

American Bloomsbury: Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau: Their Lives, Their Loves, Their Work

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A group portrait of five Concord, Massachusetts, writers whose works were at the center of mid-nineteenth-century American thought and literature evaluates their interconnected relationships, influence on each other's works, and complex beliefs. 50,000 first printing. Susan Cheever is the bestselling author of eleven previous books, including five novels and the memoirs *Note Found in a Bottle* and *Home Before Dark*. Her work has been nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won the Boston Globe Winship Medal. She is a Guggenheim Fellow, a member of the Corporation of Yaddo, and a member of the Author's Guild Council. She writes a weekly column for *Newsday* and teaches in the Bennington College M.F.A. program. She lives in New York City with her family. Chapter Two: The Alcotts Arrive for the First Time

If human nature was amenable to teaching, Louisa May Alcott would have been the perfect daughter. Her father, Bronson Alcott, believed that with the right kind of direction children could be brought into a state of peaceful harmony -- as long as that direction came from a high-minded thinker like himself. It was in pursuit of this kind of perfection that Bronson Alcott decided to bring his family to live in Concord, Massachusetts, where he could find intellectual companionship in general, and the admiration of Ralph Waldo Emerson in particular -- that and the fact that Emerson had offered to pay the rent.

The horse-drawn stage rumbled into Concord down the turnpike from Boston at the end of a spring afternoon in 1840. The wooden cab with a family inside and bags tied onto the top was pulled into town past Walden Pond and the marshes around it, and then past the First Parish Church and through Monument Square by an exhausted team of horses. After the more than three-hour trip, the stage drew up in front of the long porch of the Middlesex Hotel. The driver tied the reins to a hitching post under a huge elm. The family that climbed down, stretched, and looked around at their new surroundings was unusual even for a New England town in the 1840s.

The father was a tall man with a sweep of blond hair and a pronounced aquiline nose under the shade of a broad-brimmed tan-colored hat. Dressed simply in worn black clothing, and swinging a gleaming walking stick, he carried himself as if he was used to being listened to, and he stooped to hear the questions his three chattering daughters asked as if he were a great teacher and they his willing students. This was Bronson Alcott, the founder of the Temple School in Boston, which had recently caused a series of local scandals and finally gone bankrupt.

Alcott's "Conversations" in Boston, public forums in which he lectured and answered questions on subjects such as "Human Culture," "Man," and "Character" had attracted Emerson, who assured Alcott that in Concord he would find men with interests like his own, and a serious audience for his lectures. Emerson loved and supported Alcott, whose impractical, boyish presence always cheered him up. "I must think very ill of my age and country, if they cannot discover his extraordinary soul," he wrote. He had written furious letters in Alcott's defense when the press had attacked his writing, and he ascribed the loss of the Temple School to the stupidity of modern culture. Boston was a city in a kind of intellectual fever, Emerson believed. It was in the quieter precincts of Concord, calmed by

the rhythms of village life, that men could think important thoughts uninterrupted by others' opinions and obligations.

Emerson would soon lure Nathaniel Hawthorne away from the nearby experimental Utopian community of Brook Farm in Roxbury and help install Hawthorne and his new wife Sophia Peabody in another Emerson house, the Old Manse on the other side of town near the Old North Bridge over the Concord River. That house, built by Emerson's grandfather William, had been lived in for almost sixty years by the Reverend Ezra Ripley, who died in 1839, leaving ownership of the house to his son Samuel, a minister in Waltham. Emerson had often stayed there, and he had written his famous essay *Nature* in its upstairs study. To welcome the newlyweds, Emerson would send his friend Henry David Thoreau to plant a flower and vegetable garden so that it would be flourishing on their arrival.

In the meantime, Emerson was entertaining Sophia Peabody -- not yet married to Hawthorne -- whose sister Elizabeth's bookshop on West Street in Boston had become a center of intellectual buzz. Sophia, who was an accomplished artist, had done a bas-relief of Emerson's beloved brother Charles, who had died in 1836. After that, Emerson had invited her to stay with his family in Concord. When Sophia had written that she looked forward to long conversations with Emerson when she moved to Concord, he had written back keeping her at a distance and instead offering up Bronson Alcott. "Mr. Alcott, the prince of conversers, lives little more than a mile from our house, and we will call on his aid as we often do," he wrote.

Lizzie Peabody's bookshop was also the setting for Margaret Fuller's first "Conversations," set up by Fuller with the intention of compensating for the lack of education for women in a world where they were not admitted to college, not allowed to vote, and not often permitted to own property. Fuller's first series on Greek mythology, including discussions of Prometheus, Bacchus, and Venus as the "paradigm of instinctive womanhood," had been a huge success. She planned a second series, on the fine arts. Margaret Fuller was also in the midst of publishing the first issue of *The Dial*, a magazine with lilac covers that would become the mouthpiece for Emerson and his friends for its two years of existence.

Emerson and Alcott, Fuller and their neighbor Henry David Thoreau, who lived in town with his family, were all part of a movement that was beginning to be called Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism officially began with meetings organized by Frederic Henry Hedge, whose father was a Harvard professor and whose essay on Coleridge had delighted Emerson.

Hedge, a minister, had moved to Bangor, Maine, but he missed Concord. To keep himself in touch with his old community, he organized a series of meetings beginning in 1836 in Cambridge. Hedge's Club, as it was originally called, included James Freeman Clarke, Emerson, and Bronson Alcott among others and was later joined by Thoreau, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Peabody. The Transcendentalists who met in Hedge's Club were the original hippies -- young, smart, and dedicated to the overthrow of the stuffy existing authorities.

These authorities included the old Calvinism of the Puritans and the practical humanism of New England Unitarianism. Transcendentalism deified nature and dealt in the kinds of marvels and wonders that sometimes even transcended things like having enough to eat or making a living. It replaced the literalness of Locke with the moral imperatives of Kant. "A wonderless age is Godless," Alcott had written with his typical contempt for clarity. He sometimes called Transcendentalism "the newness." Alcott embraced the idea of Concord, which he insisted on calling Concordia.

The Concord group of Transcendentalists was part of a wave of liberalism and a passion for freedom that seemed to be sweeping through the new United States. After decades of Puritan striving and dour farmers rising at dawn to tend to the necessities of crops and barns, after new governments creating hierarchies of necessary rules and regulatory structures, the battle for survival had been won.

The wilderness had once been a dangerous place that had to be tamed; now nature was a friendly environment to be enjoyed. The world was shifting. It was time to kick up our heels. In many ways, the period of the late 1830s and '40s was a time like the 1960s when individual adventure was prized and all the old rules suddenly seemed corrupt. "The new mood spread like the flowers of May," Van Wyck Brooks has written in his account of this in *The Flowering of New England*. "One heard the flute in the fields. Farmers and village tailors stopped to watch the birds building their nests. They went on woodland walks. They recorded the days when the wildflowers opened. They observed the little tragedies of nature that no one had noticed before.... They gathered the first hepaticas, the trailing arbutus that had bled unseen under the boots of their fathers."

Even the dour, handsome Nathaniel Hawthorne was not immune to this exuberant mood. "I want my place, my own place, my true place in the world," he wrote; "I want my proper sphere, my thing."

Suddenly, poetry, once a frivolous conceit, took center stage with its literary importance. Houses once built as simply as possible against the elements bloomed with the porticoes and columns of Greek Revival. In many villages, groups assembled in awe to watch the night-blooming cereus -- a nocturnal flower recently imported from Mexico -- slowly open its magical, languid petals.

The new energy generated by the escape from the Puritan dicta and the hard facts of New England life encouraged a reaching abroad for ideas and writing unprecedented in this country. Germany, as well as Greece, was raided by Emerson and his colleagues for new and exciting ideas. The great Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish writer living in London, was as much an inspiration as if he had been living in nearby Lexington.

Enchanted by Carlyle and his orphic questions -- "Did the upholsterers make this universe? Were you created by the tailor?" -- the new generation of Concord intellectuals was intoxicated with freedom, with leisure, and with the possibilities of a life devoted to thought and pleasure. In rejecting Unitarianism, the Transcendentalists were also trying to introduce a revolutionary new populism into the already hierarchical American democratic system.

Emerson in particular hoped to help overthrow the existing intellectual elite, as represented by the Harvard community, and open the doors of American thought to anyone who had the largeness of heart and intellect required. "Man has encumbered himself with aged errors," Emerson wrote, "with usages and ceremonies, with law, property, church, customs, and books until he is almost smothered under his own institutions."

Influenced by Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, and their followers believed in the power of intuition. They thought every man and even some women harbored a divine spark -- every man including the poor and the rich, the hermit and the railroad worker and the landowner. They called this divine spark "reason." Sometimes this was an inner light; sometimes it was the voice of God. For others it was more direct -- Thoreau's friend Jones Very thought that he himself was the new Messiah. "The all is in each particle," Emerson wrote...

Other Books

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Tales and Sketches* Hawthorne's short fiction in its entirety: his three collections, *Twice-told Tales*, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, and *The Snow-Image*, along with his tales for children based on Greek myths, *The Wonder Book* and *Tanglewood Tales*, plus sixteen previously uncollected short stories. In a unique arrangement, all these stories appear in order of their first publication in periodicals, allowing the reader to experience the work of this masterful writer as it appeared before the American public. *Collected Novels* This second volume rounds off Hawthorne's complete fiction with his five novels. Includes his studies of historic and contemporary New England his acknowledged masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *Fanshawe*, written while Hawthorne was still an undergraduate, and his last completed novel of mystery and romance among American artists in Rome, *The Marble Faun*.

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