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ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

Tóth Zsófia
Anglisztika alapszak
Amerikanisztika szakirány
Film és Kultúra specializáció

2024

EÖTVÖS LORÁND TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM
Bölcsészettudományi Kar

ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

Jo March különböző reprezentációinak összehasonlító elemzése a Kisasszonyokban
A Comparative Analysis of Different Representations of Jo March in Little Women

Témavezető:
Dr. Vilmos Eszter Judit
Egyetemi tanársegéd

Készítette:
Tóth Zsófia
Anglisztika alapszak
Amerikanisztika szakirány
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A HKR 346. § ad 76. § (4) c) pontja értelmében:
„… A szakdolgozathoz csatolni kell egy nyilatkozatot arról, hogy a munka a hallgató saját szellemi terméke…”

NYILATKOZAT

Alulírott **Tóth Zsófia** ezennel kijelentem és aláírásommal megerősítem, hogy az ELTE BTK **Anglisztika** alapszak **Amerikanisztika** szakirányán írt *A Comparative Analysis of Different Representations of Jo March in Little Women* című szakdolgozatom saját szellemi termékem, melyet korábban más szakon még nem nyújtottam be szakdolgozatként/záródolgozatként és amelybe mások munkáját (könyv, tanulmány, kézirat, internetes forrás, személyes közlés stb.) idézőjel és pontos hivatkozások nélkül nem építettem be.

Budapest, 2024.04.02.

Tóth Zsófia s.k.
aláírás

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Introduction

Few works in American literature have captured the hearts of readers and audiences alike as profoundly as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. The March sisters, through their endearing stories, have become a part of the collective memory of numerous people who grew up reading the novel or watching the countless film adaptations of the beloved classic. The timeless tale of the Marches has garnered widespread admiration for its portrayal of familial bonds, individual growth, and the societal challenges faced by women during the 19th century. Set against the backdrop of the American Civil War, *Little Women* chronicles the coming-of-age journey of the four March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. The book has attracted the attention of many feminist critics, who have long debated whether the novel can be classified as a feminist piece or not. One approach vocalized by critic Hillary Kelly states that the beloved classic cannot be feminist as "it is obsessed with wifely duty—deferential to patriarchy and dismissive of female ambition of any variety other than the maternal" (Kelly). Meanwhile, critics like Kathleen Keenan claim that *Little Women* shows the importance of examining women's lives and stories, asserting that even when beloved female characters make disappointing choices, the act of writing and sharing their stories constitutes a feminist act (Keenan).

With such differing opinions on the matter, it is no surprise that Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's timeless classic—which approached the source material from a more feminist perspective, particularly when adapting Jo's character—attracted a lot of attention. Gerwig's adaptation not only reignited interest in the March girls' tale but also rekindled discussions regarding the feminist undertones of the story. The enduring popularity of *Little Women* elicits a deeper look at its material, particularly the character of the second oldest sister, Jo March. Jo, according to Judith Fetterley, emerges as "the vital center of Alcott's

book" since she is the most relenting to the idea of becoming a little woman (379). This essay aims to analyze Jo's character in the book and examine how she has been portrayed in various film adaptations, illustrating that as time goes on, newer adaptations are more likely to bring the novel's underlying feminist principles to the forefront.

The first chapter will analyze Jo's representation in the original work. Furthermore, it will give a short overview of the novel's historical background and women's roles at the time of the novel's writing. By the end of the 19th century, many women became discontent with their limited societal roles (Townsend 229). Sharing this sentiment, the character of Jo March emerges as a departure from the expected norms. Her unconventional aspirations of becoming a writer and her intentions of never marrying stand in stark contrast to the conventional roles of marriage and motherhood expected of women at the time. By examining Jo's character arc and her interactions within the narrative, the upcoming chapter intends to shed light on how Alcott utilized Jo March to subvert and critique the gender roles of her era, while also highlighting the regressive aspects of her character that uphold traditional patriarchal principles.

The second chapter aims to examine Alcott's life and the parallels between her life and that of the Marches. Namely, her family background of progressives, her feminist ideals, and her passion for writing which she shares with Jo. Through analyzing Alcott's personal journals and her intentions for the novel and its characters, we may garner a more comprehensive understanding of why the fate of Jo has become the focus of much scholarly debate. Moreover, we will compare the analysis of "book Jo" to the 1933, 1949, and 1994 film adaptations, showcasing how she was represented throughout the 20th century.

Finally, in the last chapter, we will examine the 2019 adaptation in greater detail to prove that it is the most progressive adaptation as it keeps the essence of the novel, while including meta-level changes that align with Alcott's initial vision of a more progressive *Little*

Women. As we embark on a critical examination of the varying representations of Jo March in the different adaptations, we'll unravel not just the layers of the beloved character but also the evolution of feminist narratives in literature and culture.

1. Unveiling Jo March: Exploring the Character in the Novel

Little Women was written during the tumultuous period of the American Civil War, which prompted a surge of able-bodied men to enlist in the war effort, leaving behind a significant demographic of women to navigate the challenges and responsibilities that arose in the men's absence. Before the outbreak of the war, the traditional view of femininity emphasized domesticity, nurturing, and self-sacrifice. These values are all too familiar to readers of Alcott's novel, which has been criticized for emphasizing and instilling in young women the importance of upholding these ideals (Spacks 121). However, these ingrained gender roles began to shift fundamentally by the end of the century. Women made significant contributions to the war effort through their medical work, a role uncommon for them before the war.

Louisa May Alcott herself was an Abolitionist and felt compelled to participate in the war, describing herself as longing for battle "like a warhorse when he smells powder" (Alcott 109). In 1862, she officially joined an improvised hospital in Washington, D.C., as a nurse. The Civil War offered Alcott significant life experience and memories, many of which would shape her creation of *Little Women* years later. The conclusion of the Civil War marked a period of newfound freedom and a shift in societal norms, challenging individuals to reexamine the inner workings of their society. Despite these changes, women would still need to wait a whopping 100 years to be granted the right to vote, and most men, worn out from the war, were eager to go back to the way things were with obedient, domestic wives taking care of them at home.

Nonetheless, the sudden shift in attitudes towards societal norms only highlighted women's frustration and anger with their limited possibilities.

In literature, characters like Jo March offer a poignant reflection of this historical and societal shift. Jo in the first few pages of the book is introduced to the readers with a firm assertion of her desire to be a man and her lamentation at her misfortune of having been born female. "It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy" (Alcott 4). Numerous scholars, such as Kent, Friddle, and Doyle, have endeavored to interpret Jo through a modern lens, often exploring themes of lesbianism or searching for evidence that supports a transgender reading of her character. While there is merit in these readings, this paper will argue that Jo's yearning for a different gender does not extend to a desire to actually become a man, but rather reflects her frustration with the limited opportunities available to women in her society, as expressed by her desire to fight in the war alongside her father. "I'm dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!" (Alcott 4). As seen here, Jo wishes to be at the center of the action and associates womanhood with domestic chores and boring tasks such as knitting. This initial characterization of Jo, echoing Alcott's own wish to join the war effort, lays the foundation for the novel's central theme of women's discontentment with societal constraints.

Physically, Jo is described as lanky, awkward, and less conventionally attractive than her sisters. "Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn't like it" (Alcott 5). She does not fit the beauty standards of her time, which further underscores how she is presented as someone who is out of place within her contemporary society, unfitting of its values both inside and out. Meg is often described as the most handsome of the March sisters,

followed by Amy. Consequently, Meg is the first one to accept marriage and motherhood out of the sisters, followed by Amy. Thus, their external appearances foreshadow their futures: the more a little woman fits the beauty standard the more likely they are to conform to the norms.

Chapter 3 “The Laurence Boy,” in which Jo attends a ball with her sister Meg, is a clear example of her ongoing struggle to conform. Her patched clothes, a result of her skirt catching fire, and her discomfort when approached for a dance further portray her as a misfit. Jo’s character is often associated with fire, which represents both her fiery personality and is a constant symbol of her anger. By this reading, the scorching of her dress could be interpreted as her underlying anger at objects that represent her femininity, in this case, her skirt. Jo formally meets Laurie, the boy next door, at the aforementioned ball. He serves as a playmate with whom Jo can freely express her more “boyish” tendencies without censure. Her sisters often scold Jo for acting boyish, Amy most particularly, who can be viewed as a narrative foil to Jo. Amy, the youngest sister holds society’s expectations for women in high regard and sees Jo as an embarrassment when she goes against the status quo (Alcott 3).

When it comes to her personality, Jo is a rebellious, stubborn, fiery character and in essence, the opposite of the docile ideal of femininity prevalent during the Civil War era. As Mr. March is off helping in the war effort, Jo takes on a more masculine persona to balance out her sisters’ femininity. Jo is surrounded by women, namely her sisters, her mother, and even her servant Hanna, thus she feels threatened when men encroach upon her female-centric world. This is exemplified by her revulsion at the thought that Mr. Brooks, who has been courting her elder sister, Meg, would propose to her sister, thereby stealing her from the family circle. Laurie surprisedly remarks after telling Jo of Brook’s courtship of Meg that he thought she would be pleased by the concept. She responds: “At the idea of anybody coming to take Meg away? No, thank you” (Alcott 192). Presuming that Meg would turn Mr. Brook down, she calls him “a

fallen enemy" and says she will "praise a strong-minded sister for the banishment of an objectionable lover" (Alcott 289). She is heartbroken when she finds Meg sitting upon Mr. Brook's knee with an expression of "the most abject submission" (289). In her mind, Meg has betrayed their sister-circle in favor of the enemy. On Meg's wedding day, Jo even longs to marry Meg herself to keep the family intact, wishing that "wearing flat-irons on our heads would keep us from growing up" (Alcott 253–255). In this sense, Jo seems to represent a Peter Pan-like character. Someone who never wants to grow up and demonstrates a reluctance to acknowledge the eventual maturing of those around her, clinging onto her childhood instead. "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China-aster!" (Alcott 4). However, unlike in Peter Pan, adulthood holds different and more complex struggles for young ladies of the 19th century. As Marmee plainly states: "To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman" (Alcott 123). Thus, Jo's wish to stay a child constitutes a defiance and revolt against society as a whole and the necessity of marriage.

Indeed, Jo March does not have her sights set on a domestic future, as the ambivalent narrator relays to us, "Jo's ambition was to do something very splendid; what it was she had no idea, as yet, but left it for time to tell her" (Alcott 41). She is first and foremost an artist, her writing is often described as her most prized possession. When asked in chapter 13, "Castles in the Air", what her main wish for her future is, she says "I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream" (Alcott 180). These are unconventionally ambitious dreams for a girl in the mid-nineteenth century. Women authors were scarce, and it was highly unlikely that women could truly make a living out of authorship. By letting Jo's dream be a career that mainly focuses on self-expression, Alcott is dismantling the limited domestic possibilities presented to "little women", while advocating for women's agency in the realm of intellectual pursuits. Moreover, Jo's aspiration of becoming a writer

takes on metaphorical meaning. Expressing herself and letting her voice be heard in writing is a form of empowerment, overcoming the silence imposed on women by the patriarchal system. This issue was relevant not just at its time, but decades later as well. Late 20th century feminist critic Hélène Cixous emphasized the importance of women pursuing writing in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa": "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from bodies" (Cixous 875). Therefore, Jo's passion for writing aligns with the ideals of early feminism, which sought to challenge patriarchal structures and advocate for women's rights to education, self-expression, and independence. Her creative pursuits, particularly in writing plays and stories where she takes on male roles, offer her an opportunity to escape into a world where her dream of assuming a male identity becomes a reality.

In accordance with this analysis, Alcott appears to set up Jo as a character intended to defy societal norms and diverge from the conventional representation of what women should be. She underscores her point in what might be one of the most surprising turn of events in a children's book within that period: Jo after years of friendship, refuses Laurie's marriage proposal. Such an act was generally scorned because the times dictated that women should not refuse perfectly good parties. The explanation for the rejection given by Jo herself is as follows: "Our quick tempers and strong wills would probably make us very miserable... I'm homely and awkward and odd and old, and you'd be ashamed of me ... and I shouldn't like elegant society and you would, and you'd hate my scribbling" (Alcott 457–58). Further, when Laurie asks her to at least give him a chance she retorts: "I don't see why I can't love you as you want me to. I've tried, but I can't change the feeling, and it would be a lie to say I do when I don't" (455). Jo's failure to love and marry Laurie—something Amy succeeds at, further solidifying her role as Jo's foil—marks the culmination of her shortcomings in conforming to the societal expectations of a standard lady of her time. Thus, refusing to be married and become a mother

would have been the ultimate sign of rebellion against the system, as it would have been proof of her defiance of everything a woman was thought to be fit for in the era. Further, she would have been placing her career above the traditional expectations of marriage and motherhood.

However, if this were the case, the novel would not be half as controversial in the eyes of feminist critics as it is. The element that gives course to such heated debate is the way Jo's story unfolds in the sequel to *Little Women*: *Good Wives*. In *Good Wives,* Jo goes through an uncharacteristic transformation. She moves to New York and begins to publish her works in a scandalous magazine called the Weekly Volcano, a perfect metaphor for Jo's volcanic, fiery, personality. Therefore, Jo's thrilling stories serve as a representation of her personality and even her character identity. The writing in question is intentionally dramatized by Jo to generate income for her financially strained family. While not a perfect reflection of her true writing abilities, it nonetheless holds merit in her artistic endeavors. Thus, it is particularly disconcerting that Jo, upon the arrival of Professor Bhaer, a Germanic professor in his forties who critiques and admonishes her writing, finds herself in such agreement with his criticisms that she sets her own work ablaze—an act that strikingly mirrors an earlier scene where Amy destroys Jo's cherished work via burning it. Jo's subsequent experience of a breakdown, and her vow never to forgive her sister, suggests that her later willingness to sacrifice her own creations is a form of self-annihilation rather than a liberation from perceived poor writing.

Her eventual romance and marriage with Professor Bhaer are even more peculiar, considering her countless protests of marriage and her rejection of Laurie. The decision for Jo to choose an older professor, who resembles more of a father figure than a romantic partner, over a potential lover has received criticism from readers of the novel (Fetterley 375). However, Jo appears content and willingly embraces her role as a wife in the marriage (Alcott 602–604). The seemingly progressive conclusion of Jo inheriting her aunt's house and transforming it into

a school is tempered by the fact that she will share the position of headmaster with her significantly older husband. This arrangement, marked by the inequality of the roles due to the considerable age difference between her and Bhaer, represents a significant shift in Jo's character development.

What *Little Women* presents us is a case study of how women authors made money in the 19th century by being forced to conform. The morals of their stories were required to adhere to societal norms for them to be marketable. *Little Women*'s quick success can largely be attributed to the fact that the book functioned as a guide for young ladies—little women—on how to become adult women. The morals in the book all circle around the theme of self-sacrifice. Women must sacrifice their anger, freedom, ambition, and talent to find a suitable husband. If they fail to do so, they are met with grave consequences. A clear example of this is the accident that almost leads to Amy's death due to Jo's resentment towards her for burning her book full of her cherished stories. The message is clear: women cannot afford resentment and anger to any degree because their loved ones will pay the price, in this case, Amy. However, this lesson may allude to the fact that women should repress their anger in all of its forms, not only to protect their sisters but to please their husbands. Marmee, in a later scene, advises Meg on how to behave herself with her husband: "Be careful, be very careful, not to wake his anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect" (Alcott 349–350). There are a number of these lessons in the novel and while all the sisters grow to eventually conform to them, it is Jo who suffers the most violently due to these lessons, losing her dear Beth due to illness, the sister she is described as being closest to, her dream of going to Europe being taken from her and given to Amy, and further artistic struggles she faces once she is in New York.

The book at first presented Jo's character as an alternative for women of the era who felt the need to break away from the stifling constraints of society; by the end, her story turns into a cautionary tale of what would happen to other unruly "little women" who would follow Jo's path of rebellion. Further, it serves as proof that only by adhering to expectations can one be truly happy and not wholeheartedly lonesome as Jo is before her Professor Bhaer appears and sweeps her under his umbrella. Despite the entirely conventional sentiments often expressed in Alcott's works, she is nevertheless regarded by many critics as an early feminist. These interpretations, however, constantly run into the problem that these feminist ideals are heavily veiled and hardly explicit in the novel itself. Due to this, Hollinger and Winterhalter claim that the novel remains a very contradictory, ambiguous piece that lends itself to both progressive and regressive interpretations (176).

2. The Evolution of Jo March: An Overview of 20th Century Film Adaptations

The contradictory nature of *Little Women*, which hints at progressive ideas through Jo's character but ultimately abandons them and chooses a life of conformity for Jo, might be more easily understood once we examine Alcott's own thoughts on the novel. Alcott was raised in a reform-minded household and community. She never got married and instead dedicated her life to writing, assumed the primary role of breadwinner for her family, and advocated for women's suffrage (Hollinger 175). The author was a supporter of the transcendentalist movement and advocated for the extension of the transcendentalist principles to women. "In future let woman do whatever she can do; let men place no more impediments in the way; Let woman find out her own limitations" (Porter 13–14). Conversely, Alcott hesitated to introduce her "lurid style" into Concord's traditionally subdued atmosphere. "The dear old town has never known a startling hue since the redcoats were there. Far be it from me to inject an inharmonious color

into the neutral tint" (Pickett 107–108). Her fear manifested in the repression of her liberal ideals in favor of writing more marketable stories for young girls. Moreover, in a letter she admitted that she did not enjoy writing socially acceptable "moral tales for the young" but did it only because such stories provided her family with a much-needed income (Myerson and Shealy 232).

From her letters, we can discern that Alcott wished for a different ending for her heroine, Jo. In a letter, she stated "Jo should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie or somebody, that I didn't dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her. I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect" (Myerson and Shealy 125). Alcott thus categorized her treatment of Jo and her marriage as a result of public pressure. However, though she shrugs off the backlash here and rather detaches herself from the issue, in a different letter to Samuel Joseph May written in 1869, she sounds distraught over this outcome as she bitterly complains that "publishers are very perverse & won't let authors have their way so my *Little Women* must grow up & be married off in a very stupid style" (Myerson and Shealy 121–22). Further emphasizing this point is her letter to Elizabeth Powell, in which she writes that her sequel, Good Wives, will probably "disappoint or disgust most readers, for publishers won't let authors finish up as they like but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me" (Myerson and Shealy 125).

Thus, Alcott's writing of the novel can be defined by a constant clash between her upbringing, steeped in the ideals of Emerson and Bronson Alcott—which advocated for personal freedom and assertiveness—and the expectations imposed by her readership and publishers. Alcott found herself unable to bestow upon her heroine, Jo the desired ending she envisioned, instead opting to reshape her character to conform to prevailing social norms, even

at the expense of compromising her integrity by arranging a marriage for her. As critics Estes and Lant argue, “Young Jo—fiery, angry, assertive—represents all that adult Jo can never be, and for this reason young Jo must be destroyed” (101).

Based on this background knowledge adopting such a contradictory literary piece onto the big screen can prove to be a difficult undertaking. One must contemplate whether to adhere closely to the source material, embrace Roland Barthes’ “death of the author” theory, and adapt the story with its original ending, —which the author found distasteful to put to paper—or to consider the tumultuous history of the work and offer a more fulfilling conclusion to the cherished classic, thereby honoring the creator’s intentions. Many of the early adaptations decided to opt for the prior, keeping the story intact as much as possible, even removing some crucial moments that serve Jo’s character, thereby stripping her of her anger and spirit which is so apparent in the original work. Moreover, adaptations focused less on the importance of Jo’s writing and her ambition for literature. According to Cartmell and Simons, the novel “conveys the potency of literature as a survival mechanism, film has tended to present *Little Women* in a much milder light as a sentimental story for girls, its subject that of the American family and the socialization and triumph of its unruly heroine” (77). As the films had to condense the plot of the book, Hollywood techniques were employed to alter the narrative into one more easily digestible for a general audience.

The 1933 and 1949 films follow a generally similar plotline. They were produced during the eras of the World Wars, making the topic of war from the novel ever-present. The films were produced at a time when independent women were experiencing a forceful backlash from society, due to men’s eagerness to domesticate women after the World Wars. In George Cukor’s 1933 adaptation Jo, played by Kathrine Hepburn, is portrayed with a loudness and abrasiveness characteristic of the actress. Her deep voice and sometimes awkward behavior grant this Jo a

particularly boyish, masculine energy. This masculine take on the character is underscored by her first meeting with Laurie, which turns into a playful fencing match, an activity uncharacteristic of young ladies. However, the pair are not presented as equals. Jo ends up tripping over her long skirt which causes her to lose the match. Laurie apologizes and explains that he must have played too rough because he forgot Jo was a girl. Jo, however, exclaims she could have bested him if she hadn't slipped. This scene is a stark reminder that Jo is merely pretending to be a boy, her skirt once again emerges as a representation of her femininity, which is portrayed as something that will drag her down and keep her from actually reaching the level of her male friend. Choosing to portray Jo this way characterizes and limits her to the "tomboy" trope which was a popular stereotype during the mid-20th century. The "tomboy" character—a girl or woman who rejects traditional gender norms—often exhibits traits typically associated with masculinity such as assertiveness, physical prowess, and a disdain for typical feminine pursuits. While the "tomboy" for its time may have been intended to be progressive, in the context of *Little Women*, it inadvertently reinforces the idea that for a woman to be powerful or independent, she must adopt masculine traits, but even then, her underlying femininity will eventually hold her back. Instead of exploring the cause of Jo's boyish behavior, such as a dissatisfaction with the limited roles for women in society, the film takes her manly nature at face value and does not comment on it further, treating it as a character quirk, often used to provide the film's comedy.

Moreover, the film over-sentimentalizes and idealizes its characters, in particular Jo. She appears to be constantly fighting against her tomboyish nature and wishing to break away from it as if it were a terrible affliction. For example, during the scene in which the girls receive the letter from their father, we see a closeup of Jo's face, covered in tears, as she painfully asserts her intention of doing right by her father and becoming a little woman, doing her duty at home instead of being "rough and wild". Such an assertion is absent from subsequent

adaptations; however, it showcases the implied message of the need for Jo to be "tamed". The scenes depicting Beth's illness with scarlet fever rely on melodramatic techniques. Close-ups of a tearful Jo evoke comparisons to the Virgin Mary, she is depicted with tear-stained eyes gazing up at the sky, symbolizing feminine fragility and piety. Thus, reinforcing the prevailing societal views of the era, which often cast women as overly emotional and dependent on male intervention. Distraught over Beth's worsening health, Jo laments her inability to summon their mother in time for their dying sister. Laurie arrives, consoling the overemotional Jo, and tenderly announces that he had already sent for Marmee without the girls' knowledge. This act serves as a narrative device to portray him as Jo's savior. Jo, in both 1933 and 1949 adaptations hugs and thanks Laurie, thereby framing him as the savior of the scene. Jo's gratitude and physical embrace solidify this dynamic. However, the 1994 adaptation departs from this trope. Jo exhibits greater emotional control in this scene, and Laurie's role in summoning Marmee is mentioned only as a passing comment without any emphasis. The 2019 film takes this a step further by entirely omitting Laurie's involvement, shifting the focus instead to Marmee's arrival and the subsequent family reunion. This deliberate shift from a male savior figure to a capable and caring mother underscores the film's feminist message, highlighting the crucial role of women within the family structure.

While the 1933 film does portray Jo's fiery personality to some extent, Jo's story still merely serves as a lesson for young girls that they cannot remain like Jo forever and that they must eventually turn up their hair and settle down with their own Professor Bhaer. Further proving this point is the fact that both the 1933 and the 1949 versions completely omit the scene in which Amy burns Jo's book. Thus, neither film portrays any indication of the March family's potential for betrayal, nor does it reveal the intensity of Jo's love for her stories and her capacity for unbridled rage (Kellett 19). The films choose to limit her anger to a tool for comedy, as in the scene where she knocks Laurie over in a fit after he tries to kiss her. Ultimately, this

adaptation fails to comment on any social inequalities and underlying progressive themes that are prevalent in Jo's character.

The 1949 adaptation, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, closely follows its predecessor, however, it replaces Jo's wish to go to the battlefields and fight by her father's side with a desire to be a nurse. Reinforcing gender norms, LeRoy insinuates that women are allowed to wish to contribute to the war effort, but only while staying within the confines of their gender, choosing the "appropriate" profession of a nurse, which is associated with femininity. Conversely, this film is the first one to present Jo as a published author. In the original novel, the reason Bhaer pays Jo a visit is because he read one of her poems and from it, he surmised that she was in love with him; thus, there is no mention of any book of Jo's in Alcott's work. In Cukor's version, Jo's unnamed manuscript is given to a publisher friend of Professor Bhaer's who, we are told, has high hopes for it. Whether the book is published or not is treated as irrelevant in the face of the love confession, which is presented as the climax of both Cukor's and LeRoy's films. In LeRoy's version, Jo does write a book that is published, once again by Bhaer, called "My Beth", an homage to the sister Jo lost. It is important to note that in all versions, except Gerwig's, it is Jo's love interest who gives her work to publishers instead of Jo herself, thus stripping her of her autonomy.

The 1994 adaptation of *Little Women* by Gillian Armstrong has been called by critics an "unequivocally feminist" work and while the film advocates stronger feminist views than its predecessors, it still ultimately presents its viewers with conformity (Hollinger 173). This adaptation is a departure from previous versions of Jo, as it focuses more on the autobiographical nature of the novel, framing Jo's character as reflective of her author's life. When the movie begins, Jo narrates the story from her point of view, giving the impression that we are hearing her read a passage from one of her books. This focus immediately sets it apart

from past adaptations that only show Jo's work in the form of a single play which is filled with mustache-twirling villains, and damsels in distress, thereby presenting Jo's work as solely childish. Armstrong's film tells the narrative in a way that allows its audience to appreciate Jo's creativity, framing her as a very talented aspiring author. This approach is further emphasized by the prominence of Jo's writing aspirations, reflected in frequent scenes showcasing her writing, acting out her plays with her sisters, and narrating to us at the very beginning of the film "Late at night, my mind would come alive with voices and stories... I gave myself up to it longing for transformation" (Armstrong 00:06:05–00:06:19). This adaptation reflects the feminist zeitgeist of the 1990s. In a poignant scene near the end, Jo, surrounded by a group of men, advocates for the necessity of women's right to vote. She emphasizes that women should not be granted suffrage because they are deemed "good", but rather because they are human beings and citizens of the country, equal to men in every aspect. This direct acknowledgment of feminist ideals showcases Jo's progressiveness as well as the underlying feminist subtext of the original, presenting this film's little women as early feminists (Hollinger 173). Moreover, Armstrong's portrayal of Jo is starkly different from previous adaptations. Winona Ryder's Jo exhibits a more youthful and feminine demeanor compared to earlier tomboyish interpretations. She does not shout "Christopher Colombus" in a deep, throaty voice as in previous adaptations, and her aversion to romantic feelings is the least emphasized out of all the adaptations. Significantly, the March sisters are portrayed closer to their actual ages from the novel, a shift from the practice of casting older actresses for the roles. This emphasis on youth contributes to a coming-of-age narrative, with Jo's emotional range depicted as genuine rather than melodramatic. Her anger and assertiveness are not downplayed, and she is presented as a lot more capable in the face of distress. The film uses her friendship with Laurie to explore the social divide between men and women. Upon their first meeting, Laurie complains of his grandfather insisting on him going to study at a college, while Jo asserts, that she would commit

murder to be allowed to go to college. In a later scene, Meg asks Marmee why it is that Laurie is able to flirt and act foolish without losing the respect of others. She responds quite pointedly "Laurie is a man, and as such…he may vote, and hold property and pursue any profession he pleases. And so, he is not so easily demeaned" (Armstrong 00:43:13–00:43:29).

Armstrong's display of the character is more realistic because she stresses the scenes that present Jo's fury and rage (Douglas). Moreover, Armstrong is the first to showcase the book-burning scene: Jo's anger is at the forefront as she attacks young Amy and screams hurtful things as a result of her fury. "I hate you! You're dead! You're nothing!" such a display would have been unimaginable in earlier adaptations (Armstrong 00:34:21–00:43:34). This adaptation does not shy away from portraying the characters as complex and prone to folly. In a heartbreaking scene, after Jo refuses Laurie's proposal and is denied her trip to Europe, she expresses guilt and sadness over her inability to conform. "I'm ugly and awkward, and I always say the wrong things. There's just something really wrong with me. I want to change, but I... I can't. And I just know I'll never fit in anywhere" (Armstrong 01:09:45–01:10:00). A display which demonstrates the underlying frustrations expressed by the novel's Jo at her inability to be ordinary.

Moreover, the 1994 film is the first version to actively attempt to merge Jo's character with her author. In 1933, the book she writes is unnamed, in 1949 it is called "My Beth", while in this film, the novel Jo writes and publishes is titled "Little Women", making her a representation of Alcott. However, her joy over the success of her book getting published is undercut by yet another male savior figure, Professor Bhaer. At the end of the film, Jo gleefully runs after the professor, who gets Jo's book published and leaves it in her house. The film ends with triumphant orchestral music as the youthful Jo and the significantly older-looking professor kiss in the rain beneath the umbrella, once again ending the note of the film as

romantic. In an effort to modernize the relationship dynamic, we are told Bhaer would stay with Jo and teach at her school instead of sharing the position of headmaster with her. Though this may be a more progressive approach than the book, Jo still conforms to societal norms and the climax of the film's ending remains the romance rather than Jo's success.

3. Jo March Reimagined: Deconstructing the 2019 Film Adaptation

Finally, we examine the characterization of Jo in the 2019 adaptation of the novel by director Greta Gerwig. We have seen so far that while previous adaptations managed to capture the essence of Alcott's heroine, they still ultimately stuck to the source and to the domestication of Jo. In this chapter, we will prove that Gerwig is the one who manages to translate the spirit of Jo from book to screen in the most faithful and progressive sense, giving her an ending befitting her original persona and her author's wishes.

Starting with the first scene of the film, we are introduced to an already adult Jo, portrayed by Saoirse Ronan. In previous adaptations we usually encountered all the March sisters together as young girls in the first scenes; however, Gerwig's adaptation immediately cements Jo as the focus of the story. The novel opens *in medias res*, with Jo already settled in New York, attempting to achieve her creative goals as she struggles and succeeds in getting one of her short stories accepted by a publisher. The non-linear narrative structure is a technique that Russian Formalism would categorize using the terms fabula and sjužet (Propp). The fabula, or the basic story, unfolds chronologically with the March sisters' childhood experiences and their growth into adulthood. However, the sjužet, or the narrative as presented to the audience, begins with the conclusion of the fabula, showing the sisters as adults. Presenting the story this way allows Gerwig to highlight the contrast between the sisters' youthful adventures and their adult struggles. Consequently, the cherished and iconic moments from the novel that unfold during the sisters' childhoods are framed as flashbacks. The technique employed by Gerwig to

showcase the sudden shifts in the film between past and present is color grading. Events that take place in the past are set in a sunset-like golden orange and yellow coloring, while the present is more associated with duller, cooler blue tones. Reflecting how time makes childhood memories seem sweeter and more beautiful, while adulthood is characterized by a duller level-headedness. In a narrative sense, this allows the audience to delve deeper into the societal struggles faced by these adult women as they navigate a patriarchal world and step beyond the confines of childhood innocence. While previous adaptations largely focused on the childhood of the characters, Gerwig smartly decides to utilize the adult versions of the characters to comment on the unjust expectations placed upon women of the era.

When we first encounter Jo (Saoirse Ronan), she is sitting in her publisher's office, listening to his warning that she should make sure that the heroines of her stories either always marry or die by the end. Never before has Alcott's personal life and intellectual struggles been so vividly depicted in cinema, which makes this sequence noteworthy. The audience is reminded of the criticism that Alcott herself received from publishers. The allusion is, of course, to Beth, who is the perfect little woman, yet still dies instead of marrying. In the novel, upon her deathbed, Beth asks Jo to take her place and be everything to their parents that she was (Alcott 526). Jo complies, gets married, and leaves her "scribbling" behind for a life of conformity. In contrast, at the 2019 film's end, we see Jo rolling her eyes at her publisher, who is chiding her for her decision to leave the protagonist of her latest literary work unmarried.

Gerwig's Jo is sarcastic, witty, and charming. She has less of the awkwardness that is present in the books and previous adaptations. Once more, her tomboyish tendencies are watered down and replaced with a discontentment with her society instead of womanhood. Rather than idealize, this film takes a much more realistic approach to her character. Gerwig does not shy away from showing Jo's anger and her passion for her work. She is often seen writing up a storm, clearly portraying her talent as one of genius. This film pushes her artistry

to the forefront with Jo becoming more clearly associated with the struggling artist archetype instead of the tomboy. Her story becomes a typical hero's journey where the artist must start at the bottom and work their way up to receive acknowledgment and fame.

Unlike previous adaptations, Gerwig's Jo cares deeply about her work and how it is perceived by others. In the 1933 and 1949 versions, Jo cries when Bhaer criticizes her work, however, it is revealed that the real reason she cries is because she had just been denied her trip to Europe. She reveals that she agrees with Bhaer's criticisms and discredits her work as bad without expressing any emotional attachment to it. This is accurate to the original work; however, Gerwig changes this aspect of Jo. When Bhaer, played by a much younger and more conventionally attractive actor than in previous versions, criticizes her work in the film, she is visibly upset and tells him never to speak to her again. Moreover, she states that critics like him will be forgotten but everyone will remember Jo March (Gerwig 00:23:45–00:24:05). Clearly, Gerwig's Jo has a desire to leave a mark on the world through her writing, while other directors tended to downplay this aspect of the character. Her fervent rejection of her work's criticism emphasizes how much Jo's writing means to her. Despite this, she must sacrifice writing good stories for shocking ones for monetary gain. Gerwig's Jo shares the money troubles experienced by her creator, blurring the lines between the two further. She struggles with balancing her artistic integrity with her need to make money to support her family while her sister is sick. A distinct echo of Alcott's own reasoning for why she wrote moral stories for girls: "I do it, because it pays well" (Myerson and Shealy 232).

Gerwig weaves in and rewrites the iconic scenes from the novel to make this film's Jo practically leap off the screen. Her articulation of her uncontrollable anger and resentment reflects the experiences of many women during her era. Her struggles with managing her fiery temper in a society that places unreasonably high expectations on women remain relevant issues faced by women today. "To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive, and docile.

The girl is supposed…to repress her spontaneity and substitute for it the grace and charm she has been taught by her elder sisters" says the existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, reiterating the essence of Jo's internal struggle (402).

Later on, in a strikingly raw and heartbreaking scene, Jo, filled with grief over losing Beth, tearfully admits to her mother that she is sick of being told that love is all a woman is fit for, a sentiment so pointedly reflecting Alcott's own views it may as well have been written by her. Just as Alcott states in a letter "Girls write to ask who the little women will marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life" (Cheney 201). In this film, Jo's rejection of Laurie is motivated by her need for freedom, which emphasizes the film's central message: that marriage is ultimately an "economic proposition". This idea is further expanded upon through Jo's character when she decides to marry the heroine of her book off in return for money at the end of the film. Marriage is ultimately a business transaction as she herself states in her negotiation with her publisher: "If I'm going to sell my heroine into marriage for money I might as well get some of it" (Gerwig 02:06:00–02:06:07).

Finally, we must discuss the biggest departure from the book in this adaptation: the ending. It has been said by critics that *Little Women*'s ending is largely underwhelming and perpetuates the gender norms enforced upon women of the era, as Jo March loudly advocates throughout the book that she has no intention of finding a husband for herself but ends up in wedlock anyway (Kelly). Alcott was upset at the idea of marrying her protagonist off but eventually yielded. As a last act of defiance, instead of marrying Jo to Laurie, she created a new character, Friedrich Bhaer, for Jo to tie the knot with. As we have seen, Bhaer, a much older, mostly uninteresting professor, in Alcott's eyes, was a funny, absurd way of rebellion against the need to couple up her main character with someone (Myerson and Shealy 125). For this reason, as many critics and casual enjoyers of the novel have pointed out, the ending of the story feels largely unsatisfactory for Jo's character (Kelly).

Instead of committing to the romance between Bhaer and Jo, Gerwig decides to make an ambitious meta-level change to the text. The film employs a technique known as metalepsis, where the narrative shifts from one level to another, blurring ontological boundaries (Genette 234–35). This is exemplified by the film's introduction featuring the cover of *Little Women* by Alcott, contrasted with its conclusion where Jo March is credited as the author. Thus, we may interpret her and Bhaer's romance as merely a part of the book written by Jo within the film. We may also interpret the seemingly romantic reunion between her, and the professor as the result of Jo's negotiations with her publisher who pushes her to end the novel with her heroine in wedlock and she complies, thus giving us the typical Hollywood ending of the romance. Jo becomes one and the same with Alcott, matching her struggle of having to marry her heroine off to sell her book. Gerwig is able to both keep the original ending intact, while also fulfilling Alcott's dream of leaving Jo unmarried. Consequently, this version becomes a commentary on all the previous adaptations that have presented Jo's engagement as the climax of the film. Here, the ending and highest point of the film is given to Jo's book finally getting printed, her true passion, her intellectual child that she has been dreaming of since her childhood gaining form is the true happy ending of this story.

Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* reimagines the timeless tale through a contemporary lens, reframing the narrative to align with both the era it represents and present-day concerns. The reinterpretation of the ending offers a meta-commentary on the constraints faced by female characters in literature and highlights the significance of Jo's literary ambitions over conventional romantic endings. Gerwig thus is able to do justice to both the heroine and the author of *Little Women*, finally giving both the ending they deserve.

Conclusion

The enduring legacy of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* lies not just in its timeless story but also in its profound exploration of gender roles, societal expectations, and underlying feminism. Through the character of Jo March, Alcott created a figure that defied the conventions of her time, embodying the struggles and aspirations of many women who sought independence beyond the confines of traditional gender roles. Alcott faced public pressure from readers and publishers to give a conventional ending to her protagonist, one of marriage and motherhood. As we explored various film adaptations in the second chapter, from 1933 to 1994, we witnessed the evolution of Jo's character in popular culture. As we have seen, the 1933, 1949, and 1994 films all opted to limit Jo's character to stereotypes and maintain the story's romance as the climax of her journey. In contrast, as shown in the third chapter, Gerwig's 2019 adaptation brought Jo's artistry to the forefront, presenting her as a fiercely independent and ambitious woman, staying true to Alcott's original vision while infusing it with a modern feminist perspective. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that Jo March remains a compelling and relevant figure, resonating with audiences across generations. Her journey of self-discovery, her defiance of societal expectations, and her unwavering spirit continue to inspire readers and viewers alike.

In the end, Jo March stands not just as a beloved character in American literature but as a symbol of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the celebration of women's voices. As we continue to revisit and reimagine her story, we honor the legacy of Alcott's timeless classic and its profound impact on feminist narratives in literature and culture.

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