LITTLE WOMEN
Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Literary Text: *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

THEMES

Bildungsroman – The story is a coming of age story centered on the four March girls: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. The four girls struggle to mature in difficult economic times while still remaining true to themselves and to their family. It is a story focusing on the events that ultimately shape the characters and help determine who they become.

Personal Identity – Personal identity is something that all must struggle with. What determines your identity and how do you discover it and grapple with it? Many adolescents are trying to discover who they are and who they want to be. Many of them are striving to find a place that they fit in their community of peers, their family, and ultimately society, just as each March girl does in *Little Women*. Meg fights with her ideas of appearances, Jo passionately wants to step into society and do something truly great, Beth fights scarlet fever for her life, and Amy ventures to Europe for new experiences and to develop her talents as an artist.

Gender and Gender Roles – Tied in with identity is the notion of gender and its roles in society. In *Little Women*, the characters exhibit traditional, accepted ideas of their gender roles, but the lines are also challenged. Meg strives diligently to be ladylike and do what is expected by society while Jo longs to overstep the line of proper womanly manners. Some readers have read *Little Women* as a search for personal autonomy, specifically regarding women searching for personal independence and removing themselves from women’s domestic lot. Readers can see how ideas have shifted over time regarding gender roles.

Economic Status - Alcott addresses poverty through the March’s situation. Readers see the March girls struggle with their lack of money, and then rise above their struggles. While money is important for survival, Alcott teaches that there are other ways to be rich. Readers will begin to understand the value of money and, conversely, the unimportance of physical wealth.
SETTING

*Little Women* is set in a small New England town during America’s period of Civil War. It takes place from roughly 1861 to 1876.

POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE

*Little Women* is told through an omniscient narrator who knows everything and provides analysis and commentary about the characters and their lives. The point of view is from third person. The narrator focuses on all the different characters in turn.

Organizational Patterns

The novel is just under 500 pages and is divided into two equal parts. Part One contains 23 chapters, and is what Alcott first wrote as *Little Women*. Because Part One was so popular, Alcott wrote Part Two in response (originally entitled *Good Wives*). Part Two contains 23 chapters as well, and three years have passed since the end of Part One.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Because the issues of identity, gender, and economic status are relevant in any time period to any person, adolescents can find meaning in the text of *Little Women*. Readers can grow, mature, and find themselves right along with the characters of the novel. As they begin to ask the text questions, they can ask themselves questions about what the text may suggest and how it may apply to their lives. They can address the issues related to the general themes from the novel:

-- The issue of identity: What determines your identity? Is it your family, your economic status, your personal ideals and goals? How do you discover your identity, and then how do you come to terms with it? In high school, many students will still be trying to discover who they are and who they want to be. Many of them will be striving to find a place that they fit in their community of peers, their family, and ultimately society. Each student will have to step into a role, in some sort, in society. What effects can one person have on their society, on another’s life, or on their own life? What role would you want to play in society? What role does society play in your life and how does it affect you?

-- The issue of gender: Gender, now more than ever, is a question that society has put to the test. What is gender? Is it purely determined by your sex or does it mesh with your role in the home or in society? What are the roles of a man versus a woman in today’s world? What
were the gender roles in the time period *Little Women* is set in? Do the characters model accepted gender roles or do they challenge their society’s perception of gender roles?

**Vocabulary Issues**

There are several vocabulary words in the novel that may be difficult for students to understand. Discussion will need to be implemented in the classroom to enable students to better grapple with the text.

**Background Knowledge**

Because *Little Women* is highly autobiographical, students can learn a great deal about the time period and about Alcott herself. The Civil War, transcendentalism, and the famous Bronson Alcott (Louisa May Alcott’s father) and his transcendentalist contemporaries are all significant things and ideas. Understanding the time period will enrich the students’ understanding of history. This can act as a nice counterpart or reaffirmation of what they have learned in other classes. As they are introduced to the cultural norms of the time period, they will also better understand the characters and their actions.

**Gender Issues**

Gender issues and gender roles are a major theme in the novel. The gender lines are called into question by Jo and Laurie. Jo longs more than anything to not fit into the stereotypical woman from this time period. She wants to enter a man’s profession and be adventurous and wild. In fact, she says, “It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys’ games and work and manners! I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy. . .” (13). Similarly, Laurie desires to cross over into the feminine pursuits. His desire to stay home and study the piano are more feminine qualities. Anyone who has felt that they don’t fit into the stereotypical norm will relate to these characters’ feelings.

**The Central Question or Enduring Issue**

There are many themes and issues at play in the novel and it’s difficult to say which, if any, Alcott was trying to put forth. The question of identity, though, can be addressed with this novel, and many other novels that are a coming of age story. This issue is a significant matter among secondary students since they are still in such malleable states. Everything that happens to them affects who they are and who they will become. They will be able to see the characters choose to grow up and put away childish ideas and follow in that path, like Meg puts away her desire for riches and instead marries a good man who she loves.
Research Issues/Project Ideas

RESEARCH ISSUES

Understanding background knowledge of the time period is important for students so they can more fully comprehend all that is going on in *Little Women*. The characters’ actions, and the themes and morals Alcott puts forth are related to the time period. Alcott seems to put forth the idea that a simple way of life and getting back to nature benefits one’s life, an idea that Alcott’s father (a Transcendentalist) believed in and taught his children.

PROJECT IDEAS

- Collage or Movie: Students can create either a poster board-sized collage or a short 2-3 minute video using images and music to describe who they are and their personal identity. They can accompany this with a short 2 page reflection explaining how and why they chose the images and music that they did and how they represent their identity and tie into the issues talked about in class. (No music is needed for the collage.)

To complete this task, students must consider the main questions addressed in class.

- What does identity mean to you? What is it?
- What determines your identity? Is it your family, your economic status, your personal ideals and goals? Do these things determine it or simply contribute to your identity?
- How do you discover your identity, and then how do you come to terms with it?
- How does your gender influence your identity? Does your gender role influence who you become?
- How does your identity fit into the roles you play in your family, with your friends, and in society?

- ABC Book Writing Assignment: Essentially students would create a book and choose characters, themes, symbols, etc to represent each letter of the alphabet, write a paragraph explaining why that person/thing is relevant to the novel, and include an illustration for each page. They are, in essence, doing a lot of in-depth analysis in a setting that is not as intimidating as a traditional research paper. (For detailed instructions, see the “Writing to Understand” strategy for this novel.)

INFORMATIONAL/FUNCTIONAL TEXTS

*Little Women* makes many allusions to other literary works. Depending on the text, studying excerpts from these texts can enhance student comprehension of the time period. Some literary works Alcott alludes to are:

- *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan (one of the main influential texts of the novel)
- *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes
- Various Shakespeare plays
- *Paradise Lost* by John Milton
• Several Dickins novels

Even if looking at some of these texts that Alcott alludes to may not be directly helpful for students, it is at least worth pointing out that even just the fact that these texts are all mentioned (and Alcott expects her readers to know something about these words) teaches us something about Alcott and one of her morals: education is important, highly valued, and relevant in one’s life.

Students would also benefit from learning about Alcott’s life, since the story is partially autobiographical. Possible sources to consult include: