Discussion Guide

Little Women

By Louisa May Alcott

Adapted by Emma Reeves

Directed by Sara Clark

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Louisa May Alcott (November 29, 1832 – March 6, 1888) was an American novelist best known as author of the novel *Little Women* and its sequels *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*. Raised by her transcendentalist parents, Abigail May and Amos Bronson Alcott in New England, she grew up among many of the well-known intellectuals of the day such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau.

Nevertheless, her family suffered severe financial difficulties and Alcott worked to help support the family from an early age. She began to receive critical success for her writing in the 1860s. Early in her career, she sometimes used the pen name A. M. Barnard. With her pen name Louisa wrote novels for young adults in juvenile hall.

Published in 1868, *Little Women* is set in the Alcott family home, Orchard House, in Concord, Massachusetts and is loosely based on Alcott's childhood experiences with her three sisters. The novel was very well received and is still a popular children's novel today. Alcott was an abolitionist and a feminist. She died in Boston on March 6, 1888.

“I like good strong words that mean something…”

— Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

EARLY YEARS:

Alcott was born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pa., which is now part of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on her father's 33rd birthday. She was the daughter of transcendentalist and educator Amos Bronson Alcott and social worker Abby May and the second of four daughters: Anna Bronson Alcott was the eldest; Elizabeth Sewall Alcott and Abigail May Alcott were the two youngest. The family moved to Boston in 1838, where Alcott's father established an experimental school and joined the Transcendental Club with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Bronson Alcott's opinions on education and tough views on child-rearing shaped young Alcott's mind with a desire to achieve perfection, a goal of the transcendentalists. His attitudes towards Alcott's sometimes wild and independent behavior, and his inability to provide for his family, sometimes created conflict between Bronson Alcott and his wife and daughters.

In 1840, after several setbacks with the school, the Alcott family moved to a cottage on 2 acres (8,100 m²) of land, situated along the Sudbury River in Concord, Massachusetts. The three years they spent at the rented Hosmer Cottage were described as idyllic. By 1843, the Alcott family moved, along with six other members of the Consociate Family to the Utopian Fruitlands community for a brief interval in 1843–1844. After the collapse of the Utopian Fruitlands, they moved on to rented rooms and finally, with Abigail May Alcott's inheritance and financial help from Emerson, they purchased a homestead in Concord. They moved into the home they named "Hillside" on April 1, 1845.

Alcott's early education included lessons from the naturalist Henry David Thoreau, but she received the majority of her schooling from her father, who was strict and believed in "the sweetness of self-denial". She also received some instruction from writers and educators such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller, all of whom were family friends. She later described these early years in a newspaper sketch entitled "Transcendental Wild Oats". The sketch was reprinted in the volume *Silver Pitchers* (1876), which relates the family's experiment in "plain living and high thinking" at Fruitlands.

Poverty made it necessary for Alcott to go to work at an early age as a teacher, seamstress, governess, domestic helper, and writer. Her sisters also supported the family, working as seamstresses, while their mother took on social work among the Irish immigrants. Only the youngest, May, was able to attend public school. Due to all of these pressures, writing became a creative and emotional outlet for Alcott. Her first book was *Flower Fables* (1849), a selection of tales originally written for Ellen Emerson, daughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson.
As an adult, Alcott was an abolitionist and a feminist. In 1847, she and her family served as station masters on the Underground Railroad, when they housed a fugitive slave for one week and in 1848 Alcott read and admired the "Declaration of Sentiments", published by the Seneca Falls Convention on women's rights, advocating for women's suffrage and became the first woman to register to vote in Concord, Massachusetts in a school board election. The 1850s were hard times for the Alcotts. At one point in 1857, unable to find work and filled with such despair, Alcott contemplated suicide. During that year, she read Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë and found many parallels to her own life. In 1858, her younger sister Elizabeth died, and her older sister Anna married a man by the name of John Pratt. This felt, to Alcott, to be a breaking up of their sisterhood.

LITERARY SUCCESS:
In 1860, Alcott began writing for the Atlantic Monthly. When the American Civil War broke out, she served as a nurse in the Union Hospital at Georgetown, D.C., for six weeks in 1862–1863. Her letters home – revised and published in the Commonwealth and collected as Hospital Sketches (1863, republished with additions in 1869) – brought her first critical recognition for her observations and humor. It was originally written for the Boston anti-slavery paper The Commonwealth. She speaks out about the mismanagement of hospitals and the indifference and callousness of some of the surgeons she encountered. Her main character Trib showed a passage from innocence to maturity and is a "serious and eloquent witness". Her novel Moods (1864), based on her own experience, was also promising.

In the mid-1860s, Alcott wrote passionate, fiery novels and sensational stories under the nom de plume A. M. Barnard. Among these are A Long Fatal Love Chase and Pauline's Passion and Punishment. Her protagonists for these tales are willful and relentless in their pursuit of their own aims, which often include revenge on those who have humiliated or thwarted them. She also produced wholesome stories for children, and after their positive reception, she did not generally return to creating works for adults. Adult-oriented exceptions include the anonymous novelette A Modern Mephistopheles (1875), which attracted suspicion that it was written by Julian Hawthorne; and the semi-autobiographical tale Work (1873).

Alcott became even more successful with the publication by the Roberts Brothers of the first part of Little Women: or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy (1868), a semi-autobiographical account of her childhood with her sisters in Concord, Massachusetts. Part two, or Part Second, also known as Good Wives (1869), followed the March sisters into adulthood and their respective marriages. Little Men (1871) detailed Jo's life at the Plumfield School that she founded with her husband Professor Bhaer at the conclusion of Part Two of Little Women. Jo's Boys (1886) completed the "March Family Saga".

In Little Women, Alcott based her heroine "Jo" on herself. But whereas Jo marries at the end of the story, Alcott remained single throughout her life. She explained her "spinsterhood" in an interview with Louise Chandler Moulton, "I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul put by some freak of nature into a woman's body ... because I have fallen in love with so many pretty girls and never once the least bit with any man." However, Alcott's romance while in Europe with the young Polish man Ladislas "Laddie" Wisniewski was detailed in her journals but then deleted by Alcott herself before her death. Alcott identified Laddie as the model for Laurie in Little Women, and there is strong evidence this was the significant emotional relationship of her life. Likewise, every character seems to be paralleled to some extent, from Beth's death mirroring Lizzie's to Jo's rivalry with the youngest, Amy, as Alcott felt a sort of rivalry for (Abigail) May, at times. Though Alcott never married, she did take in May's daughter, Louisa, after May's death in 1879 from childbed fever, caring for little "Lulu" until her death.

Little Women was well received, with critics and audiences finding it suitable for many age groups. A reviewer of Eclectic Magazine called it "the very best of books to reach the hearts of the young of any age from six to sixty,". It was also said[by whom?] to be a fresh, natural representation of daily life.
Along with Elizabeth Stoddard, Rebecca Harding Davis, Anne Moncure Crane, and others, Alcott was part of a group of female authors during the Gilded Age, who addressed women’s issues in a modern and candid manner. Their works were, as one newspaper columnist of the period commented, "among the decided 'signs of the times'"

LATER LIFE:
Alcott, who continued to write until her death, suffered chronic health problems in her later years, including vertigo. She and her earliest biographers attributed her illness and death to mercury poisoning. During her American Civil War service, Alcott contracted typhoid fever and was treated with a compound containing mercury. Recent analysis of Alcott's illness, however, suggests that her chronic health problems may have been associated with an autoimmune disease, not acute mercury exposure. Moreover, a late portrait of Alcott shows a rash on her cheeks, which is a characteristic of lupus.

Alcott died at age 55 of a stroke in Boston, on March 6, 1888, two days after her father's death. Her last words were "Is it not meningitis?" She is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, near Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau, on a hillside now known as "Authors' Ridge."

FROM THE ACTORS:

MAGGIE LOU RADER—JO MARCH: “I’m thrilled to be spending some time with my favorite literary heroine this year. I first read Little Women in fifth grade and, as a 5’ 6” clumsy, long limbed, tomboy who wore nothing but WNBA t-shirts for a solid two years in middle school, I fell in love with Jo. She is stubborn, headstrong, and brash, but she’s incredibly loving and her greatest fear is the breaking up of her family. She’s a woman that takes more responsibility upon herself than any 15 year old girl should and her commitment to those she loves is unwavering and incredibly admirable.

Knowing that Jo is based loosely on Alcott herself, I feel a bit of pressure to live up to the incredible spirit which inhabited the authoress. As I started working on the role, I had ghosts of June Allyson, Katharine Hepburn, and even information about Alcott in my head that I wanted to honor, yet find the truth of Jo for myself. This role has taught me to love deeper, fight stronger, and conquer myself as beautifully as I can… today. She’s been my hero since the age of 10, and I hope she lives on to be a hero to more young women struggling to find where her square pegged-ness fits into a world of round holes.

KELLY MENGELKOCH—MEG MARCH: “Meg is the oldest of the March children. While this gives her a bit more maturity and wisdom than the other girls, she is still a young woman learning the values of an honest day’s work, humility, pride in one’s societal status and limitations. The play and book provide in her a beautiful story of a devoted sister who learns from her siblings and parents how to begin a life as a married mother of her own little ones.”
CAITLIN McWETHY—BETH MARCH:
“Taking on the role of Beth is incredibly daunting to me. I feel like my imperfections so far outweigh Beth’s, though we do share a deep rooted shyness (surprising, given my profession, but true), it’s a bit of a stretch for me to imagine my judgmental, snarky self, being perceived as, "always hopeful, happy, and serene ... everyone’s friend, and an angel in the house". Much like the other characters in the book, I look to Beth as a role model. Though she may appear small and unremarkable, she is by far the most courageous character in the story. I cherish every day I get to spend with this gentle soul and hope, from the bottom of my heart, never to forget the lessons she teaches me (and all the people she has touched with her story). “

COURTNEY LucIEN—AMY MARCH:
“It has been quite a journey, exploring the character of Amy March. It was tough at first, knowing that Amy can appear unlikable to readers - selfish, affected, and not the #1 choice to end up with Laurie. Most of Alcott’s readers desperately wanted Laurie and Jo together, but Alcott refused. So, I had the positive challenge of finding what makes Amy and Laurie mesh, and exploring how Amy grows throughout the novel. I began by reading and analyzing Alcott’s text, pulling quotes that described Amy’s personality, choices, ways of speaking, and characteristics. Then, I came up with a list of things that Amy likes and dislikes, about herself and others. I also wrote out a list of words that Alcott uses to describe Amy (ex. prim, affected, artistic, tact, sprightly, strong will, frankness, petted, snow maiden...). From there, I researched Victorian Etiquette and compiled photos of women from the time - how do they carry themselves in the outfits they wear? What sort of expressions do they use? After the preliminary research, I dove into the text of the adaptation, and compared the book to the play. In rehearsals I tried to mesh them together, allowing the book to add richness to the shorter play version.

Amy goes through 3 distinct phases of maturation in the book/play. She begins as a young and spoiled 12 year-old. Then, at the start of Act II we see Amy at age 16. It is clear that age has caused the first phase of distinct growth. Then, she is invited to go to England and once abroad, she matures rapidly in a different way, and her affectations change and grow. She becomes an elegant young lady, with “a certain aplomb in both carriage and conversation”. With this comes her decision to marry into money (Fred Vaughn). The third phase of maturations occurs when she is confronted with her faults (her affectations, her loss of connection to home - highlighted by the death of Beth, moments of heartlessness/selfishness, her “air of martyrdom”). She turns down Fred’s offer, falls for Laurie, and by the end of the story it is clear that “the cordial sweetness of her manner...stamped her at once with the unmistakable sign of the true gentlewoman she had hoped to become”. I hope that you can love Amy as much as I do; and see that her intentions, although sometimes covered up by affectations or airs, are innately good - she truly does try and do the best she can for those she loves.”

ANNIE FITZPATRICK—MRS. MARCH (MARMEE):
“Reading Little Women for the first time in the 7th or 8th grade, I loved all the “loverly parts”, as Meg would say, and Jo’s rebellious spirit but hated Amy for “stealing” Laurie! I remember feeling lucky to live in a modern age where girls could do anything they put their minds to, and penicillin could keep a beloved sister from dying. But to be honest, it seemed a little dated. So many of the lessons March girls discover went right over my head. Re-reading it at 53, I was struck by how timely this book is. The issues that Marmee tries to help her daughters deal with, wanting to be rich and famous, worrying about what other people think, and getting over painful shyness, are issues that we still struggle with today. And not just in childhood but even as adults! Being a little older also helped me to be less judgmental about poor Amy. I now see her through Marmee’s eyes, as an all too human and lovable girl
just trying to figure out how to become the woman she hopes to be. I also love the fact that Louisa May Alcott let’s Marmee be less than saintly at times, as she struggles to balance all the needs of her very different children.”

ABOUT THE NOVEL:

“I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.”

— Louisa May Alcott, Little Women

Little Women is a classic – if not the classic – girls’ book. Written just after the Civil War in response to a publisher’s demand for a novel that could appeal to young female readers, it was originally published as two books: Chapters 1-23 were issued in 1868 with the title Little Women, and, after the book became a sensational success, Chapters 24-47 were issued in 1869 with the title Good Wives. Today we read both sections together as Little Women, but it’s important to know that the book began in two pieces, because there’s more separating them than time.

The first half of the book is loosely based on Louisa May Alcott’s own life; in fact, it’s semi-autobiographical, and reflects the experiences she had growing up with her sisters in New England. After it was published, readers wrote to Alcott and her publishers asking for more, and especially asking about the girls’ love lives. Most readers wanted to know who each sister married – especially whether Jo married Laurie. Alcott herself remained unmarried all her life, so, in order to write the sequel, she had to depart from autobiography and write straight-up fiction. Without her own life experiences, the second part of the novel may feel less realistic. However, no amount of fan-mail could force Alcott to marry off the two main characters in the way her readers expected. What does she do? Well, you’ll have to read the book to find out, but let’s just say you probably won’t see it coming!

Little Women has been popular ever since its first publication; after more than 140 years, it still appeals to readers young and old, female and male – although, admittedly, the majority of the novel’s lifelong lovers are female. The story has been adapted three times as a film, starring first Katherine Hepburn, then June Allyson, then Winona Ryder as Jo March. It has also been transformed into a play, an opera, and a musical. Apart from the different version of Little Women itself, we think we can detect the influence of Little Women on other great North American girls’ books, such as The Little House on the Prairie and Anne of Green Gables, as well as some of the great British girls’ books of the time, such as A Little Princess.

Part of the fascination with the novel is its treatment of gender roles, which balances tradition and gender distinction with more forward-thinking, proto-feminist attitudes. We fully expect that readers will be considering and debating issues of gender in this novel for many decades to come.

“I’ve got the key to my castle in the air, but whether I can unlock the door remains to be seen.”

— Louisa May Alcott, Little Women
SYNOPSIS:

Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy March are four sisters living with their mother in New England. Their father is away serving as a chaplain in the Civil War, and the sisters struggle to support themselves and keep their household running despite the fact that the family recently lost its fortune. In the process, they become close friends with their wealthy neighbor, Theodore Laurence, known as "Laurie."

As the girls grow older, each faces her own personal demons and moral challenges. Jo, our beloved protagonist, must tame her tomboyish ways and learn to be more ladylike while pursuing her ambition to be a great writer. Meg, the oldest, must put aside her love of wealth and finery in order to follow her heart. Beth, the shy one, must conquer her bashfulness, while Amy, the youngest, has to sacrifice her aristocratic pride. The girls are guided in their personal growth by their mother, "Marmee," and by their religious faith.

The family's tight bonds are forever changed when Meg falls in love with John Brooke, Laurie's tutor. Meg and John marry and begin a home of their own, quickly populated by twins Daisy and Demi. Another marriage seems imminent when Laurie reveals to Jo that he has fallen in love with her, but she declares that she cannot care for him in the same way. Jo goes to New York as the governess for a family friend, Mrs. Kirke, experiencing the big city and trying her hand as a professional writer. Meanwhile, Amy travels through Europe with her wealthy Aunt Carroll and cousin Flo, nurturing her artistic talent. Separately, Laurie goes to Europe accompanied by his grandfather. He pursues his passion for music and tries to forget Jo.

While in New York, Jo meets German expatriate Professor Bhaer, whose intellect and strong moral nature spark her interest. Across the Atlantic, Laurie and Amy discover that they lack the genius to be great artists, but that they make an excellent romantic pairing. When Beth, who has never been strong, dies young, the sorrow of their loss solidifies Amy's bond to Laurie. Back in the States, Jo returns home to care for her bereaved parents and learns to embrace her domestic side.

All the loose ends are tied up as Jo and Professor Bhaer marry and start a boarding school for boys, while Amy and Laurie marry and use the Laurence family wealth to support struggling young artists. The Brooke, Bhaer, and Laurence households flourish, and the novel ends with a birthday party for Marmee, celebrating the extended March family connections and the progress of Jo's boarding school, Plumfield.
DEVELOPMENT:

"I'd rather take coffee than compliments just now."

— Louisa May Alcott, Little Women

In 1868, Thomas Niles, the publisher of Louisa May Alcott, recommended that she write a book about girls that would have widespread appeal. At first she resisted, preferring to publish a collection of her short stories. Niles pressed her to write the girls' book first, and he was aided by her father Amos Bronson Alcott, who also urged her to do so.

In May 1868, Alcott wrote in her journal: "Niles, partner of Roberts, asked me to write a girl's book. I said I'd try." Alcott set her novel in an imaginary Orchard House modeled on her own residence of the same name, where she wrote the novel. She later recalled that she did not think she could write a successful book for girls and did not enjoy writing it.¹ "I plod away," she wrote in her diary, "although I don't enjoy this sort of things." Scholars classify Little Women as an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical novel.

By June, Alcott had sent the first dozen chapters to Niles, and both agreed these were dull. But Niles' niece Lillie Almy read them and said she enjoyed them. The completed manuscript was shown to several girls, who agreed it was "splendid". Alcott wrote, "they are the best critics, so I should definitely be satisfied." She wrote Little Women "in record time for money", but the book's immediate success surprised both her and her publisher.

According to literary critic Sarah Elbert, when using the term "little women", Alcott was drawing on its Dickensian meaning; it represented the period in a young woman's life where childhood and elder childhood were "overlapping" with young womanhood. Each of the March sister heroines had a harrowing experience that alerted her and the reader that "childhood innocence" was of the past, and that "the inescapable woman problem" was all that remained. Other views suggest that the title was meant to highlight the inferiority of women as compared to men, or, alternatively, describe the lives of simple people, "unimportant" in the social sense.

INSPIRATION:

For her books, Alcott was often inspired by familiar elements. The characters in Little Women are recognizably drawn from family members and friends. Her married sister Anna was Meg, the family beauty. Lizzie, Alcott's beloved sister who died at the age of twenty-three, was the model for Beth, and May, Alcott's strong-willed sister, was portrayed as Amy, whose pretentious affectations cause her occasional downfalls. Alcott portrayed herself as Jo. Alcott readily corresponded with readers who addressed her as "Miss March" or "Jo", and she did not correct them.

However, Alcott's portrayal, even if inspired by her family, is an idealized one. For instance, Mr. March is portrayed as a hero of the American Civil War, a gainfully employed chaplain, and, presumably, a source of inspiration to the women of the family. He is absent for most of the novel. In contrast, Bronson Alcott was very present in his family's household, due in part to his inability to find steady work. While he espoused many of the educational principles touted by the March family, he was loud and dictatorial. His lack of financial independence was a source of humiliation to his wife and
daughters. The March family is portrayed living in genteel penury, but the Alcott family, dependent on an improvident, impractical father, suffered real poverty and occasional hunger. In addition to her own childhood and that of her sisters, scholars who have come across the diaries of Louisa Alcott's mother, have surmised that Little Women was also heavily inspired by Abigail Alcott's own early life.

**THEMES:**

**WOMEN AND FEMININITY:**

Little Women considers the place of women in society by presenting the portraits of several very different but equally praiseworthy women. As we read the novel, we experience their different interpretations of femininity, and we see a range of different possibilities for integrating women into society. Because the novel was written in the mid-nineteenth century, historical context places limits on what women can do. However, modern readers may be pleasantly surprised by the novel's tendency to push the boundaries of women's traditional roles. This book insists that women have a great deal to contribute, certainly to the home and domestic sphere, but also to literature, art, and an ethical society.

**HOME:**

In Little Women, the home is more than a house where you sleep at night. The domestic sphere provides a moral center for men and women alike, and a comfortable home, full of love, is depicted as the basic unit of a stable society. As children grow up, they learn to contribute to the comfort and structure of the family home, which prepares them to develop homes of their own once they marry and "leave the nest." According to this view, joyless or unhappy homes are the root of most of the problems in the world.

**VISIONS OF AMERICA:**

Did the American Dream die in 2008, or did it die in 1918—or did it never really exist at all? In The Great Gatsby, the American Dream is supposed to stand for independence and the ability to make something of one's self with hard work, but it ends up being more about materialism and selfish pursuit of pleasure. No amount of hard work can change where Gatsby came from, and old money knows it. Merit and hard work aren't enough, and so the American Dream collapses—just like the ballooning dresses of Jordan and Daisy when Nick first sees them.

**LITERATURE AND WRITING:**

Little Women is a text about writing texts. The protagonist, herself an author, experiments with different genres and voices in order to find her own "truth" as a writer. Literature also provides inspiration, not only for childhood games, but also for adult lessons. Shakespeare is a particular touchstone for these characters, exemplifying both writerly talent and development of characters. The German Romantic poets and the American Transcendentalists are also sources of wisdom and interest, uniting Romantic ideas with social ideals. However, writing can also be dangerous in this novel; sensational or thrilling fiction divorces entertainment from ethics, and writing or reading texts of that kind can harm someone's character.
LOVE:

Love is everywhere in *Little Women*, a novel about four marriageable sisters and their various friends. Often it is romantic love, either reciprocated or unrequited. But there are many other kinds of love that sustain the characters, and it’s even suggested that they could substitute for romantic love if necessary. These other forms of love include the different bonds of family, especially parent to child and sisters to each other. They also include more abstract affections, such as the love of country (patriotism) or the love of God (religion). Love is able to sweeten almost any sour situation, from poverty to loss to loneliness, and nothing can compensate for the lack of love.

SACRIFICE:

In *Little Women*, the ability to make sacrifices, both great and small, is an essential part of ethical behavior. Everyone must be able to show a certain degree of selflessness – doing without material comforts, letting go of pride, or giving up personal desires for the good of the family or community. Sacrifices might also be more extreme or serious; sisters must sacrifice their claim on their sisters, daughters must sacrifice their claim on their fathers, and lovers must sacrifice their claim on their beloveds when the situation requires. It’s not surprising that sacrifice plays such an important role in a novel that, underneath it all, is structured around Christianity – a religion that centers around one great sacrifice.

POVERTY:

There are many different kinds of poverty in *Little Women*. Most obvious is financial poverty, lacking money and material goods. Financial poverty comes in many strains, and the novel reminds us that even families that seem to have very little might be better off than those who are truly indigent. More serious than financial poverty, however, is spiritual poverty. Wealthy families and individuals sometimes lack the most important things in life – love, happiness, family togetherness, and morality. In the end, spiritual and material wealth are brought together in a variety of ways to create the happiest possible situations, but financial poverty remains bearable when necessary.

AMBITION:

Most of the characters in *Little Women* are ambitious – either they want to get rich, or they want to be famous, or they just want to see the world and have a good time. As they mature, each must learn to subordinate ambition to duty, or to shift his or her ambitions in different directions. Instead of seeking fulfillment outside the home, characters must redirect their ambitions into the domestic sphere. Characters with artistic talent must learn to distinguish between wanting to do brilliant work and actually being geniuses, and sometimes ambition has to give way to love and realism.
Women's suffrage in the United States, the legal right of women to vote in that country, was established over the course of several decades, first in various states and localities, sometimes on a limited basis, and then nationally in 1920.

The demand for women's suffrage began to gather strength in the 1840s, emerging from the broader movement for women's rights. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention, the first women's rights convention, passed a resolution in favor of women's suffrage despite opposition from some of its organizers, who believed the idea was too extreme. By the time of the first National Women's Rights Convention in 1850, however, suffrage was becoming an increasingly important aspect of the movement's activities.

The first national suffrage organizations were established in 1869 when two competing organizations were formed, one led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the other by Lucy Stone. After years of bitter rivalry, they merged in 1890 as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) with Anthony as its leading force.

Hoping the U.S. Supreme Court would rule that women had a constitutional right to vote, suffragists made several attempts to vote in the early 1870s and then filed lawsuits when they were turned away. Anthony actually succeeded in voting in 1872 but was arrested for that act and found guilty in a widely publicized trial that gave the movement fresh momentum. After the Supreme Court ruled against them in 1875, suffragists began the decades-long campaign for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would enfranchise women. Much of the movement's energy, however, went toward working for suffrage on a state-by-state basis.

In 1916 Alice Paul formed the National Woman's Party (NWP), a militant group focused on the passage of a national suffrage amendment. Over 200 NWP supporters were arrested in 1917 while picketing the White House, some of whom went on hunger strike and endured forced feeding after being sent to prison. Under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt, the two-million-member NAWSA also made a national suffrage amendment its top priority. After a hard-fought series of votes in the U.S. Congress and in state legislatures, the Nineteenth Amendment became part of the U.S. Constitution on August 20, 1920. It states, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."
**WOMEN SOLDIERS DURING THE CIVIL WAR:**

Even though women weren’t legally allowed to fight in the Civil War, it is estimated that somewhere around 400 women disguised themselves as men and went to war, sometimes without anyone ever discovering their true identities.

Pictured below is Sarah Edmonds, one of the best documented female soldiers during the Civil War. She was a Union soldier and worked during the Civil War as a nurse.

**Why weren’t women allowed to fight in the Civil War?**

At the time, women weren’t perceived as equals by any stretch of the imagination. It was the Victorian era and women were mostly confined to the domestic sphere. Both the Union and Confederate armies actually forbade the enlistment of women. I think it was during the Revolutionary War that they established women as nurses because they needed help on the front when soldiers were injured. But women weren’t allowed to serve in combat. Of course, women did disguise themselves and enlist as men. There is evidence that they also did so during the Revolutionary War.

**How did they do it?**

Honestly, the lore is that the physical exams were not rigorous at all. If you had enough teeth in your head and could hold a musket, you were fine. The funny thing is, in this scenario, a lot of women didn’t seem any less manly than, for example, the teenage boys who were enlisting. At the time, I believe the Union had an official cutoff age of 18 for soldiers, but that was often flouted and people often lied. They had a lot of young guys and their voices hadn’t changed and their faces were smooth. The Confederacy never actually established an age requirement. So [women] bound their breasts if they had to, and just kind of layered on clothes, wore loose clothing, cut their hair short and rubbed dirt on their faces. They also kind of kept to themselves. The evidence that survived often describes them as aloof. Keeping to themselves certainly helped maintain the secret.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How would you describe this novel's vision of the place of women in society? What about in the home?
2. What virtues does the novel depict as especially feminine? What character flaws? What's your own opinion of these stereotypes?
3. What avenues does the novel explore for women who can't or don't want to get married? Describe the narrator's opinions about spinsters and old maids.
4. Why does Mr. March describe his daughters as "little women" in a letter quoted at the beginning of the book? Does the meaning of this phrase change over the course of the novel?
5. What makes the March family home so attractive to Laurie? What do Marmee and her daughters have that the Laurences are lacking?
6. What is Hannah's contribution to the March family home? Would they be able to get by without a servant?
7. How does Beth's affinity for housework and homemaking contribute to her importance as a character?
8. How does the home that Meg and John establish contrast with the home in which Meg grew up? Is Meg turning into Marmee, or is she a different kind of wife and mother?
9. What are the different kinds of love that provide structure for this novel? Try to brainstorm at least 3-5 different types. How do these different forms of love complement one another?
10. Do you find it frustrating that Jo can't make herself love Laurie? Why or why not?
11. How does the realistic love that the March girls experience contrast with the passionate love in the romantic plays and stories that Jo writes? What do you make of this contrast?
12. What kinds of love does the novel suggest are essential for people to have in order to lead happy, fulfilled lives? What kinds can they do without, if necessary?
13. Just how poor is the March family? What kinds of things do they have to go without that you consider important? What do they have that makes them, in a sense, wealthy?
14. Compare and contrast the Marches with the Hummels. How does each family experience poverty differently? Which family is truly needy?

15. Compare and contrast the Marches with the Laurences. Is there a way in which the Marches are actually richer than their wealthy neighbors?
16. How do poverty, hard work, and morality seem to go together in this novel? Would it be more difficult for the Marches to hold on to their principles if they had more money? How does Meg's experience at the Moffats' house illustrate this point?
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:

ACTIVITY 1 – WRITE “THE WITCH’S CURSE”

Melodrama was a very popular form of theater in the 1800’s and is definitely the type of plays Jo and Laurie would be seeing in town. It’s a very heightened style of performance in which the good characters are all good, and the bad, all bad. The actors use larger than life movements and expression to convey the emotions and feelings of the characters. Oh, and the good guy always wins in the end.

In the book, we see snippets of the melodrama, “The Witch’s Curse,” written by Jo; however, we don’t get to hear much of the dialogue. As a class, write the rest of the story of Hugo, Roderigo, the witch, etc. and perform it in class.

ACTIVITY 2 – CREATE THE GIRLS’ FEAST:

In the book, we get to see the girls’ prepare the food for the day after their “experiment” is over and Marmee takes a much needed day off. Even though Jo mistakes salt for sugar and ruins the lobster, you don’t have to! Create a meal from the 1860’s and have it in class. Better luck to you than Jo and Meg had!

ACTIVITY 3 – FATHER’S LETTERS:

During this time, letters were the main mode of communication with loved ones far away. Luckily, we get to read many of the characters’ letters to each other in the novel; however, we don’t get to read many of the letters between Marmee and Father. Split the class into two and have one half write letters from Father to Marmee and the other from Marmee to Father. What has Father been experiencing at war? What does Marmee choose to tell Father about the March antics at home?

“Let us be elegant or die!”

― Louisa May Alcott, Little Women
Sources:


http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Women

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisa_May_Alcott

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