“Let the World Know You Are Alive”: May Alcott Nieriker and Louisa May Alcott Confront Nineteenth-Century Ideas about Women’s Genius

by Lauren Hehmeyer

This article examines the attitude of the nineteenth-century artist May Alcott Nieriker toward the concepts of talent and genius, two terms that were subject to debate and controversy among the Transcendentalists of her hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, especially as they applied to women. Her attitude differed from that of her elder sister, the writer, Louisa May Alcott, who had some reservations about the use of the word as applied to her literary efforts.

Nieriker (the model for the character of “Amy” in Little Women) embraced the term genius for women and eventually achieved success at the Paris Salon in 1877 and 1879. Nieriker’s last picture, La Négresse, is a rare, respectful treatment of a black subject. Nieriker’s choices in her life and work are evidence of her belief that women could reach creative fulfillment, even genius.

1 Abba May Alcott, mother of Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888), a writer, and May Alcott Nieriker (1840–1879), an artist, once boldly told her daughters that they needed to “let the world know you are alive” (qtd. in LaPlante 168). Both daughters choose to heed their mother’s words in their productive lives, although the obstacles in front of them as professionals were large. Generally, their century viewed the creative capabilities of women as limited to talent rather than extended to genius. Both women will confront the definitions of these words as they apply to their lives and work, making unique choices.

2 Louisa May Alcott (Louisa), the first of the two sisters to find success, certainly had a positive impact on her sibling’s creative life. But I argue that May Alcott Nieriker (May) is the one who most fully embraces the word ‘genius’ for herself and for other creative women of her time. Her more confident attitude influenced her older sister, and near the end of Louisa’s life, Louisa thought that she too might claim what May referred to as “the immortal fire” (MAM 209).

3 To understand the sisters’ views regarding this subject, it is necessary to look at the historic definitions of both talent and genius and the pervasive views about them in the nineteenth century, particularly as they apply to women. These prevailing views had to be confronted by any serious, creative woman of that century.

4 In Louisa’s widely successful novel Little Women, the character of Jo (Louisa’s alter ego) is asked, “Does Genius burn, Jo?” (342). Nineteenth-century philosophers asked questions about genius too. What exactly was this thing called genius that seems to “burn”: Was it innate? Could it be nurtured? Was it a freak of nature? Was it insanity? The answers that previous generations had passed on to them no longer seemed relevant in the hard-charging Industrial Age.
Defining Genius in a Historical Context

During the Middle Ages, genius had been identified with copying and faithful reproduction. “Originality was not a virtue. Creativity was a theological and not an aesthetic concept. [...] Who was the workman mattered hardly at all; what was produced was the important thing” (Battersby 25, emphasis in original). There was honor in producing the perfect copy. Indeed, even today we value the faithful copies of religious manuscripts handed down to us by nameless monks, toiling away at their desks, dedicated to their art. Their genius lay in mimesis.

The idea that some men (not women) might have a genius surpassing imitation, and that certain individuals were very special, was put forth during the Italian Renaissance by Giorgio Vasari, who proposed that the term ‘genio’ be reserved for the likes of artists such as Michelangelo. Despite this, as George Becker says, “this term did not become commonly accepted during the late Renaissance” (24). Or, as Darrin McMahon explains, to the thinkers of the Renaissance, genius was “an object, something one has (a spirit, an angel, a talent), rather than something one is” (70; my emphasis).

By the seventeen-hundreds, the modern idea of genius began to emerge. Some began to argue that a genius might be defined by originality rather than mimesis, but in general, they preferred originality that was tempered by tradition and form. After all, this is the Age of Reason, the age of the Head, not the Heart, and Reason they believed, served as a balance to Imagination. Joseph Addison (1672–1719), essayist and editor of the Spectator, felt that there were two types of genius: original/natural and imitative. He believed that both had great value. It is during this century that men such as William Shakespeare and Benjamin Franklin were dubbed ‘geniuses,’ not simply possessed of genius.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) addressed the question late in the eighteenth century, redefining genius as clearly different from talent. Genius, for him, was separate from the ability to imitate brilliantly; it stood alone. “Genius, as Kant sees it, is thus always original. Yet since there may also be original nonsense, its products must at the same time be models, i.e., be exemplary and consequently though not themselves derived from imitation, they must serve that purpose for others” (Guyer 390).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was a certainty that the old mimesis definition was dead. The Industrial Revolution made imitation easy and rapid. The new, loud, dirty factories were turning out identical goods at a fantastic rate, lowering prices and raising the standard of living, even as old ways of life disappeared. But would Kant's eighteenth-century definition of Genius work for the American intellectuals of the nineteenth century? Or did America need to sort out its own definition of the concept? The group of transcendental philosophers who inhabited Concord certainly believed they should.

Genius and the Transcendentalists

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), the neighbor, friend, and mentor of the Alcott sisters, generally agreed with Kant, but added more. His thoughts on genius are expressed in his essay, “New Poetry,” published in 1840 in the Dial, a core publication of transcendental
thought. For him, genius is not necessarily a direct glorification of God (as in Michelangelo’s ceiling), but a “worship of the Ideal Beauty.” Beauty is an indirect expression of the Divine, or as the Romantics sometimes referred to it: a Sublime expression. Interestingly, for the purposes of looking at the creative output of both Louisa and May, Emerson argues that the material from which this new thought and art will emanate is not always from the Sublime and the Beautiful, but may also be found in, “the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, and the topics of the time. [...] I embrace the common” (“American Scholar” 209). He also praises poetic attempts to achieve new heights that fall short of the summit. It is better, he says, to try to be great and fail, than to try the routine and succeed.

Emerson was influenced by Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), a man all the Concord philosophers admired and read. Louisa had read him too. To Carlyle, genius was a transfer of power from the daemon within to the world without, and it was original. He helped shape this Romantic definition of genius and gave examples of men he considered to be geniuses, such as Robert Burns.

According to Christine Battersby, Carlyle’s basic assumption is that the power of genius belongs to the male, the procreator (14). In her book, Gender and Genius, she argues that for women, the nineteenth-century ideas of talent and genius were particularly limiting, as they strongly identified genius with male sexual strength and virility. She explains that the word ‘genius’ itself is from the Latin ingenium. This word was associated with male sexuality and procreation in ancient times, and those male associations were retained and even re-enforced in Western culture. In fact, Battersby notes that the male is so highly associated with genius that it is, “hard to translate into non-gendered language passages that praise art-works as ‘seminal,’ artists as ‘virile,’ authors as ‘masterly’” (159).

Nineteenth-Century Women’s Views on Genius

Most of nineteenth-century society thought the idea that a woman could possess more than talent was ludicrous. Had a woman ever produced a famous concert? A famous painting? Could there be a female Napoleon (considered an “evil” genius)? Even forward-thinking women doubted the possibility that a woman could be a genius. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804–1894), an intellectual friend of the Alcott family, kept a record of “The Conversations of Margaret Fuller” that demonstrates this. Fuller, one of many talents drawn into Emerson’s sway, held a “conversation” in 1840 for intellectual women. They discuss what we would call the psychological limitations placed upon creative women, the emotional characteristics of women, and pragmatically, the physical inconvenience of sculpture and architecture. They also discuss the interruption of motherhood in, what are often for men, the most creative years (282). These were some of the brightest women of their day, meeting under the guidance of one of the best minds of the nineteenth century, Margaret Fuller (1810–1840), and yet, as the conversation shows, they doubted that women could be geniuses. In other words, these creative women, gathered in the hometown of Louisa and May, had so absorbed the view that genius was a male characteristic that even among their own gender in an open, intellectual conversation, they wrestled with the concept that the daemon existed in womankind.
Louisa, the oldest of the two sisters by eight years, probably attended such a discussion. Her diary of December 1860 records that, “Mr. Emerson invited me to his class when they meet to talk on Genius, a great honor, as all the learned ladies go” (Journals of Louisa May Alcott 101). Although she does not record that she attended, Emerson certainly gave the class, speaking on April 9, 1861, in Boston. He mentions at the beginning of his talk that those in attendance had known him for many years (“Later” 200). His lecture, “Genius and Temperament,” attempts to define genius, its characteristics, and the difference between it and talent. If Louisa was in attendance as she had planned to be, or perhaps heard a rough draft or discussion of Emerson’s speech beforehand in Concord, she would have heard that genius is characterized by: veracity, youthful energy, imagination, humanity, and sensibility. Talent, he points out carefully, is not to be despised, but valued. Nevertheless, it is only the knack of, “doing something well and popularly” (204). Emerson refers to Louisa’s philosopher father, Bronson, in the lecture twice, as an example of a man of generalized genius (209–10).

If she was in attendance, one wonders what she made of Emerson’s reference to her father as a man of genius. Bronson Alcott was a man who, in the eyes of the world, had largely failed both as an educator and as a provider. As a result of Bronson’s chosen life as a philosopher, his family suffered from unrelenting hardship and humiliation; the tentative title of Louisa’s never-written book about him was The Cost of an Idea. As one of the older sisters, she keenly felt the cost of Bronson’s choices and spent her adult life in the pursuit of the financial security her father had failed to provide. Bronson often seemed unfazed by the hardship the family endured, ignoring the debts he accumulated and accepting the handouts of family and friends. Louisa, at twenty-three, wrote a letter to her father on their joint birthday and mentioned his equanimity, saying that Bronson was one who walked easily through life, without the struggle of mere mortals. This included, it seems, the burden great debt would mentally impose on most. According to Louisa’s description of herself in her letter of 1855, she was a decided contrast to her father: distant from divine origins, close to Nature, not Heaven (“Selected Letters” 13–15). If she saw him as a genius, she would not want to see herself as such. His influence on her concept of genius was a contrary one: genius might be admired, but it was not to be desired.

If Louisa ruled genius out for herself in terms of the nineteenth-century male-centered view and through comparison with her philosopher father, it did not mean she was uninterested in the concept. Indeed, it is a constant theme in her work. She explores questions about the compatibility or incompatibility of genius and happiness, and she also examines genius and its relationship to madness and a lack of self-control. Additionally, she looks at the question of female ambition and how it conflicts with duty to family, a question that will apply both to her personal life and that of her sister May.

Genius and Little Women

In Little Women, published from 1868–69, Louisa addresses the question of whether the conflict of talent vs. genius can be resolved and happiness achieved. The chapter “Castles in the Air” provides an outline of the talents and dreams of Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Laurie Lawrence. Meg is theatrical, Jo literary, Beth and Laurie musical, and Amy, artistic. Meg, a talented actress, will choose a respectable marriage over a stage career. Beth has talent, but
she is too shy to share her gifts with anyone other than family. The three remaining characters discuss the difference between talent and genius and eventually face the resulting conflicts presented by having one and striving for the other.

Louisa's own trials as a writer are used as a basis for the chapters "Literary Lessons" and "A Friend" in *Little Women* and describe Jo's experiences, which mirror her own. She makes a joke of her own intense creative work, describing Jo at her desk, writing in a frenzy, her cap "pushed rakishly askew; and when despair seized the author it was plucked wholly off, and cast upon the floor" (342–43). Louisa ends this paragraph by saying, "The divine afflatus usually lasted a week or two, and then [Jo] emerged from her 'vortex' hungry, sleepy, cross, or despondent" (344). "Divine afflatus" is used here in a mildly sardonic way, not to convey spirituality on Jo March. Her description of the irritable writer is far from the Romantics’ vision of the male and pale poet, searching for Ideal Beauty. Louisa also states in this passage that her alter-ego Jo "did not think herself a genius by any means" (343). In her journals, Louisa occasionally refers to "Genius burning" when mentioning her own efforts as an author, but it is always humorous and even self-deprecating.

Each ambitious character in the book, including the artist, Amy, rejects genius for herself, curtails her ambition, and accepts an ordinary and non-creative life. In real life, May will openly embrace ambition with no apologies given for her choice. Matteson argues that the ending of *Little Women* satisfies readers and the theme, leaving the characters happy, not because their dreams come true, but because they have grown up into loving, unselfish adults who define happiness in new ways (347). Certainly Louisa's public loved the book and the only complaint from fans was the fact that Jo does not marry Laurie, *not* that the main characters give up their ambitions (Clark 18). Readers of our century may find their abandonment of ambition as problematic and see this as a core thematic weakness.

### Genius and Madness

In addition to exploring the theme of genius and happiness in her most famous work, Louisa also addresses the theme of genius and its relationship to madness. According to George Becker, author of *The Mad Genius Controversy*, the nineteenth-century discussion about the connection between genius and madness ranged from about 1840 to 1950, with the most important years being 1837–1880, the years that coincide with Louisa's life. These years saw a rise in the idea that genius is accompanied by a compensating weakness (disequilibrium) and degeneracy. It was argued that such characteristics were "biologically transmissible" (Becker 38). Louisa, like others of her time, saw madness as transmissible and used it to provide conflict in her work. She devotes an entire chapter in her novel *Work* to the madness that runs through the fictional Carrol family. The theme of its chapter "Companion" centers around the moral obligation of the Carrols to deny themselves the fulfillment of marriage and children to refrain from passing down their mental weakness. Louisa also mentions this obligation of those with depressive or moody tendencies to refrain from marriage in the novel *Moods*, as the character of Faith advises the mercurial Sylvia to refrain from divorcing Geoffrey and marrying Adam (179).

For Louisa, ideas about the link between creativity and madness must have resonated. Her father had a nervous breakdown in 1844 following the collapse of the Utopian community he
helped to found, Fruitlands. May was only four and probably unaffected. When Louisa was twenty, Bronson’s brother, Louisa and May’s Uncle Junius, a diarist and poet, committed suicide in a horrific way, throwing himself into a piece of mechanical equipment. In 1858, Louisa, in mourning for the death of her sister, Elizabeth, and depressed by the poverty, current and prospective, in her own life, thought about suicide, but pulled herself back from despair.

Given her personal background, it was far safer to think of herself as talented, not possessed by anything, even genius. For even if one rejected the idea that genius and madness were linked, genius was associated at the very least with ill health. The philosopher, J. F. Nisbit, writing just a few years after Louisa’s death, summed up the opinion of some when he claimed that talented men were the top of the evolutional pyramid, but the man of genius was degenerate and unhealthy (Becker 92). As she grew older, Louisa’s writing vortex sometimes worried not just her family (Matteson 261) but herself; she said that she, “dared not get into a vortex for fear of a break down” (JLA 213). Antebellum female writers “often associated creativity and genius with the ailments they experienced” (Boyd 179), including, but not limited to, depression. Her own moods could be hints of hereditary weakness. Weakness, and therefore genius, needed to be avoided.

To be a genius was to be a victim of one’s own emotions, someone who lacked self-control. Self-control was a quality Louisa had been encouraged to acquire, even as a child. In her work, she often gave that quality to her most heroic characters, such as Adam Warwick in her novel Moods. Warwick has such self-control that he is willing to part from the woman he loves for a year to keep a promise to another woman whom he does not love and cannot respect. Sylvia, the moody character of the title, suffers greatly due to her own lack of self-control. Louisa does have Sylvia develop some self-restraint and has her die beautifully at the end, “having learned to live by principle, not impulse” (280).

Living by principle was what Louisa believed one should do. The model in Louisa’s home of the talented woman sacrificing for the male genius was displayed year after grinding year; Abba, the matriarch of the Alcott family, put Bronson and her children above Self. Her example to her daughters that sacrifice was the highest goal of a woman’s life was not unreasonable, given their circumstances. Because they lived on the financial edge every day of their lives, teaching her daughters to regard self-sacrifice as the high path was perhaps a coping mechanism. It was better to see self-sacrifice as positive if it must be done.

Matteson points out that Louisa saw herself as somewhat of a martyr, toiling away with no role model. He argues that this was fantasy, given her intellectually rich upbringing in Concord (297), but perhaps for Louisa it was more comfortable to think of her vortex moments as sacrifice than to take herself seriously as a genius.

May Alcott’s View of Genius

If nineteenth-century views on genius and Louisa’s complicated relationship with her father gave Louisa negative views of genius, May’s life and choices serve as the counter-weight to that view, influencing Louisa’s later, more positive treatment of the theme of genius and Louisa’s self-image as a creative artist. Of the four sisters described in Little Women, Jo, the
writer, and Amy, the artist, have the most difficulty understanding one another. Yet, the real lives of Louisa and May Alcott Nieriker are a reminder that the fictional treatment of the four sisters cannot be taken as a mirror of real-life relationships. Louisa encouraged and financed her sister May through all her real-life artistic attempts.

As an aspiring artist, not a writer, May had few available mentors or role models, even in the fertile intellectual ground of Concord. One family friend of May's childhood, Sophia Peabody, a truly gifted Concord artist living on the same street as the Alcotts, chose to give up her artistic pursuits shortly after marrying Nathaniel Hawthorne (Marshall 452)—not a mentor for May, certainly. There were few great museums in America in which to see fine works of art. Teachers would take women artists on as pupils, but when they did, there were restrictions upon that training: no live models. Nevertheless, May did pursue what art education she could, although she had difficulty in finding all she needed. “The one thing the women could not do was find everything they needed in one place, and so for them training at mid-century was a matter of piecing together the components of an artistic education as best they could” (Borzello 129).

Some psychological support did come from May's parents, Abba and Bronson. They both believed in Bronson's theory that all children's needs should be nurtured: physical, emotional, moral, and intellectual. In fact, any visitor to their home, Orchard House, could literally see how encouraging Abba and Bronson Alcott were. As Lydia Maria Child reported in a letter, “the artist-daughter filled up all the nooks and corners [of the house] with pannels [sic] on which she had painted birds, or flowers; and over the open fire-places she painted mottoes in ancient English character. Owls blink at you, and faces peep from the most unexpected places” (535). Despite Bronson's failure to provide financially and the frustrations that Abba felt with her complicated marriage, the couple's liberal views about how to raise children bore fruit.

Louisa became another influence that shaped May's open attitude toward the possibility of women's genius. May was twenty-three years old when Louisa published Hospital Sketches to some acclaim. Louisa tried to take her success lightly and was uneasy with fame, but she was living proof that women could succeed in a world balanced in favor of men. May was proud of her sister's fame and success, describing in a letter home an incident where a fellow-traveler unwittingly praised her sister's book to her (MAM 128–32). In another letter dated May 30, 1870, she uses the word “genius” for Louisa when referring to a friend's regard for her sister (66). May followed Louisa's example of hard work but did not cloak her ambition with a veneer of sacrifice. Even as a small child, she had rejected the idea of giving things up (MAM 11) and perfect self-control was not one of her virtues.

Becoming a True Artist

Like other young women aspiring to be visual artists in the post-bellum era, May wanted to be truly professional, not an amateur, and she would not be swayed, nor be discouraged. During the nineteenth century the idea that a woman could draw a little and have small accomplishments was common, but the idea that a woman could sculpt and paint as a genius was a new and exciting idea that May fully embraced. Above the door to her room in Concord are the words: “True genius is infinite patience.—Michael Angelo” (MAM xvii).
May had the patience to find what she needed to become a true artist, despite the limited availability of art education in America and the expensive necessity for all serious artists to visit European museums and ateliers (studio/workshops). In the 1850s, Ednah Chaney (1824–1904), an abolitionist and feminist, pushed for the creation of an art school in Boston, which became known as the School of Design. May took lessons there, but there were no life classes, which are essential to education of a professional artist. After the School of Design closed, the Lowell Institute served as a replacement, and William Rimmer (1816–79) took over as art instructor. Rimmer did emphasize anatomy and sculpture but was uncomfortable with the idea of women drawing a nude male model. There was a discussion that it might be allowed, if the women artists were veiled to hide their identity (Hirschler 12).

For painting lessons, May Alcott attended the atelier of William Morris Hunt (1824–79). Hunt was not only willing to instruct female students, but he also “gave them a sense of their own worth” (Hirschler 24). May’s own pupil, the American sculptor, Daniel Chester French (1850–1931) reported later that May had absorbed both Rimmer’s sense of line and Hunt’s sense of color. May valued Hunt’s instruction so much that she was later inspired to visit Hunt’s teacher in Europe, the much-admired French artist, Thomas Couture. She said scornfully about Couture that “for all his genius, he like so many Frenchmen, has no opinion of women” (MAM 174). May Alcott’s sensitivity to Couture’s misogyny makes it evident she had a good opinion of her own worth as a person and an artist. Her letters, sent home from Europe, are the cheerful, self-confident expression of a young woman with her eyes on the prize of artistic immortality.

In 1870, Louisa accompanied May to Europe, the first of the three trips that May took to see the great art museums of Europe, acquire a serious art education, and pursue fame. In a letter home from 1877, she stated her desire for fame outright, and in straight-forward language: [I have] “proved to my satisfaction that there is enough talent [within herself] to pay for educating it and giving my life to it […] as a hard-working artist, living for future fame […] this is what I think my life must be” (MAM 170–71). Although May’s confidence as she sets out to conquer the artistic world is out of step with views of women’s roles in her day, there were others among May’s artistic friends that shared her ideas. As women began to clamor for roles as professional artists on both sides of the Atlantic, they were filled with optimism. After all, if they were allowed entry to art shows or salons, their work, just like the men’s, would be submitted anonymously. How, the women asked, could they not be judged fairly, on an equal playing field with men if they were allowed entry into great ateliers? In May Alcott’s published book, How to Study Abroad, and How to Do It Cheaply, she notes, “a stranger seeing the two canvases [of Rosa Bonheur (1822–99) and Jules, Rosa’s brother] side by side, would unhesitatingly select hers as the work of the man” (52) and she adds that Bonheur had an “almost masculine use of the brush.” When May refers to Bonheur as “masculine,” it is important to remember that masculine connoted both power and genius. May wants those reading her letter to understand that genius is possible in a woman.

Borzello, an art history scholar, comments that the hope that women artists could be judged and found worthy, “was never to be repeated for at this stage there were no troubling case histories to show that […] women still faced circumstances and situations that the men did not have to deal with” (128). Though the struggle for equality for women artists moved at a slow and uneven pace and would go on into the next centuries, May was optimistic and
clearly felt women, like men, could combine the qualities of the “male virility” and “female sensitivity,” which theorists believed were combined in a genius (Battersby 103–06).

May also admired the work of the artist Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), who, like May, was an American living in Paris. May visited Cassatt’s studio in November of 1876, describing it to friends as a cheerful, pretty place of work. Cassatt's studio life most likely affirmed May's choice to pursue the life of a hard-working artist for it was obvious Cassatt's choices had not led to unhappiness or mental instability.

Although Cassatt's artistic style could not have been more different than Rosa Bonheur’s, May had the highest praise for them both calling Cassatt “a woman of real genius” (MAM 152). Cassatt, an impressionist, who used a light palette, was particularly known for her paintings of children. Nevertheless, the Paris Salon in 1877 rejected her brilliant entries. May expressed her astonishment at that rejection and commented that the judges were too stuffy to appreciate Cassatt and her style (MAM 194). The Paris Salon, held by the French Academy, was important to any serious artist. It was an opportunity to show work to the critics and the public. Acceptance into this prestigious Salon meant that as a painter, you had been accepted as accomplished by one’s peers.

It is remarkable that May had the foresight to say Cassatt's work should have been included. It is particularly prescient that, like art critics today, she admired the work of both Bonheur and Cassatt. They used different color palettes, chose entirely different subjects, and finished the surface of their works in opposite ways. Their lives were very different too. Cassatt lived the traditional life of an upper-class woman; Bonheur dressed in men's clothing and led a decidedly non-bourgeois, openly lesbian life. May's praise for Bonheur is unrestrained, though she probably knew about her unconventional ways. May accepted both painters’ genius and, it seems, their life choices.

**Encountering the Sublime**

May's own choices in her first European trip were bold. One of her early letters home from Europe (July 10, 1870) described an experience that she could have seen as a sign of her own possible genius, and the length of her letter to her parents about her Switzerland mountain journey proves she saw it as especially significant (Little Women Abroad 132V36). A girl from puritanical New England, religiously and historically steeped in the significance of signs and portents, i.e., the Salem Witch Trials, could not fail to appreciate the import of her own tale. May is not a philosopher and the details she gives of her experience emphasize her own personal sense of adventure and love of physical danger, not transcendental thought. Although she does not directly reflect on Transcendentalism in this letter, as a child of Concord, she certainly understood the term 'Sublime Experience.' She knows how strongly this letter will resonate in her parents' home and that it will be read aloud to other Concord intellectuals who thought, wrote, and debated the meaning of the term 'Sublime.'

The word 'Sublime' as understood by Romantic philosophy was “something separate and apart from the Beautiful [...] it could produce thought of [...] awe but also magnificence, vastness, and danger” (Paris). For the philosopher Edmund Burke (1729–97), fear, mingled with a feeling of beauty and the infinite, mark the Sublime (Sandner 116). Logically, having a
Sublime Experience marks one as having an acute sensibility and increases the possibility of genius.

May’s lengthy letter describes the difficult trip up the pass of St. Bernard in the Alps (8100 ft. elevation) to see the Hospice of St. Bernard. It was a three-day trip, and Louisa did not accompany her. May describes the experience of being caught in a storm with relish, saying that she boldly hiked upward. “The lightning flashed and the tremendous claps of thunder seemed so near, that the mules stopped. [...] But I wouldn’t have missed seeing the mountains in the storms, for it was more fearfully beautiful [italics mine] than anything I ever imagined [...]. I much preferred the wild stormy scene and blessed my stars that everything had happened as did” (MAM 87). A following letter from May on August 20, 1870, to her family indicates that they had asked for even more details—a clear indication that Bronson, the transcendental philosopher back home, saw her experience as a necessary baptism into the Sublime; Nature revealed the Divine, and May had seen it (LWA 193).

If the mountain climb was a mystical sign to the people back home that May might be possessed of a certain genius, the family there believed in another sign of May’s abilities. The great art critic John Ruskin, “a single writer [who held] enormous sway over the hearts and minds of American artists, critics, and the general public” (Parks 58), apparently commented favorably on her copies of J. M. W. Turner’s watercolors. Years later Louisa denied this oft-repeated, but not well corroborated story (LaPlante 216). However, the significance of the Ruskin story, even if mythical, about May’s success in copying Turner, is that it shows she had perfected mimesis, which was no longer seen as genius itself (as in the Middle Ages) but as a step toward developing genius. Copying “was an important learning exercise [...] a time-tested method for learning to draw [...] and essentially deconstructed the works of the masters” (Paris).

Despite the handicap of her gender, May had moved along the classic path for fine artists as recognized by critics. May refers to reading Ruskin in her unpublished work, “An Artist’s Holiday” (seq. 96–97). Ruskin considered an encounter with great mountains a necessary experience for becoming an artist of worth. He had written “copiously and brilliantly of the feelings inspired by this experience” (Parks 60). She had a sublime mountain experience and perfected mimesis—two signs of nascent genius. Then, in 1876, her still life, Nature Morte, was accepted at the Paris Salon.

With the Salon’s approval, she, like her sister Louisa, received public approval for her work and seemed destined for success. There has been some scholarly comment that Louisa and May were jealous of one another because of Louisa’s occasional comment in her journals that May was “the fortunate one” (JLA 100). May was charming, attractive, and received financial support from interested patrons. Despite Louisa’s grumbling, I agree with Boyd that the sisters were not jealous, but mutually supportive and that Louisa “viewed her younger sibling as a surrogate daughter” (108). Louisa financially supported May’s artist lifestyle and commented that she did not want May “to be thwarted in her work” by a lack of money to support her foreign studies (JLA 179). She includes May as a role model of the highest type in her short essay “My Girls,” praising her ability to stay dedicated to her work (Aunt Jo’s 195–96). But what did dedication mean for creative women of the nineteenth century? How was dedication to be measured?
Marriage, Art, or Both?

Who to marry was the crucial choice for women in the nineteenth century and many authors of the day chose that theme in their stories, but for real-life creative women such as Louisa and May, the choice was not only who to marry, but if. To use Boyd’s summary of the various views of the century:

Whereas de Stael understood romantic love as absorbing a woman’s interest and therefore replacing a woman’s genius once she discovered it, and Barrett Browning saw love as the key to a woman’s poetic genius, and [Elizabeth Barstow] Stoddard and [George] Eliot portrayed women artists who believed romantic love and art to be incompatible and therefore chose art over heterosexual love, [Elizabeth Stuart] Phelps’ novel [The Story of Avis] makes the dilemma overtly irreconcilable […] the woman artist who loves […] is doomed as both a woman and an artist. (101)

These multiple views about marriage for the creative woman had to have been in the sisters’ consciousness. In Louisa’s fictional account of the sisters’ trip to Europe she says, “they confide to one another the secrets of their soul” (Aunt Jo’s 122). The two sisters, personally and professionally close, undoubtedly did bare their souls during their travels, discussing marriage and its possible effects on their work.

Given the complications of marriage for someone who was both a woman and a writer, Louisa chose not to marry, citing a desire for freedom and economic independence. May chose instead to delay marriage, which would naturally limit the number of births possible, allowing her, as she hoped, to pursue both marriage and art. Her letter home to announce her engagement, dated March 11, 1878, expressly states she would not relinquish her art (MAM 261). She was thirty-nine when she married Ernest Nieriker, a younger man who promised to support, not forbid, her artistic ambitions.

In her work, Louisa often uses the tension between artistic ambitions and a desire for marriage as the creative theme. One of her early short stories, published in 1858, entitled “Psyche’s Art,” charts the path of two artists, one male (Paul) and one female (Psyche). Paul produces a work of genius, and Psyche sacrifices her ambitions to tend to her nuclear family. Louisa makes it clear that Psyche’s sacrifice has made her a better woman and a better artist. Louisa’s ending is coy, giving to the reader the imaginative choice of marrying the two artists to one another or letting both remain friends. Louisa’s story embraces sacrifice for one’s parents and siblings as a sacred obligation, but marriage? It is not an obligation, but a choice that can be rejected.

An example of her later thought on the subject, influenced by the life of her sister, May, is Diana and Persis, an unfinished work written in 1879, which compares the choices of two female visual artists, one of whom remains single (Diana), whereas the other chooses to marry (Persis). Twenty-one years had elapsed since Louisa wrote “Psyche’s Art,” and eleven years had passed since Louisa had written of the thwarted dreams (Matteson 347) of the sisters in Little Women. The story of the two artists in Diana and Persis is only four chapters, yet it is a rich four chapters. May’s influence is strongly felt in this work, for not only is she the model for the artist characters, but Louisa has the character of Percy argue that women can be geniuses, specifically naming a Miss Cassal (Mary Cassatt) and Rosa Bonheur as such, just
as the real-life May had.

The characters of Diana and Percy embrace the possibility of genius for women, believing that happiness can be found by fulfilling one’s genius, not by denying it or settling for an ordinary life. They stand in direct contrast to the characters of Jo, Amy, and Laurie in *Little Women* who give up their ambitions. Stafford, the character in *Diana and Persis* who represents the “new man” in the novel, admires Diana’s sculpture and calls her a genius. “Few men would say that to a woman,” replies Diana to him, and he in turn says that her work is powerful indeed (103). Here Louisa has given her readers a female character who is not simply talented, but a genius. I argue that it was May’s optimistic example that effected Louisa’s thinking between 1858 (“Psyche’s Art”) and 1879 (*Diana and Persis*). Louisa even refers to May as “Diana” in her journal entry of May-June 1879, making May’s influence on the book and the ideas it contains plain.

Though Louisa makes clear in the story that Diana is a genius and not just possessed of a flash of inspiration, Louisa’s other character, Percy, has failed to nurture her own talent to the level of genius. Percy has chosen to marry and have a child. When Diana visits, Diana spots Percy’s dusty easel and dried palette. Perhaps this scene means that Louisa now believed that a woman could be a genius, but only if she remained alone, like Louisa herself. Or perhaps the never-written ending would have had Diana married to Stafford and pursuing both genius and family, as May intended to do? We will never know.

Although we do not know Louisa’s ending, we do know that marriage did not affect May’s output or ambition as Louisa had feared. On the contrary, May’s letter home after her wedding in early fall of 1878 states: “Since July I’ve painted oils and water colors, fourteen sketches. Having already seven studies on exhibition in Paris, two just finished for Lille, a panel in the Manchester gallery, two in London, and an order ready for America, I feel that I can rest” (*MAM* 281).

May’s single success at the Salon was not enough for her. To stake a claim to genius, she needed to move up the scale of the Hierarchy of Genres. This Hierarchy, established during the High Renaissance and still in effect through the nineteenth century, was codified by the French Academy. The argument was that in judging the value of an artistic work, there was a scale to its cultural values. History painting was at the top of that pyramid, followed by Portraits, Genre painting, Landscape, and Animal painting, with Still Life at the very bottom rung. May had a success at the Salon, but it was on that very lowest rung. In “An Artist’s Holiday” she imagines her stuffed owl, the subject of a still life and a sort of totem that she kept in her studio, saying to her: “Yes I am tired of posing and disgusted with such low aims in Art” (seq. 207).

**La Négresse—May’s Masterwork**

In her new work, May aimed higher, choosing a portrait, and then subtly combining other rungs of the pyramid. She added characteristics of history and genre painting to elevate this new work into the top half of the traditional hierarchy. Turner, her artistic hero, had elevated his landscapes by combining historical and classical elements, so perhaps she had this idea of enriching her work from him.
In any case, the picture she submitted to the Paris Salon of 1879 is special. The subject of May's last and most original painting, *La Négresse*, is wholly American. The black woman in the portrait is presented as an individual: young, lovely, and dignified, a truly revolutionary, respectful treatment of a black sitter by a white artist during the nineteenth century. When black subjects do appear in nineteenth-century art, they are overwhelmingly shown only in relationship to whites as servants or entertainers, and not on the same picture plane as whites. Even the Northern Republican-leaning *Harper's Weekly* in the 1850s and 1860s regularly published racist comic images of Blacks. Currier and Ives had a racist, best-selling series called “Darktown Comics” throughout the 1880s, which depicted blacks as ignorant and child-like (Harris 56–63).

May's family did not accept the common white view of their day about black Americans. As abolitionists in an abolitionist town, they had participated in the famous Underground Railroad and hosted runaway families in their own home. Bronson recorded one such episode in his diary (“Journals” 190). Some of May's early art lessons were paid for by the wife of George Luther Stearns, the anti-slavery reformer, and there is no doubt that May shared the family views on abolition. In January of 1877, May sent a letter home in which she described drawing a black man during an art lesson. She cites the artist Carl Muller's (1818–93) comment concerning her work: “With what passion and enthusiasm you draw this ensemble; it is very vigorous and shows your interest and not scorn of the race.” (*MAM* 164).

May was probably familiar with some of the very few works that emphasized black subjects. She may have known of *Portrait d'une Négresse* by the French artist, Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist (1768–1826), which emphasizes the exotic nature of the sitter. She must have seen the major sculpture exhibited in Paris, by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (1827–1875), entitled, *Les Quatre Parties du Monde Soutenant la Sphere Céleste* in 1874, which included a powerful figure of a black woman. She would almost certainly have heard of the black American sculptor, Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907) for Lewis worked in Rome from 1865–69, achieving some fame.

May not only chose an unusual subject, but she also incorporated historical and classical elements into the painting, perhaps taking those elements from a very famous painting that entered the Louvre in 1874. As she was a frequent visitor there, she would have seen Eugene Delacroix's much-discussed *Liberty Leading the People*. Delacroix's painting depicts Liberty as the allegorical figure of a woman (also known as Marianne in France), with one breast bare, wearing a red Phrygian helmet on her head, striding forward. The Phrygian helmet, reportedly the hat worn by freed slaves of Rome, was the common symbol of freedom in France. It appeared on French coins after the Revolution and even on some American coins.

May's *La Négresse* hints at allegory, but keeps a solemn woman, not a symbol, the focus of her picture. The woman wears a reddish head covering, and her loose-fitting top, reminiscent of classical Rome, slides half-way off her shoulder. The reference to the freed slaves of Rome is very subtle, but arguably there, and the quiet use of historical elements serves both to echo the theme of emancipation and connect it to the highest rung in painting, history.

The sitter is not, of course, high born. The third category in the hierarchy of genres is simply called genre painting, or the visual description of everyday places and people. May's subject is an ordinary woman and as an artist she sees beauty in the ordinary. Emerson, the Sage of
Concord, in his essay the “American Scholar” had called for Americans to find inspiration in the common. *La Négresse* is the answer by the youngest Alcott, as *Little Women* had been for her elder sister.

Unlike the prior Genre pictures of the few American painters who interpreted black subjects, May’s subject is not shown in a negative relationship to whites. The subject commands the entire canvas. The term “male gaze,” coined by Laura Mulvey, has been used to describe an artist/viewer/observer who is active (male) and the sitter passive (female). In May’s painting there is no trace of the sitter being sexualized. May’s woman’s gaze is interested, not patronizing. The sitter looks away, thinking her own thoughts, keeping her own identity. She is not an object for someone else’s pleasure or subjugation or ridicule.

May’s dignified treatment, although not singular, was very rare for nineteenth-century American artists, and will not be repeated until after her death by men such as Frederic Remington (1861–1909) and Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937). May’s *La Négresse* deserved the attention it received both from the French Academy and from May’s abolitionist family.
back home. Her daring attempt in this painting to move beyond the imitative and embrace original subject matter led her a small step away from talent and closer to genius. It was an attempt to “be exemplary and consequently [...] not [...] derived from imitation,” as Kant had defined genius (137). Her father, Bronson, was ecstatic, recording his excitement in a letter dated May 7, 1879, just months before May's death: “Were your picture here now [...] I know not what new honors might await the artist on this side the Atlantic. The Negress might rival even Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom” (“Letters” 758).

The critic Ruskin honored social commentary in art, purchasing Turner's 1840 work, *The Slave Ship*. May's painting is certainly social commentary, for as it celebrates the Emancipation, it also condemns the institution that would put chains on a woman who was so dignified, so lovely. May chose, with *La Négresse*, to create meaning on many levels, reaching high.

May had no doubts about talent and genius in her confidently-lived life. She accepted genius as a term that could be applied to women, and she never tried to subordinate or cloak her ambition in self-sacrifice for others. In May's final work, she made the ideological concept of Freedom concrete in multiple ways. Through her woman's gaze, May celebrated the freedom of the portrait's model to be herself and not an object. Her choice of subject (as Bronson's response shows) commemorates a historic event in America, the emancipation of an enslaved people. And finally, the painting is evidence of May's belief in her freedom as a woman artist to reach ever higher, attempting to grasp genius.

Unfortunately, May's golden year of 1879 ended tragically, as she died of post-partum complications in December of that year. The child, Lulu, survived, to be raised by May's sister, her namesake. Five years after May's death, in a deeply moving letter written to a friend, Louisa gives her thoughts on death and the afterlife. She expresses the idea that perhaps those we regard as possessing genius have lived past lives. She adds about herself, “I seem to remember former states before this, and feel that in them I have learned some of the lessons that have never been mine here” (*Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* 280). Unlike other references to genius in her writing, there is no flippancy here; she is taking her creative powers seriously. Here she finally acknowledges a bit of the immortal fire for herself.

**Coda**

*La Négresse* is a most American of paintings, reflecting a hopeful American painter’s gaze, on the future of an America that May could only imagine and would not live long enough to experience. Considering how rare such images of real, not characterized, black Americans are from the nineteenth century, and how seldom African Americans can see themselves depicted as worthy subjects from that time period, it would be nice to see *La Négresse* exhibited, even as a copy, by an American Art Museum such as the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, or by the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC It is an inclusive picture that needs to be included, not forgotten.

**Notes**

[1] The letters of Alcott Nieriker are quoted extensively in Caroline Ticknor's book *May
Alcott: A Memoir (MAM) and are also reprinted in Little Women Abroad (LWA) edited by Daniel Shealy. The original letters and her unpublished manuscript “An Artist’s Holiday” are held at Harvard University.

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Author
Lauren Hehmeyer is professor of History and English at Texarkana College. She holds an MA in Library Science and an MIS in Literature. She has published recently in the *Thoreau Society Bulletin* (poem, book review, drawings) and speaks frequently in East Texas to intellectual groups on Thoreau, the Alcotts, and the major World Religions. Further information can be found on her [website](#).

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