



## Louisa May Alcott

### *Transcendental Wild Oats* and *Little Women* Background, Discussion, and Activities

#### Objectives:

1. To become better acquainted with Louisa May Alcott, author and pioneer in juvenile literary endeavors.
2. To learn about the life of 19<sup>th</sup> century children
3. To appreciate and practice memoir and autobiographical fiction.

#### Process:

- I. Read Louisa May's Alcott's biography
- II. Watch the Alcott video biography
- III. Read the background for [Transcendental Wild Oats](#) and complete the discussion questions and activities.
- IV. Watch the *Little Women* video
- V. Read [Little Women](#) and complete the discussion questions and activities





## Louisa May Alcott

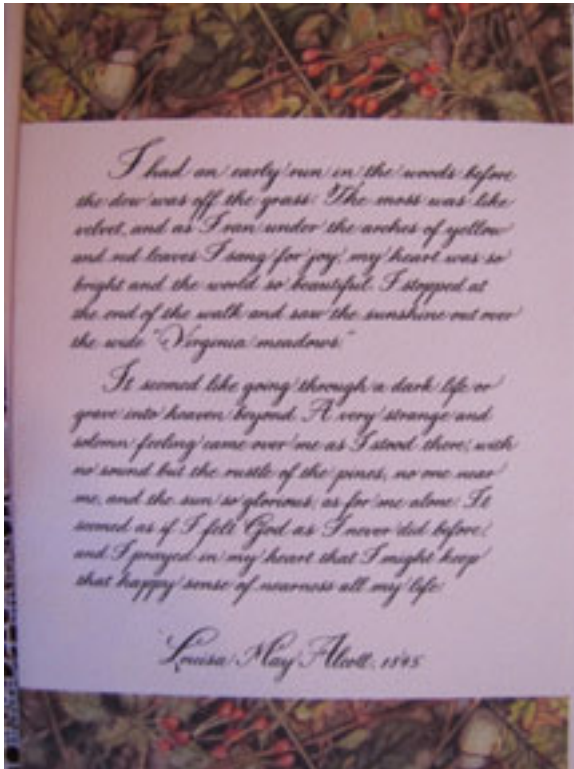
### *Transcendental Wild Oats*

#### Background

Louisa May Alcott's father, Bronson Alcott, along with a few other idealists, founded a utopian family community at Fruitlands, MA (about seven miles away from what would become Atlantic Union College some 40 years later) in 1842. He took his family out of Concord to live in what he thought at the time was the best way to live in harmony with God and nature. Louisa was ten years old at the time.

Unfortunately, Alcott and his colleagues were more visionary than practical and the experiment failed within eight months. The family left Fruitlands worse off financially than when they entered, and it was years before they recovered from the toll life there

took on them. Still, Louisa remembers her time there with a measure of fondness. As her father would have her, she kept a journal of her thoughts and feelings. In it, she describes life at Fruitlands with pleasure:



*September 1<sup>st</sup>—I rose at five and had my bath. I love cold water! Then we had our singing lesson with Mr. Lane. After breakfast I washed dishes, and ran on the hill till nine, and had some thoughts—it was so beautiful up there. Did my lessons,—wrote and spelt and did sums; and Mr. Lane read a story, "The Judicious Father": How a rich girl told a poor girl not to look over the fence at the flowers, and was cross to her because she was unhappy. The father heard her do it, and made the girls change clothes. The*

*poor one was glad to do it, and he told her to keep them. But the rich one was very sad; for she had to wear the old ones a week, and after that she was good to shabby girls. I liked it very much, and I shall be kind to poor people.*

*Father asked us what was God's noblest work. Anna said men, ; but I'm going to be good. I've made so many resolutions, and written sad notes, and cried over my sins, and it doesn't seem to do any good! Now I'm going to work really, for I feel a true desire to improve, and be a help and comfort, not a care and sorrow, to my dear mother, but I said babies. Men are often bad; babies never are. We had a long talk, and I felt better after it, and cleared up.*



*We had bread and fruit for dinner. I read and walked and played till supper-time. We sung in the evening. As I went to bed the moon came up very brightly and looked at me. I felt sad because I have been cross today, and did not mind mother. I cried, and then I felt better, and said that piece from Mrs. Sigourney, "I must not tease my mother." I get to sleep saying poetry,--I know a good deal.*

*Sunday,  
21<sup>st</sup>.—Father and  
Mr. Lane have  
gone to N.H. to  
preach. It was  
very lovely. . . .  
Anna and I got  
supper. In the  
eve I read "Vicar  
of Wakefield." I  
was cross to-day,  
and I cried when  
I went to bed. I  
made good  
resolutions, and  
felt better in my  
heart. If I only  
kept all I make, I should be the best girl in the world. But I don't, and so am very  
bad.*



*January, 1845, Wednesday.—I am so cross I wish I had never been born.*

*Thursday.-- . . . I found this note from dear Mother in my journal:--*

*My Dearest Louy,--I often peep into your diary, hoping to see some record of more happy days. "Hope, and keep busy," dear daughter, and in all perplexity or trouble come freely to your Mother.*

*Dear Mother,--You shall see more happy days, and I will come to you with my worries, for you are the best woman in the world. L.M.A.*

*March, 1846.—I have at last got the little room I have wanted so long, and am very happy about it. It does me good to be alone, and Mother has made it very pretty and neat for me. My work-basket and desk are by the window, and my closet is full of dried herbs that smell very nice. The door that opens into the garden will be very pretty in summer, and I can run off to the woods when I like.*

*I have made a plan for my life, as I am in my teens, and no more a child. I am old for my age, and don't care much for girl's things. People think I'm wild and queer; but Mother understands and helps me. I have not told any one about my plan but I'm going to be good. I've made so many resolutions, and written sad*



*notes, and cried over my sins, and it doesn't seem to do any good! Now I'm going to work really, for I feel a true desire to improve, and be a help and comfort, not a care and sorrow, to my dear mother.*

from *Early Diary Kept at Fruitlands, 1843-1846* by Louisa May Alcott in *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, edited by Ednah D. Cheney. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889.

This journal later grew into *Transcendental Wild Oats*, a satire first published in the *Boston Independent* in December 1873 and later published on its own as a small book. The book is much less gentle than the diary Louisa kept at the time. She disguises the real-life people with pseudonyms, but otherwise, the characters stay fairly true to their living counterparts. She portrays her father and his co-founders as impractical idealists and her mother as having to do all the household management. The truth of the experiment is probably somewhere in between the exuberance of the young girl and the disillusionment of the world-weary woman 30 years later.







## Louisa May Alcott

### *Transcendental Wild Oats*

#### Discussion Questions and Activities

1. Judging solely from her diary, what kind of personality do you imagine Louisa May Alcott had as a young girl? Support your answers by citing specific passages.
2. Judging solely from her *Transcendental Wild Oats*, what kind of personality does Alcott give her alter ego? Is it the same as what you glean from her diary? Different? Cite specific passages that give you clues to how she sees herself from a distance (as opposed to in the moment).
3. Compare and contrast your childhood with that of Louisa as presented in both her diary entries and *Transcendental Wild Oats*. List the pros and cons of each.
4. Note the happiness Louisa expressed at having her own room (last entry). Reread her account, then write a short essay expressing your ideas on everyone's need for occasional solitude and ways in which this need might be met for you today.



5. What is your idea of an ideal community? Give specific details. How does it differ from Bronson Alcott's (pictured at left) as presented in *Transcendental Wild Oats*? What, if anything, would you do the same? What would you do differently?
6. Imagine that you are a child again of ten-thirteen years old. Write a series of 10-12 diary entries that would capture the physical and emotional environment of that time in your life.



## Louisa May Alcott

### *Little Women*

#### Background

When Louisa May Alcott published her most popular novel, *Little Women*, in 1868-1869, her characters Amy, Jo, Beth, and Meg (based mainly on personal experience) became familiar in most American households and were admired by most young readers. Whatever the novel did for others, it did more for Louisa May and her family: it provided them with the financial security that had eluded Louisa's father, Bronson Alcott.

Louisa May was educated by her father (who was a great experimentalist in modern education) and by her father's friends, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other thinkers of the time. She wrote her first book at the age of sixteen. After serving as a nurse during the Civil War, she began to write and publish a series of books that became ever more popular. *Little Women* was followed by *An Old Fashioned Girl* (1870) and *Little Men* (1871).

In spite of her success as a writer, Louisa May Alcott never lost her interest in moral and social reform. She supported various movements, including that for women's right to vote. Many of her books, like *Jo's Boys* (1886), were written especially for children, but others, like *Transcendental Wild Oats* and *Hospital Sketches* (an account of her experience as a Civil War nurse based on the letters she wrote home) were written for grown-ups. Her books are still popular with children today and have been made into movies and even a television series.

*Little Women* transformed the genre of juvenile literature, changing forever how girls and young women saw their life choices and supporting the values of hard work, independence, tolerance, and unconditional family love.

Louisa May Alcott wrote 30 other books and hundreds of poems and short stories. She also worked tirelessly for social reform dealing with women's rights, all the while taking care of her family.





**Louisa May Alcott**  
*Little Women*

**Discussion and Activities**

1. You read in the excerpt from Louisa's diary that she liked to have her quiet time where she could think. In *Little Women*, Jo makes it a point to have her own space up in the attic where she could think and read and write. Why do you think this space was so important to her? What does this tell you about the importance of place and quiet for thinking and writing (and studying!)?
2. In *Little Women*, Jo had certain rituals that she followed when she was writing. She often had a bowl of apples by her side, she wore a "scribbling suit" consisting mainly of a big black apron to keep her clothes clean (the pen she used was somewhat messy) and a funny black hat with a red bow. Rituals are important to some writers, and Jo seemed to be one of them. What help do you think these rituals were to her when she was writing? Do you have any rituals that you follow when you are studying or creating? What are they? How do they help you with your work?
3. Jo was a reader as well as a writer. Her parents encouraged her and her sisters to read. What are some of the books that they read? Why do you think writing was important to the March family? How do you think her own wide reading helped Louisa May to become a good writer?





4. The March girls were very active, getting exercise every day in a number of ways. List them. Why was good health important to them? The Alcotts themselves were pioneers in healthy living. Mr. Alcott was a devoted student of health and physiology. He encouraged his family to get up early, drink plenty of water, get good exercise, dress sensibly, read, write, and pray daily, and stay away from animal products (they were vegetarian). Does this remind you of another pioneer woman living in New England about this same time?! Recall what you know about the Seventh-day Adventist health message. Compare and contrast its principles with those the Alcott/March family endeavored to practice.
5. The opening lines of *Little Women* are among the most famous in all of literature. What makes them so memorable, so effective?
6. One of Louisa's favorite ways to begin a story or book was with dialogue. It gives her the opportunity to introduce us to her characters in an intimate way, showing us them in action. In just a few sentences at the beginning of *Little Women*, we learn some very specific things about the March family and each of the four girls. List the information we gain through this opening dialogue.
7. Louisa ends the first part of *Little Women* with a kind of still-life scene of the family, telling how each one is sitting or standing. She gives us a very specific picture of all the major characters, as they are now. The scene is similar to the one that opens the book, giving us a clear reminder of how each character has changed and grown since the story began. Compare and contrast each of the characters from beginning to end.







8. The second part of *Little Women* was written later, after the first part had been published to rave reviews and a great clamoring for "more" from the public. By the time Louisa finished it, much had changed in her own family with both her mother and sister dead. She said it was hard for her to write about the fictional characters once the real-life models were no longer living. Can you detect a difference in the way Alcott portrays Marmee and Beth between the first and second parts? List some of the differences.
9. In real life, Louisa May Alcott never married. Seems she spent too much time taking care of her family to settle down and have a family of her own. Yet she knew that her reading public would want Jo to have that "happily ever after" marriage that was considered important for every girl at that time. Louisa does not, however, have Jo marry the dashing Laurie. Why do you think that is? Why do you think she has Jo marry Professor Bhaer, someone more like her own father?
10. Which of the March girls is your favorite? Tell what you like best about her. Be specific. Which of the young men in the story do you like best? Why? If you were to be one character in the book, which one would it be? Why? Be specific.
11. What is the overall message Louisa May Alcott is trying to portray in *Little Women*? How relevant do you think this message is to young people today? Be specific.





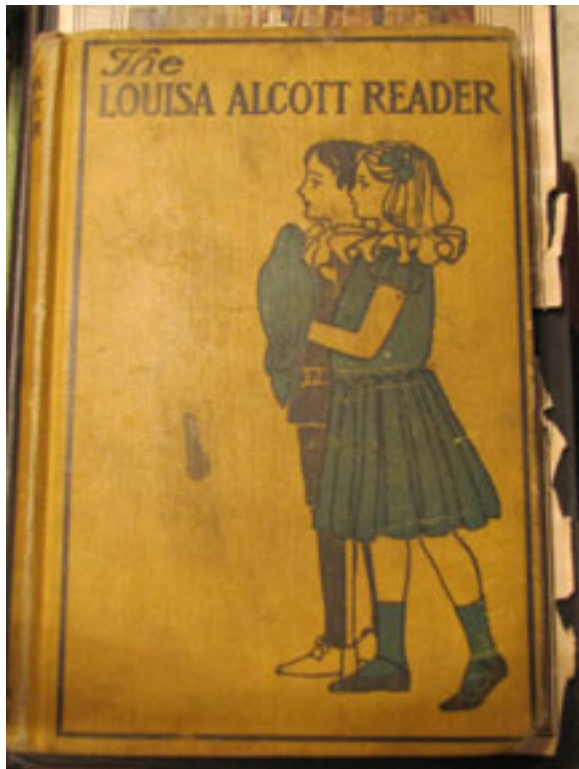
## Louisa May Alcott

### *Transcendental Wild Oats* and *Little Women*

#### Writing Projects

Choose two of the following options to complete and share with your classmates.

1. Imagine that you are Louisa May Alcott. Write a series of 10-12 journal entries that express your thoughts and feelings about the Fruitlands experiment both during your time there and in retrospect as you are writing *Transcendental Wild Oats*.
2. Imagine that you are one of the March girls. Write 10-12 journal entries about your favorite scenes from *Little Women*.
3. Imagine your ideal writing spot. Write about it in a journal entry. Describe exactly what it would look like and what it would be like to write in such a place. Experiment with writing at different times of the day. Write down your impressions of which is the best time to write. Then write a series of 5-6 entries as if you were actually writing in that place at that time. Be creative! Try a poem or a short story!

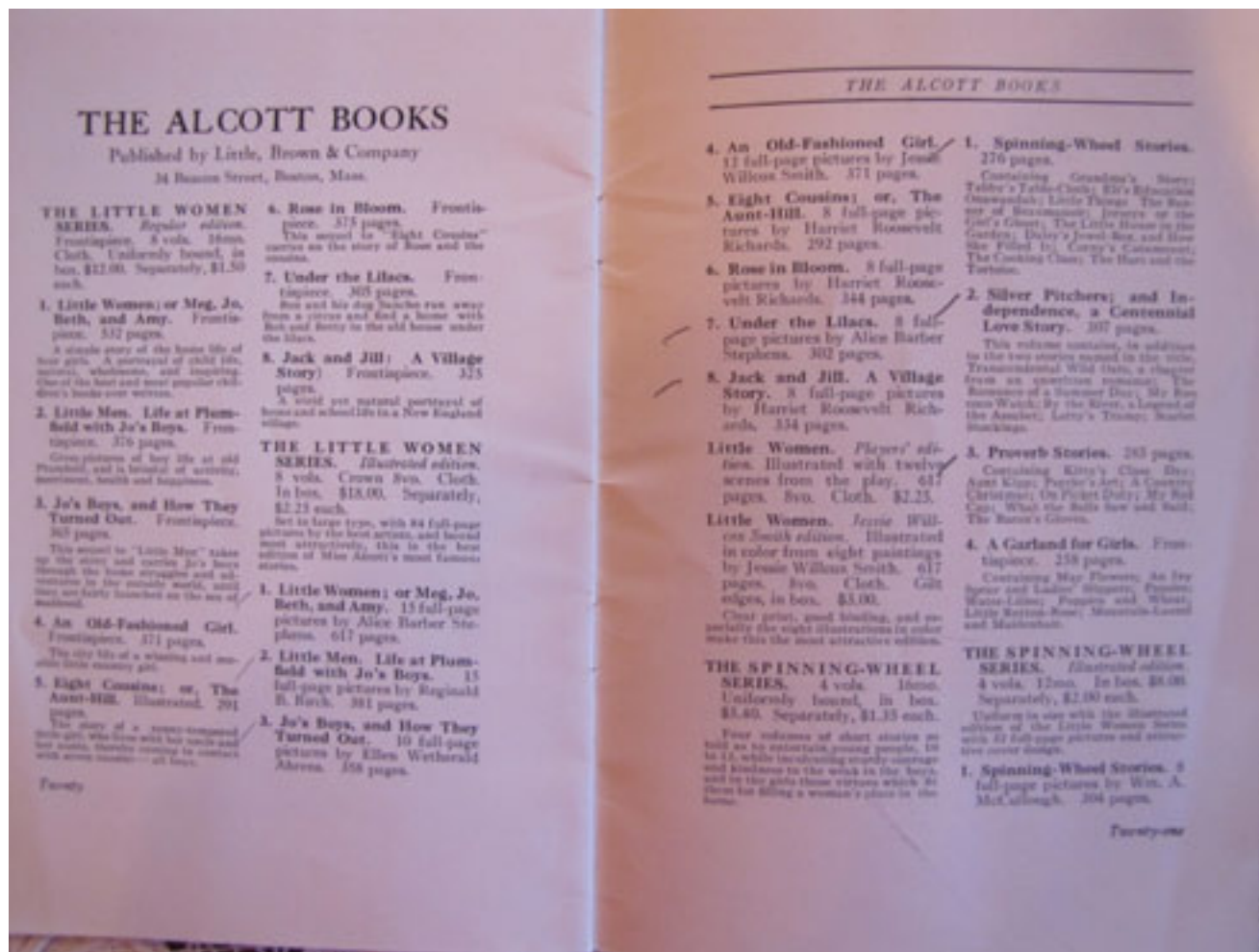


4. Make a list of the books you have read recently and write out your thoughts about each book. Include what you liked and didn't like, and see if you can figure out why. Then make a general statement about the kind of book/author you like and what makes them your favorites. Ask your parents what their favorite books were when they were children. Write down their recommendations and read them if/when you get the chance! Then have a discussion with them about your response to the books.

5. Write about an experience you had recently with someone in your family. You can "fictionalize" it if you wish to. Be as concrete and specific as you can, making sure you appeal to the senses as you write.



6. Write a short story about a family dinnertime or other family gathering from a guest's point of view. Use first person.
7. Write a story using words of only one syllable.
8. Write a story that begins and ends with the same (or similar) scene.



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Questions for *Little Women* and the Writing Project suggestions were inspired by Amy Belding Brown's book *Aunt Jo's Literary Lessons: Advice & Exercises for Young Writers*. Bright Ink Books, Grafton, MA, 2004.