

Jan Turnquist:

Louisa May Alcott: Dynamic Author
Educational Guide, Grades PreK-12



About the Performance

Meet Louisa May Alcott, author of the much-loved autobiographical novel, *Little Women*. Louisa introduces students to important 19th century issues including suffrage, abolition, equal education, and the Underground Railroad. Students also learn about the many famous friends of the Alcotts, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and come to appreciate the courage and determination of a fiercely independent woman and her unusual Victorian family. Programs can focus on a variety of topics, including the “literary flowering” of New England, the Underground Railroad, the Union Hospital, the Civil War, 19th century women’s rights and social reforms, and Louisa’s “thriller tales.”



About the Artist

An accomplished actress and historian, and executive director of Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House in Concord, MA, Jan Turnquist brings Alcott and other important women from American History vividly to life. In her performances, she comes in character and full historical dress, tells stories full of audience participation, and answers student questions, providing a unique and insightful experience of history. Jan has presented her work under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor, the Federal Women’s Council, the National Park Service, and Continental Airlines and has performed at numerous libraries, schools, and universities. She has also appeared on the BBC, PBS, and WCVB.

Program Learning Goals

1. To explore life in turn-of-the-century America from the perspective of a colorful historical figure.
2. To experience the writings of Louisa May Alcott, particularly *Little Women*.
3. To become familiarized with storytelling as a way to pass on history.

Essential Questions

1. Why is it important to learn from historical figures?
2. How is “meeting” a historical figure different from learning about them in books or movies?
3. Why is it important to tell stories about the past and historical events?

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Pre-Performance Note for Teachers

This is a performance of living history. Jan Turnquist will be in character as Louisa May Alcott for the entire time she is interacting with students and refer to herself as “Miss Alcott.”

Please read and discuss the “Pre-Performance Note for Students” to prepare students for what to expect and how to interact with Miss Alcott. Be sure to focus on the phrase “willing suspension of disbelief.” This will enable students to take a more active role in the performance.

Pre-Performance Note for Students

Louisa May Alcott will visit us in a living history program on _____.

Like a play, living history involves actors and requires the willing suspension of disbelief by its viewers. Louisa May Alcott lived from 1832-1888 and although she will be played by an actress for this visit, please treat her as if she is the real Miss Alcott.

Unlike a regular play, living history allows the audience to be a part of the performance. You are invited to respond to Miss Alcott’s conversation, but please do not feel pressured to do so. You do not need to be an expert on the 1800s and only need to be yourself.

In her visit, Miss Alcott will have experienced a minor carriage accident which has left her temporarily stranded. She will have been led to this room to rest and await her carriage repair. She will, of course, know nothing of modern life, but will be looking for someone to keep her company while she waits for her carriage to be fixed. This is the role you may play. Your own willing suspension of disbelief during this performance will lead you to the magic of meeting a woman who lived over 100 years ago, and by simply making her welcome, you will have a chance to travel back in time yourself. Miss Alcott looks forward to meeting you.



Vocabulary

- **Autobiography:** a written account of a person's life told in their own words.
- **Biography:** a history of a person's life written by another person.
- **Reformism:** a movement in the 1800s that sought societal and political changes including women's rights, child labor laws, racial equality, and free education.
- **Transcendentalism:** a literary movement in the 1800s that developed in and around Concord, MA. Followers questioned the traditional rules of society and believed in valuing nature and personal freedom.

Key Facts and Context for Students

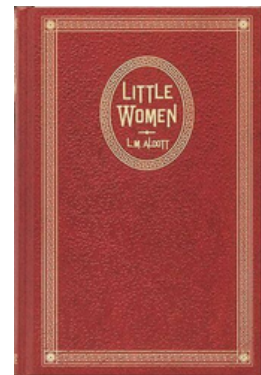


Louisa May Alcott

One of America's most prolific writers, Louisa May Alcott was born in 1832 to an unconventional family who were leaders in abolition, women's suffrage, educational reform, child welfare, and much more. Growing up in Concord, MA, reading and writing were among her favorite passions. Louisa published over 30 books and collections of short stories and poems. Throughout her life she remained fiercely independent and supported many reform movements.

Little Women

In 1868, Louisa wrote and published *Little Women*. Asked by her publisher to write "a girls' story," the novel is based on the childhood of her and her sisters. She based the main character, Jo March, on herself and wrote her as an independent, free-thinking, and flawed person that contrasted societal stereotypes of femininity. *Little Women* was a huge success at the time, and continues to be today. It has been translated into many languages, adapted into films, and inspired numerous other works.



The Age of Reform

In the 1800s, the United States went through a period of massive change. Many people fought for political causes to create a better world. Educational reformists fought for relevant and accessible curriculum. The women's rights movement fought for equal rights for women, including the right to vote. Labor movements sought an eight-hour work day and child labor laws. Abolitionists fought for racial equality and an end to slavery. These ideals influenced the artistic and literary movement called Transcendentalism.

Pre-Performance Discussion Questions

- What do you know about life in the 1800s? What would you like to know? How could you find out more?
- What might a story teach us about history that we might not get from a history book?
- What does “willing suspension of disbelief” mean? Why must we suspend disbelief to enjoy this performance?

Pre-Performance Activities

Activity 1: Life in the 1800s Versus Life Today

Learning Goal:

To reflect on the comparisons of life in the 1800s with life today.

Materials:

Books and vetted websites about life in the 1800s (see *resources on page 10 for ideas*), “Life in the 1800s Versus Life Today” worksheet (see *page 5*), coloring/art supplies (optional)



Directions:

1. Discuss the 1800s. What was life like? How was it different from today?
2. Divide the class into seven groups. Assign each group a topic: food, homes, transportation, school, clothing, entertainment, and medical care. *Note: for younger grades, this activity could be done in a large group and with a smaller number of topics.*
3. Using books and vetted websites, have each group research their topic and note similarities and differences between the 1800s and today on the “Life in the 1800s Versus Life Today” worksheet.
4. Optional: using the information gathered on the worksheet, have each group make a poster with art supplies to display their findings in a creative way.
5. Have each group present about their topic to the class.
6. Write a short paragraph entitled, “If I Lived in the 1800s...” reflecting on one of the topics presented. *Note: for younger grades, this could be a discussion prompt instead of a written exercise.*
7. Ask volunteers to share their paragraphs with the rest of the class.

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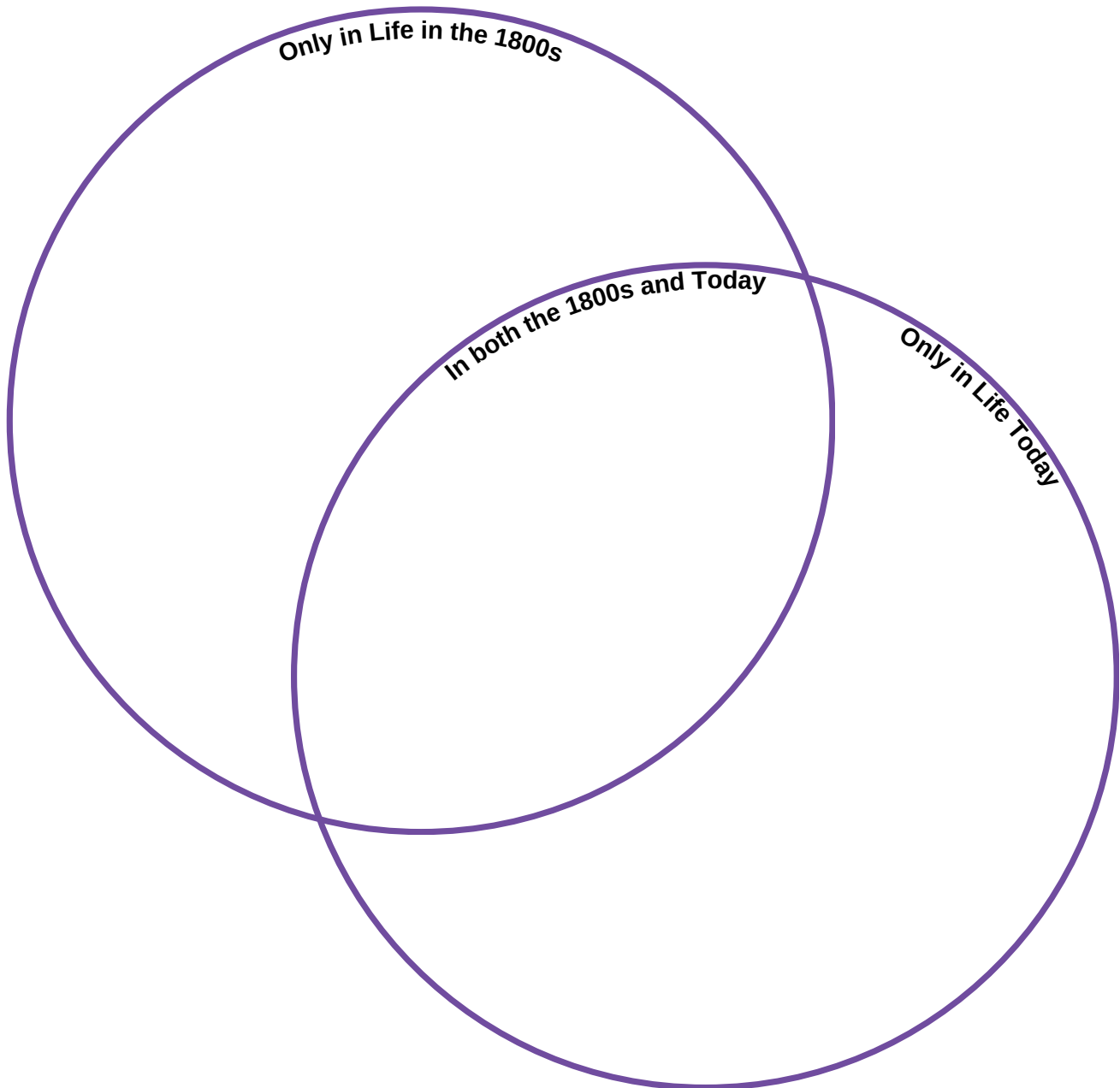


Name: _____

Topic: _____

Life in the 1800s Versus Life Today

Directions: Research your topic and note similarities and differences on the Venn diagram below between life in the 1800s and life today.



Pre-Performance Activities, continued

Activity 2: Authors of the 1800s

Learning Goal:

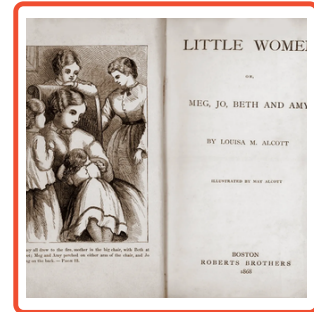
To investigate authors who lived and wrote during the 1800s.

Materials:

Books and vetted websites about:

- Louisa May Alcott
- Henry David Thoreau
- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Emily Dickinson

“Authors of the 1800s” worksheet (see page 7), coloring/art supplies (optional)



Directions:

1. Discuss the author Louisa May Alcott and her literary contemporaries Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Emily Dickinson. What do you know about them? What do you know about the time period they lived in? Do you know any of their books or what they are about?
2. Divide the class into four groups and assign an author to each. *Note: for younger grades, this activity could be done in a large group and focus only on Louisa May Alcott.*
3. Have the groups research their author and fill out the “Authors of the 1800s” worksheet.
4. Optional: using the information gathered on the worksheet, have each group make a poster with art supplies to display their findings in a creative way.
5. Have the groups present their research to the class.
6. Discuss all the authors again. How were they similar? How were they different? How do their writing styles compare?

Pre-Performance Activity Extensions

- Read all or part of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. For older students, this could be done independently and for younger students, read a few pages aloud each day. Make sure students know that *Little Women* is an autobiographical novel. Keep a running list of elements from the story that are surprising.
- Have students think of relevant questions to ask Louisa May Alcott during her visit.

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Name: _____

Author: _____

Authors in the 1800s

Directions: Research your assigned author and fill in the information below.

Where and when did the author live?

What are the author's most famous books?

Write a summary of one of the author's books.

What themes are in the author's writings?

What is noteworthy about the author's writing style?

Post-Performance Discussion Questions

- What did you learn about Louisa May Alcott?
- How is an autobiography different from a biography?
- How does a living history portrayal like this performance compare to learning about history from books or movies? What did you like best about it?

Post-Performance Activities

Activity 1: Writing a Book

Learning Goals:

- To write a personal story.
- To experience the bookmaking process.



Materials:

4" x 5" pieces of lined paper, 4" x 5" pieces of colored card stock, hole punch, yarn

Notes for the teacher:

- It is helpful to have a sample handmade book available as a guide.
- For young students, this activity can be done using pictures instead of words.

Directions:

1. Discuss the word "author." Ask students to name authors of books they have read.
2. Discuss the process of writing a book. First, the author writes a story. An editor then reviews and comments on it. Next, the editor returns the story to the author to make changes. This step might be repeated numerous times. Finally, the story is printed and bound.
3. Have students write short stories about an event in their lives.
4. Ask students to exchange stories. Have them act as editors for each other with an emphasis on constructive criticism.
5. Have students write a second draft of their story that incorporates their editor's feedback.
6. Pass out 4" x 5" lined paper, and have students transcribe their revised stories onto as many pages as necessary.
7. Give students two pieces of 4" x 5" colored card stock. Ask them to decorate one for the cover, and use the other as the back.
8. Put the covers and all pages in order and make three hole punches in the left margin.
9. Use yarn to tie the book together.
10. Share the books with the class.

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Post-Performance Activities, continued

Activity 2: Writing Autobiographies

Learning Goal:

To write autobiographical excerpts.

Materials:

Writing paper, pens/pencils



Directions:

1. Discuss the difference between a biography and an autobiography. Why do people write autobiographies? When do they write them? What details might be included in an autobiography that are not found in a biography?
2. Ask students to make a list of important events in their lives. Events can be serious, funny, emotional, or anything else they are comfortable sharing.
3. Have students select one event from their list and write an autobiographical excerpt about it. This could be writing about the full event, or simply a moment from the event.
4. Share autobiographical excerpts with the class.
5. Optional: repeat and modify the writing activity for biographies. Have students share an event from their life with a partner. Then have students write about their partner's event and share with the class. Discuss the difference between writing an autobiography and writing a biography.

Post-Performance Activity Extensions

- Plan a class trip to Louisa May Alcott's home, the Orchard House, in Concord, MA (see *resources on page 10 for more information*).
- Have students write a letter to Louisa May Alcott to share their thoughts about her visit and/or opinions about her life and *Little Women*.
- Discuss life in the 1800s and compare it to life today.



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Further Resources

- [Jan Turnquist Artist Website](#)
- [Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House in Concord, MA](#)
- [Orchard House: The Home of Little Women documentary](#)
- [National Geographic "Reform Movements 1800s" Collection](#)
- [Scholastic Publishing: "Websites Where Kids Can Create Books"](#)
- Alcott, Louisa May: *Little Women* (1868)
- Meigs, Cornelia: *Invincible Louisa* (1933)
- Pirotta, Saviour: *Classic Stories: Little Women*, Starry Forest Books (2021)



Curricular Connections

Arts Standards: Theatre

Responding

- Perceive and analyze artistic work. (T.R.07)
- Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. (T.R.08)
- Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. (T.R.09)

Connecting

- Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art. (T.Co.10)
- Relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical contexts to deepen understanding. (T.Co.11)

English Language Arts and Literacy Anchor Standards

Reading

- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. (R.PK-12.2)
- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. (R.PK-12.4)

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Curricular Connections, continued

English Language Arts and Literacy Anchor Standards, continued

Writing

- Write narratives to develop experiences or events using effective literary techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured sequences. (W.PK-12.3)

Speaking and Listening

- Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. (SL.PK-12.2)
- Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric. (SL.PK-12.3)

Language

- Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening. (L.PK-12.3)
- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings. (L.PK-12.5)

History and Social Science

Pre-K

- Topic 1: Civics: fairness, friendship, responsibility, and respect (HSS.Pre-K.T1)
- Topic 3: History: personal experiences and memories (HSS.Pre-K.T3)

K

- Topic 1: Civics: classroom citizenship (HSS.K.T1)
- Topic 3: History: shared traditions (HSS.K.T3)

Grade 1

- Topic 1: Civics: communities, elections, and leadership (HSS.1.T1)
- Topic 3: History: unity and diversity in the United States (HSS.1.T3)

Grade 2

- Topic 3: History: migrations and cultures (HSS.2.T3)

Grade 3

- Topic 1: Massachusetts cities and towns today and in history (HSS.3.T1)

Grade 4

- Topic 4: The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today (HSS.4.T4)
- Topic 4a: The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today: The Northeast (HSS.4.T4a)

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Curricular Connections, continued

History and Social Science, continued

Grade 5

- Topic 5: Slavery, the legacy of the Civil War, and the struggle for civil rights for all (HSS.5.T5)

Grade 8

- Topic 4: Rights and responsibilities of citizens (HSS.8.T4)

Grades 9-12

- US History I Topic 2: Democratization and expansion (HSS.USI.T2)
- US History I Topic 4: Social, political, and religious change (HSS.USI.T4)

