

# LITTLE WOMEN

## Historical & Literary Source Packet

Context for Advanced Literary Inquiry • Grades 5–7

### Inquiry purpose

Use historical evidence to deepen, challenge, or revise an interpretation of the novel. Context explains possibilities and constraints; it does not provide one correct interpretation.

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Selected focus: ☐ Identity ☐ Expectations ☐ Work ☐ Ambition ☐ Responsibility

☐ Independence ☐ Class ☐ Representation ☐ Another concept: \_\_\_\_\_

### Source responsibility

Distinguish what the source directly establishes, what you infer, and what remains unknown. Never use one document to make a claim about every person in a historical period.

# How to Analyze a Historical Source

## SOURCE

Who created it? When? What kind of source is it? Who preserved or published it?

## OBSERVE

What details, words, images, choices, or omissions do you notice?

## CONTEXTUALIZE

What was happening at the time? What opportunities or limitations shaped the source?

## INFER

What reasonable conclusion can you draw? Which details support it?

## LIMIT

What can this source not tell you? Whose perspective is missing?

## CONNECT

How does the source deepen, challenge, or complicate an interpretation of Little Women?

### Important distinction

A primary source was created during the period being studied. A secondary source was created later to explain or interpret the period. Both can be useful when their roles are clear.

## Citation Pattern

Creator. "Title or Description." Date. Repository or Organization. URL.

# Source 1: Alcott's Childhood and the Fictional March Family

TYPE: SECONDARY CONTEXT

CREATOR / REPOSITORY: National Park Service

TITLE: The Wayside—Little Women Happened Here!

Open the source: [View the original or official source page](#)

## Source Brief

The National Park Service explains that Alcott drew on experiences with her sisters, childhood playacting, household work, intellectual neighbors, reform ideas, and economic difficulty. The page also emphasizes that she transformed those experiences through fiction.

## Observe Before You Interpret

Record three details directly visible or stated in the source.

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## Inquiry Questions

- Which details from Alcott's childhood appear to have influenced the novel?
- Why must Jo and Alcott still be treated as different people?
- How might a family transform difficulty into imagination or creative work?

## Source Limitation

### Do not overclaim

Autobiographical influence does not make a novel a factual record. Use this source to investigate influence, not to claim that every scene happened exactly as written.

## Connection to Little Women

This source deepens, challenges, or complicates my interpretation because:

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## Source 2: Louisa May Alcott Writes from the Civil War

TYPE: PRIMARY SOURCE

CREATOR / REPOSITORY: Louisa May Alcott; Massachusetts Historical Society

TITLE: Letter to Hannah Stevenson, December 26, 1862

Open the source: [View the original or official source page](#)

### Source Brief

Alcott wrote this letter shortly after arriving in Washington, D.C., to serve as a Civil War nurse. The digitized manuscript offers direct evidence of her voice, experiences, observations, and decision to enter work beyond the home.

### Observe Before You Interpret

Record three details directly visible or stated in the source.

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### Inquiry Questions

- What does the letter reveal about Alcott's purpose or state of mind?
- Which details show the opportunities and risks of nursing?
- How might this experience complicate interpretations of work, service, or independence in the novel?

### Source Limitation

#### Do not overclaim

One personal letter represents one moment and one writer. It cannot establish what all women, nurses, or families experienced.

### Connection to Little Women

This source deepens, challenges, or complicates my interpretation because:

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# Source 3: A Civil War Hospital

TYPE: PRIMARY VISUAL SOURCE

CREATOR / REPOSITORY: Library of Congress

TITLE: Regimental Hospital, 1863—drawing from entrance and pulpit

Open the source: [View the original or official source page](#)

## Source Brief

This 1863 drawing depicts the interior of a regimental hospital. It provides visual evidence about crowded space, beds, architecture, caregiving conditions, and the environment in which injured or ill soldiers received treatment.

## Observe Before You Interpret

Record three details directly visible or stated in the source.

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## Inquiry Questions

- List five details before interpreting the image.
- What might the image suggest about the physical and emotional demands of care?
- Which details would Alcott's written account help explain that the image cannot?

## Source Limitation

### Do not overclaim

A drawing reflects the artist's viewpoint and selected moment. It does not reveal every sound, smell, emotion, medical practice, or patient experience.

## Connection to Little Women

This source deepens, challenges, or complicates my interpretation because:

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## Source 4: Women's Civil War Roles

TYPE: SECONDARY CONTEXT WITH PRIMARY-SOURCE REFERENCES

CREATOR / REPOSITORY: National Park Service

TITLE: Breaking Down Boundaries: Women of the Civil War

Open the source: [View the original or official source page](#)

### Source Brief

The National Park Service describes women managing homes, farms, shops, and businesses; volunteering as nurses; writing about war; and negotiating expectations that women remain supportive and home-centered.

### Observe Before You Interpret

Record three details directly visible or stated in the source.

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### Inquiry Questions

- Which roles expanded because of wartime conditions?
- Which expectations remained in place even when women's work changed?
- How might war increase opportunity while also increasing burden?

### Source Limitation

#### Do not overclaim

This overview combines many experiences. It should be paired with individual primary sources and should not be treated as a description of every woman.

### Connection to Little Women

This source deepens, challenges, or complicates my interpretation because:

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# Source 5: Women Petition for Political Voice

TYPE: PRIMARY SOURCE SET

CREATOR / REPOSITORY: National Archives

TITLE: 1865 Petition for Universal Suffrage

Open the source: [View the original or official source page](#)

## Source Brief

In 1865, women organized a petition seeking constitutional protection of voting rights. The document demonstrates collective political action at a time when women lacked the vote and were contesting the meaning of consent and citizenship.

## Observe Before You Interpret

Record three details directly visible or stated in the source.

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## Inquiry Questions

- What methods did women use when formal political power was denied?
- What does a petition reveal about agency within legal limitations?
- How might political inequality affect interpretations of independence in the novel?

## Source Limitation

### Do not overclaim

The petition represents organized advocates, not all women. It also requires attention to whose rights were centered or excluded within nineteenth-century reform movements.

## Connection to Little Women

This source deepens, challenges, or complicates my interpretation because:

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# Source 6: Teaching During Reconstruction

TYPE: PRIMARY VISUAL SOURCE

CREATOR / REPOSITORY: Library of Congress

TITLE: Sarah Jane Foster, teacher to freedpeople in West Virginia

Open the source: [View the original or official source page](#)

## Source Brief

This photograph identifies Sarah Jane Foster as a Reconstruction missionary teacher working with freedpeople. It broadens the packet beyond the March family's white New England perspective and highlights education as work, reform, mobility, and contested power.

## Observe Before You Interpret

Record three details directly visible or stated in the source.

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## Inquiry Questions

- What can the photograph and catalog record establish?
- What additional evidence is needed to understand Foster's students and community?
- How might this source complicate an interpretation of Plumfield or education as reform?

## Source Limitation

### Do not overclaim

The teacher's portrait does not center the voices of the freedpeople she taught. Use the absence itself as an important source question.

## Connection to Little Women

This source deepens, challenges, or complicates my interpretation because:

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# Cross-Source Synthesis

Use at least three sources. Do not merely summarize them separately.

| Source | Important Evidence | Connection to Novel | Limitation / Missing Voice |
|--------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| 1      |                    |                     |                            |
| 2      |                    |                     |                            |
| 3      |                    |                     |                            |
| 4      |                    |                     |                            |

## Pattern

Across these sources, a pattern I notice is:

## Tension or Contradiction

The sources disagree or complicate one another because:

## Revised Literary Claim

After examining the historical evidence, my interpretation of the novel is:

# Source Evaluation and Citation Record

Complete one record for each source used in a final product.

Creator: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Repository / organization:

\_\_\_\_\_

URL: \_\_\_\_\_

Date accessed:

\_\_\_\_\_

## Credibility

What expertise, collection, evidence, or institutional responsibility supports this source?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Relevance

How does this source help answer the inquiry question?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Limitations

Whose perspective is missing? What cannot be concluded?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Use in My Work

☐ Direct quotation of fewer than 25 words   ☐ Paraphrase   ☐ Visual evidence   ☐ Background context

My citation:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

FINAL CHECK: Give credit for words, images, and ideas. A link alone is not analysis; explain how the source changes, supports, or complicates your interpretation.