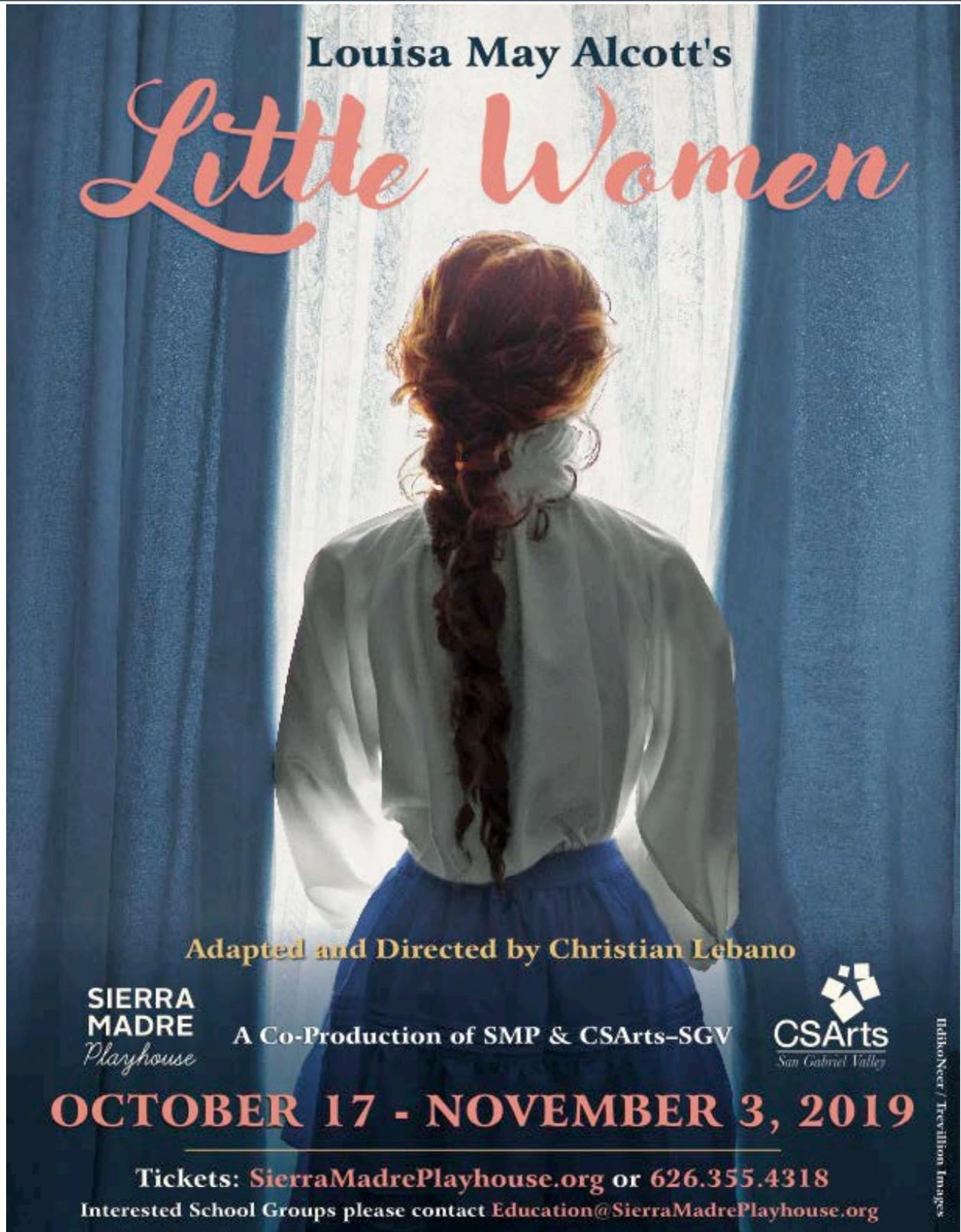


# STUDY GUIDE



Louisa May Alcott's  
*Little Women*

Adapted and Directed by Christian Lebano

SIERRA MADRE Playhouse  
A Co-Production of SMP & CSArts-SGV  
CSArts San Gabriel Valley

**OCTOBER 17 - NOVEMBER 3, 2019**

Tickets: [SierraMadrePlayhouse.org](http://SierraMadrePlayhouse.org) or 626.355.4318  
Interested School Groups please contact [Education@SierraMadrePlayhouse.org](mailto:Education@SierraMadrePlayhouse.org)

Edith Neer / Trevillion Images

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### What's this play about?

- Plot, Characters, and Themes..... 3

### Is this a true story?

- About the Author..... 5
- Field Trip: Boston and Concord..... 6

### What's the big deal about the book?

- A Gamechanger..... 8
- An Original Influencer..... 8
- Not Just for Little Girls..... 8

### Is this play different from the book?

- The Art of Adaptation..... 9
- An Interview with the Adaptor..... 9

### What should I know about the time period?

- The Civil War..... 10
- The Victorian Era..... 11
- Everyday Life..... 11
- Christmas..... 11
- Morality, Manners, and Etiquette..... 12

### What were they thinking?

- Transcendentalism..... 12
- Abolitionism..... 12
- Feminism..... 13

### Suggestions for Student Activities..... 14

### Where can I learn more? ..... 15

### Bibliography..... 17

### Appendix: Vocabulary List..... 18

## WHAT'S THIS PLAY ABOUT?

### PLOT AND CHARACTERS

The play opens one week before Christmas in 1863, in the home of the March family in Concord, Massachusetts, near Boston. The family consists of four girls (Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy) who range in age from twelve to sixteen. They have a mother, whom they call “Marmee,” a housekeeper (Hannah), and a father, who is away serving as a chaplain in the Civil War. Their wealthy and cantankerous Aunt March lives nearby. Their neighbor, Theodore Laurence (Laurie) and his tutor, John Brooke, are friends of the family. The action follows the course of one year in the characters’ lives; the play is broken into four scenes.

#### *Scene 1, December*

The girls lament they will have no presents for Christmas and that their father will not be home. Meg and Jo receive an invitation to a Christmas dance. They all make plans to buy gifts for Marmee and then rehearse a play Jo has written. Marmee returns with a letter from their father. Laurie and Brooke come to ask if they might watch the rehearsal, but the girls refuse. Brooke has translated a song for Meg. Then the set collapses and the girls leave off rehearsing. Brooke and Laurie leave. Mrs. March reads the girls part of a letter she’s received from their father and tells the girls about a man she met who’d given four sons to the war. The family leaves to take their tea to a poor local family.

#### *Scene 2, May*

A few months have passed. Beth receives a piano from Mr. Laurence, and despite her shyness, goes next door to thank him. Meg and Jo discuss plans to go to the theater the next day. Amy asks if she might join them, but Jo rebuffs her. In retaliation, Amy throws Jo’s manuscript into the fire. In a fit of temper, Jo won’t allow Amy to ice skate with her and Laurie. Amy chases after them.

Meg reveals to Marmee that she is embarrassed by how she behaved at the Christmas dance, and that the girls there gossiped about her and Laurie. Marmee gives her advice. Jo and Laurie return with Amy, who fell through the ice at the pond. Marmee and Jo talk about Jo’s temper, and then the girls make up. A telegram arrives from the hospital in Washington D.C., where Mr. March has fallen ill. The family determines that Marmee must go to him. Aunt March gives Marmee money for the trip. Not knowing this, Jo sells her hair.

#### *Scene 3, July*

Marmee is still away visiting Mr. March. Meg has some time off and the girls decide to have a whole day with no housework. They give Hannah the day off. A weekly paper arrives, and in it, a story Jo has written. Jo and Meg argue a bit over Mr. Brooke’s interest in Meg. Amy works on a plaster cast of her own foot. Beth goes to care for the Hummel family, whose baby is ill. Laurie comes by to see if he might introduce an English girl that is visiting. He and Jo discuss their dreams for their future artistic successes. Aunt March arrives to ask after Mr. March’s illness. Laurie leaves and then returns with the English girl, Kate. The girls attempt to put tea together for their guests, and it is a disaster. The guests leave. Beth returns, very ill, from the Hummels and says the baby has died of scarlet fever. Hannah tends to Beth; it is decided that Amy should go stay with Aunt March until Beth has recovered.

Several days pass. Beth is not doing well, and the doctor has told Jo to send for her mother. Jo collapses in tears and Laurie consoles her. Soon after, Marmee returns and Beth’s fever breaks.

#### *Scene 4, December*

Amy brings in gifts that Laurie has left in the March's mailbox. Hannah tells a story of Mr. Laurence's kindness to a poor woman. Laurie arrives and asks if anyone will go for a sleigh ride. He tells Jo that Brooke has a glove belonging to Meg that he carries in his pocket. Jo assumes Brooke means to propose to Meg and is upset. She discusses it with Marmee, who reveals that she knows of Brooke's plans and that she and Mr. March approve. Brooke arrives and tries to talk to Meg, who deflects his proposal. Then Aunt March arrives and announces her disapproval. In standing up for Brooke, Meg reveals that she does in fact love him, and she accepts his proposal. Beth appears. She has recovered but is still weak. Laurie arrives and shows her that he has built her a "snow maiden" outside. They all sing her a song. The girls learn that their father is returning as the lights go down.

#### THEMES

##### *Family and Growing Up*

*Little Women* is very much about how each of us finds our way in the world. It is a portrait of a loving family, but one which is not currently intact and is also beginning to change. The girls are at the awkward peak of adolescence, where children begin to pull away from their parents and forge their own identities. Each in her own way is searching for the balance in being independent while still depending on the love and support found at home.

To some extent, the Marches create an extended family, both in how close they are to Hannah and in the way that they "adopt" orphaned Laurie. They value the concept of family so highly that they don't want anyone to be without it.

*JO: "Laurie's a nice boy, and I like him... We'll all be good to him, because he hasn't got any mother..."*

*MARMEE: "I hope Meg will remember that children should be children as long as they can."*

*MARMEE: "I know, by experience, how much genuine happiness can be had in a plain little house."*

##### *Gender Norms and Identity*

The March family is very different from most nineteenth-century families: Mr. March is largely absent and the family is led by Marmee, who is a gentle guide rather than an authoritarian matriarch. In a time when most girls were expected only to learn domestic skills and then marry, the March girls are encouraged to pursue education and their artistic interests, and to focus on the substance of their characters and not their outward appearance. By necessity, they go out and find work.

Each of the girls struggles with how to be a "little woman." Meg, as the oldest, is the most domestic. Jo chafes against the constrictions on her behavior and attire that come with being a girl. Amy is most focused on her own appearance. Beth does not want to grow up. She clings to childish things (like her dolls).

Laurie, on the other hand, is a sensitive and artistic boy. He wants to pursue a career as a musician, but his grandfather expects him to go to college and become a businessman.

*JO: "It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit..."*

*MARMEE: "I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected; to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow as God sees fit to send."*

*MARMEE: "I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace."*

### *Sacrifice and Duty*

In part because of the time that they lived, and also because of their specific Christian and Transcendental ideals, the Marches each work hard at improving their character. Marmee encourages them to work on their most troubling flaw: Meg to be less vain, Jo to manage her anger, and Amy to be less selfish. (Beth doesn't seem to have a flaw they feel needs fixing.)

In several instances, the girls make selfless sacrifices. The family as a whole is patient and supportive in sacrificing their breadwinner, Mr. March to the war effort.

When the girls grow lazy in the summer, they see what happens when they leave off doing chores and host their disastrous tea.

*MR. MARCH (in his letter): "I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully... and conquer themselves so beautifully, that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women."*

*MARMEE: "An old man came in. He sat down near me, and I began to talk with him. "Have you sons in the army?" I asked. "Yes, ma'am. I had four, but two were killed, one is a prisoner and I'm going to the other, who is very sick in hospital," he answered quietly. "You have done a great deal for your country, sir," I said. "Not a mite more than I ought, ma'am." He spoke so cheerfully, looked so sincere, and seemed so glad to give his all, that I was ashamed of myself. I'd given one man, and thought it too much, while he gave four."*

## IS THIS A TRUE STORY?

While it is based on the author's childhood experiences with her family, she fictionalized the story to appeal to an audience of young people. She wrote the first half of the novel when she was 35 and set it during the Civil War, which had ended only three years prior.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louisa May Alcott was born in 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Bronson Alcott and Abigail May Alcott (whom the family called "Abba"). She had an older sister, Anna, and later, two younger sisters, Elizabeth and Abigail (later called "May"). They soon moved to Boston, where Bronson founded the Temple School, based on his progressive educational ideals.

Louisa's life was marked indelibly by the influence of her father, who believed in the innate genius of every child and rejected traditional teaching practices of rote memorization and drills. His practices were alternately praised and ridiculed, and his Temple School closed after about seven years. He then turned his attention to philosophy and religion. Lacking practical skills, suffering from bouts of mental instability, and refusing to accept money for any work besides teaching or woodchopping, Bronson found it hard to make a living.

Life for the Alcotts was difficult and sometimes troubled. The family remained mostly in the Boston area, but moved often – over thirty times in Louisa's first twenty-five years – as they sought work and sometimes outran their creditors. Bronson was regularly absent, and from time to time, one or more of the girls would be sent off to live with family or friends. In their own home, they sometimes took in boarders to help defray costs. The girls were always encouraged in their academic and artistic pursuits, but were often hungry and cold. Bronson's very strict beliefs called for the family to be vegan, before that was a term anyone knew and in a climate that did not provide much in the way of fresh produce. Often, they consumed only bread and water. They wore only linen clothes, even during the harsh New England winters, because to wear wool would be to steal warmth from the sheep and to wear cotton would be to support the slave trade. To support themselves, Louisa and her sisters worked as teachers and governesses; Anna even worked for a time in a mental hospital. To a large extent, Louisa dedicated herself to writing because she needed to make money.

Prior to writing *Little Women*, Louisa had written serialized sensation stories such as "The Rival Painters" and "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," because they allowed her to earn money quickly. An early book, called *Flower Fables*, was a collection of fairy tales. She found her voice, though, when she wrote *Hospital Sketches*, based on her time as a nurse in a Union hospital. After its success, she was asked by a publisher to write a book for girls, an offer she accepted but was not pleased about, writing later in her journal, "Never liked girls, or knew many, except my sisters." She agreed to write the book mainly because the publisher promised to also take on a new book her father had written. A year later, she retreated to her room at Orchard House in Concord and wrote the manuscript in less than two months.

In writing *Little Women*, Louisa created an idealized version of her family life, one that was both appropriate for a children's book and also acceptable to the Alcotts. Though set at Orchard House, the book is based on the family's time at Hillside, their home in Concord from the time Louisa was twelve until she was fifteen. Louisa enjoyed this relatively stable time in their lives, which followed six months on a failed commune her father had called Fruitlands. At Hillside, she had her own room and plenty of space to run. Her tutors were the famous authors who also lived in Concord.

**FIELD TRIP:**

Significant sites in Boston and Concord, Massachusetts.



The Wayside, Minuteman National Park, Concord  
Louisa May Alcott spent part of her childhood in this house, which her family called “Hillside.” Much of *Little Women* is based on her experiences here. During the winter of 1846-1847, the Alcotts sheltered two fugitive slaves here. The family sold the home to writer Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1852, who added the left wing.



20 Pinckney Street, Beacon Hill  
The Alcotts moved in and out of Boston and Concord throughout their lives. Louisa lived in rented rooms in this Boston home around the age of 20. She and her sister Anna opened a school in the parlor.



Orchard House, Concord  
Located next door to The Wayside, Orchard House is where Louisa wrote *Little Women* at the age of 35. The surrounding property contained a forty-tree apple orchard, and Louisa and her sister May called the house “Apple Slump” after a popular dessert at the time, because the floors sloped. Louisa’s financial success allowed the family to complete several rounds of renovations while they owned it. Elizabeth never lived there, as she died before the family purchased the home, but Mrs. Alcott kept her piano in the dining room.



10 Louisburg Square, Beacon Hill, Boston

After Bronson suffered a stroke in 1882, Louisa bought this home for her family in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in the city. Bronson and Louisa lived here at the time of their deaths, two days apart, in 1888. The home has 5 bedrooms and four baths, and was last sold in 1990 for more than three million dollars.



Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, Mass

On a hill known as “Authors Ridge” lie the graves of Concord’s most famous intellectuals and their families: Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Visitors to their graves often leave a token to show their respect, as in the pens and pencils on Louisa’s marker.



## WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT THE BOOK?

### A GAMECHANGER

Before *Little Women*, children's literature was written mainly to instruct boys and girls in godliness and proper behavior. Characters were overly pious and overly dramatic, and their conversations were stilted. While to us, Alcott's language might sound formal and old-fashioned, at the time it was considered simple and natural. Her characters had their own personalities, dreams, and flaws. Instead of showing girls "letting go of childhood" to become obedient wives and self-sacrificing mothers, she showed four girls (and a boy) embracing their strengths and talents to become more fully themselves. Quite simply, no one had ever seen anything like this book before, and it captured the attention of all ages and social classes. Louisa was an instant celebrity.

The book was, at first, a small volume that ended where our production ends. It sold so many copies so quickly (2,000 in its first few days, and then tens of thousands of books) that Louisa was almost immediately tasked with writing the second part, in which the girls grow up and marry. Eventually, the books were combined and sold as one volume.

*Little Women* has since been translated into fifty languages and has never gone out of print in the 150 years since its publication in 1868.

### AN ORIGINAL INFLUENCER

Louisa May Alcott's "book for girls" has from the very beginning inspired adaptations and copycats. The March girls have been played by famous actresses in four movie versions, with another to be released this year. There have been more than ten television versions, a Broadway musical, an opera, even a graphic novel with modern characters. More than fifty books have retold the story or created a sequel or prequel.

The character of Jo has given inspiration to generations of women writers, including Barbara Kingsolver, Nora Ephron, J.K. Rowling, and Margaret Atwood, whose ambitions were given voice when they recognized themselves in her. Jo's influence can be seen in the many strong, bookish heroines that followed, not least of which is Hermione Granger of Hogwart's fame. Before Hermione though, there was *Anne of Greene Gables*, Laura Ingalls of *Little House on the Prairie*, and Meg Murry of *A Wrinkle in Time*. More recently, critics have compared Rory Gilmore to Jo March.

The March sisters also seem to have paved the way for books, movies, and television shows about four women or girls, each with their own individual personality. Often, one is a writer. Consider *The Babysitters Club*, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *Sex and the City*, and *Girls*.

### NOT JUST FOR LITTLE GIRLS

The book was a classroom staple for many years, but is not taught much anymore. This seems to be due to the perception that it is, as Louisa said, "a book for girls."

When it was first published, the book was popular with both boys and girls, even making a list called "the 20 best books for boys." Theodore Roosevelt, our 26<sup>th</sup> president and certified "manly-man" admitted that

he “worshipped” the book. Other men though, have said that they read it only at home, or with the title covered, to avoid being teased. Beginning in the 1950’s, the book started to fall out of favor with teachers.

This assumption that there is nothing to be learned by boys in reading about girls has sparked much discussion among writers, feminists, and psychologists. In her book *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families*, Jane Roland Martin says, “How can boys respect girls if they are never encouraged to see the world as girls do?”

## **IS THIS PLAY DIFFERENT FROM THE BOOK?**

### THE ART OF ADAPTATION

This is a new adaptation by Sierra Madre Playhouse Artistic Director, Christian Lebano, drawn directly from the 1868 novel. The story has been rewritten to meet the needs and requirements of a theatrical presentation.

In adapting from one medium to another, the playwright first decides which parts of the plot and which characters are most important to the story he wants to tell. He must decide which action will take place on stage and what will merely be described. He may change or restrict the setting based on the size of the stage on which the play is to be presented. He may emphasize certain dialogue he believes will resonate with a modern audience - or create new material.

### AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ADAPTOR: CHRISTIAN LEBANO

*What drew you to the story of Little Women?*

“When I was offered the opportunity to work with the students at the California School of the Arts - SGV, I gave some thought to a project that would satisfy both SMP's mission to illuminate the American experience through plays by American authors and a project that would make sense to work on with a cast of young actors. Knowing that there are fewer roles for young women, I was determined to find a story that focused on them. *Little Women* instantly came to mind. I liked it because it would offer the young actors so much to work on. The story takes place during the Civil War, when things were very different for young women. I knew these young actors would have to work on language, compoirtment (they'd have to handle those dresses!), and understanding the time period, but they would also be playing some of the most iconic young women in literature. These were unusual young women for their time - young women who were encouraged to pursue their education and creativity, who were encouraged to think for themselves, and who find solace and satisfaction in their relationships with each other. It's a great piece of American literature and I'm so glad that we will be introducing it to young people who may not be familiar with it.”

*What kind of research did you do before writing?*

“Well, I went back to the novel, obviously. I read it and reread it. Carrying it around with me, I was often stopped by women who would tell me it was their favorite book. I also read several other theatrical adaptations of the book and watched some of the film versions just to see what other adapters thought was

important. I read about the Alcotts. I read some critical analyses of the book. I researched slang and idioms used in that period. I then went to town on the novel, marking it up and sticking post-its on every page which had a line I liked or an episode I wanted to include. I also spoke to several people - all women - who had told me that they loved this book to find out what stood out for them when they thought of the story.”

*What challenges did you face in adapting the novel?*

“The novel spans many years in the lives of the Marches, there are many characters and many episodes. I knew that I was writing a particular adaptation for a particular cast - 3 adult women, 5 younger women, and 2 younger men and that meant that there were many people and things I would have to leave out or reassign to other characters. Also, I decided to keep it all to one setting - the March's parlor. That meant I would have to bring inside some of the outdoor moments if I wanted to include them.”

*What was most important to you in deciding what should stay and how to arrange it?*

“I knew that the story I wanted to share was focused on the girls. Their love for each other and their parents. Their growth as young women guided by maybe the most perfect mother in literature: Marmee. I also knew that I wanted to capture the great friendship that Jo and Laurie have and the budding romance between Meg and John Brooke. Having decided what I thought were the most important, most iconic scenes, moments, and lines in the book, it was a matter of getting them all into one play while still creating a dramatic arc and a satisfying story. It was important to me that I include as much of the dialogue that Louisa May Alcott wrote for these characters and that I not invent anything that doesn't happen in the book. Now, I had to take some liberties with things - I have people saying lines that others say in the book, I've had to dramatize scenes in the play that are only referred to in the book, I've brought characters into scenes that they are not in in the book, *but* I always based it on the events in the book and used as many lines from the book as I could.”

## **WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT THE TIME PERIOD?**

### **THE CIVIL WAR**

Mr. March is serving as a chaplain to Union troops in the North. The war has reached its midpoint; with the bloody battle at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania only a few months past.

At the time, there were only about thirty-one million people living in the U.S., very close to the current population of California. Of those thirty-one million, twenty-two million of them lived in the industrialized North. The North contained most of the nation's coal mines, canals, and railroads, and controlled most of the nation's bank deposits and gold reserves. The population was mostly educated and literate.

Meanwhile, the South was home to only about nine-million people, three million of whom were slaves. The economy depended mostly on the production of cotton, which made the white landowners wealthy. Public schools and universities were far less prevalent in the South, and so literacy rates were significantly lower than in the North.

The people of Massachusetts were particularly supportive of the North's cause, eventually sending more than two million men to fight and contributing much in the way of blankets, uniforms and supplies. Of the men who joined the effort, nearly six hundred thousand were killed, wounded, missing or captured.

With so much focus on supporting the war, household items became more expensive and more difficult to get. Inflation meant that wages earned weren't worth as much. And with many families' breadwinners away at war, daily life became more difficult.

## THE VICTORIAN ERA

Life on both sides of the Atlantic changed a lot during the reign of Queen Victoria in England, from 1837 to 1901. During this time, the telegraph, telephone, and modern photography were invented. The Industrial Revolution moved people from rural areas to cities, where jobs in factories were plentiful and the American economy soon changed from agrarian to capitalistic. The Potato Famine in Ireland created nearly one million refugees, many of whom emigrated to America. The invention of the steam engine and the ensuing railroad boom allowed for the transportation of goods and people, and the push began for American westward expansion, wiping out Native American tribes as it grew. After the Civil War, industrialization led to the Labor Movement and the rise of the Gilded Age millionaire.

## DAILY LIFE

In a town like Concord, twenty miles from big-city Boston, streets and sidewalks would probably not have been paved, except possibly in the city center. There would have been churches and schools, clothing shops and a general store, doctors' and lawyers' offices, inns and taverns, a theater, a train station, a telegraph office, a pharmacy, and some sort of "town green" or market square. There was, of course, a cemetery. People traveled on foot, on horseback, or in a carriage. Heavy snow in the winter required a sleigh.

Running water and municipal water systems in general were a fairly new development, so most families relied on well water. Chamber pots and outhouses were used instead of modern toilets; houses were not built with bathrooms. People generally bathed once a week, in a wood or tin tub in front of a fireplace or kitchen stove.

## CHRISTMAS

Christmas was not an official holiday in Massachusetts until 1856, when Washington's birthday and the Fourth of July were also adopted. It became a federal holiday in 1870, after the Civil War.

Because of Massachusetts' Puritan roots, the holiday had actually been banned during the seventeenth century. Even when this ban was lifted, businesses and schools were expected to remain open and the churches closed. Then, in the 1800's, people began creating more secular songs and poetry about sleigh rides and visits from Santa that popularized the holiday as a time to give gifts and celebrate with food and drink. When the first Christmas of the Civil War arrived, families and sweethearts felt their separation even more, and Christmas was embraced as a sort of fairy tale version of home. The decision to celebrate more modestly was both a practical necessity and a declaration of patriotism, and magazines and newspapers promoted this idea, with images of families gathered together and of Santa delivering treats to

soldiers on the front. Louisa May Alcott's popular novel included beautiful scenes of family Christmases that we continue to idealize.

## MORALITY, MANNERS AND ETIQUETTE

Social life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was controlled by what we now call the "Victorian Sensibility." This was a set of values and expectations governing behavior that many today regard as prudish. Modest attire was to be worn at all times. Men and women could not be alone together without damaging their reputations. The role of the wife and mother was glorified as a woman's ultimate achievement, and men were expected to engage in business and politics. Every social interaction followed very specific rules. For women especially, following these rules and being considered "a lady" was very important because social standing determined their prospects for marriage and their choice of a husband determined their financial stability for the rest of their lives. Good manners equaled good company and a gentleman would not mix with a woman of low company and vulgar manners.

## WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?

### TRANSCENDENTALISM

Bronson Alcott was part of a group of writers, philosophers and activists in Concord from about 1830-1885 known as the Transcendental Club. The group included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller and was a response to and a rejection of the strict Unitarian Church of the Puritans.

The Transcendentalists believed in living simply without care for material possessions. God could be reached through personal intuition and a connection with nature. They were optimistic about the basic goodness of all people and believed that life was meant to be a journey toward being the best person they could: compassionate, patient, selfless, and self-reliant. They valued both education and the arts.

The influence of this philosophy is clear in the characters of *Little Women*. The girls strive to be less selfish, less lazy, and to control their tempers, and they care for each other and their neighbors.

### ABOLITIONISM

Beginning around 1830, there was a social and political push to end the slave trade and immediately free all enslaved people in the United States. It was a controversial movement with much support in revitalized Northern churches. Despite this support, it was a dangerous cause to champion, as abolitionists were sometimes beaten, imprisoned, or tarred and feathered. Tensions grew over several decades and eventually led to the secession of the southern states and the beginning of the Civil War in 1861.

Bronson Alcott felt strongly about the immorality of slavery, and worked with prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. During the winter of 1846-1847, Hillside house served as a safe house on the Underground Railroad, with the Alcotts hiding two fugitive slaves until temperatures warmed enough for

them to continue their journey to freedom in Canada. In 1839, Bronson's Temple School in Boston was closed when every student withdrew because he admitted an African American student.

## FEMINISM

Feminism, the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities, gained steam in the mid-1800's, in tandem with the call for abolition. Many women leaders of that movement pointed out the irony of demanding rights for slaves that they themselves had not been granted. At the time, women were denied opportunities for education, were not legally entitled to own property, and could not vote. The first Women's Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848.

The feminist writer Margaret Fuller was a part of Mr. Alcott's transcendentalist circles and was employed as a teacher at his Temple School. While Mr. and Mrs. Alcott shared fairly progressive ideas about educating girls and encouraging them to pursue their artistic talents, Mrs. Alcott was still generally excluded from Bronson's intellectual pursuits, and left to manage the business of the home, including earning the money to pay for it. Though idealistic and academically gifted in her own right, Abigail did not enjoy a marriage of equals as she had hoped, and in her disappointment, sought to raise her daughters to be more independent and self-sufficient.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDENT ACTIVITIES

### LANGUAGE ARTS

Write a third-person narrative about an event in your childhood.

Challenge: Change the time period in which it is set.

Choose a scene from *Little Women* and write your own adaptation. Format it like a play script.

Create a modern soundtrack for the novel. Choose 8-10 important scenes in the book and find a popular song you feel fits each one. Write out one verse or the chorus, and explain why you feel the song fits the scene.

Create Twitter handles for the March girls. Write tweets from each of their points of view describing events in the book.

Create Instagram posts that show the definition of vocabulary words (list in appendix) OR make a list of the slang Jo uses throughout the novel and write definitions for each word or phrase a la "urban dictionary."

Watch one of the movie versions of *Little Women*. Write a review describing how well the film adapts and depicts the novel's plot, setting, characters, etc.

Read and "translate" paragraph seven of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance." Write about whether you could or would embrace his ideas about life.

## HISTORY

Imagine you are a soldier in the Civil War. Write a letter home describing your experiences.  
Challenge: Write a return letter from someone at home, describing how life has changed because of the war.

Compare and contrast the North and the South before the Civil War. Consider climate, economy, transportation, and culture.

Research the women's convention at Seneca Falls. (Hint: Look for primary sources on the Library of Congress website.) Write a speech you would have given there OR write a letter to the editor making a case for women's suffrage.

Create a timeline of the abolitionist movement, ending with the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment.

Research education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Who was being educated? How and where? (In other words, what methods were used and what systems were in place?) Compare it to education now.  
Challenge: Write a persuasive essay about a current educational practice you think should be changed.

Read Thoreau's essay, *Civil Disobedience*. Compare his beliefs to those of protesters during the Civil Rights era, or more recent protesters, such as those in the Black Lives Matter or March for Our Lives movements.

Learn more about Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands community. Why did it fail? Can you find an example of a more successful utopian community? What does a successful commune require? Do any still exist?

## WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

### WATCH

*American Masters: Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*  
PBS, 2008; 84 minutes. Recipient of numerous awards and film festival selections.

*Mercy Street*  
PBS, 2016-2017; 2 Seasons.

A Civil War - era drama set in a hospital in Alexandria, Virginia. Please be aware that this series contains strong content, including graphic images of bloody injuries and surgeries and frequent use of the "N" word. Prostitution, the use of morphine, corruption, and slavery are also addressed. Recommended for 14+.

### BROWSE

Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House Museum website: <https://louisamayalcott.org>

*Pinterest:* SIERRA MADRE PLAYHOUSE, Little Women Board [<https://pin.it/afqncauardk5ls>]  
Photos, Quotes, Quizzes, Fact Lists, Recipes, etc.

## LISTEN

*The History Chicks Podcast*, Episode 104, “Louisa May Alcott,” April 8, 2018.  
<http://thehistorychicks.com/episode-104-louisa-may-alcott/#more-7704>  
(Approximately 2 hrs.)

Now and Then: Music of the 1860's by Various Artists  
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/now-and-then-music-of-the-1860s/557654169>

*Little Women: The Musical* (Original Broadway Cast Recording)  
by Jason Howland and Mindi Dickstein

## READ

*Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy: Little Women*, A graphic novel by Rey Terciero and Bre Indigo

*The Other Alcott* by Alise Hooper

*Marmee and Louisa* by Eve LaPlante

*March* by Geraldine Brooks

*The House Girl* by Tara Conklin

*Crossing Ebenezer Creek* by Tonya Bolden

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- American Battlefield Trust. "The Cost of War: Killed, Wounded, Captured, and Missing. Civil War Dead." <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/civil-war-casualties>.
- Babbage, Frances. "Adaptation and Storytelling in the Theatre." <http://www.critical-stages.org/12/adaptation-and-storytelling-in-the-theatre>.
- Blakemore, Erin. "How the Civil War Changed Christmas in the United States." History.com. December 13, 2018. <https://www.history.com/news/civil-war-christmas>.
- Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "New England Transcendentalism." Revised April 19, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Transcendentalism-American-movement>.
- Erbsen, Wayne. *Manners and Morals of Victorian America*. Native Ground Books & Music, Asheville, NC, 2009.
- George, Alice L. "Why 'Little Women' Endures 150 Years Later." Foreword to the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. Sea Wolf Press, Orinda, CA, 2019.
- Graham, Beckett, and Vollenweider, Susan. "Louisa May Alcott." *The History Chicks Podcast*, Episode 104. April 8, 2018.
- Historical Folk Toys, LLC. "Children's Manners and Morals." Charlotte, NC, 2004.
- History.com Editors. "Victorian Era Timeline." March 15, 2019. <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/victorian-era-timeline>
- Independence Hall Association, Philadelphia. "Victorian Values in a New Age." <http://www.ushistory.org/us/39d.asp>
- James, Mallory. *Elegant Etiquette in the Nineteenth Century*. Pen and Sword Books, Ltd., South Yorkshire, Great Britain, 2017.
- Myerson, Joel, and Shealy, Daniel, Ed. *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*. University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA, 1997.
- Rioux, Anne Boyd. *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why it Still Matters*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 2018.
- Varhola, Michael J. *Everyday Life During the Civil War: A Guide for Writers, Students and Historians*. Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, OH, 1999.

## APPENDIX: Vocabulary

1. bashful: self-consciously timid
2. clarifying: to make clear
3. coiffure: the arrangement of the hair
4. conservatory: a school with special facilities for fine arts
5. cordial: politely warm and friendly
6. dawdle: to hang or fall in movement, progress, development, etc.
7. despondent: without or almost without hope
8. dowdy: lacking in stylishness or taste
9. droll: comical in an odd or whimsical manner
10. glacial: relating to or derived from a slowly moving mass of ice
11. gruff: brusque and surly and forbidding
12. listless: lacking zest or vivacity
13. lucre: informal term for money, especially in a distasteful sense
14. mope: be apathetic, gloomy, or dazed
15. penitent: feeling or expressing remorse for misdeeds
16. pensive: deeply or seriously thoughtful
17. precocious: characterized by exceptionally early development
18. prim: affectedly dainty or refined
19. quench: satisfy, as thirst
20. quizzical: perplexed
21. ragamuffin: a dirty shabbily clothed urchin
22. ramble: move about aimlessly or without any destination
23. raspy: unpleasantly harsh or grating in sound
24. revolve: turn on or around an axis or a center
25. wheedle: influence or urge by gentle urging, caressing, or flattering
26. worldly: characteristic of secularity rather than spirituality