

**Background** Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888) published her first work when she was 22, and she published over 30 books and story collections during her lifetime. In addition to writing literary masterworks such as *Little Women*, she is also known for the journal she kept during the Civil War. During the war she nursed wounded soldiers in Washington, D.C., hospitals. Army officials thought that female nurses would improve the morale of the wounded men, even though critics said the work was “indecent” for women and fretted that women would flirt with the soldiers. Alcott’s journal proved critics wrong about female nurses.

# Civil War Journal

Journal Entries by Louisa May Alcott

CLOSE READ  
Notes

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–21, begin to collect and cite text evidence.

- In the margin, state when Alcott wrote the entry in lines 1–8.
- Circle phrases that reveal Alcott’s feelings about the war.
- Underline reasons why Alcott wants to become a nurse.

1861

April.—War declared with the South, and our Concord company went to Washington. A busy time getting them ready, and a sad day seeing them off, for in a little town like this we all seem like one family in times like these. At the station the scene was very dramatic, as the brave boys went away perhaps never to come back again.

I’ve often longed to see a war, and now I have my wish. I long to be a man, but as I can’t fight, I will **content** myself with working for those who can. . . .

1862

10 September, October.— . . . War news bad. Anxious faces, beating hearts, and busy minds.

I like the stir in the air, and long for battle like a warhorse when he smells powder. The blood of the Mays is up!<sup>1</sup> . . .

<sup>1</sup> **The blood of the Mays is up!**: The temper that Alcott has inherited from her ancestors (the Mays) is aroused.

content:

November.—Thirty years old. Decided to go to Washington as a nurse if I could find a place. Help needed, and I love nursing, and *must* let out my pent-up energy in some new way. Winter is always a hard and a dull time, and if I am away there is one less to feed and warm and worry over.

I want new experiences, and am sure to get 'em if I go. So I've sent in my name, and bide my time<sup>2</sup> writing tales, to leave all snug behind  
20 me, and mending up my old clothes,—for nurses don't need nice things, thank goodness!

December.—On the 11th I received a note from Miss H. M. Stevenson telling me to start for Georgetown next day to fill a place in the Union Hotel Hospital. Mrs. Ropes of Boston was matron, and Miss Kendall of Plymouth was a nurse there, and though a hard place, help was needed. I was ready, and when my commander said "March!" I marched. Packed my trunk, and reported in B.[oston] that same evening.

We had all been full of courage till the last moment came, then we  
30 all broke down. I realized that I had taken my life in my hand, and might never see them all again. I said, "Shall I stay, Mother?" as I hugged her close. "No, go!" answered the Spartan<sup>3</sup> woman, and till I turned the corner she bravely smiled and waved her wet handkerchief on the doorstep. Shall I ever see that dear old face again?

<sup>2</sup> **bide my time:** wait around.

<sup>3</sup> **Spartan:** strong and self-disciplined.

2. ◀ **REREAD** Reread lines 1–21. How does Alcott use words with positive connotations to explain her desire to become a Civil War nurse? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

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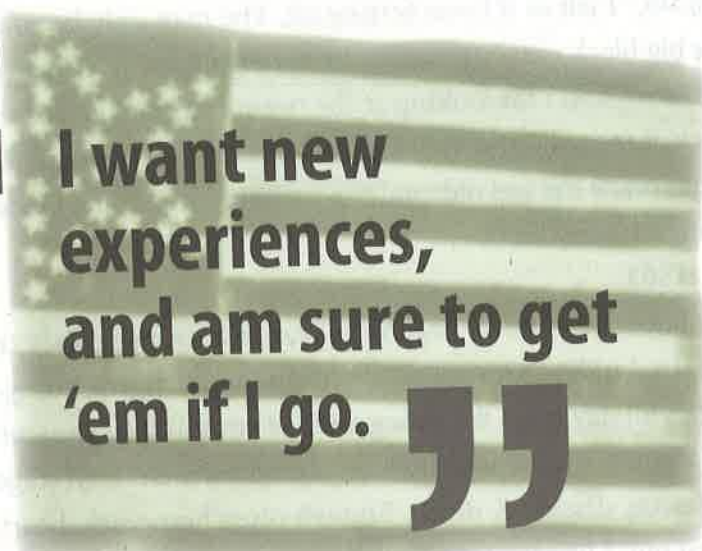
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3. ▶ **READ** As you read lines 22–64, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline details in lines 22–37 that suggest a similarity between Alcott and a soldier.
- In the margin, paraphrase Alcott's thoughts in lines 48–49.
- Circle the little boy's description of Alcott in lines 52–64.

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I want new experiences, and am sure to get 'em if I go. ”

So I set forth in the December twilight, with May and Julian Hawthorne as escort, feeling as if I was the son of the house going to war.

40 Friday, the 12th, was a very memorable day, spent in running all over Boston to get my pass, etc., calling for parcels, getting a tooth filled, and buying a veil,—my only purchase. A. C. gave me some old clothes, the dear Sewalls money for myself and boys, lots of love and help, and at 5 P.M., saying “good-by” to a group of tearful faces at the station, I started on my long journey, full of hope and sorrow, courage and plans.

A most interesting journey into a new world full of stirring sights and sounds, new adventures, and an evergrowing sense of the great task I had undertaken.

I said my prayers as I went rushing through the country white with tents, all alive with patriotism, and already red with blood.

50 A solemn time, but I'm glad to live in it, and am sure it will do me good whether I come out alive or dead.

All went well, and I got to Georgetown one evening very tired. Was kindly welcomed, slept in my narrow bed with two other roommates, and on the morrow began my new life by seeing a poor man die at dawn, and sitting all day between a boy with pneumonia and a man shot through the lungs. A strange day, but I did my best, and when I put mother's little black shawl round the boy while he sat up panting for breath, he smiled and said, “You are real motherly,

ma'am." I felt as if I was getting on. The man only lay and stared with  
60 his big black eyes, and made me very nervous. But all were well  
behaved, and I sat looking at the twenty strong faces as they looked  
back at me,—hoping that I looked "motherly" to them, for my thirty  
years made me feel old, and the suffering round me made me long to  
comfort every one. . . .

1863

January.—I never began the year in a stranger place than this, five  
hundred miles from home, alone among strangers, doing painful  
duties all day long, & leading a life of constant excitement in this  
greathouse surrounded by 3 or 4 hundred men in all stages of  
suffering, disease & death. Though often home sick, heart sick &  
70 worn out, I like it—find real pleasure in comforting tending &  
cheering these poor souls who seem to love me, to feel my sympathy  
though unspoken, & acknowledge my hearty good will in spite of the  
ignorance, awkwardness, & bashfulness which I cannot help showing  
in so new & trying a situation. The men are docile, respectful, &  
affectionate, with but few exceptions, truly lovable & manly many of  
them. John Suhre a Virginia blacksmith is the prince of patients, &  
though what we call a common man, in education & condition, to me  
is all that I could expect or ask from the first gentleman in the land.  
Under his plain speech & unpolished manner I seem to see a noble  
80 character, a heart as warm & tender as a woman's, a nature fresh &

4. **REREAD** Reread lines 52–64. Alcott says she hopes to appear "motherly" to all her patients. How would your perception of Alcott change if she had used a word such as *watchful* or *protective*, which has a similar denotation but different connotation?

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5. **READ** As you read lines 65–86, continue to cite text evidence.
- Underline details that describe Alcott's duties.
  - Circle details that describe Alcott's patients, including John Suhre.
  - In the margin, summarize Alcott's feelings about her experiences.

frank as any child's. He is about thirty, I think, tall & handsome, mortally wounded & dying royally, without **reproach**, repining,<sup>4</sup> or remorse. Mrs. Ropes & myself love him & feel indignant that such a man should be so early lost, for though he might never distinguish himself before the world, his influence & example cannot be without effect, for real goodness is never wasted.

Mon 4th—I shall record the events of a day as a sample of the days I spend—

90 Up at six, dress by gas light, run through my ward & fling up the windows though the men grumble & shiver; but the air is bad enough to breed a pestilence & as no notice is taken of our frequent appeals for better ventilation I must do what I can. Poke up the fire, add blankets, joke, coax & command, but continue to open doors & windows as if life depended on it; mine does, & doubtless many another, for a more perfect pestilence-box than this house I never saw—cold, damp, dirty, full of vile odors from wounds, kitchens, wash rooms, & stables. No competent head, male or female, to right matters, & a jumble of good, bad, & indifferent nurses, surgeons & attendants to complicate the Chaos still more.

100 After this unwelcome progress through my **stifling** ward I go to breakfast with what appetite I may; find the inevitable fried beef, salt butter, husky bread & washy coffee; listen to the clack of eight women & a dozen men; the first silly, stupid or possessed of but one idea, the last absorbed in their breakfast & themselves to a degree that is both **ludicrous** and provoking, for all the dishes are ordered down the table *full* & returned *empty*, the conversation is entirely among themselves

reproach:

stifling:

ludicrous:

<sup>4</sup> **repining**: fretting, being discontented.

6. ◀ **REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 65–86. In a small group, compare and contrast Alcott's feelings about the war in this entry with the way she felt in previous journal entries. Cite explicit textual evidence in your discussion.

7. ▶ **READ** ▶ As you read lines 87–117, continue to cite textual evidence.

- In the margin, restate what Alcott says about the journal entry for Monday the 4th in lines 87–88.
- Circle the phrases that describe the conditions in the hospital.
- Underline the description of Alcott's duties as a nurse on a typical day.

& each announces his opinion with an air of importance that frequently causes me to choke in my cup or bolt my meals with undignified speed lest a laugh betray to these pompous beings that a  
 110 “child’s among them takin’ notes.” Till noon I trot, trot, giving out rations, cutting up food for helpless “boys,” washing faces, teaching my attendants how beds are made or floors swept, dressing wounds, taking Dr. FitzPatrick’s orders, (privately wishing all the time that he would be more gentle with my big babies), dusting tables, sewing bandages, keeping my tray tidy, rushing up & down after pillows, bed linen, sponges, book & directions, till it seems as if I would joyfully pay down all I possess for a fifteen minutes rest.

8. **REREAD** Reread lines 87–117. Which details in these lines develop Alcott’s concept of the poor working conditions in the hospital? Explain, citing explicit textual evidence in your answer.

## SHORT RESPONSE

**Cite Text Evidence** Compare and contrast Alcott’s journal entry in lines 1–64 with her entry in lines 87–117. Which concepts do each of these entries develop? Be sure to cite text evidence in your response.

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