

# The Art of Beautification: The Graces of Ordinary Life

*The beautification of life, the highest “household art” of making people happy and places pretty, also encompasses the adornment of the soul. Because life is more than work, economics, and money, the life of the heart and spirit need constant replenishment...*

What do decorating a room, wearing tasteful clothes, expressing cheerfulness, offering friendship, enjoying Mayday, taking a vacation, and cultivating the ordinary virtues of patience, friendliness, and kindness all have in common? What do a bare, plain room, an unkempt appearance, a surly demeanor, an environment without flowers, a life of work with no leisure, and a murmuring disposition all share in common? Just as a room can be clean but drab, a person’s appearance proper but unattractive, persons moral but unpleasant, a life useful but joyless, so human life needs to be more than utilitarian, functional, practical, and economic. The art of happiness requires the gift of beautifying daily life with the gracious touches that decorate rooms, select elegant clothing, bring cheer into others’ lives, create hospitable social occasions, and cultivate the manners that create harmony and affability in human relationships. Daily life can be a Mayday of lovely flowers of great variety and splendid color, or it can be a dreary existence that is colorless and lackluster.

In Louisa May Alcott’s [Jack and Jill](#) (1880), the main events of the novel depict the rhythms of daily life for families in a New England village and the experience of young men and women in early adulthood going to school. In the midst of this ordinary business of families engaged in farming, managing households, and educating their children, Alcott depicts the joy of the normal day as men and women perform the duties of

their vocation and students come and go from school. Ordinary life, of course, extends beyond work, responsibilities, and studies. Social life, fun, sledding adventures, game parties, picnics, Christmas celebrations, vacations, and the visits of friends also fill the day with cheer and capture the goodness of simple pleasures. The novel depicts the ways that daily experience radiates an aura of the beautiful and the pleasing that heightens the joy of living.

In one of the early chapters of the novel, however, a sledding accident occurs that results in serious injuries for Jack and Jill who lie bedridden for months as their broken bones heal and they suffer the interruption of their normal lives. Deprived of the company of their friends and classmates and feeling like birds in a cage, Jack and Jill long to resume their daily life of work and play and to be busy at home and school with friends. For, as Alcott writes, "Daily duties and studies are the wholesome bread which feeds the mind better than the dyspeptic plum-cake of sensational reading, or the unsubstantial *bons-bons* of frivolous amusement." The novel shows that daily life can decline into drab monotony or be filled with vibrant liveliness. Whether daily life remains plain or grows beautiful depends on the art of living that Alcott calls "the household art," the skill to make "people happy and places pretty." Daily life requires the same beautification as homes needing interior decoration and young women desiring fashionable clothing.

Once Jack and Jill find themselves confined to their beds and feel like "prisoners," daily life becomes endless boredom and dreary idleness. Jill complains that a bare room without adornment makes each day even more oppressive: "It was very neat, but so plain that there was not even a picture on the walls, nor an ornament upon the mantel, except the necessary clock, lamp, and match-box. The paper was ugly..." However, once her mother adds some beautiful touches to the room and friends bring gifts that brighten and cheer the patient's ward, daily

life once again assumes some semblance of the normal: "But Jill did not mind her loneliness now, and sang like a happy canary, while she threaded these sparkling beads, or hung the gay horns to dry, ready for their cargo of sweets." Another girl in the story, Merry Grant, also "longing to make plain things nice and comfortable," complains to her mother that their home and her bedroom lack elegance, lamenting that "It is neat, but so bare and ugly I hate to be there. I do so love something pretty to look at!" The ordinary day and the plain room need embellishment to create a human world that adds play to work and beauty to usefulness so that the household art of beautification complements the housewifery lessons of cleaning, cooking, and sewing.

This image of the plain room transformed into a beautiful place illustrates what Alcott calls the "household art" that fills daily life with a splendor and grace that captures the joy of living. Complimenting Merry for her practice of this art, Ralph explains that the household lamp in her home shines like a beacon that cheers him when he sees it in the dark. The homemaking skills Merry reads about in books do not compare to her special gift: "You've got a better sort of household art, I think, for you make people happy and places pretty, without fussing over it," Ralph remarks. Daily life can assume the nature of a dull, bare room or an appealing, elevating environment. Once Jack and Jill's friends visit the patients in their confined spaces, the decorations make their rooms human habitations that touch Jack and Jill with the goodness of the normal: "for school gossip crept in, games could not be prevented, and Christmas secrets were concocted in these rooms till they were regular conspirators' dens, when they were not little Bedlams." Merry's beautifying instinct also transforms the atmosphere of her home, earning her father's praise: "Why, she touches up the old place better than a dozen flower-pots in full blow." Daily life, then, although not spectacular or glamorous, possesses its quiet contentment, "touch of elegance," and special charm that transforms it from the

perfunctory performance of duty to the household art of uplifting human spirits so that human lives do not become “as dismal as a tomb” or “prim, chilly parlors with little beauty and no comfort.”

This household art consists of not only the arrangement of flowers, curtains, and furniture but also the ordinary virtues of daily life that change ugly rooms and chilly parlors into beautiful places and cheerful atmospheres. In the novel, the virtues of kindness, affability, obedience, humility, and patience always decorate domestic life. For example, in *Jack and Jill* patience provides a beacon of light that dispels gloom and a song in the heart that sweetens life. Because Jack’s broken leg and Jill’s broken back require several months to heal, irritability, sullenness, and complaints serve no purpose. The mothers who nurse their patients also exemplify this virtue that transforms misfortunes. In the chapter “Saint Lucy,” Mrs. Minot, the mother of Jack, tells the story of a wild girl found injured in an accident. After two princes carry her home to the queen, Lucy, lying in bed from her fall, exhausts everyone’s patience: “she scolded and cried, and could not be resigned, because she was a prisoner” and resembled a bird in a cage beating her wings. While recovering, she sings “Sweet Patience, Come” to pass the time only to discover that she has summoned the angel of Patience who hears the song and obeys the call. Having invoked the power of Patience, the wild bird stops beating its wings in the cage and continues its singing, soon producing music for everyone in the court—a melody that endears her to the queen, enlivens the spirits of her mother, and earns her the title of nightingale. Patience and cheerfulness bring a music to daily life that dispels the heaviness of work and duty without relief.

Daily life always demands this virtue that combats grouchiness and short temper. The uncomplaining patience of Mrs. Pecq and Mrs. Minot in caring for their invalid children impresses Jack

and Jill who also learn the lesson about the bird in the cage and resign themselves to their lot instead of constantly protesting, indulging in self-pity, or showing fits of temper or moodiness. Because "Patience made Lucy sweet and cheerful, she began to have a curious power over those about her, and to work little miracles herself, though she did not know it." As Mrs. Minot comments at the end of her story about Lucy, "Saints are not born—they are made after many trials and tribulations." After Mrs. Minot finishes the story, Jill receives the compliment that she resembles Saint Lucy by her cheerfulness and pleasantness, exerting an influence like the music of the bird that transforms the atmosphere and brings "joy and comfort to all who know her." Without the "household arts" of patience and cheerfulness the duties and trials of domestic life appear as oppressive burdens that impose the weight of the world and rob life of its simple pleasures and innocent delight. As Jill remarks, "I can wait. Months are not years."

In the novel, young women not only desire to arrange their homes with beautiful elegant touches that bring brightness into dark rooms but also like to dress in becoming ways that add the grace of loveliness to their daily life. Merry arranged the dining nook in her home with beautiful flowers that "changed the whole room like magic" and made it a "bower" of delight—a "pleasant room, full of spring sunshine, fresh air, and exquisite order." She also took the same pains in making herself attractive, always dressing with exquisite taste and style, "for she took pleasure in her own little charms, and felt a sense of comfort in knowing that she could always have one pretty thing to look at if she kept her own face serene and sweet." Molly too wants to present a more lovely appearance, complaining to her widowed father that Miss Bat, the housekeeper, "dresses me alike an old woman" and "has no more taste than a—caterpillar." Admiring Merry who "knows what is pretty and becoming," Molly is thrilled at the thought of "How nice it will seem to have a plenty of new, neat

dresses all at once, and be like other girls!" Thus nature requires art for its perfection, for without the household art, the womanly touch, and good taste, the plain and homely reduce life to the merely utilitarian.

Just as tasteful dress beautifies a woman's nature and flowers adorn a home, the feminine sensibility and presence also embellish and enhance civilized life. In one of the friendly arguments of the boys at one of their Debating Club's meetings, they discuss the question of women at college. When one boy proposes, "They are well enough at home, and I like them at parties, but for real fun I wouldn't give a cent for them," Ed responds that the quality of daily life would lack a refining influence: "But I think that a school would be awfully dry and dismal without—ahem!—any young ladies to make it nice." Flowers adorn homes, clothes dignify women, and women refine human life. As Ed states to his fellow debaters, "I tell you we can't do without girls, and I'm not ashamed to say that I think the more we see of them . . . the better men we shall be by and by." In short, Alcott's novel explains the nature of civilization as the art of refining, adorning, enriching, and humanizing the business of daily living so that the work ethic of duty and discipline do not stifle the human need for beauty, play, and mirth. Life without the aesthetic dimension reduces existence to mere survival.

This beautification of life, the highest "household art" of making people happy and places pretty, also encompasses the adornment of the soul. Alcott comments that just as neatness and simplicity are "the best ornaments" with regard to attractive appearance, "good habits are better than fine clothes, and the most elegant manners are the kindest." One character in the novel, Ed, especially illustrates the beauty of the kind heart. Complimented for his example of "quiet well-doing" and always looking "so happy and contented," Ed earns the praise of all his classmates. Noticing "the unusually fresh and sunny expression of Ed's face," Jack

acknowledges that Ed's refreshing, cheerful presence does not result from mere grooming and washing but radiates from a pure heart: "it seems to come from the inside, somehow, as if he was always jolly and clean and good in his mind, you know." Manners and morals that adorn the soul become a light that resembles the lamp that shines in Merry's home as a beacon to Ralph in the darkness.

Modest and unassuming, Ed never seeks recognition and seems unconscious of the fact that "the sunshine he saw in other faces was only the reflection from his own." Complimentary, amiable, and pleasing to all, Ed epitomizes the chivalrous gentleman who appreciates the feminine sensibility that refines and civilizes daily life, arguing "I pity any boy who has no sisters" and "Home wouldn't be worth having without them to look after a fellow." Dying suddenly from typhoid, Ed's "shining face and pleasant manners" touched the lives of all who knew him during his seventeen years. At a loss to explain the secret of his simple charm, those who mourn conclude "it was not what he did but what he was that made him so beloved." Ed's goodness in the form of kindness, affability, dutifulness, and patience beautified lives and inspired the pastor's eulogy of the boy who attracted everyone "by the shining face, the pleasant manners." Praised for his charity to all, Ed is remembered for all the virtues St. Paul described in I Corinthians 13 as the pastor remembers him as "dutiful and loving; ready to help; patient to bear and forbear... possessing the childlike piety that can trust and believe, wait and hope. Good and happy—the two things we all long for and so few of us truly are."

In all these ways the household art that Merry excelled in practicing—making others happy and places pretty—defines also the role of the family, the school, religion, and culture as elevating and ennobling. Because life is more than work, economics, and money, the life of the heart and spirit need constant replenishment. Because life requires more than bare

rooms and plain clothing, the ways to beautify life need multiplication. Civilization requires women who value the old-fashioned art of homemaking to cultivate the heartwarming hospitality and lighthearted friendliness of cheerful homes. Civilization requires education that transcends utilitarian outcomes and leads minds to a contemplation of the beauty of goodness ("Taste and see the sweetness of the Lord"), of the beauty of creation ("Glory be to God for dappled things"), and of the beauty of God ("The heavens declare the glory of God and the heavens show his handiwork"). Civilization demands religion that teaches that man does not live by bread alone, that man should seek the things that are above—in St. Paul's words, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious"—that all human life is sacred, and that God came to teach man not merely to live but to live abundantly—with cheerfulness, with friendship, with kindness, with courtesy, and with beauty—the beauty of the body, mind, heart, and soul.

This theme of life's beautification reaches its culmination in the chapter "May Baskets" that celebrates the custom of preparing baskets of the first spring flowers and leaving them by the doors of neighbors and friends, gifts accompanied by notes of affection or poems: "a bit of spring left at their doors by the May elves who haunted the town that night." Ralph hangs a basket for his grandmother, Ed encourages everyone to bring baskets to families not expecting any flowers because "it would please and surprise them so," and Merry decides to give a basket to Ralph because "I'd love to surprise him with one all to himself. He's always so good to us" and includes a kind note of appreciation: "To one who teaches me/ The sweetness and the beauty/ Of doing faithfully/ And cheerfully my duty." When Merry returns home to find all the baskets left by her door, she finds in one of them a bas-relief of a lily in plaster from Ralph. She is touched by a gift she will always cherish because it fills her room and her life with a token of life's beautiful moments: "How lovely! And this one



will never fade, but always be a pleasure hanging there. Now I really have something beautiful all my own." The tradition of May baskets left at the doors of homes resembles the mysterious favors of the fairies performing their magic in the mystery of the night as they adorn the world with dewdrops that gild the earth.

In small ways and great ways, the art of living is the household art of Merry that adorns a room with flowers, the custom of May baskets filled with flowers appearing on the doorsteps, the touches of elegance and graciousness befitting ladies and gentlemen, and "the sweetness and beauty" of performing daily duties with cheerfulness. However, of all these exquisite touches, the works of charity that transform daily life radiate an even greater beauty that adorns life and illumines the world. When Jill's friends in The Dramatic Club plan a performance of *Sleeping Beauty*, the girls all compete for the part of the princess and decide to draw lots because they all wish to wear the beautiful clothing: "We all want to wear the nice things." As the girls argue and show petulance and envy, Molly notices how a play about a beautiful princess has been reduced to a display of ugly manners: "I think you are a set of cross, selfish girls to back out and keep your nice things because you can't *all* have the best part." When Merry suggests that Jill deserves to be the princess because "it is the only thing poor Jill *can* be, and it would make her so happy," she dispels the vanity of the other girls as everyone agrees to the choice. This thoughtful act of kindness beautifies Jill's drab life as an invalid: "Oh, you dear, kind things, to think of me and give me all your best clothes! I shall never forget it, and I'll do anything for you."

Without this charity, all the other elegant touches—while embellishing the quality of daily life—never fully transfigure it. Only when decorating rooms, wearing lovely clothing, and reflecting a cheerful heart lead to the beautifying of the soul does the world become lit with a beacon that offers the

radiant light that Merry's lamp symbolized for Ralph when he said, "What a good light that gives! I can see it as I go home every night, and it burns up here like a beacon. I always look for it, and it hardly ever fails to be burning. Sort of cheers up the way, you know, when I'm tired or low in my mind." The soul needs the same beautification that rooms of a house and the appearance of the body require. When the girls who vie for the role of Sleeping Beauty put Jill's happiness above their own vanity, the girls appear in their most beautiful form: "So the fairy play woke the sleeping beauty that lies in all of us, and makes us lovely when we rouse it with a kiss of unselfish good-will, for, though the girls did not know it then, they had adorned themselves with pearls more precious than the waxen ones they decked their Princess in."

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