



# Plot Development in *Little Women*



Read the following excerpt adapted from Chapter 18 of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Then answer the questions that follow.

*In this excerpt, Meg and Jo March, along with their housekeeper, Hannah, are watching over their sister Beth, who is sick with scarlet fever. Their mother, Mrs. March, has been in Washington D.C. tending to her husband, who has also been ill. The Marches' friend and neighbor, Laurie, sent an urgent message to Mrs. March the day before, and they are all anxiously waiting for her train to arrive.*

- 1 "I wish I had no heart, it aches so," sighed Meg.
- 2 "If life is often as hard as this, I don't see how we ever shall get through it," added her sister Jo.
- 3 The clock struck midnight. The house was as still as death. Nothing but the wailing wind broke the deep hush. Weary Hannah slept on. No one but the sisters saw the pale shadow fall upon the bed. An hour went by; nothing happened except Laurie's quiet departure for the station. Another hour, still no one came, and anxious fears of delay in the storm or accidents along the way haunted the girls.
- 4 It was past two when Jo, who stood at the window thinking how dreary the world looked in its winding sheet of snow, heard a movement by the bed. Turning quickly, she saw Meg kneeling before their mother's chair, her face hidden. A dreadful fear passed coldly over Jo as she thought, "Beth is dead, and Meg is afraid to tell me."
- 5 Jo was back at her post in a second, and to her eyes, a great change seemed to have taken place. The fever flush and look of pain were gone. Beth's beloved face looked so peaceful that Jo felt no desire to weep. Leaning low over her dearest sister, she kissed her damp forehead and softly whispered, "Goodbye, my Beth. Goodbye!"
- 6 Hannah awoke suddenly, hurried to the bed, looked at Beth, felt her hands, listened at her lips, and then sat down, rocking to and fro, saying quietly, "The fever's turned, she's sleepin' nat'ral, her skin's damp, she breathes easy. Praise be given!"
- 7 Before the girls could believe the happy truth, the doctor came to confirm it. "Yes, my dears, the little girl will pull through this time. Keep the house quiet, let her sleep, and when she wakes, give her. . ."
- 8 What they were to give, neither heard, for both crept into the dark hall and, sitting on the stairs, held each other close, rejoicing with hearts too full for words. When they went back to be kissed and cuddled by faithful Hannah, they found Beth lying, as she used to do, with her cheek pillowed on her hand, the dreadful pallor gone, and breathing quietly, as if she had just fallen asleep.
- 9 "If Mother would only come now!" said Jo. Never had the sun risen so beautifully, and never had the world seemed so lovely as it did to their heavy eyes as they looked out on the early morning.
- 10 "It's like a fairy world," said Meg.
- 11 "Listen!" cried Jo, starting to her feet.
- 12 Yes, there was a sound of bells at the door below, a cry from Hannah, and then Laurie's voice saying in a joyful whisper, "Girls, she's come! She's come!"



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Answer the following questions about the adapted excerpt from Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*.

1. What do Meg and Jo's words at the opening of the excerpt reveal about their feelings regarding the events happening in the story?

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2. What event happens in paragraph 3 that moves the plot forward to what eventually happens at the end of the excerpt?

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3. **Part A:** When Jo hears a sound and turns to see Meg kneeling beside their mother's chair with her face hidden, what does Jo assume?

- A. She thinks Meg has fallen ill as well.
- B. She thinks Meg is worried about Mother.
- C. She thinks Beth must have died.
- D. She thinks Mother has finally returned.

3. **Part B:** How does Jo's assumption affect how she interprets what she sees when she returns to Beth's bedside?

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4. In paragraph 5, Jo feels no desire to cry, and she says, "Goodbye, my Beth. Goodbye!" Why?

- A. Jo must leave to get Mother from the station.
- B. Jo believes that Beth is at peace in death.
- C. Jo knows Beth will have to go to the hospital.
- D. Jo is relieved that she can leave soon.

5. What do Hannah's actions and words in paragraph 6 reveal?

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6. When Jo looks out at the wintry scene a little after two in the morning, she thinks how dreary it looks. When she and Meg look outside later in the early morning, they both think the world has never seemed so lovely. What does this show?

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