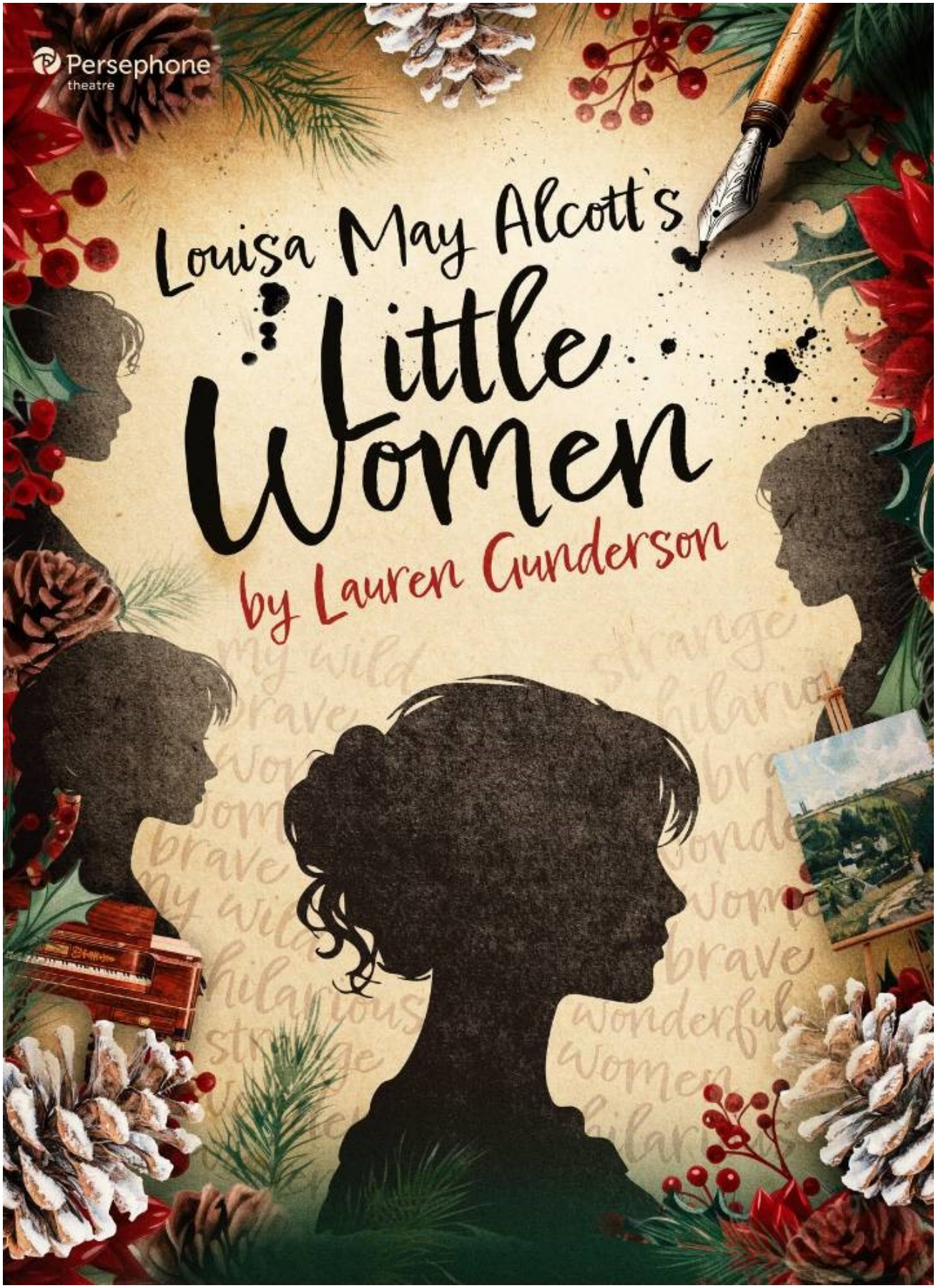


Enrichment Guide

Persephone Theatre is located on the beautiful lands of Indigenous peoples who have lived here since time immemorial, including the Nêhiyawak, Nêhithawak, Anishinabek, Nakawe, Nakota, Nehinawak, Lakota, Dakota and Dene peoples. This place is also the homeland of the Métis. At Persephone, we also like to acknowledge the contributions of the Whitecap Dakota and Round Prairie Métis peoples in establishing our city of Saskatoon. Persephone Theatre is located on Treaty 6 territory and is committed to living in good relations with our Indigenous neighbours, in the spirit with which the Treaties were intended.

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

IMPORTANT INFORMATION: *Several of the Persephone School Matinees are integrated with our Subscribers Wednesday Matinee. Our subscribers are paying full price for their tickets and many of them are seniors. Bringing youth and elders together has proven to be important and valuable for both mental health and social skills of all ages, which is one of the reasons why Persephone Theatre decided to program the Wednesday matinees in this way. Some of the seniors in attendance may have hearing or visual impairment, so we ask:*

- ***Students*** *to please be respectful by turning off their phones, not talking, and staying in their seats for the duration of each act.*
- ***Teachers and chaperones*** *please step in when needed to remind students of theatre etiquette.*

Here are some other ways in which the audience can contribute to make this a positive experience for all:

- *If you purchase items at the concession - please be mindful of the noise the packaging can make. Open your bags, packages, and lids before the show starts. The concession is NOT open during the performance, only before the play begins and at intermission.*
- *Try to use the washroom before the show starts. If you cannot wait until intermission, please try to leave the theatre discreetly. Our volunteer ushers will let you know when it is an appropriate moment to return to your seat. You may be seated in an alternate seat upon return.*

What makes theatre unique is that it is a communal experience and we can all work together to make it a positive one for everyone. The actors present the audience with their characters and specific events. The audience in turn responds to the story in real time whether it is through laughing at comedic moments, crying when something meaningful happens, or even gasping in surprise – even if their reactions are not visible or audible, the energy is palpable. Everyone goes home with a special experience to reflect on. And of course, applause is always greatly appreciated.

CONTENT OVERVIEW

CHARACTERS

LOUISA / JO - ambitious and determined to pursue her dreams of becoming a writer.
MEG - the eldest March sister, nurturing, traditional, and full of romantic dreams.
BETH - quiet, gentle, and musical.
AMY - the youngest sister who is impatient, artistic, vivacious, charming.
MARMEE - mother of the March sisters who is wise, compassionate, and patient.
AUNT MARCH - fussy, rich, judgmental, 70 years old.
LAURIE - wealthy, charming neighbour and close friend of the March sisters.
JOHN - Laurie's tutor and later Meg's husband.
MR. LAURENCE - Laurie's prickly grandfather.
MR. MARCH – the March sister's father.
FRIEDRICH - a sunny, generous German immigrant and professor.

SETTING

1860s - Concord, Massachusetts in the March family's cozy home and its surroundings. As well as New York City

RUNNING TIME

2 hours and 10 minutes, plus intermission

CONTENT ADVISORY

Illness, death of a family member

THEATRICAL CONVENTION

This play breaks the fourth wall, meaning characters directly address to the audience as well as act in scenes with one another. This occurs throughout the play.

SYNOPSIS

SPOILER ALERT: You can choose not to read or share the synopsis in advance so that you (and those in attendance with you) have the experience of discovering everything in the moment. We leave this to your discretion.

PROLOGUE

The play opens with Louisa May Alcott telling us the story of when she was first asked to write a novel for girls. Alcott is frustrated that she has to write about girls, before she comes up with the idea of writing about her sisters. She introduces us to the sisters and begins to transform into Jo March. The play shifts to the March home at Christmas.

ACT ONE

The first act opens with the March sisters on Christmas Eve. Marmee arrives with a letter from their father who is away fighting the war. They are reminded how much they have to be grateful for and decide to give their Christmas breakfast to a family in need. When they return from delivering it, there is a bounty of food waiting for them. Their neighbour, Mr. Laurence, had seen them taking food to others and wanted to support them in their kindness.

Meg and Jo attend a fancy dance party. Jo attempts to hide from a young man and meets Laurie, Mr. Laurence's nephew. Jo and Laurie soon realize that they have a lot in common.

Meg later meets John, Laurie's tutor, and they take an interest in one another. The young people from the March house and the Laurence house become a tight knit group. Beth, the youngest sister, loves to play piano. Upon hearing Beth play, Mr. Laurence is reminded of his granddaughter and gifts Beth his own piano.

Jo and Amy have an argument. In a fit of anger, Amy takes revenge by burning Jo's manuscript. When Jo discovers this, she hits Amy and refuses to forgive her. The next day, Jo and Laurie go skating and Amy tries to join them to win Jo over. Amy falls through some thin ice and Jo and Laurie rescue her. Jo realizes what she could have lost and it makes her reflect on her own anger and values.

Jo submits some stories to a newspaper, and they are selected for publication. Just as she is sharing this with her family, they receive news that their father is sick in a hospital in Washington. Marmee must go to nurse him back to health. To help pay for Marmee's travels, Jo sells her hair, which is a huge deal for a young woman at this time.

While Marmee is away, Beth has been helping their poor neighbours and is exposed to scarlet fever. Meg and Jo do their best to nurse Beth, but she becomes very ill. Laurie sends for Marmee to return.

Beth improves and at Christmas, Mr. March returns home from the front. John reveals his love for Meg just as Aunt March enters the room. She declares that John is an impoverished tutor and if Meg marries him, she will not receive any of the Aunt's fortune. Meg defends John and agrees to marry him. Aunt March storms off while the rest of the family celebrates. Laurie hints at his own feelings for Jo.

ACT TWO

Louisa May Alcott is writing at her desk. It is now 3 years later. Meg is married, Jo is writing, Beth is weak after scarlet fever, and Amy creates artwork and sits with Aunt March. Laurie is expelled from college and when Jo chastises him for it, he hints at his feelings for her again.

Jo continues to write and has realized that she can help support the family with it. Aunt March decides to take Amy to Europe instead of Jo. Jo decides to move to New York to teach in a girl's boarding house and continue writing. She also hopes this will dissuade Laurie's feelings for her.

Jo writes to the family about her adventures and about her new friend Professor Friedrich Bhaer. Laurie is jealous.

Jo returns home to discover that Beth's health has declined. Laurie and Jo go for a walk where he reveals that he is in love with her, but Jo says that she does not love him back. Laurie storms off to Europe. He runs into Amy, who reveals that she has a rich suitor who is going to propose to her.

Beth's health has continued to fail and she reassures Jo that they will carry on without her. After a few months, she passes away. They send word to Amy of her passing.

Jo finds it hard to write after Beth's death, but Marmee and Meg convince her to keep at it. She soon finds solace in writing about their family. They receive news that Amy and Laurie have married and are coming home.

Amy and Laurie arrive and it is a bittersweet reunion for the family. Suddenly, there is a knock at the door and Jo is shocked to find Friedrich has come to visit. After a few days, they finally admit their feelings to one another.

As the play comes to a close, the cast addresses the audience with what happens with their characters. Louisa reads the last passage from the novel.

CONTEXT

Louisa May Alcott - Louisa May Alcott was born November 29th, 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, as the second of four daughters.

Her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was brilliant, idealistic, and almost completely unable to earn a living. Her mother, Abigail "Abba" May Alcott, held the family together through constant poverty. Alcott grew up watching her mother make a home out of almost nothing, and she decided early on that she would be the one to earn the money her father never could.

The Alcott's settled in Concord, Massachusetts, where Louisa developed a hunger to write and be taken seriously as an intellectual. From her teens, Louisa worked to support the family as a teacher, seamstress, governess, and domestic servant. To earn money faster, she also wrote sensational "blood-and-thunder" thrillers, full of revenge and disguise, under the pen name A. M. Barnard.

In 1862, she volunteered as a Union Army nurse in Georgetown during the Civil War. She caught typhoid, and the mercury-based treatment left her with poor health for the rest of her life. *Hospital Sketches* (1863), based on her letters home during her time as a nurse, became her first real success, but *Little Women* (1868) is what made Alcott famous and, at last, financially secure.

Later in life, she wrote sequels (*Little Men, Jo's Boys*) and other popular novels, cared for her aging parents, and remained active as an abolitionist and a suffragist. She was the first woman to register to vote in Concord. She never married. Worn down by her chronic illness, she died in Boston on March 6, 1888, at age 55, just two days after her father.

History of the novel *Little Women* – *Little Women* is Louisa May Alcott's semi-autobiographical smash-hit success of a novel that cemented her as a celebrated author ahead of her time. In 1868, her publisher, Thomas Niles, asked her to write "a book for girls." Alcott was not enthusiastic as she found the assignment dull, but the family needed the money, so she wrote part one of *Little Women* in about ten weeks, drawing directly from her childhood with her three sisters. It was an instant, enormous success, and after readers demanded a sequel, she wrote part two the next year. Readers begged her to marry Jo to Laurie, but Alcott refused; she had meant to keep Jo single, and as a compromise, invented the older, unromantic Professor Bhaer rather than give readers the pairing they wanted — a small act of authorial defiance. To this day, *Little Women* is considered one of the most widely read novels in the world and has influenced countless authors to create strong, intelligent, and driven lead female characters like Jo March.

Scarlet fever - A form of bacterial strep throat, scarlet fever is a historically deadly disease that still exists today, but due to modern medicine and antibiotics is now much less dangerous. Between 1820 and 1880, there was a scarlet fever pandemic in Europe and North America. The disease could be diagnosed by its characteristic rash, or 'exanthem,' that accompanied a sore throat, fever, inflammation of the lymph nodes, and abscessing of the throat and tonsils. Once there is the onset of symptoms such as sore throat and fever, the infection can progress very quickly, and children in 19th century outbreaks were known to succumb within as little as 48 hours. *Streptococci* exposure may occur through human contact, airborne droplets, or ingestion. Beth contracted the disease in *Little Women* through the Hummel's, the impoverished family she was assisting and looking after, when their baby died in her arms from the illness. Despite Beth's initial recovery, severe untreated scarlet fever frequently causes permanent internal damage like rheumatic heart disease or kidney inflammation, explaining Beth's long, slow fading and eventual passing in the novel.

GLOSSARY

Cabinet piano - a type of upright piano that was popular in the 19th century. These instruments were characterized by their very tall, rectangular shape, with shelves in the upper part of the case to the right of the strings. This design allowed for unusually long strings, contributing to their sound.

Capital - an old-fashioned term of exclamation, meaning wonderful, first-rate, or excellent. It is used to express delight, approval or satisfaction.

Docile - willing to accept control or instruction; submissive - something Jo March out rightly admits she will never be on any continent.

Autonomy - self-governance, personal independence, and freedom of choice. It is the power or right to guide your own life, make your own decisions, and act without being controlled by outside forces.

Spinster - an older or elderly unmarried woman, particularly one perceived as unlikely to ever marry. Historically, the word meant a person whose occupation was spinning thread or yarn, but over centuries, it shifted into a culturally loaded and often derogatory label for an unmarried woman beyond an age that was considered ideal for marriage. This is considered a derogatory term in the March's time, as society loaded the term with negative moral and social judgments that pictured single women as lonely, repressed, or bitter.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW

1. What do you already know about the story *Little Women*? What is your impression of it going into this play?
2. What does it mean to have a good relationship with your family? What does that look like to you?

POST-SHOW

1. Why did the playwright choose to have Louisa as a character in the play, as well as use the other characters in the story for real-time narration? What purpose did this serve?
2. Marmee admits she has fought her temper for 40 years without winning. Why does Alcott give the kind and wise mother this struggle?

RESOURCES

FILMS

Little Women (2019) LITTLE WOMEN - Official Trailer (HD)
Greta Gerwig's rendition of the classic tale, which questions the ending of the novel, leaving you with a more open-ended interpretation of Jo's marriage. Streaming on Netflix.

There are many other movie adaptations, including the 1994 Gillian Armstrong version with Winona Ryder as Jo and Kirsten Dunst as Amy streaming on Crave, as well as a stunning black and white version (1933) with Katharine Hepburn in the role of Jo March.

PODCASTS

Lauren Gunderson - How to Playwright
A podcast series by the playwright of this adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* that covers the craft, the joy, and creativity of the medium of theatre while providing dramaturgical tools and writing tips to make you a stronger playwright.

BOOKS

***Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott**

There is a reason this novel has been revered as one of the most widely read novels in the English language, and why it continues to be adapted and presented both on stage and in film. It's worth the read!

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. **Writing prompts**
   Have students choose a writing prompt that helps them think about the play they witnessed in greater depth.

   a. Rewrite Mignon's song by Goethe - A poem that illustrates the longing and yearning for a more nostalgic time and for the place that made the subject feel safest and most at peace, Friedrich sings it while Jo listens, and it's the first time that she recognizes an affinity and connection with this man. While traditionally 3 stanzas, only the first of the poem appears in this adaptation of *Little Women*.

   Have your students think about their version of "Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts" - the safest place in the world to them. Have them rewrite the poem to illustrate their special place. Keep the structure the same, but change the details to make it more modern and personal! This poem is also very common in the classical music world as a piece set to music. As an extension, listen to the different renditions by composers like Schubert, Beethoven, Schumann, Liszt and see how the musicality affects the meaning and tone of the message.

   > "Do you know the land where lemon trees blossom,
   > where golden oranges glow amid dark leaves.
   > A gentle wind blows from the blue sky,
   > the myrtle stands silent, the laurel tall
   > Do you know it? There, O there
   > I desire to go with you, my beloved."
   > - Wolfgang Johann Von Goethe, 1784.

   b. For richer or poorer – Reflection - When Beth gets sick, it is a stark moment of reflection for the March family of all the wealth they truly had in their lives: "it was then that Meg felt how rich she had been in things more precious than all the luxuries money could buy - in love, peace, and health." Reflect on this quote and what it means to you. In a material world, what are the things that we have in our lives that money can't buy? Write about the wealth that you have in your life that has nothing to do with material possessions.

2. **Character comparison Venn diagram**
   Amy and Jo are wildly different girls who, despite growing up together, value vastly different things and have many differences. However, there are more similarities than one might expect, like both girls being fierce lovers of their family. Using the printout attached, compare the characteristics of Amy and of Jo, and then in the middle section brainstorm some common traits that both girls possess. Included is a dotted line for the bottom third of

the Venn diagram for students to consider the similarities/differences in the characters in the beginning of the play versus the end. Both girls go through drastic changes through maturation and life experience, so this gives students a chance to evaluate how their comparisons change as the characters age throughout the play.

3. **Socratic seminar - Class discussion**
   This novel has been studied by middle school-aged children for decades, and the reason is clear: the story is rife with discussion points that keep students engaged in their individual interpretations of the March sisters' lives. This is an opportunity to get your students discussing and engaging with each other about the content and greater themes of the play they just saw.

   Have your students choose one of the following prompts to discuss, and give some time for an individual brainstorming session to gather their thoughts. Everyone who chose prompt A (see below) will sit on the inside of the circle with their notes, and everyone else will be on the outside. Setting a timer for 5-8 minutes, allow your students to share their thoughts and engage with the prompt and each other. The students on the outside are the observers and are given the observation sheet graphic organizer attached to this guide to write down their thoughts. After the timer goes, the session is complete and the observers can share their feedback with their classmates on their questions, if they made eye contact, if there was some room to ask a clarifying question, etc. Repeat for all 3 prompts provided- or feel free to make up your own!
   a. Ambition vs. home: does the play finally free Jo, contain her, or something more complicated?
   b. Is *Little Women* a feminist story, a conservative one, or both at once?
   c. Whose 'burden' is most fully carried by the end, and whose is never resolved?

4. **Put on a play**
   As a fun homage to the tradition of the March sisters on Christmas, let your students get creative in writing their own 10-minute or less play. In groups of 4, have them assign a role for themselves - the author, the director, the props master, and the sound designer. While they should each help with all aspects, it is good to assign a leader to each task to make sure every aspect is considered. The author writes the play, the director stages the play (where people move, stand, enter from, etc.), the props master constructs/sources all the necessary props, and the sound designer uses their musical knowledge to help set the mood and tone of the piece. It is ideal if all 4 have a role in the play. It can be about whatever they want! Present for the class, or pair up the groups to present to each other for a smaller, less intimidating audience.

5. **Neighbourly good deeds for Christmas**
   The play's first scene shows the March girls dreaming about getting Christmas presents, but then Marmee tells them of a family who needs their help, and asks the girls to donate their Christmas breakfast to feed the starving children of the Hummel family. With enthusiasm (or reluctance for some), all of the sisters contribute to helping out a neighbour in need, despite it being a personal sacrifice to themselves.

In this season of giving, brainstorm some good deeds that make your community a better place - not just holding the door open for the person behind you, but really going out of your way to do a good deed. Perhaps it's writing a letter to an elderly lady who lives alone on your block, or cleaning up litter in the park, or sending a meal to someone who has been sick. Challenge your students to plan and execute a good deed that truly captures the spirit of the holidays. Practising kindness will develop good character and make the world a better place!

6. **Breaking the fourth wall - an improv game**
   A unique feature of *Little Women* the novel, as well as in this play, is that the author/playwright uses a direct address narration through the characters to give further depth and perspective on the motivations, desires, and intentions of the characters. For this exercise, have your students pair up for a 90-second planning session of a scene they want to do. They should be able to sustain this scene for at least a few minutes. Keeping the planning short allows for more improvisation later. The pairs come up one at a time and improvise their scene, and at some point in the action, one of the characters breaks the fourth wall and says, "Thank you for seeing me, Doctor." Immediately, the action switches to that character in their therapist's office in the middle of a session. The session takes the form of a character interview in which the therapist (volunteers from the audience) asks character-development questions like, "Tell me about your childhood." "How do you feel about your sister?" "Why are you afraid of accepting that promotion at work?" etc. After a few minutes of this, the head therapist (the teacher) says, "Well, that's all the time we have today," and the character goes back into the action of the scene or the play, which is now informed emotionally and narratively by the discoveries from their time on the couch.

CURRICULAR OUTCOMES

Arts Ed CP6.4 Initiate and develop roles in selected drama forms

Arts Ed CP8.5 Investigate how theatrical elements (e.g., story, character, design, space) are combined to achieve dramatic purpose.

Arts Ed CR9.1 Respond to professional dance, drama, music, and visual art works through individual or collaborative inquiry and the creation of own arts expressions.

Drama CP10.4 Investigate a creative process for building a play or scene from devised material.

ELA CR6.1 View, listen to, read, comprehend, and respond to a variety of texts that address identity (e.g., Growing Up), social responsibility (e.g., Going the Distance), and efficacy (e.g., Making Our Community More Peaceful).

ELA CC6.5 Use oral language to interact appropriately with others in pairs, and small and large group situations (e.g., asking questions to explore others' ideas and viewpoints, discussing and comparing ideas and opinions, completing tasks and contributing to group success).

ELA AR6.3 Appraise own and others' work for clarity.

ELA CR9.1b View, listen to, read, comprehend, and respond to a variety of texts that address identity (e.g., Exploring Loyalty, Love, and Relationships), social responsibility (e.g., Equal Opportunity), and efficacy (e.g., Surviving and Conquering).

ELA CC9.8a Write to describe (a profile of a character), to narrate (a narrative essay), to explain and inform (a researched report), and to persuade (a review).

ELA CR B10.4 Read, interpret, and summarize a wide variety of classical and contemporary literary (including drama, biography, autobiography, poetry, short stories, novels) and informational (including letters, diaries, memoranda, electronic communications) texts.

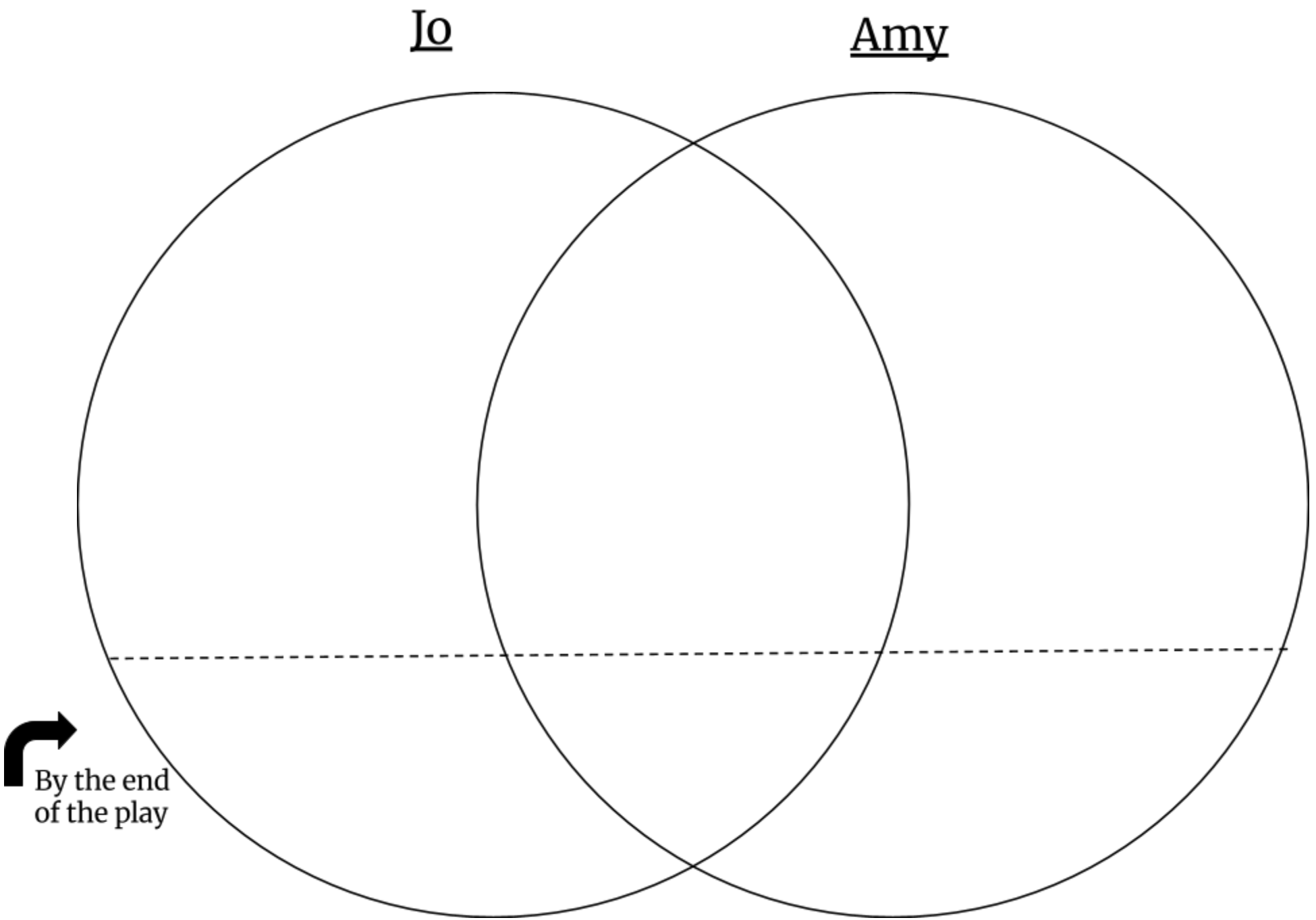
Social Studies RW6.1 Examine and analyze factors that contribute to quality of life, including material and non-material factors.

ENRICHMENT GUIDE CONTRIBUTOR BIO

Sam Fairweather

Sam (she/her) is a theatre artist based in Saskatoon on Treaty Six Territory, working as an actor, educator, stage manager, and peacemaker. She is a substitute teacher with Saskatoon Public Schools and loves to teach primary years and math - a strange combo for a teacher who doubles as an artist! Sam has one brother, but grew up very close with her 5 female cousins, who are in their own right fierce, wild, intelligent and loving not-so-little women. Sam's chosen family is full of women who inspire her, support her, protect her, make her laugh, and love her no matter what. She is very lucky.

Character Comparisons - Little Women



Observer 1

Our **learning target** is to critique the performance of our peers.

Feedback

I am observing _____.

Which of their answers didn't connect to the question? Explain why.

Did the person stay on topic?

Source: Barbara Morgan STEM Academy, Meridian, Idaho, via Edutopia.

Observer 2

Our **learning target** is to critique the performance of our peers.

Feedback

I am observing _____.

Which of their answers best connected to the question? Explain why.

Did the person keep eye contact when talking?

Source: Barbara Morgan STEM Academy, Meridian, Idaho, via Edutopia.