# PRACTICAL TRANSCENDENTALISM FOR THE CULT OF TRUE WOMANHOOD

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Louisa May Alcott inhabits a unique place in the world of American literature. The daughter of Amos Bronson Alcott, possibly the least financially successful member of the Concord, Massachusetts, Transcendentalist Group, she grew up under the influence of Emerson and Thoreau and experienced firsthand the results of her father's failed attempts at using Transcendental principles to teach school (Temple School, Boston) and to create a closed living community (Fruitlands). The second oldest of the four surviving daughters of Bronson and Abba May, Louisa also understood the impact that these Transcendental experiments had on the wives and children of the philosophers. These realities formed her into a particularly practical woman who, recognizing her father's inability to support his family, became determined to help her mother and sisters. With this background, it is no surprise that Louisa was tapped to write stories for girls in response to Oliver Optics' collection for boys in Post-Civil War America, or that when she began writing she focused on stories of capable young women who espoused society's feminine requirements and were able to turn their hand to almost any task and make a success of it. This is a fitting description for her heroines Jo (*Little Women* and *Little Men*), Rose (*Eight Cousins* and *A Rose in Bloom*), and Christie (*Work: A Story of Experience*).

Alcott's didactic novel, *Work: A Story of Experience,* is the last of her comparatively few works of adult fiction. Best known for her *Little Women* series, Alcott was a prolific author who published in multiple genres, including children's literature (both novels and short stories), adult sentimental fiction, gothic fiction, and poetry. *Work,* published in 1873 (but begun in 1860 under

the name *Success*), tells the story of Christie Devon's experiences as a Northern middle-class woman working in the years before, during, and after the Civil War. Patricia Repka tells us that *Work* shows Alcott's own spiritual struggle through Christie's: "Veiled as Christie's story, *Work: A Story of Experience* chronicles Alcott's transcendental conversion, details her creation of a self and her selection of a vocation within the framework of transcendentalism, and advances her pursuit of spiritual perfection" (160). Likewise, Angela Christaldi states that Alcott "create[s] her own version of Transcendentalism, one in which women are included to a far greater extent than the one created by her father and his peers" (69-70). I argue that Christie, Alcott's most autobiographical character, appears as a kind of practical female counterpoint to Thoreau's take on how to live out Transcendental principles. Thoreau tells men to go into the woods alone and live deliberately to find connection to the Infinite. Alcott tells women to go into the world, where, in addition to finding the voice of the Infinite within themselves, they can help others find their own voice.

The path to Transcendental enlightenment, as philosophized by Emerson and lived out by Thoreau, requires that the individual "trust thyself" (Emerson, *Self-Reliance*) for both the physical upkeep of the body and, eventually, the spiritual upkeep of the soul. To go from focusing on physical upkeep to spiritual upkeep, the individual must take a journey into himself/herself. As Thoreau reflects in *Walden* and Alcott writes in *Work,* this journey begins with the realization that the current situation is not sustainable and a change must be made. Thoreau looks around Concord and declares "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (972) as he reflects on how they are trapped by their possessions: "How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one

hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture and woodlot!" (970). Alcott begins her domestic novel *Work* with her heroine Christie, age 21, making a similar reflection:

> Christie plainly saw that one of three things would surely happen, if she lived on there with no vent for her full heart and busy mind. She would either marry Joe Butterfield in sheer desperation, and become a farmer's household drudge; settle down into a sour spinster, content to make butter, gossip, and lay up money all her days; or do what poor Matty Stone had done, try to crush and curb her needs and aspirations till the struggle grew too hard, and then in a fit of despair end her life (Alcott 12);

She also makes a similar declaration: "Aunt Betsey, there's going to be a new Declaration of Independence …. I mean that, being of age, I'm going to take care of myself, and not be a burden any longer (Alcott 1-2). Notice that Thoreau's reflection and declaration is in the third person; he observes the condition of the men around him and makes a declaration that is universal for all men. Alcott's heroine also observes the world around her, but that world is very narrow. Her reflection and declaration are in the first person because she has not experienced enough to speak for all women. The difference in these opening declarations sets the foundation for different journeys to Transcendental enlightenment. Nineteenth-century men, who were constantly in society, must withdraw and focus inward on the self, while nineteenth-century women, who lived insular lives, must journey into the world and focus outward.

The world of the Nineteenth Century is ruled by gender division. Known as "the doctrine of separate spheres" and dubbed "The Cult of True Womanhood" by Barbara Welter, these standards dictated strict rules for women that kept them out of the work world and in the home and church. These same standards dictated that a man's place was doing whatever was necessary to earn money and support his family, usually in the business world. Therefore men, who lived a

very public life, needed to retreat from the world so that they could focus inward to find the voice of the Infinite. Women, who spent their lives at home and out of society, needed to do the exact opposite – enter the world to learn about life and relationships, and to find themselves. Both Thoreau and Alcott understood the impact of these standards on their audience and wrote to encourage the necessary action for each gender. Just as Thoreau hoped to inspire men out of their lives of quiet desperation, Alcott "seeks to inspire women to escape lives of quiet desperation [within the home by engaging] in paid labor outside of the home" (Cummings 15).

Male or female, a nineteenth-century seeker for Transcendental enlightenment must secure the needs of the physical body before giving himself or herself over to the search for spiritual fulfillment. Thoreau famously situated himself in a cabin near Walden Pond on land belonging to Emerson. His early days are filled with building his cabin, growing and trading beans, and keeping detailed accounts of his finances. He is determined to live as simply as possible so as to not be trapped by possessions. He tells his readers: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (1014). Christie must also see to her physical needs, and in the opening chapters of the novel she takes jobs as a servant, an actress, a governess, a companion, and a seamstress. Each job in succession teaches her about living in society and helps her learn to trust her own intuition, but many of the jobs are emotionally draining. As each one ends, Christie is continually dissatisfied. None of the jobs live up to the expectations she expressed before leaving home as she watched logs in the fireplace, one burning brightly and one smoldering:

> I know the end is the same; but it does make a difference how they turn to ashes, and how I spend my life …. I hope my life may be like that [the brightly burning log], so that,

> whether it be long or short, it will be useful and cheerful while it lasts, will be missed when it ends, and leave something behind besides ashes" (Alcott 7).

It is this desire to become something more, to understand the "whys" of life, and to actually live before dying that inspires every enlightenment journey. The journey toward Transcendental enlightenment is no different.

While going about the tasks required to meet their physical needs, both Thoreau and Christie make acquaintances and mention the need for companionship. Thoreau, having gone into the woods, makes the acquaintance of the woodchucks, loons, mice, and hawks in the forest and often uses their habits to explain the habits of men. He also makes the acquaintance of an old settler who tells him mystical stories and an old woman whose "memory runs back farther than mythology" (1037). These two characters may be real, or they may be representations of God and Mother Nature. Either way, Thoreau's relationship with them, like his relationship with the animals, is outside human society. Although Thoreau occasionally has visitors from town or goes into town, he "find[s] it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (1036). This preference against company is a negative response to his life in a nineteenth-century society where men were most often in company. Christie, on the other hand, as a woman in that same society is hungry for companionship. At each job she finds a friend, but none are kindred spirits until she finds Rachel, who is ripped away from her by the cruelty of the rules of the Cult of True Womanhood. Being a fallen woman, Rachel is unwelcome to stay in the sewing circle where she and Christie are both working, lest she taint the others. Christie's response is impassioned, but ineffective:

> '…if you send her away, I must take her in; for if she does go back to the old life, the sin of it will lie at our door, and God will remember it against us in the end. Someone must trust her, help her, love her, and so save her, as nothing else will. Perhaps I can do this better than you,—at least, I'll try; for even if I risk the loss of my good name, I could bear that better than the thought that Rachel had lost the work of these hard years for want of upholding now [sic]' (Alcott 139).

Despite Christie's wishes, Rachel and Christie must part, leaving Christie more alone than she has ever felt before.

As a man, Thoreau had every opportunity to find companions. He made life-long friends of Emerson and the other members of the Transcendental circle. Having had the opportunity throughout his life to find companions who were like-minded, Thoreau knew that companionship did not hold the answers he sought. Christie, however, being raised in a narrow world where her only companions were girls preoccupied with the societal expectation of getting married, finds this first kindred soul relationship all consuming. Her response to this lost relationship will be the catalyst that turns her away from a focus on making money to survive and renews her desire for a true and meaningful life.

At some point in the journey, the questioner comes to the realization that meeting physical needs alone is not a reason for this journey, so they begin to search for answers. Thoreau turns to the reading of the classics in their original languages, distinguishing this reading from reading by common men and saying, "Most men are satisfied if they read or hear read, and perchance have been convicted by the wisdom of one good book the Bible, and for the rest of their lives vegetate and dissipate their faculties in what is called easy reading" (1021). Thoreau is disgusted with the lack of learning in society and wonders why the modern world

cannot be a kind of lifelong university, but he never seems to find all of the answers he is seeking in his books. After losing Rachel, Christie finds herself alone in her room, month after month, unable to brighten herself or bring happiness to her life, and she declares, "I am not good enough yet to deserve happiness. I think too much of human love, too little of divine. When I have made God my friend perhaps He will let me find and keep one heart to make life happy with" (Alcott 146). But though her search for God leads her to many churches and causes her to study many creeds, she is unable to discover God:

> 'I'm afraid I never shall get religion, for all that's offered me seems so poor, so narrow, or so hard that I cannot take it for my stay. … I want a Father to whom I can go with all my sins and sorrows, all my hopes and joys, as freely and fearlessly as I used to go to my human father, sure of help and sympathy and love. Shall I ever find Him?' (Alcott 147).

Along the journey, both Thoreau and Christie make an attempt to find answers in the places that the world declares answers should be found – literature and religion. Unfortunately, like many others, they discover that the answers they seek do not lie in any books or creeds. Thoreau, having lived in society, reveals his understanding of this reality early when he says, "For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it [life], whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to 'glorify God and enjoy him forever' (1014). Additionally, his lengthy discussion of the importance of reading classical literature does not seem to lead him to any true enlightenment about life. Christie actually takes an opposite route, as is often the case with women in the nineteenth century. While still living at home, she had her father's books and she "wore [them] out with much reading" (Alcott 12). Having discarded books as an answer to her longings, she searches for God after her

heart is opened and broken by losing Rachel. Unfortunately, like Thoreau, she finds that people give lip service to God and religion. They are not actually changed or enlightened by it.

Unable to find answers in books or religion, our searchers now face the point of spiritual conversion. Unlike many of the Puritan conversion narratives, Transcendental spiritual conversion resulting in enlightenment does not happen all at once; it is a process. Being in the woods and watching the animals, insects, and plants that thrive there daily, Thoreau came to the realization that there was as much heaven *in* Walden Pond as there was *above* Walden Pond:

> It was very queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmogonal themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward 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 (1056).

In quotes like these, we see how Thoreau repeatedly connects Nature and heaven. His conversations with the old settler and the old woman, and his thoughts about the origin of the Pond and its continued existence, work together. He sees that the Creator exists in all of Nature and likewise within him. When spring arrives and he sees the natural world bursting forth, Thoreau concludes that it is time to dismiss old grudges and forgive old sins so that life can move forward: “I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success …. And he will live with the license of a higher order of beings” (1127). This idea of confident living is the Transcendental concept of self-reliance and the “license of a higher order of beings” is the voice of the Infinite, found within by those, like Thoreau, who choose self-reliance and listen to that voice. In his conclusion Thoreau avers, “I delight … to walk even with

the Builder of the universe, if I may, -- not to live this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by" (1130). Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond changed him, brought him through Transcendental spiritual conversion, and allowed him to be at peace with himself and the world.

Christie reaches a spiritual conversion, too, but as a nineteenth-century woman, finding that place is significantly more complicated than Thoreau's time in the woods. Having demonstrated that the female path to Transcendental enlightenment proceeds in a different direction from the male path, we return to Christie's story at the point when she has lost Rachel and given up on religion. Alone and desperate in a world full of people, Christie ends up on the wharf contemplating suicide when she is pulled back from the edge by Rachel. The "rock bottom" of Christie's life comes in the middle of her journey because, as a nineteenth-century woman, Christie needed to learn about relationships and people in real time (not just by reading about them) before she is ready for spiritual conversion. From the wharf, Christie is taken to the Wilkins' home and introduced to a circle of like-minded people, just as those people Thoreau had known before he went to Walden Pond. With their help, Christie takes steps toward spiritual conversion, although those steps are convoluted by Alcott's need to appease her audience with the expectations of the nineteenth-century domestic novel.

Yielding to the marriage plot of said domestic novels, Alcott has Christie meet David Sterling, the son of the woman she is "working" for (although there is no mention of her being paid money, just of her having a place where she is accepted, respected, and loved). David is one of Alcott's Thoreau characters. According to Tracey Cummings, Thoreau appears in as many as five of Alcott's works – *Moods, Work, Little Men, Jo's Boys*, and "Thoreau's Flute." Cummings also claims that:

> …Alcott restates, recreates and rescues Thoreau. She restates Thoreau by rewriting his transcendental ideas and prose as domestic fiction, in one instance offering up her *Work* as *Walden* rewritten for a female audience. She recreates Thoreau by re-imagining his transcendentalism in terms of middle-class domesticity and by recasting Thoreau's reputation, raising him from the dead through the creation of a variety of different characters throughout her fiction (1).

It is Cummings' assertion that Alcott repeatedly created characters that had certain Thoreauvian qualities, and David Sterling certainly shares much with Thoreau. First, he is a naturalist and a florist, spending much of his time with plants and flowers, finding "all the delicate traits, curious habits, and poetical romances of the sweet things, as if [he] knew and loved them as friends, not merely valued them as merchandise" (Alcott 236). This anthropomorphizing of the flowers is akin to Thoreau imbibing the natural world around him with spiritual and philosophical significance. Secondly, just as Thoreau resists leaving the woods, David resists leaving the closed world of his flowers and his mother's home, refusing to take an active role in nineteenth-century male society. And third, David has a secret sorrow that drives him to a solitary life, much like the death of Thoreau's brother provided the impetus for Thoreau's sojourn at Walden Pond. And if all of this doesn't make it clear that David is a Thoreauvian character, both Thoreau and David play a flute, which speaks when words fail during life and comforts loved ones after death.

Through Christie's interactions with David, we see that she, like Thoreau, saw things in the natural world that many do not see. On her first afternoon in the Sterling household, Christie enters the conservatory to assist David and is awe struck:

> All manner of beautiful and curious plants were there; and Christie walked among them, as happy as a child who finds its playmates again. Coming to a bed of pansies she…

> feasted her eyes on these her favorites. Her face grew young as she looked, her hands touched them with a lingering tenderness as if to her they were half human… 'ever since I was a child, I always see a little face when I look at this flower. Sometimes it is a sad one, sometimes it's merry, often roguish, but always a dear little face; and when I see so many together, it's like a flock of children, all nodding and smiling at me at once' (Alcott 229-230).

Christie's fancy for flowers continues through the afternoon as she displays unusual adeptness at creating bouquets that express personalities for a party and helps David find the right blossoms to add to an arrangement intended to comfort a mother whose baby has died. The couple's conversations concerning the messages inherent within each flower continue throughout the work and make a clear connection to Thoreau and his discovery of the Infinite in the natural world.

Additionally, in a concession to the domestic novel's facet of unreal coincidence and to uphold the precepts of the Cult of True Womanhood, Rachel's true identity as David's sister Letty is revealed, and Rachel/Letty is restored to the family circle to the delight of her mother, her brother, and her friend. Although Letty's story is not explored fully, the little we know paints her as a foil to Christie's moral fortitude. Letty also left home to make her way in the world, but instead of maintaining the dictates of the Cult of True Womanhood, Letty was drawn into an out-of-wedlock relationship. Her attempts to return home were met with righteous indignation by her brother David. The grief he carried was his belief that Letty had died in a shipwreck after he refused to forgive her. It is possible that Letty, too, reaches Transcendental enlightenment, but whether she does or not, we know that her decision to go out into the world supports the idea that nineteenth-century women could not withdraw to find themselves.

Although Alcott upholds the Cult of True Womanhood and acquiesces to the marriage plot and unreal coincidences features of the domestic novel, *Work* is the final novel of an experienced author, and she is not willing to concede all of her principles. Christie speaks one of Alcott's most famous quotes – "I'll paddle my own canoe as long as I can … and when I must ask help I'll turn to strangers for it, or scuttle my boat, and go down without troubling anyone" (Alcott 153) – at her lowest point, just before she finds herself on the wharf. Alcott has Christie paddle on long after the traditional domestic novel would have ended by using the Civil War to remove David from the novel so that Christie's story and her spiritual journey can continue. Christie mourns David deeply, but the wind playing through David's flute and the birth of their daughter, Ruth, have the same effect on Christie that the arrival of Spring has for Thoreau – it is a time to let go of the past and move on into the future. Christie's spiritual conversion is complete at this point, but Alcott wants the world to see what a woman's life in Transcendental enlightenment looks like, so Christie's story continues.

In the final chapters of the novel, Christie discovers her life's work: sharing her story of work and faith with other working women to help them find their own connection to the Infinite and discover their own life's work. Along the path to these discoveries, Alcott makes clear her feelings about men of the nineteenth century and society's views on racial and class stereotypes. The story ends with the return of Bella, a wealthy young woman advised by Christie, now at loose ends trying to figure out how to make her life count. Christie, probably remembering the lessons she learned as a maid, suggests that Bella grow where she is planted by hosting parties and "provid[ing] employment and pleasure for others like yourself, who now are dying of frivolity or ennui" (Alcott 436). Christie further explains that: "Women lead in society, and when men find that they can not only dress with taste, but talk with sense, the lords of creation will be

glad to drop mere twaddle and converse as with their equals" (Alcott 438). As the discussion between Christie and Bella ends, they are joined by several members of Christie's circle of like-minded women, who encourage Christie to continue her good work, which she promises to do until the day she dies. The final scene in the book is this circle of women, young and old, rich and poor, black and white, joining hands, as they promise to do their part to create a world where "women will not only receive but deserve their liberty, by learning that the greatest of God's gifts to us is the privilege of sharing His great work" (Alcott 443). These scenes and conversations at the end of Alcott's last work of adult fiction are tantamount to Alcott's final say on nineteenth-century society: society is led by women; the "lords of creation" (Alcott 438) need to recognize the intelligence of the women around them; women of all ages, races, and economic status are equal partners; and, women are just as capable of reaching Transcendental enlightenment as Thoreau's men.

Numerous critics recognize that *Work* embodies elements of Transcendentalism. Some only acknowledge Christie's striving toward individual Transcendental tenets, like self-reliance: "As Christie makes her way in the world, following the tenets of Emersonian individualism, her experiences reveal the socially-constructed barriers to a woman's self-reliance" (Rigsby 135). While others focus on the bond of sisterhood shown when Christie is at a point of giving up: "It is a 'woman's arm about her' which saves her, not a man's" (Cummings 124); and, in the final scene of the novel: "acts of true charity form the bond of sisterhood necessary for the happy ending Alcott promises" (Cadwallader 105). However, none of these critics look beyond the individual elements and see Christie as a Transcendental journeyer providing nineteenth-century women with the same roadmap Thoreau provided nineteenth-century men. Widdicombe comes closest when he states: the novel is "a fictionalized treatise on the Transcendental themes of the

value of work, the healing power of nature, the sustaining power of self-reliance (its capacity to aid the individual in his realization of his own spiritual perfection), and the enduring grace of experience in life" (103). However, a "fictionalized treatise" on "Transcendental themes" is not the same as identifying Christie (and Alcott, for this semi-biographical novel is as much her story as Christie's) as a Transcendental woman.

Although the Transcendental elements of work, nature, and self-reliance are important and the bond of sisterhood is an essential element for women in the transitional period of the nineteenth century, it is Christie's spiritual conversion that is the true catalyst for the outcome of the novel, just as Thoreau's spiritual conversion at Walden Pond is what allows him to let go of the past and move forward into the future. This is the goal of Transcendentalism: to recognize the voice within as the voice of the Infinite and to follow that voice wherever it leads. Both Thoreau and Christie learn this precept and conclude their stories with productive and happy lives. However, in the nineteenth century, the path to that spiritual conversion was necessarily different for men and women. As men, both Thoreau and David Sterling stepped out of the world that the doctrine of separate spheres required them to live in to find the space to hear the Infinite within. As women, both Christie and Rachel/Letty felt compelled to leave the confining world of home, which the Cult of True Womanhood dictated as their sphere, and enter the world to find themselves so they too would be able to hear the Infinite and discover the strength of both self-reliance and sisterhood.

When Emerson wrote "Trust thyself" (*Self-Reliance*) and Thoreau wrote "All men want, not something to do with, but something to do, or rather something to be" (*Walden*) they were talking to men, but Alcott heard them, and she believed the lessons were also true for women. In writing this work for girls and women, Alcott takes the Transcendental principles bred in her by

her upbringing, combines them with the societal mores placed upon women by the "Cult of True Womanhood," and creates a manual for nineteenth-century women to find their own Transcendental enlightenment, a connection to the Infinite and important work to do in the world.

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