

Publishers' Bindings Online, 1815-1930: The Art of Books
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Sample Lesson Plan: Louisa May Alcott
Grades 9-12

Objectives:

Students will learn that Louisa May Alcott was famous for her children's books, she wrote numerous books and stories for adults as well. The lesson will be completed with the aid of the PBO bindings database.

*This lesson requires two class periods and out of class work.

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) One copy for each student of the following readings: Chapter 1, "Jane Muir," in "Behind a Mask, or A Woman's Power," available full text on-line at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/8677>; any story selected from "A Garden for Girls," available full text on-line at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/5830>.

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. A prominent Transcendentalist, her father was friends with famous writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Louisa spent some time with these men in her youth and began emulating their writing at an early age.

The Alcott family was poor, and Louisa vowed to do anything she could to help them. Although she got any job that would hire a woman, she was most passionate about writing. She began selling stories and poems to magazines in 1851. By 1854, she had begun to publish her stories in books.

Most of her early books were collections of stories for children. She is most famous for the book *Little Women*, published in 1868, and its sequels *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*. Other books she wrote for children included *An Old Fashioned Girl*, *Eight Cousins*, and *Rose in Bloom*.

But Miss Alcott had another side, a side about which most people didn't know until after she died. In this lesson, we will learn about the stories she wrote for adults, most of which were published anonymously or under pseudonyms during her life, or not published at all until after she died.

Moods

[Teacher's Note: 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. Type pbw00186 in the first search box. Click on "Search." Click on the thumbnail. Enlarge the image by clicking on the largest of three boxes under it.]

Louisa May Alcott's first novel, *Moods*, was published in 1864. Alcott first wrote the book in 1860, but had a hard time finding a publisher. She was told repeatedly to shorten it; publishers believed it was too long to sell as one volume, and that it would not sell well as two. Publishers also were wary because it took up a serious issue: What should a woman do when she discovers that she has married a man she cannot love?

Moods draws heavily on Alcott's experience in the Transcendentalist movement, in which she grew up thanks to her father. Many aspects of the novel were inspired by people, episodes, and ideas associated with the movement, including the book's title, which came from a passage in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Experience." Characters are based on Emerson, Thoreau, William Ellery Channing, and Margaret Fuller. The main character, Sylvia, is based on Alcott herself.

Alcott eventually sold the work to a publisher, and was convinced to shorten it considerably. It sold well, and two more editions were issued within a year. More than a decade later, the original publisher (A. K. Loring) sought to republish it because the success of *Little Women* made any book she wrote a hot commodity. Alcott was worried that reissuing *Moods* would damage her new reputation as the author of unexceptionably moral children's stories. She bought the copyright from the publisher and edited it extensively. This cover is from the revised edition, published in 1882 by Roberts Brothers.

A Modern Mephistopheles

[In "Guided Search," type pbw00251 in the first search box. Click on "Search." Click on the thumbnail.]

The fear of damaging her reputation also prevented Alcott from publishing the adult novel, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, under her own name. In fact, she published it anonymously. Her regular publisher, Roberts Brothers, first issued the book in 1877 as number six in its "No Name Series"—a collection of anonymous books by popular authors.

The lurid tale of lust, deception, greed, and drug abuse was actually a revision of a story Alcott called "A Modern Mephistopheles, or A Long Fatal Love Chase." When publishers initially rejected it, Alcott made extensive changes. The popular novel *A Modern Mephistopheles* was the result. The original story was published as *A Long Fatal Love Chase* in 1993, under Alcott's name.

The revision first surfaced with Alcott's name on the cover in 1889, when Roberts Brothers reprinted it along with another of Alcott's stories called "A Whisper in the Dark." This is the cover of that book. Published a year after her death, it not only credits the story to Alcott but also ties it to her children's book, *Little Women*.

The Mysterious Key, and What it Opened

[In “Guided Search,” type pbw00130 in the first search box. Click on “Search.” Click on the thumbnail.]

Many of the adult stories Alcott wrote were published either under pseudonyms or with her name disguised. Elliott, Tholmes & Talbot first published this book, *The Mysterious Key, and What it Opened*, under the name L. M. Alcott in 1867. It was part of the publisher’s “Ten-Cent Novelette” series. The thriller, which was organized into eight chapters, features a heroic villainess.

This copy is a 1902 paperback, published under Alcott’s full name. The story also was reprinted in the 1975 collection *Behind the Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*.

Others

Alcott wrote numerous other stories for adults. The only others that were published under her name were *Hospital Sketches* (1863), based on letters she wrote home while serving as a nurse during the Civil War, and *Work* (1873/1875), based on her experiences as a teacher, governess, and seamstress, among other jobs.

Many of her adult stories were published either as L.M. Alcott or A. M. Barnard. In fact, Alcott made quite a bit of money off of the Gothic thriller novels she wrote as Barnard. Other pen names she used included Flora Fairfield, Aunt Weedy, Oranthy Bluggage, and Minerva Moody.

Several of those stories, as well as adult stories Alcott never published, have been issued since her death in collections such as *Behind the Mask* (1975), *Plots and Counterplots: More Unknown Thrillers* (1976), *Hidden Louisa May Alcott* (1985), *Double Life: Newly Discovered Thrillers* (1988), *Freaks of Genius* (1991), and *From Jo March’s Attic: Stories of Intrigue and Suspense* (1993).

Full adult novels also have appeared since her death, including *Diana and Persis* (1978), *A Long Fatal Love Chase* (1995), and the first novel Alcott ever wrote, *The Inheritance* (1997).

Activity

As we have learned, Louisa May Alcott had two sides: the children’s author, for which she was famous, and the adult writer. In this activity we will compare one of her children’s stories with a story she wrote for adults.

[Distribute one copy of each reading to each student; see “Materials.”]

HOMEWORK: Students will read both selections and come to class the following session prepared to discuss the works.

Discussion

In the next class session, students will compare and contrast the two pieces by Louisa May Alcott that they have read. Students will discuss differences and similarities based on the following:

- General writing style
- Type of characters
- Action in the story
- Dialogue
- Setting
- Descriptions

Further discussion may be conducted based on the following questions:

- Which reading did students enjoy more? Why?
- Why might Louisa May Alcott have chosen not to use her own name when she published stories like “Behind a Mask?” (Consider the time period in which she wrote—the Victorian era, as well as the reputations of her and her family.)
- Given the reasons she would have written her adult stories anonymously or under pen names, why would the adult books have been so lucrative?
- Why is it important for current scholars of American literature to know that Louisa May Alcott was the actual writer of these works?
- Has your view of Louisa May Alcott changed? If so, how?