

Little Women Study Guide

by Carol Clark

*For the novel by
Louisa May Alcott*

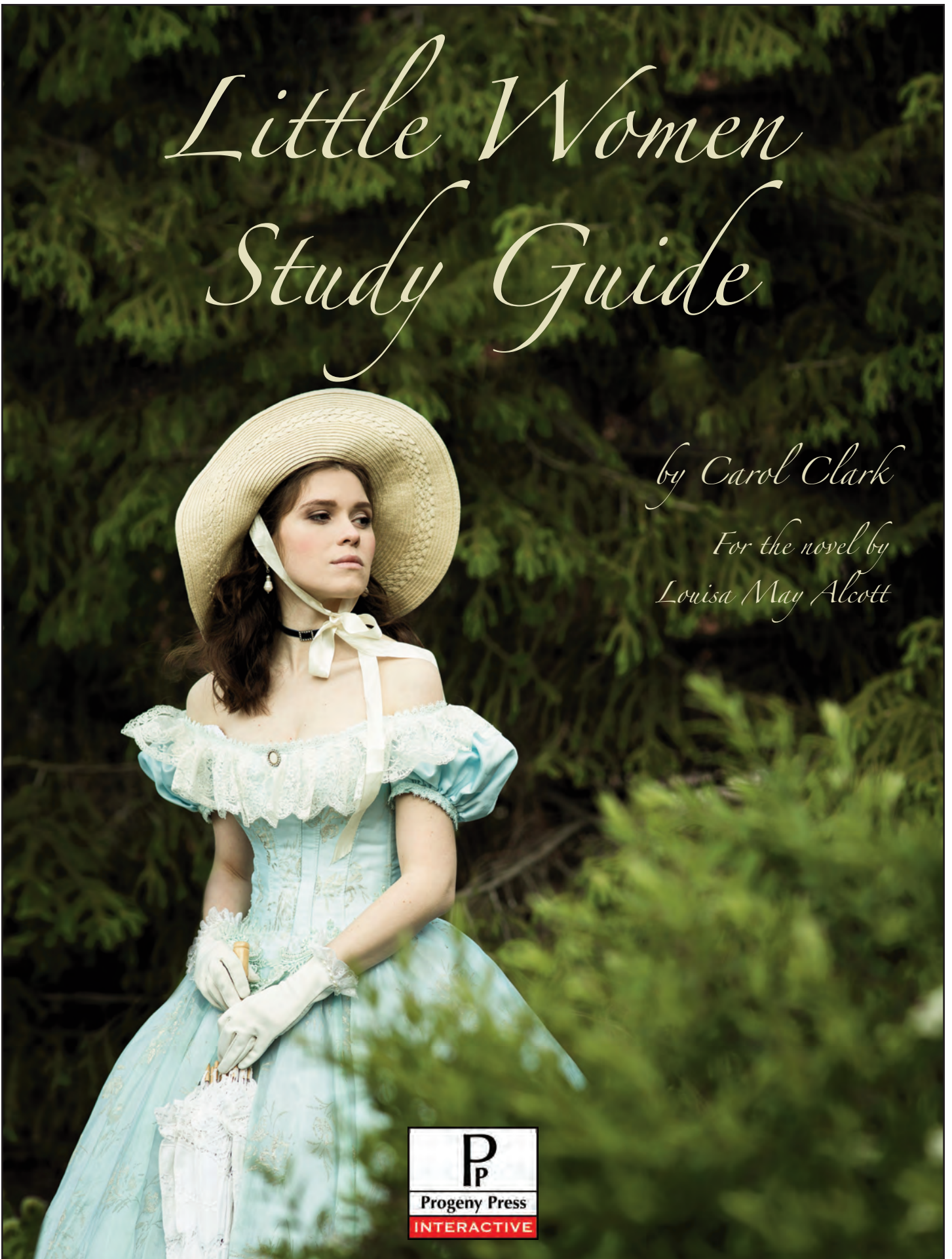


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Synopsis

With their father away as a Chaplain in the Civil War, Christmas looks bleak and life is a financial struggle for the March family. Money is tight, so Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy entertain themselves at home with sewing, mending, music, reading, and acting in their own stage plays.

Mrs. March spends her time and energy helping the poor and in supporting the war effort by sewing uniforms for Union soldiers. When a war injury leaves Mr. March at the brink of death, Mrs. March leaves her daughters to tend to him in Washington, D.C.

Father eventually recovers, but as each girl is planning, dreaming, learning, growing, and finding love, tragedy strikes the family as Beth's health fails. Real life weaves itself through the rich tapestry of their lives. Jobs, new friends, sickness, health, loss, grief, and love will all combine to create individual stories and "castles in the air" for each girl.

Chapters 40–43

Vocabulary:

For each group of synonyms below, choose a vocabulary word from the Word Bank that matches and write the word in the blank.

Word Bank:

vagaries	embodied	interred	desultory	vanity
unscathed	pensive	pertinaciously	circumspection	quaint
consolation	bided	imperceptible	detriment	genial

- _____ conceit, self-centeredness, egotism
- _____ inconsistent, random, disorderly
- _____ tolerated, endured, waited
- _____ thoughtful, contemplative, introspective
- _____ stubbornly, resolutely, obstinately, persistently
- _____ harm, disadvantage, disservice
- _____ caution, judiciousness, discretion, prudence
- _____ whims, impulses, quirks
- _____ buried, covered, laid-to-rest
- _____ personified, represented, symbolized
- _____ picturesque, old-fashioned, charming
- _____ unnoticeable, unapparent, indiscernible
- _____ comfort, solace, relief
- _____ unharmed, intact, safe and sound
- _____ affable, easy-going, pleasant

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Questions:

1. As Jo tends the dying Beth, Alcott says Jo's heart receives the teaching that it needed. Find this paragraph almost halfway through Chapter 40. What does the author say Jo learns?
2. Reread Jo's poem, "My Beth." What qualities does Jo see in Beth, as explained in the poem?
3. What does Beth ask Jo to do when she is gone? Why does Beth ask this?
4. After Beth dies, what comforts Jo when she breaks down weeping in the night? Who helps her troubled mind? How?
5. What surprise does Amy have for her family when she returns from Europe?
6. Who unexpectedly comes to visit Jo during the welcome home party for Amy and Laurie? How does the family react?

Thinking About the Story:

7. Underline the antithesis, or seeming contradiction, in each selection below.
 - a. "It was evident that his mind was not in working order yet, and his ideas needed clarifying; for often, in the middle of a plaintive strain, he would find himself humming a dancing tune that vividly recalled the Christmas ball at Nice ... and put an effectual stop to tragic composition for the time being."
 - b. "He did come very soon; for the same mail brought letters to them both.... The moment he read it, he packed his knapsack, bade adieu to his fellow-pedestrians, and was off to keep his promise, with a heart full of joy and sorrow, hope and suspense."

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8. *Alliteration* is the repetition of consonant sounds. *Assonance* is the repetition of similar vowel sounds in successive or adjacent words. For example, the phrase “ideas of individualism and integrity” is assonance, repeating the short /i/ sound. Assonance can be at the beginning or in the middle of words. From the quotation below, copy the words and phrases with alliteration and those with assonance and indicate what letters or sounds are being repeated.

They seemed to get clearer views of life and duty up there among the everlasting hills; the fresh winds blew away desponding doubts, delusive fancies, and moody mists; ... the grand old mountains to look benignly down upon them, saying, “Little children, love one another.”

Alliteration:

Assonance:

9. An *epiphany* is a moment of sudden awareness, an insight that serves as a turning point for perception, or what we or a character understands. What epiphany occurs to Laurie and Amy in Chapter 41 when Laurie arrives and runs up to Amy in Vevey after Beth has died?
10. In Chapter 42, we see an extended metaphor describing Jo as a chestnut burr. Explain how the author uses this to give us insight into Jo’s heart and mind.
11. Why does Laurie regard the professor with suspicion when they first meet?

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Dig Deeper:

12. Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–5, Ecclesiastes 4:9–12, and Proverbs 17:17. How does the March family demonstrate and practice these verses in their family? How should we try to behave in difficult and dark times?
13. Chapter 40 is titled “The Valley of the Shadow.” Read Psalm 23 and observe what this refers to. (See if you can read this in multiple translations.) How does this psalm reflect Beth’s experience as she was ill and dying?
14. Depression is a condition characterized by feelings of severe despondency, sadness, and dejection, typically also with feelings of inadequacy and guilt, often accompanied by lack of energy, lack of appetite and poor sleep. After Beth dies, Jo struggles with depression brought on by grief and loneliness. In Chapter 42, we see her progression through grief. What things helped her through this time?

Optional Activities:

1. *Art project:* In a fine art context, “art medium” refers to the art materials or artist supplies used to create a work of art. Ultimately, it’s whatever you use to make a mark upon a surface or create something. You may choose your “medium” for this project.
Use Psalm 23 as your inspiration and create an art project featuring some or all of it either in words or images. Ideas may include acrylic painting, watercolor painting, markers, colored pencils, pastels, ink and calligraphy, embroidery, sewing, paper art, sculpture, carving, woodburning, posters, wood plaques, Christmas ornaments, and more.
2. *Hobby craft:* Jo is busy making kites for Meg’s children. Make a kite yourself by buying a kit or creating your own.

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13. These verses teach us that quiet prayer and reading and meditating on the Bible feeds us, helps us grow and makes us productive like a well-watered tree that yields fruit and does not wither. God's paths are truth and hope, mercy and love; keeping his word in our hearts and meditating on it strengthens us against sin. Scripture is God's breath, developing our wisdom and faith and equipping us for good works.

14. Answers may vary. Jo tells her mother that Mr. Brooke has one of Meg's glove and admitted he likes Meg. She thinks it's dreadful because Meg may marry him and leave home and Jo feels Meg should always remain in the family. Mother responds that John has already confessed his affection for Meg to her and Father and asked for their approval to pursue her affections. Mother says they both like John very much, but they are waiting until everyone is back home and they can see how Meg responds to John. She also says they are against Meg becoming engaged at such a young age.

15. Answers will vary. We see that Jo falsely accuses and dishonors Mr. Brooke, accusing him of being mean, currying favor with Mother and Father and helping them only because he wants Meg, and causing mischief. She loses her temper, pulls her hair, and shakes her fist. She is envious and selfish, wishing to keep Meg to herself and safe so the family stays together. She also had her own plans of marrying Meg to Laurie and feels her plan is spoiled. We can see how Jo's envy is in danger of causing "rot." Jo should not be dishonoring John, not seeking only her own desires and plans, not envious, not easily angered, not keeping a list of wrongs. She should be patient, loving, understanding, protective, trusting.

Chapters 21–23

Vocabulary:

Definitions. Sentences will vary. 1. bad beyond correction, willful, unruly; 2. wisdom, judgement, good sense; 3. carefulness, circumspection, tact; 4. intentionally harmful, spiteful; 5. repentant, contrite, sorry; 6. cool and distant, detached; 7. uninteresting, inexpressive, boring; 8. stubborn, unyielding; 9. even-tempered, calm, composed; 10. mournfully, sorrowfully; 11. hardworking, diligent; 12. contrariness, unreasonableness; 13. rejoice, be elated

Questions:

1. Answers may vary but should mention some of the following points. Laurie writes two letters and delivers them to Meg as if they are from Mr. Brooke, asking her to give him a word of hope (of her love) and to say nothing to her parents about it. Meg responds to the first letter explaining she is too young and doesn't want to keep secrets from her parents and asks him to speak to her father. After Meg receives the second letter, she thinks Jo has written both of them as a trick and she becomes very upset. She is also extremely embarrassed because she thinks she wrote to and answered John when he had not actually written to her. Laurie is called before Mrs. March and spoken to severely and then asked to keep the whole situation secret to avoid further embarrassment to Meg. When Laurie returns home, his grandfather asks him what is happening. When Laurie won't tell him, they argue and Laurie is shaken by his grandfather. Jo goes to Mr. Laurence and explains that Laurie is keeping silent for someone else and eventually all is forgiven after Mr. Laurence apologizes to Laurie.

2. Jo and Laurie build a snow maiden in the garden. She is crowned with holly and bearing gifts for Beth: a basket of fruit, flowers, a roll of new music, an afghan, a red ribbon for the cat, a drawing, a mont blanc ice cream in a pail, and a carol on a pink paper streamer.

3. Father and Mr. Brooke arrive home from Washington.

4. Meg's hands, once white and smooth, have now become darkened, burned, and calloused by her cooking and sewing. By taking on these chores, she has set aside her vanity. Jo, although her hair is boyishly cut, is becoming a gentler young woman who no longer runs through the house, whistles, uses slang, or lies on the floor. She pays more attention to how she is dressed now. She is becoming a strong but tender-hearted young woman. Amy has been molding her character, much as she molds her clay figures; she pays less attention to herself and more to the needs of others. Beth is not as shy as she was, but she has become frailer due to her long illness.

5. Answers will vary but may mention a few of the following: After Laurie's prank with the letters, Mrs. March explains John's true feelings to Meg and asks how Meg feels about him. Although Meg says she is too young to marry, she still thinks often about Mr. Brooke, dreams about him, and at one point she calls him John. She also writes her name as Mrs. John Brooke. When he arrives with Father, Mr. Brooke kisses Meg, but says it is accidental. Meg seems to pay more attention to housekeeping, sewing, and cooking skills than she did before, perhaps in preparation for being married. When John asks her if she likes him, she has difficulty in stating the rejection she has prepared. She only tells him she's too young. When he protests, she finds her heart melting until Aunt March enters and declares that Meg will not share an inheritance from her if she marries John Brooke. Being forbidden to accept him by her aunt, Meg suddenly defends