

# LITTLE WOMEN LESSON PLANS



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# Introducing Characters

## Close Reading and Discussion Activities (40–60 minutes)

### Prereading question (5–10 minutes)

What do you already know about Louisa May Alcott’s novel *Little Women* and the characters in it?

Before assigning students the note-taking prompt, briefly explain that a character trait is a quality that makes up the personality of a character in a work of fiction. A character trait may be positive (honesty, kindness), negative (dishonesty, unkindness), or relatively neutral (outgoing, shy). In fiction, an author reveals many character traits through what the characters say and do.

Let students know that after they complete the note-taking prompt, they will be discussing their ideas about what the most important character traits shown by each sister are.

### Note-taking prompt (15–25 minutes)

Mark a **C** where a March sister’s words or actions reveal a **character trait**. Then reread the passage and note two traits you see for each sister. Finally, put a \* next to the trait you think is most important for each sister.

**Traits to consider** (feel free to add your own):

selfish, unselfish  
serious, funny  
peacemaking, quarrelsome  
loud, quiet  
cooperative, competitive  
bold, shy

Character	For each sister, note two traits and * the trait you think is most important.
Meg	
Jo	
Amy	
Beth	

### Suggested follow-up questions:

- *What about this part shows you that <character> is <trait>?*
- *Would you say more about why you chose <trait> for this character?*
- *Why did you decide that this trait is the most important one shown by <character>?*
- *Do you agree or disagree with the idea that <character> shows <trait> here?*

## Shared Inquiry discussion question (20–25 minutes)

In this passage, which is the most important character trait shown by each sister?

### Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

#### Chapter 1: Playing Pilgrims (excerpt)

The clock struck six and, having swept up the hearth, Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm. Somehow the sight of the old shoes had a good effect upon the girls, for Mother was coming, and everyone brightened to welcome her. Meg stopped lecturing and lit the lamp, Amy got out of the easy chair without being asked, and Jo forgot how tired she was as she sat up to hold the slippers nearer to the blaze.

“They are quite worn out; Marmee must have a new pair.”

“I thought I’d get her some with my dollar,” said Beth.

“No, I shall!” cried Amy.

“I’m the oldest,” began Meg, but Joe cut in with a decided—

“I’m the man of the family now Papa is away, and *I* shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone.”

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” said Beth, “let’s each get her something for Christmas, and not get anything for ourselves.”

“That’s like you, dear! What will we get?” exclaimed Jo.

Everyone thought soberly for a minute; then Meg announced, as if the idea was suggested by the sight of her own pretty hands, “I shall give her a nice pair of gloves.”

“Army shoes, best to be had,” cried Jo.

“Some handkerchiefs, all hemmed,” said Beth.

“I’ll get her a little bottle of cologne; she likes it, and it won’t cost much, so I’ll have some left to buy something for me,” added Amy.

“How will we give the things?” asked Meg.

“Put ’em on the table, and bring her in and see her open the bundles. Don’t you remember how we used to do on our birthdays?” answered Jo.

“I used to be so frightened when it was my turn to sit in the big chair with a crown on, and see you all come marching round to give the presents, with a kiss. I liked the things and the kisses, but it was dreadful to have you sit looking at me while I opened the bundles,” said Beth, who was toasting her face and the bread for tea, at the same time.

“Let Marmee think we are getting things for ourselves, and then surprise her. We must go shopping tomorrow afternoon, Meg; there is lots to do about the play for Christmas night,” said Jo, marching up and down with her hands behind her back, and her nose in the air.

“I don’t mean to act any more after this time; I’m getting too old for such things,” observed Meg, who was as much a child as ever about “dressing-up” frolics.

“You won’t stop, I know, as long as you can trail round in a white gown with your hair down, and wear gold-paper jewelry. You are the best actress we’ve got, and there’ll be an end of everything if you quit the boards,” said Jo. “We ought to rehearse tonight; come here, Amy, and do the fainting scene, for you are as stiff as a poker in that.”

“I can’t help it; I never saw anyone faint, and I don’t choose to make myself all black and blue, tumbling flat as you do. If I can go down easily, I’ll drop; if I can’t, I shall fall into a chair and be graceful; I don’t care if Hugo does come at me with a pistol,” returned Amy, who was not gifted with dramatic power, but was chosen because she was small enough to be borne out shrieking by the hero of the piece.

“Do it this way; clasp your hands so, and stagger across the room, crying frantically, ‘Roderigo! Save me! Save me!’” and away went Jo, with a melodramatic scream which was truly thrilling.

Amy followed, but she poked her hands out stiffly before her, and jerked herself along as if she went by machinery; and her “Ow!” was more suggestive of pins being run into her than of fear and anguish. Jo gave a despairing groan, and Meg laughed outright, while Beth let her bread burn as she watched the fun, with interest.

“It’s no use! Do the best you can when the time comes, and if the audience laughs, don’t blame me. Come on, Meg.”

Then things went smoothly, for Don Pedro defied the world in a speech of two pages without a single break; Hagar, the witch, chanted an awful incantation over her kettleful of simmering toads, with weird effect; Roderigo rent his chains asunder manfully; and Hugo died in agonies of remorse and arsenic, with a wild “Ha! Ha!”

“It’s the best we’ve had yet,” said Meg, as the dead villain sat up and rubbed his elbows.

“I don’t see how you can write and act such splendid things, Jo. You’re a regular Shakespeare!” exclaimed Beth, who firmly believed that her sisters were gifted with wonderful genius in all things.

“Not quite,” replied Jo, modestly. “I do think *The Witch’s Curse, an Operatic Tragedy* is rather a nice thing, but I’d like to try *Macbeth*, if we only had a trapdoor for Banquo. I always wanted to do the killing part. ‘Is that a dagger that I see before me?’” muttered Jo, rolling her eyes and clutching at the air, as she had seen a famous tragedian do.

“No, it’s the toasting fork, with Ma’s shoe on it instead of the bread. Beth’s stage-struck!” cried Meg, and the rehearsal ended in a general burst of laughter.

# Thanksgiving

## Close Reading and Discussion Activities (40–60 minutes)

### Prereading question (5–10 minutes)

What do you think people need to have to be happy?

### Note-taking prompt (15–25 minutes)

Mark an **S** where a character is happy for **himself or herself**; mark an **O** where a character is happy for **others**.

### Suggested follow-up questions:

- *What about this part makes you think this character is happy for himself or herself (or for someone else)?*
- *Would you say more about what is making the character happy here?*
- *How do you think the character's happiness here connects to his or her character traits?*
- *Overall, which character seems most focused on himself or herself, and which character seems most focused on others?*

### Shared Inquiry discussion question (20–25 minutes)

According to Alcott, what character traits and actions lead to lasting happiness?

## Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

### Chapter 47: Harvest Time (excerpt)

“I do think that families are the most beautiful things in all the world!” burst out Jo, who was in an unusually uplifted frame of mind just then. “When I have one of my own, I hope it will be as happy as the three I know and love the best. If John and my Fritz were only here, it would be quite a little heaven on earth,” she added more quietly. And that night when she went to her room after a blissful evening of family counsels, hopes, and plans, her heart was so full of happiness that she could only calm it by kneeling beside the empty bed always near her own, and thinking tender thoughts of Beth.

It was a very astonishing year altogether, for things seemed to happen in an unusually rapid and delightful manner. Almost before she knew where she was, Jo found herself married and settled at Plumfield. Then a family of six or seven boys sprung up like mushrooms, and flourished surprisingly, poor boys as well as rich, for Mr. Laurence was continually finding some touching case of destitution, and begging the Bhaers to take pity on the child, and he would gladly pay a trifle for its support. In this way, the sly old gentleman got round proud Jo, and furnished her with the style of boy in which she most delighted.

Of course it was uphill work at first, and Jo made queer mistakes, but the wise Professor steered her safely into calmer waters, and the most rampant ragamuffin was conquered in the end. How Jo did enjoy her “wilderness of boys,” and how poor, dear Aunt March would have lamented had she been there to see the sacred precincts of prim, well-ordered Plumfield overrun with Toms, Dicks, and Harrys! There was a sort of poetic justice about it, after all, for the old lady

had been the terror of the boys for miles around, and now the exiles feasted freely on forbidden plums, kicked up the gravel with profane boots unreprieved, and played cricket in the big field where the irritable “cow with a crumpled horn” used to invite rash youths to come and be tossed. It became a sort of boys’ paradise, and Laurie suggested that it should be called the “Bhaer-garten,” as a compliment to its master and appropriate to its inhabitants.

It never was a fashionable school, and the Professor did not lay up a fortune, but it was just what Jo intended it to be—“a happy, homelike place for boys, who needed teaching, care, and kindness.” Every room in the big house was soon full. Every little plot in the garden soon had its owner. A regular menagerie appeared in barn and shed, for pet animals were allowed. And three times a day, Jo smiled at her Fritz from the head of a long table lined on either side with rows of happy young faces, which all turned to her with affectionate eyes, confiding words, and grateful hearts, full of love for “Mother Bhaer.” She had boys enough now, and did not tire of them, though they were not angels, by any means, and some of them caused both Professor and Professorin much trouble and anxiety. But her faith in the good spot which exists in the heart of the naughtiest, sauciest, most tantalizing little ragamuffin gave her patience, skill, and in time success, for no mortal boy could hold out long with Father Bhaer shining on him as benevolently as the sun, and Mother Bhaer forgiving him seventy times seven. Very precious to Jo was the friendship of the lads, their penitent sniffs and whispers after wrongdoing, their droll or touching little confidences, their pleasant enthusiasms, hopes, and plans, even their misfortunes, for they only endeared them to her all the more. There were slow boys and bashful boys, feeble boys and riotous boys, boys that lisped and boys that stuttered, one or two lame ones, and a merry little quadron, who could not be taken in elsewhere, but who was welcome to the “Bhaer-garten,” though some people predicted that his admission would ruin the school.

Yes, Jo was a very happy woman there, in spite of hard work, much anxiety, and a perpetual racket. She enjoyed it heartily and found the applause of her boys more satisfying than any praise of the world, for now she told no stories except to her flock of enthusiastic believers and admirers. As the years went on, two little lads of her own came to increase her happiness—Rob, named for Grandpa, and Teddy, a happy-go-lucky baby, who seemed to have inherited his papa’s sunshiny temper as well as his mother’s lively spirit. How they ever grew up alive in that whirlpool of boys was a mystery to their grandma and aunts, but they flourished like dandelions in spring, and their rough nurses loved and served them well.

There were a great many holidays at Plumfield, and one of the most delightful was the yearly apple-picking. For then the Marches, Laurences, Brookes, and Bhaers turned out in full force and made a day of it. Five years after Jo’s wedding, one of these fruitful festivals occurred, a mellow October day, when the air was full of an exhilarating freshness which made the spirits rise and the blood dance healthily in the veins. The old orchard wore its holiday attire. Goldenrod and asters fringed the mossy walls. Grasshoppers skipped briskly in the sere grass, and crickets chirped like fairy pipers at a feast. Squirrels were busy with their small harvesting. Birds twittered their adieux from the alders in the lane, and every tree stood ready to send down its shower of red or yellow apples at the first shake. 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 freely as if there were no such things as care or sorrow in the world.

Mr. March strolled placidly about, quoting Tusser, Cowley, and Columella to Mr. Laurence, while enjoying . . .

The gentle apple’s winy juice.

The Professor charged up and down the green aisles like a stout Teutonic knight, with a pole for a lance, leading on the boys, who made a hook and ladder company of themselves, and performed wonders in the way of ground and lofty tumbling. Laurie devoted himself to the little ones, rode his small daughter in a bushel-basket, took Daisy up among the bird's nests, and kept adventurous Rob from breaking his neck. Mrs. March and Meg sat among the apple piles like a pair of Pomonas, sorting the contributions that kept pouring in, while Amy with a beautiful motherly expression in her face sketched the various groups, and watched over one pale lad, who sat adoring her with his little crutch beside him.

Jo was in her element that day, and rushed about, with her gown pinned up, and her hat anywhere but on her head, and her baby tucked under her arm, ready for any lively adventure which might turn up. Little Teddy bore a charmed life, for nothing ever happened to him, and Jo never felt any anxiety when he was whisked up into a tree by one lad, galloped off on the back of another, or supplied with sour russets by his indulgent papa, who labored under the Germanic delusion that babies could digest anything, from pickled cabbage to buttons, nails, and their own small shoes. She knew that little Ted would turn up again in time, safe and rosy, dirty and serene, and she always received him back with a hearty welcome, for Jo loved her babies tenderly.

At four o'clock a lull took place, and baskets remained empty, while the apple pickers rested and compared rents and bruises. Then Jo and Meg, with a detachment of the bigger boys, set forth the supper on the grass, for an out-of-door tea was always the crowning joy of the day. The land literally flowed with milk and honey on such occasions, for the lads were not required to sit at table, but allowed to partake of refreshment as they liked—freedom being the sauce best beloved by the boyish soul. They availed themselves of the rare privilege to the fullest extent, for some tried the pleasing experiment of drinking milk while standing on their heads, others lent a charm to leapfrog by eating pie in the pauses of the game, cookies were sown broadcast over the field, and apple turnovers roosted in the trees like a new style of bird. The little girls had a private tea party, and Ted roved among the edibles at his own sweet will.

When no one could eat any more, the Professor proposed the first regular toast, which was always drunk at such times—"Aunt March, God bless her!" A toast heartily given by the good man, who never forgot how much he owed her, and quietly drunk by the boys, who had been taught to keep her memory green.

"Now, Grandma's sixtieth birthday! Long life to her, with three times three!"

That was given with a will, as you may well believe, and the cheering once begun, it was hard to stop it. Everybody's health was proposed, from Mr. Laurence, who was considered their special patron, to the astonished guinea pig, who had strayed from its proper sphere in search of its young master. Demi, as the oldest grandchild, then presented the queen of the day with various gifts, so numerous that they were transported to the festive scene in a wheelbarrow. Funny presents, some of them, but what would have been defects to other eyes were ornaments to Grandma's—for the children's gifts were all their own. Every stitch Daisy's patient little fingers had put into the handkerchiefs she hemmed was better than embroidery to Mrs. March. Demi's miracle of mechanical skill, though the cover wouldn't shut, Rob's footstool had a wiggle in its uneven legs that she declared was soothing, and no page of the costly book Amy's child gave her was so fair as that on which appeared in tippy capitals, the words—"To dear Grandma, from her little Beth."

During the ceremony the boys had mysteriously disappeared, and when Mrs. March had tried to thank her children, and broken down, while Teddy wiped her eyes on his pinafore, the Professor suddenly began to sing. Then, from above him, voice after voice took up the words, and from tree to tree echoed the music of the unseen choir, as the boys sang with all their hearts the

little song that Jo had written, Laurie set to music, and the Professor trained his lads to give with the best effect. This was something altogether new, and it proved a grand success, for Mrs. March couldn't get over her surprise, and insisted on shaking hands with every one of the featherless birds, from tall Franz and Emil to the little quadron, who had the sweetest voice of all.

After this, the boys dispersed for a final lark, leaving Mrs. March and her daughters under the festival tree.

"I don't think I ever ought to call myself 'unlucky Jo' again, when my greatest wish has been so beautifully gratified," said Mrs. Bhaer, taking Teddy's little fist out of the milk pitcher, in which he was rapturously churning.

"And yet your life is very different from the one you pictured so long ago. Do you remember our castles in the air?" asked Amy, smiling as she watched Laurie and John playing cricket with the boys.

"Dear fellows! It does my heart good to see them forget business and frolic for a day," answered Jo, who now spoke in a maternal way of all mankind. "Yes, I remember, but the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to me now. I haven't given up the 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," and Jo pointed from the lively lads in the distance to her father, leaning on the Professor's arm, as they walked to and fro in the sunshine, deep in one of the conversations which both enjoyed so much, and then to her mother, sitting enthroned among her daughters, with their children in her lap and at her feet, as if all found help and happiness in the face which never could grow old to them.

"My castle was the most nearly realized of all. 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," and Meg laid her hand on her tall boy's head, with a face full of tender and devout content.

"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. I've begun to model a figure of baby, and Laurie says it is the best thing I've ever done. I think so, myself, and mean to do it in marble, so that, whatever happens, I may at least keep the image of my little angel."

As Amy spoke, a great tear dropped on the golden hair of the sleeping child in her arms, for her one well-beloved daughter was a frail little creature and the dread of losing her was the shadow over Amy's sunshine. This cross was doing much for both father and mother, for one love and sorrow bound them closely together. Amy's nature was growing sweeter, deeper, and more tender. Laurie was growing more serious, strong, and firm, and both were learning that beauty, youth, good fortune, even love itself, cannot keep care and pain, loss and sorrow, from the most blessed for . . .

Into each life some rain must fall,  
Some days must be dark and sad and dreary.

"She is growing better, I am sure of it, my dear. Don't despond, but hope and keep happy," said Mrs. March, as tenderhearted Daisy stooped from her knee to lay her rosy cheek against her little cousin's pale one.

"I never ought to, while I have you to cheer me up, Marmee, and Laurie to take more than half of every burden," replied Amy warmly. "He never lets me see his anxiety, but is so sweet and patient with me, so devoted to Beth, and such a stay and comfort to me always that I can't love

him enough. So, in spite of my one cross, I can say with Meg, "Thank God, I'm a happy woman."

"There's no need for me to say it, for everyone can see that I'm far happier than I deserve," added Jo, glancing from her good husband to her chubby children, tumbling on the grass beside her. "Fritz is getting gray and stout. I'm growing as thin as a shadow, and am thirty. We never shall be rich, and Plumfield may burn up any night, for that incorrigible Tommy Bangs will smoke sweet-fern cigars under the bedclothes, though he's set himself afire three times already. But in spite of these unromantic facts, I have nothing to complain of, and never was so jolly in my life. Excuse the remark, but living among boys, I can't help using their expressions now and then."

"Yes, Jo, I think your harvest will be a good one," began Mrs. March, frightening away a big black cricket that was staring Teddy out of countenance.

"Not half so good as yours, Mother. Here it is, and we never can thank you enough for the patient sowing and reaping you have done," cried Jo, with the loving impetuosity which she never would outgrow.

"I hope there will be more wheat and fewer tares every year," said Amy softly.

"A large sheaf, but I know there's room in your heart for it, Marmee dear," added Meg's tender voice.

Touched to the heart, Mrs. March could only stretch out her arms, as if to gather children and grandchildren to herself, and say, with face and voice full of motherly love, gratitude, and humility . . .

"Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!"

# Christmas

## Close Reading and Discussion Activities (40–60 minutes)

### Prereading question (5–10 minutes)

What does it mean to be “merry,” and what makes a holiday celebration “merry”?

### Note-taking prompt (15–25 minutes)

Mark a **C** where a character makes a **choice**; mark an **M** where a character feels **merry**.

#### Suggested follow-up questions:

- *What about this part makes you think this character is making a choice or feeling merry?*
- *Would you say more about what the character is choosing here or why the character is merry?*
- *How do you think <character’s> choices connect to <his or her> merriment?*
- *Which character do you think made the best choices overall? Which character is merriest?*

### Shared Inquiry discussion question (20–25 minutes)

How are the choices the characters make related to the merriment they feel?

## Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

### Chapter 2: A Merry Christmas (excerpt)

“Merry Christmas, Marmee! Many of them! Thank you for our books. We read some, and mean to every day,” they all cried in chorus.

“Merry Christmas, little daughters! I’m glad you began at once, and hope you will keep on. But I want to say one word before we sit down. Not far away from here lies a poor woman with a little newborn baby. Six children are huddled into one bed to keep from freezing, for they have no fire. There is nothing to eat over there, and the oldest boy came to tell me they were suffering hunger and cold. My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?”

They were all unusually hungry, having waited nearly an hour, and for a minute no one spoke, only a minute, for Jo exclaimed impetuously, “I’m so glad you came before we began!”

“May I go and help carry the things to the poor little children?” asked Beth eagerly.

“I shall take the cream and the muffins,” added Amy, heroically giving up the article she most liked.

Meg was already covering the buckwheats, and piling the bread into one big plate.

“I thought you’d do it,” said Mrs. March, smiling as if satisfied. “You shall all go and help me, and when we come back we will have bread and milk for breakfast, and make it up at dinnertime.”

They were soon ready, and the procession set out. Fortunately it was early, and they went through back streets, so few people saw them, and no one laughed at the queer party.

A poor, bare, miserable room it was, with broken windows, no fire, ragged bedclothes, a sick mother, wailing baby, and a group of pale, hungry children cuddled under one old quilt, trying to keep warm.

How the big eyes stared and the blue lips smiled as the girls went in.

“Ach, mein Gott! It is good angels come to us!” said the poor woman, crying for joy.

“Funny angels in hoods and mittens,” said Jo, and set them to laughing.

In a few minutes it really did seem as if kind spirits had been at work there. Hannah, who had carried wood, made a fire, and stopped up the broken panes with old hats and her own cloak. Mrs. March gave the mother tea and gruel, and comforted her with promises of help, while she dressed the little baby as tenderly as if it had been her own. The girls meantime spread the table, set the children round the fire, and fed them like so many hungry birds, laughing, talking, and trying to understand the funny broken English.

“Das ist gut!” “Die Engel-kinder!” cried the poor things as they ate and warmed their purple hands at the comfortable blaze. The girls had never been called angel children before, and thought it very agreeable, especially Jo, who had been considered a “Sancho” ever since she was born. That was a very happy breakfast, though they didn’t get any of it. And when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were not in all the city four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts and contented themselves with bread and milk on Christmas morning.

“That’s loving our neighbor better than ourselves, and I like it,” said Meg, as they set out their presents while their mother was upstairs collecting clothes for the poor Hummels.

Not a very splendid show, but there was a great deal of love done up in the few little bundles, and the tall vase of red roses, white chrysanthemums, and trailing vines, which stood in the middle, gave quite an elegant air to the table.

“She’s coming! Strike up, Beth! Open the door, Amy! Three cheers for Marmee!” cried Jo, prancing about while Meg went to conduct Mother to the seat of honor.

Beth played her gayest march, Amy threw open the door, and Meg enacted escort with great dignity. Mrs. March was both surprised and touched, and smiled with her eyes full as she examined her presents and read the little notes which accompanied them. The slippers went on at once, a new handkerchief was slipped into her pocket, well scented with Amy’s cologne, the rose was fastened in her bosom, and the nice gloves were pronounced a perfect fit.

There was a good deal of laughing and kissing and explaining, in the simple, loving fashion which makes these home festivals so pleasant at the time, so sweet to remember long afterward, and then all fell to work.

The morning charities and ceremonies took so much time that the rest of the day was devoted to preparations for the evening festivities. Being still too young to go often to the theater, and not rich enough to afford any great outlay for private performances, the girls put their wits to work, and necessity being the mother of invention, made whatever they needed. Very clever were some of their productions, pasteboard guitars, antique lamps made of old-fashioned butter boats covered with silver paper, gorgeous robes of old cotton, glittering with tin spangles from a pickle factory, and armor covered with the same useful diamond-shaped bits left in sheets when the lids of preserve pots were cut out. The big chamber was the scene of many innocent revels.

No gentlemen were admitted, so Jo played male parts to her heart’s content and took immense satisfaction in a pair of russet leather boots given her by a friend, who knew a lady who knew an actor. These boots, an old foil, and a slashed doublet once used by an artist for some picture, were Jo’s chief treasures and appeared on all occasions. The smallness of the company made it necessary for the two principal actors to take several parts apiece, and they certainly deserved some credit for the hard work they did in learning three or four different parts, whisking in and out of various costumes, and managing the stage besides. It was excellent drill for their memories, a harmless amusement, and employed many hours which otherwise would have been idle, lonely, or spent in less profitable society.

On Christmas night, a dozen girls piled onto the bed which was the dress circle, and sat

before the blue and yellow chintz curtains in a most flattering state of expectancy. There was a good deal of rustling and whispering behind the curtain, a trifle of lamp smoke, and an occasional giggle from Amy, who was apt to get hysterical in the excitement of the moment. Presently a bell sounded, the curtains flew apart, and the *operatic tragedy* began. . . .

Tumultuous applause followed but received an unexpected check, for the cot bed, on which the dress circle was built, suddenly shut up and extinguished the enthusiastic audience. Roderigo and Don Pedro flew to the rescue, and all were taken out unhurt, though many were speechless with laughter. The excitement had hardly subsided when Hannah appeared, with “Mrs. March’s compliments, and would the ladies walk down to supper.”

This was a surprise even to the actors, and when they saw the table, they looked at one another in rapturous amazement. It was like Marmee to get up a little treat for them, but anything so fine as this was unheard of since the departed days of plenty. There was ice cream, actually two dishes of it, pink and white, and cake and fruit and distracting French bonbons and, in the middle of the table, four great bouquets of hot house flowers.

It quite took their breath away, and they stared first at the table and then at their mother, who looked as if she enjoyed it immensely.

“Is it fairies?” asked Amy.

“Santa Claus,” said Beth.

“Mother did it.” And Meg smiled her sweetest, in spite of her gray beard and white eyebrows.

“Aunt March had a good fit and sent the supper,” cried Jo, with a sudden inspiration.

“All wrong. Old Mr. Laurence sent it,” replied Mrs. March.

“The Laurence boy’s grandfather! What in the world put such a thing into his head? We don’t know him!” exclaimed Meg.

“Hannah told one of his servants about your breakfast party. He is an odd old gentleman, but that pleased him. He knew my father years ago, and he sent me a polite note this afternoon, saying he hoped I would allow him to express his friendly feeling toward my children by sending them a few trifles in honor of the day. I could not refuse, and so you have a little feast at night to make up for the bread-and-milk breakfast.”

“That boy put it into his head, I know he did! He’s a capital fellow, and I wish we could get acquainted. He looks as if he’d like to know us but he’s bashful, and Meg is so prim she won’t let me speak to him when we pass,” said Jo, as the plates went round, and the ice began to melt out of sight, with ohs and ahs of satisfaction.

“You mean the people who live in the big house next door, don’t you?” asked one of the girls. “My mother knows old Mr. Laurence, but says he’s very proud and doesn’t like to mix with his neighbors. He keeps his grandson shut up, when he isn’t riding or walking with his tutor, and makes him study very hard. We invited him to our party, but he didn’t come. Mother says he’s very nice, though he never speaks to us girls.”

“Our cat ran away once, and he brought her back, and we talked over the fence, and were getting on capitally, all about cricket, and so on, when he saw Meg coming, and walked off. I mean to know him some day, for he needs fun, I’m sure he does,” said Jo decidedly.

“I like his manners, and he looks like a little gentleman, so I’ve no objection to your knowing him, if a proper opportunity comes. He brought the flowers himself, and I should have asked him in, if I had been sure what was going on upstairs. He looked so wistful as he went away, hearing the frolic and evidently having none of his own.”

“It’s a mercy you didn’t, Mother!” laughed Jo, looking at her boots. “But we’ll have another play sometime that he can see. Perhaps he’ll help act. Wouldn’t that be jolly?”

“I never had such a fine bouquet before! How pretty it is!” And Meg examined her flowers with great interest.

“They are lovely. But Beth’s roses are sweeter to me,” said Mrs. March, smelling the half-dead posy in her belt.

Beth nestled up to her, and whispered softly, “I wish I could send my bunch to Father. I’m afraid he isn’t having such a merry Christmas as we are.”

# About the Great Books Foundation

The Great Books Foundation is an independent, nonprofit educational organization that has been creating reading and discussion programs for over 70 years. We believe that literacy and critical thinking form reflective, knowledgeable citizens and that open inquiry into the world's enduring texts advances the ultimate promise of democracy—participation for all. Through our publications and our teaching of the Shared Inquiry method of learning, we seek to:

- Inspire students to explore essential ideas and learn to read and think critically
- Equip teachers to lead engaging, inquiry-focused explorations of challenging texts
- Build communities of lifelong learners and engaged citizens
- Expand access to inquiry-based learning through partnerships and outreach programs

## About Shared Inquiry

Shared Inquiry is an active and collaborative search for answers to questions of meaning about a text. Rooted in the Socratic method, Shared Inquiry is distinct in its focus on high-quality texts and the skilled questioning of the leader.

Shared Inquiry discussion engages all participants in reading closely, asking questions, and building answers. Discussion leaders use questions to help participants develop ideas, explain evidence, and respond to each other. Because discussion focuses on interpretive questions that have more than one reasonable answer, the goal is not consensus, and the leader does not offer answers. Participants weigh multiple ideas and come to their own reasoned conclusions.

## Shared Inquiry Discussion Guidelines

Great Books participants of all ages use the guidelines below to keep discussions productive and civil.

- 1. Read the text (or listen to it) carefully before the discussion.** This ensures that all participants are prepared to support opinions with evidence from the text and respond to others' ideas.
- 2. Discuss only the text that everyone has read.** Talking at length about personal experiences or unfamiliar texts can exclude some participants and cause discussion to drift off-topic.
- 3. Support your ideas with evidence from the text.** Evidence enables everyone to weigh the validity of different ideas, rather than merely agreeing or disagreeing.
- 4. Listen to other participants and respond to them directly.** Shared Inquiry is about learning from each other, so participants should feel free to speak directly to one another rather than only to the leader.
- 5. Expect the leader to only ask questions.** The leader models a willingness to hear what everyone thinks by asking questions rather than sharing ideas and answers.

## Free Online Resources

Visit [greatbooks.org/resources](https://greatbooks.org/resources) to learn more about or to access:

- FREE K–12 sample lesson plans
- Classroom materials
- Videos of Shared Inquiry in the classroom
- The Great Books Plus digital platform—take a virtual tour!
- Alignments to commonly used standards
- Research supporting Shared Inquiry and Great Books programs
- Additional professional development opportunities

## Great Books Professional Development

All Great Books professional development is designed to help you learn, practice, and master the Shared Inquiry method of teaching and learning. Our experienced trainers have helped thousands of teachers use this method with Great Books classroom materials and other curriculum. It empowers teachers to use interpretive, evaluative, and factual questions to help students dig deeper into whatever they are reading, so they can express themselves, listen to others, and synthesize new ideas from the input they are receiving.

The Shared Inquiry method is an active and collaborative search for answers to questions of meaning about a text. It is a research-supported method of learning that promotes deeper thinking through reading, discussion, and writing. Shared Inquiry enhances all the basic language arts skills—reading comprehension, critical thinking, writing, speaking, and listening—and enables students to learn more across the curriculum.

Visit [greatbooks.org/k-12-pd](https://greatbooks.org/k-12-pd) to learn more!

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