

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Little Women (Book I and II) (Unabridged)

by  
Louisa May Alcott

## Book Information

Louisa May Alcott, Little Women (Book I and II)  
(Unabridged)

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475 Pages

Book Level: 7.9

Interest Level: MG

This story is based on the family life of the author and her sisters and their diverse personalities as they grew up. This complete edition contains both Book 1 "LITTLE WOMEN," and Book 2 "GOOD WIVES."

**Topics:** Classics, Classics (All); Common Core State Standards Appendix B Titles, CCSS Grade Band 6-8; Family Life, Misc./Other; Family Life, Sisters; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Series, Modern Library Classics; What Kids Are Reading, 2014, 75 Most Read Fiction, ATOS Book Levels 7.0-10.0

## Main Characters

Amy March the youngest sister who was slightly vain and the pet of the family

Aunt March Mr. March's elderly and wealthy aunt

Beth March the timid March sister whose father called her "Little Tranquility"

Hannah the family's servant

Jo March the strong, bright, resolute March sister

Meg March the eldest March sister who is the first to marry

Mr. Brooke Laurie's tutor who is enamored with Meg

Mr. Laurence Laurie's kind and wealthy grandfather

Mr. March the girls' father

Mrs. March Marmee to her girls; a strong, wise woman

Professor Friedrich Bhaer a kind German man who develops a friendship with Jo

Theodore "Laurie" Laurence neighbor of the Marches who becomes their lifelong friend

## Vocabulary

**bijou** a small and elegant trinket

**disapprobation** disapproval

**ennui** boredom

**fastidious** overly difficult to please

**gilded** given an attractive but often deceptive appearance

**minion** a servile dependent or underling

**saleratus** sodium bicarbonate or baking soda

**salver** a small serving tray

**samphire** a type of plant

**scapegrace** an incorrigible rascal

## Synopsis

The March girls are loving, close-knit, and distinctly different from one another. Meg, the eldest, is sturdy and reliable. She is mildly envious of her friends, who can afford fine clothing and parties, but she appreciates the loving relationship of her family. Jo is rather a tomboy. She speaks her mind and does as she pleases. She is smart and creative and takes it upon herself to befriend their lonely neighbor, Laurie. Beth is frail and sweet. She is the heart of the March family, always thinking of others. Amy is the spoiled baby of the family. She is concerned with her looks and her art.

The girls live and grow within the confines of their close and comfortable family. Meg, after a brief fling with the high-class set, realizes that her family is rich in many ways. Jo continues crafting poems, stories, and plays, while her friendship with Laurie blossoms and grows. Beth contracts scarlet fever while caring for the baby of a less fortunate family, takes ill, and never completely recovers. Amy continues to draw, sketch, sculpt, and paint while learning lessons about life.

As the girls grow older, Meg marries John Brooke, Laurie's former tutor, and they start a family. To escape Laurie's inclinations toward romance, Jo

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takes a job in New York caring for some children. Amy is invited to accompany Aunt March abroad, and Beth's health deteriorates.

In New York, Jo meets the kindly but poor Professor Friedrich Bhaer, of whom she grows quite fond. She begins earning money by writing sensational stories for a rather insipid newspaper, and when the professor finds out, he shows his disappointment.

Jo returns home to make the rest of Beth's days as comfortable as possible. Jo is comforted by the fact that Laurie has gone abroad with his grandfather and had promised to look in on Amy. It is apparent that Beth is dying, and the family gathers around her as she slips away.

After Beth's death, Amy and Laurie return from Europe with the surprise announcement that they have married. As Jo tries to share in everyone's happiness, her loneliness is apparent as she recalls her happy times with Friedrich Bhaer. When he appears on the Marches' doorstep, her happiness is tempered with the realization that he likes her only as a friend. The professor confesses that he loves her with all his heart, and the two make plans for the future. With their inheritance from Aunt March, the Bhaers open a school for boys, and Jo, along with the rest of the March and Laurence clans, appears to be infinitely happy.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

The girls' mother suggested they live their lives based on the game they used to play when they acted out *The Pilgrim's Progress*. How did they try to do this?

*They chose to use their money to buy Marmee a Christmas present instead of things for themselves. They gave their Christmas breakfast to a poor family. They tried not to complain when they had to do their chores and fulfill their obligations.*

### Literary Analysis

Some readers think that Jo should have married Laurie. Would this be a good idea? Why or why not?

*Yes, because they were such good friends, and Laurie was truly in love with Jo. He knew her well and would not have tried to change her. She would have been a good influence on him; she made him a better person. They enjoyed many of the same things, and each had a great sense of humor. No, because Jo did not love Laurie the way he loved her. She was more mature than he was; he was rather flighty. She wouldn't have fit into the lifestyle that he undoubtedly would want to have and his social position would dictate. They were both too strong-willed to be able to compromise on anything.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Laurie eventually accepts Jo's feelings about him and goes to Europe where he marries Amy. Why was Amy a more suitable wife for Laurie?

*Amy seemed to be "to the manner born." She always had dreams of living a grander, more elegant life, and though she was a bit of a snob as a child, she grew to be a sensible and refined young woman. Laurie needed a woman he could take care of, and Amy would allow him to do that.*

### Constructing Meaning

Most readers relate best to Jo. What qualities does she have that make her such a likeable character?

*She is not a stereotype. She is her own person, and her creativity is shown through her poems and stories and by the games she made up for the sisters. She doesn't like phony people or situations and tries to avoid them wherever possible. She is loyal and loving and sympathetic when she should be.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The story took place during the Civil War, a time of great change in America. The story briefly alludes to the war, but doesn't

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make any political statements. Find instances in the story to show how readers can detect the time period in which it is set. Find descriptions of household goods, transportation, apparel and accessories, the expectations of girls and women, and other details that illustrate this period.

**Understanding Literary Features** The story of a close-knit, loving family is a common theme in literature. Most of the stories with this theme take place in the past, during simpler times. Some books included in this genre are *I Remember Mama*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, *Spencer's Mountain* (made into the television show *The Waltons*), and *The Little House on the Prairie*. Write about a close-knit family of today. What makes them close? What kinds of things do the children do together? How do they sacrifice for each other? Why is it easier or harder to keep a family close today?

**Understanding Characterization** Jo March is one of the most beloved characters of literature. What kind of person would she be if she lived today? Choose a current event or something from your own life and write it from Jo's perspective. How would she feel about women's roles in contemporary society? What injustices would she see in your hometown? What would she and Friedrich do after they were married if they were living in modern times?

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The story is told in chronological fashion with comments from an outside observer sprinkled throughout. It appears that the author knows her subjects very well, and it has been said that the novel is autobiographical. Research Louisa May Alcott's life, and find out what she did throughout her life that may have contributed to events in the book. Read some of her other books and compare the themes of those to that of *Little Women*.