

Louisa May Alcott

Looking at Life in Concord, MA through the Eyes of
the Alcott and March Sisters

1840 through 1870

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Louisa May Alcott – Author Study and Historical Fiction Guided Reading Unit

Introduction

Grade three students will be introduced to Louisa May Alcott through a number of age appropriate lessons. Students will participate in a number of activities: in small reading groups they will read abridged versions of **Little Women**, take a virtual field trip to the Orchard House, play an historical board game and be exposed to vocabulary of the time period, compare their lives to the lives of the March sisters, and choose a final project that will assess their understanding of Louisa May Alcott.

Unit Essential Questions

Throughout the lesson plans teachers can visit and revisit the following essential questions:

- Why is Louisa May Alcott an important figure in Massachusetts's history?
- What was life like in Concord, MA during Louisa May Alcott's life?

The essential questions are based on several Grade 3 Massachusetts History and Social Study Standards. Under the Grade 3 Concepts and Skills students will:

2. Observe visual sources such as historic paintings, photographs, or illustrations that accompany historical narratives, and describe details such as clothing, setting, or action. Students will read the historical fiction, Little Women, as well as look at artifacts through a website, and discuss vocabulary of the time throughout this unit.

3. Observe and describe local or regional historic artifacts and sites and generate questions about their function, construction, and significance. This standard will be utilized during the students' virtual fieldtrip in Lesson One and again when playing the historical board game, Mansion of Happiness, from 1843.

Under the Grade 3 Learning Standards students will:

3.7 After reading a biography of a person from Massachusetts (Louisa May Alcott is listed under the arts) summarize the person's life and achievements.

3.9 Identify historic buildings, monuments, or sites in the area (Concord, MA) and explain their purpose and significance.

3.12 Explain how objects or artifacts of everyday life in the past tell us how ordinary people lived and how everyday life has changed. Draw on the services of the local historical society and local museums as needed.

Historical Context and Background

Louisa May Alcott was born on November 29, 1832 in Germantown, PA. Her family moved to Concord, MA in 1840 where she spent most of her childhood. Her parents, Bronson and Abigail (Abba) Alcott were intellectual, progressive people who believed in daily stimulation and challenge for their four children. Bronson was an educator and lecturer. Abba was one of Massachusetts's first social workers.

Concord was a hub of intellectuals at the time of Louisa's childhood. Her parents were part of the American Transcendentalists group along with other famous contemporaries. This group included family friends: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller. Louisa had unlimited access to Emerson's personal library, spent hours walking in the local woods with Thoreau and considered Fuller a mentor. It was a fertile environment for Louisa's need for adventure and stimulus. For a few years the family lived in a utopian commune, Fruitlands, in Harvard, MA but eventually returned to Concord.

Louisa and her three sisters, Anna, Elizabeth and May grew up with the encouragement to be conscientious, bright and creative. The girls kept daily writing journals that their parents would critique and support. They also would write dramatic skits that they would perform for family and friends. Louisa was imaginative, active and creative as a child. Even though her parents were supportive of her individuality, Louisa's high energy and curiosity would often get her into trouble. Bronson built a desk for her to support her daily writing. From this desk, she would eventually write her tale, **Little Women**.

Throughout his life Bronson had difficulty supporting his family because of his progressive ideas about education and his poor financial skills. As a result, Abba and the girls worked to help support the family. Louisa took many jobs including teacher, seamstress, cook and servant to contribute to the family finances. She also started to send her writing to publishers. She wrote under many pen names. She had different pen names for different genres of writing. She wrote fairy tales, stories for children and for adults. She was immediately successful as a writer.

In 1868, **Little Women** was written at the insistence of her publisher. He requested that she write a girl story. In two and a half months, she wrote the semi-autobiographical story about four girls growing up in Concord. The story was popular because for the first time it depicted the realistic daily life of the adolescent. She later wrote **The Good Wives**, **Little Men** and **Jo's Boys** chronicling the girls' lives as adults.

Louisa became a very successful writer. As an adult she was able to sustain her family and support herself. There were times that she lived alone to write in solitude. For most of her adult life, she stayed with and cared for her family. She adopted many of her parents causes especially education reform, feminism and women's suffrage. She was the first woman to vote in Concord. During the Civil War, she volunteered as a nurse in Washington, D. C. She became ill with typhoid fever and would remain in poor health until her death in 1888. She is buried on Author's Ridge in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, MA.

Unit Objectives

Through a number of lessons and activities students will have a better understanding of life in the mid 1800's. They will learn about Louisa May Alcott and her family. Third graders will read an abridged version of **Little Women**. Students will observe and compare life in Concord, MA in the 1860's to their modern life today. While playing the historical board game, **Mansion of Happiness**, students will become familiar with some of the vocabulary of the time. Lastly, students will demonstrate their understanding of the time period by choosing a writing assignment, an art assignment, or a combination of both.

Teachers should continue to revisit the essential questions of the unit:

- Why is Louisa May Alcott an important figure in Massachusetts history?
- What was life like in Concord, MA during Louisa May Alcott's life?

The questions should be raised and discussed several times throughout the unit. They can be used as prompts throughout the readings or to start or end each lesson.

Lesson Plan One: Louisa May Alcott: Introduction and Historical Background Lesson

Duration of Lesson: 2-3 Library Lessons

Essential Questions:

- Why is Louisa May Alcott an important figure in Massachusetts's history?
- What was life like in Concord, MA during Louisa May Alcott's life?

Learning Objectives:

Students will learn about and research the life and times of Louisa May Alcott using technology and resources available in the library media center. Students will acquire and practice research and note-taking skills.

Background Information:

The third grade students are learning about Louisa May Alcott in the classroom and in the library. This lesson introduces students to the historical background and time period of the Alcott family using the following website:

Welcome to Orchard House –Home of the Alcotts (Orchard House website)
<http://www.louisamayalcott.org/alcottorchard.html>

Materials:

- Computer Lab
- Smart Board
- Website: <http://www.louisamayalcott.org/alcottorchard.html>
- Books: Little Women by Louisa May Alcott retold by Deanna McFadden
Little Women by Louisa May Alcott adapted by Monica Kulling
- Note-taking worksheets (attached)

Lesson:

- Introduce the unit in library and the classroom through a collaborative introduction through discussion and book displays.
- Introduce and post the Essential Questions in the library and the classroom.
- Introduce Louisa May Alcott and solicit prior knowledge from students.
- Inform students of the lesson in the computer lab using the Smart Board and the computers.
- Review website and lesson.
- Review note-taking instructions for pictures lesson and for text lesson.

- Introduce the time period of Louisa May Alcott by using the Orchard House website to acquire knowledge and research skills.
- Solicit student knowledge of Louisa May Alcott and the Orchard House at the conclusion of each daily lesson.

Learning Outcome:

Students will learn about History and Social Science using the curriculum about Louisa May Alcott.

Students will develop and practice research skills.

Students will develop computer technology skills.

Student will practice ELA skills using the interactive Smart Board and the website with support from the library media specialist.

Name _____

Date _____

Little Women and the Orchard House

<http://www.louisamayalcott.org/>

Click: *Alcotts and Orchard House* (see sidebar)

Click: *Tour the Rooms of Orchard House*

Take notes on the pictures of each room.

Take at least three (3) notes on each picture.

Start each note with a bullet (.).

Start each note on a separate line.

1. Study: _____

2. Kitchen: _____

3. Dining Room: _____

4. Parlor: _____

5. Louisa's Chamber: _____

6. May Alcott's Chamber: _____

7. Parents' Chamber: _____

Name _____

Date _____

Little Women and the Orchard House

<http://www.louisamayalcott.org/>

Click: *Alcotts and Orchard House* (see sidebar)

Click: *Tour the Rooms of Orchard House*

Go back to each room. Read about each room.

Now take notes on the text.

Take at least three (3) notes on each room.

Start each note with a bullet (.).

Start each note on a separate line.

1. Study: _____

2. Kitchen: _____

3. Dining Room: _____

4. Parlor: _____

5. Louisa's Chamber: _____

6. May Alcott's Chamber: _____

7. Parents' Chamber: _____

Lesson Plan Two – The Mansion of Happiness

Essential Questions:

- Why is Louisa May Alcott an important figure in Massachusetts's history?
- What was life like in Concord, MA during Louisa May Alcott's life?

Learning Objectives: Students will play a board game developed in the time period that Louisa May Alcott grew up. Students will understand that this was the first board game and one that literate children and adults of the time period might play. Students will be exposed to vocabulary of this time period and learn some of the definitions. Young students may not be able to define the words by game end, but should be able to understand if the word had a positive or negative meaning.

Background Information: “In 1843 W. and S.B. Ives of Boston introduced the Mansion of Happiness, one of the first board games published in the United States. The goal of the game was to be the first player to reach the “Mansion of Happiness”, or heaven by passing virtues and vices along a 66 space of life.

By the 1830s the hardships of the colonial era and early Republic had given way to increasing prosperity. Industrialization moved families into cities and changed the roles children played within the home. Parents particularly mothers became responsible for teaching children expectations of learning, religious piety, and personal appearance.

These attitudes combined with a new middle class and advances in papermaking, printing technology assured a lucrative market for board games.”¹

Materials:

- Laminated game board, taken from poster purchased from the following site: <http://stores.ebay.com/ArtCantHurtU>
- Rules for game (attached scan)
- Dice
- Game pieces, buttons or coins, etc.
- List of definitions (attached scan)

¹ Teaching Success Through Play: American Board and Table Games, 1840-1900, Magazine Antiques, Jennifer Jenson
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1026/is_6_160/ai_80864307/pg_1

Lesson:

1. Review the 22 vocabulary words that students will be using. Explain to students that they are not yet familiar with most of these words, but after a few rounds of the game should understand whether the word had a positive meaning or negative meaning during the time period that March sisters would have played this game (1860s) or the Alcott sisters (1840s – 1850s). (20 minutes)
2. Share the rules of the game (attached) (5 minutes)
3. Create a chart that separates words into move forward, backward, or stay the same as the game is being played. See attached chart (20 minutes)

Assessment: A formal assessment would be to provide a word splash of vocabulary and have students recreate the chart that they used as they played the game. Did the words have a negative, positive, or neither meaning?

An informal assessment would be to let the students play the again without an adult and observe if they understand the rules and language without the support of the written rules and definitions.

Name _____ Date _____

Chart for Vocabulary - Mansion of Happiness

Words that move you forward

To where/how many

1. _____ →→→→ _____

2. _____ →→→→ _____

3. _____ →→→→ _____

4. _____ →→→→ _____

5. _____ →→→→ _____

6. _____ →→→→ _____

7. _____ →→→→ _____

8. _____ →→→→ _____

9. _____ →→→→ _____

10. _____ →→→→ _____

Words that send you back

To where/how many

1. _____ →→→→ _____

2. _____ →→→→ _____

3. _____ →→→→ _____

4. _____ →→→→ _____

5. _____ →→→→ _____

6. _____ →→→→ _____

7. _____ →→→→ _____

8. _____ →→→→ _____

9. _____ →→→→ _____

10. _____ →→→→ _____

Lesson Plan Three: Comparison of Life: 1860's vs. Today

Essential Questions:

The essential questions from the unit are displayed in the classroom and the library. The questions will be reviewed at the beginning of the lesson.

- Why is Louisa May Alcott an important figure in Massachusetts's history?
- What was life like in Concord, MA during Louisa May Alcott's life?

Learning Objectives:

Students will demonstrate knowledge acquired during and/or after reading **Little Women**. Students will also draw from background knowledge acquired during Lesson One and Lesson Two. A Venn diagram format will be used to compare and contrast life during the mid 1800's vs. life today.

Materials:

Depending on reading level one of the following abridged versions of **Little Women**:
Alcott, Louisa May, Little Women. Retold by Deanna McFadden. New York: Sterling Publishing, Co., 2005.

Alcott, Louisa May, Little Women. Adapted by Monica Kulling. New York: Random House, 1994.

Venn diagram worksheet (attached) *Note: Print in landscape format*

Lesson:

This comprehension tool can be used during the reading of **Little Women**, either at the end of each chapter or after reading a couple of chapters; or it can be as a cumulative comprehension assessment after the entire book has been read.

- Students work individually or pair students based on learning abilities.
- Explain the Venn diagram worksheet.
- Students will compare life in the 1860's (time period of **Little Women**) to their lives today.
- Students will utilize information acquired during reading to complete the worksheet.
- Students will draw on information from Lesson One and Lesson Two.
- Students may refer to their note-taking sheets and their game vocabulary sheets from the prior lessons in the unit.

Assessment:

Rubric (attached) *Note: Print in landscape format*

Name _____

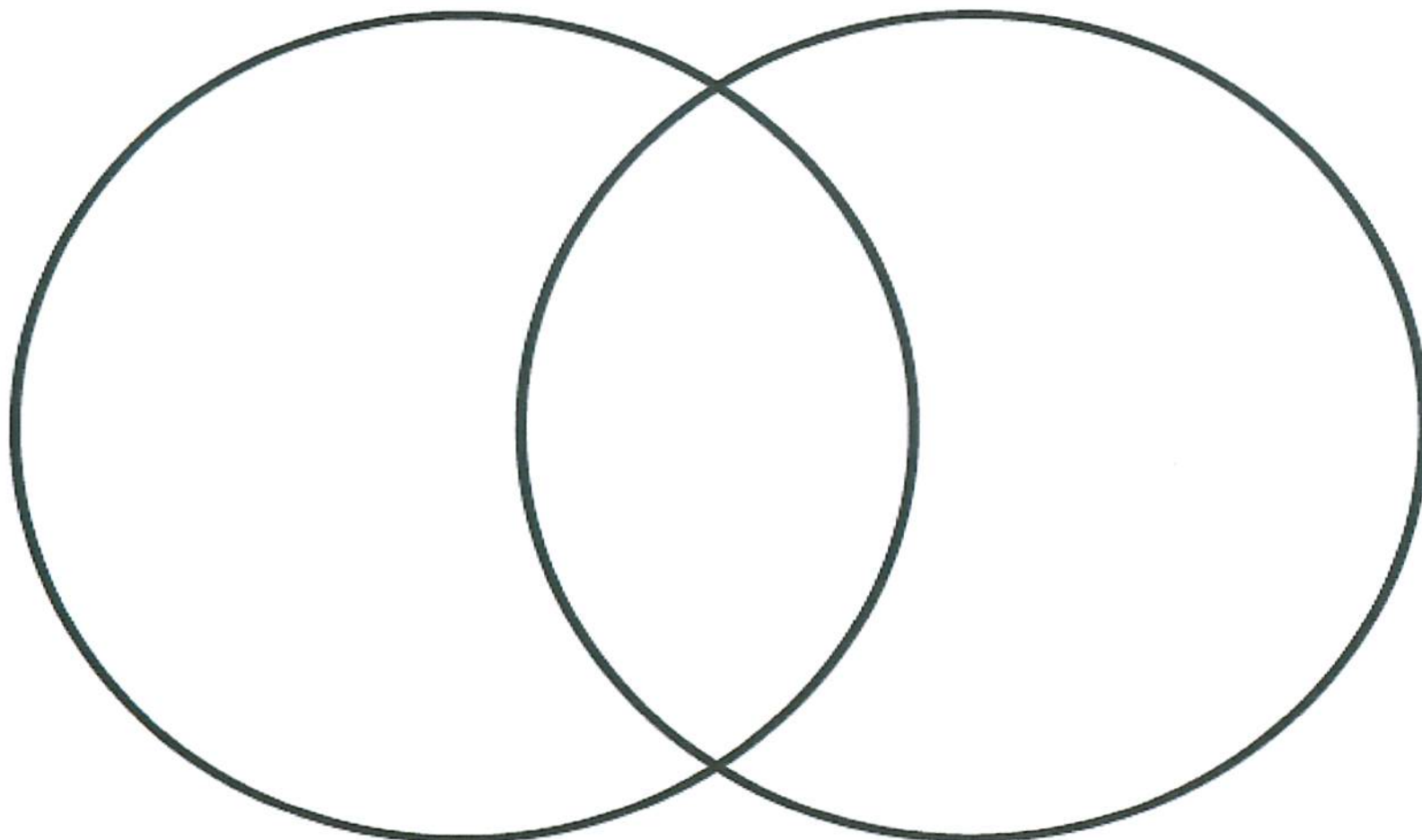
Date _____

Little Women

Show the similarities and differences between life in the 1860's and today. Refer to the Map of Happiness game and notes from the Orchard House website for information.

1860's (in Louisa's day)

Today



Lesson Plan Four – Little Women Final Project

Learning Objectives:

The essential questions from the unit will be revisited and assessed.

- Why is Louisa May Alcott an important figure in Massachusetts's history?
- What was life like in Concord, MA during Louisa May Alcott's life?

This assessment will be used to determine if students understood the place and time of **Little Women** along with main character and main events of the story.

Materials:

Worksheet describing each job (attached)

Rubric (attached)

Classic Starts: Little Women, Retold from the Louisa May Alcott original or

Stepping Stones: Little Women by Louisa May Alcott adapted by Monica Kulling

Lesson: Assign roles based on learning ability and/or interest of each student. Go over criteria. Each project must include an illustration or description that is relevant to the time period. It must also be a significant scene or event from the book or from Louisa May Alcott's life. Students must be prepared to discuss their project.

Assessment:

Rubric (attached)

Name _____ Date _____

*To complete our discussion in your reading group of **Little Women** by Louisa May Alcott, there will be a final book project. Please choose one of the following jobs and complete it for our next meeting. Come prepared to discuss what you have done and why you chose the format. Your job must be completed by _____.*

Essential Questions:

- Why is Louisa May Alcott an important figure in Massachusetts's history?
- What was life like in Concord, MA during Louisa May Alcott's life?

Postcard designer – Create a postcard sent by one of the characters in the book.

The illustration/picture side should be from a site in Massachusetts. It should be written as if your character was visiting the site during their lifetime. (Some suggestions would be: Boston/The Charles River, Walden Pond, Fruitlands, etc.) Be prepared to share with the group.

Journal Entry - Louisa May Alcott and her sisters kept daily journals.

Choose your favorite character in the book, **Little Women**, and write a journal entry. It should represent a day in the life of the time period. It should be at least three paragraphs. Be prepared to share it with the group.

Predictor – Louisa May Alcott wrote many stories and plays as a young girl.

Write a short story or play about what happens next in the story, **Little Women**. You should include one of the main characters and an event that was possible given the time period. It should be at least three paragraphs. Be prepared to read it to the group.

Artist – Louisa May Alcott's sister was a talented artist and a lot of her artwork is displayed at Old Orchard House.

Recreate a scene from the book, **Little Women**. Use lots of color with pencils or paint. Remember to represent the time period in the picture and write a short caption about the illustration. Be prepared to discuss your art with the group.

Name _____ Date _____

Rubric for Louisa May Alcott Study

Final Assessment

Creativity 1 2 3 4

Historically Accurate 1 2 3 4

Presentation/ 1 2 3 4

Discussion of Questions

On Time 1 2 3 4

Total points _____

14 – 16 = A

12 – 14 = B

6 – 12 = C

References:

Websites:

<http://projects.edtech.sandi.net/kimbrough/pilgrimlife/venndiagramrubric.html>

www.teach-nology.com

<http://stores.ebay.com/ArtCantHurtU>

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1026/is_6_160/ai_80864307/pg_1

<http://www.louisamavalcott.org/alcottorchard.html>

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1999/1/99.01.06.x.html>

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

Books:

Alcott, Louisa May, Little Women. Retold by Deanna McFadden. New York: Sterling Publishing, Co., 2005.

Alcott, Louisa May, Little Women. Adapted by Monica Kulling. New York: Random House, 1994.

Brooks, Geraldine, March. New York: Viking, 2005.

Encyclopedias:

Tharp, Louise Hall. "Alcott, Louisa May". The New Book of Knowledge. 2003 ed.