

Treasures on Earth and in Heaven: Nature and Simple Living in *Walden* and *Little Women*

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Introduction

Don't store up treasures on earth! Moths and rust can destroy them, and thieves can break in and steal them. Instead, store up your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy them, and thieves cannot break in and steal them. Your heart will always be where your treasure is. (Matt. 6.19-21)

This Biblical passage may well be the central message of both *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and Henry David Thoreau's masterpiece *Walden*, as they both convey the virtues of a simple life and the importance of non-material values like self-reflection and a relationship with the divine. Alcott's novel, published in 1868, focuses on the moral development of Jo March and her sisters as they try to manage at home with their father gone to fight in the American Civil War. It is partly based on Alcott and her sisters' childhood in New England. The March sisters set off on a journey of personal development as they encounter disease, poverty and gossip; they learn to be independent, become ambitious and experience their first love as females growing up in a time when the suffragette movement had barely begun and was then interrupted by the war. Thoreau's autobiographical work describes the experiment, observations and philosophies of his two years (1845-1846) in a self-built cabin in the woods near Concord, New England. It was published in 1854 and is written in a dense poetic prose which he had rewritten so often that he provocatively called it "scripture" (Ruland 5).

Both Thoreau and Alcott were important figures in American Transcendentalism, a philosophy with ideas about religion and politics, which were not fixed but rather a set of shared beliefs of individuals. It was derived from Romanticism and started as a comment on Unitarianism, an enlightened theologian philosophy that focused on the intellect and the senses. Contrary to Unitarianism, Transcendentalism refuted the idea that human beings are born as a blank slate because they have an inborn connection to God (Schneider 6).

Consequently, Transcendentalists tried to focus on their mind, intuition and character rather than trusting the body and the world, in order to transcend and come to a higher spiritual level in connection to God and find true wisdom. Another way to spiritual growth is being in nature, because that is God's creation and it reminds of the paradise to come. What is more, Transcendentalists believed that part of paradise is already on earth because nature has a divine quality and it is worth discovering it, or, as Thoreau puts it, to "live deliberately" (135). This implies that Transcendentalism is not only a philosophy but also has pragmatic implications. One of its prime convictions is that a simple life is highly preferred to a life of wealth as materialism is seen as an obstacle between the human being and God because it distracts from more important goals. Thoreau calls every possession a "positive hinderance of elevation of mankind", which caused Transcendentalists to stand radically opposed to the growing capitalist ideals of nineteenth century Americans (56). Still, Transcendentalism was perhaps more a private matter than a public one because its followers focused on independence and individual growth, which resulted in the development of personal philosophies that encouraged others to develop their own convictions and way of life (Brulatour). *Walden* was written in the heyday of the Transcendentalist movement, while *Little Women* was published after the disillusionment of the Civil War which had meant the end of the movement. It is therefore relevant to compare Alcott and Thoreau as two Transcendentalists with their own separate views on the world and ways to improve the self, especially in relation to their manifestation of the natural environment.

According to Barry, American Ecocriticism has its roots in Transcendentalism because of the positive attitude of the latter towards nature and the recognition of the importance of its wellbeing to human beings (241). *Walden* is seen as a key-text in Ecocriticism as it is a "return to nature" that exemplifies and lays the foundations for ecocentric texts (Barry 241). Ecocritics believe that through the analysis of the natural environment and the relationship

between the human and nonhuman environment in literature, more awareness of nature and the feeling of responsibility towards its wellbeing is created (Johnson 7). Literary works are examined while keeping in mind the word *eco* as it is derived from the Greek word *oikos*, or house. Accordingly, the natural environment is not seen as other, but as part of the human house and home, as human beings are part of nature (Johnson 7). Ecocritics thus try to develop consciousness of people's unity with nature instead of people merely being posited as users of it.

To foster moral and spiritual growth and come nearer to a divine, transcendent being, the focus should be on what is real, that is, the physical and metaphysical truth through self-reflection, living simple and being in nature. In order to establish how improvement of the self in relation to nature is depicted in *Walden* and *Little Women*, this paper first examines the relation between minimalism and nature by analysing Thoreau and Alcott's views on austerity and the human relation with nature. It is followed by the complex connections between nature and the divine, by reviewing nature as allusion to heaven in relation to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the different incarnations nature demonstrates. Subsequently the implications of gender and simple living are touched upon, as Alcott wants to convey a female perspective of receiving education while maintaining a sober life.

Chapter 1: Simple Living and Nature

An Ecocritical Analysis of Simplicity

In both *Walden* and *Little Women*, austerity and a simple way of living with consideration for nature is noticeable.

In *Walden*, the beauty of a sober life is straightforward and ever-present: “Our life is frittered away by detail [...] Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” (135). Thoreau wants to show how he imagines life can be lived without the burden of having possessions and without hurry while searching for what is really important: wisdom, truth and the divine: “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life in a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms” (135). To Thoreau this means reducing food and possessions to the most basic necessities without being hungry or cold. He calls everything excessive “not life” to show that abundance implies stagnation: there is no growth if a person is surrounded by luxury because its maintenance costs time and anxiety (Thoreau 135). What is more, people who have to work all week have “no time to be anything but a machine” (Thoreau 48). Thoreau’s choice for a simple life means that he is rich in thought and observation and that he has time to learn what is real: “the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us” (Thoreau 141). Pure, unspoiled reality is to be found in nature, so Thoreau takes his natural surroundings as his house or *oikos* literally when he says: “Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat?—better if a country seat.” (Thoreau 125). He feels at home in nature and wants a house not to be a border between him and nature, so that his house is merely a shelter, close to Walden Pond and with birds as his neighbours: “It was not so much within doors as behind

a door where I sat” (Thoreau 129). He resolves to find truth in nature by surrounding himself with it while removing all excessive luxury.

According to Buell, *Walden* shows a development of becoming less centred on the *I*, Thoreau, and instead focuses more on the nature around him so that he becomes more and more a naturalist (122). Indeed, the first half of the book is about his motivations, his actions and ideas, while the latter part features the ponds, beans and animal life. Perhaps the lack of distraction enables him to develop his self towards the point where he can peacefully redirect his attention outwards to his surroundings, to that which he believes is important to become a transcendent being close to divine reality.

Walden does not severely attack people who destroy nature’s peace, but rather stresses the beauty of nature. There is deforestation in the woods and a railroad goes through it but Thoreau does not give that more attention than necessary (240). The train is part of his routine and he is quite fond of it: it connects him to society, its sound reminds him of a hawk and he compares it to a mighty “iron horse” with a “snort like thunder, shaking the earth with its feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils” (Thoreau 161). The only thing he objects to is what the train serves: the greed of man. Instead of elaborating on this, *Walden* celebrates the beauty of nature, which is another way to starting to feel responsible for the environment, as Buell stresses: “bonding to nature at the aesthetic level is one of the paths to developing a mature environmental concern” (121). Thoreau first chose a simple life in the woods and grew to feel more one with nature, while his writing excites a fondness for nature with the reader that can lead to environmental concern. This can result in the choice for a more simple life responsible for and close to nature. His positivity keeps him from sounding too pedantic, because taking away the opposition between the human and nonhuman environment is perhaps a better way to kindle love for nature in others than stressing the destructive effects of human behaviour towards nature.

Alcott adopts a different view-point towards simple living as she highlights the difficulties of accepting poverty while at the same time acknowledging its advantages. *Little Women* starts with complaints of the sisters' objections to being poor. They cannot have presents for Christmas because they have to spend their days doing work they do not enjoy, imagining "how happy and good" they would be if they were richer (Alcott 4). However, almost immediately following that passage, they realise they are happier than the rich King family and when their thoughts turn to their mother they resolve to spend part of their money on presents for her. This shows the double-sidedness of lacking money because it can be difficult for girls to deal with, but they see that although they have to work they are "a pretty jolly set" (Alcott 4). This stance sets the tone for the rest of the novel, as the four sisters experience the "burden" of poverty and discover values other than money, like creativity, honesty and kindness. Mrs March teaches them that "money is a needful and precious thing—and, when well used, a noble thing—but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for" (Alcott 92). Alcott wants to communicate that it is sometimes difficult to be poor but it gives strength of character and forces to acknowledge other, more worthy values in life.

One of the results of the Marches' simple life is their awareness of nature's beauty as the girls see their natural surroundings as the extension of their home. Their garden is part of home and they use nature creatively as their playground, for example as they make a horse from a tree branch and tea cups from acorns (Alcott 126, 127). When they picnic with friends on Longmeadow, nature seems to join them: "acorns dropped into the milk, little black ants partook of the refreshments without being invited, and fuzzy caterpillars swung down from the tree to see what was going on" (Alcott 118). The meadow becomes their drawing room and they enjoy the unity with their environment. Also, part of nature comes inside the home to provide strength and beauty. Beth especially is fond of the elements of nature inside, because she is most affectionate to her cats and treats them as her children, she takes care of the canary

and tends the roses in the garden. When Beth falls ill with scarlet fever, Meg brings up a white rose that blossoms when the fever turns, suggesting hope and new life and perhaps foretells Beth's recovery. They put the rose by her bed so "the first thing she sees will be the little rose" to give her strength (Alcott 175). Its blossoming when Beth's worst hours of illness are over alludes to the unity of human beings with nature and the healing power it may have.

The vulnerability of nature and the implication that it needs care from human beings is taught by a hard lesson. The March sisters want to try how life is without work and thereby forget to feed Pip the canary. Beth discovers him dead in his cage and the sisters realise "Pip has had the worst of the experiment" (Alcott 107). This small example shows how destructive human actions can be to nature and how irreparable nature is damaged by neglect.

Interestingly, the death of the bird is part of the lesson about work the girls learn. Contrary to Thoreau, Alcott stresses the importance of hard work. It makes leisure more agreeable but it also makes sure the living space is looked after so that everyone is healthy and happy: "work is wholesome [...] it keeps us from ennui and mischief, is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion" (Alcott 111). Mrs March says that work will form the character as it fosters selflessness and determination, while Thoreau sees it as a form of enslavement and a working life prevents a person from moral growth (Thoreau 47).

Affectation and Didacticism

Along with a simple lifestyle, a simple, unaffected character is encouraged, for example when Meg visits the rich and fashionable Moffats. They are described as "not particularly cultivated or intelligent people" who lead a "frivolous life" (Alcott 81). Meg is sensitive to luxury and

good looks, so she is impressed and imitates their “airs and graces” (Alcott 81). She dresses up, drinks champagne and “danced and flirted, chattered and giggled, as the other girls did” (Alcott 89). She even says: “I’m not Meg tonight, I’m a doll who does all sorts of crazy things. (Alcott 89). Afterwards, however, she feels like it was a “masquerade and hadn’t enjoyed herself as much as she expected” (Alcott 89). She feels guilty and confesses everything to Mrs March, who tells her “be modest as well as pretty” (Alcott 91). Alcott makes a connection between money and affectedness, implying that people who have much money pretend to be better than they are while poverty humbles a person. However, this contrasts with Alcott’s style, which is sometimes pedantic. She preaches honesty, simplicity and individual responsibility while the perfection of the girls’ repentance and Mrs March’ advice come across as pretentious. The realistic and lively behaviour of Jo and her sisters who make mistakes and complain about work and poverty seems incompatible with the self-righteousness of the life-lessons. Moreover, Alcott’s didactic style conflicts with the Transcendentalists’ principle of individual freedom and stress on responsibility to determine what is important in life. Consequently, this conflict lessens Alcott’s persuasive power to make people behave more unaffectedly.

In *Walden*, nature and simplicity are obviously and continuously connected because they are what Thoreau believes to be essential towards a more meaningful, divine and purer life. In *Little Women*, nature has a significant background function as the rural setting enriches the girls’ lives and has become a part of their *oikos* as much as they become a part of nature when they spend time in it. Although it disagrees with Alcott’s didactic style, she encourages simplicity and honesty in behaviour as well as in possessions.

Chapter 2: Nature and Spiritual Growth

Life's Quest

Although sometimes the political and environmental aspects are regarded as key elements of *Walden*, John Pickard rightly states that the book is essentially about religion, or rather spirituality, as Thoreau does not approve of religious institutions (Pickard 85). Thoreau did not believe that the mind alone was real, as his mentor Emerson did, but that through nature truth could also be found. Reality for Thoreau was “the relation among God, humanity and nature”, so that he searched for divine reality in nature (Schneider 7). Indeed, although he never attended a church, he was looking for God his whole life (Schneider 2). Therefore Thoreau's choices and ideologies in political and environmental areas are the conclusions of his spiritual beliefs and are all focused on his spiritual development and his wish to know and to learn to live in a higher, pure state to “flow at once to God” (Thoreau 267).

Little Women is also primarily about moral and spiritual growth of character, and takes John Bunyan's protestant work *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published in 1678, as its most important inspiration. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegorical narrative about Christian who undertakes a quest to reach the Celestial City, on the way to which he finds inspirations and trials that distract or guide him. The pilgrim's life and his efforts to find redemption and to go to heaven are symbolised as a journey through different landscapes with hills and valleys. Louisa Alcott grew up reading this book and her family used it as inspirational instruction, so it has an important role in *Little Women* (Howe). In the first chapter, the four sisters resolve to see their life as a pilgrimage with obstacles to overcome and acknowledge the specific weaknesses they will work on: “Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to

the peace which is a true Celestial City” (Alcott 11). Accordingly they go through the Wicket Gate, the Palace Beautiful, pass Apollyon and visit Vanity Fair, among other places adapted from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Each symbolises a difficult situation where their character is tested and sometimes one of the girls makes a mistake and has to confess. They talk about it with Mrs March who guides them and encourages the girls to take their time to read the Bible, pray and try again next time. Their life is compared to the allegorical journey through the landscapes of Bunyan’s book accordingly.

In the chapter “Castles in the Air” the March sisters spend some time on a hill and look out over the landscape. They compare the hill with Bunyan’s Delectable Mountain “for we can look far away and see the country where we hope to live some time” and see “silvery white peaks that shone like the airy spires of some Celestial City” (Alcott 131). The Delectable Mountain in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is a pleasant place where Christian and Hopeful meet kind Shepherds who give him food and shelter, and show them the view of the surrounding mountains, as well as the gates of the Celestial City which they can see through a glass. They do not see it clearly, but they see “some of the glory of the place” and later sing: “Come to the Shepherds, then, if you would see / Things deep, things hid, and that mysterious be” (Bunyan). It is the only example where the landscape of Little Women corresponds literally instead of metaphorically with *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, because in the other instances they interpret the pilgrimage as symbolic. Now they can see a heavenly scene in reality, the impressive view is a great inspiration to “fight and work, and climb and wait” in order to reach the lovely country (Alcott 132). The landscape that the March girls see, represents therefore “some of the glory” and mysteries of heaven and encourages them to play pilgrims “in earnest” and keep improving themselves (Bunyan; Alcott 131).

Walden could also be seen as a journey of life, or a quest for spiritual truth, as *Pilgrim’s Progress* is said to have influenced Thoreau (Schneider 46). Thoreau constantly

travels back and forth from reality to the ideal, between civilisation and wilderness and “between land and sky” (Thoreau 236). His mind makes a continuous journey from the natural land to heavenly spheres which are both equally valuable for him, for example as he describes here how he catches a fish:

It was very queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmogonical themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense.

Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook (Thoreau 222).

He constantly decides whether he “shall go to heaven or a-fishing” (Thoreau 271). He is also away from the village but not secluded from it, and keeps visiting Concord. Even the chapters of *Walden* are in opposition from real to ideal, constantly moving: “a structure that imitates the fluctuations of nature itself in ebb and flow, day and night, fall and spring” such as the philosophical chapter “Reading” that is followed by the more physical “Sounds” (Schneider 52). For Thoreau reality is both physical and spiritual and he continually stresses that.

His constant travels back and forth enable Thoreau to be in an intermediate state, and according to Garber he consequently becomes a “mediator”, a connection between God and the land, so that he connects the physical and the spiritual (135). *Walden* mediates because it wants to demonstrate that a life that is real and earthly *can* be fused with higher goals as search for the divine, as Thoreau’s explanation of his life to the Irish farmer of Baker farm proves. Thoreau wants to go from the physical to the spiritual to “encourage the reader to undertake his own regeneration” (Garber 241).

It could be said that *Walden* is also a quest for truth religious truths as the book is interspersed with references to the Bible, the Vedas and the Greek classics, but it does not abide by any religious dogma. For the greatest part, it seems that Thoreau did this to wake people up, to show them that they should think for themselves and find their own way of

spiritual development rather than slavishly follow an institution. However, in his final chapter *Spring*, a Christian view seems to come about, as he describes the rebirth of nature as it refers to the resurrection of Christ: “Walden was dead and is alive again” (Thoreau 360). Although Thoreau cannot claim to have found ultimate truth, he has this message of renewal that gives hope to others who want to undertake such a quest. The return of spring therefore “helps [to] reinforce [...] present a self in the process of maturation and renewal (McIntire 240).

Heavenly Nature

Thoreau has a complicated view on nature in its relation to the spiritual, which he defines in all its aspects in his writing about Walden Pond. Those elements include nature as part of God, as savage wilderness, as a friend and as a strange mystery. According to Thoreau all of these aspects teach him to grow into a human being closer to heavenly truth.

First of all, the pond has a divine characteristic, a “patent of heaven” that inspires Thoreau and gives him heavenly guidance (227). In the poem in the chapter “The Ponds” he says: “I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven // Than I live to Walden even” because it is so pure that it is heaven on earth (Thoreau 241). He calls it “God’s drop” and “Celestial Dews” because “all impurity presented to it sinks” (Thoreau 227, 241, 236). That is why being close to nature is the same as being close to God, for it is a portal to the divine. When looking at the water Thoreau seems to receive visions that put his life in a wider, eternal perspective because the pond has been there since the beginning of time: he thinks of the pond in the time of Adam and Eve, of nymphs in the Golden Age, compares it to the holy river Ganges and when he goes for a swim he meets Hindu priests (Thoreau 226-227, 239, 346). Yet it is not merely inspiring; the pond is also a continuous reproach and example to sinful human beings.

Thoreau makes this clear by describing Walden Pond as a mirror or an eye: the pond reflects the sky and thus the heavenly but also invokes self-reflection: “looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” because it “betrays the spirit that is in the air” (Thoreau 233, 236). The pond can thereby help Thoreau to know his weaknesses and constantly encourages him so that he can follow his divine instinct and grow into a purer being, as well as providing him with a meditative place of worship.

At the same time, Thoreau realises that nature has a wild, savage side that he can find in himself as well. He explains in the chapter “Higher laws” that there are two opposing forces in him: “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward the higher, or as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both” (Thoreau 257). The primitive instinct wants to kill, hunt and eat animals and wants immediate satisfaction of needs, exactly as animals live. According to Thoreau every person goes through the hunter stage because he should learn how to hunt, but the stage should be transcended in order to hunt for higher goals like virtue and a relationship with God. The primitive instinct is therefore necessary but should be overcome (Thoreau 268). Thoreau believes that no mortal being can wholly overcome the primitive instinct, but by trying, the spirit can gain control over the body to let “the animal dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established” (Thoreau 267). As that divine being grows, people’s relationship with nature changes because they become searchers for the divine quality in nature instead of nature as a subordinate entity that can fulfil primitive needs like appetite. Thoreau realises that nature is not wholly part of heaven, that it is also real and earthly. Schneider argues that Thoreau tries to warn people, but especially himself, not to “fall in love” with nature because it has primitive qualities he wants to overcome (67).

The combination of savage and divine qualities that Nature shares with human beings, enable Thoreau to personify Nature, as well as to feel a connection with it. He describes the

pond as an eye, it has “lips [...] on which no beard grows and he calls the pond “Squaw Walden” who can take revenge on the people who hack out the ice in the winter (Thoreau 229). The pond is his constant companion and neighbour because he built his cabin near the pond and it seems a living being because its water rises and falls, and is born again when the ice melts in the spring. He even says: “of all the characters I have known, perhaps Walden wears best, and best preserves its purity (Thoreau 240). To Thoreau, the pond has a personality and he has a relationship with it. He sees the pond as a part of himself because they share the same part of divine instinct together with a wild part. As a consequence, when he looks in the ponds water and sees his reflection, he can say: “I see by its face that it is visited by the same reflection; and I can almost say, Walden, is it you?” (Thoreau 241).

On the other hand, nature has a mysterious, unknown part that indicates the human’s impossibility of knowing the absolute truth. Walden Pond is extremely deep and although its water is clear, the bottom is invisible in some places. Some people say it is bottomless, so Thoreau tries to measure its depth, and although he succeeds in that he can never see what is at the bottom. He also tries to determine what colour the pond’s water is but it keeps altering with every movement. With this he acknowledges the limitations of man and how little they know about the laws of nature because from “our points of view, as, to the traveller, a mountain outline varies with every step”, so people can never have a complete overview (Thoreau 339). What is more, people can fall in holes at every step, like the ice-cutter who falls in the pond: “he who was so brave before suddenly became but the ninth part of a man” (Thoreau 343). So Thoreau tries to allow for “the unsettling possibility that nature is not always a human ally” and may want to argue that people can be surprised by nature while thinking to have fathomed its laws, while only God knows them (Schneider 70). By noting the mysterious, unknown side of nature, he tries to humble himself and human beings in general, because although he is in search for truth, he cannot presume that he will find it.

For Louisa Alcott nature had several characteristics as well and could give her divine inspiration:

Running in the Concord woods early one fall morning, she stopped to see the sunshine over the meadows. “A very strange and solemn feeling came over me as I stood there,” she wrote in her journal, “with no sound but the rustle of the pines, no one near me, and the sun so glorious, as for me alone. It seemed as if I felt God as I never did before, and I prayed in my heart that I might keep that happy sense of nearness all my life.” (Goodwin)

In *Little Women*, the water is represented as having several personalities. When Jo and Laurie go ice-skating Amy follows Jo and Laurie while Jo and Amy are angry with each other. Although Jo knows that she should warn Amy for the thin ice, her anger keeps her from that. Still, Jo feels intuitively that something is wrong: “For a minute Jo stood still with a strange feeling in her heart; then she resolved to go on” (Alcott 74). This shows the instinctive connection with God that gives Jo a warning, but she does not listen because her anger “took possession of her, as evil thoughts and feelings always do” (Alcott 73-74). There is a struggle inside her and this time she fails to choose rightly. Then Amy falls through the ice, so that the friendly river that gave so much joy when frozen suddenly turns into treacherous “rotten ice” and “black water” that can kill people (Alcott 74). The river that caused the awful incident shows Amy and Jo a different perspective towards life because the moment Amy falls, all trivial things like pride and anger are forgotten in the fear of losing a loved one. Jo realises the grave results of having a passionate nature, and resolves to try harder and looks “remorsefully at the golden head, which might have been swept away from her sight forever under the treacherous ice” (Alcott 74). She says that anger makes her “savage”, but at the same time it is the savage water of the river that made her realise this (Alcott 75). Consequently, the river in its varied aspects played a large role in Jo’s consciousness of her weakness and a new step

towards controlling it.

Chapter 3: Gender Differences

The Blessing of Education

Alcott manages to describe traditional roles without fierce judgement while at the same time doing justice to the independence of women and challenging accepted beliefs about gender. The strong-minded female characters in *Little Women* move in a relatively small world where their fate is largely dependent on the choice of husband, which causes protests especially from the independent Jo. The novel is set in the period between the pre-emancipated society that Alcott herself grew up in, and the growth of the suffragette movement after the Civil War that could only be recognised as significant in the 1880s (Armstrong 454). This results in uncertainty about women's future, because on the one hand women like Jo become ambitious and hopeful of becoming an autonomous person with a job, while society gives little opportunities for such a development.

Alcott's views on gender are reflected in *Little Women* and are rooted in her childhood. Her father, Bronson Alcott, also an important Transcendentalist, was never able to provide for his family because he was too busy with his philosophies. He is best known for his failed attempt to put his Transcendentalist views into practice by setting up *Fruitlands*, an enclosed, self-sufficient, vegetarian community, which Louisa Alcott satirised in *Transcendental Wild Oats* (Howe). With the success of *Little Women*, she could support her family so that they no longer needed to accept gifts from their friends. These experiences and the views of her parents made her an independent, responsible woman who supported feminist

and abolitionist views, but at the same time her writing often reflects her disappointment in her father and the consequences of his partial absence: “My definition [of philosophy] is of a man up in a balloon, with his family and friends pulling the ropes which confine him to earth and trying to haul him down” (Goodwin). The practicalities of life came down on the women in the family while Bronson Alcott dreamed of a better world. Louisa Alcott experienced the difficulties of poverty and reliance on the help of others and therefore gives expression to those difficulties in *Little Women*, where it is acknowledged that having money is convenient.

This double feeling of love and disappointment in her father is reflected in *Little Women*, where Mr March is largely absent. They can cope without him although they also miss him terribly. In the only passage where he is present, he makes a judgement on his daughters’ moral growth and praises their development, after which they are happy with his approval (Alcott 205-506). They want him to see how they develop and do their best, but it seems as if they are not accepted as they are and constantly reminded to improve themselves. Although Alcott approves of supporting moral growth, the evaluation of his children’s character results in the depiction of Mr March as a demanding, authoritative figure, who wants to see results without being there to guide the girls.

As a feminist, Alcott challenges Thoreau’s convictions with regard to education and freedom of choice. Thoreau criticises universities because they are not practical enough, teach knowledge rather than wisdom and do not teach the students anything about life: “How could youths better learn to live than by once trying the experiment of living?” (94). Yet Thoreau attended Harvard University and had a choice to go to college or not, whereas Jo, and Alcott for that matter, do not. Jo exclaims that she would love to be a boy because that would give her much more freedom: “I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy” (Alcott 5). She tells Laurie: “How I wish I was going to college! You don't look as if you liked it.” (Alcott 28). Attending college as a female was still controversial, and instead of going to

university she is forced to be educated by life and earn money to help take care of her family. Jo has not chosen a simple life and self-education. As a girl, she cannot behave as she likes, and is put right by her sisters every time she acts too much like a boy. She struggles with the inevitable fate of married life and therefore certainly does not have the opportunity to choose a life in the woods. Laurie asks her to run away with together but her feeling of responsibility arrests her. What is conveyed here is that a simple life as Thoreau imagined is not as easily accessible for women with families and is perhaps not a sign of independence but of selfishness, because women are almost always given responsibility for others and do not have the freedom to choose a controversial way of life without starving to death or becoming outcasts. Thoreau's philosophy is too idealised to be realistic for Alcott because she has seen the failure of her father's experiment, and expresses critique on Bronson Alcott through Jo's responsibility towards her family.

On the other hand, personal convictions are placed above the right to go to school. When Amy is beaten by her teacher, Mrs March takes her from school and makes her promise to take lessons at home (Alcott 66). The novel shows more examples of the importance of principles above socially accepted values that are regarded as childish by Aunt March: "Your parents, my dear, have more worldly wisdom than two babies" (Alcott 213). Perhaps the wisdom the world teaches is not as important as living according to personal convictions. In that, Thoreau and Alcott agree in their view on education. In the sequels to *Little Women*, female education remains an important theme as Jo becomes a teacher and sets up a boys' school in *Good Wives*. The school subsequently admits girls and encourages them to apply for further education in *Little Men* as Nan wants to become a doctor (Alcott). The nonconformist school is run at Aunt March's "once decorous" house Plumfield and organised rather like a family, where the children can play, work in the garden and have pets besides following

lessons (Alcott). The simple style of living is continued by Jo and her husband, as well as the principles of moral education and female rights she received in her upbringing.

Alcott challenges the freedom of choice Thoreau assumes in his work, by noting the female difficulties of receiving education and the practical consequences of poverty, suggesting that responsibility for others is more important than practising an over-idealising philosophy.

Conclusion

To live a simple, non-materialistic life as Transcendentalists imagine, can open the eyes to the reality of nature and God and foster spiritual and moral character growth. A simple lifestyle also leads to appreciation of the natural environment that can culminate in a concern for the welfare of nature. While Thoreau mainly stresses the beauty of nature, Alcott also shows its vulnerability. Both works show how the human and nonhuman environment are fused because they share an inborn divine quality. The combination of wildness and divinity that can be found in nature causes Thoreau to conclude that it is the closest to truth that he can find and enables him to switch between the purely physical and the metaphysical which he needs to elevate himself. For him it is therefore fundamental to live close to nature in order to transcend. Alcott also stresses the importance of a natural environment as a source of education, self-reflection and reminder of the paradise to come. Together with a simple lifestyle of work and meditation, this adds to the moral and spiritual development of the March sisters, although Alcott acknowledges the difficulties of poverty for women in a pre-emancipated society. Education is not a luxury but a necessity according to Alcott, which is shown in Jo's determined pursuit for the possibility of female education while maintaining her simple life. Education and its connection to austerity in Alcott's work is only briefly touched upon and could be a valuable topic for further analysis.

Both Alcott and Thoreau show a distinctly positive view of the nature of man, because although there is a struggle to overcome nature, it is possible to come closer to the inborn divine being through further willpower, introspection and searching for purity in the world, such as nature. For these two Transcendentalists the passage from Matthew could be slightly adapted: through nature there are treasures to be found in heaven *and* on earth.

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