Objectives

1. Engage students in the language and themes of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* so that they are prepared to discuss and write about the excerpt.

2. Practice and reinforce the following Grade 8 ELA Common Core Standards for reading literature, writing, speaking and listening:

   - **READING: LITERATURE** – RL.8.1-6, 10
   - **WRITING** – W.8.1-10
   - **SPEAKING AND LISTENING** – SL.8.1-6

Time

130 minutes (with up to an additional 230 minutes of extension possibilities)

Materials

SyncTV Premium Lesson on Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*

Overview

Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* was the first in a series of young adult novels, and one of the predecessors of an entire genre to come. It tells the story of the four adolescent March sisters, who grow older and learn valuable lessons while their father is away fighting in the Civil War. An immediate success upon its publication in 1869, Alcott’s timeless story has been retold across several mediums, and has influenced countless authors and stories to come. Close examination of this text will prepare students to develop thoughtful responses to higher-level literary texts, and to write thoughtful, informed, and textually-rooted responses, consistent with the ELA Common Core Standards for the eighth grade.
Background (10 minutes)

1. **Watch the Preview (SL.8.1-2).** As a group, watch the video preview of the premium lesson. After viewing, use the following questions to spur a discussion:
   
a. How do you imagine the excerpt's setting, "a small town in Massachusetts, mid-19th century"? In what ways were things different then? In what ways were they similar?
   
b. What does a "democratized household" mean to you? How might this have been something different or unusual in the middle of the 19th century?
   
c. As stated in the preview, *Little Women* took on a social relevance that transcended its status as merely a novel. Does literature have the power to effect social change, and if so, how? Can you think of other examples of literature that has influenced the way people think?

Extension (additional 50 minutes)

*d. Research (SL.8.1, 4-6 and W.8.7).* Concord, Massachusetts, was the home of author Louisa May Alcott, as well as many other important writers of her time. Split into four groups, each group responsible for covering a different Concord writer (Alcott, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne). Groups must prepare a three-minute presentation on their assigned writer, discussing their life and work and integrating digital media (photos, illustrations, short film clips) when possible.

*e. Context (SL.8.1, 5 and W.8.7).* In the same four groups, have students choose and research a particular woman who gained notoriety for her actions during the Civil War. Assign each group the task of creating a brief visual timeline of the noteworthy events and achievements in their woman’s life. (A good primer on visual timeline programs can be found at: [http://www.pbs.org/teachers/learning.now/2008/01/its_time_for_a_more_open_ti mel_1.html](http://www.pbs.org/teachers/learning.now/2008/01/its_time_for_a_more_open_timel_1.html))

Engaging the Text (120 minutes)

2. **Read the Text (30 minutes)**

   *a. Read and Annotate (RL.8.1-4, 6).* Have students read and annotate the introduction and excerpt. If your classroom has a projector, you may want to model note-taking skills by reading and annotating the beginning as a class. Underline unknown words or passages that are confusing; mark sentences that express the author's key ideas or otherwise seem significant. If students are completing as a homework assignment, ask them to write any questions they have into the annotation tool—these questions are visible to you after the students submit their writing assignments or beforehand if you use the “Mimic” function to access the students’ accounts.

   *b. Discuss (SL.8.1-3 and RL.8.1-2).* Have students get into small groups or pairs and briefly discuss the questions and inferences they had while reading. As a class, discuss the following: *Little Women* has sometimes been described as a "didactic" novel, meaning a novel that intends to teach its readers valuable lessons about life, the world, and so on. Do you agree or disagree with this assessment? Based on the excerpt, do you think *Little Women*’s purpose is to teach its readers moral lessons, or to tell an entertaining story? Why? What, if any, are the moral lessons
within the excerpt?

Extension (additional 20 minutes)

c. **Listen and Discuss** (*SL.8.1-2*). As a class, listen to the audio reading of the text. Ask students to share how their understanding of the text changed after listening. What additional images came to mind? What words did the author use to develop the setting?

d. **Comprehend** (*RL.8.1-4, 6, 10*). Have students complete the multiple-choice questions. Collect papers or discuss answers as a class.

3. **Watch SyncTV (30 minutes)**

   a. **Watch**. Either watch the SyncTV discussion as a class or ask students to watch it on their individual computers.

   b. **Focus** (*SL.8.1-3 and RL.8.1-4*). From 1:00-1:50, focus on how the SyncTV students extrapolate themes and connect the excerpt with their own experiences and prior knowledge.

   c. **Focus** (*SL.8.1-3 and RL.8.1-4*). Using the portion from 1:50-2:40, model how the SyncTV students discuss the novel's context, as well as Louisa May Alcott's background, to determine the meaning and purpose of the text.

   d. **Focus** (*SL.8.1-3 and RL.8.4*). From 6:10-6:30, the SyncTV students closely analyze the meaning of the title, *Little Women*. Have students focus on how they closely analyze the implications of these words.

   e. **Discuss** (*SL.8.1-3 and RL.8.1-4, 6, 9-10*). After watching the model discussion, have a conversation with the class about the ideas discussed in the SyncTV episode that stood out the most. What new thoughts do they have after hearing the students' discussion? Next, divide students into small groups (3-4 students). Move around the room monitoring the groups as students follow the SyncTV episode as a model to discuss some of the following questions:

   i. How does Alcott use dialogue to delineate character? How does the dialogue in the beginning of Chapter 1 reveal the sisters' distinct personality traits?

   ii. What do you think Alcott's objective or purpose was when writing this text? Do you think she has a moral lesson she is trying to impart on her audience?

   iii. What is Amy's motivation in returning her present for a bigger size? Is it purely out of benevolence, or are there other emotions at work?

   iv. Discuss the religious element or message(s) that can be read in this excerpt from *Little Women*. Do you think there is any Christian subtext to the novel?

   v. What is the significance of the title, *Little Women*? Is this a contradiction? What does the title specify about the sisters' situation, and the particular time in their lives when the story takes place?
vi. *Little Women*, as stated in the preview, offers a "precursor to modern feminism." Having read and discussed the excerpt, in what ways do you think this is true? Use examples from the text.

**Extension (additional 80 minutes)**

f. **Discuss** (*SL.8.1-2 and RL.8.5, 9*). What is the "young adult" genre? What sorts of elements and themes do we typically identify within this genre? Brainstorm other young adult novels students may have read. What similar purposes and audiences do young adult novels generally entertain?

g. **Write Creatively** (*W.8.3, 9 and SL.8.1, 4-6*). Divide the class into two groups: boys and girls. Have the girls’ group re-write this excerpt from *Little Women* as a stage play. Have the boys’ group re-imagine this excerpt from *Little Women* in an alternate play called “Little Men.” Their play must preserve the general milieu of Alcott’s original, transposing it to a group of young boys on Christmas morning. (Think about boys’ concerns and personalities and how they differ from girls’.) Both plays should be five to ten minutes and will be performed before the class, and filmed and published online, if desired.

h. **Using Social Media** (*SL.8.4-5*). Images of Christmas are ingrained in the national consciousness. Create a social media page, account, or hashtag (using Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, etc.) and have students post Christmas-themed pictures they deem relevant to this excerpt from *Little Women*. Make sure they explain why they’ve chosen their particular picture and how it’s directly or thematically related to Alcott’s story. Encourage class participations in the discussion threads.

i. **Discuss** (*SL.8.1-3 and RL.8.1, 6*). Have students discuss parallels between the excerpt and their own siblings’ lives. Have them also explain which of the four sisters they identify with the most and why. Why did they pick this particular character to represent them?

4. **Think (10 minutes)**

   a. **Respond** (*W.8.1, 4*). Ask students to read the “Think” questions, watch the corresponding video clips, and respond to the questions, either in class or for homework.

5. **Write (50 minutes)**

   a. **Discuss** (*SL.8.1*). Read the prompt you have chosen for students, and then solicit questions regarding the prompt or the assignment expectations. Whichever prompt you have chosen, make sure you are clear about the assignment expectations and the rubric by which you and the other students will be evaluating them.

   b. **Organize** (*RL.8.1-4, 6, 10 and W.8.1-2, 5*). Ask students to go back and annotate the text with the prompt in mind. They should be organizing their thoughts and the points they’ll address in their writing as they make annotations. If you’ve worked on outlining or other organizational tools for writing, this is a good place to apply them.

   c. **Write** (*W.8.1-2, 4-6, 8-10*). Have students go through the writing process of planning, revising, editing, and publishing their writing responses.

   d. **Review** (*W.8.4-6*). Use the StudySync “Review” feature to have students complete
one to two evaluations of their peers’ work based on your chosen review rubric. Have the students look at and reflect upon the peer evaluations of their own writing. What might you do differently in a revision? How might you strengthen the writing and the ideas?

Extension (additional 80 minutes)

e. **Write** (*W.8.1-2, 4-6, 9-10*). For homework, have students write an essay using one of the prompts you did not chose to do in class. Students should publish their responses online.

f. **Write Argumentatively** (*RL.8.1-4 and W.8.1, 4-6, 9-10*). As discussed, some scholars argue that *Little Women* is a progressive text that greatly influenced feminist texts to come. Others scholars, however, have argued that it is largely conservative, seeking to teach and uphold traditional values and gender roles. In another 300- to 400-word essay response, argue which of the above statements, in your opinion, more actually reflects the novel.
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Key Vocabulary

1. hearth (n.) – The floor around and inside of a fireplace
2. vittles (n.) – Food, drink (informal)
3. cologne (n.) – A kind of liquid people put on their skin to smell nice; perfume
4. labor (n.) – Physical work
5. hastily (adv.) – In a quickly done or rushed manner
6. earnest (adj.) – Sincere, with meaning, serious
7. trump (n.) – An admirable person (informal)
8. stately (adj.) – Impressive or high-class in appearance, manner
9. impetuous (adj.) – Done quickly and without much forethought
10. procession (n.) – An organized group of people traveling together

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. The oldest of the four March sisters is ____________.
   a. Meg
   b. Jo
   c. Beth
   d. Amy

2. Marmee seeks to teach her daughters a lesson about ____________.
   a. generosity
   b. jealousy
   c. religion
   d. adulthood

3. Which of the following words best describes Amy in chapter one?
   a. gracious
   b. selfless
   c. jealous
   d. selfish

4. We can infer, from the description in the beginning of the excerpt, that the family is ____________.
   a. wealthy
   b. an immigrant family
   c. not wealthy
   d. receiving assistance from the government
5. Jo March is ______________.
   a. the second-oldest sister
   b. more tomboyish than the others
   c. the leader of the group
   d. all of the above

6. On Christmas morning, where does Hannah suggest their mother has probably gone?
   a. to buy food and groceries
   b. to church
   c. to help the poor
   d. to beg for food on the street

7. We can infer that Mr. March is not there with them on Christmas because ____________.
   a. he died of starvation
   b. he is fighting in the war
   c. he ran off and left them alone
   d. he is away on business in a foreign land

8. "The girls had never been called angel children before, and thought it was very agreeable, especially Jo, who had been considered a 'Sancho' ever since she was born."
   'Sancho' is probably ______________.
   a. a term describing an un-angelic personality
   b. the family's last name
   c. a term meaning 'angel'
   d. a term for a well-behaved young girl

9. In the excerpt, the Hummels are ______________.
   a. dolls
   b. German
   c. Southerners
   d. servants

10. Why does Amy return her original gift?
    a. She is embarrassed that her gift was not generous
    b. She feels her sisters' gifts are better than hers
    c. She wants her gift to be the best of the lot
    d. all of the above

Answer Key

1. A
2. A
3. D
4. C
5. D
6. C
7. B
8. A
9. B
10. D
Further Assignments

1. Have students download and read the entirety of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. Have them explore various themes and moral lessons expressed within the complete work. *(RL.8.1-4, 6, 9)*

2. Now that they have read the full text, screen a film version of *Little Women* for the class—either the 1949 version or the 1994 version will suffice. Discuss, as a class, how the filmmakers interpret Alcott’s vision and whether their interpretation is faithful to or divergent from the text, or both. *(SL.8.1-3 and RL.8.7)*

3. Have them independently choose another, more contemporary novel in the young adult genre to read. Once they are finished, have them compare and contrast the themes and moral lessons with those of *Little Women*. Is any of the influence of *Little Women* evident in their novel of choice? Explain. *(RL.8.5)*

4. In a short paragraph response, have students analyze the religious themes and subtext in the excerpt. Is Alcott preaching? Does she have a particular religious agenda, or are her themes more universal? *(RL.8.1-2 and W.8.9)*

5. The title of the first chapter of the excerpt, Playing Pilgrims, is a literary allusion that is not directly evident without a little research. Define allusion, if necessary, and then have students research this particular allusion. What additional meaning does this allusion bring to the text? Does it change anything about students’ interpretation or reaction to the excerpt? *(RL.8.5 and W.8.7-9)*

6. Have students change the verb tense of this excerpt from the past to the present tense. Pay notice to particular verb tenses (e.g., simple present, present continuous, present perfect) and when they should be used. *(ELL)*