Echoes of Transcendentalism: Role of Nature in Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands*

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the intricate relationship between nature and humans in Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands: Louisa May Alcott Made Perfect* (2002). Echoing the themes of Transcendentalism, the narrative vividly portrays the lives of individuals aspiring to an idealistic existence in harmony with nature. The portrayal of the debatably unbelievable but real utopian commune 'Fruitlands' demonstrates how the natural environment influences the lives and literary development of its inhabitants, particularly young Louisa May Alcott. The characters' struggle to live off the land, practising agrarianism, vegetarianism, and rejecting materialism underscores their efforts to connect more deeply with nature. This transformative journey reshapes their personal traits and literary sensibilities. The well-integrated depiction of environmental surroundings and philosophical discussions offers a critical lens through which we observe the characters' deep connection to the natural world. This paper will also contextualise the novel within the tradition of environmental literature and transcendental movement, set against the backdrop of rapid industrialisation in the 19th-century America. By examining the fictionalised account of Amos Bronson Alcott's attempt to establish a utopian commune in New England, the paper will contribute to understanding how literature reflects and is shaped by the natural environment. A close examination of Louisa May Alcott's experiences in her father's utopian commune and her later literary achievement will be undertaken.

Keywords: Environment, Fruitland, Nature, Transcendentalism

Introduction

The relationship between humans and nature has long been a central theme in literature across the globe, dating back to ancient works like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Writers and critics in America in the 19th century increasingly sought to explore the spiritual and philosophical connections between

human existence and the natural world. Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands: Louisa May Alcott Made Perfect* (2002) offers a fictionalised account of a real-life utopian commune experiment led by Amos Bronson Alcott, one of the prominent figures of the American Transcendentalist movement. The novel delves into the complexities of struggling for an ideal life in harmony with nature, foregrounding the challenges posed by both human limitations and the natural environment. Cheryll Glotfelty believes that "the absence of environment perspective in literary studies suggests the work done in the field remains isolated from the real world outside academia" (xv) since it fails to address the environmental crises and the stress on the earth's life support systems. And it may prevent the people from being aware of the environmental crises. Bronson Alcott's utopian commune, as referred to in the novel, had the aim of creating a self-sufficient, spiritually pure community in the wilderness of the nature away from the hustle and bustle of the industrialised locale. Despite its high ideals, the commune failed, leading to its collapse due to the the harshness of nature and human achievement limitations. Lawrence Buell's concept of "New World Dreams and Environmental Actualities" clarifies and reflects on the causes of the collapse of Alcott's commune as "some imported enterprises prove more adaptable than others" (56). This paper attempts to read *Fruitlands* in connection with Ralph Waldo Emerson's belief in self-reliance and the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world. Much like to Henry David Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond, the commune in the novel struggled to live in close communion with nature. Louisa May Alcott, a young girl who narrates and comments on the lofty ideals in *Fruitlands*, exhibits her budding awareness of the world around her, hinting at her later literary talents. She repeatedly mentions Emerson and Thoreau to criticise the "hypercivilized effeteness" (Buell 54) of 19th-century America, probably to echo their voices. Thus, the paper uniquely displays the connections between humans and the natural world through the lens of Transcendentalist philosophy.

Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands: Louisa May Alcott Made Perfect* is a novella that offers a fictionalised account of the utopian commune 'Fruitlands' envisioned and led by Bronson Alcott. The story explores how the rigid ideals of Bronson Alcott and Mr. Lane shape life in the commune and

its impact on young Louisa May Alcott. Louisa, portrayed as a lively and inquisitive girl, navigates the difficulties of living in the harshness of nature and the strict environment, sometimes showing insensitivity to others' feelings. The tension between her inner aspirations and external expectations is reflected in her decision to keep two diaries: private and public. The novella is praised for its meticulous historical details and philosophical themes, which add depth to the engaging narrative. It is viewed as a balanced work of historical fiction, artistically presenting complex themes in an accessible manner. The portrayal of the people at or around 'Fruitlands', along with their excitement and challenges, is vivid and engaging.

In her review of the book *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and Their Search for Utopia* by Richard Francis, Helen Epstein reflects on "what the Transcendentalist was thinking" (para.1) referring to their move to "farmhouse at Fruitlands" (para.1) – a utopian commune envisioned by Amos Bronson Alcott in the early 1840s. She notes that "Fruitlands was one of a number of political and religious utopian experiments in New England that fused Transcendentalist ideas with the writings of the Frenchman Charler Fourier and the English Robert Owen". Epstein also emphasizes the lasting impact of the commune on its inhabitants, particularly young Louisa, who "later mined some of the experience in her classic *Little Women*" (para. 7). The review highlights the transcendental themes and the influence that the stay at 'Fruitlands' had on its inhabitants.

Similarly, in her review of *Fruitlands: Louisa May Alcott Made Perfect*, Susan Bailey highlights the novella's imaginative reconstruction of Louisa's lost diary as she writes, "The premise of the book is based on Louisa's diary kept at 'Fruitlands'. . . Gloria Whelan maintains that Bronson destroyed much of it as he had also destroyed Anna's kept during that time" (para. 2). She has an opinion that Whelan masterfully presents the increasing tension as she writes, "The best part of this book was the 'slow burn:' the building desperation, not only of how the extended family would survive but Louisa's own desperation with herself and all the criticism she took from the adults" (para.9). She praises the novel for the imaginative reconstruction of the lost diary and mounting tension and desperation experienced by the young girl.

In the same way, the critic Thomas Blanding draws a comparison between the 'Fruitlands' and paradise, stating, "Thus, in early June, 1843, Bronson Alcott gathered his family about him and began the Pilgrim's Progress from Concord to Paradise" (5). His presentation of 'Fruitlands' as a 'misplaced' paradise shows the challenges associated with the utopian concept of land. He further mentions Alcott's ambitious ideals in establishing the utopian community. Alcott was sensitive to pollution of not only of land but also of mind, stating, "Alcott went to great lengths to avoid pollution of body and mind" (4). He never considered going beyond the utopian mindset and did not seriously consider the practical realities. Blanding notes that the 'Fruitlands' community, once established for an ideal utopia, was short-lived: "The demise of 'Fruitlands' began with its founding. Alcott failed to distinguish between spiritual ideals and physical practicalities" (6). He observes that the 'Fruitlands' community did not last long due to the disparity between physical aspects and spiritual ones.

Richard Francis similarly comments on the short-lived utopian life of the community, established on the ground of egalitarian principles and ethics: "The community, established in a small farmhouse overlooking the Nashua valley in central Massachusetts, lasted from June 1843 until the end of the year" (202). In spite of its root in idealistic values, the community did not survive even a single year. Their plan not to eat potatoes hint at their impracticality: "Fruitlanders accused the potato of failure to aspire, because it grew down- ward" (203). Francis highlights the community's failure to take idealism together with practicality, to acknowledge the practicality. He also focuses on the dual nature of Alcott between limitation on humans and immense potentiality:

> Alcott's ideas had arrived at this point when he embarked for England. His dilemma was that on the one hand, in his role as America's number one idealist, he saw man as spirit casting aside circumstances en route to God; while on the other, as historian and social evolutionist of sorts, he couldn't help feeling that the human race was capable of achieving a worth- while destiny for itself on earth. (209)

Alcott's ambitious project of the 'Fruitlands' community shows the immense potentiality of humanity and the omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence of God. Though unsuccessful, this

experimentation of utopian life has left a good inspiration and initiation for transcendence. Jacqueline E. M. Latham notes, “This experiment in communal living lasted from 1838 to 1848 and was inspired by the ideals of the "sacred socialist" James Pierrepont Greaves and named after Bronson Alcott who visited it in 1842” (61). Despite its promising beginnings, the ecological commune of Fruilands disappeared shortly.

The majority of people at first did not move to ‘Fruitlands’ to live there. Sterling F. Delano emphasises the diverse members of the community, stating, “The cast or characters is actually quite large—much larger than the thirteen or so people who eventually settled at ‘Fruitlands’ (eight of them Alcott and Lane family member” (1492). The other members were “the English Transcendentalists—particularly James Pierrepont Greaves, William Oldham, Henry Gardner Wright, and of course Lane himself—who welcomed Alcott when he arrived an British shores in May” (1492). This diversity of people made ‘Fruitlands’ a wonderful and unique community.

Thus, the novel has received a range of responses, most of which focus on idea of moving to nature and living a pure life. Emerson highlights the interconnectedness between humans and nature by saying, “Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE” (1-2). It aligns with the Transcendentalist belief, the inherent goodness of humans and nature, mainly through self-reliance. In line with the ideas discussed so far, this paper seeks to explore the following queries: What is the impact of the natural environment on the personal and literary development of the people? To what extent does the novella *Fruitlands* reflect the principles of Transcendentalism? And how does the narrative connect the ‘Fruitlands’ commune to environmental literature and transcendental movement, especially against the backdrop of rapid industrialisation of America in the 19th century? This discussion draws the readers’ attention to exploring how the novella embodies the philosophy of Transcendentalism and environmental literature.

Transcendentalism: A Theoretical Perspective

Transcendentalism stresses the inherent goodness of humans and nature, calling for self-reliance, individualism, and the humans' spiritual connection with the natural world. Through the ideas of thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalism interrogated the prevailing materialism and conformity of society. It urged the people to search for and believe in individuality with an appeal to be in close association of nature. Emerson's essay *Nature* embodies the core principles of Transcendentalism, showing how nature serves as a channel to understanding the divine and the self. Exploring the profound and harmonious interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, Emerson portrays the "lover of nature" (4) as someone "whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other" (4) and "who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood" (4) letting them experience nature with a sense of awe and joy. Nature complements and supplements the joyful and sorrowful moments of life, as pointed out by Emerson: "Nature is a setting that fits equally well as a comic or a mourning piece" (4). Emerson's claim, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith," probably advocates Thoreau's choice to live at Walden Pond. Thoreau questioned and challenged the acts that his reasoning faculty deemed unjust, and he prepared himself for civil disobedience–whether it was with the issue of the American war with Mexico or slavery. In Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands*, the Alcott family moves from their comfortable home in Concord to 'Fruitlands' for an idealistic experiment. Referring to the move of the family, accompanied by an Englishman, Mr. Lane and his son, the young girl narrates the journey, "This day we left Concord in the rain to travel by wagon the ten miles to our new home, which Father has named Fruitlands" (3). She clarifies the purpose of their move when she says, "Father and Mr. Lane are removing us from the imperfect world (4)," and "We are all going to be made perfect (3)." This shift hints at the commune's intense commitment to seek life based on Transcendentalist ideals of simplicity, self-reliance and a strong connection to nature. The move brings excitement and challenges to all the inhabitants of 'Fruitlands', and their stay perfectly works as a formative experience to shape Louisa May Alcott's later life and literary sensibilities.

Lofty Ideals versus Practicalities

Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands: Louisa May Alcott Made Perfect* exposes and explores the tension between lofty ideals and practical realities. The novel dives into an experiment of creating a utopian commune to shape a perfect society based on transcendental principles. Henry David Thoreau sets out some prerequisite conditions regarding the plausibility of creating a good society, stating, "I am convinced that if all men were to live as simply as I then did, thieving and robbery would be unknown. These take place only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough" (115). Through the eyes and mind of young Louisa, Whelan presents the intentions behind the commune as she says, "…we are to be a means of improving mankind. We will do nothing that might harm our brother animals. We will eat only fruit, vegetables, and grains. Because milk belongs to the cow and her calf, we will drink only water" (4). Louisa remains bold, innovative and inquisitive throughout the novel, particularly in her curiosity about the Shaker family. When she observes that "All the men live in one part of the house and all the women in another," she doubts: ". . . they live as married men and women usually do" (39). She questions her mother, "where Shaker babies would come from" (39). Through Louisa's eyes, Whelan presents excitement, a natural mode of life, lofty ideals, and the complexities of honouring these values. The novel displays a gap between the high-minded ideals and survival necessities.

Echoing transcendentalist principles, the narrative reflects on the strong claim made by Louisa's father, who reportedly says, ". . . each man should live his own life, not as others live theirs" (5). It is a freedom associated with the individuals themselves. They follow the impulses released from the heart, including self-reliance, a sense of communal living, and a profound tribute to nature. Clarifying the notion of "Self-reliance," particularly for Emerson, writes Regis Michaud, it is "a declaration of spiritual independence, a plea for religious autonomous independence, a plea for religious autonomy" (76). The declaration of spiritual autonomy concerning inner calling of nature is a primary tenet of transcendentalism.

The concept of individual freedom, echoing the spirit of ecological self, is materialised in the 'Fruitlands' community, where the interplay between humans and nature, including animals and plants enhances the health of all ecological selves based on environmental ethics. With regard to the well-being of all selves, the narrator observes, "By the fine example we all set at 'Fruitlands', we are to be a means of improving mankind. We will do nothing that might harm our brother animals. We will eat only fruit, vegetables, and grains. Because milk belongs to the cow and her calf, we will drink only water" (4). These views are idealistic if seen from an anthropocentric point of view. However, it is reasonable to argue that there is nothing wrong to live in communion with nature with due respect to the land and its beings. For the attainment of such state and mode of life, one must abandon the physical cum mundane world with greedy feelings. In this regard, with Emerson in reference, Regis Michaud further argues, "Transcendentalism is an excess of faith. We see in Nature Emerson's self-satisfied indifference to the problem of the existence of external reality which he dismisses offhand to turn to idealism as to a dogma" (79). Emerson's take on transcendentalism is based on self-induced indifference to the external and its affairs.

The narrator is captivated by the willow tree, which "stands close to the river, and its overhanging branches form a curtain" (11). This sight of nature's beauty - branches forming a curtain – brings her joy and resonates with her spirit. She feels that the development of her own self and the growth observed in nature are parallel, likening it to "the tree branches grooming its fur and twitching its whiskers" (11). This bond leads her to assert, "there is something in me that makes me want to hide away and just be by myself" (12). She desires to be a natural being like a tree where the leaf naturally comes.

Transcendentalist philosophy stresses ideals such as following the inner calling of heart, self-reliance, intellectual development in harmony with nature, and struggling for moral/ideal perfection. In *Fruitlands*, the narrator finds the community as a place for pure living, free from modern society's corruption and disastrous outcomes. The voice is echoed in the attention given to the health of soil, as hinted at by the statement, "The men will plant clover and buckwheat to enrich the soil" (17). The

Fruitland dwellers are concerned with the health of the soil like the health of the body. Enriching soil through planting clover and buckwheat not only enrich the soil, but also it equally enhances the body and mind of inhabitants to maturity, intellectuality, and self-empowerment. In addition, the narrator mentions the teachings of Mr. Lane, one of the co-founders of the commune, who encourages selflessness: "Mr. Lane helped me to see that I am selfish, thinking little of others. I must be willing to do without so that my soul may be strengthened" (20). The soul is enriched if the mind is free from the selfish thoughts. Life is also meant for others. When one thinks less about own prosperity, the mind is creative and focused.

According to transcendental philosophy, the creative faculty of mind is not related to the collection of facts. It is related to a creative outpour of intellectual wisdom. The narrator reflects the idea, stating, "Father says that children are born with a great deal of knowledge. The job of the teacher is not to impart knowledge but to arouse the conscience" (42). The conscience is related to the intellectual journey that the children are born with, and these potential outputs should not be overshadowed by the collections either of facts or materials. In this regard, she remembers what her father says, "Father thinks it is shameful to work for wages, and he will not do it" (44). The founder of 'Fruitlands' is against the collection of money, akin to Thoreau's idea that thieving and robbery: "take place only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough" (115). The narrator expresses her boundless happiness in being a part of 'Fruitlands' community, stating, "I am glad I am a part of 'Fruitlands'. I am happy to take the rugs outside and beat out the sand and dirt. I feel like I am cleaning up the whole world" (47). Her joy in maintaining the land's beauty reflects the idea of cleansing her soul, body, and the world around her.

Transcending the limitations imposed upon humans by social constraints offers a different experience of nature. Freedom does not simply mean being free from cultural restrictions; rather, it means living in harmony with nature. The experiences gained and shared in the company of nature are long-lasting and immortal. Such experiences create an awareness of humans' interconnectedness with nature and ecological awareness. Furthermore, the narrator wakes up at night and ruminates, "I

listened to the screech owl and stood at the window looking out. There was a full moon, and I watched the bats dive for mosquitoes. I imagined myself cast out and living in a woods with nothing but owls and bats for company and was very sorry for myself which made me feel better" (71-72). In the full moonlight, the narrator watches owl, bats, and mosquitoes with a sense of regret to think humans as superior beings. Then, the narrator blurs the false constructed dichotomies between humans and others, aligning with the principles set by her father while creating the 'Fruitlands' community.

This perception of an inherent connection with nature aligns with the argument of literary scholar, Lawrence Buell. He asserts, "The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (7). Humanity is intrinsically connected to natural history, and humans are comparatively new members on the Earth. Drawing on Thoreau's Walden, Buell argues that this relationship shows "a recognition of the delicacy of the complementary project to which Walden is committed: to turn nature to human uses, as a barometer of and stimulus to the speaker's spiritual development" (123). The interplay between Nature and humans, when examined through an ecological lens, catalyses spiritual development. Thus, the narrator comments, "Self-denial is the road to eternal life" (29). The road to eternal life with spiritual vigor is attained, discarding physical comfort and pleasure, embracing self-denial and wandering alone without being lost.

Conclusion

Written in the context of the rapid industrialisation of America, Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands* is a critique of the idea of establishing a utopian commune where the characters struggle to live off the land, practising agrarianism, vegetarianism, and rejecting materialism to connect more deeply with the nature. This paper has explored the tension between lofty ideals and practicality, demonstrating that while nature can be a source of profound delight and spiritual insight, it also has challenges that require adaptation. This paper has highlighted how the narrative reflects and critiques the transcendental philosophy. Discussing the capacity of human spirit to grow, the paper has also explored the limits of idealism in the harsh realities of nature. Thus, the paper has depicted

'Fruitlands' as a microcosm for the complex challenges of utopian movements, offering the limitations of idealism in both historical and contemporary contexts. Furthermore, this paper has initiated discussions how Louisa May Alcott's experiences at 'Fruitlands' contributed to her literary sensibilities and later works such as *Little Women*. Thus, this paper expects to open up a new avenue for readers to explore the challenges of preserving spiritual and environmental purity, both in literature and life, in an age of increasing industrialisation and consumerism.

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