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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**Becoming Women: The Different Representations of
Womanhood in Greta Gerwig's Film Adaptation of
Alcott's Little Women**

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I declare that this is a totally original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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Abstract

“Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they’ve got ambition, and they’ve got talent, as well as just beauty. I’m so sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for.”

— Jo March, *Little Women*

Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* has been re-interpreted countless times, undoubtedly proving its high relevance in American literature and culture. Because of this, the themes that are introduced in the novel have been often analyzed and discussed throughout the decades. Furthermore, the novel’s nuanced female characters and the diversity that they showcase is worthy of mentioning through a feminist standpoint, although still being subjected to the social norms of the American Civil period, when the novel is based on. Within these numerous film adaptations that have been previously made, it is important to point out the social and cultural context of the period when they are made. The latest film adaptation, a film homonymously titled ‘*Little Women*’ (2019) - directed and written by Greta Gerwig -, was acclaimed for its display of multi-layered women who are complex and intricate, something that has not always been done in films. In this thesis, I will study how essential this kind of representation of women is within our current social and cultural parameters in order to be granted an unprejudiced and equitable depiction.

In order to achieve this, it is necessary to also delve into representations of female characters in both cinema and literature, which have been commonly subjected to the male gaze and made to appease the general male audience, and how the characters of *Little Women* fit into this. Through the analysis of Gerwig’s modern take on the novel and the characters, and the comparison between these interpretations and the original text, a better understanding of the female character and its representation will be ultimately achieved.

Keywords: *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, Greta Gerwig, feminist theory, women’s representation

0. Introduction

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has been highly praised since its publication in the late nineteenth century. It is considered a classic, which is in turn regarded as a work of art of established value and recognition, oftentimes staying relevant through the passage of time. Classic novels highly aid in establishing a genre, as well as substantially contributing to literature as a whole. Alcott's most renowned book has proved to be a prime example of this; the book has been analyzed and re-interpreted in numerous studies and literature classes, proving its significance through the decades that have succeeded it, being made into numerous film adaptations that are worthy of analysis. Despite its status, I had personally never picked up the book until I watched the latest film adaptation, Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019). In fact, I was not familiar at all with Alcott's works before, but this film really sparked my interest and made me curious about the novel and the themes that it dealt with and the historical context that it was set in.

The novel's great influence and distinction is partly due to the many re-interpretations of the story. The fact that the book has withstood different eras of time allows for many perspectives and dissections that vary depending on the audience that was analyzing it, as well as the social and cultural background that surrounded it. The most recent production - Gerwig's version - emerged as a modern take on the book that, despite commonly sharing many characteristics, has also taken a new contemporary approach to the story of the four March sisters. Through a feminist standpoint, the women in *Little Women* - both the film adaptation and the original literary text -, are depicted as self-reliant and autonomous women, while still being subjected to the sociocultural structures of the late nineteenth century. According to Wester: "The Victorian patriarchal system begets domesticity and consigns the March women—Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Marmee—to the domestic sphere, yet, paradoxically, the little women dominate their

world and thus the novel, reciprocally consigning the male characters to the margins unless and until they can adjust to the women's domain." (5). Despite the social constructs present during that era, they do not take away from the autonomous nature of the female characters in the book. The depiction of women depends on the historical and social context that it is constructed around, which is where the novel and the film differ from each other. Their image in nowadays society is far more liberal and progressive than it could have been during the nineteenth century - while still considering how modern the way the characters were originally written.

It is worth mentioning that Alcott's own experiences are depicted in the novel to a certain extent, especially through the eyes of Jo March, who is a writer herself trying to find her own voice. It could be argued that she also resembles Amy March, as she was responsible for providing for her family economically. Through the archetype of the 'struggling artist' - both in the economic sense as well as in terms of gender -, the writer shaped the novel around her own story, arguably becoming a pseudo-autobiography to a certain extent. This is established from the beginning of the story, when Jo brings her novel to a male publisher, who orders her to either marry or kill her female protagonist. It is suspected that this is the main reason for Alcott's choice of marrying Jo to Professor Bhaer. For this reason, Gerwig chooses to end the film on an ambiguous note, leaving the ending open for the viewer's interpretation, therefore putting forward the idea that perhaps Alcott would not have chosen to marry off the protagonist, but was strongly instructed to do so instead.

Because of the original way that Gerwig's film is directed - with scenes from the past interpolated between scenes from the present -, it is worth several viewings, as new things that could have previously gone unnoticed arise during every watch, proving how nuanced and well-produced the film is. This is what initially sparked a curiosity to

discover how this work compared to the original text, and what choices had been made that made this particular film version stand out from other previous versions. Stemming from this notion, the main purpose of this thesis is to analyze and further compare Gerwig's recent adaptation of *Little Women* and the original text by Alcott. To conduct this thesis, a study of feminist theorists and critics' own analysis of the book will be firstly made in order to grasp the feminist message and its subtleties that it brings forth. Secondly, the focus will shift from the primary source to Gerwig's film adaptation and how the characters are portrayed. Lastly, to achieve a thorough comparison between both works, it is necessary to point out the formal choices that the director made, such as the changes in time and some traces of metawriting.

Through a close examination of both works - as well as the way that women are generally represented in cinema -, a better grasp of the multifaceted female characters portrayed will be reached, especially through the analysis of the sociocultural and historical context that surround both stories. The significance of this lies in the impact that *Little Women* has on young girls that grow up to become women - much like the characters in this coming-of-age story -, as well as how pivotal it is to display an empowering image of women in both literature and film.

1. The Women in Little Women

1.1. Little Women As A Feminist Novel

The story of *Little Women* emerged during a period of revolution for women's rights. With the rise of the first feminist wave in 1850 and the *suffragette* movement, society was slowly but steadily undergoing several changes. Women were no longer completely relegated to domestic roles and marriage, and had a new range of opportunities that were

previously nonexistent. This prompted the figure of the New Woman, which threatened the prevailing concepts of women and femininity:

The New Woman was a real, as well as a cultural phenomenon. In society she was a feminist and a social reformer; a poet or a playwright who addressed female suffrage. In literature, however, as a character in a play or a novel, she frequently took a different form – that of someone whose thoughts and desires highlighted not only her own aspirations, but also served as a mirror in which to reflect the attitudes of society. (Buzwell)

Although this term was first coined by Irish author Sarah Grand, it later gained popularity when British-American writer Henry James made use of it to describe the introduction of a new feminist and educated woman. It could be argued that the character of Jo adequately fits this image, representing an opinionated and strong-willed female character. Apropos to this, Alcott's own sociopolitical views are clearly reflected in most of her writings. She was committed to the feminist and abolitionist movement, also depicting quite controversial topics such as adultery and incest. In addition to Alcott's book, there were other novels during the Victorian era that also portrayed this concept of the New Woman, such as 1895 Grant Allen's 'The Woman Who Did'¹, which introduced a main female character that constructed her own path by living outside of wedlock.

In terms of *Little Women*, however, there have been some opposing opinions in regard to how women are portrayed, and how the current feminist theory applies to them, if it could even be considered a feminist novel at all. On the one hand, it presents an empowering feminist message; on the other, it teaches young girls to conform to social normativity - to remain 'little'. This idea developed partly because of how each of the March sisters conclude their story at the end of the book in terms of their marital choices. Meg marries and has children, choosing to stay within the traditional gender roles,

¹ While Allen sympathized with the feminist movement, his novel 'The Woman Who Did' received numerous criticism from both conservative society and liberal women's rights supporters.

whereas Beth does not get to choose at all due to her untimely death. Amy eventually marries Laurie and “loses her pretentious affections”, and even Jo surprisingly marries Professor Bhaer, therefore “renounces her previously wild temperament”. To add to this, they are also subjected to gendered flaws - as it is described in the following chapter -, and overseen by Marmee, who constantly reminds them to “reject the “evils” of femininity (or, in Jo’s case, un-femininity) and retain only the most feminine virtues, such as softness, selflessness, and modesty.” (Tracey)

To a certain extent, it could be said that each sisters’ own personality is molded to fit into society’s standards built around women. In the first chapter of the book, the March family receive a letter from their father, who is serving in the army:

“I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women.” (5)

After Marmee reads this text aloud, each sister states how they will attempt to change their character in order to please their father - or, from a broader perspective, society as a whole. Amy promises to be less selfish, and Meg says she will put her vanity aside and try to work harder. While Beth simply cries and promptly starts to knit with all her might, Jo states: “I will try and be what he loves to call me, a ‘little woman’ and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else.” (6) The four girls are essentially instructed to put aside their unladylike mannerisms and actions, and instead behave in a more socially appropriate way. Marmee then proposes that they play ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’² - which they loved acting out when they were younger -, but that they should turn their burdens to each of their flaws, suggesting that they try to live their

² ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ (1678) was a Christian allegoric tale written by English writer and preacher John Bunyan, that tells the story of a Christian man and his journey from The City of Destruction (Earth) and the Celestial City (Heaven).

lives in a Christian way to ultimately reach the 'Celestial City', which is an allegory for Heaven.

In opposition to these arguments, Ann B. Murphy argues: "Like the patchwork quilts of her predecessors and contemporaries, Alcott's novel assembles "fragments into an intricate and ingenious design" containing both messages of "female patience, perseverance, good nature and industry" and "an alternative model of female power and creativity." Its power derives from its contradictions rather than prevailing despite them." (565) Although some critics may put forth the concepts of docility and agency as opposites, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The sisters in *Little Women* are perfect examples of this; while in some aspects they display their own choices and will, they inevitably part of a society that influences their behavior.

1.2. Female Representation In The Media and 'The Male Gaze'

The portrayal of women is illustrative of the sociocultural background of the historical context. This means that it is likely going to be dependent and influenced by the constructs that are created around women. Within our current context - adopting a Western-centric focus -, the rapid rise of the media has undeniably made a great impact on our culture. Therefore, the way that certain agents are represented is extremely important. According to van Zoonen: "Representation has always been an important battleground for contemporary feminism. The women's movement is not only engaged in a material struggle about equal rights and opportunities for women, but also in a symbolic conflict about definitions of femininity". (12) In terms of literature, Judith Fetterley argues: "To examine American fictions in light of how attitudes towards women shape their form and content is to make available to consciousness that which has been largely left unconscious and thus to change our understanding of these fictions, our relation to them, and their

effect on us.” (xi-xii) The realization of how women are represented has been especially examined throughout the last decades, prompting numerous analyses of different books and films and how they deal with this topic.

The way that cinema portrays women has opened up various debates within the feminist movement, with the emergence of concepts such as ‘the male gaze’, which views the female body as a spectacle by means of their sexualization. Consequently, women are assigned a passive role within the story, as opposed to the active roles of their male counterparts. (Mulvey, 808-809) In terms of *Little Women*, however, the plot centers around a matriarchal household where the female characters are the main focus. This is shown in Gerwig’s 2019 adaptation, where the opposite occurs: the male characters are the ones who stay fixed in a female driven scene. One prime example of this is Amy’s powerful speech about marriage, which she effectively relays while Laurie is a mere spectator. Another instance of this is Mr. March’s absence through most of the film. While in the book, his influence is clearly visible and is mentioned more often, in the film he is not as prominent, almost shifting the focus from the father to their mother - from a patriarchal household to a matriarchal one.

As far as women’s representation in Gerwig’s version is concerned, the director not only subverts gender stereotypes by giving her characters more freedom to make their own path, but she also highlights the gender fluid aspects that Jo and Laurie possess, which are mentioned throughout the book. While Jo presents herself in a ‘tomboyish’ way, Laurie also has many feminine qualities - such as his piano skills and fashion sense. These details are what give the story a much more contemporary feel; while the accurate and fair representation of the female character is necessary, the display of gender as a construct provides the characters with more depth, and in turn makes the film much more nuanced. Due to this, every character - both female and male included - are allowed to

express themselves without being strictly contained within the gender norms set by society.

2. The Characters Through Gerwig's Creative Lens

2.1. Introduction

It could be argued that one of the most crucial features of a novel is its characters. They are the ones responsible for moving the story along, and they can help in making the plot less or more intriguing. An effective book character usually consists of someone who is not one-dimensional and shows some form of character development throughout the novel. This ultimately makes them seem more relatable and believable, as it is a fact that humans are flawed by nature. There is, however, a distinction to be made between flat and round characters. According to Forster, flat characters are consistent in their qualities, and they do not undergo any change throughout the story. This primarily means that they fail to gain any growth, as they remain the same way from beginning to end. Despite this, he still considers these types of characters essential to the novel. As he states: "a novel that is at all complex often requires flat people as well as round, and the outcome of their collisions parallels life more accurately." (51)

Although both the female and the male characters in *Little Women* are depicted as multi-layered characters, some appear rounder than others. Overall, each of them seems to have their own unique personality and individual perspectives, but they also vary significantly from each other. This consequently means that, while some of the characters evolve throughout the novel as they grow older, others do not achieve this. This particularity does not hinder the way that they intertwine with each other and the relationships that they establish, which is what makes the story more intricate. At the core

of the novel is the March sisters' family bond, which comes across as very authentic throughout the whole story. Gerwig's way of displaying these characters is extremely convincing, as they come across as a genuine family that, despite their recurring fights, still show deep love and care for each other. They each possess very dissimilar personalities and dispositions that make the group dynamic stand out, as well as their own specific fault, as I will further develop in the following paragraphs.

2.2 The March Sisters

2.2.1 Margaret "Meg" March

As the oldest March sister, Meg is the first of the daughters to be responsible for their economic well-being, as their father is off to fight in the war. In the book, Meg is represented as vain and materialistic, which proves to be a struggle for her since her family cannot afford any luxuries. Because of this, she constantly pretends to be wealthier in order to fit in with her friends. However, she still has some admirable qualities; she cares deeply for her family, as well as being a key participant in their made-up theater plays. Eventually, she ends up marrying John Brooke - Laurie's instructor -, who is not wealthy. This proves how her character undergoes a significant development; she shifts her focus from achieving material gain to following her feelings, showing her maturity and character growth. Her central flaw is her greed, which she slowly overcomes through the novel. This desire is directly connected to the concept of American capitalism, which Meg learns through her attendance at a high society ball where she indulges her desires of being wealthy. By the end of the event, especially because of her encounter with Laurie - who tells her he fails to recognize her -, she is embarrassed by her actions and implores him to not tell Jo or her family, but eventually decides to tell them herself, accepting the

selfless principles established by Marmee. This scene in the novel is in direct opposition with the one in the film adaptation, where she seems to be less remorseful. Although she may realize that she was acting superfluous, she still wishes to continue with her endeavors, even saying to Laurie: “Let me have my fun tonight, I’ll be desperately good for the rest of my life.” (min. 60.56)

Through a feminist analysis, it could be argued that Meg represents the model woman that was prevalent during the Victorian era. She embodies the figure of the ‘angel in the house’, a woman who complies to her socially established duties as the caretaker. She takes care of her sisters and helps out her mother, and she marries John and has children. In the film, however, she stands her ground when Jo asks her to run away. She states: “Just because my dreams are different than yours doesn’t mean they’re unimportant” (min 92.04). This way, she is shown as a woman with agency who makes her own choices and ultimately chooses love over money, but is still compliant to the expectations that were placed on women.

2.2.2 Josephine “Jo” March

Jo could be considered the main character of the book, the flawed heroine of the story. She is partly responsible for her family’s economic sustenance, which is the main reason why she works hard to earn money from her writings. While in the novel she visits New York, she moves into the city in the film adaptation. This is immediately shown in the film’s opening scene, where Jo sells one of her stories to an editor despite her dissatisfaction with their agreement, yet she still concurs due to monetary reasons. This way, her initial passion for writing eventually turns into her way of sustaining her family. Jo arguably takes on the role of the man of the March household, as they were traditionally the ones responsible for supporting the family. Because their father is serving in the army,

however, they have no monetary support. She even goes as far as saying that she would join the army herself if she was allowed to, which clearly represents her unconventional and liberal views right from the start of the novel.

Throughout the book, Jo is shown as a nonconformist and revolutionary character, as she does not abide by social norms. She is portrayed as the opposite of what a “proper” woman was considered to be within the context of the late nineteenth century. This can be observed in many instances throughout the story; one of them is the scene where she cuts her hair in order to earn money for train fare for Marmee so she can visit her injured husband. Despite appearing nonchalant about her new appearance at first, she eventually laments about it to her sisters, showing that she really does care about seemingly superficial and vain matters. Jo is arguably the most reluctant about growing up and separating from her sisters, which is inevitable as they flourish into themselves and their own narratives.

It is also worth mentioning that there have been many parallels drawn between the character of Jo and Alcott. Due to their numerous similarities, it is hard to tell where the author ends, and the character begins. The most obvious resemblance is that they both possess an affinity for writing, which they eventually pursue. Because they both come from a poor family, they had to work from an early age in order to support their families, which also included four sisters. From this perspective, *Little Women* has always been considered a semi-autobiographical novel, being loosely based on Alcott’s own personal story. Nevertheless, the novel is still a work of fiction, which is why the plot is only accurate to a certain extent. One prime example of this is the ending, when Jo pursues a romantic relationship with professor Bhaer. This is in opposition to Alcott’s own marital status, given that she never married or had any children, which greatly defied the gender

norms of the time. This detail is portrayed in Gerwig's version rather ambiguously by means of the ending, which I will further explain in the following chapter.

Overall, Jo is portrayed as a self-sufficient woman who is confident of herself and her choices in the film adaptation. According to West: "Jo is never Jo. She is the author, she is the reader, she is feminist icon or disappointment; she is the times as they change, she is society itself" (419). Jo ultimately represents more than a mere fictional character or even the author herself; she stands for the values of a transformative society that is constantly evolving. This is represented in the altered script of the film, such as in the scene where she is talking with Marmee and questioning her choice of turning Laurie's marriage proposal down. In one of the most poignant scenes of the film, she says: "Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for. I'm so sick of it. But I'm so lonely." (min. 98.19) This way, Gerwig introduces a blatantly feminist perspective into the nineteenth century story, adopting a new modern take on the traditional Victorian representation of women that is more suited to our current society.

2.2.3 Elizabeth "Beth" March

Even though Beth has a special bond with Jo, she is arguably the most unlike her sisters. She is oftentimes overcome by her shyness, which could be considered her fatal flaw. While she could also represent the figure of 'the angel in the house' because of her passiveness and tame demeanor, she is not yet of age to entirely fulfill that role and dies before she can become a wife. Eventually, her selfishness and caring nature is what makes her become ill, as she helps a poor immigrant German family by herself seeing how her sisters refuse. She gradually starts coming out of her shell when she is offered the

opportunity to play the piano at Laurence's neighboring house, mostly because of her passion for music. As Mr. March says: "There's so little of her, I'm afraid to say much, for fear she will slip away altogether, though she is not so shy as she used to be" (144).

Although Beth seems more like a flat character that does not contribute too much to the scenes of the film, her death is very impactful to her sisters, as well as the story as a whole. Despite playing a rather passive role, it could be argued that she plays a crucial part in the story. Her death is a pivotal part of the novel; all the characters seem to be influenced by her, which they come to realize once she passes away. In a way, her death symbolizes the loss of childhood, and the imminent transition to adulthood from the characters. She does not get the chance to grow older and mature, a fact that is foreshadowed when she says she never thought she would become an adult: "I only mean to say that I have a feeling that it never was intended I should live long, [...] I'm not like the rest of you. I never made any plans about what I'd do when I grew up." (242) As the reader, imagining a future for Beth proves to be quite a difficult task. Additionally, her lack of ambition and dimension provide the character no room to grow. She is constantly regarded as a dutiful and humble girl, whose only wish is to stay home and care for her family. All the characteristics that are attributed to her are not the ideals that women should strive for during the late nineteenth century. Alcott's decision to eventually kill off Beth could be rooted in her feminist beliefs; instead, she chooses to put Jo in the spotlight. While Beth represents all the good virtues that women were expected to possess, Jo is a woman who makes her own path according to her own beliefs, which is a focal point of the novel.

2.2.4 Amy March

Since Amy is the youngest of the four sisters, she is introduced as a childish and indulged girl. Her fatal flaw is selfishness, which she eventually becomes aware of at some point in the novel, especially after her quarrels with Jo. She is vain about her appearance, especially with her non aristocratic nose, and is keen on becoming part of high society. To a certain extent, she embodies and embraces every trait that was expected of women in the nineteenth century. This desire becomes a reality once she moves in with Aunt March when Beth becomes ill, since she is at risk of also catching the disease. She finds herself in an entirely new environment where she has to please other people, far from the coddling that her family offered. In the book, she moves abroad with Aunt Carrol - who is barely mentioned -, whereas in the film she is chosen by Aunt March to travel to France with her to pursue her art for passion, and more importantly a suitable and wealthy husband.

Amy's growth is especially apparent in the second part of the story, when she is shown as a mature and sophisticated woman who is set to be engaged to a man named Fred Vaughn. She is reminded by her aunt that she must 'marry well' to financially support her struggling family, given that her sisters are seemingly unable to do so. This is introduced in Gerwig's adaptation, as she states in her conversation with Laurie about marriage:

“[...] And as a woman, there is no way for me to make my own money. Not enough to earn a living or to support my family. And if I had my own money - which I don't -, that money would belong to my husband the moment we got married. And if we had children, they would be his, not mine; they would be his property. So don't sit there and tell me that marriage is not an economical proposition, because it is. It may not be for you, but it most certainly is for me.” (min. 63.10)

This added scene gives Amy's character a sense of awareness that is not as prominent in the book. She is conscious of the responsibility that she carries, not only for her but for her family. It effectively displays the struggles and expectations

that women experienced during the Victorian era through her highly relevant speech.

3. Gerwig's Narrative and Stylistic Choices

3.1. Gerwig's nonlinear structure

Little Women has been brought to the big screen on six occasions, as well as being adapted for television and theater plays several times. It even reached the anime market, as it was made into an animated Japanese film in the eighties. Greta Gerwig's 2019 version proved to be well-received by the audiences, gathering many awards and nominations. Through all the numerous versions that the novel has prompted, the latest film proved to be unique in its storytelling, making the plot more compelling and emotionally driven.

While the film preserves many original lines, it also introduces new dialogue that contributes to the book's modern perspective. The most noticeable difference, however, is the use of a nonlinear timeline, meaning that the story does not occur chronologically. In regard to this stylistic choice, Gerwig said in an interview: "The way it's structured is there's just two different origin points of the story but everything moves forward, so one starts in 1868 and everything moves forward and one starts in 1861 and everything moves forward. So, you're never jumping back within a timeline, you're only moving forward." (min. 1.45) This emits the feeling of everything happening at the same time, which ultimately culminates in Beth's death. The way that she effectively accomplishes this is by adding a warmer tone to the past scenes and a cooler tone to the scenes from the present time. Because of this, the past gives off a homely and pleasant feel, as opposed to the bleakness of the present - and the distinction between both is much clearer. The parallels

between the past and the present is what make the transition between both timelines more effective, such as the scene where Beth recovers - which takes place in the warm-toned past -, in opposition to the scene when she has passed away in the desolate present (min. 85.54).

3.2. Alcott's renewed ending through Gerwig's writing

Another aspect of the 2019 film that makes it stand out among other adaptations is the ending. As I have previously mentioned in the introduction, it is unclear whether Jo chooses to marry Professor Bhaer as she does in the book. The closure of *Little Women* has been numerously questioned by the readers since its publication, seeing how Jo had always expressed her desire to never marry on multiple occasions. As she says during Laurie's marriage proposal: "Nothing more, except that I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man." (236), or when she talks to Meg right before her wedding: "I'd rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe" (min. 89). Gerwig's therefore introduces a quite vague ending, where the audience cannot be completely certain of what truly happens; this choice satisfies all of the opposing opinions on what the ending of the story should have been. According to Professor Patricia White:

Thus Gerwig "out of perversity" gets away with not marrying off Jo. [...] The ambiguity has led to conservative readings on either side: one reviewer objected to Gerwig's "postmodern feminism," which has rejected the novel's Jo's mature decision to forgo independence for a "genuinely egalitarian marriage"; another source "explains" the ending, but sees it as both literally and literarily uniting the heterosexual couple.

This ambiguity is achieved through the use of metawriting; essentially, Gerwig is writing about Alcott who is in turn writing about Jo. In the film and in the novel, Jo is writing her story, the same way that Alcott wrote hers through Jo. This literary device allows the

director to use both characters and their own narratives in order to build a different and innovative ending, ultimately including Alcott's own will in the plot of the film. In this case, however, it is related to the writing of a script that is for a visual piece, therefore becoming a second-degree type of metafiction. It is unclear whether the author was made to end the book by marrying her heroine or if it was her intention all along. As she stated in one of her letters to her friend Elizabeth Powell:

A sequel will be out early in April, & like all sequels 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. "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.

Whether Alcott would have ultimately chosen to marry off Jo or leave her a "free spinster" is difficult to prove, but it certainly brings up the question about how women were represented in literature during the nineteenth century era, and how they were subjected to society's expectations.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to conduct a contrastive analysis between the novel *Little Women* and its 2019 film adaptation by Greta Gerwig. The main aspect that is needed to take into consideration when comparing the two is their vastly different historical contexts. Society during the 19th century was quite dissimilar to our current sociocultural reality, and the feminist movement during this era was not as nuanced and extensive as it is in the 21st century. This consequently means that, while the perspective that the book offered at the time may not completely align with our Fourth-wave feminism, it was incredibly innovative at the time.

The diverse adaptations that were molded around the social context that they were made in prove how the story and its interpretation has shifted from time to time. Gerwig's *Little Women* - which came out twenty-five years after the last film adaptation -, has been praised as one of the best versions. Through the changes in storytelling that I have previously mentioned - such as the use of a non-chronological order or the creative alteration of the ending -, the film has arguably added new intricacies that were not used before, therefore attracting more attention to itself. Furthermore, because of the evolution in society, the female characters in the film are portrayed a bit differently than in the book. They are still subjected to the expectations and demands of 19th century North American society, they are more aware and vocal about them. This grants the story a new modern perspective that can only be adopted in our current times, which would have not been possible during Alcott's era. This is clearly proven by the unsatisfying ending of the novel where Jo unexpectedly marries Professor Bhaer, which has been highly questioned since its publication, and has even been described as a betrayal from her part. Consequently, the characters have more room to grow in the film and are still allowed to stay true to themselves and choose their own path - while still preserving the original plot and dialogue. This is also achieved by Gerwig's use of other lines written by Alcott, not only this novel, but also her personal letters and journal - many of which were included in the film.

Gerwig stated how, after fifteen years since last reading *Little Women*, she picked up the book again and was surprised at how modern it still was to this day. The way that women were the center of the story and how it subtly introduced the construct of gender, and its implications are topics that are still part of the conversation today. This proves how relevant and worthy of analysis this classic has become and will continue to do so as long as it resonates with young girls in their journey to womanhood.

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Filmatography

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