Little Women: Civil War Literature Lesson Plan Teaching Guide

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What does this classic novel reveal about the Northern Home Front during the American Civil War?

OVERVIEW

In 1868 and 1869, Louisa May Alcott published her novel, *Little Women*. It became an instant bestseller and a classic. The story of the four March sisters opens in Civil War era Massachusetts as the girls grapple with the reality of their father away from home and the struggles of growing up and taking responsibilities. Often seen as semi-autobiographical, Alcott drew on her and her sisters' own experiences along with her weeks of volunteering in a military hospital in Civil War Washington D.C. The book is often praised for its warm-hearted adventures and misadventures while showing an array of opportunities and hopes for women's futures.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, the students will be able to:

1. Knowledge
    - Students will be able to briefly describe the home front during the American Civil War.
    - Students will also note some of the experiences of young girls on the northern home front.
2. Comprehension/Application/Analysis
    - Read a summary of *Little Women* and read an excerpt from the novel; then answer inquiry questions to explore the home front history included in the story.
3. Evaluation
    - Discuss observations from and about the historic novel and evaluate as a class what it tells us about the American Civil War's impact on the northern home front.

ACTIVITIES

1. Use the Lesson Plan's PowerPoint to explore the context and history.
2. As a class or in groups read this article Little Women (from Lit Chart) for the story plot and context.
3. As a class or in groups, read one of the excerpts from *Little Women*.
    - Chapter 1
    - Chapter 15
    - Chapter 24
4. Distribute the primary source worksheet and have students fill out their answers. (Or use the questions for verbal discussion.)
5. Encourage a class discussion about *Little Women* and literature.
    - Is the Home Front part of a war?

- Is the Civil War the focus in *Little Women*? How does a military or political happening in the "background" affect life?
- What is a coming-of-age story? Do you have a favorite book with this theme?
- From the excerpts (or if you've read the book or watched a film version), which March sister is your favorite character? Why?
- Can you think of a "famous" woman from the Civil War era? What did she do during the conflict?
- Alcott wrote Little Women for children to read. Do you think war should be included in children's literature (even in the background)? Why or why not?

STANDARDS

Please visit the Lesson Plan Page and select the "Common Core and NCSS Standards for Social Studies" to view the details.

RESOURCES

Visit the Lesson Plan Page to find all resources in one convenient place. You'll find everything mentioned or linked in this Lesson Plan along with additional videos, articles, primary sources, and biographies.

Quick Links

- PowerPoint
- Little Women Summary – Lit Chart
- Lesson Plan Worksheet
- Little Women: Chapter 1
- Little Women: Chapter 15
- Little Women: Chapter 24 Excerpts

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK/ASSESSMENT/ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:

Option 1: Louisa May Alcott's Civil War

Alcott journeyed to Washington DC and worked as a nurse in a military hospital during the winter of 1862-1863. She later wrote about her experiences in stories published under the title *Hospital Sketches*. Individually or in groups, students can read Chapter 3 from Hospital Sketches and make notes about Alcott's work, her challenges, and how humor helped her through challenging moments. Then, watch the In4Minute video and compare Alcott's experiences to examples of other women's work during the Civil War.

- Hospital Sketches: Chapter 3
- In4Minutes: Women and the Civil War
- "A record of the personal services of our American women in the late Civil War" (extra primary source for comparison)