

Little Women
by Louisa May Alcott

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Clare Kearns



TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introduction	3
Quick Card	5
Questions about Structure: Setting	6
Questions about Structure: Characters	8
Questions about Structure: Conflict and Plot	20
Questions about Structure: Theme	24
Questions about Style	27
Questions about Context	31
Suggestions for Writing Assignments	33
Story Charts	34

INTRODUCTION



CenterForLit’s teacher guide series is intended to assist teachers and parents in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. It is important to note that they are **not** intended to be workbooks for the student, but rather models and guides for discussion leaders. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, CenterForLit’s flagship literature seminar. Though the concepts underlying this approach to literary analysis are explained in detail in that seminar, the following brief summary presents the basic principles upon which this guide is based.

The *Teaching the Classics* approach to literary analysis and interpretation is built around **three unique ideas** which, when combined, produce a powerful instrument for understanding and teaching literature:

First: All works of fiction share the same basic elements — **Context, Structure, and Style**. A literature lesson that helps the student identify these elements in a story prepares them for meaningful discussion of the story’s themes.

Context encompasses all of the details of time and place surrounding the writing of a story, including the personal life of the author as well as historical events that shaped the author’s world.

Structure includes the essential building blocks that make up a story, and that all stories have in common: Conflict, Plot (which includes *exposition*, *rising action*, *climax*, *denouement*, and *conclusion*), Setting, Characters, and Theme.

Style refers to the literary devices used by authors to create the mood and atmosphere of their stories. Recognition of some basic literary devices (alliteration, simile, personification, metaphor, etc.) enables a reader not only to understand the author’s themes more readily, but also to appreciate his craftsmanship more fully.

Second: Because it is approachable and engaging, *children’s literature* is the best genre to employ in teaching the foundational principles of literary analysis. Children’s books present these building blocks in clear, memorable language, and are thus treasure mines of opportunities for the astute teacher — allowing him to present Context, Structure, and Style with ease to children and adults alike. Having learned to recognize these basic elements in the simple text of a classic children’s story, a student is well prepared to analyze complex works suitable for his own age and level of intellectual development.

Third: The best classroom technique for teaching literary analysis and interpretation is the *Socratic Method*. Named after the ancient gadfly who first popularized this style of teaching, the Socratic method employs the art of questioning, rather than lecturing, to accomplish education. Based upon the conviction that the process of discovery constitutes the better part of learning, our program uses well-placed questions to teach students how to think, rather than dictating to them what to think.

The *Teaching the Classics* seminar syllabus supplies a thorough list of Socratic questions for teachers to use in class discussion. The questions are general enough to be used with any book, but focused enough to lead the

student into meaningful contemplation of the themes of even the most difficult stories. Questions on the list are arranged in order of difficulty: from grammar-level questions which ask for the mere fact of a story, to rhetoric-level questions which require discussion of ideologies and transcendent themes. Properly employed, this list can help teachers engage their classes in important discussions of ideas, and can also provide a rich resource for essays and other writing assignments! Used in conjunction with a good writing program, *Teaching the Classics* produces **deep thinkers** at any age.

The questions used in this guide have been taken directly from the Socratic list, and will therefore be familiar to the seminar alumnus.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics.

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Andrews", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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QUICK CARD



Reference	<i>Little Women</i> by Louisa May Alcott ISBN: 978-0-451-53208-4
Plot	Four sisters learn about life, loss, and love as they pass from childhood to womanhood in late nineteenth-century New England.
Setting	The story begins during the Civil War and continues through the following ten years of the girls' lives. Other than Amy's trip to Europe, the story occurs entirely in New England.
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March• Marmee• Mr. March• Hannah• Laurie• Mr. Laurence• Mr. John Brooke• Aunt March• Mr. Bhaer• Daisy and Demi Brooke• Ned Moffat, Sallie Moffat• Fred Vaughn
Conflict	Man vs. Himself: Will Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy learn to live meaningful lives as loving and virtuous women?
Theme	Family Relationships Materialism Contentment Ambition Love
Literary Devices	Imagery Simile Personification Metaphor Foreshadowing Allusion

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



The following questions are drawn from the “Setting” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 80-81 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

In what country or region does this story happen? (1a)

The story happens almost entirely in New England, particularly in the March’s own home. Notable exceptions are Jo’s time working in New York, and Amy’s trip to Europe.

What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? What words, phrases, or descriptions does the author use to create this atmosphere? (1d)

The atmosphere in the March’s home is warm and familiar. Before the house itself is even described, the author has already created this atmosphere through the interactions of the four girls and their mother. In the first chapter, we feel that the home is permeated by love and affection through the description of the the family’s posture as Marmee reads Mr. March’s letter: “They all drew to the fire, Mother in the big chair with Beth at her feet, Meg and Amy perched on either arm of the chair, and Jo leaning on the back...” (14). Their physical closeness and ease reflects their spiritual closeness and ease with each other.

Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)

The March family is poor, as we discover in the first few lines. While they have a comfortable home, the older girls work and they must live simply. The sisters are sometimes discontent with this life, as Amy voices when she says, “I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all” (7). However, they are a happy and lively family in spite of their poverty. The author reveals their real wealth through a comparison between their house and that of rich neighbors: “On one side was an old, brown house, looking rather bare and shabby, robbed of the vines that in summer covered its walls and the flowers which then surrounded. On the other side was a stately stone mansion, plainly betokening every sort of comfort and luxury...Yet it seemed a lonely, lifeless sort of house, for no children frolicked on the lawn, no motherly face ever smiled at the windows, and few people went in and out” (52). This comparison suggests that while the March home is poor in external things, it is rich in the joy and love without which a house is “lonely” and “lifeless” (52). As Jo gets to know Laurie, who lives in the mansion, she realizes this difference even more strikingly, and “feeling how rich she was in home love and happiness, she gladly tried to share it with him” (56).

How long a period of time does the story cover? A few minutes? A single day? A whole lifetime? (2b)

The story covers about ten years in total, from the time when Jo is fifteen to when she is twenty-five.

Does the story happen in a particular year, era, or age of the world? What historical events may have just preceded the period of the story? Do these events help explain the actions of characters, the action of the story, or its mood? (2d)

The first half of the story occurs during the Civil War. Because Mr. March is away serving as an army chaplain, Mrs. March and the girls must work to make ends meet and support the army from home. Also, Mr. March falls ill while away at war, and Marmee leaves to join him. The sisters are left at home to care for themselves, and during this time Beth contracts scarlet fever.

In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grown up? How does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives affect the story? (2e)

The story begins when the four sisters are still children, and concludes once they are adults. Their coming of age actually serves as the main focus of the story, and the most important events involve their growth in character and maturity.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



The following questions are drawn from the “Characters” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 82-83 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Meg

What does the character look like (hair, eyes, height, build, etc.)? (3d)

In the first chapter, Meg is described as “very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain” (10). Her sweet appearance corresponds to her sweet, gentle character.

Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, compassionate or exacting? Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the character’s part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

- gentle
- sensible
- pious
- vain
- loves luxuries and finery
- sweet

As the oldest sister, Meg often gently advises and directs her sisters, such as in the first chapter when she reminds them, “we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly” (7). Her calm way of speaking and mild “lecturing” reveals her sensible and pious, but also gentle, character (10). She has a particular love of finery that makes her complain about their poverty and think “regretfully of all the pretty things she wanted” (7). She also tends to be vain, which she is aware of, saying honestly, “I think too much of my looks and hate to work, but won’t any more if I can help it” (15). However, her honesty about her faults and earnest desire to be a good example to her sisters reveals her true sweetness. The author directly describes how “Margaret had a sweet and pious nature, which unconsciously influenced her sisters, especially Jo, who loved her very tenderly, and obeyed her because her advice was so gently given” (18).

What does the character do for a living? Is she a professional or a blue-collar worker? Is she wealthy or impoverished? Is she content with her lot in life, or does she long to improve herself, like Pip in Great Expectations? (3h)

In the first half of the story, Meg earns money by working as a nursery governess. As discussed earlier, the family is impoverished, but unlike her younger sisters Meg “could remember a time when home was beautiful, life full of ease and pleasure, and want of any kind unknown” before

“Mr. March lost his property in trying to help an unfortunate friend” (42-43). Although she works diligently and patiently, her “sense of injustice made her feel bitter toward everyone sometimes, for she had not yet learned to know how rich she was in the blessings which alone can make life happy” (43). At the home where she works as a governess, she is constantly surrounded by the luxuries she could have had, intensifying her feeling of injustice. She hopes to begin to support herself through her work, improving her own and her family’s situation.

What does the character say about herself to other people? (3j)

As quoted earlier, Meg admits, “I think too much of my looks and hate to work,” but she is genuinely striving to conquer these faults (15). When discussing the activities of rich families, she says, “I always envy girls who do such things, I’m so fond of luxury” (40). However, when she is visiting Sallie Moffat and lets the other girls dress her up for a dance, she later reflects, “I wish I’d been sensible and worn my own things, then I should not have disgusted other people, or felt so uncomfortable and ashamed myself” (99).

Later, when she comes to value love over wealth and finery, she tells Aunt March, “I’m proud to think [John] cares for me, though I’m so poor and young and silly” (236). As she plans her wedding, she says, “I don’t want a fashionable wedding, but only those about me whom I love, and to them I wish to look and be my familiar self” (255).

What do other characters think or say about her? (3k)

Laurie (seeing her dressed up at the Moffat’s party): “I don’t like your gown, but I do think you are--just splendid.”

Mr. Brooke: “Young ladies in America love independence as much as their ancestors did, and are admired and respected for supporting themselves.”

Marmee: “She is so conscientious...My pretty, tenderhearted girl! I hope things will go happily with her.”

Mr. March: “Meg, my dear, I value the womanly skill which keeps home happy more than white hands or fashionable accomplishments. I’m proud to shake this good, industrious little hand...”

Aunt March, after Meg refuses to give up thinking of John Brooke: “You are a willful child...I’m disappointed in you.”

Do the character’s priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is it a change for the better, or for the worse? (3n)

At the beginning of the story, Meg seems to prioritize the achievement of a life of beauty, ease, and luxury, especially in contrast to her own tedious and burdensome life. However, her love for the poor tutor John Brooke changes her desires. When Aunt March rebukes Meg for wanting to marry a poor man, she declares, “I’m not afraid of being poor, for I’ve been happy so far, and I know I shall be with him because he loves me...” (236). Seeing Aunt March’s lonely existence in her large costly house, she realizes the full value of love and family, and knows that these things can transform a poor, simple life into a life of the greatest beauty and happiness. This understanding develops throughout her marriage, and she even learns “to love her husband better for his poverty, because it seemed to have made a man of him, given him the strength and courage to fight his own way, and

taught him a tender patience” (291). Her priorities are so different at the end of the book that, even as she lives simply, she can honestly call herself “the happiest woman in the world” (497).

Is the character a sympathetic character? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you pity him? Do you scorn or despise his weakness in some way? Why? (3q)

Meg is a sympathetic character, because her vanities and weaknesses are ordinary and relatable. It’s not surprising that she wishes for luxuries and an easier life, particularly because she can still remember the time when her family was wealthier. Furthermore, we can see her struggling against her faults and striving to conquer them, such as when she confesses her superficial behavior at the Moffatts to Marmee (102). We see this even more particularly in her marriage, such as when she sells the expensive silk to Sallie for John’s sake (291).

Jo

What does the character look like (hair, eyes, height, build, etc.)? (3d)

At fifteen, Jo is “very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt” (10). She has “a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful” (10). Her height and energetic demeanor help reveal her natural exuberance and impulsiveness. The description of her features also gives us a glimpse of her character, which combines both a deep thoughtfulness and a sense of humor.

At the beginning of part two, three years after the close of the first part, we see Jo’s new maturity through her external changes, as her “angles are much softened, and she has learned to carry herself with ease, if not grace” (256). Similarly, she has also become more sensitive and thoughtful, and “only gentle words fall from her sharp tongue” (256).

Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, compassionate or exacting? Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the character’s part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

- authentic
- humorous
- insightful
- scatter-brained
- willful
- quick-tempered
- impulsive
- energetic
- restless
- ambitious
- passionate

Jo is wholeheartedly and stubbornly herself, refusing to do or say anything she deems inauthentic. When Amy rebukes her for using slang and whistling, she declares, “I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!” (9). Even years later, when she is paying calls with Amy, she refuses to conform to standards of etiquette, and gives attention only to those she actually likes and respects. One of Jo’s most loveable qualities is her sense of humor, which helps her take herself lightly and laugh through the

difficulties of life. She always has a funny yet insightful perspective to offer, such as when she ends a discussion on conceit with the comment that it isn't necessary to display one's talents "[a]ny more than it's proper to wear all your bonnets and gowns and ribbons at once, that folks may know you've got them" (77). When she is younger, she is also scatter-brained and clumsy, such as when she attempts to host a nice dinner party and fails spectacularly (121).

We learn early on that Jo's "quick temper, sharp tongue, and restless spirit were always getting her into scrapes" (44). She learns to watch and battle her temper after a memorable fight with Amy, when she is so angry that she doesn't warn Amy about thin ice while they are skating. Jo tells Marmee, "[i]t seems as if I could do anything when I'm in a passion; I get so savage, I could hurt anyone and enjoy it. I'm afraid I shall do something dreadful some day, and spoil my life, and make everybody hate me" (85). However, the revelation that Marmee herself had to work for years to control her temper enlightens and encourages Jo. Jo's "sharp tongue" often causes problems for her as well, such as when she bluntly tells Aunt March, "I don't like favors" and is not invited to go to Europe with her as a result (306).

Jo struggles with her restless spirit throughout the story, and often wishes out loud that she could fight in the war or go on adventures, except that she is "a miserable girl" and "must be proper and stop at home" (219). She cannot contain her own energy, and finds "her greatest affliction in the fact that she couldn't read, run, and ride as much as she liked" (44). For a while, she finds an outlet for this energy in her ambition to be a great writer, and "when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon" (272). However, she eventually discovers that ambition alone is not enough, and after several failures says humbly, "I don't know anything; I'll wait till I do before I try again" (365). It is not until after Beth dies and she is writing from her own experience and to please her family that she truly unlocks her talent. When she expresses surprise at the success of a story, Marmee explains, "[y]ou wrote it with no thought of fame or money, and put your heart into it" (444). She also channels this enthusiasm for life in her relationships, and loves her family members and friends with all her heart. When Mr. March is ill and the family needs money, she impulsively sells her hair, saying she was "wild to do something for Father" (168). When she discovers that Beth is declining, she puts everything aside to assist her sister and "dedicated herself soul and body to Beth" (383). While she resists the idea of romantic love for a while, Laurie already sees her capacity to love intensely when he predicts, "there'll come a time when you will care for somebody, and you'll love him tremendously, and live and die for him...it's your way..." (373).

What does the character do for a living? Is she a professional or a blue-collar worker? Is she wealthy or impoverished? Is she content with her lot in life, or does she long to improve herself, like Pip in *Great Expectations*? (3h)

In part one of the story, Jo earns money by waiting on Aunt March. It is a tedious job, except that Aunt March has a large library which she takes advantage of whenever she can. In part two, she goes to New York to work as a tutor for a family in a boarding house. As she tells Marmee, "[i]t's honest work, and I'm not ashamed of it" (337). She has no desire to raise herself in society, but is entirely focused on supporting herself and her family. However, she is extremely gratified when she gets her first story published and realizes that her ambition can also be a means of income. She also experiences a breakthrough when she hears about an author who makes a living writing sensational stories. Aware of her own capabilities, she tries writing a story in that melodramatic style and wins the prize, earning a hundred dollars. Her father tells her she could do better, saying, "[a]im at the highest, and never mind the money," but for a time she writes the kind of stories that sell rather than what she believes are actually good (275).

Her desire to earn money often conflicts with her desire for greatness, but one of her best stories is written out of neither of these motivations. After Beth's death, she writes a story upon Marmee's request "with no thought of fame or money," and is finally able to express her true talent and experience. At the end of the story, she embarks on the new task of opening a school with Professor Bhaer, where she has an outlet for both her intelligence and her compassion for others. In the final chapter, she voices her hope, saying "I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I'm sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these" (497).

What does the character say about herself to other people? (3j)

"I'm not afraid of anything" (57).

"I won't have any sentimental stuff about compliments and such rubbish" (62).

"'Prunes and prisms' are my doom and I may as well make up my mind to it" (218).

"I'm not one of the agreeable sort. Nobody will want me, and it's a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in a family" (253).

"I'm a crotchety old thing, and always shall be...it's easier for me to risk my life for a person than to be pleasant to him when I don't feel like it" (304).

"I don't like favors, they oppress me and make me feel like a slave. I'd rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent" (306).

(To Laurie) "I'm homely and awkward and odd and old, and you'd be ashamed of me, and we should quarrel..." (372).

"I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (373).

What do other characters think or say about her? (3k)

Meg: "What shall we do with that girl? She never will behave like a young lady."

Beth: "I hope she won't; she is so funny and dear as she is" (160).

Mr. March: "I rather miss my wild girl, but if I get a strong, helpful, tenderhearted woman in her place, I shall feel quite satisfied" (228).

Laurie: "You won't show the soft side of your character, and if a fellow gets a peep at it by accident and can't help showing that he likes it, you...get so thorny no one dares touch or look at you" (253).

Amy: "You can talk so well, look so aristocratic in your best things, and behave so beautifully, if you try" (296).

Laurie: "I'm glad you can't flirt; it's really refreshing to see a sensible, straightforward girl, who can be jolly and kind without making a fool of herself" (334).

Laurie: "...there'll come a time when you will care for somebody, and you'll love him tremendously, and live and die for him. I know you will, it's your way..." (373).

Beth: “You are the gull, Jo, strong and wild, fond of the storm and the wind, flying far out to sea, and happy all alone” (383).

Meg: “You are like a chestnut burr, prickly outside, but silky-soft within, and a sweet kernel, if one can only get at it. Love will make you show your heart some day, and then the rough burr will fall off” (442).

Do the character’s priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is it a change for the better, or for the worse? (3n)

Yes! Like Meg, Jo learns to value love over the things that she once sought the most—fame, money, the development of her talent, and even independence. She first learns to devote her life to another person as she cares for her sister Beth. Without hesitating, she freely chooses to give up all her time and energy to her dying sister. After Beth’s death, she feels empty and lonely. She tries to live selflessly for her parents at home, but longs to “live and die” for someone, and even more, “to be loved” (373, 445). This period of loneliness reveals that ambition and work alone cannot satisfy her, preparing her heart to receive Prof. Bhaer’s love.

Is the character a sympathetic character? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you pity him? Do you scorn or despise his weakness in some way? Why? (3q)

Jo is a deeply sympathetic character: It’s impossible to help loving and sympathizing with her as she struggles to live well and fails in many relatable ways. We can easily identify with her because she is open and honest about her faults and sufferings. When she fails, such as when she lets herself become furious with Amy, and when she speaks ungratefully to Aunt March, she acknowledges her failures with humble remorse (85, 317). We see her raw and vulnerable moments of suffering, such as when she clings to Laurie when Beth is in danger, and when she confesses her loneliness to her mother (189, 443). Through all these difficulties, she does not lose hope in life or in herself. Even when her own future looks empty, she continues to work out of love for her family. When a new love comes into her life, we rejoice with her and feel that she deeply deserves it.

Beth

What does the character look like (hair, eyes, height, build, etc.)? (3d)

At the beginning of the story, Beth is described simply as “a rosy, smooth-haired, bright eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression” (10). Beth’s calmly pleasant appearance reflects her humble yet compassionate character. Her “shy manner” and “peaceful expression” help us picture the way she quietly lives for others without thinking of herself or expecting praise.

At the beginning of part two, her physical appearance reveals the way her soul has developed even further through suffering: Her “beautiful, kind eyes are larger, and in them lies an expression that saddens one, although it is not sad itself” (256). She has become more delicate and continues to suffer, but “seldom complains,” and seems to have achieved an even deeper understanding and patience through suffering.

Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, compassionate or exacting? Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the character's part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

- gentle
- peaceful
- empathetic
- quiet
- shy
- industrious
- selfless
- faithful
- patient
- humble

At the beginning, Beth's gentleness is clear through the way she cares for her dolls and speaks kindly and encouragingly to her more rambunctious sisters. She acts as a peacemaker, as we see in the very first chapter when she quiets Jo and Amy's argument by making her sisters laugh (9). She readily shares in the suffering of others, such as when she sympathizes with Jo's restlessness and strokes her head "with a hand that all the dishwashing and dusting in the world could not make ungentle in its touch" (9). She is "too bashful to go to school" but helps Hannah at home and is "by nature a busy bee," spending her quiet days doing household tasks (44). When Mr. Laurence sends her a piano, she selflessly overcomes her fear and goes alone to thank him (70). When Marmee is away with their sick father, Beth never stops doing her daily duty, even when the others lapse into grief or laziness. She alone continues to visit the poor Hummel family as their mother requested, and consequently catches the illness that weakens her permanently (181). As she gets gradually weaker and sicker, she does not complain but hides her suffering as long as she can. She speaks to Jo with peace and courage, describing herself humorously as "stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there" (382). At the very end, she is sweetly gratified to find that her life has done good to Jo and the family, and admits, "I'm not so good as you make me, but I have tried to do right" (426).

What does the character do for a living? Is she a professional or a blue-collar worker? Is she wealthy or impoverished? Is she content with her lot in life, or does she long to improve herself, like Pip in Great Expectations? (3h)

Out of all the sisters, Beth alone seems entirely content with her lot in life, although her work is the simplest. Her tasks are mainly "washing dishes and keeping things tidy" and other household duties, which she does as long as her health permits. She has no ambition or aspirations, and does not even desire to be amazingly useful or virtuous. In fact, she doesn't think much about herself at all, but lives simply for others.

What does the character say about herself to other people? (3j)

"[My burden] is dishes and dusters, and envying girls with nice pianos, and being afraid of people" (16).

"Since I had my little piano, I am perfectly satisfied. I only wish we may all keep well and be together, nothing else" (149).

“...I have a feeling that it was never intended that I should live long. I’m not like the rest of you; I never made any plans about what I’d do when I grew up...I couldn’t seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there” (382).

(to Jo) “I’m not so good as you make me, but I have tried to do right; and now, when it’s too late to begin even to do better, it’s such a comfort to know that someone loves me so much, and feels as if I’d helped them” (426).

What do other characters think or say about her? (3k)

Meg: “You’re a dear, and nothing else” (9).

Meg: “I always said she was a little saint” (142).

Jo: “Beth is my conscience, and I can’t give her up!” (190).

Amy: “Beth isn’t selfish, and that’s the reason everyone loves her and feels so bad at the thought of losing her...I’m going to try and be like Beth all I can” (206).

“...[Jo] recognized the beauty of her sister’s life--uneventful, unambitious, yet full of the genuine virtues which ‘smell sweet, and blossom in the dust,’ the self-forgetfulness that makes the humblest on earth remembered soonest in heaven, the true success which is possible to all” (424).

Do the character’s priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is it a change for the better, or for the worse? (3n)

Beth’s priorities do not change over the course of the story. From the beginning, she strives to live for others, particularly her parents and sisters, and this continues to be her priority to the end. Because she has directed her entire life toward this single, simple goal, she is able to face death peacefully.

Amy

What does the character look like (hair, eyes, height, build, etc.)? (3d)

At twelve, Amy is a “regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young lady mindful of her manners” (10). Already, Amy has a sense of elegance and refinement, but she is over-conscious of her looks and her own importance. Her cool demeanour reflects her practical, composed character that develops throughout the story, particularly in contrast to Jo’s scatterbrained and passionate personality. At sixteen she is already “possessed of that indescribable charm called grace” and “has the air and bearing of a full-grown woman” (256).

Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, logical, rational, compassionate or exacting? Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist. What words or actions on the character's part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

- conceited
- selfish
- beauty-loving
- artistic
- elegant
- tactful
- self-possessed
- practical
- level-headed
- womanly

As a young girl, the author reveals that “Amy was in a fair way to be spoiled, for everyone petted her” (46). We see evidence of her growing conceit when she attempts to use words she cannot pronounce and reprimands Jo for whistling, saying, “I detest rude, unladylike girls!” (9). She also struggles with selfishness, as we see when she burns Jo’s book, and when she almost refuses to stay with Aunt March while Beth has scarlet fever (81, 184). She has a passion for art and beauty, and is frustrated by her unbecoming clothes and her flat nose (46). In part two, however, we see her develop her love of beauty by channeling it into her “artistic attempts” and into her efforts to create an atmosphere of beauty through her actions as well as appearance (264). She has a natural elegance, and “is possessed of that indescribable charm called grace” (256). She is also naturally tactful, and has “an instinctive sense of what was pleasing and proper,” always saying “the right thing to the right person” (264). This allows her to effortlessly please others, an ability that she treasures as a means of showing love and gratitude. As she tells Jo, “[w]omen should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones, for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive” (304). She also tends to think more practically and unemotionally than her sisters, particularly with regard to marriage. While travelling Europe, she writes home, “I hate poverty, and don’t mean to bear it a minute longer than I can help” (327). She continues by explaining that none of the other sisters can or will marry for money, so she must do so to “make everything cozy all round” (327). However, after she refuses to marry Fred and begins to love Laurie, she realizes that “she didn’t care to be a queen of society now half as much as she did to be a loveable woman” (433). Love for Laurie, and sorrow after Beth’s death, deepen and develop her nature to reveal her capacity for love and tenderness. Her family notices this when she returns from Europe and “the cordial sweetness of her manner was more charming than the new beauty or the old grace” (456).

What does the character do for a living? Is she a professional or a blue-collar worker? Is she wealthy or impoverished? Is she content with her lot in life, or does she long to improve herself, like Pip in Great Expectations? (3h)

Like Meg, Amy longs to break out of poverty, but she is more focused on rising in society than she is on being able to afford luxuries. Her desire, if she cannot be a great artist, is to be “an ornament to society,” which she can only accomplish by marrying a wealthy man (413). She is also like Jo in her ambition, and works with intensity and persistence to achieve her highest wish, to “be the best artist in the whole world” (149). However, when she finally realizes that “talent is not genius, and no amount of energy can make it so,” she gives up on art and focuses on gaining her secondary dream by marrying Fred Vaughn, until real love intrudes (413).

What does the character say about himself to other people? (3j)

“I am a selfish girl! but I’ll truly try to be better, so [Father] mayn’t be disappointed in me by-and-by” (15).

“I’ve thought a great deal lately about my ‘bundle of naughties,’ and being selfish is the largest one in it; so I’m going to try hard to cure it, if I can” (206).

“Because they are mean is no reason why I should be. I hate such things, and though I think I’ve a right to be hurt, I don’t intend to show it” (310).

“...talent isn’t genius, and no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great, or nothing. I won’t be a common-place dauber, so I don’t intend to try any more” (413).

“I don’t pretend to be wise, but I am observing, and I see a great deal more than you’d imagine. I’m interested in other people’s experiences and inconsistencies, and, though I can’t explain, I remember and use them for my own benefit” (419).

What do other characters think or say about him? (3k)

Meg: “...you are altogether too particular and prim. Your airs are funny now, but you’ll grow up an affected little goose, if you don’t take care” (9).

Marmee: “You are getting to be rather conceited, my dear, and it is quite time you set about correcting it. You have a good many little gifts and virtues, but there is no need of parading them, for conceit spoils the finest genius” (76).

Mr. March: “I conclude that she has learned to think of other people more and of herself less, and has decided to try and mold her character as carefully as she molds her little clay figures. I am glad of this, for though I should be very proud of a graceful statue made by her, I shall be infinitely prouder of a loveable daughter with a talent for making life beautiful to herself and others” (228-29).

(The sisters) “If Amy went to court without any rehearsal beforehand, she’d know exactly what to do” (264).

Jo: “I wish it was as easy for me to do little things to please people as it is for you” (304).

Jo: “You’ve a deal more principle and generosity and nobleness of character than I ever gave you credit for, Amy. You’ve behaved sweetly and I respect you with all my heart” (316).

“Laurie...found himself both admiring and respecting the brave patience that made the most of opportunity, and the cheerful spirit that covered poverty with flowers” (395).

Laurie: “I’m never angry with you. It takes two flints to make a fire: you are as cool and soft as snow” (414).

Laurie: “She is the sort of woman who knows how to rule well; in fact, I rather like it, for she winds one round her finger as softly and prettily as a skein of silk, and makes you feel as if she was doing you a favor all the while” (455).

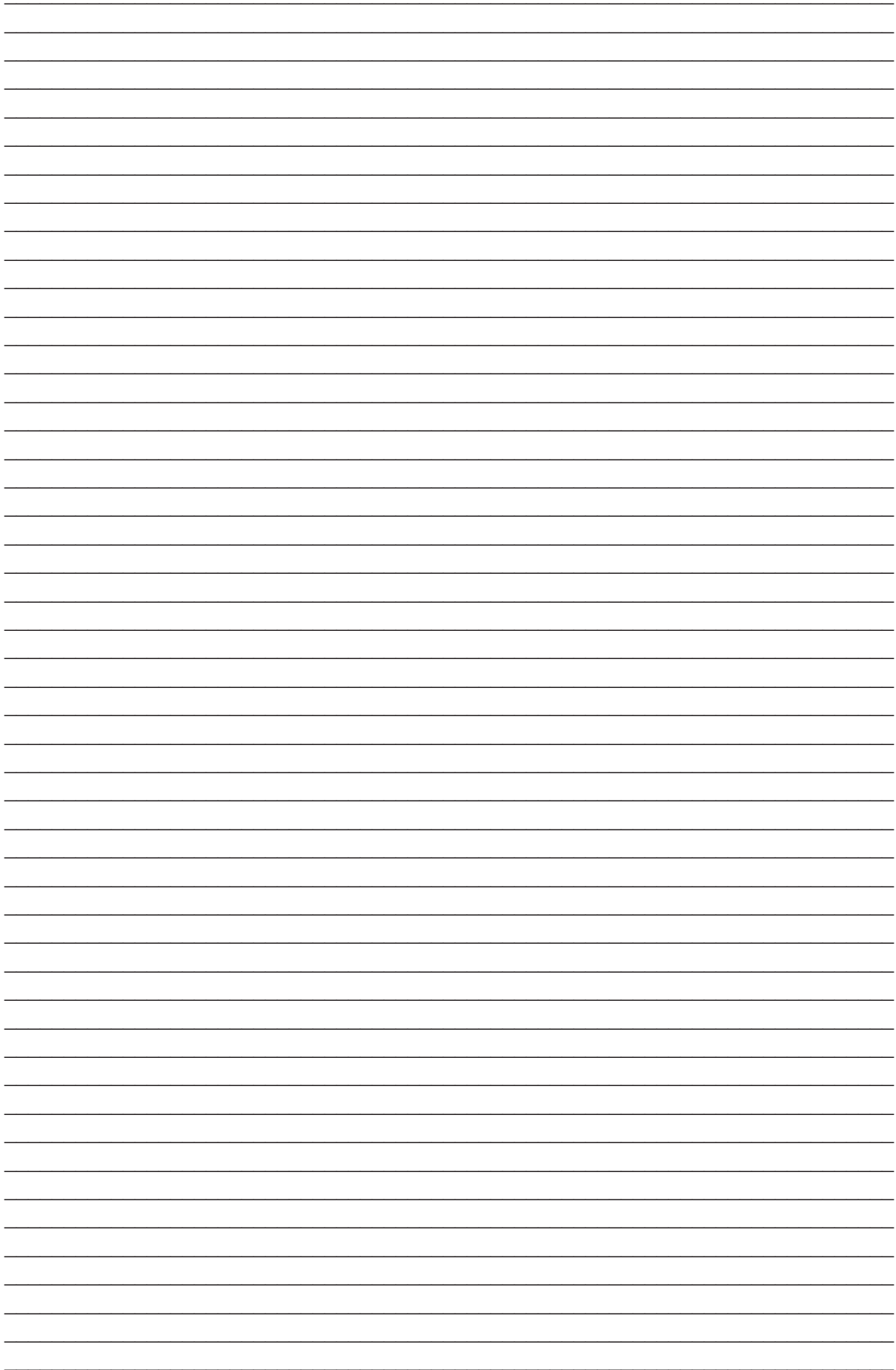
Do the character's priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is it a change for the better, or for the worse? (3n)

Even as a child, Amy recognizes that she often prioritizes herself over others, but struggles to overcome her selfishness. As a young woman, she prioritizes wealth and the "best society," for practical as well as selfish reasons (264). It is not until Fred Vaughn proposes, and the life she thought she wanted is in reach, that she realizes that "something more than money and position was needed to satisfy the new longing that filled her heart so full of tender hopes and fears" (433). She learns to prioritize love over any amount of wealth or beauty or good society, and is rewarded by Laurie's love.

Is the character a sympathetic character? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you pity him? Do you scorn or despise his weakness in some way? Why? (3q)

At first, Amy's selfishness can make her less of a sympathetic character than her sisters, until we see her more tender side. Like her sisters, she too is struggling to overcome her faults, and we see her triumphs as well as her failures. One of her most notable triumphs is her charity and forgiveness at the fair when the other girls treat her unjustly (311). The development of her gentleness and deep capacity to love makes her an interesting and ultimately admirable character.

NOTES:



QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



The following questions are drawn from the “Conflict” and “Plot” sections of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 84-86 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

What do Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy want? (5)

In the chapter “Castles in the Air,” Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy describe what they most desire in life. Meg wants “a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things,” where she can manage things as she pleases and do good to others in her spare time (148). Jo wants to do “something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten,” particularly to “write books, and get rich and famous” (149). Beth only wants “to stay at home safe with Father and Mother, and help take care of the family” (149). Among Amy’s many wishes is her desire “to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world” (149). However, these youthful desires change and develop as the girls grow in maturity. Thus the conflict is not only about getting what they desire, but learning to desire the right things.

Is the conflict an external one, having to do with circumstances in the protagonist’s physical world, or is it an internal conflict, taking place in their minds and emotions? (5e)

All four sisters experience external conflict, even if it’s only “dishes and dusters” as in Beth’s case (16). Particularly for Meg and Amy, poverty is a source of external conflict, as it is an obstacle to their desire for finery, leisure, and good society. The girls also struggle with the external conflicts present in their work and relationships. However, from the very first chapter, all four sisters are aware that the primary struggle is within themselves. As young girls, they strive to conquer their faults, or their “bosom enemies” (14). Meg works to conquer her vanity and distaste for work, Jo her roughness and restlessness, Beth her fear, and Amy her selfishness. These conflicts take place in their minds and emotions as they strive to react better to their circumstances, building virtue and contentment. Each sister also experiences an internal conflict through the transformation of her desire as she learns to prize love over her “castle in the air” (148).

Do their objectives or goals change throughout the story? How? Why? (5f)

As discussed in the Characters section, Meg, Jo, and Amy’s worldly goals involving wealth, fame, and status are gradually transformed into the goal of becoming virtuous women and loving others well. They work toward this goal from the beginning, but only as they mature into women do they learn that love alone, and not their other “castles in the air,” can satisfy them. Beth’s goals do not change, as loving her family well is her single goal from the beginning.

Throughout the story, the girls become more focused on overcoming their internal weaknesses, rather than worrying continuously about poverty and other external struggles. Their changing goals prepare them to embrace their lives as young women with joy and energy, even when poverty, sick-

ness, and other difficulties are still present. Further, as they grow and mature internally, they become ready to receive love when it comes into their lives, even when it does not come in the exact way they expected.

What external impulses heighten the conflict – weather, war, summer break, separation, sickness, etc.? (8d)

External circumstances in the story make life and the practice of virtue more difficult. While the Civil War is being fought, Mr. March is absent and the girls must work hard and live frugally at home, even when that means no presents at Christmas. Then Mr. March falls ill away in Washington, and Marmee leaves to care for him. The sisters are left at home, during which time Beth catches scarlet fever. As a result, Amy must go live with Aunt March, and Meg and Jo are faced with the terrifying responsibility of caring for Beth without Marmee. This series of difficulties tests the sisters and reveals their weaknesses.

In part two, each girl is faced with external difficulties that challenge them to grow where they are weakest. Meg is challenged by the poverty of her married life. Jo is challenged by her uneventful life at home, first when Amy goes to Europe instead of her, and much more after Beth dies and she must endure grief and loneliness. Amy is challenged by the temptation to marry Fred Vaughn, who is wealthy but whom she does not love.

What events form the high point or climax of the story’s tension? Are they circumstantial events, or emotional ones? Is the climax a spiritual or physical one? (9d)

Because the story is about the four sisters’ coming of age, there is not one unique climax in which each “gains” maturity. In fact, each girl has many moments of realization and growth. However, the story does seem to highlight specific moments in each sister’s life in which her internal achievement of maturity is manifested externally.

Meg experiences multiple opportunities to put her own wants aside in order to love others well. One climax is the moment she fearlessly combats Aunt March’s warnings against marrying a poor man. She declares, “I’m not afraid of being poor, for I’ve been happy so far, and I know I shall be with him...” (236). This declaration proves that she has learned to value love over wealth, but the tension in her story continues as she tries to live out this lesson in her daily life with John. Further climactic moments include the scene when she realizes she has been too free with John’s money and sells the expensive silk she bought, and when she lets John discipline Demi and strives to be a good wife as well as mother (291, 405). In both of these scenes, Meg learns to consider John’s needs and to place them before her own. Because John is striving to do the same thing for her, they together cultivate a happy and loving home.

Beth’s climax seems to be the moment shortly before her death when she reads Jo’s poem and shares a final, intimate conversation with her sister. In this scene, Beth fully comprehends how much Jo values her, and in this, realizes how much good her short life has done. Even though she has barely left her home, and known few people outside of her family, her peace and goodness have influenced her sister and her whole family beyond what she could have imagined. This knowledge is more than enough for her to say simply, “I don’t feel as if I’ve wasted my life” (426). Because Beth has always put others before herself, her climax is simply the realization that she has lived well.

Jo’s first climax also comes through her final conversation with Beth, when Beth asks her to take care of their parents after she dies. Beth recognizes that this won’t be an easy task for her restless

sister, but she tells her, “you’ll be happier in doing that than writing splendid books or seeing all the world; for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy” (426). Beth’s peace expresses the truth of her words, so that “then and there Jo renounced her old ambition, pledged herself to a new and better one, acknowledging the poverty of other desires, and feeling the blessed solace of a belief in the immortality of love” (426). This is the moment when Jo fully realizes that the desire to love others is the best desire.

However, like Meg’s similar realization about love when she chooses to marry John, Jo must live out her new understanding on a daily basis—and this is extremely difficult. The tension in her story continues as she struggles with her loneliness and restlessness at home. However, this experience teaches her that her heart was made for an even deeper love. Thus, the second and complete climax of her story is the scene when she realizes how much she loves Professor Bhaer and receives his love in return: “Though it came in such a very simple guise, that was the crowning moment of both their lives, when, turning from the night and storm and loneliness to the household light and warmth and peace waiting to receive them, with a glad ‘Welcome home!’ Jo led her lover in, and shut the door” (488).

Amy’s climax comes when she begins to desire love more than she desires to be a “queen of society” (433). She refuses Fred Vaughn’s proposal, and grows to love Laurie with a deep, tender love. He also falls in love, and is moved by the sight of “the tender side of Amy’s character” and the discovery of her loving heart.

How does the resolution affect each individual character? (10f)

The resolution leaves Meg, Jo, and Amy in the midst of flourishing and love-centered lives. Meg is living a happy home life with John and their growing family. Jo is thriving as a mother to two of her own children and to the many boys that have come to the Bhaers’ school at Plumfield. She puts her love and energy to good use, while gaining life experience that she hopes to use in her writing. Amy continues her artistic pursuits in the midst of a beautiful family life, only darkened by her worries about her sickly daughter.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



The following questions are drawn from the “Theme” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, page 87 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Are the protagonists changed in their minds and hearts by the events of the story? Do they re-examine their values and ideas? (11a, 12e)

In the final chapter, “Harvest Time,” Meg, Jo, and Amy consider their new lives in light of their childhood “castles in the air.” Jo remarks that “the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to me now. I haven’t given up hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I’m sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these” (497). Jo has realized that becoming “rich and famous” through her writing could never satisfy her in a solitary life (149). Her heart has been expanded so that she has a great desire and capacity for love, which she pours out on the Professor, their children, and all the needy boys in her school. Further, she realizes that in order to write well, she must experience more of life and human relationships, and she gets plenty of this in her lively home.

Meg was already beginning to be changed the first time they discussed castles in the air. She recalls, “I asked for splendid things, to be sure, but in my heart I knew I should be satisfied if I had a little home, and John, and some dear children like these. I’ve got them all, thank God, and am the happiest woman in the world” (497). Meg has realized both in mind and heart that she does not require the wealth and luxuries she once thought were necessary for her happiness. Now, with an abundance of love in a comfortable home, she is completely satisfied.

Amy has been deeply changed in mind and heart, as she acknowledges: “My castle is very different from what I planned, but I would not alter it, though like Jo, I don’t relinquish all my artistic hopes, or confine myself to helping others fulfill their dreams of beauty” (497). Amy recognizes with Jo that ambition and success alone cannot satisfy, but she still sees a place for these dreams now that she is happy and at rest in her new life. Also, we learn that “Amy’s nature was growing sweeter, deeper, and more tender,” particularly through her worry about her sickly daughter (497). This one sorrow draws her and Laurie closer together and gives them the opportunity to support each other faithfully when life is not easy.

Does the story seem to deal with a universal theme like the ones listed in the syllabus? (13a)

While the story touches on many universal themes, some of the main ones are materialism, ambition, family relationships, and growing up. The story seems to make a similar point about wealth and ambition: Both are good things in themselves, but they alone are not enough to satisfy a person. Only when a person is in loving relationships with others can they use their money and ambition properly, out of love and not for futile self-satisfaction. The story gives many warnings against materialism,

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QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



The following questions are drawn from the “Literary Devices” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 88-90 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Does the author create snapshots of images in the mind of the reader for the sake of enhancing meaning, creating setting or mood, or developing character? (16a – Imagery)

The author frequently captures a moment of joy through a series of images. Not only do these snapshots give us information about the characters in the scene, but they also describe their movements and positions in a way that helps us experience the atmosphere of love and affection:

“It was rather a pretty little picture, for the sisters sat together in the shady nook, with sun and shadow flickering over them, the aromatic wind lifting their hair and cooling their hot cheeks, and all the little wood people going on with their affairs as if these were no strangers but old friends” (145).

“Father and Mother sat together, quietly reliving the first chapter of the romance which for them began some twenty years ago. Amy was drawing the lovers, who sat apart in a beautiful world of their own...Beth lay on her sofa, talking cheerily with her old friend...Jo lounged in her favorite low seat, with the grave, quiet look which best became her, and Laurie, leaning on the back of her chair...smiled with his friendliest aspect” (240).

“They stood watching her, with faces full of love and hope and tender pride as she walked away, leaning on her husband’s arm, with her hands full of flowers, and the June sunshine brightening her happy face” (261).

“Though it came in such a very simple guise, that was the crowning moment of both their lives, when, turning from the night and storm and loneliness to the household light and warmth and peace waiting to receive them, with a glad ‘Welcome home!’ Jo led her lover in, and shut the door” (488).

“Everybody was there; everybody laughed and sang, climbed up and tumbled down; everybody declared that there never had been such a perfect day or such a jolly set to enjoy it; and everyone gave themselves up to the simple pleasures of the hour as if there were no such things as care or sorrow in the world” (494).

Does the author use the words “like” or “as” in making comparisons between two or more dissimilar things? (16d – Simile)

“With a blissful sense of burdens lifted off, Meg and Jo closed their weary eyes, and lay at rest, like storm-beaten boats safe at anchor in a quiet harbor” (204).

“Like sunshine after a storm were the peaceful weeks that followed” (223).

“Like bees swarming after their queen, mother and daughters hovered about Mr. March the next day” (230).

“Like a confiding child, [Beth] asked no questions, but left everything to God and nature” (382).

“Here, cherished like a household saint in its shrine, sat Beth” (422).

“The children went to [Professor Bhaer] like bees to a honeypot” (459).

“...in a minute she found herself walking away arm in arm with her Professor, feeling as if the sun had suddenly burst out with uncommon brilliancy” (478).

Does the author represent inanimate objects as being lifelike or human? (16e – *Personification*)

“Yet it seemed a lonely, lifeless sort of house, for no children frolicked on the lawn...” (52).

“This funny spectacle appeared to amuse the sun, for he burst out with such radiance that Jo woke up...” (128).

“...the moon broke suddenly from behind the clouds and shone upon her like a bright benignant face, which seemed to whisper in the silence, ‘Be comforted, dear soul! There is always light behind the cloud’” (171).

“The June roses over the porch were awake bright and early on that morning, rejoicing with all their hearts in the cloudless sunshine, like friendly little neighbors, as they were. Quite flushed with excitement were their ruddy faces, as they swung in the wind, whispering to one another what they had seen...” (255).

Does the author make comparisons of dissimilar objects or things without the use of the words “like” or “as”? (16h – *Metaphor*)

“There are many Beths in the world...living for others so cheerfully that no one sees the sacrifices till the little cricket on the heart stops chirping” (45).

“Poor Jo tried desperately to be good, but her bosom enemy was always ready to flame up and defeat her, and it took years of patient effort to subdue it” (80).

“So [Meg] made her wedding gown herself, sewing into it the tender hopes and innocent romances of a girlish heart” (255).

“Fortune suddenly smiled on Jo, and dropped a good-luck penny in her path” (272).

“...she electrified the family by appearing before them with the letter in one hand, the check in the other, announcing that she had won the prize” (275).

“Amy’s conscience preached her a little sermon from that text, then and there” (311).

“Jo rashly took a plunge into the frothy sea of sensational literature” (356).

“...out of the grave of a boyish passion there had risen a beautiful, strong friendship to bless them

both” (453).

**Does the author provide any clues early in the story of things to come in the plot?
(17a - Foreshadowing)**

“How they laughed when the secret came out, never dreaming how many love letters that little post office would hold in the years to come!” (113).

“...their mistake was in ceasing to do well, and they learned this lesson through much anxiety and regret” (181).

“If she had known what birthday gift was coming every minute nearer and nearer, she would not have said to herself, ‘I’ll weep a little weep when I go to bed” (458).

Does the author refer to other works of literature, historical events, works of art, or well-known ideas in his work? (17f – Allusion)

The most obvious and recurring allusions in the story are to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, published in two parts in 1678 and 1684. *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is an allegory describing the journey of a man named Christian’s journey to the Celestial City, symbolizing any Christian’s journey to heaven through temptations and difficulties. Each March sister receives a copy of the book near the beginning of the story, and they continually allude to it throughout:

Marmee: “Do you remember how you used to play Pilgrim’s Progress when you were little things?... We are never too old for this, my dear, because it is play we are playing all the time in one way or another. Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City” (15-16).

“The big house did prove a Palace Beautiful, though it took some time for all to get in, and Beth found it very hard to pass the lions” (64).

“Feeling stronger than ever to meet and subdue her Apollyon, she pinned the note inside her frock...” (126).

“We call this hill the Delectable Mountain, for we can look far away and see the country where we hope to live some time” (147).

“...after many troubles, Christian and Hopeful came to a pleasant green meadow where lilies bloomed all the year round, and there they rested happily as we do now... “ (229).

“...those about her felt that [Beth] was ready, saw that the first pilgrim called was likewise the fittest, and waited with her on the shore, trying to see the Shining Ones coming to receive her when she crossed the river” (423).

Classical Allusions:

“That little goose means a centaur, and she called him a Cyclops” (71).

“Laurie reached the goal first and was quite satisfied with the success of his treatment, for his Atalan-

ta came panting up with flying hair, bright eyes, ruddy cheeks, and no signs of dissatisfaction in her face” (158).

“...the young musician, who was charming the city like a second Orpheus, talked horses” (360).

“...she thought it gave his fine forehead a Jove-like aspect” (460).

“Mrs. March and Meg sat among the apple piles like a pair of Pomonas” (495).

Biblical:

“But that autumn the serpent got into Meg’s paradise, and tempted her like many a modern Eve, not with apples, but with dress” (288).

Shakespearean:

“I stand to the letter of my bond, Shylock. There is a pile of clouds in the east, it’s not fair, and I don’t go” (295).

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT:



The following questions are drawn from the “Context” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 91-92 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

Who is the author? (18)

Louisa May Alcott was born in 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, although she would spend most of her life between Boston and Concord, Massachusetts. Her father, Bronson Alcott, was a transcendentalist and educator, and her mother Abby May was a social worker. Like her character Jo March, Louisa was the second of four sisters. The family struggled with poverty throughout her young life, primarily because of her impractical father’s inability to provide for the family. In 1843, the Alcott family moved to a utopian community that he founded called Fruitlands, where they lived until its collapse the following year. The family moved around many times throughout Louisa’s life until they settled in Concord in 1858, in a house they called the Orchard House. Due to the family’s poverty, Louisa began working as a teacher, a domestic, and finally as a writer. In 1860, she began writing for *The Atlantic Monthly*. After serving as a Civil War nurse between 1862 and 1863, her letters home were published as Hospital Sketches by the paper *Commonwealth*. In the years that followed, Louisa published gothic thrillers and sensation stories anonymously or under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard. However, *Little Women: or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy*, published in 1868, became her most successful novel. Following this success, she became a magazine editor for *Merry’s Museum*, where she was encouraged to write Part Two of *Little Women*, also titled *Good Wives* (1869). Besides *Little Women*, some of her other works include her novelette *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1875), a semi-autobiographical novel called *Work* (1873), and many other short stories and novels for young people, including two sequels to *Little Women: Little Men* (1871) and *Jo’s Boys and How They Turned Out* (1886). In the later years of her life, Louisa became a co-founder of the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union in Boston. She also cared for her mother, who died in 1877, and her niece Lulu after the death of her youngest sister May in 1879. Louisa died of a stroke in 1888, and is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord near other American greats like Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau.

Does the author refer to the events of her lifetime in her story? (20c)

Little Women is semi-autobiographical: Louisa based the character Jo on herself, Meg on her older sister Anna, and Beth and Amy on her younger sisters Lizzie and May. The story is particularly based on their time in the Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts. Like Beth, Lizzie died in 1858, and Anna married a man named John Pratt. Unlike Jo, Louisa never married.

Was the author associated with a particular social cause or movement? (21c)

Louisa May Alcott grew up in the atmosphere of transcendentalism, as her father joined the Transcendentalists Club along with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The Transcendentalists emphasized idealism, the primacy of the spiritual over the material, individualism, and the limitless potential of man. In politics, they focused on abolitionism, women’s rights, and experimental forms of education. They also experimented with communal living, such as with the utopian

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:



Hints for effective writing assignments can be found on pages 73-74 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus and chapter 6 of Reading Roadmaps.

1. Compare and contrast Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy as they are described at the beginning of Part One (42-46). What qualities do they share? What are some of their strengths and weaknesses?
2. What does Meg learn after her visit to the Moffats in the chapter “Meg Goes to Vanity Fair”? How does her experience affect her view of the proper way to speak and act toward others?
3. When Amy returns home after her marriage, Mr. and Mrs. March notice how “the cordial sweetness of her manner was more charming than the new beauty or the old grace, for it stamped her at once with the unmistakable sign of the true gentlewoman she had hoped to become” (456). How has Amy’s concept of being a “gentlewoman” changed throughout the story? What events and circumstances have helped cause this change?
4. In the chapter “Calls,” Jo and Amy discuss whether it is more important to “be agreeable” in society or to show disapproval in order to reform society. Arguing for the importance of reformers, Jo tells Amy, “you belong to the old set, and I to the new: you will get on best, but I shall have the liveliest time of it” (304-305). How does this discussion reveal which virtues and vices each sister sees as important? How are their views of the world different?
5. Following a conversation between Jo and Meg after Beth’s death, the author describes how “grief is the best opener for some hearts, and Jo’s was nearly ready for the bag: a little more sunshine to ripen the nut, then, not a boy’s impatient shake, but a man’s hand reached up to pick it gently from the burr, and find the kernel sound and sweet” (442-43). Why does the author suggest that Jo was previously unready for love? What changes have occurred in her since then? How did her time caring for Beth and her grief after her sister’s death help prepare her heart?

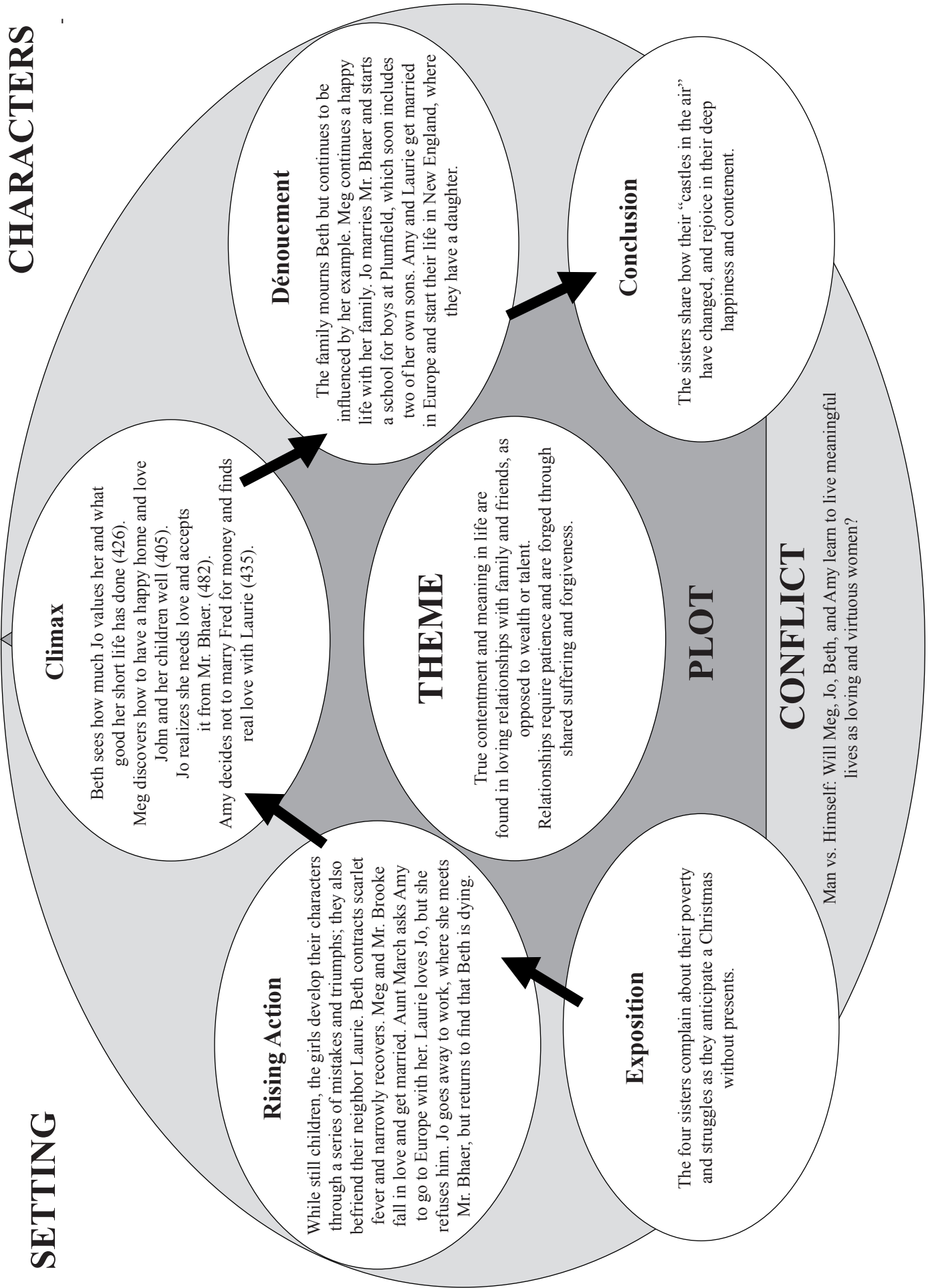
STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central conflict. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected — even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

Story Chart: *Little Women*



Story Chart: *Little Women*

SETTING

CHARACTERS

