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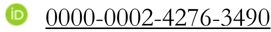
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How to Nurture (Little) Men and (Little) Women: New Directions in Louisa May Alcott's Educational Novels

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Abstract

As is well known, Louisa May Alcott's books for children and young adults had a broad popular appeal in the post-bellum United States and helped establish their author's reputation and financial success. Alcott undeniably drew on her own experience of being home-schooled and raised by experimental educational methods advocated by her parents, Bronson and Abigail May Alcott, and other Transcendentalist reformers, who laid out novel and unconventional theories of education based on their philosophical principles. Even though Alcott considered ways to undo the stereotypes regarding the education and raising of children, it also transpires from reading her family March trilogy—*Little Women* (1868–1869), *Little Men* (1871), and *Jo's Boys* (1886)—that she generally found ways to straddle the gap between the traditional, Victorian and the new, Transcendentalist/romantic models of education. Moreover, as new scientific ideas infused with social Darwinism began to spread in the late nineteenth-century, Alcott increasingly incorporated some of their features in her educational novels. In this essay, I propose to examine how Alcott manages to create visions of an alternative educational model for boys and girls, respectively, and to what extent this reflects a departure from traditional methods and stereotypes, and leads to the adoption of more modern nurturing practices in the realms of public education and popular culture.

Keywords: Louisa May Alcott, the March trilogy, the educational novel, Transcendentalism, Social Darwinism

I suppose it is inevitable, since we live in America, so I won't borrow trouble, but hope that some of the new ideas of education will produce a few hearty, happy, capable, and intelligent girls for my lads.

—Louisa May Alcott, *Jo's Boys*

Louisa May Alcott's best known and best-selling novel, *Little Women* (first volume published in 1868, second volume in 1869), concerns the development of four typical American middle-class girls, namely, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March, as they transition into young women. It is perhaps hardly necessary to recount the novel's plot, the story having become a household item for generations of American and global readers, both male and female (Stimpson 593). As an essential part of the girls' *Bildung*, the coming-of-age process, the novel keenly registers the nurturing practices and the ways of instruction and education that the March girls receive in the ambit of their home and under their mother's, Marmee's, benevolent and enlightened supervision. The novel's phenomenal success opened to Louisa May a gateway to literary fame and financial security for herself and her family, and launched her irrevocably into the realm of literary celebrity according to the times. Such a prominent position thus enabled Louisa May to illustrate and propagate in her subsequent children's and young adults' novels considered as sequels to *Little Women*—*Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886)—ideas that engaged more sophisticated and intriguing concepts of education for children and young adults, i.e., from primary to post-secondary education. The ways in which Louisa May Alcott made use of the opportunity to disseminate in reader-friendly and unobtrusive forms these notions in her educational trilogy in the con-

text of late nineteenth-century American culture will be the focus of the ensuing remarks.[1]

The debate about different educational models begins to resonate in the scope of larger issues about the (diminishing) role of religion—although temporarily rescued by Transcendentalism—and the (rising) role of science, from medical, to natural, to social, to educational, which began to shape the profile of the late-nineteenth-century United States. As this development is outlined by Bernard Wishy, it might be possible to argue that Alcott's educational trilogy spans the key moments in the trajectory of education as it was transposed from mostly spiritual and moral to a largely scientific and professional endeavor carried out by qualified experts rather than well-meaning amateurs of the likes of Jo and Fritz Bhaer of Plumfield. Tentatively, *Little Women* exemplifies the rise and demise of the home as the center point of nurture; *Little Men* carries this suspicion even further, creating a hybrid educational setting where the old and the new styles still co-exist, while in *Jo's Boys* Alcott makes a more decisive transition towards a formal and officially, scientifically certified format of education.

One of the striking facts as regards education in *Little Women*, however, is that the March girls mostly receive their schooling at home, except for the youngest Amy, whose case will be considered later. Why is this the case, and how can this situation sustain Alcott's ongoing interest in contributing to the debates about children's education? There are perhaps

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[1] My argument presupposes, although it cannot fully encompass within its restricted scope, a number of intersecting processes in mid- to late-nineteenth-century America. The broadest development is outlined by what Philippe Ariès terms the invention of childhood in Western culture evincing the emergence of the figure of the child as a being endowed with mind, emotions, and in need of nurture and guidance across a wider spectrum of society (not restricted merely to the higher classes). Intersecting with this is the rising culture of domesticity in the United States, as demonstrated by numerous studies of sentimental and domestic culture of the nineteenth century (see, for instance, Brodhead, Samuels, Strickland, Tompkins). Added to this are the attendant shifts in the constitution of the literary field in postbellum America, where a niche opened to accommodate children's authors and a didactic-educational mode of literature in the context of popular culture, as shown by Richard Brodhead.

several reasons. The most obvious would be that female education in America at the time shortly before and during the Civil War was hampered by gender stereotypes, as indicated by an earlier experience, namely, that of Margaret Fuller, who received her early education at home before being sent for a short stretch to a more formal educational setting. Nonetheless, being a woman, she would not be admitted to Harvard (as was her brother) nor to most other institutions of higher education in the country (Douglas 263–69). However, this tendency should also be seen in a different light, in terms of the then current debates into the educational reform spawned by the New England Transcendentalist movement, which sought to make an impact on the notion of education and the idea that a new spiritually-minded subject is sustained by a new kind of upbringing. We shall therefore look into ways in which Alcott's educational novels, from *Little Women* to its two sequels, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*—sometimes jointly referred to as the March trilogy—intervene into public debates about education and seek to introduce particular Transcendentalist and other reformist educational ideas, thus circumventing or obviating stereotypical educational endeavors applied to both boys and girls. As Wishy points out in his seminal study *The Child and the Republic*, "The spread of common school education after 1830 started a full-scale American debate about educational theory that has continued with enormous vigor down to today" (67). Alcott's juvenile literature crucially participates in and contributes to the debates of the time, as will be shown.

By all means, Bronson Alcott, Louisa's reformist father and one of the quirkiest Transcendentalists, was no enemy of (female) education—his experimental and short-lived Temple School in Boston was coeducational. He resented, however, traditional educational methods and sought energetically to implement all manner of pedagogical reforms (Showalter x). Besides teaching himself, he recruited for this goal several talented and multifaceted women, from Margaret Fuller to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, both prominent and energetic members of the Transcendentalist circle in their own right. Bronson Alcott drew for his re-

formist views on particular "ideas of child development," partly derived from direct observation of his four daughters and their early development, which he would subsequently apply at home and in his experimental schools (Showalter xi–xii). For instance, Bronson's eldest daughter, Anna, was only four when she attended the Temple School and was thus one of the youngest pupils there. As pointed out by various critics, his other source of inspiration and influence in this regard was the work of the Swiss reformer Johannes Pestalozzi (Flint 80; Parille and Mallory 16; Proehl 43).

The Transcendentalist impulse, which Strickland appropriately terms "the sentimental revolution" (3), required a whole new outlook on the family and relations between parents and children. This impulse is reflected in Bronson's facetious autobiographical account of the communitarian experiment at Fruitlands, a utopian community established by Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane, an English reformer, when Louisa was ten years old. Retreating with her parents and three sisters to a secluded farm in New England's countryside, Louisa recollects the experience in terms of the pilgrimage in line with one of her favorite texts, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the pioneer experience: "Thus these modern pilgrims journeyed hopefully out of the old world, to found a new one in the wilderness" ("Transcendental" 538). Seeking to reform the shape of the nuclear family and to apply in practice the spiritual principles of abstemiousness, non-violence, vegetarianism, and the repudiation of materialistic principles and dependence on commodities, the (male) reformers recruited their children and only one woman, Abigail May Alcott, to reside permanently at Fruitlands as co-partners in their scheme of self-reform and purification ("Transcendental" 539). As Alcott quips, "in those days communities were the fashion and transcendentalism raged wildly" ("Transcendental" 544).

Fruitlands, apart from being an experiment in companionate living and labor (albeit not a lasting or a successful one), provided the Alcott children—the beneficiaries of their father's program of spiritual uplift—with a unique opportunity to try out a whole new way of living and learn-

ing for the brief duration of the experience. It is partly from Louisa's journals of her time at Fruitlands that we may get a sense of the novelty and radicalism of the proposition to rearrange their own and their family's lives in order to provide an example of principled living.

The daily program for Louisa in this "Utopia" ("Transcendental" 549) consisted of rising early, bathing in cold water, studying various subjects, reading, music lessons, helping with chores, and frolicking with her sisters around the farm and in the woods. In her diary, which she had been encouraged to keep since her early childhood, Louisa notes her emotions, thoughts, reflections on her guided reading, and self-reflexive comments on her own behavior: "I was cross to-day, and I cried when I went to bed. I made good resolutions, and felt better in my heart" ("Transcendental" 554). Like self-scrutiny, a poignant lesson inculcated by her parents, the habit of keeping a journal was also practiced by other adult Transcendentalists including the luminaries of the movement, Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller, among others, who drew upon the introspective tradition of American Puritanism. Even though Luisa was only ten when she penned these thoughts, her mother comments on the margins of her daughter's diary: "Remember, dear girl, that a diary should be an epitome of your life" ("Transcendental" 555), clearly implying that attention to one's thoughts, emotions, and feelings is crucial for self-growth in moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense, a triad that would continue to figure in Alcott's literature for boys and girls.

Fruitlands catered to a program of the integration of labor and philosophy in an effort to awaken Man (Woman) Thinking, Emerson's idea of a holistic human being rather than a fragmented, specialized individual, so that even the children were required to take part in sundry forms of agricultural and domestic labor and also be little scholars. What shows in Louisa's jottings, however, is a rising sense of anxiety about the tensions besetting the Fruitlands utopia and her sense that Lane was trying to interfere between her father and her mother, a development which indeed

eventually led to the dissolution of the consociate arrangement in tandem with other difficulties facing the brave pioneers.

These new methods reflected not simply the Transcendentalists' concern for transforming the dominant model of public education at the time, which was mired in Lockean materialism and sensualism, on one hand, and rote learning and mechanical repetition and cramming, on the other; they also meant to involve the ideas of marriage, the family, sex/gender relations, and even sex/gender roles as such—all of which were in the purview of the reformers. Still, as Strickland points out, Alcott does not merely advocate what today would be termed a feminist perspective; rather, she is more refined in pushing for co-education, companionate marriage, and consociate family (39, 133; Proehl 43–44).

Closely correlating with the Alcott family experience, *Little Women* weaves the story of the girls' education into a larger plot of nineteenth-century female *Bildung*, particularly at the time when female education was going through considerable adjustments to new social ideas and new post-war socio-political realities. What these adjustments entail will be illustrated by the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leading light of the Transcendentalist movement, which, however, as shown by Philip F. Gura, features many diverse and multifaceted theories and approaches, making it difficult to impose a single dominant strain. However, we could assume Emerson's influence and proximity to the Alcotts, from the parents (Bronson and Abigail) to Louisa May herself, who professed a great admiration for the philosopher and his ideas in the course of her life and work (Alcott, *LW* 431; Walls 430).

Emerson's ideas will thus serve as a general departure point to explain not only the general cultural drift of the Transcendentalist reforms but also more particular notions of education within it. Emerson's rambling style requires that we search in his different writings and essays for a coherent theory of education from which some practical observations could be derived and applied.

In 1837, Emerson delivered an address before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard, known by the title "The American Scholar," poised to become one of the definitive expressions of American intellectual and spiritual independence from Europe and its models, or at least one of its most articulate expressions. Hailed as a declaration of American cultural independence, the essay is interesting also as an attempt to chart a viable program of education of the American genius, education that would be pertinent to American conditions and relevant for the nation's spiritual needs (Buell 43–44). Emerson thus lays out a model of an ideal scholar, but also prods the American institutions of higher education (here, one of its leading universities) to foster a model of learning that would give rise to a new kind of individual. For one, as Emerson says, American education should be more attuned to the study of "letters" (humanities) rather than "mechanical skill" ("The American" 43). Such a more encompassing, holistic approach should furthermore counter the already rampant specialization, fragmentation, and division of education and labor subsisting in society. That this re-valorization of education and labor is absolutely necessary is pressed by Emerson as he belabors the idea of "the true dignity of his ministry" that should come forth in any man's labor in any form or capacity: "Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing. . . . The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship" ("The American" 44).

Where the needed unification of these functions should take place, according to Emerson, is in Man Thinking, or, the American scholar, who must therefore solicit the help of contribution of different modes of gaining knowledge and experience that would allow him to perform the role of a newly dignified, consecrated member of society. In the course of the essay, Emerson famously provides a blueprint for resuscitating the role of education and turning it into a tool for individual and social regeneration. The first source of a new educational program is, appropriately, nature, "this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself" ("The American" 45). Nature is, for the young scholar, the first

model allowing him to decipher not only the external world but also to understand "the law of the human mind" working by the principles of "analogy" and "identity" ("The American" 45). By striving to understand the laws of nature, we simultaneously gain insights into our own soul or mind.

Presumably, this analogizing from nature to the human being and back is a direct way of obtaining knowledge not mediated by institutional meddling unlike the other major source of (self)-knowledge that Emerson posits, the influence of books, "the mind of the Past" ("The American" 46). Here, Emerson is mindful lest the book knowledge stifle the inspiration, the creative and thinking genius that had engendered particular books. Rather, what he suggests is that the knowledge of books should be used as a template for individuals to unleash their own creative and active effort relative to their times rather than just imitating or blindly accepting the dogmas of the past. This would indicate that, for Transcendentalists, each person is potentially a genius if s/he taps into her/his divine, soulful potential, while one type of the awakening of this spirit ought to happen in educating young people to assume different offices in society or to equip them for living a good life: "Colleges . . . can only highly serve us when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls" ("The American" 49).

As a third ingredient in this new program for raising and nurturing the Man Thinking, Emerson posits the need for practical education grounded in the experience of the quotidian, in terms of places, types of labor, different idioms, the cross-section of society, all of which should be integral to the scholar's holistic education. Experience, having tried something whether to succeed or fail in it, comprises a valid asset in the scholar's toolkit: "Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not" ("The American" 49). This call for practical endeavors, which should not be foreign to the American scholar at least, echoes the idea of pragmatism and practical interweaving of abstract knowledge with lived experience and concrete

action: "I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake" ("The American" 50). The experience and action thus leaven the scholar's bookish knowledge and equip him all the better to perform his manifold duties for American society. One manifestation of this fruitful interweaving is, for instance, the use of language, which should replenish itself from the speech of the people, from "action," "life," whereas the "frank intercourse with many men and women" ("The American" 51) should make provision for the expressions used by the scholar, but also reflect the production of the nation's culture and literature. Importantly, Emerson implies that educational institutions, colleges in particular, should embrace this new program of raising scholars who will be able to respond to new national needs and to reform "[t]he mind of his country, taught to aim at low objects" ("The American" 59).

While Emerson's lofty exhortation aims at shaking up the complacent colleges, Alcott seeks to transpose some of these ideas into an educational program more suitable for younger students, children, and adolescents, while the premises retain their Transcendentalist flavor and further endorse the Emersonian trilogy of nature, books, and experience, now adjusted to the lower rungs of the educational system and younger age groups. This shows in particular, as Flint contends, in the way Alcott combines Transcendentalist abstraction (of Emerson's style) with the pragmatic, practical, and hands-on approach favored by other reformers and implemented by Alcott's parents at home and in public (81). Alcott readily conceded the importance of her personal experience and her home-induced love of books and reading for her literary imagination, choice of topics, and style, as is evident in her guarded comments on the proofs of what is later to become *Little Women*: "It reads better than I expected. Not a bit sensational, but simple and true, for we really lived most of it, and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it" (*The Journals* 166).

It is precisely the enmeshment of the abstract and the practical that Alcott rehearses in the trilogy. For one, as she demonstrates in *Little*

Women, she is quite ambivalent about the benefits of formal, public education, one reason being that it fails to implement Emersonian standards. The chapter "Amy's Valley of Humiliation" recounts a school episode when Amy is punished for harboring pickled limes under her desk, which condenses all the troublesome points of the public educational system in New England. For one, corporal punishment was the order of the day, as pupils were regularly feruled for different offenses. Next, the teacher, Mr. Davis, is a caricature of an incompetent but harsh instructor, a member of the tribe of "nervous gentlemen with tyrannical tempers, and no more talent for teaching than 'Dr. Blimber'" (*Little Women* [*LW*] 58). More subtly, Mr. Davis's educational methods are obviously of the old school, as he lays great stress on "Greek, Latin, Algebra and ologies of all sorts" but foregoes "manners, moral, feelings, and examples," which, as the narrator opines, "were not considered of any particular importance" (*LW* 58). In such an instrumentalist model of education, Amy is to face the wrath and contempt of an irascible educator and to be humiliated by the public show of punishment in class. The narrative sympathetically takes up her childish perspective of the event, which, banal though it may seem, had solemn meaning for her: "For the first time in her life she had been struck; and the disgrace, in her eyes, was as deep as if he had knocked her down" (*LW* 60). After the corporal part of the punishment is meted out, the little scholar is further humiliated as she is ordered to "stand on the platform till recess," for all the school to see, confounding her sense of wrong and humiliation by the sense of shame: "[F]or a second she felt as if she could only drop down where she stood and break her heart with crying" (*LW* 60). The narrative continues to register Amy's inner feelings and her perception of the event: "[T]he proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot," and part of the shock comes from the fact that Amy's upbringing at home is fundamentally different, as "during the twelve years of her life she had been governed by love alone, and a blow of that sort had never touched her before" (*LW* 60). The family's reaction is also indicative of their profound disagree-

ment with traditional methods, as she is withdrawn from school, and her mother dismisses the standard educational methods as inappropriate and ineffective: "I don't approve of corporal punishment, especially for girls. I dislike Mr. Davis' manner of teaching, and don't think the girls you associate with are doing our any good. . . ," declares Mrs. March and closes the door on the youngest sister's career in a public school (*LW* 61). This is not to say that the mother lets Amy lightly off the hook but, rather, that the moral lesson is obtained in a radically different way.

As a teacher in Bronson Alcott's experimental Boston school, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, one of the leading Transcendentalists and the owner of a famous bookstore featuring the latest foreign titles brokering new ideas to America, took to writing a journal of everyday instruction at the school soon to be published under the title *Record of a School* (1835), in which she partly wants to vindicate Alcott and his presumably outlandish and controversial methods of dealing with children (Hamblen 82–83). In addition to Emerson, Peabody's educational writings will be taken as emblematic of some of these new tendencies (Walls 426–27). By faithfully recording the daily work done in class and particularly Bronson's intense and imaginative interaction with his young students, ranging from the ages of four to twelve, Peabody demonstrates the systematic grounding of his methods, based as they were on the new philosophy of education in tandem with the new philosophical notions of human nature (Parille and Mallory 21; Peabody 38, 110).

To give but one example how Bronson intends to apply the new science and how it later seeps into Louisa's writings, I will discuss the issue of disciplining the child and the question of applying the punishment. As Peabody repeatedly demonstrates, Alcott insisted on his pupils being very disciplined and focused in the class and did not hesitate to apply various modes of punishment in order for the children to acquire self-control. But he sometimes did it in quite unorthodox ways, also by means of "vicarious punishment," as Peabody terms it (146). This line of proceeding will be familiar to the reader of *Little Men,* since the same logic is applied

at Plumfield, a boarding school for boys run by Jo and Professor Bhaer, her German husband. Bhaer, in fact, in terms of some of his features and the ideas that he professes, reminds one of Alcott's father, who likely is one of the prototypes for the Professor's profile, but not the only one, as reasonably suggested by Laura Dassow Walls (430). Bronson's idea is, first, for the pupil to understand why the punishment is being applied; secondly, he turns the tables on the perpetrator as he demands that the culprit punish him, the teacher. As Peabody explains, often in the course of administering punishment and smacking Bronson, the guilty party would cry (145). Granted, this would possibly not be a widely applied new educational invention in any school, but Bronson's other practices, obviously carefully thought through from the arsenal of theories coming from Europe, from Pestalozzi to Froebel, would be more likely to survive even in a modern educational environment (Manning 2–3).

Peabody records fascinating examples of Bronson conducting analysis with individual pupils in class and skillfully leading them to self-knowledge through guided conversation often based on a reading of selected texts or the parsing of a word. The choice of questions strikes one as a careful and sensitive psychological exercise, while the reader is taken aback by the scope and depth of the young students' answers, which range over a whole field of human knowledge and endeavor or show the child's capacity for introspection. Clearly, Bronson did not think his students incapable of generating thoughts on virtually any subject under the sun. In that his program resonates with the Emersonian, Transcendentalist notion of the divine spark within us, which plugs us into the lap of mother Nature, while our native capacities constitute the latent power within us, capable of growth. The wonderful intuitions that the students provide in these sessions are a record of the innate capacity of the human mind, combined with the moral sense that the teachers, Bronson and Peabody, strove to awaken in children. This is very much in line with Ralph Waldo Emerson's contemporary writings on education: "Whilst thus the world exists for the mind; whilst thus the man is ever invited in-

ward into shining realms of knowledge and power by the shows of the world, which interpret to him the infinitude of his own consciousness--it becomes the office of a just education to awaken him to the knowledge of this fact" ("Lectures: Emerson on Education"). This could very well provide a manual for educators at all levels even nowadays.

This theory, and its quotidian practice in Bronson's school, was readily transposed into his daughter's fictional works, scattered with autobiographical facts, so let us look at a few examples from particular educational settings that Louisa May recreates in the other two novels, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*, both focusing on the male *Bildung* but also presenting co-educational settings. Let me once again revert to some of Emerson's insights on education, such as when he opines, "I believe that our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil" (Emerson), the call which was the underlying principle in Plumfield (a name evocative of Fruitlands). Symbolically, this location stands for a kind of pastoral retreat, a self-styled City on a Hill (Van Engen 49–59), apart from the contamination of the rest of society and its ways in its effort to raise new young American men and women.

In *Little Men,* the narrative focus is on twelve boys raised and educated by Jo and her husband in Plumfield, joined by three girls, Daisy, Bess, and Nan. As the narrator unveils a cast of pupils at Plumfield, we might be put in mind of a morality play in which each particular boy embodies one of seven deadly sins. Jack Ford is "a sharp, rather sly lad" who loves money and skims his peers for profit (*Little Men* [*LM*] 20); Ned Barker is prone to tale-telling, as is Nat; George Cole—Stuffy is a lazy glutton; Demi might become a victim of his intellectual pride. Others show minor or less conspicuous moral defects, such as making mischief, misbehaving occasionally, and disrespecting the rules. The remains of the old theology find extension also in the prevailing idea in Plumfield that the boys need religion but in an attenuated form which will be taught them through nature (*LM* 38), and the novel does not insist overmuch on theological views except in broadly abstract pantheistic ways. The Bhaers, faithful to

their Transcendentalist roots, which we recall from *Little Women*, employ "sympathy" to reach the boys (*LM* 45). Other helpful educational tools in an unobtrusive way are stories, Bible stories, fables, fairy tales, and importantly, music. There is a notion, for example, that Nat might be redeemed through his talent for music, which indicates a soul's higher aspiration and thus vindicates Nat's potential corruption in his earlier life.

Generally, the structure of *Little Men* revolves around the episodes presenting a particular child (a boy or a girl) and demonstrating a unique educational problem which in the course of the chapter gets addressed and resolved in most cases. Each child embodies a specific vice or frailty—depending on one's perspective—which is occasionally attributed to heredity and sometimes ascribed to unhappy circumstances. In the case of Nat, a street urchin and an orphan who is received in Plumfield, the problem is not only his poverty but also his soiled appearance, which prefigures possible moral defects caused by street life.[2] The narrative does not provide the exact tally of nature vs. nurture but is aware of the longstanding debate raging in the course of the nineteenth century and unable to ascertain which of them comes first. This openness is indicated, for instance, in the chapter "In the Willow," in which the children are paired and contrasted for better effect: Daisy and Nan as two distinct feminine types; Tommy and Nat, the former depicting the worldly principle, the latter a spiritual drive; Demi and Dan, illustrating a difference between "the little deacon" and "the Colt" (*LM* 207, 232).

As already mentioned, one of the striking facts for the contemporary reader about Plumfield would be its co-educational nature, a facet which Louisa May Alcott evidently took from the practice in Bronson Alcott's Temple School. A cohort of twelve boys is joined by a small number of girls—the dainty and feminine Daisy, the tomboy Nan, and the sublime,

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[2] This raised the specter of pauperism, a particular blend of traditional ideas about poverty in the Protestant context and the new ideas incarnated in social Darwinism (see Brownson, Leviatin, Schocket—particularly Schocket's joining the issue of pauperism to that of racialization).

angelic Bess. This co-educational aspect of the school was one of Jo's "inspirations," as she proudly claims in her conversation with Teddy Laurence, her companionate friend from *Little Women* (*LM* 312).

Following upon Wishy's helpful historical overview of American education, one is pressed to admit the necessity of establishing a nation-wide system of public education, meaning that the responsibility for child rearing was gradually wrested away from the parents and the family and transferred into the hands of the professionals. The process of the professionalization of education (Wishy 67–68) is presented ambivalently by Alcott, since in her education trilogy, it is the case that Plumfield combines the features of home and family with those of the boarding school and the formal educational setting (Clark 326). Already in Alcott's time the balanced combination of these two sides was slipping away. Moreover, as Wishy contends, "[i]f the school was going to share or supplement the work of the home" (69), then Plumfield is devised as a utopian place where Jo and Fritz Bhaer play both surrogate parents and educators to their own children, their nephew and nieces, and the boys and girls whom they take in as students—roles that occasionally interfere with each other. For example, Jo, acting as mother, would not condone some actions that she ought to endorse as a teacher in relation to her sons. Concurrently with the raised stakes of nurturing a child, the level of "emotional investment" in each child goes up, as well (Wishy viii).

As is amply the case with *Little Women*, in *Little Men* one also finds scattered autobiographical episodes. In one of them, Jo's attempts to discipline Nan, a tomboy among the girls. The scene of Jo tying Nan to a bedpost, as Strickland explains, echoes a parallel episode from Louisa's childhood when her mother similarly tried to punish her after she had run away (31). In Jo's application, however, the act of binding a child, but in a way that Nan would be able to extricate herself, is there not primarily as a form of corporal punishment but, more importantly, as a way to appeal to her conscience and to foster her self-control (*LM* 183). Illustrative in this episode is what Wishy calls a wavering between the issues of "tradi-

tion and authority" and "rational sanctions for limits on [a child's] freedom" (vii).

Another major concern of the educational theories and models seeping into Alcott's books is the inconclusive wrangling between nature and nurture. Going for the side of nurture, a major contribution by the Enlightenment theory of man as a blank slate, there would be quite a few corrections from different sources. First, the notion of nurture was incongruous with the Transcendentalist belief in the soul, inborn genius, and inspiration, which mark every human being. Next, it went against the abiding religious belief in the fallen nature. Later on, it faced a fierce adversary in the form of Darwinism and its related theories, which began to spread in the United States in the postbellum era. If indeed the truth about human nature is that it is endlessly perfectible, then there is hardly a more important question than that of the nurturing of children. If indeed human nature is malleable to some (considerable) degree, it then follows that it is open to modification through education, as Wishy comments (viii). Approaching it from the other side, Rousseau's notion of the ideal nature still created an opening for nurturing practices to make the child resistant to the corruption of society (Parille and Mallory 16). While these models generally tended to favor nurture over nature, the Darwinian revolution made that idea less possible to entertain and, at least to some extent, swung the question back towards the pole of nature, heredity, and biology.[3] The terms of the debate became even more complicated with the growing dissemination and appreciation for Darwin's ideas, or for the way Darwin's followers deployed them. Whereas prior to the scientific discourse on human nature as predetermined, the experiments would be focused on more ethereal things, such as spirit and mind (see

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[3] A good overview of the influence of Darwinism and its various applications in American culture is to be found in Bannister and in Hofstadter. For the ways Alcott manages to combine and waver between her Transcendentalist roots, sentimental/romantic inclinations, and Darwinian notions, see Levander, Proehl, Wishy. Levander in particular is concerned with the issue that Darwinism serves the process of nation-building based on the idea of Whiteness.

Peabody), as in *Little Women*, the new scientific wave was inclined to drop these categories and take into account more sensible, materialist, biological, and hereditary strains.

In its seclusion, Plumfield becomes an experiment for moderating the boys' and girls' behavior and modifying it to suit the latest wave of educational theories.[4] I stress the word *experiment*, since it is by considering *Little Men*'s structure that we notice the pattern employed in the individual chapters. Each chapter focuses on a particular student, elucidates his or her background, considers a problem or a crisis organically related to a pupil's "nature," and describes methods used by the Bhaers to contain the crisis. Each section thus becomes an occasion for the narrative to delve into the possible educational strategies in dealing with boys and girls, respectively. Of the two groups, the emphasis in this novel is on boys, due in part to their greater vulnerability and exposure to contemporary social ills—pauperism, crime, homelessness (Wishy 131), as exemplified by the appearance of the figure of the "Wild Boy" (LM 87).

In the novel, this particular issue is taken up in two plotlines, Nat's and Dan's, respectively. The pairing of the two is also a suggestive device, since the two boys come from a similar milieu—the urban slum—and have been consistently exposed to street life, poverty, and abuse. That the same or similar circumstances nevertheless have produced different outcomes for the two boys serves to underscore the importance of nature, heredity, and biology, which—all other things being equal—will prove a key factor in determining the boys' respective chances to become useful members of society. When Nat is admitted to Plumfield, he soon adopts

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[4] In the context of the late nineteenth century, in particular concerning the immigration tide, pauperism, etc., public opinion was split along the lines that follow the two predominant strains of social thinking: one that "argued that heredity determined the character of individuals and groups" and drew its inspiration from social Darwinism, and another which placed emphasis on the way that "material conditions determined the character of individuals and groups" (Leviatin 19). These debates found their echoes in the contemporary ideas of education and Americanization and were reflected particularly in *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*, more squarely placed in the social and cultural contexts of the era.

the school's ways and is quite tractable, manageable, and susceptible to moral lessons or punishment, to which he is exposed for his habit of lying. Conversely, Dan proves to be more intractable, his temperament standing in the way of docility or susceptibility to discipline. The question is whether this is corrigible, or whether he is long gone. The narrator is at first willing to gamble that his revolt against discipline is due to his unfortunate circumstances (*LM* 86). However, as he reappears later in the novel and joins the cast of characters in *Jo's Boys*, we realize that at least some of his accidents result from his character set-up. Their respective trajectories are to be deciphered even from the boys' faces: ". . . Uncle Teddy would sit opposite . . . that he might study the faces before him – both so happy, yet so different, for Dan's was square and brown and strong, while Nat's was long and fair and rather weak, but very amiable with its mild eyes and good forehead" (*LM* 154).

Having been evicted from Plumfield on account of his misbehavior and unwillingness to bend to discipline, Dan is sent to another institution, where he also does not last long. Finally, hungry and exhausted, he wanders back to Plumfield to ask for forgiveness and to be given a second chance, which the Bhaers readily concede. It is interesting that Jo favors Dan over the other boys precisely for the sake of his wildness and the idea that he is a "prodigal son," impetuous and difficult to restrain, just as she used to be in her childhood (*LM* 141).

Dan begins to discover in himself an interest in nature, turning into a veritable "naturalist" (*LM* 145). This framing of Dan's story is interesting in view of the aforementioned new winds in education appearing in the second half of the nineteenth century and inspired by the rise of Social Darwinism. Dan's narrative, therefore, ought to be seen in relation to the idea of struggle, survival, and savagery that prevail in nature, as illustrated in the episode when a big crab devours small crabs (*LM* 149). If this was an appropriate image of Dan's former life, with him back in Plumfield, it now needs to be exchanged for a new way guided by "love and gratitude" (*LM* 151). However, even with this promising direction, the naturalist,

Darwinian script remains tied to Dan, who in the sequel to *Little Men* still remains "the black sheep of [Jo's] flock," calling up an animalistic metaphor (*Jo's Boys* [*JB*] 11).

Dan's naturalist inclinations lead him to other lines of inquiry and beget his interest in older civilizations, archaeology, and ethnology as fledgling attempts to provide a scientific account of cultural differences. More often than not, these differences would underlie taxonomies and hierarchies based on some presumably immutable features, such as race and social status (e.g., pauperism) in particular thus raising the stakes of the Plumfield students' educational chances and endowing the experiment with scientific aura.

When the children, led by Dan and his desire to assemble a naturalist collection, are encouraged to establish a museum of natural history in Plumfield, we see a new principle at work. Nature is no longer a romantic and Transcendentalist source of inspiration or knowledge; it is no longer a fount of spiritual nourishment but turns into a blueprint for scientific principles that will provide explanations and definitions previously derived from other sources. The museum's cabinet of curiosities sampling world cultures is a good example of this new tendency, which now begins to permeate the education of the children, too. Pursuing further this line of thinking, we observe that the idea of Dan's education is tied to taming and breaking in, just like a young colt has to be subdued and trained. Dan needs to realize the wild impulses within himself and learn to control them. Before interiorizing self-control, however, a process of domesticating needs to take place just as the one he had been practicing on a horse. Here Alcott wavers between the discipline of love and sympathy, which she has already proclaimed as paramount for Plumfield (and Dan in particular) and the notion of intractable nature that requires struggle, contention, force, and submission (*LM* 241).

Another marked change attending the transition from *Little Women* to the next two March novels is dictated by the changing gender norms observable in American society during the post-war era. As the situation for

the girls in *Little Women* still shows considerable obstacles for them to pursue different careers rather than the ones represented by feminine roles, in family or in the public, the other two novels, *Jo's Boys* in particular, have come to the point where they contemplate and represent a host of new roles for women, as the society seems to have become more inclusive of them.

Considering the changes in the representation of viable female types in post-Civil War literature, Abate points out that already by the 1860s, the tomboy appears as a literary type (xv) signifying "gender-bending female figures" (x). These figures become increasingly accommodated in children's literature, in itself a burgeoning section of the literary field after the Civil War (see Brodhead 80; Wishy 54). Furthermore, Clark points out importantly that the inclusion of girls in the school story is a novelty introduced by Alcott (325). As Abate explains, Annie Harding, nicknamed "Naughty Nan," continues Alcott's abiding interest in tomboyish girl characters: "Although a generation younger than Jo March, this tomboyish figure is in many ways patterned after her" (48). Jo literally projects her younger self into a strong-willed, impulsive, and rambunctious girl child: ". . . I feel a great sympathy for Nan, because I was such a naughty child myself that I know all about it" (*LM* 102). One major distinction between Jo and Nan, however, is that, unlike Jo in *Little Women*, Nan pointedly does not go through the process of "tomboy taming," which, according to Abate, "sought to eradicate . . . a gender-bending girl's iconoclastic ways and have her adopt more feminine behaviors" (31). *Little Men*, therefore, accommodates new dispensations in gender roles. As Jo continues to elaborate on her sympathetic identification with Nan, she nevertheless contrasts Nan, a little feminist, with Daisy, a domestic type. However, this is done with the intent to exercise the idea of different models of feminine *Bildung*, both equally valid and feasible in the novel, rather than to favor the traditional over the transformative one: "[Nan] is full of spirits and only needs to be taught what to do with them to be as nice a little girl as Daisy. Those quick wits of hers would enjoy

lessons if they were rightly directed, and what is now a tricksy midget would soon become a busy, happy child" (*LM* 102). Even though not exactly tamed, Nan needs to be disciplined so that in *Jo's Boys* she might blossom into a new kind of woman: "[I]t was what she needed, for this little garden was full of sweet flowers, half hidden by weeds; and when kind hands gently began to cultivate it, all sorts of green shoots sprung up. . ." (*LM* 110).

According to Wishy, during the nineteenth century, the growing debates about the nature of the child, and the fittest form of his/her nurture, become entangled with the idea of the American nation, its character and identity, its past, present, and future (4). Also, in the context of this paper's interest in the aspects of nineteenth-century American popular culture, I would like to endorse the argument made by Wishy to the effect that by the 1830s, concurrent with various reform initiatives, "the older and isolated concerns about the proper raising of children merged into a flood of popular criticism" (4), of which Alcott's novels partake.[5]

Plumfield illustrates these tendencies as it tries to model itself on an extended family, while "their rules were few and sensible" (*LM* 16).[6] Instruction and studying are interspersed with "jovial games" and occasional but restricted rough-and-tumble (*LM* 16). Besides academic subjects, "manners and morals were insinuated" (*LM* 18). In Jo's playful take, "[W]e don't believe in making children miserable by too many rules and too much study" (*LM* 24), meaning that Plumfield's curriculum combines

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[5] As Van Engen contends, social elites in the early republic had no doubt of the value and the necessity of education to foster "an informed citizenry . . . absolutely vital to any liberty loving republic" (121). Education was recognized as a tool for not only molding and perfecting individuals but also additionally building up the nation (121).

[6] The new educational endeavor attempted in the fictional Plumfield, as critics point out, exemplifies and amplifies the extant reforms and debates in the ambit of new, progressive, romantic, and scientific pedagogical ideas on education. As Proehl sums it up, "Plumfield serves not only as a testing ground for different pedagogical philosophies but also reflects the tensions between competing understandings of childhood development in nineteenth-century America" (44). See other contributions in Elbert and Ginsberg.

"Latin, Greek, and mathematics" with Transcendentalist topics of "self-knowledge, self-help, and self-control," making it "an odd school" for its time (*LM* 33). Religion is taught, but this is done through nature and age-appropriate Bible stories (*LM* 38, 51), and Jo keeps a record, her "conscience book" (*LM* 37), of each of the pupils. Corporal punishment, still a fixture in American schools, was avoided in Plumfield unless strictly necessary but was even then employed in line with the new method, as previously illustrated. Fictional material—stories, fables, fairy tales—is amply used to spur the children's imagination, while the teachers rely on "sympathy" to mold their charges (*LM* 45). The school aligns itself with the Transcendentalist adage, as expressed by Peabody: "We need schools not for inculcation of knowledge, merely, but for the development of genius. Genius is the peculiar attribute of the soul" (17).

However, rather than being simply a pastoral retreat from the increasingly complex society, Plumfield is supposed to reflect how these new tendencies should provide a buffer and accommodation to the manifold challenges facing the nation from the rupture caused by the Civil War to major transformations of the urban space due to industrialization and immigration. How education might bridge some of these divides and repair some of these problems is highlighted in the chapter of *Little Men* titled "Round the Fire," in which stories become a framing device for an influx of the new national sentiment. In a game of storytelling, Silas, a farmer who helps with the chores around Plumfield, tells a story of his Civil War experience, which not only showcases his manly valor but also suggests a way of reconciliation between the two warring sides and lectures children in the value of forgiveness for the sake of a new community.

That Plumfield should give a yield of new young Americans is clear in the culminating chapter, "Thanksgiving," in which the national ritual, itself invented in the course of the Civil War and so as to act as a salve to the sectional differences, is celebrated with all the appurtenances of a "site of memory" (Nora) for the sake of the present and the future. The

standard elements required to fill the story taking shape in the course of the nineteenth century, as documented by Van Engen, include the Pilgrims, the Native Americans, religion, and liberty, and are being peddled to American children in schools across the nation in order to sustain a nation-building myth and "create . . . a usable past" (200). We perhaps do not realize how late an invention the Thanksgiving holiday has been (Kaplan 592; Van Engen 115–18). The Thanksgiving table of Plumfield, even though a bit constricted, is still inclusive enough to sit not only the descendants of the Pilgrims (the Marches) but also first-generation immigrants (Fritz Bhaer and his nephews, Emil and Franz) and the formerly delinquent boys excluded from the social contract, such as Nat and Dan. They are all embraced in the vision of a new American community offered at the end of the novel, testifying to the success of the educational experiment: "[T]he good Professor and his wife were taken prisoner by many arms and half hidden by the bouquet of laughing young faces which surrounded them, proving that one plant had taken root and blossomed beautifully in all the little gardens" (*LM* 315).

After a ten-year span, in *Jo's Boys,* Plumfield has advanced from a modest boarding school predominantly for boys to a full-scale coeducational college endowed by Laurie, the March sisters' companion from *Little Women*. There is the lingering Puritan view of the city as a place of "temptations" (*JB* 11), from which the young people should be shielded. Especially in the post-Civil War context, as Wishy mentions, Americans found that they needed to "adjust . . . the old Christian republican code to the demands of the complex, industrial society" (82). The difficulty of this enterprise is shown in the relative insularism of all three of Alcott's novels. In the first one, the women of the March family are safely ensconced in their family home, a modest but warm shell of protection from the intrusive outside events, from war to poverty. In *Little Men*, the boarding school is set apart from the city and set in pastoral surroundings, making it possible, for a while at least, to flee the corruption and temptations of the city and its complex universe. In *Jo's Boys*, the pas-

toral seclusion is deepened as the boarding school is expanded into a college which is a self-contained system—removed from the confusion of everyday life. The grounds of the college present "the pleasant scene," set in contrast to "the rapid growth of the city" (*JB* 3–4).

Pursuing further my aforementioned concerns, the debate of nature vs. nurture, the issue of gender, and the national element of education, let us delve into some aspects of *Jo's Boys*. Here we should focus again particularly on the figures of Dan, the wild boy, Nat, his counterpart, and Nan and Josie, the tomboys. We notice that the question raised by evolutionary theory and its blank moral purpose begins to insinuate itself into the young people's life plots. Dan returns from years of adventure in South America, followed by the spell of adventurous living in California and among the Natives of the West. It is clear that his wild nature has not changed, since he returns as a dark, brown, strong, and restless man yearning for open space, freedom, and independence. This strong inclination is ascribed by Jo to his (imaginary) Native background, which can be fantasized about in the novel, given that Dan's parentage is unknown. Surrounded by animals (his mustang and a dog) and drawn to nature, Dan cannot stand the strictures of civilization and evinces the untamed nature of an Indian to whom he feels unusually strong affinity and friendship (*JB* 57). He is only partly an Emersonian, more willing to learn from Nature rather than from books.

In the span of time from *Little Men* to *Jo's Boys*, the educational view has further shifted to favor the role of nature ("race," as also transpires in Dan's case). If Dan's lineage is also racially marked, as suggested by the insinuation of his Indigenous origin, the evidence of his Mexican (Spanish, brown) complexion, and by him being cast in the role of Othello (to Bess's Desdemona), he comes close to the dark, ambivalent, and potentially corrupt male characters of Alcott's sensational thrillers here transposed into an educational setting but brimming with subversive potential (Stern x, xii, xvii). However, Alcott has by now given up on the idea that nurture can sway nature, as Jo contends: "We can't change his nature –

only help it to develop in the right direction" (*JB* 50). But from the point of view of a strict Darwinian outlook, there is no warranty for this meliorist expectation (Wishy 95, 112). Indeed, as Dan's plotline evolves, we see his further enmeshments into borderline situations and risky endeavors, just in line with his wild temperament that resents being civilized. Ultimately, due to the defects of his nature, he will not be reintegrated into the pastoral utopia of Plumfield but remains the inveterate rebel. Despite his delinquency, he still continues to draw the strongest sympathy from Jo, thus leading Clark to speculate that Alcott projected on Dan her subversive views (331).

In unpretentious descriptions of day-to-day goings-on at Plumfield, what comes forth is a particular educational tone, perhaps best qualified by Emerson as "Sympathy, the female force," which, as Emerson explains, is "deficient in instant control and the breaking down of resistance, [but] is more subtle and lasting and creative" (Emerson). Jo's boys indeed are governed and disciplined by love, extended by their teachers and substitute parents, Jo and Fritz, who, therefore, as if on Emerson's cue, "cherish mother-wit" (Emerson). Conversely, if boys should be extended female-styled sympathy and instructed by mother-wit, the girls, who have gained at least in Alcott's fictional universe, but increasingly also in post-Civil War America, access to all manner of educational institutions and can now contemplate different professions, need to strike out on their own. Mr. March, the philosophically minded father from *Little Women*, obviously modelled on Bronson Alcott, expounds on his educational precepts and announces that "the woman's hour has struck" (*JB* 23).

As for Jo, her advice to her girl charges echoes her own unorthodox upbringing, "let them run and play and build up good, stout bodies before she talks about careers" (*JB* 32), and she shows her girls running a gamut of options, from pursuing careers in acting or medicine to being involved in romantic and marriage plots. New gender roles for women are being interrogated rather than simply prescribed, so that the question

of the supposed feminine nature remains open. That Alcott's view of gender roles modulates new social trends is illustrated in Nan's character. Erstwhile Naughty Nan now morphs into another feminine type, ambivalently titled "the superfluous [woman]" or "spinster," while Jo allows herself to still second-guess the advantages of marriage to her premarital freedom and independence (*JB* 13). In Nan's trajectory, the novel thus convincingly outlines possible avenues of fulfillment for women who fall out of the traditional feminine roles. By now the text has adopted an intellectual argument that can plausibly endorse and sustain Nan's plea for equality, even within the broader public sphere demarcated by juvenile literature. Her tomboyism "would evolve from a method of raising adolescent girls to a type of training ground for professional adult women" (Abate 48).

Arguably, it was this didactic framework that contained Alcott's more daring endorsement of the feminist ideas of the time. As an example, Alcott takes up the traditionally derogatory feminine types, the superfluous woman and the spinster, and turns them into empowering roles for women (*JB* 186). In another twist, what starts out as the sewing circle for female students under the tutelage of Meg, who, faithful to her character in *Little Women*, fulfills the nurturing feminine role (*JB* 185), soon evolves into a hub of reading and discussing art, "romances, poetry, and plays," "health, religion, politics," and a growing body of feminist ideas (*JB* 186). The point is, however, that Alcott's feminist perspective enthusiastically encompasses a gamut of options for women, from the idea that they should seek a profession and then marry, to the notion that a woman need not marry in order to make herself useful to society, or that for some women, marriage indeed might be the ultimate goal. Her feminism is thus pragmatic and situationist, making allowances for a number of female choices as to how to accomplish their private and social roles.

A further example which distills and meshes the abovementioned gender, Darwinian, and national concerns is the continuing theme of the tomboy as a relatively new cultural type in girl's development observed

from mid-nineteenth century on and taken up in *Jo's Boys* in the next generation of the March women. Jo's niece, appropriately named Josie, is a spirited and vibrant girl aspiring to become an actress, the wish that is finally granted to one of Alcott's heroines without the lingering fear of the loss of respectability. This is a decided shift from *Little Women*, where acting is prohibited to the respectable Protestant girls except as a domestic diversion, "the Marches [being] a theatrical family" (*JB* 126). Now, with religious and social strictures loosening, even the middle-class Marches may join in. Josie's tomboy energy, just like Nan's, need not be contained and, rather than undergoing "tomboy taming," Josie is shown in her efforts to enter the profession of her dreams.

Josie is bent on pursuing a career in acting and seems to be perfectly suited, a true natural, for that profession given her vitality, vigor, energy, impetuousness, and pluck, all traits that might serve her well on stage. Acting as a tomboy, Josie elicits concern from her traditionally minded mother, Mrs. Meg, who endorses the idea that the March family stands for respectability. Yet trying to contain both Josie's impulse for acting as well as her elder sister Daisy's illicit affection toward the orphaned and no-name Nat, Mrs. Meg subtly but persistently trails the line of heredity. Even in Josie's choice of a career in acting, it is the family "stock" that matters (*JB* 103). Likewise, Mrs. Meg only reluctantly concedes Nat's right to court her Daisy after being persuaded so by her more democratically minded sister Jo: "We Marches, though we have been poor, are, I confess, a little proud of our good family" (*JB* 77).

Pursuing further Nat's case, we see that the source of his problems, with Mrs. Meg and during his stay and study in Germany, becomes his pauperism, the notion that his origin and his status as "a charity boy" might be unrespectable (*JB* 77). Moreover, the hidden familial stock might not evidence his potential hereditary vices that are still hinted at. Even as a young adult, he is still prone to his inherent weakness, softness. Even the sympathetic Jo suspects that he might lack "principles" and firmness (*JB* 75). Indeed, when he finds himself on his own in the whirl-

wind of social and cultural life of Leipzig, his head is turned and "the weak side of his nature came uppermost here" (*JB* 147). However, given that from its inception the goal of Plumfield was utopian in that it has had "educational" as well as "social and philanthropic" aims (Proehl 43), the novel intends to find a solution to the enduring dilemma by allowing Nat to recoup and get a second chance defying the idea that biology and heredity are his only destiny. This irresolvable issue continues to haunt the text of the novel and the educational issues that it has raised, illustrating the inconclusive nature of the debate (Wishy 95).

The ferment of educational reform contained in Transcendentalism and concentrated in mid- to late-nineteenth century New England resonated deeply for some time and left its trace in practical endeavors by its proponents. It was reflected also in the popular literature for children and young adults, as shown by Louisa May Alcott's works, which thus gave it a more lasting and broader purchase. Still, Alcott, rather than being a code breaker, tended to place her work in the gap opening between the Victorian and post-Victorian age (Strickland 133), between the approaches favoring nature and those promoting nurture, between romantic and sentimentalist and empiricist and disciplinarian models of education, between Transcendentalist spiritualism and Darwinian biologism and materialism, so that we find in her novels of education the reactions to the debates percolating in mid- to late-nineteenth-century American culture. Alcott's perceptive observation of changes makes her educational novels a significant record of American popular culture in the sphere of public education as it was becoming modelled on more modern patterns, closer to our age and sensibility. Offering a curious blend of nineteenth-century Victorian decorum and its more irreverent romantic (Transcendentalist) revision, Alcott's March family trilogy still captures the attention of modern readers grappling with contemporary issues of education.

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