face explains she is right. At that time, he was a prisoner of his mansion, having no friends around nor opportunity to get outside. Her pure advice persuaded him. It is thinkable Emerson would have smiled upon Jo's blunt words, for he says:

> Rough and graceless would be such greeting, but truth is handsomer than the affection of love. (*Self-Reliance*, 148)

Judging from his statement, Jo's thoughtful audacity appears to be rewarded by any type of man as a result. At the age of thirty, Louisa was asked to try the vocation of teaching at a Kindergarten, and she did her best after many struggles and tagging. In five months or thereabouts, she is resolved to quit for lack of real foundation and she thought there was nothing to learn for the kids. A man told her to keep teaching because he thought she could not write, however, her strong willfulness allowed her to reply, "I won't teach; and I can write, and I'll prove it." And she did. The long and the short of it is that she apparently followed her heart, and it displays the spirit of self-reliance.

iii. Beth's Happiness

Beth has a special constitution. All she wishes is the happiness of her family and of the few

people she loves as though no envy or doubt exists. She expresses her sympathy by action and feels joy and sadness which belong to others. Emerson says:

> Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation. (*Self-Reliance*, 166)

Beth seems as if she does not know how to imitate, and her pure happiness may be regarded as "her own gift." Her life is short but her mind is so matured that every moment she was able to appreciate and enjoy. In the novel, she often visits Mr. Lawrence, which astounds her family. She treasures her friendship with him, though he is believed a hard, scary, square-headed man. The girls need a lot of courage to get close to him; there seems to be obstacles in the way, while Beth had nothing. Her crystal purity leads her to the man's mansion as she was swallowed up. To sum up, it amounts to this, that her philosophic ripeness was exactly similar to that of Mr. Lawrence.

iv. Amy's Selfishness

Amy is the youngest of all but strongly wishes to be a sophisticated woman in the high class and her precocity vastly amuses us. She at times behaves as if she was the center of the world but the girl is so innocent that her sisters cannot help smiling upon her. After she is emotional, Amy is always resolved to be good. Still, she seems satisfied with the fact that she actually made a resolution, and soon goes back to what she is. In the chapter "Merry Christmas," Amy learns the first self-sacrifice:

> I only meant to change the little bottle for a big one, and I gave *all* my money to get it, and I'm truly trying not to be selfish any more." (11)

The sisters decide to use money just to buy a present for their Marmee. At first, Amy prepared for a little bottle so that she could buy something for herself, too. Nevertheless, as the time comes, she appeared to be ashamed of her stinginess and went out to get a big one. By and by she tries her best not to annoy her sisters and bother parents. But she is too young to be perfect. In "Jo Meets Apollyon," she makes the biggest mistake, perhaps the worst memory of her life. Meg and Jo go to the theatre with Laurie, and Amy is not invited. She gets furious at Jo, for she would not take her no matter how hard Amy asks. Next day, Jo is taken over by the Apollyon and never forgets what Amy has done. Any readers would sympathize with Jo because Amy burned her scripts that Jo spent much time and energy writing. In this respect, it can be said that what Amy did was the consequence of her honesty. Emerson courts her:

> A boy is in the parlor…tries and sentences them [people and facts] on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys,… He cumbers himself never about

consequences, about interests; he gives an independent, genuine verdict. (*Self-Reliance*, 147)

He admits a child is irresponsible but calls him brave because he is free-minded. He does not think of what the result will be and acts as his heart bids. Amy has this spirit. To be sure, this is very selfish of her to burn such precious scripts. Nevertheless, she had to do it because it was her genuine verdict. Another example of Amy is seen in the chapter "Consequences." She joins a fair and sells her handmade works. Then, she is disgraced but keeps a smile upon her lips and acts in a dignified manner. Louisa accounts:

> … when we make little sacrifices we like to have them appreciated, at least; and for a minute Amy was sorry she had done it, feeling that virtue was not always its own reward. But it is, as she presently discovered. (245)

Even though she is humiliated, she never loses reason to do the right thing. It is natural she regret her good deed but she did as her heart told. She was, like Meg, always aware of how she looks and what is in fashion. Thus glittered her jewelry upon her. Through experiences, she gradually notices jewelry cannot make her graceful. All things considered, it follows that her selfishness took shape into self-sacrifice and her true beauty begins to glow as she really expects.

Conclusion

Louisa's head appears to be full of the influences of Emerson, Thoreau and her father, and it is clearly seen in her journal and her novel *Little Women*. After it was published, Bronson Alcott visited Europe and delivered a speech on New England writers. It is agreeable that he was asked to include Louisa in his topic of Emerson, Thoreau, and other eminent authors. Also, every one introduced him as the father of the little women.

Her works is proven to contain quite many elements of Emerson, Thoreau and Bronson. Jo's partner is German and has a noble, bold and flexible mind. Meg marries a man with a gift of talent and is good at the German language. We could presume that they may be the reflection of Emerson because he also respects Goethe and admires the German philosophy. The simple life of the March family can be looked upon as a demonstration of Thoreau's ideas. The relationships with children are almost like the records of Bronson's education. *Little Women* is the literary achievement of combining the thoughts of those three philosophers in Concord.

Louisa and the Alcott family might have been substantially a poor family. Still, having Bronson as her father, Emerson and Thoreau as their neighbors, she lives in a wonderful land

which is full of woods. Viewed from her surroundings, she, in the final analysis, must be proud that she is richer than anyone else in the world.

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