In addition to works mentioned herein, the influence of Hawthorne on Louisa May Alcott is discernible in the following collections of her work: *Louisa May Alcott: Selected Fiction*, ed. Daniel Shealy, Madeleine B. Stern, and Joel Myerson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990); *Freaks of Genius: Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Daniel Shealy (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1991); and *Alternative Alcott*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1988).

In the tiny New England village of Concord, Massachusetts, at the height of the American Civil War, two of the century's fiction writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott, with their strong-minded artistic families, lived side-by-side. In these few years Hawthorne's powers and reputation dwindled and Alcott's star rose. In one of the most turbulent of political and philosophical times, the families, deeply implicated in so many major national issues, attempted to come to terms with their contradictory politics and clashing temperaments during personal and national trial. Despite the unfortunate discord that surfaced between the Hawthornes and Alcotts, Louisa May Alcott would find in Hawthorne's work instructive treatments and themes compatible with her own interests and would eventually discover in *The Scarlet Letter* a means of coping fictionally with her often dysfunctional family.

In many ways, no two souls could be more antithetical, particularly touching the stormy politics of race and gender, than Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott. In marked contrast to Hawthorne, Louisa Alcott was a devoted abolitionist, a feminist, and, like her father and mother, an admirer of John Brown. Moreover, she was in her essence the very type that Hawthorne made no secret of scorning—a woman who wrote fiction. Yet there are vocational links between the two neighbors, and Louisa seemed always to stand in awe and admiration of the man Hawthorne.
Moreover, her work, especially her adult fiction, continued and enlivened themes we have come to regard as part of the Hawthorne tradition—the turmoil suffered by the powerful mother and the power of and disjunction between woman's work and man's vocation which figured in the disruption of the traditional family.

**Biographical Relations**

The connection in life between Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott, which is essentially the story of the friendship between the Hawthorne and Alcott families, is a tangled chapter of literature and politics in the history of American letters which prepares the ground for Louisa May Alcott's absorption in *The Scarlet Letter* and subsequent fictionalizing of her own disjointed family.

By reading in parallel fashion the histories available in the copious materials gathered by their biographers and the editors of their journals and letters, I hope to raise questions about the personal and political dynamics of a close and cordial relationship between neighbors and friends which came to an end abruptly just a few months before Hawthorne died, leaving for Louisa May only the poignant memory of the man she admired—always so close physically yet so distant psychologically—and the enduring influence of *The Scarlet Letter* on her work.

The two families were linked in friendship for over twenty years, embracing the two generations of Alcott and Hawthorne parents and children, beginning in the late 1830s, when Bronson and Nathaniel were introduced, until the last years of Hawthorne's life when the two families were next-door neighbors. (For information about the lives of the two families, I am heavily indebted to the biographers of Hawthorne and the Alcotts, especially Mellow, Arvin, Saxon, Stern).

The Alcotts returned to Concord in 1857 after five lean years in New Hampshire and Boston. Two years later, in 1859, Hawthorne also began plans to return to his own house in Concord, where, by this time, his closest neighbors would be the Alcotts. If we can believe Una Hawthorne's account, her father was very apprehensive about moving next-door to Bronson. In a letter to her Aunt Elizabeth, her mother's sister, Una writes, "Papa does not seem to look forward to Mr. Alcott's near neighborhood with any pleasure at all. It seems to me it would be an excellent way of getting rid of him to buy up the houses," meaning the Alcotts' property (Hawthorne, *Letters* 541). Unlike the Hawthornes, Bronson Alcott and his family were unreservedly pleased at the arrival of the new neighbors.

The high excitement in the Alcott house is attested to by Louisa in a letter to a friend in the summer of 1860:

We are all blooming and just now full of the Hawthornes whose arrival gives us new neighbors and something to talk about besides Parker, Sumner and Sanborn. Mr. H. is
as queer as ever and we catch glimpses of a dark mysterious looking man in a big hat and red slippers darting over the hills or skimming by as if he expected the house of Alcott were about to rush out and clutch him. (L. Alcott, Letters 57)

The warmest connections between the families were those forged by the children. Immediately upon the arrival of the Hawthornes, the younger generation of Alcotts and Hawthornes, especially Julian, were close and constant companions, even though Louisa was twenty-eight and Julian only fourteen. In a letter to Alfred Whitman in September of 1863 Louisa still considered Julian one of her “boys” (L. Alcott, Letters 92). Julian describes these days in his book *Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife*, writing that an “unfailing spring of hospitable entertainment was always to be found at Alcotts” and that “social gayety in Concord” centered on the Alcotts (267, 322).

In December of 1862, Louisa’s orders came to report to Washington to begin her duties as a nurse of Union soldiers. Sophia Hawthorne seemed to be as excited about and involved in the departure as any member of the Alcott family. Mellow writes that the news of Louisa’s being called to service in Washington “created a flurry of excitement in the Alcott and Hawthorne households. Sophia had helped mark Louisa’s clothing with indelible ink, in preparation for the journey” (Mellow 561). Hawthorne’s son Julian saw Louisa to the train heading for Washington in December of 1862, and it was Una, Hawthorne’s daughter, on whose shoulder the sick Louisa’s head rested on the return trip to Concord in January of 1863. A concerned Hawthorne wrote to James Fields on 30 January that “Louisa Alcott has returned from Washington with Typhus fever which looks very threatening. I fear she will not come through it” (Hawthorne, Letters 533). Again, the Hawthornes, and especially Sophia, were deeply involved in the Alcotts’ tribulations throughout the winter and spring of 1863. Sophia especially helped nurse Louisa and suggested that her sister May Alcott take all her meals with the Hawthornes in the darkest days of Louisa’s illness.

During Louisa’s recuperation, as Sophia was busy helping Abba and the Alcott daughters, Bronson was one of the few people on earth to continue to be a recipient of Hawthorne’s friendship. Indeed, there appears to have been a reversal in Hawthorne’s response to Bronson. The irksomeness with which he viewed Bronson in his younger days and the dread with which he may have faced moving next-door to him in 1860 seem to have been replaced by a new regard for Bronson as “the most excellent of men.” Julian may have been drawing on his father’s estimate of Bronson in *The Memoirs of Julian Hawthorne*, when he describes him as having “really gained in moral and intellectual stature as he advanced in age” (59).

Bronson and Nathaniel continued their rather unlikely friendship, but just months before Hawthorne died, probably sometime in the late fall of 1863 or the winter of 1862, the Hawthornes as a family broke off their friendship with their neighbors. We know from publisher William Ticknor’s report that Hawthorne told
Bronson that the reason for the split was Hawthorne's and Sophia's inability to abide Bronson's wife, Abba. Yet the events surrounding the break were incontrovertibly complex, and Louisa herself may have inadvertently contributed to the break by literally "writing" her family out of their neighbors' lives. Though Louisa's own writing is part of the background of the break, it was a peculiar turn of events which had no connection at all with Hawthorne's infamous 1830 disparagement of scribbling women. There is no evidence that Hawthorne ever thought of Louisa as one of that abhorrent horde. In fact, there is no reference to suggest that he had read any of the fiction she wrote before her departure for Washington, or that he knew much about it. However, the events preceding the Hawthornes' break with the Alcotts suggests that one of Louisa's works, "Hospital Sketches" (1863), combined with the politics of the time, may have figured in the break that was blamed on Abba Alcott's difficult personality.

Differences in politics as well as differences in temperament, amplified by events following John Brown's execution, could have been expected to put a strain on the neighbors' friendship from the first. Alcott was the most fervent of the transcendentalists in speaking of Brown as a martyr while Hawthorne dismissed Brown as a criminal and scoffed at the transcendentalist characterization of Brown as a Christ-figure. In the summer of 1860, the time of Hawthorne's move to Concord, the Alcotts had held a celebrated tea for Brown's widow. Biographer James R. Mellow writes that "The politics of Concord, transcendental or otherwise, were never to Hawthorne's liking. It was, perhaps, one of the reasons he seldom ventured into Concord society after his return from Europe" (535). Even given Hawthorne's ownership of Concord property, a question arises as to why, if Hawthorne found Concord society so distasteful, he chose to settle there in his declining years and to situate himself next-door to a man whose company, not to mention politics, he had usually found irksome.

A closer examination of the chronology of the events of 1862-63 is instructive. In July of 1862 Hawthorne published an essay, "Chiefly about War Matters," based upon his firsthand observations of a battlefield, a prisoner-of-war camp, and an interview with Abraham Lincoln. The piece fell discordantly on New England ears. During the understandable patriotic fervor of wartime, Hawthorne did the unforgivable, betraying his own skepticism about the conflict, his empathy with the common soldiers of both sides, and his aversion to both John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. The lengthy correspondence about the article between Hawthorne and his publishers suggests just how removed he was from the mainstream wartime politics of his friends. The original included reference, among other things, to a Union officer who was "the stupidest looking man he ever saw" and to "the genial courtesy" of southerners contrasted to the "uncouthness of Uncle Abe's" (Hawthorne, Letters 462). In the Concord/Boston circles "Chiefly about War Matters" created even greater ill will because of Hawthorne's reference to Emerson's behavior after John Brown's arrest. Although Hawthorne had not returned to the United States at the
time, word reached him that in a speech after Brown's execution Emerson had called him "the Saint . . . whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows as glorious as the cross" (Lusk 402). What was not expunged from the first printing of "Chiefly about War Matters" was a comment about Emerson's remark:

I shall not pretend to be an admirer of old John Brown . . . ; nor did I expect ever to shrink so unutterably from any apothegm of a sage, whose happy lips have uttered a hundred golden sentences, as from that saying (perhaps falsely attributed to so honored a source) that the death of this blood-stained fanatic has "made the Gallows as venerable as the Cross!" ("War Matters" 327)

Hawthorne was reminded repeatedly of the cool public reception of his piece, as when, in June of 1862, he felt compelled to respond to a Mr. Woodman who objected to his treatment of Emerson.

In the summer of 1863 Hawthorne prepared for publication his last major work, and Louisa May Alcott began publishing the hospital sketches which would propel her into the literary world as a figure to be reckoned with. Both Hawthorne's and Alcott's works had political implications in a time of war. Alcott's was the well-received, politically correct piece, in marked contrast to Hawthorne's unpopular, politically inexpedient Civil War article which had appeared only eleven months earlier.

In the spring Louisa was well enough to begin work on her "Hospital Sketches," which appeared in serial form from 22 May to 26 June. She seemed to receive celebrity overnight as publishers courted her and newspapers throughout the country began reprinting the sketches. Despite the war and Louisa's still delicate health, the atmosphere in the Alcott house throughout the summer was one of jubilation. Abba and Bronson were exceptionally proud of their daughter, and tracking her success became a regular part of Bronson's journal. On 5 June he recorded that publisher Whipple was asking for the "Hospital Sketches" manuscript. On the thirteenth of that month he noted the appearance of the last of the sketches in the Commonwealth, all "having met with unexpected favor from various quarters." Next day he boasted about the compliment she received from Henry James Sr., and on the twenty-third he recorded the proposal from Redpath to publish the sketches as a book. On 10 July he wrote that in reviews "Hospital Sketches" is praised "highly." On 3 August he wrote that "Louisa is busy with her pen writing for the Atlantic and Commonwealth." Later in August he appended a clipping of her poem "Thoreau's Flute." He recorded the arrival of Louisa's book and a number of favorable reviews in his journal entry of 26 August. On 4 September he indicated that James T. Fields had accepted a story of Louisa's. And on 7 September he was still proudly recording her good reviews.

To the Hawthorne house next-door, by contrast, the literary and political activity of that same summer had brought a strained and somber atmosphere. Hawthorne,
still agonizing over his inability to proceed with his romances, still smarting from the hostile reception of “Chiefly about War Matters” he had received the previous year, was in the spring of 1863 preparing his memoirs of England, Our Old Home, for publication in book form. In July he threw this book into the turbulent political scene, as he had done his earlier piece, by determining to dedicate the book to his friend Franklin Pierce at precisely the time when the public found renewed reasons to consider Pierce a traitor to the Union cause. In May of that spring he had been undecided about how he should inscribe the volume, but by the first of July something had occurred to cause him to be very firm in his intent: “It requires some little thought and policy in order to say nothing amiss at this time; for I intend to dedicate the book to Frank Pierce, come what may” (Hawthorne, Letters 579). On 15 July, Fields replied, by way of a very carefully worded warning about dedicating the volume to Pierce. But Hawthorne’s mind was made up, and on 18 July he replied, standing by his choice and issuing a few choice words for those who would object: “If the public of the north see fit to ostracize me for this, I can only say that I would gladly sacrifice a thousand or two of dollars rather than retain the good will of such a herd of dolts and mean-spirited scoundrels” (Hawthorne, Letters 587).

The subject of Franklin Pierce was a volatile topic in New England, but especially in the Hawthorne/Peabody family. Pierce had been a friend of Hawthorne’s since their Bowdoin days, had offered Hawthorne assistance in his various political appointments, saving his life and family with the appointment to the Liverpool consulship. Yet Pierce had proved himself to be a copperhead and was suspected of having worked directly with the Confederacy to the detriment of the Union.

The very political Peabody family’s anger at Pierce’s behavior was as fierce as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s loyalty to him. Sophia pled repeatedly and unsuccessfully with her family to be silent on the subject of Pierce in her husband’s presence. Following on the heels of his decision to dedicate his book to Pierce, on the Fourth of July Hawthorne sat on the platform while Pierce excoriated Lincoln, the Republicans, and the Union army, and at the very time when news of Gettysburg made its way through the crowd. When draft riots erupted almost immediately in New York City, resulting in the lynching of black people, many northerners blamed Pierce for helping to incite the trouble.

In political contrast to Hawthorne, who had sat on the podium with Pierce on the Fourth of July, Bronson Alcott pasted into his journal a Fourth of July speech in Boston delivered by Oliver Wendell Holmes. And Holmes’s speech reads like a direct response to the arguments that Pierce reiterated in New Hampshire on the same day. Pierce excoriated Lincoln for thwarting free speech while Holmes attacked those who “damn their leaders in war time for limiting freedom of discussion.” Pierce excoriated the abolitionists who had ignited the war while Holmes answered that “the combustibles were all ready on the other side of the border.” Holmes’s denunciation of those “whose patriotism consists in stopping an inch short of treason” seemed to be directed particularly at Pierce, in light of his reputation at the time.
The controversy tainted the Hawthornes’ relations with both friends and family throughout the summer as Fields and Ellery Channing, in a move which can only be described as self-defeating, secretly urged Sophia’s sister Elizabeth to convince her brother-in-law to rethink his dedication to Pierce. Hawthorne responded in a fury. To those who would call Pierce a traitor, he replied, “A traitor? Why, he is the only loyal man in the country, North or South!” (Hawthorne, Letters 151).

Summer for the Alcotts ended on an even more glorious note when Louisa received the bound copies of her book. Interestingly enough, while Hawthorne on principle resisted strong pressure, from friendship and wisdom, to follow political and economic expediency, Louisa viewed her Civil War piece in just the opposite way, writing in April of the same year that the Commonwealth thought her letters home “witty & pathetic,” but, she writes, “I didn’t, but I wanted money so I made three ‘Hospital Sketches.’ Much to my surprise they made a great hit, & people bought the papers faster than they could be supplied” (L. Alcott, Journals 118). The same expedient approach applies several years later, when on 1 February 1868 she writes, “Arranged ‘Hospital Sketches and War Stories’ for a book. By taking out all the Biblical allusions, and softening all allusions to rebs., the book may be made ‘quite perfect,’ I am told. Anything to suit customers” (L. Alcott, Journals 164). In June of 1863 she recorded in her journal that she was feeling “encouraged by the commendation bestowed upon ‘Hospital Sketches’ which were noticed, talked & inquired about much to my surprise and delight. Had a fine letter from Henry James, also one from Wasson & a request from Redpath to be allowed to print the Sketches in a book” (L. Alcott, Journals 119). In August of 1863 she was ebullient over the response to the publication: “I have the satisfaction of seeing my towns folk buying, reading, laughing and crying over it wherever I go” (L. Alcott, Letters 88).

Within the next few months, the Hawthornes brought their association with the Alcotts to an end. The breach must have gradually dawned on the Alcotts and puzzled them tremendously, especially in a year when the families had been so incredibly close. Finally, on a Sunday afternoon in January of 1864, Bronson called on Hawthorne to ask him what the problem was. Mellow and Saxon record Ticknor’s account as reported by Annie Fields. Hawthorne had first described Bronson as “one of the most excellent of men.” Ticknor went on to say that

a few days before, Alcott had asked if there was some misunderstanding between their two families and Hawthorne had told him no, but that it “was not possible to live upon amicable terms with Mrs. Alcott.” He added that in “time of illness or necessity,” he was sure they would be the best of helpers to each other. “I dolled all this in velvet phrases, that it might not seem too hard for him to hear,” Hawthorne said, “but he took it all like a saint.” (Mellow 574)

In the report from Annie Fields’s diary, quoted by Martha Saxon, Hawthorne enlarged on his comments about Abba:
"She is a person who prides herself much on her family, is busied in the desire to outshine her neighbors, is totally devoid of the power to tell the truth and occupies herself much with circulating unworthy reports; She seems to possess an oblique vision to which nothing presents itself as it is." Bronson acknowledged that this was so.

"Indeed," said Hawthorne, "who should know it better?" (258)

Without doubt, Abba had driven Sophia mad for years, not just in the last months of December. She had written the following diatribe to Annie Fields two years before, on 29 May 1862:

I was so cut to the heart by the rather ferocious and sudden announcement of Mrs. Alcott on Monday morning "That General Banks' army was entirely destroyed" and that the rebels were hurrying to Washington and that the governor had ordered off every man capable of bearing arms—and so on—that though feeling very well before hand, I became as it were a dead woman—and I have accomplished nothing this week. And that terrible news was merely all an exaggeration and I suffered for nothing. Mrs. Alcott is the most appalling sensationalist. She frightens me out of my five senses from time to time with telling me one thing and another and suggesting blood curdling possibilities. (Saxon 258)

Why, if Abba was the reason for the breach, did the Hawthornes wait for two years to cut the Alcotts? Had Louisa's summer successes heightened Abba's "pride" in her family and her "desire to outshine her neighbors"—actions of which Hawthorne complained—perhaps making too obvious her "desire to outshine her [Hawthorne] neighbors" at a time when the Concord set, in particular, was so unhappy with what he was writing? Interestingly, Julian appears to have had an opinion of Abba opposite to that expressed by the older Hawthornes. He had a high regard not only for Bronson and the girls but especially for Abba. His Memoirs contain these lines: "[Bronson] married a woman of beauty and charm and of great practical good sense, for whom and for his gifted and agreeable daughters I was much indebted to him" (61).

Whether Louisa ever knew the details of her father's interview with Hawthorne on that Sunday afternoon remains a mystery. She never betrayed any suspicion that her own first literary acclaim may have been politically galling to the Hawthornes, or that the Alcotts' joy that summer and fall amplified, by comparison, the Hawthorne family's agony over Pierce, over the public unhappiness with Hawthorne’s own Civil War piece, and over his friends' violent disapproval of the dedication to Our Old Home, all of which may have just accelerated the inevitable, in light of Sophia's long-standing dislike of Abba. However, it would have been in the realm of probability, in light of the sequence of events, for Louisa to form such a supposition.

Louisa’s own reaction suggests that she herself believed that Sophia and not Hawthorne was to blame for the rift. After all, Hawthorne's relationship to the
Claudia Durst Johnson

Alcotts probably never changed an iota. He had always been aloof from the first, only rarely seeing or visiting anyone in Concord, the Alcotts included.

Bronson makes no mention in his own journal of the painful talk in January about the break between the families (B. Alcott, Journals 362), but on 8 January he made a rare reference to Abba in his journal, which may be his private response to Hawthorne’s statement that Abba was insufferable: “My wife overburthened with household chores. . . . Alas!” He followed this statement with a discussion of the cost of his way of life, which he acknowledged but did not regret. Yet Bronson’s continued friendship with Hawthorne after the painful interview suggests that the breach between the families was Sophia’s and not Nathaniel’s doing.

At Hawthorne’s death, the Alcotts, especially Louisa, were genuinely saddened and assumed some of the burden of the funeral. Louisa wrote in her journal entry for May 1864 that “We dressed the church on the 23rd for the funeral. . . . On the morning after the news came I sent in some violets from the hill where he used to walk. It pleased Mrs. H. very much and she wrote me a note” (L. Alcott, Journals 130). Yet Louisa and her family could plainly see that Sophia and perhaps one or more of the Hawthorne children refused to respond to any overtures to resume the friendship after Hawthorne’s death. “We did all we could to heal the breach between the families,” she wrote, “but they held off, so we let things rest” (L. Alcott, Journals 130). Yet a letter of Louisa to James T. Fields indicates that Sophia had not been remiss in expressing her gratitude, even if she continued to maintain her distance. After all the injustice that Sophia saw in Hawthorne’s having been snubbed by a world which rewarded the intemperate Alcotts, it must have been particularly painful for her to see the obnoxious Abba still comforted by her husband while Sophia’s own Nathaniel was gone.

The intertwined lives of the two writers and their literary families form a weave of many threads. The dynamics are composed of not only the impossible complexities and tensions of domestic life involving Sophia and Abba, the change in Hawthorne’s response to Bronson in these last years, and the struggles inherent in Louisa’s and Nathaniel’s attempts to write fiction in America, but conflicts on matters of national import: transcendental philosophy, communitarianism, the woman question, and, notably, slavery and abolition, the Civil War, and party politics.

Literary Connections

Despite the neighbors’ discordant politics and personalities, there was transcendence in Concord. It is curious to note, for example, that the friendship of the most political of the family members—Nathaniel and Bronson, standing at opposite political poles—was the most constant, remaining largely unaffected by the family feud. More important, however, was Louisa May Alcott’s transcendence of the strained relations between key members of the families, as she continued to hold Hawthorne in highest regard, finding in his work subjects and a thematic stance for much of her own
fiction. In 1850, Louisa, then eighteen years old, had the first documentable adult encounter with Hawthorne; she read *The Scarlet Letter* some four months after its publication, in August of 1850, writing: "Reading Mrs. Bremer and Hawthorne. The "Scarlet Letter" is my favorite. Mother likes Miss Bremer better, as more wholesome. I fancy 'lurid' things, if strong and true also" (L. Alcott, *Journals* 57). In calling Hawthorne's novel lurid, she curiously applied to it the same adjective she later used to describe her own anonymously published, sensationalistic fictions. Just a month before Hawthorne died she recorded rereading *The Scarlet Letter* (L. Alcott, *Journals* 129) and, on 28 May 1864, she wrote to Fields, "Mr. Hawthorne is gone, but [Sophia] still finds herself patiently, hopefully awaiting his return. Many of us will have the same feeling, I fancy, because he was one of those who are felt not seen, and we shall not really miss him till we turn the last leaf of his story without an end" (L. Alcott, *Letters* 106). Her journal reveals that she reread *The Scarlet Letter* on the evening of 6 March 1885 (L. Alcott, *Journals* 253). He continued to be on her mind when, in a letter to her father on 13 October 1887, she recorded her memory of Hawthorne, along with Emerson, as "a beautiful soul in prison, trying to reach his fellow beings through bars, and sad because he cannot" (L. Alcott, *Letters* 321).

Not only do Alcott's journal and letter gleanings provide every reason to believe that Hawthorne and his work had a profound impact on his neighbor, but her works themselves are evidence of his influence. Certainly she selected subjects that Hawthorne had made his own, and both wrote what she described as "lurid" fictions about the complications of love and sex (note *Behind a Mask* and other fictions for adults written under pseudonyms); both wrote about the lives of visual artists in Europe (his *The Marble Faun* can be compared with her *Diana and Persis*); both wrote fictions for young people; both wrote eyewitness accounts of the Civil War; and both wrote trenchantly of their own experiences in transcendental communities and of the transcendental school itself, which was related in the minds of both with Louisa's father Bronson Alcott (see Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and Alcott's *Transcendental Wild Oats*).

Despite Alcott's use of subjects in multiple works by Hawthorne, there seems to be little doubt that it was *The Scarlet Letter* that had the most enduring influence on her work, and that the most profound and pervasive of this novel's themes appear in two of her fictions for adults that were forged from the often painful dynamics of her own family—Work and *Transcendental Wild Oats*. These themes common to the works of both writers included the power of and disjunction between woman's labor and man's vocation, the turmoil suffered by the powerful mother, and the disruption in the traditional family.

A central theme in much of Alcott's fiction, and especially in the novel, *Work*, which she considered sufficiently serious and respectable to carry her true name, is the issue of work, in its narrow sense, and vocation or career, in a larger sense, a theme which is integral to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Reviewing the subject's importance to, *The Scarlet Letter*, the reader notes that the subject of the introduc-
tory, "The Custom-House," is the narrator's conflict between his wage-earning work as a bureaucrat and his struggle as a writer attempting to recapture lost inspiration. His story is played out against that of other Custom House inhabitants who neglect their work—from the old Inspector whose fitting vocation had been that of a soldier to the lesser functionaries who spend their working hours at home in bed or snoozing in their chairs. Only when the narrator loses his work and his wages can he then resume his vocation as writer. Similarly, the theme of work pervades the story of Hester which follows. The three major characters, Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, represent each of the vocations of which Hawthorne so often wrote: artist, minister, and scientist. Chapter headings in the novel which identify characters by their work, accentuate the theme of work: "Hester at Her Needle," "The Elf-child and the Minister," "The Leech," "The Leech and His Patient," "The Minister's Vigil," "Hester and the Physician," "The Pastor and His Parishioner," and "The Minister in a Maze." Hester's work, which includes that of seamstress and sister of mercy, both saves her and fosters her self-delusion, joins and separates her from the community.

Coincidentally, 1850 was the year when Louisa May first read The Scarlet Letter and when she first "went out to service" to make her living outside her family domicile, the beginning of several years of hard domestic service which formed the subject matter of her novel Work.

The similarities between Hawthorne's seventeenth-century seamstress and Alcott's nineteenth-century seamstress (based on her mother's experiences and hers) are remarkable. Both Hester and Christie enter the scene without supportive families, Hester's being across the ocean in England and Christie's being dead. Both women work in Boston; both are seamstresses; both are pushed to the point of suicide by their trials; both are betrayed by men; both are sisters of charity to the sick, poor, and dying; both raise their daughters without the help of husband or lover and devote themselves to troubled women in the end.

Similarly, many of Alcott's women protagonists in what she called her lurid fictions are identified by occupation, and Work is a narrative of the labors of its heroine, labors which include housekeeper, governess, nurse and companion, seamstress, and actress. As Hester finds some solace in her work, so does Christie.

In Hester, Hawthorne also gave Alcott the model for Christie as a strong, independent female survivor. Both heroines declare their independence, grow in endurance through their independent labors, survive work in hostile environments, and defy the expectations of the patriarchy, represented by Governor Bellingham and Reverend John Wilson in The Scarlet Letter and by Christie's disagreeable old uncle in Work.

The tragedy of The Scarlet Letter begins with the fractured family, proceeds without any picture in the Puritan community of the usual family of mother, father, and children, and ends with Hester taking up her mothering again, but primarily to the community of women, continuing to believe that no happiness is possible until
the relationship between men and women can be altered. In similar fashion, Chris-
tie, in pursuit of her independence and freedom, begins her life of work by rejecting
the idea of a marriage of convenience with a local farmer. As she proceeds, she finds
relationships with men, like the wealthy Mr. Fletcher, to be untenable under the
expected arrangements of the day. Only when she meets a man who is a friend first
and a lover second can she consider marriage, coming closer to the ideal situation
suggested by Hester, when “the whole relation between man and woman” would be
established “on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (N. Hawthorne, The Scarlet
Letter 177). Christie, in declaring her love for David, makes plain that she can be
happy in marriage only if she is allowed her “independence.” They join the Union
effort in the Civil War together, very nearly as equals.

But the Davids and Reverend Powers of this world are rare men, and with David’s
demise, Christie, like Hester, must rear her daughter alone. As Hester at the end of
her life “comforted and counselled” women in need, so Christie (like Alcott’s own
mother, Abba) devoted her life to working women like she herself had been. Haw-
thorne’s and Alcott’s descriptions of this work are similar. Hawthorne had written of
Hester’s last days:

Women, more especially,—in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted,
wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion,—or with the dreary burden of a
heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought,—came to Hester’s cottage demand-
ing why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! (N. Hawthorne, The Scarlet
Letter 177)

Note the resemblance to Alcott’s description of Christie’s activities:

The workers poured out their wrongs and hardships passionately or plaintively,
demanding or imploring justice, sympathy, and help; displaying the ignorance, inca-
pacity, and prejudice, which make their need all the more pitiful, their relief all the
more imperative. (L. Alcott, Work 425)

When Louisa and her mother first read The Scarlet Letter in 1850, Abba was
supporting her family by working for philanthropic societies similar to the one
Christie decided to devote herself to in the novel Work. So it was entirely fitting that
Louisa dedicated Work to her strong, long-suffering mother:

To
MY MOTHER,
Whose Life has been a Long Labor of Love,
This Book is Gratefully Inscribed
By
HER DAUGHTER

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Ironically, then, it was Abba Alcott, the woman who so irritated the Hawthornes that they severed relations with their neighbors to avoid her, with whom Louisa saw herself sharing Hester's mantle in the Hawthornean tradition of maternal endurance, survival, moral growth, and self-sacrifice.

The writing and publication of *Work* seemed to bring Louisa May Alcott to the subject of the burden of labor and the privilege of vocation within the family as she contemplated *Transcendental Wild Oats* only a few months later. One might even suspect that the reliving of her and her mother's desperation and travail in performing menial labor for the family's survival sufficiently angered her to expose the inequities between man's vocation and woman's work and their effects on family survival.

One essential meaning of *The Scarlet Letter* would have been painfully clear to young Louisa May Alcott, even when she read the novel in 1850 as she first went out to domestic service, at a time when Bronson's entire activity was to hold conversations on transcendentalism in a room he maintained off Boston Common. That meaning was that, while the mother's work sustained the family, masculine "vocation" drained the family.

*Transcendental Wild Oats* (1872), her second fiction for adults based on Alcott family experiences, contains surprising echoes of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The themes again are the power of and disjunction between a woman's work and a man's vocation, the turmoil suffered by the powerful mother, and the disruption in the traditional family.

*Transcendental Wild Oats* is her fictionalized account of the family's eight-month attempt to succeed in establishing a transcendental commune in the hills of central Massachusetts. Joining them were Charles Lane, an English disciple of Bronson's, and his son William. The struggle Louisa dramatizes arises, not between the community and the outside world, but among members within the tiny group. Charles Lane, a transcendental tyrant appropriately renamed Timon Lion in the fiction, is involved in a war with Mother Hope (Abba Alcott) and, secondarily, with the children for the soul of Abel Lamb (Bronson Alcott). Lion's argument from the beginning is that Hope stands in the way of her husband's spiritual journey, yet his and Lamb's transcendental vocations are possible only because Hope takes on most of the burden of physical labor. Eventually, Lion deserts the Lambs when Abel decides, somewhat reluctantly, to remain with his wife rather than join Lion in a consociate family. Lion takes his leave, giving them a few weeks to move out, and, in dead of winter, forbids them to devalue the property by cutting wood to burn or by harvesting grain for their bread. Lamb, broken and distraught, decides to die by refusing to eat. Meanwhile Hope bestirs herself to find work for herself and rooms to rent for her family in a nearby village. Finally, Lamb emerges from his depression, decides to live, and moves away from Fruitlands with his family, led by Hope.

Behind the conflict between mother's work and father's vocation in *Transcendental Wild Oats* was Lane's and Bronson's firm conviction not to work for wages, which
they considered tainted, but to wait to give themselves to their God-intended vocation. As Timon Lion answers Sister Hope, when she asks him what part of the work of the commune he proposes doing, “I shall wait till it is made clear to me” (L. Alcott, Transcendental Wild Oats 35). Bronson considered his vocation to be teaching and, since no teaching opportunities had arisen, he had not worked since his school in Boston had failed. Until Louisa May had been able to make a livelihood, Abba had been the parent to support the family (helped with generous gifts from Emerson and Abba’s brother).

As in The Scarlet Letter and in Work, so in Transcendental Wild Oats—the saving qualities of physical labor are associated with woman. Mother Hope is the one who does all the work. Note her suspicion that Lion won’t be lifting his finger while he pursues his vocation; the narrator’s observation that only Forest Absalom helped Hope with the work:

He it was who helped over-worked Sister Hope with her heavy washes, kneaded the endless succession of batches of bread, watched over the children, and did the many tasks left undone by the brethren, who were so busy discussing and defining great duties that they forgot to perform the small ones. (L. Alcott, Transcendental Wild Oats 45)

Most important, Hope is the one who, harnessing the children to clothes baskets, must harvest the grain after “some call of the Oversoul wafted all the men away” (L. Alcott, Transcendental Wild Oats 53). Only men like Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, Lion, and Lamb have the luxury of a “vocation”—intellectual and largely free of the physical, menial toil demanded of Hester, Christie, and Hope.

The comparison of the dynamics of Transcendental Wild Oats with that of The Scarlet Letter is startling. In both books, the dissolution of the “family” occurs simultaneously with or because of the introduction of a third man into what should ideally have been a couple, making a deadly triangle. In The Scarlet Letter, that triangle consists of Hester Prynne; the father of her child, Arthur Dimmesdale; and the husband she never loved and believed to be dead, Roger Chillingworth. Chillingworth it is who has a diabolical hold over Dimmesdale and says at the moment when Dimmesdale acknowledges his child and the mother of his child, “Thou hast escaped me!” In Transcendental Wild Oats, the trio are, similarly, Hope, Lamb who is the father of Hope’s children, and Lion, the man who exercises a diabolical influence over Lamb and encourages him to shirk his rightful role as father and husband, finally trying to goad Abel into deserting them altogether.

Abel Lamb bears a remarkable resemblance to Arthur Dimmesdale. Both Dimmesdale and Abel are willing to sacrifice the good of their lovers and children to their vocations. Single-mindedly and ambitiously, Dimmesdale pursued his vocation as minister, preserving his professional reputation by denying Hester and Pearl. Abel Lamb is passionately dedicated to his “vocation” to the detriment of his family.
In refusing to work for wages, like Dimmesdale he denies his responsibility to his family and his vocations as father and husband.

Having fathered children, both men become intent on pursuits of saintliness. As Dimmesdale cultivates his saintliness, so Lamb's goal is to transcend the world. As Dimmesdale flagellates himself in the closet to purge himself of carnality, Lamb makes a religious ritual of icy cold baths. The watchword in *Transcendental Wild Oats* is transcend and "Abstain" (36). In pursuit of his own saintliness, Lamb is encouraged by Timon Lion to transcend the world and the flesh and, incidentally, his family. Though the word "abstain" is used, suggesting abstinence from sex and alcohol, the full implication is not made clear in Louisa's fictionalized account—that Charles Lane had successfully persuaded Bronson to sever his marital relations with the mother of his children and was further badgering him to dissolve the marriage/family union altogether, perhaps in preparation to join the celibate Shakers, as Lane actually did do briefly after Fruitlands folded. There seems to be no question that Bronson, so profoundly under Lane's influence, was seriously considering such a move.

The forest scene between Hester and Dimmesdale and the final sickbed scene between Hope and Abel are remarkable in their similarity of family tensions. Moreover, both are reversals of gender role expectations. In the forest scene, Arthur Dimmesdale is found to be an emotional wreck and a moral weakling. He seems to reach a nadir of despair when he pleads, "Think for me, Hester. . . . Must I sink down there, and die at once?" (N. Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 134). Hester is provoked to groan: "Wilt thou die for very weakness?" (*The Scarlet Letter* 134). So it has to be Hester, who by taking charge of the practical economic situation, gives him and herself some hope and direction, almost forcing it on him. She tells him what to think, how to justify himself, where they will go, what he can do, and how she could arrange it all: "Hester Prynne—whose vocation, as a self-enlisted Sister of Charity, had brought her acquainted with the captain and crew—could take upon herself to secure the passage of two individuals and a child" (*The Scarlet Letter* 145).

What may well have been a deathwatch near the close of *Transcendental Wild Oats* is notably similar. Abel Lamb has been destroyed by his "Brother" Lane, as the biblical Abel was killed like a sacrificial Lamb by his brother Cain. As a result, Abel lies down and turns toward the wall, "to die for very weakness," to borrow the phrase from *The Scarlet Letter*. It is not just that he is rendering up his own life, but, one must remember, in so doing he is abandoning his wife and three little girls in deepest winter in a lonely, isolated place without food or fuel. If Hope had been anything less than the extraordinary mother she was, Lamb's suicide may well have been his family's death sentence. Dimmesdale's rejection of his paternal responsibilities was scarcely greater than Lamb's. But, as in Hawthorne's forest scene in *The Scarlet Letter*, a woman—a mother—is present who can do a man's work—a woman who has grown in strength and moral stature while her mate has deteriorated. The conversation between mother and father, after Abel's decision to live, is reminiscent of the
forest scene when Hester firmly and specifically answers all of Dimmesdale's frantic questions about how he can make up for what he has done, how he can continue to face Chillingworth, what he can do with his life, where they can go, and how they can get there. Like Hester, Hope has already laid plans for the family's survival. Hope speaks first:

"Leave all to God—and me. He has done his part; now I will do mine."
"But we have no money, dear."
"Yes, we have. I sold all we could spare, and have enough to take us away from this snowbank."
"Where can we go?"
"I have engaged four rooms at our good neighbor, Lovejoy's. There we can live cheaply till spring. Then for new plans and a home of our own, please God."
"But, Hope, your little store won't last long, and we have no friends."
"I can sew and you can chop wood. Lovejoy offers you the same pay as he gives his other men; my old friend, Mrs. Truman, will send me all the work I want." (L. Alcott, Transcendental Wild Oats 61)

And so the strong and long-suffering mothers—Hester and Hope—forgive the humiliations, try to forget that paternal love has faltered, and, through work and maternal love, attempt to put their dysfunctional families together. Louisa May Alcott also transcended and tried to forget the fundamental ideological and personal friction between the Hawthorne and Alcott families and what she obviously regarded as Nathaniel's family's ill treatment of her mother, who had been so kind to Julian Hawthorne especially. She gave no hint that the family pettiness might have been caused in part by her own brilliant success at a time when Hawthorne's powers and popularity were fading.

To her, he remained the mentor, the great tragic figure, the "beautiful soul." She wrote just after his funeral that she, like Sophia, "still finds herself patiently, hopefully awaiting his return." "We shall not really miss him," she wrote, "till we turn the last leaf of his story without an end." His story continued not only in the fictions he wrote; it continued in the fictions written, as were so many of her own, in the Hawthorne tradition. Hawthorne's work likely provided Alcott a tone and a variety of themes, and Work and Transcendental Wild Oats suggest that his masterpiece, to which she turned repeatedly during her life, gave her the means for fictionally exploring the "lurid" and disruptive elements in her own difficult family.

Works Cited