

Little Women Teacher's Notes **B1+** **B2**

Greta Gerwig's latest movie based on Louisa May Alcott's novel will take you into a female world in which conventions are defied, questioned and challenged by four sisters. Indeed, these four women on the brink of emancipation shatter the traditional image of upper-middle class young ladies whose role (and even duty) was to get married and comply with the rules society had set for them.

This lively and rather fast-paced trailer will enable your students to not only get a glimpse of what life was like for women at that time but also to feel the brewing change embodied by Jo and her sisters.

This work on *Little Women* can be a good introduction to a sequence on coming-of-age stories. (Keep it in mind for *LLCER Terminale Thématique* « *Expression et construction de soi* », *Axe d'étude : Initiation, apprentissage*). It is also a good addition to study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (*LLCER Première oeuvres intégrales*), both coming-of-age novels.

► VOCABULARY AND STRUCTURES

Describing people: *look / sound / seem*

Linkwords:

- contrast (*whereas, yet...*) and paradox (*however...*)
- cause (*as, because...*) and consequence (*that's why, therefore...*)
- adding ideas : *moreover, what's more, furthermore...*

► CULTURE

A classic American coming-of-age novel

- justifying / explaining : *insofar as / inasmuch as / since / as*

Preterite / present

Hypotheses: *be likely to / be bound to / must / may be...*

Activities: *running, dancing, acting...*

Social status / background: *well-off, affluent, upper-middle class, aristocracy...*

► LISTENING, SPEAKING, WRITING

- We suggest starting with a speaking activity to help the students enter the world of the movie. Use the photos and poster to have them guess the possible period and themes of the movie. Have them say what they know about the era, more particularly about women (their rights, roles, duties, social status...) at that time.
- Then, use the trailer and do the comprehension activities. Depending on your students' level, you can choose to divide the class up into 3 groups while watching the trailer for the second time (each group would then be in charge of 1 sister). These activities will help them first meet the characters and their environment and then get to know them, focusing on Jo and her "rebellious" attitude and how she challenges and questions the standards of the period. You could use one or more of the extracts from the book suggested in **Going further** to give pupils more material for this activity.
- The final writing activity will enable each one to voice their opinion and organise their ideas while showing the tensions at work.

► GOING FURTHER

You'll find three extracts from *Little Women* at the end of this supplement, if you would like to work on the book as well as the film. All of them add to the character portrait of the sisters (all four for extracts 1 and 3, and Jo for extract 2.) They could be studied separately, or given to students to help them complete their

mindmaps of the sisters. We would suggest either giving extract 1 to everyone in that case, or having three groups, each with a different extract, and then a collective session to allow the groups to share their findings.

► TRAILER TRANSCRIPT

Laurie: This is Meg, Amy, Beth and Jo.

Jo: I'm working on a novel. It is the story of my life, and my sisters'.

Publisher: Make it short and spicy. And if the main character is a girl, make sure she's married by the end.

Laurie: Ow! Jo!

Amy: I want to be an artist in Rome and the best painter in the world.

Beth: That's what you want too, Jo, isn't it, to be a famous writer?

Jo: Yes, but it sounds so crass when she says it.

Marmee: My girls have a way of getting into mischief.

Laurie: Well, so do I.

Laurie: This is Meg, Amy, Beth and Jo.

Jo: I intend to make my own way in the world.

Aunt March: No one makes their own way, least of all a woman. You'll need to marry well!

Jo: But you are not married, Aunt March.

Aunt March: Well that's because I'm rich!

Laurie: Jo, would you like to dance with me?

Jo: I can't because I scorched my dress and Meg told me to keep still so no one would see it.

Laurie: I've an idea of how we can manage.

Aunt March: Jo is a lost cause, so you are your family's hope now.

Amy: I believe we have some power over who we love. It isn't something that just happens to a person.

Laurie: I think the poets might disagree.

Jo: We can leave, right now. I'll sell stories...

Meg: Jo...

Jo: And you, you should be an actress and you should have a life on the stage.

Meg: Just because my dreams are different than yours doesn't mean they are unimportant.

Laurie: I've loved you ever since I met you, Jo.

Jo: It would be a disaster if we married.

Laurie: It wouldn't be a disaster.

Jo: We would be miserable!

Laurie: I would be a perfect saint!

Jo: I can't. I can't.

Woman's voice: A new play written by Miss Jo March.

Jo: Women, they have minds and they have souls, as well as just hearts.

Amy: I want to be great, or nothing.

Jo: And they've got ambition, and they've got talent as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying love is all a woman is fit for. I'm so sick of it.

Marmee: There are some natures too lofty to bend.

Publisher: So, who does she marry?

► SOLUTIONS

These are examples of what students can say:

1. 4 women, about the same age and a boy. Look young and determined / bold. They are bound to be from a wealthy / well-off / affluent family

The plot is likely to take place in the mid-19th century (judging from the way they are dressed)

2. First viewing

1.a. Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy / Aunt March

b. mid-late 19th century

c. 4 sisters + mom? + aunt? + a young man in love with Jo

We can see the women running/dancing/quarrelling / fighting / laughing/ acting / getting into mischief / writing fiction (drama/novels) (→ not "proper" behaviour for a young upper-middle-class lady / behaviours that don't fit decorum/ not suitable for young ladies)

d. "Women, they have minds and they have souls as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition and they've got talent as well as just beauty. I am so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for. I'm so sick of it."

"I want to be great, or nothing!"

"I intend to make my own way in the world."

"You need to marry well."

"I believe we have some power over who we love."

"If the main character is a girl, make sure she's married by the end of the book."

2. not "proper" behaviour for a young upper-middle-class lady / behaviour that doesn't fit decorum/ not suitable for young ladies

Their behaviour / deeds don't tally with the standards since / insofar as / inasmuch as they (dare) have ambition or expect to become famous, which were usually male things As a matter of fact, men were the "bread-winners" and were allowed to have ambition whereas women were supposed to get married and stay at home. One of them stands out: Jo. She sounds more rebellious and somehow reckless.

Second viewing

1. Amy

a. "I want to be an artist / the best painter in the world." "We have a power over who we love." "I want to be great or nothing."

b. She looks and sounds determined

c. "You are your family's hope now."

d. ambitious

2. Jo

a. "I intend to make my own way into the world." "Women have minds and they have souls as well as just hearts."

b. She looks and sounds determined, even rebellious and reckless. Sometimes she has a tie / boyish clothes.

c. "Jo is a lost cause."

d. ambitious and determined

3. Meg

a. "Just because my dreams are different from yours doesn't mean they are unimportant."

b. She looks and sounds more docile than Jo.

c. "You should be an actress."

d. docile / quiet

Third viewing

1.a. "The story of my life and my sisters!"

b. "Make it short and spicy" + the main female character must get married at the end of the novel

c. "Who does she marry?"

d. she looks bored / fed up / sick and tired of that question that only reduces women to a role of wives and mothers and sets aside their value as writers, artists, as human beings in a way, thus denying them equal rights and status

2. Jo's words underline the fact that women should no longer be seen through their husbands only.

She puts forward the idea of independent women who would not have to abide by/ obey the established rules.

3. a. As a man, his words betray how women were considered at that time: wives/ mothers but not women capable of being someone without a husband.

b. On the contrary, Jo's reaction conveys her boredom/ proves she didn't accept the situation and was willing to make it change / evolve

4. She is ahead of her times, she's bound to become a trailblazer/ pioneer. (Her character can remind us of the suffragettes.)

C. Write about it!

Here are some tips to help students write sentences and organise their ideas.

Ask them for words / expressions / adjectives that could be used to define these women and the movie.

Then, to help them find ideas, you could list their ideas on the board using 2 columns: the characters' behaviour / ambitions/ ideas vs Mid-19th century society (conventions / women's role).

Then, have them choose one idea in each column and match these ideas using linkwords.

Finally, ask the students to organise the sentences in a paragraph, for example:
In Little Women, you'll meet unconventional 19th-century women who want to shatter conventions and make things change. For instance, Jo doesn't want to get married even if that is what was expected of women at that time.

Her sister Amy expects to become a famous artist although women were supposed to abide by the rules and stay at home....

▶ GOING FURTHER

Extract 1 - Chapter 1 Playing Pilgrims

1 "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

"It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

5 "I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

"We've got Father and Mother, and each other," said Beth contentedly from her corner.

10 The four young faces on which the firelight shone brightened at the cheerful words, but darkened again as Jo said sadly, "We haven't got Father, and shall not have him for a long time." She didn't say "perhaps never," but each silently added it, thinking of Father far away, where the fighting was.

Nobody spoke for a minute; then Meg said in an altered tone, "You know the reason Mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas

20 was because it is going to be a hard winter for everyone; and she thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure, when our men are suffering so in the army. We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly. But

25 I am afraid I don't," and Meg shook her head, as she thought regretfully of all the pretty things she wanted.

"But I don't think the little we should spend would do any good. We've each got a dollar, and the

30 army wouldn't be much helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect anything from Mother or you, but I do want to buy Undine and Sintran for myself. I've wanted it so long," said Jo, who was a bookworm.

35 "I planned to spend mine in new music," said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard but the hearth brush and kettle-holder.

"I shall get a nice box of Faber's drawing pencils; I really need them," said Amy decidedly.

40 "Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun; I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it," cried Jo, examining the heels of her shoes in a gentlemanly
45 manner.

"I know I do—teaching those tiresome children nearly all day, when I'm longing to enjoy myself at home," began Meg, in the complaining tone again.

"You don't have half such a hard time as I do,"

50 said Jo. "How would you like to be shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady, who keeps you trotting, is never satisfied, and worries you till you're ready to fly out the window or cry?"

"It's naughty to fret, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross, and my hands get so stiff, I can't practice well at all." And Beth looked at her rough hands with a sigh that any one could hear that time.

60 "I don't believe any of you suffer as I do," cried Amy, "for you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls." [...]

Jo sat up, put her hands in her pockets, and began to whistle.

65 "Don't, Jo. It's so boyish!"

"That's why I do it."

"I detest rude, unladylike girls!"

"I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!"

70 "Birds in their little nests agree," sang Beth, the peacemaker, with such a funny face that both sharp voices softened to a laugh, and the "pecking" ended for that time.

"Really, girls, you are both to be blamed," said Meg, beginning to lecture in her elder-sisterly fashion.

75 "You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better, Josephine. It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady."

80 "I'm not! And if turning up my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm twenty," cried Jo, pulling off her net, and shaking down a chestnut mane. "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as

85 prim as a China Aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy. And it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only
90 stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!"

Extract 2

Chapter 3 The Laurence Boy

Intro: Jo and Meg go to a New Year's party.

1 Down they went, feeling a trifle timid, for they seldom went to parties, and informal as this little gathering was, it was an event to them. Mrs. Gardiner, a stately old lady, greeted them kindly
5 and handed them over to the eldest of her six daughters. Meg knew Sallie and was at her ease very soon, but Jo, who didn't care much for girls or girlish gossip, stood about, with her back carefully against the wall, and felt as much out of place as a
10 colt in a flower garden. Half a dozen jovial lads were talking about skates in another part of the room, and she longed to go and join them, for skating was one of the joys of her life. She telegraphed her wish to Meg, but the eyebrows went up so
15 alarmingly that she dared not stir. No one came to talk to her, and one by one the group dwindled away till she was left alone. She could not roam about and amuse herself, for the burned breadth would show, so she stared at people rather forlornly
20 till the dancing began. Meg was asked at once, and the tight slippers tripped about so briskly that none would have guessed the pain their wearer suffered smilingly. Jo saw a big red headed youth approaching her corner, and fearing he meant to
25 engage her, she slipped into a curtained recess, intending to peep and enjoy herself in peace. Unfortunately, another bashful person had chosen the same refuge, for, as the curtain fell behind her, she found herself face to face with the 'Laurence
30 boy'.

"Dear me, I didn't know anyone was here!" stammered Jo, preparing to back out as speedily as she had bounced in.

But the boy laughed and said pleasantly, though he
35 looked a little startled, "Don't mind me, stay if you like."

"Shan't I disturb you?"

"Not a bit. I only came here because I don't know many people and felt rather strange at first, you
40 know."

"So did I. Don't go away, please, unless you'd rather."

The boy sat down again and looked at his pumps, till Jo said, trying to be polite and easy, "I think I've
45 had the pleasure of seeing you before. You live near us, don't you?"

"Next door." And he looked up and laughed outright, for Jo's prim manner was rather funny when he remembered how they had chatted about
50 cricket when he brought the cat home.

That put Jo at her ease and she laughed too, as she said, in her heartiest way, "We did have such a good time over your nice Christmas present."

"Grandpa sent it."

55 "But you put it into his head, didn't you, now?"

"How is your cat, Miss March?" asked the boy, trying to look sober while his black eyes shone with fun.

"Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence. But I am not Miss March, I'm only Jo," returned the young lady.

60 "I'm not Mr. Laurence, I'm only Laurie."

"Laurie Laurence, what an odd name."

"My first name is Theodore, but I don't like it, for the fellows called me Dora, so I made them say Laurie instead."

65 "I hate my name, too, so sentimental! I wish every one would say Jo instead of Josephine. How did you make the boys stop calling you Dora?"

"I thrashed 'em."

"I can't thrash Aunt March, so I suppose I shall have
70 to bear it." And Jo resigned herself with a sigh.

"Don't you like to dance, Miss Jo?" asked Laurie, looking as if he thought the name suited her.

"I like it well enough if there is plenty of room, and everyone is lively. In a place like this I'm sure
75 to upset something, tread on people's toes, or do something dreadful, so I keep out of mischief and let Meg sail about. Don't you dance?"

"Sometimes. You see I've been abroad a good many years, and haven't been into company enough yet
80 to know how you do things here."

Extract 3

Chapter 13 Castles in the Air

1 “Wouldn’t it be fun if all the castles in the air which we make could come true, and we could live in them?” said Jo, after a little pause.

“I’ve made such quantities it would be hard to
5 choose which I’d have,” said Laurie, lying flat and throwing cones at the squirrel who had betrayed him.

“You’d have to take your favorite one. What is it?” asked Meg.

10 “If I tell mine, will you tell yours?”

“Yes, if the girls will too.”

“We will. Now, Laurie.”

“After I’d seen as much of the world as I want to, I’d like to settle in Germany and have just as much
15 music as I choose. I’m to be a famous musician myself, and all creation is to rush to hear me. And I’m never to be bothered about money or business, but just enjoy myself and live for what I like. That’s my favorite castle. What’s yours, Meg?”

20 Margaret seemed to find it a little hard to tell hers, and waved a brake before her face, as if to disperse imaginary gnats, while she said slowly, “I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things— nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture,
25 pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need work a bit. How I should enjoy it! For I wouldn’t be idle, but do good, and make everyone love me dearly.”

30 “Wouldn’t you have a master for your castle in the air?” asked Laurie slyly.

“I said ‘pleasant people’, you know,” and Meg carefully tied up her shoe as she spoke, so that no one saw her face.

35 “Why don’t you say you’d have a splendid, wise, good husband and some angelic little children? You know your castle wouldn’t be perfect without,” said blunt Jo, who had no tender fancies yet, and rather scorned romance, except in books.

40 “You’d have nothing but horses, inkstands, and novels in yours,” answered Meg petulantly.

“Wouldn’t I though? I’d have a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled high with books, and I’d write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works
45 should be as famous as Laurie’s music. I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after I’m dead. I don’t know what, but I’m on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you
50 all some day. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream.”

“Mine is to stay at home safe with Father and Mother, and help take care of the family,” said Beth
55 contentedly.

“Don’t you wish for anything else?” asked Laurie.

“Since I had my little piano, I am perfectly satisfied. I only wish we may all keep well and be together,
nothing else.”

60 “I have ever so many wishes, but the pet one is to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world,” was Amy’s modest desire.

“We’re an ambitious set, aren’t we? Every one of
65 us, but Beth, wants to be rich and famous, and gorgeous in every respect. I do wonder if any of us will ever get our wishes,” said Laurie, chewing grass like a meditative calf.

“I’ve got the key to my castle in the air, but whether
70 I can unlock the door remains to be seen,” observed Jo mysteriously.