

Anne K. Phillips, “How [She] Went Out to Service”: Alcott’s Empathy and Activism in the 1870s

Using Daniel Goleman’s notion of “service orientation” and other frameworks, this presentation will address Louisa May Alcott’s evolving empathy during the 1870s, the era in which she published *Work*, *Eight Cousins*, and *Rose in Bloom*. In this decade, she had recognized that the perspectives apparent in her fiction were received, followed, and appreciated by readers. As she acknowledged in 1871, “Over a hundred letters from boys & girls, & many from teachers and parents assure me that my little books are read & valued in a way I never dreamed of seeing them” (*Selected Letters* 161). In processing the experiences of self and others, Alcott returned to, reflected on, and wrote about formative experiences from her adolescence. Accordingly, the protagonist of *Work* considers committing suicide. Alcott later noted, “I did not like the suicide in ‘Work,’ but . . . I have already had letters from strangers thanking me for it, so I am not sorry it went in” (*SL* 177). Similarly, she revisited in writing what Harriet Reisen has dubbed Louisa’s #MeToo moment, a humiliating harassment by a male employer. Finally, her “political awareness” grew as a result of her participation in local social activism associations such as the Woman’s Suffrage Society of Concord, involvement with progressive publications such as the *Woman’s Journal*, and exposure to social welfare institutions such as New York’s Newsboys’ Lodging House and the Randall’s Island orphanage, among others. Considering these experiences, we can trace and contextualize Alcott’s evolving empathy and her subsequent activism.