

Publishers' Bindings Online, 1815-1930: The Art of Books
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Sample Lesson Plan: Louisa May Alcott
Grades 6-8

Objectives:

- Students will learn about Louisa May Alcott's famous book *Little Women*, including when and why she wrote it, her feelings about writing it, and the basis for the characters and settings.
- Using *Little Women* as an example, students will learn that one book can take on a variety of appearances.
- The lesson will be completed with the aid of the PBO bindings database and includes a creative classroom activity.
- Lesson will take 2-3 class periods with the activity; one class period without it.

Materials:

- 1) A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.
- 2) Excerpt from Chapter 2, "Merry Christmas," in *Little Women*, describing the Christmas play. (From "Being still too young to go often to the theater," to "many were speechless with laughter.") Full text available at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/ALCOTT/lwtext.html>.
- 3) "Props" and "costumes" that students bring from home.

Lesson

Introduction

Born in 1832, in a Pennsylvania town that now is part of Philadelphia, Louisa May Alcott, grew up in Boston and Concord, Massachusetts. She spent a lot of time with her family. She was educated at home by her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, and her mother Abigail May Alcott, or Abba. Her classmates and playmates were her three sisters: her older sister Anna, and her younger sisters Elizabeth and May.

The Alcott family was poor, and Louisa vowed to do anything she could to help them. She began earning money at various jobs at the age of fifteen, but what she really loved to do was write. Louisa began keeping a diary at the age of seven, and she often wrote poems and stories in it. She also wrote plays with her sister Anna, and all the Alcott sisters acted them out, using props and costumes they found around the house. That was how they amused themselves, since their parents couldn't afford toys.

Eventually, Louisa began earning money with her writing. At first, she sold short stories and poems to magazines. Then she started publishing books. Her first book, *Flower Fables*, was a

collection of tales she wrote for Ellen Emerson, the daughter of Louisa's father's famous friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Flower Fables* was published in 1854. Most of her early books were collections of stories, mainly for children. She published her first novel, an adult book called *Moods*, in 1865.

In 1867, Louisa began working as an editor for a magazine of children's literature called *Merry's Museum*. By this time, she had published 10 books and numerous stories and poems in magazines, but she was not well known.

Then, Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers Publishing asked her to write a story for girls. That story would make her rich and famous.

Little Women

Louisa was hesitant to write a girls' story. She had always been a tomboy, and she did not know a lot of girls other than her own sisters. So, she decided to base her story on her family. Once she decided what to write, Louisa finished the book quickly. The entire story was completed in less than three months.

Louisa drew inspiration for many of the characters and places in her story from people and places she knew well.

"Marmee"	Louisa's mother
Mr. March	Louisa's father
Meg	sister Anna
Jo	Louisa herself
Beth	sister Elizabeth
Amy	sister May
John Brooke (Meg's husband)	John Pratt (Anna's husband)
Laurie	A combination of two of Louisa's friends
Mr. Lawrence	A combination of Louisa's grandfather and uncle
Aunt March	Louisa's Great-Aunt Hancock, wife of the famous politician John Hancock
Professor Bhaer	Family friend Ralph Waldo Emerson
Plumfield school	Bronson Alcott's Temple School

The story takes place in New England, where Alcott grew up. Many of the events that take place in the book also were lifted from Louisa's real life. Like Beth in *Little Women*, Louisa's sister Elizabeth died from scarlet fever at a young age. Jo earns extra money reading for an elderly neighbor, and Louisa did the same. The March sisters also amused themselves by writing and performing plays, just as the Alcott sisters did.

More Little Women: Sequels

Little Women was a tremendous success, selling 2,000 copies immediately upon its release in September, 1868. Readers begged for a sequel, causing Louisa to write *Little Women*, part 2, which she called *Good Wives*. Whereas the first part of *Little Women* deals with the March sisters coming of age, *Good Wives* sees them into adulthood and marriage. Part two originally published in April, 1869. Since then, both parts have published in one volume, simply titled *Little Women*. *Little Men*, published in 1871, discussed the boarding school called Plumfield that Jo ran with her husband.

Louisa took a break from the March family for a while, writing other stories for both children and adults. Just before her death, she wrote the final installment of the *Little Women* series. Published in 1886, *Jo's Boys* reunited graduates of Plumfield and told stories of their adventures in the world.

Several of Louisa May Alcott's unpublished writings have been discovered in her papers since her death. Other books and stories that she published anonymously or under pseudonyms also have been republished under her name. Publishers of this material often refer to Louisa as "Jo" in the book titles. For instance, some unpublished mystery stories were published in 1993 as *From Jo March's Attic: Stories of Intrigue and Suspense*. One hundred years earlier, some of the Alcott sisters' plays were published in a collection called *Comic Tragedies, Written by Jo and Meg, and Acted by the Little Women*.

Book Covers

[Teacher's Note: Covers for *Little Women* can be found by going to "Guided Search" (go to <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the "Search by Keyword" link, and click on "Guided Search" at the top of the page) and seeking Little Women (as a phrase) in the title field. Specify records to be "Displayed in Gallery" before clicking on "Search."]]

The book *Little Women* never has gone out of print. That means several editions of the book have been published over time, and the book covers all look different. This is a small sampling of book covers that appeared on editions of *Little Women* published between the first issuing in 1868 and the turn of the century.

As you can see, the early editions looked very similar. [Click on the first thumbnail. Enlarge the image by clicking on the largest of three boxes under it.] Because of the Civil War and Reconstruction, book covers in the 1860s usually were somber. The color of the materials was drab, and the decoration was plain. This book, for instance, has only the title of the book and the author's name stamped on the front in gold leaf, surrounded by a small, oval border. [Click on spine image.] The same design is on the spine of the book.

[Click "Results" to return to gallery view. Click on the first thumbnail in the second row.] Like the previous cover, this one also was published in 1869. However, this one was published in London, whereas the first one was published in Boston. *What differences do you see?* The color of the material is brighter; it is blue, rather than brown or green. The design is more intricate and

interesting. [\[Click on spine image.\]](#) There is more design on the spine. In fact, the spine is practically covered in gold leaf.

[\[Click “Results” to return to gallery view. Click on the last thumbnail in the first row.\]](#) This edition was published around 1880. *How is it different from the other two?* The title is printed in large type on the front, with the author’s name and the word “illustrated” printed in medium type. There are pictures of people—presumably the four March sisters—stamped in gold, rather than a generic design. There also is some black ink, rather than just gold. Stamping in black ink became popular in the 1870s, and many book binders used black and gold together at that time. [\[Click on spine image.\]](#) Black and gold are used together on the spine as well. Otherwise, the spine is much like the London edition from 1869.

[\[Click “Results” to return to gallery view. Click on the last thumbnail in the second row.\]](#) This edition is from 1891. *How is it different from the others?* The design of this cover is all black, with floral print and strong lines. This is known as the Eastlake style, which was popular at the end of the 19th century. [\[Click on spine image.\]](#) The spine is printed in black and gold. Notice the letters at the bottom of the spine. Those are the initials of the person who designed the book cover. In the 1890s, most book bindings were designed by professional artists, and they typically signed their work in this way.

Many more editions of *Little Women* have been published since the turn of the 20th century. If you went to a bookstore or library, you would find covers much different from those on editions published in the first few decades after the book was written.

Activity

As we have already learned, the Alcott sisters—and the March sisters—amused themselves by writing plays, searching their home for costumes and props, and then performing their work for family and friends.

[\[Read excerpt of *Little Women* in which the girls perform a play; see “Materials.”\]](#)

In this activity, students will gather in groups of four and spend class time writing a 10-minute skit. The topic of the skit can be drawn from their own experiences or total fiction. Each skit should have at least four characters, so that each student will have at least one role.

NOTE: If there is not enough class time to prepare sufficiently, a second class period may be set aside for writing and rehearsing the skit. Additional rehearsal also may be conducted outside of class.

HOMEWORK: Students should find at home the costumes and props for their play. Students must ask permission of their parents to bring these items to class. Students should NOT purchase these items; the Alcott sisters didn’t!

Groups will perform their skits during the next class session, using the costumes and props they found at home.