

Thoreau's Influence upon Louisa May Alcott

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I. Introduction

As a child, Louisa May Alcott attended the Concord Academy, which was run and taught by Thoreau, for her father wanted her to study nature with him. Since her father was a good friend of his, Thoreau was “like a big brother” to her. By describing various phenomena of the natural world as if they belonged to a fairyland, Thoreau opened her eyes to the enchanting world of nature. As a result, at the age of 16, Louisa May Alcott started to write fairy tales for Ralph Waldo Emerson's child Ellen. The tales were published as “*Flower Fables*,” her first small book, when she was 22 years old (*JLMA* 18). These tales eventually led to her world-famous juvenile novels. Thoreau's influence upon her, then, was important in exciting her imagination and helping evolve her creative ability. Interestingly, how Thoreau treated and amused children, along with his attitude toward nature, is revealed in her novels through the characters modeled on him.

In this study, three novels by Louisa May Alcott—*Moods*, *Work*, and *Eight Cousins*—will be discussed with three characters modeled on Thoreau in focus. As Thoreau attached great importance to the art of living, understanding his mode of life and his personality should lead to understanding his philosophy and principles. In this sense, it is worthwhile analyzing the three characters, through whom one can see how Alcott saw Thoreau with the eye of a child, a pupil, and a younger friend. Significantly, Thoreau's important educational ideas can be detected in the actions of each character. This will be discussed in more detail as we proceed.

II. Louisa May Alcott's Attitude Toward Thoreau's Death

As Thoreau's *Journal* has no entries for more than forty days from two days before his brother John's sudden death, so Louisa May Alcott's *Journals* shows few entries and no mention of Thoreau while he was seriously ill and long after his demise, though she entered her sister Lizzie's death in her journal for March 14, 1858 (*Journals* 88-89). Her father Bronson Alcott had his students all attend Thoreau's funeral, Emerson pronounced his eulogy, and “the Stanzas” by Channing¹ was sung. The funeral must have been, to borrow Emily Dickinson's words, one of “the solemnest of industries enacted”² in Concord, and Louisa May herself attended it, yet she never referred to it in her *Journals*, either.

However, she did write about Thoreau on May 11, 1862, five days after his death, in her letter to Sophia Ford, her former teacher.³ In the letter Louisa May describes how Thoreau was when her father

Bronson Alcott visited him the day before he died. Her description coincides with what we find in Bronson Alcott's *Journals* for May 6, 1862 (*JAB* 347).⁴ Concerning Emerson's address at the funeral, she criticizes it as "good in itself but not appropriate to the time or place" except for the last few sentences delineating a flower called "Adelvezia" or "noble purity": "I think our friend's life was a search for this rare flower, & I know that we see him now we should find him adorned with profuse garlands of it for none could more fitly wear them ("A Sprig of Andromeda" 9). Further she continues :

If ever a man was a real Christian it was Henry, & I think his own wise & pious thoughts read by one who loved him...convinced many & touched the hearts of all. It was a lovely day clear & calm, & spring like...it seemed as if Nature wore her most benignant aspect to welcome her dutiful & loving son to his long sleep in her arms. ...though his life seemed too short, it would blossom & bear its fruit for us long after he was gone, & that perhaps we should know a closer friendship now than even while he lived. (*Ibid.* 10)

The letter conveys the writer's deep understanding of and her grief over the loss of her friend and teacher who was "like a big brother" to her. The fact that there is no mention of Thoreau's death in her *Journals* may serve as a proof of her deep sorrow.

Although Louisa May Alcott was merely a child at the time when Thoreau took up residence at Walden, he must have left a lasting impression upon her as indicated by the statement which she made years later :

[He] used to come smiling up to his neighbors, to announce that the bluebirds had arrived, with as much interest in the fact as other men take in messages by the Atlantic cable.... He gravely informed us once, that frogs were much more confiding in the spring, than later in the season; for then, it only took an hour to get well acquainted with one of the speckled swimmers, who liked to be tickled with a blade of grass, and would feed from his hand in the most sociable manner. (qtd. in *Days* 192)

Similarly, mourning Thoreau's death, she wrote a poem, in which the "bluebird," whose arrival gave Thoreau such delight in the block quotation above, "chants a requiem" for him :

*We sighing said, "Our Pan is dead;
His pipe hangs mute beside the river;
Around it wistful sunbeams quiver,
But Music's airy voice is fled.
Spring came to us in guise forlorn;
The bluebird chants a requiem;
The willow-blossom waits for him;—
The Genius of the wood is gone."*

Then from the flute, untouched by hands,

*There came a low, harmonious breath:
 "For such as he there is no death;—
 His life the eternal life commends;
 Above man's aims his nature rose.
 The wisdom of a just content
 Made one small spot a continent,
 And turned to poetry life's prose.*

*"Haunting the hills, the stream, the wind,
 Swallow and aster, lake and pine,
 To him grew human or divine,—
 Fit mates for this large-hearted child.
 Such homage Nature ne'er forgets,
 And yearly on the coverlid
 'Neath which her darling lieth hid
 Will write his name in violets.*

*"To him no vain regrets belong
 Whose soul, that finer instrument,
 Gave to the world no poor lament,
 But wood-notes ever sweet and strong.
 O lonely friend! he still will be
 A potent presence, though unseen,—
 Steadfast, sagacious, and serene;
 Seek not for him—he is with thee." (LMAB 121-22)*

This poem on Thoreau's flute was first composed at night at the Union Hotel Hospital while she was working as a nurse during the Civil War. Although it slipped from her memory because of stress, she retrieved it later during her recuperation from a severe illness (Cheney 139). The poem had not been shown to anybody until she herself secretly delivered it to Nathaniel Hawthorne. His wife Sophia showed it to the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, which resulted in its appearance in the magazine "as a tribute" to Thoreau (Meigs 135).⁵ As articles were published anonymously in those days, Longfellow mistakenly assumed that the writer of the poem was Emerson, who was considered to be one of the most prominent writers in America at that time (Ibid. 135-36).

III. Thoreau as Model of Characters in Louisa May Alcott's Works

Important characters in Louisa May Alcott's works are often suggestive of those who actually lived in the society to which she belonged. Among the characters, the most conspicuous are Geoffrey Moor and Adam Warwick in *Moods*, and Rev. Power and David Sterling in *Work*. According to Elbert and Kasson, the editors of *Moods* and *Work*, respectively, Geoffrey Moor is modeled on Emerson, Rev. Power on Theodore Parker, and both Adam Warwick and David Sterling on Thoreau (*Moods* xxx, *Work*

xxiv). As Louisa May Alcott writes in her *Journals*: “I wrote from my own life & experience & hope it may suit some one & at least do not harm,” it may not be too difficult for the reader to associate these characters with actual persons (*JLMA* 133). Especially, Adam Warwick and David Sterling seem to reveal the true qualities of Thoreau which the author keenly perceived.

It is intriguing that the two characters are both the object of the true love of the main character in each novel—Sylvia Yule and Christie Devon. Significantly, in the introductory part of *Little Men*, we find the remark: “In the same year, an adult novel, *Moods*, based on her love for the famous American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, was published.” Although the authenticity of this remark cannot be verified, it is well worth noting. It may be equally important that she began to write *Moods* in June, completing it in October 1863, and that she had already written “several chapters” of *Work* in October 1864—all happened within two years after Thoreau’s death (*JLMA* 120-21, 132).

IV. “Adam Warwick” in *Moods*

Although some analyze “Adam Warwick” as a person with a dark side like “Rochester” in *Jane Eyre*, Warwick is actually described as a man with a pure heart who has stoic principles of his own, and above all, brave and “manly.” This last quality is repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel. Henry James, who criticizes his “disagreeable” personality, admits that “Mr. Warwick is plainly a great favorite with the author” (James 220).

In the novel, Warwick is depicted as a “heroic type of man—”broad-shouldered, strong-limbed, and bronzed by wind and weather,”—who has “a great and tender heart” (*Moods* 36, 207). The main character Sylvia, when she first sees him, notices that his gray eyes seem to “pierce through all disguises,” his nose is “eminent,” his beard like that of a statue of a portly saint, and that “power, intellect, and courage” are “stamped on face and figure, making him the manliest man” she has ever seen (*Ibid.* 36). Her brother Mark, on the other hand, describes him as a “virtuous” man who “possesses great nobility of character, great audacity of mind, and leads a life of the sternest integrity” (*Ibid.* 37). It is possible to infer that the author associated these features and qualities, if not all of them, with those of Thoreau.

Also, there are some scenes which suggest strong resemblances between Thoreau and Warwick. For the first example, a sparrow, attracted by Warwick’s whistle, stops twittering and without fear flies to his palm to peck some crumbs (*Ibid.* 55). For the second, Warwick is surrounded by a group of boys who marvel at what he produces “with knife, stick, and string” (*Ibid.* 68). These scenes correspond with the author’s and others’ childhood memories of the “expeditions” led by Thoreau (*Bedell* 66).

For the third example, Warwick tells Sylvia about his “sojourn among the Indians,” through which he has learned a great deal about “their woodcraft, arts, and superstitions” (*Moods* 48). Thoreau, who loved nature and attracted wild animals and birds, knew how to amuse children and had a profound interest in the native Americans, as shown in his own words: “Nature must have made a thousand revelations to them [the Indians] which are still secrets to us” (*Main Woods* 181). Therefore, the three scenes described above serve as good illustrations of how Thoreau actually treated little birds and children and how he respected the Native Americans, or the “Indians,” for their “intelligence” which the white men did not possess (*Correspondence* 491).

Furthermore, on “Warwick’s Essays” we find the narrator’s comment: “Young men received the

Essays as brave protests against the evils of the times, and old men felt their faith in honor and honesty revive. The wise saw great promise in it, and the most critical could not deny its beauty and its power" (*Moods* 194). It may be possible to apply this comment to Thoreau's essays. Insightfully, through Mark's utterance the author further notes :

"... He [Warwick] is too fierce an iconoclast to suit the old party, too individual a reformer to join the new, and being born a century too soon must bide his time, or play out his part before stage and audience are ready for him." (Ibid. 37).

Edward Emerson, the second son of Ralph Waldo Emerson, once observed: "Thoreau was half a century in advance of his time" ("A Different Drummer" 80); and in 1962 Walter Harding wrote: "The Thoreau school was a century ahead of its time" (*Days* 88). Also, in the same year, Teale affirmed that a "century ahead of his time he [Thoreau] expressed modern ideas on conservation and forestry and the preservation of wild land" (Teale xiii). If we assume that Thoreau is the prototype of Warwick, it is noteworthy that Louisa May Alcott, who was only fifteen years younger than Thoreau, thus perceived his "being born a century too soon" in her own time. This kind of discovery must need the test of time.

V. "David Sterling" in *Work*

"David Sterling," another important character modeled on Thoreau, appears in *Work* as a person with a burden of sorrow, the cause of which is eventually revealed to Christie, the main character of the novel. As its subtitle "A Story of Experience" implies, this novel is based on the author's own experiences, her aim being to write "her own autobiography." The original story entitled "Success" was started as early as 1861 (*LMAB* 100-01).

In *Work*, Rev. Power, who is modeled on Theodore Parker, describes David as a "grave" and "blunt" man of slightly over thirty (*Work* 167). According to Power, David is sometimes misjudged by people because of his old-fashioned manner and plain speech and, not seeking society, he is considered unsocial, but those who know him know his "genuine goodness" (Ibid. 168). Christie later finds out that David's "bluntness" is "of such a gentle sort," which is "a pleasant contrast to the polite insincerity so common" (Ibid. 182). The following is Christie's first impression of David :

[David's face] possessed no striking comeliness of shape or color; but the brown, becoming beard made it manly, and the broad arch of a benevolent brow added nobility to features otherwise not beautiful,—a face plainly expressing resolution and rectitude, inspiring respect...the sober cheerfulness that softened the lines of the firm-set lips, and warmed the glance of the thoughtful eyes. (Ibid. 187)

It is of great interest that David's features listed above remind us of Thoreau's daguerreotype picture at the age of thirty-nine.

Christy observes that David's collection of books includes works by Goethe, Shakespeare, George Herbert, Augustine, Milton, Montaigne, Andersen, Plato, Browning, Keats, and Coleridge (Ibid. 174). The writers do not necessarily coincide with those in the list in *Thoreau's Reading* by Sattelmeyer, yet

it is most probable that Thoreau himself read them all, judging from the wide range of his knowledge. Significantly, Power explains David's character :

“A wise man says, ‘The essence of greatness is the perception that virtue is enough.’ I think David one of the most ambitious men I ever know, because at thirty he has discovered this truth, and taken it to heart. Many men can be what the world calls great : very few men are what God calls good. This is the harder task to choose, yet the only success that satisfies, the only honor that outlives death. These faithful lives, whether seen of men or hidden in corners, are the salvation of the world....” (Ibid. 195)

This excerpt seems to show Thoreau's virtue as seen by Louisa May Alcott. Power's statement that David “will yet do something to be proud of” gives an impression as if the author predicted Thoreau's posthumous success as a philosopher and writer though Power meant something different in the novel (Ibid. 195).

Also, David's principles are exhibited through his brave actions. He joins the army during the Civil War and shows his courage through his deeds as captain of a corps. One day he helps several slaves escape by boat, which eventually brings his death. Although in reality Thoreau, who died a year after the breakout of the Civil War, neither became a soldier nor even referred to the War in his writings; Louisa May Alcott's keen insight made David fulfill in her novel the wishes of his prototype. David's bravery reminds us of Thoreau's admiration for the figure of the soldier and the fact that he was called “Trainer Thoreau” by boys (*Days* 87). The soldiers he admired must have been not just any soldier but those who fought bravely for a principle. Significantly, David says: “to my thinking a soldier needs a principle as well as a weapon, if he is to do real service” (*Work* 279).

Furthermore, after David's death Christie always bears in mind that she has “a double duty to perform,” and her remark that she works “for two” calls to mind Thoreau's statement in his *Journal* for February 23, 1840: “On the death of a friend, we should consider that the fates through confidence have developed on us the task of a double living—that we have henceforth to fulfill the promise of our friend's life also, in our own, to the world” (Ibid. 321, 343, I: 114).

Like Thoreau, David plays the flute, and like Thoreau's flute in the poem cited earlier, David's old flute, or “David's voice,” makes a whispering sound “by the wind's soft breath” when he is no longer in this world (*Work* 320).

VI. “Uncle Alec” in *Eight Cousins*

Eight Cousins [EC], a juvenile novel, began its serialization in December 1874, which was about a year after *Work* was published. In this story, “Uncle Alec,” Rose Campbell's uncle, is another character modeled on Thoreau. However, the introductory part of EC says: “Rose's guardian, the idealistic Uncle Alec, may be partly modeled on Bronson Alcott.” This remark may be “partly” true, for Alec values “morals” more than mathematics (EC 227), but it is quite clear from various evidences that he is modeled on Thoreau rather than the author's father.

To give some examples, Alec is “a brown, bearded man” with “keen blue eyes,” and a “curly head,” “broad-shouldered, alert in his motions,” having “a general air of strength and stability about him” and

calls out to Rose “in a bluff, cheery voice” (Ibid. 23, 25). Moreover, the way he walks is expressed as “striding,” he can swim “like a fish,” and rows a boat well (Ibid. 56, 75, 83). It is safe to say that all these features or characteristics belong to Thoreau. In addition, the subjects Alec teaches Rose—navigation, geography, grammar, and arithmetic—are mostly among the ones Thoreau taught at his own school, and “navigation” was the subject he “had studied” at Harvard, on which he makes a critical comment in *Walden* (Ibid. 94, *Walden* 52).

Also, inferring from the fact that there was “another Rose who used to play” the organ for Alec, the trouble between Alec and Rose’s father in the past sounds somewhat suggestive of that between Thoreau and his brother John over Ellen Sewall (*EC* 47).⁶ The truth about “another Rose” is confirmed in the last chapter of this story (Ibid. 295).

Of even greater appeal, Alec strictly carries out the idea of “learning by doing” with Rose. For example, he instructs her in steering, milking a cow, riding a horse, and visiting a Chinese ship to learn about China firsthand from two Chinese people from Hong Kong. Also, she learns bread baking and sawing from her aunts. All this brings to mind that Thoreau placed much value on learning by doing and that he had his pupils learn by outdoor lessons, such as plowing the land, tarring a boat, surveying, and visiting a printing shop, a gunsmith shop or a grocery store (Delano 9). It is noteworthy that Alec’s remark addressed to Rose includes the words: “you should learn by experience” (*EC* 190).

VII. Other Aspects of Thoreau’s Influence on Alcott’s Works

Some scenes in Louisa May Alcott’s stories are easily traced to Thoreau’s *Walden*. For example, in *Moods*, Christie watches “a battle between black ants and red” (*Moods* 44). It is crystal-clear that this scene is derived from the “war between two races of ants” in the “Brute Neighbors” chapter of *Walden* (*Walden* 228).

Likewise, the word “experiment” appears twice in *Work*, and three times in *EC* (*Work* 8, 338; *EC* Preface, 47, 293). Thoreau, with his scientific mind, used the word sixteen times in *Walden*, including the well-known sentence in the last chapter “Conclusion” (*Walden* 323)⁷ and the following sentence in the “Economy” chapter: “How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?” (Ibid. 51) It is possible to presume that Thoreau had an influence upon Louisa May Alcott in her use of the word “experiment.”

Turning now to another juvenile novel, in *Little Men [LM]* we find the word “woods” several times. The woods are an important part of the children’s lives at Plumfield (*LM* 62), and the word inevitably brings to mind Walden Woods, which the author, as a child, frequently visited with her father while Thoreau lived there.

Interestingly, in this story are introduced some educational devices that are similar to those which Thoreau employed at his own school. One method shown by Joe (Ibid. 30) somewhat reminds us of one of Thoreau’s methods, in which he had each boy promise to do certain things on his first day at school and reminded him of his promise if he broke it later (*Days* 79-80). Another example is shown as an attitude toward the child’s mind, which places emphasis on helping it “unfold as naturally and beautifully as sun and dew help roses bloom” (*LM* 19). Although it is quite conceivable that the author was influenced by her father Bronson Alcott who dedicated his whole life to education, still this illustration calls to mind Thoreau’s way of helping his pupils when they showed their willingness to

learn (Edward Emerson 85).

VIII. Implications

As we have seen in Louisa May Alcott's own statement, the "capital" of her stories was her own life and experiences and "those of others directly about her" (Cheney iv). Accordingly, in order to have a full understanding of her works it is essential to know about her life and experiences (Ibid. vi). Significantly, Whicher says: "What Thoreau aimed at from first to last in all his writings was the expression of ultimate truth or reality" (Whicher 82). It is safe to say, then, that Louisa May Alcott followed the path of Thoreau in writing since she, too, prized "truth or reality." Also, Thoreau's belief that "whenever men have lived there was a story to be told" may have inspired her (*LMAB* 113).

Louisa May Alcott's novels make it possible for later generations to have a better understanding of the historical figures of her time as living human beings, who might otherwise be merely well-known people in the distant past. Thus, even from the world of fiction we can derive some reliable, precious information about the people far back in the history.

Bronson Alcott, who was a close friend of Thoreau's, seems to have perceived his true nature and qualities. His opinion of Thoreau may have influenced his daughter. He once said about young Thoreau: "...there is about him a nobleness and integrity of bearing that make possible and actual the virtues of Rome and Sparta.... Plutarch would have made him an immortal, had he known him" (Bedell 265). Viewing Thoreau as "a genius of the natural world," he continues:

He belongs to the Homeric age...as virile and talented as Homer's heroes, and the elements. He seems alone, of all the men I have known, to be a native New Englander—as much so as the oak, or granite ledge; and I would rather send him to London or Vienna or Berlin, as a specimen of American genius spontaneous and unmixed, than anyone else.... This man is the independent of independents, is indeed the sole signer of the Declaration, and a Revolution in himself... (Ibid. 265)

In this excerpt we can see what Louisa May Alcott tried to show through the characters modeled on Thoreau in *Moods* and *Work*. Perhaps Bronson Alcott's observation of Thoreau is more recognizable in Warwick than in David. David, as Kasson comments, may be "distinctly feminized" compared to his prototype "the prickly Thoreau" (*Work* xxiv), yet according to Meig, Thoreau was "a very shy young man, who did not say much" (Meig 67).

It is said that Louisa May Alcott destroyed many of her journal entries. Cheney explicates that Alcott, revising her journals "at different times during her later life," deleted what she thought was "too personal for other eyes than her own" (Cheney iv). Moreover, Alcott wished most of her letters to be destroyed, which her sister respected. Her letters are said to be "brief, and strictly to the point" (Ibid. v). Although it was unfortunate that her wish was granted by her sister, fortunately, her letter to Ford was not destroyed. If Alcott ever wrote anything about Thoreau's death in her journal, it might have been among the entries that were eliminated.

To recapitulate briefly, the analyses of the three characters in Louisa May Alcott's novels—Warwick, David, and Alec—indisputably show that Thoreau is their model. It is true that two

characters in Hawthorne's works have also been said to be modeled on Thoreau—Owen Warland in "The Artist of the Beautiful" and Donatello in *The Marble Faun*, but in these cases, while the characters show some resemblances to Thoreau, it seems disputable whether they are actually modeled on him or not. For that matter, David in the same writer's "David Swan" also reminds us of Thoreau to a certain degree. The fact that the three heroes in Alcott's novels clearly indicate Thoreau's characteristic features may serve as evidence that Alcott saw and understood Thoreau from the points of view of not only a child and a pupil but also an adult and a friend. It also corroborates evidence that Thoreau had a deep influence upon her life—even after his death—as shown in her letter to Ford and in her novels we have discussed.

Notes

1. The four lines of the eighth and last stanza in Channing's "Stanzas" are as follows: "We, like parted drops of rain,/ Swelling till they meet and run,/ Shall be all absorbed again,/ Melting, flowing into one." (*The Dial* 1: 98)
2. The quoted part is from Emily Dickinson's poem "The Bustle in a House" (Dickinson 763).
3. Sophia Ford, a friend of the Alcotts, was for a while a tutor of the Alcott children, including Louisa May, and later the Emerson and Ellery Channing children joined them (*Days* 225).
4. Bronson Alcott entered in his *Journals* for May 6, 1862: "Channing comes in the afternoon and informs me of Thoreau's decease this morning at 9, peacefully" (*JBA* 347). On May 7, after visiting Thoreau's family, he entered: "It is the departure of many persons from our population, and leaves the town greatly the poorer in virtue and expectation" (*Ibid.*).
5. The editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* then was James T. Fields (*LAMB* 131). Fields published in *The Atlantic Monthly* Thoreau's essays such as "Autumnal Tints," "Life Without Principle," "Walking," and "Wild Apples," and after Thoreau's death requested Bronson Alcott to write a tribute to him, which was published under the title, "The Forester" (*Days* 458).
6. Ellen Sewall, a daughter of a minister, is said to be the only girl Thoreau loved. He met her when he was 22, and she was five years younger than he. Both he and his brother John proposed to her. (*A Thoreau Profile* 60).
7. The following is the sentence in the "Conclusion" chapter of *Walden*: "I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours" (*Walden* 323).

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