Little Women: Opening Extract

This extract is from the 19th century American novel, ‘Little Women’ by Louisa May Alcott. In this extract from the opening of the novel, the four March girls contemplate a Christmas without the normal gifts they would have. The story takes place during the Civil War in America and the girls’ father is away with the troops.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,’ grumbled Jo, lying on the rug. ‘It’s so dreadful to be poor!’ sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

‘I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,’ added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

‘We’ve got Father and Mother, and each other,’ said Beth contentedly from her corner.

The four young faces on which the firelight shone brightened at the cheerful words, but darkened again as Jo said sadly, ‘We haven’t got Father, and shall not have him for a long time.’

She didn’t say ‘perhaps never,’ but each silently added it, thinking of Father far away, where the fighting was.

Nobody spoke for a minute; then Meg said in an altered tone, ‘You know the reason Mother proposed not having any presents this Christmas was because it is going to be a hard winter for everyone; and she thinks we ought not to spend money for pleasure, when our men are suffering so in the army. We can’t do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly. But I am afraid I don’t.’ And Meg shook her head, as she thought regretfully of all the pretty things she wanted.

‘But I don’t think the little we should spend would do any good. We’ve each got a dollar, and the army wouldn’t be much helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect anything from Mother or you, but I do want to buy UNDINE AND SINTRAM for myself. I’ve wanted it so long,’ said Jo, who was a bookworm.

‘I planned to spend mine in new music,’ said Beth, with a little sigh, which no one heard but the hearth brush and kettle holder.

‘I shall get a nice box of Faber’s drawing pencils. I really need them,’ said Amy decidedly.

‘Mother didn’t say anything about our money, and she won’t wish us to give up everything. Let’s each buy what we want, and have a little fun. I’m sure we work hard enough to earn it,’ cried Jo, examining the heels of her shoes in a gentlemanly
manner.
‘I know I do—teaching those tiresome children nearly all day, when I’m longing to enjoy myself at home,’ began Meg, in the complaining tone again. ‘You don’t have half such a hard time as I do,’ said Jo. ‘How would you like to be shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady, who keeps you trotting, is never satisfied, and worries you till you’re ready to fly out the window or cry?’
‘It’s naughty to fret, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross, and my hands get so stiff, I can’t practice well at all.’ And Beth looked at her rough hands with a sigh that anyone could hear that time.

Little Women
First-Time Reading
1. Give a summary of the extract in 50 words or less.

2. Based on what you’ve read so far, what is the story probably about?

3. What characters are introduced in the opening of the novel? How are they related to each other?
Closer Reading

4. Highlight the words that are spoken aloud. These are examples of *direct speech*. What is the effect of starting the novel in the middle of a conversation between the four girls?

5. What *narrative perspective* is the story from? Do we see everything from one character’s point of view or is it a more general view of each girl? Why do you think the author used this perspective?

6. There are four girls in the extract. Give one *noun* or *noun phrase* from the text that describes each character.
7. The girls each discuss the possibility of having no presents at Christmas. What is the effect of Amy’s lines here?

"I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

8. Why do you think the author has added these lines to the text? What implications are there about what might happen in the rest of the novel?

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9. What details do we get from the extract about the social status, wealth and background of the girls in the extract? Remember this is set in 19th century America.
A pupil has written: ‘Louisa May Alcott has created a very effective opening here. She makes the different characters come alive. Beth, in particular, is shown as extremely quiet and content with her life while the others are more boisterous and demanding.’ To what extent do you agree with these comments? You may comment on all the characters or concentrate on Beth.

Bonus:
Which of the girls do you think you would like best? Why? Remember to use quotations to explain your decision.
Creative writing:

Write a scene from a story/play between some siblings in a situation where they are talking. Try to show their different characters through what they say, how they say it, what they do and how they behave.
Read the extract below and complete the questions.

The old man’s eyes burned red, reflecting the last flames of the fire. The sun had already begun to set and the shadows were closing in. Far away, a huge bird – a condor – wheeled around in a lazy circle before plunging back down to earth. Then everything was still. The night was just a breath away.

“He will come,” the old man said. He spoke in a strange language, and one known to very few people in the world. “We have no need to send for him. He will come anyway.”

He got to his feet, supporting himself on a walking-stick carved from the branch of a tree, and made his way to the edge of the stone terrace where he had been sitting. From here he could look down into a canyon that seemed to fall away forever, a fault line in the planet that had occurred perhaps a million years ago. For a time he was silent. There were a dozen men behind him, waiting for him to speak. None of them moved. Not one of them dared interrupt him while he stood there in deep thought.

At last he turned back.

5 Quick-fire questions

1. What kind of bird did the man see in the distance? ______________________________
2. What language did the old man speak? _______________________________________
3. How many people could speak the language? _________________________________
4. What was the terrace made of? _____________________________________________
5. How many men were stood behind him? ______________________________________

4 Things we learn about the man (you must write these in full sentences)

1. _______________________________________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________ ___________________________
3. ____________________________________________ ___________________________
4. _______________________________________________________________________

3 Definitions and examples

1. Plunging
   Definition: ______________________________
   Example Sentence: ____________________________
2. Terrace
Definition:

Example Sentence:

3. Interrupt
Definition:

Example Sentence:

2 Quotations to find
1. A quotation that describes the setting.

2. A quotation that describes the old man.

1 Language analysis question
1. How does the writer use language to describe the old man? (APE paragraph)
S-T-R-E-T-C-H

What impression does the writer give us about the mood in the extract?

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Creative writing:

Write either a descriptive piece OR a narrative (story) about a mysterious creature or character.

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