

Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind *Little Women*

INTRODUCTION

Louisa May Alcott is best known as the author of *Little Women*. Through the main character, Jo March, *Little Women* has charmed and empowered girls around the world. Reading *Little Women* inspired the literary careers of J.K. Rowling, Cynthia Ozick, Simone de Beauvoir, and a multitude of others. Prominent women such as Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and former First Lady and librarian Laura Bush cite *Little Women* as the most influential book of their childhoods. "You don't grow up to walk two steps behind your husband if you've met Jo March," a Korean woman said in a recent interview.

Few people realize that Louisa May Alcott was also a versatile and prolific writer of poetry, satire, novels, and sensational thrillers and that she lived a fascinating life at the center of the developments of her day. The story of her life is also the story of her times.

Alcott's work entertained not only her readers but also addressed the political, social, and cultural issues of her time. The study of her life affords deep insight into topics fundamental to secondary English, Women's Studies, and U.S. History curricula: the periods of Transcendentalism, the Civil War, and the Gilded Age, and the subjects of education and the antislavery and women's rights movements. Alcott's characters and Alcott herself had the same struggle students grapple with today, within their families and with the wider society--to find a balance between individuality and conformity that is compatible with independence, dependence, and interdependence. Like Louisa Alcott, students will ultimately arrive at their personal voice and the narrative of their experience. As she has done around the world and in more than fifty languages for over the 140 years since *Little Women* was published, Alcott can help young adults find their footing in society.

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT: THE WOMAN BEHIND LITTLE WOMEN

The lessons in this teacher guide are based upon the video, the book, and the website for *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women* (abbreviated as *LMA: TWBLW*). Directed by Nancy Porter, written by Harriet Reisen, and produced for *American Masters* on PBS, the documentary was named by *Booklist* as the Best Video of 2009. A book of the same title by Harriet Reisen was published by Henry Holt and Company and named by the *Wall Street Journal* as one of Ten Standout Books of 2009. *Booklist* ranked the biography among the Top Five Nonfiction Adult Books for Young Readers.

Both film and book draw extensively from primary sources. The film combines documentary and dramatic techniques to visualize life in the 19th century, and was filmed in several of the locations where the events took place. The book is a more detailed account of Louisa May Alcott's life, works, and times.

THE LESSON PLANS

A mix of media and teacher instruction helps students connect selected events of Alcott's life with their historical backdrop and with her works. Video clips from the film *Louisa*

May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women are provided with related discussion topics for teachers to adjust based on their classroom's curricula, educational level, and available time. Resources from the web and the book *LMA: TWBLW* provide background for teachers and the more motivated or advanced students. Students in class chart each event along a timeline (the graphic organizer) as a reference for writing assignments.

OBJECTIVES

- - to use viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret film clips.
- - to absorb and record information on Alcott's life and related writings.
- - to discuss Alcott's life and writing in the context of American history.
- - to deepen individual understanding by writing a journal entry as Alcott or another fictional, original, or historical character.

GRADE LEVELS

6-12

SUBJECT AREAS

U.S. History, English/Language Arts, Women's Studies

MATERIALS

- Video clips from the film, reference copies of the book, and website resources for *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*
- Handout blank timeline chart (graphic organizer): Louisa May Alcott (PDF file)
- Completed LMA graphic organizer for teacher's reference (PDF file)

CLASS TIME

The time needed for this lesson or lessons depends on the number of video clips and the length of discussions your class may require. All four clips could make one lesson with very brief discussions between each or following all. A sequence of two lessons could be based upon two clips per lesson, or four lessons based on one clip each.

Teachers should also consider using only clips pertinent to their curriculum – for example CLIP ONE (Transcendentalism) and CLIP FOUR (Civil War) for American History, or CLIP THREE (Work) and CLIP FOUR (Civil War Nurses) for Women's Studies.

Alcott's wide range of experiences can take a class in a number of directions.

VIDEO CLIPS

Clips from *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women* (84 minutes), some in the places she lived, provide students with an introduction to Alcott's life from childhood to death. In interviews, scholars describe Alcott in her historical context and evaluate her achievements and her legacy.

An Introductory Clip (Chapter One on the DVD) shows who Louisa was, what she was like, what she is known for, and what she achieved. Teachers should stop after the first minute and twenty seconds of the film.

Clip One, *Utopia*, Chapter Three on the DVD, shows Louisa as a ten year-old living in one of the ideal communities of the 1840s. It lasts six minutes and twenty-eight seconds.

Clip Two, *Happiest Years*, Chapter Four on the DVD, shows a thirteen year-old Louisa and her extraordinary education with mentors Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, two of the greatest minds of their day. It goes on for four minutes and sixteen seconds.

Clip Three, *Work*, Chapter Five on the DVD, picks up Louisa as a young woman trying to earn her own living while her family lives in the worst kind of poverty. Duration of the clip is five minutes and fifty-four seconds.

Clip Four, *War*, Chapter Seven on the DVD, traces Louisa's service as a nurse during the Civil War. The length of the clip is five minutes and forty-six seconds.

ACTIVITIES

INTRODUCING LOUISA MAY ALCOTT (*Meet Louisa* – DVD Chapter 1, stop at 1:20 when teen Louisa enters class)

Let Louisa introduce herself via video. Your class will learn that Louisa May Alcott was a 19th century writer, best known for *Little Women*, and hear a précis of that book. They'll discover that Alcott also wrote poetry, satire, anti-slavery stories, non-fiction and – under a pen name or anonymously – pulp fiction thrillers with shocking plots and shady characters.

Let the class know that through these activities they will learn about Alcott's experiences and their relationship to her work and her times, the 19th century in the periods before, during, and after the Civil War. You may want to read or display this passage from page 19 of the book *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*:

“In everything Louisa Alcott wrote she made use of the outward details and the hidden emotional currents of her life, and her life was no children's book. She knew not only family affection but also dangerous family disaffection; not just domestic toil but grueling manual labor; she knew gnawing hunger and the bloody aftermath of war. She was familiar with scenes of wealth and fashion from visits to privileged relatives, knew the famed sights of Europe from traveling as paid companion to a wealthy woman, and had vast vicarious experience from a lifetime of reading novels.”

Louisa May Alcott drew from her observations and experiences, her reading and her imagination. After learning about her, students will be asked to create a piece of writing drawing from the content and insight they have gained and their own resources of experience and imagination, as Louisa May Alcott did.

CLIP ONE: UTOPIA

Explain that in the 1830's and 1840's in New England, after the Puritan and Revolutionary eras, there was a new social and intellectual movement, transcendentalism.

[Chapter 2 of *LMA:TWBLW*, pp. 18-31, covers transcendentalism, reform movements, and Bronson Alcott's teaching career.]

Transcendentalism (sometimes called American Romanticism) valued individuals and their relations with each other over the community interest (which was ranked highest in the Puritan period) or family unit (as was stressed in the Revolutionary period). Transcendental groundbreakers, such as Louisa Alcott's father Bronson Alcott, and his friends Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Peabody, and Henry David Thoreau, looked for God not in churches or by following religious authority, but in nature, in children, and in themselves, relying on instinct, intuition, observation, imagination, and experience to reveal the basic truths of existence.

Most of the Transcendentalists felt strongly that the American Revolution was not finished as long as liberty and justice did not apply to more than half of all Americans – people held in slavery, and women (and other population categories) denied the vote. Alcott's parents and their friends supported the abolition of slavery, the expansion of the vote to all, and equal rights for women.

Alcott's father was an educator who believed children should be treated with respect. He taught through discussion rather than memorization. He instituted an honor system and allowed breaks for play at school - he thought play was important to learning. These were all radical ideas at the time. When Bronson Alcott admitted a black girl to his school in 1837 (a quarter-century before slavery ended in the South), his pupils left and his career as a teacher came crashing to an end.

[Chapter 6 of *LMA:TWBLW*, pp. 69-86, describes the Fruitlands venture and touches upon the Utopian communities Brook Farm and Oneida, and the Shakers and Mormons.]

A few years later (1843) Alcott's father and an Englishman, Charles Lane, set up an ideal (Utopian) community, Fruitlands, where all members would be one family and grow or make everything they needed. They were also vegetarians who didn't believe animals should be used for labor, which made farming very difficult. Alcott, who turned eleven at Fruitlands, later satirized the venture in "Transcendental Wild Oats."

Distribute the handout and help students fill in the first row, then show Clip 1. (You might remind students that all the dialogue in the film comes from primary sources – letters, journals, Alcott's writings and her father's, etc.)

Distribute and explain the handout and help students fill in the first row as you get ready to show CLIP ONE: UTOPIA (*Utopia* – DVD Chapter Three, 6:28 min.)

Discussion Ideas to follow Clip 1:

- What was valuable or important about the experiment at Fruitlands? Why did it [and other Utopias] fail?
- There was a power struggle among the adults at Fruitlands – Mrs. Alcott, Mr. Alcott, and Charles Lane. What tactics did they use? What was at stake?
- How did Fruitlands change Louisa May Alcott and help her find her goals in life?
- What does Louisa’s Fruitlands journal reveal about her feelings and experiences while at Fruitlands? When she wrote about them in “Transcendental Wild Oats?” 30 years later how had they changed? [How had America attitudes and life changed during those years to make Utopian movements seem quaint and laughable? Teachers can bring up industrialization, urbanization, the Civil War, and the development of mass culture.]

CLIP TWO: HAPPIEST YEARS (DVD Chapter Four, 4:16 min.)

After their experience at Fruitlands, you tell the class, the Alcott family moved back to Concord, Massachusetts where their closest friends and neighbors were some of the great thinkers of the day. Ralph Waldo Emerson lived across the street, and Nathaniel Hawthorne lived down the road. Henry David Thoreau dropped in nearly every day, and often invited Louisa and her sisters to come along on his famed nature walks.

[Chapter 7 of *LMA:TWBLW*, pp. 87-106, covers these years.]

Later, Alcott would base characters on Emerson and Thoreau in her first novel, *Moods*, and again cast Thoreau in *Little Men* and *Work*. She used the incidents from the lives of the four sisters at this time in *Little Women*. Show Clip 2 and have students continue to complete the handout.

Discussion Ideas:

- What did Louisa Alcott learn from Emerson and Thoreau?
- How did she feel about them?
- How would you feel if someone based a character in a book on you?

CLIP THREE: A STRUGGLING WRITER (DVD Chapter Five, 5:54 min.)

Explain to the class that Alcott’s father was focused on living out his ideals without compromise, and did not earn enough to support the family, which put a heavy burden on his wife and daughters. The Alcotts moved more than 30 times as their fortunes went up and (mostly) down. Louisa Alcott was determined to put an end to her family’s poverty. She took on whatever jobs she could find—as a seamstress, teacher, governess, a live-in household servant, and as a laundress, stirring dirty clothing in heavy kettles heated by open fires.

[Chapter 8 of *LMA:TWBLW*, pp. 107-125, covers these years]

Hoping to escape the misery, poverty, and limited choices of working women of the day, and to help her family, she tried acting and playwriting, and began selling short stories for five or ten dollars. “I mean to take Fate by the throat and shake a living out of her,”

she wrote, “by “turning my brains into stories.” She wrote about her low-paying jobs in “How I Went Out to Service” and *Work: A Story of Experience*, and gave the jobs to characters in many of her short stories and thrillers. Show Clip 3 and have students continue to complete the handout.

Discussion Ideas:

- What was Louisa Alcott’s role in her family?
- What do you think Alcott’s experiences tell you about the social and economic position of women in the 19th century? What were their options and limitations?
- How did Alcott’s experiences influence her writing? How was it different to be a seamstress, a laundress, a household servant, or a nurse in Louisa’s day?
- If you had to support your family, what would you consider doing?

CLIP FOUR: WAR (DVD Chapter Seven, 5 min 46 secs)

Continue by telling students that when the Civil War broke out, Louisa wanted to be a soldier but could serve the cause of abolition of slavery only as a nurse. She wrote about her experiences tending wounded soldiers in *Hospital Sketches*. Show Clip 4 and have students continue to complete the handout.

[Chapter 11 of *LMA:TWBLW*, pp. 168-182, covers these years]

7. Tell students that Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches* was Louisa’s first bestseller. She learned that realism and truth gave her writing power and her voice as a writer, but she could make more money by secretly writing pulp fiction thrillers. The pen name she used for five of those stories – A.M. Barnard – was not discovered until decades after her death. Writing stories for young readers became even better paid. Alcott edited a children’s magazine, then wrote *Little Women*, an account of the four Alcott sisters’ adolescence and young womanhood. *Little Women* became hugely popular through much of the world, and made Louisa Alcott rich and famous. To keep the money rolling in for her family, she continued to write almost exclusively for children.

Discussion Ideas:

- How would you feel about working in an Army hospital very near the fighting?
- What role could someone like Alcott play in reform movements such as abolition and women’s rights?
- What changes in American life occurred during Louisa May Alcott’s lifetime? (Note: You may want to refer to the online [timeline](http://alcottfilm.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/timeline.swf) (<http://alcottfilm.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/timeline.swf>) for this part of the discussion. Key events in Alcott’s life are noted alongside major historical events of the 19th Century. Consider developments that affected daily life, such as the spread of the railroads, the flatbed printing press, and the telegraph, all critical to the new mass culture that delivered Louisa’s work to a large audience.)
- As a child Louisa vowed to become rich, famous, and happy. Was she successful? What is success?

8. Tell students that throughout her life Alcott kept journals, making a record of herself and her times. For homework, have students write a journal entry.

U.S. History students should write as Alcott at a particular time in her life. Have each take her through a day, including historical details of ordinary life, issues of the day, and people she knew who were important at the time. For preparation, students can use the details on their handouts, refer to *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*, and conduct additional research.

English students should write a journal entry from the perspective of a fictional character. Alcott developed characters based on people she knew or read about and made them realistic. Students should seek their own narrative voice by creating a fictional character the way Alcott did, provide details of the character in the social and historical context, and then write about a problem or challenge the character faces.

9. Provide an assignment deadline based on the abilities of your students.

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students can be assessed on:

- the quality and amount of information on their graphic organizer.
- their participation in class discussions.
- the quality of their journal entries.

EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS

- Study the inner conflict frequently experienced by women in Alcott's stories: choosing between individuality and independence on one hand, and the companionship and security that came with the responsibilities of marriage and domesticity on the other. For example *Work: A Story of Experience* and *Rose in Bloom* feature young women who develop inner strength through hardship, then find satisfaction through careers rather than marriage. In *Jo's Boys*, the character Nan chooses a career in medicine over marriage, but Bess and Josie give up their careers to marry. Jo March in *Little Women* surrenders her independence to marry Professor Bhaer and to nurture the next generation. Alcott herself chose to remain an independent spinster. Read the three-page essay "[Happy Women](http://books.google.com/books?id=MBjPbrWzBDwC&pg=PA40&lpg=PA40&dq=%22Happy+Women%22+Louisa+Alcott&source=bl&ots=Nm2Y07Hq2I&sig=_bRZsEIDLion1RdM40lwcYrRSb4&hl=en&ei=O-8RS6qHKsmOlAerr_jvDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CBIQ6AEwA#v=onepage&q=%22Happy%20Women%22%20Louisa%20Alcott&f=false)" (http://books.google.com/books?id=MBjPbrWzBDwC&pg=PA40&lpg=PA40&dq=%22Happy+Women%22+Louisa+Alcott&source=bl&ots=Nm2Y07Hq2I&sig=_bRZsEIDLion1RdM40lwcYrRSb4&hl=en&ei=O-8RS6qHKsmOlAerr_jvDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CBIQ6AEwA#v=onepage&q=%22Happy%20Women%22%20Louisa%20Alcott&f=false) to see Alcott's case for the single life. What advantages and disadvantages are there for a 19th Century woman who chooses not to marry? Based on the women in her stories, would students consider Alcott a feminist? Why or why not? Do women face the same inner conflict about independence and

family today?

- Investigate how Alcott's writing advanced her abolitionist agenda by reading one or more of her anti-slavery stories: "M.L.," "An Hour," and "The Brothers" (later published as "My Contraband"). These works and two others are available in *Louisa May Alcott on Race, Sex, and Slavery* (with an excellent introduction by Sarah Elbert). "An Hour" and "My Contraband" can also be found free online as part of *Hospital Sketches and Camp and Fireside Stories* (<http://www.archive.org/stream/hospitalsketches00alco#page/n7/mode/2up>). Discuss how Alcott's stories both reflected American culture in the 1860's and were ahead of their time. Then, ask students to write a review about one of the stories. Consider offering the [tips for writing reviews](http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/bookrev/tips.htm) at (<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/bookrev/tips.htm>) as a resource. Finally, invite students to publish their reviews online, for instance on the Amazon.com page or on a class blog.
- Follow Alcott's example and write a fictional story or develop a play based on personal observations and experiences, imagination, and/or characters and plots from their favorite books. To get started, the class might think about some of the [writing prompts](http://home.earthlink.net/~jhholly/pnarrative.html) at (<http://home.earthlink.net/~jhholly/pnarrative.html>) and then brainstorm some details about a specific experience. It may also be helpful for students to review a [guide for writing personal narratives](http://www.essortment.com/all/personalnarrarucuc.htm) (<http://www.essortment.com/all/personalnarrarucuc.htm>). Have students create their drafts and then ask a classmate to review and provide feedback on it. Students can then make revisions and submit a final draft. Consider giving extra credit for sharing stories or putting on plays for the class.
- Explore the range of genres Alcott wrote in. Have students read three shorter works available free online:
 - [Transcendental Wild Oats](http://www.classicauthors.net/Alcott/trancendental) (<http://www.classicauthors.net/Alcott/trancendental>) – a fictionalized satire on her family's life in a 19th-century Utopian community
 - [Hospital Sketches](http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/3837) (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/3837>) – an account of Alcott's time spent as an army nurse during the Civil War
 - [Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power](http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/8677) (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/8677>) – a thriller Alcott wrote under a pseudonym.

Possible discussion questions might be: Which text did students enjoy most.

Why?

What aspects of 19th Century culture stand out in each piece? What type of audience would be most interested in each piece during the 19th Century? Today? Have students create illustrations for these works that reflect the cultural details they identify, or pick a genre and try to write a paragraph in its style.

- Examine Alcott's connections to the political, social and intellectual movements of her time. Ask the class to read work of Alcott's contemporaries.

- “Self Reliance,” an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson, resonates with adolescents.
<http://books.google.com/books?id=IqU3YwfgzZUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=self-reliance+emerson&cd=2#v=onepage&q=&f=false>
Another Emerson essay to consider is “Nature,” which made him famous. (<http://www.archive.org/details/naturemunroe00emerrich>), “Nature” was deeply influenced by conversations with Bronson Alcott and a reading of his journals; the “Orphic Poet” at the end is Bronson Alcott.
- “Walking” by Henry David Thoreau. This essay was the one Thoreau read to groups. Harriet Reisen, author of the biography used in this lesson, believes that the unnamed female companion might be the young Louisa Alcott. See whether students agree.
(<http://www.transcendentalists.com/walking.htm>)
- *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Though lengthy, the novel has not lost the power to shock and engross the reader.
(<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/StoCabi.html>)
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave by Frederick Douglass
(<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/>).
- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, edited by Lydia Maria Child, a childhood friend of Abigail May Alcott. This powerful book deserves to be better known; it has the impact of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Elie Weisel’s *Night*.
(<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JACOBS/hj-site-index.htm>)

Louisa knew all of these authors personally. Have students role-play the author of the selection, or simply describe the chosen reading, emphasizing incidents and ideas relevant to Alcott’s life and work. Break up the class into groups to undertake research on the chosen author’s life and historical context, then have them discuss how these writers influenced Alcott’s ideas and writing. Students can be assigned to organize their ideas in persuasive essays.

RESOURCES

About Louisa May Alcott

<http://www.classicauthors.net/Alcott/>

The Classicauthors.net site provides a free online collection of Alcott’s work. Other places to find Alcott’s writings online include [Project Gutenberg](http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/a#a102)

(<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/a#a102>) and [The Literature Network](http://www.online-literature.com/alcott/)

(<http://www.online-literature.com/alcott/>), which also provides a brief biography.

Living the Legacy: The Women’s Rights Movement 1848-1998

<http://www.legacy98.org/move-hist.html>

This text outlines 150 years of the history of the Women’s Rights Movement from 1848-1998.

LouisaMayAlcott.net

<http://louisamayalcott.net/>

Find details related to the biographical film and book used in this lesson plan, plus an overview of Alcott's life, the biography through the first chapter, video clips not on the American Masters on PBS site, an interactive timeline, an annotated list of key Alcott works, and a picture gallery.

Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/louisa-may-alcott/the-woman-behind-little-women/1295/>

The American Masters website features the film used in this lesson plan and provides additional resources, including a video discussion with the director and writer, extended interviews with the commentators, and clips.

Socratic Seminars

<http://www.greece.k12.ny.us/instruction/ela/SocraticSeminars/overview.htm>

This site provides a careful outline of how to conduct Socratic seminars, a pedagogical approach favored by Branson Alcott and used in Louisa's education.

Transcendentalism

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/>

This article from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes the Transcendentalist movement, its origins, history, chief figures and works.

STANDARDS

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Behavioral Studies, Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity and behavior.

Historical Understanding, Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 6: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.

Language Arts, Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

U.S. History, Standard 12: Understands the sources and character of cultural, religious, and social reform movements in the antebellum period.

U.S. History, Standard 14: Understands the course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people.

U.S. History, Standard 17: Understands massive immigration after 1870 and how new social patterns, conflicts, and ideas of national unity developed amid growing cultural diversity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, Cari Ladd with Harriet Reisen

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's Director of Education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource Website (now PBS Teachers), and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.

Harriet Reisen is the producer and writer of the American Masters PBS documentary *Louisa May Alcott, the Woman Behind Little Women* (Nancy Porter, producer and director), and the author of the Henry Holt biography of the same title.