

Cathlin Davis - The Difference Between Talent and Genius

"Is is talent or genius?"

Part One: how Louisa represented talent in her stories

Alcott refers to people having genius versus being a genius - refers mostly to the fine arts, a little bit about writing.

Little Women

Laurie and Amy - talent comes with ambition with the goal being genius - Amy wanted to be great or nothing. Laurie wanted to excel at music to make Jo love him.

While both of them realize they don't have genius, they do not give up their art. Their talent enriches lives and connect relationships with others. They counsel the children if they don't have genius.

Using talent properly can bring comfort to others (think of Nat in Little Men playing after John Brooks' death and how the heart that he put into the music comforted those around him).

Alcott - talent gives you a profession, a means of earning a living - connection between art and pragmatic life

Talent is especially important for the poor in this context.

***Rose in Bloom*- book's theme is finding one's talent**

Rose's talent is helping people (think Lizzie - in Louisa's mind, Lizzie had a talent for helping others)

Talent does not always have to be artistic - this is important because often the quiet, retiring people have great talent in their ability to comfort and help people, and they are dismissed.

Then you have Charlie who has talent but has no ambition - he works at nothing. Genius takes effort and it can be wasted - you have to be trained and you have to practice to achieve genius.

Phoebe - once you receive genius it then comes easily - she was a trained singer - the training brings one to the point of genius if they have that in them. Phoebe chooses love over career and ends up singing for smaller audiences.

Mac - wants to study love and science - Rose thinks he's a genius - description of Mac's poetry is a wonderful description by Louisa of art and genius.

Genius has simplicity and conscious power, the skill to tell nature's deepest secret, and it contains truth and virtue.

Ambition without love will never attain genius

Psyche's Art (Proverb Stories, PDF on Nook)

A group of girls are taking art lessons with the goal of becoming famous. They believe Psyche a genius but she doesn't want the title for fear of being spoiled. She recognizes genius and asks Paul to describe it (see handout). Louisa has a great appreciation for beauty and believes it is brought forth only with truth - it must be authentic. Desire is not enough. Psyche finds it difficult to balance housework with art (which Louisa dealt with too) but once she deals with the needs with her family members, she is able to pour herself into her art. THIS STORY RELATES TO LOUISA AND LIZZIE. Connection with others is essential to genius. Simple grace and truth enabled Psyche to draw out her genius. She had sculpted her younger sister May (a Lizzie-like character) who had recently died and was able to pour herself into it, much like Louisa poured herself into her dying/death scenes. Psyche achieves balance in her life between her art and home life - would May Alcott have achieved it?

Paul's road to genius is truth.

A Bright Idea

from Aunt Jo's Scrap-bag Volume 5 - look online for it

story of someone (Clara) with talent who does not wish to use it - she makes hats and knows what looks good on people. Even though she was trained in the fashionable life, she was able to make a living through her talent. In Alcott's view, talent can be enough.

Diana and Persis

Unfinished story - based on May's life - she is Persis - Persis says that genius moves on its won whereas talent needs courage and patience - it can become discouraged with too many obstacles. Trying too hard is a sign of talent whereas genius flows out of you.

Accuracy as well as passion - Genius

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Art must be a representation of life - honest emotion must be present. The above examples spell this out.

Life creates the best stories.

What about Louisa?

SHE HAD TALENT:

She knew she could make a living at art

She needs support

She comforts others

She could get discouraged

DID SHE HAVE GENIUS?

There was (and still can be) no respect for writing for children. In the post Harry Potter world, this view has changed (at least for Harry Potter). It's considered a fall-back position. The true test of a child's book being brilliant is that adults appreciate it too.

Alcott felt her children's books were "moral pap for the young." The ability to instruct and entertain is genius.

Childhood must be presented as it really is.

Other comparative authors:

(Tanglewood Tales) Hawthorne - he studied children but could not recreate their speech whereas Alcott could easily recreate childhood speech. Alcott gets into childhood mischief whereas Hawthorne just wants to instruct. (think Demi not wanting to go to bed whereas Hawthorne says that children should go to bed at a certain hour).

GENIUS - ALCOTT LOVED HER CHARACTERS, REPRESENTED SIMPLE GRACE AND TRUTH IN CHILDHOOD. SIMPLICITY AND CONSCIOUS POWER. She portrayed things from the child's point of view. ACCURACY AS WELL AS PASSION. She respects children and does not write "down" to them.

Hans Brinker - Mary Mapes Dodge - her characters are "too good." She also devotes a chapter to a straight-forward history of Holland! Whereas, Alcott would do that through a conversation. Also, her characters are good and bad, in other words: human! THIS is Alcott's genius - making children HUMAN.

Louisa was too close to her own work to see the intrinsic value of her stories, nor how long some would last. Is it possible to be a genius without being aware of it, especially when you're a genius at something that you don't want to be a genius at?

- She sees the truth of childhood, genuinely loved children. She respected the needs of children to have free time to play and just be. She recognized that childhood isn't always fun.