

Faculty of Humanities  
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**EVALUATION FORM BA/MA THESIS**

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**FORMAL PRECONDITIONS**

Preconditions	Assessment	Comments
Correct use of language (sentence structure, spelling, punctuation)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> met <input type="checkbox"/> not met	
Table of contents and summary	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> met <input type="checkbox"/> not met	
Notation and list of sources in accordance with formal rules in the field	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> met <input type="checkbox"/> not met	
Design and layout in accordance with degree programme guidelines	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> met <input type="checkbox"/> not met	

*Note: If one of these formal preconditions has not been met, the supervisor may decide not to evaluate the content of the thesis. The student will be given one opportunity to make corrections. The standards for meeting/not meeting the preconditions are determined by the degree programme (e.g. number of language mistakes tolerated).*

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Categories 1 to 6 *must* all be assessed pass when handing out a passing or higher grade!

1. RESEARCH QUESTION	<input type="checkbox"/> fail	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pass
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & ACADEMIC RELEVANCE	<input type="checkbox"/> fail	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pass
3. METHOD	<input type="checkbox"/> fail	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pass
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5. CONCLUSION	<input type="checkbox"/> fail	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> pass
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Please substantiate your proposed grade by commenting on relevant strong and weak points of the thesis, in particular those that address the first six assessment categories listed above.

## SUBSTANTIATION

*(Research question)*

*(Theoretical framework & academic relevance)*

*(Method)*

*(Analysis)*

*(Conclusion)*

*(Use & citation of sources)*

*(Structure of the argument)*

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*(Additional remarks)*

*Note: In commenting on the quality with which the student has demonstrated her/his academic abilities, please consider answering one or more of the following questions:*

- 1. Research question: Was the research question formulated clearly? Were the sub-topics logically derived from the main topic? Was the research topic sufficiently focused, and was the reasoning behind this focus explained in the paper?*
- 2. Theoretical framework & academic relevance: Are the chosen theories and/or analytical concepts pertinent to the research question? Are the main concepts/terms clearly defined? Is the academic relevance of the research clearly stated? Are the sources relevant, representative and of sufficient academic quality? Are the sources discussed adequately and critically?*
- 3. Method: Is the choice for the research method sufficiently justified? Are the research methods used adequate to address the research question? Are they used in the correct manner? Is the method used to collect data described and justified in detail?*
- 4. Analysis: Has the student sufficiently and adequately utilised her/his academic knowledge of the subject? Is there a good balance between description and analysis? Is there enough cross-referencing between the student's own empirical research results and the literature/theory?*
- 5. Conclusion: Does the conclusion answer the main question? Is the conclusion more than just a summary? Does the student reflect critically on her/his own approach? Does the paper make suggestions for further research?*
- 6. Use & citation of sources: Is the difference between the student's own analysis and the analysis of others clearly apparent? Is the citation of sources adequate and accurate? Are the references used correctly? Does the student approach the literature and other sources critically?*
- 7. Structure of the argument: Is the information presented in a logical order (for example: introduction/theoretical context, question, method, results, discussion)? Is there a clear division into chapters and paragraphs? Is the argumentation clear and coherent? Are the paragraphs and sections coherent and sufficiently limited in scope?*
- 8. Composition & style: Is the paper readable and easy to understand? Is terminology used adequately and accurately?*
- 9. Initiative: Has the student carefully utilised the feedback provided? Did the student respect agreements and deadlines? Did the student need much help during the process? If so, on which points (e.g. formulating a research question, familiarisation with the literature, structure of the argument, composition)?*

A Thesis on:

Meg and Beth's *Little Women*: The Adaptation of the Domestic  
Woman in Modern Times

By: Emma Beelen

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BA Thesis English Language & Culture

Supervised by Roselinde Supheert and Paul Franssen

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### Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the prominence and characteristics of two of Louisa May Alcott's more traditional feminine heroines in *Little Women*, Meg March and Beth March, and to analyse whether or not more traditional female characters have become less prominent over time. To understand how traditional feminine heroines could have become less popular over time, and therefore lose prominence, a brief and general history about the evolution of feminism will be provided in the thesis. Next, certain chapters in the novel will have been close-read, and compared to the respective scenes in the adaptation, and will illustrate if and how the prominence and characterisation of both characters has changed over time. These chapters discuss both characterisation and symbolism of the characters. Lastly, the analyses of all chapters and scenes will be thoroughly summarized to answer the questions at the beginning of the thesis.

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## Introduction

*Little Women*, published in 1868 by Louisa May Alcott, describes the lives of four sisters and their transitions from childhood to womanhood. Jo's story through the novel describes her hardships as a female writer in a male dominated work environment. Furthermore, Jo's character and the statements she makes regarding marriage clearly demonstrate that she values her career, and an independent financial income, above romance. On the other hand, Amy's character reflects the challenges that arise while trying to rise in status within her society and demonstrates that, while Amy wants to improve upon her talents, she values romance above a career. Meg's character illustrates the problems that arise if a woman marries into poverty, and how this affects her role as a wife and mother. Beth's character, in opposition to her sisters, reflects the need to stay in one's childhood home, instead of trying to fit into society when growing up.

In short, the novel represents various perspectives on a woman's place in society, and demonstrates that not every female is bound to move in the same direction. Therefore, the stories surrounding the sisters provide different perspectives on a woman's journey through life and the obstacles she had to face in the 1860s, while including morals and messages for girls reading *Little Women* in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, these stories are regarded by multiple critics as one of the reasons for *Little Women's* popularity (Rioux; Reisen). Other scholars, although they agree, also base the success of *Little Women's* popularity on Jo (Hollander, 30; Quimby, 1). More recent studies also regard *Little Women's* success as a result of Amy's character, her ambitious pursuit to marry into high society, and her opposing character to Jo (Blackford).

In contrast, recent analyses of Meg and Beth's influence on *Little Women's* overall message and success are lacking. One possible reason for the omission of Meg and Beth's influence could be connected to their characteristics. While Jo and Amy are more rebellious or ambitious in nature, and strive for self-government, Meg and Beth seem more reserved and not very dedicated to becoming independent women. Rather, they strive for a peaceful life with their families. In light of recent feminist values, it becomes clear that the rebellious type, most clearly seen in Jo and Amy, is more engaging to women than the reserved type, seen in Meg and Beth. One way to examine whether or not reserved types like Meg and Beth have become outdated in modern society is to look at recent interpretations of the novel. The most recent adaptation of the novel is Gerwig's 2019 film, also titled *Little Women*, to which the most popular predecessor is Armstrong's 1994 adaptation, released 15 years prior to the 2019 film, in an era with different cultural and social values. A more recent predecessor is Clare Niederpruem's 2018 feature film, however, Gerwig's adaptation proves to be more popular, grossing \$218,9 million worldwide, while the 2018 film only grossed 12 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the morals and messages included in Gerwig's adaptation would be seen by a larger audience than Niederpruem's adaptation. Additionally, the 2018 film depicts a modern retelling of the novel, changing characteristics of all four women. The 2019 film depicts the lives of the four March sisters in a similar fashion to the novel and in the same time period. However, since the film was released in 2019, it was written for a modern audience, with different and new perspectives on feministic morals and values. Will Meg and Beth's characterisation therefore be as prominent and as similar in Gerwig's adaptation as it was in the original novel, and what part of their characteristics and

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from both the 2019 film and the 2018 feature film, Heidi Thomas directed a TV-series, also named *Little Women*, for the BBC. This TV-series will not be discussed in this thesis, because, similarly to the feature film, it has not been as popular as Gerwig's adaptation.

prominence might have been omitted to better suit a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience and a change in medium?

To investigate this question, this thesis will be divided into three chapters, one chapter regarding Beth, and two regarding Meg. Meg's first chapter consists of a close reading of 'Vanity Fair', ranging from page 79 to page 93, and an analysis of the same scene in Gerwig's adaptation, starting at 54:22 and ending at 1:02:22. The second chapter also consists of a close reading of 'Domestic Experiences', ranging from page 257 to page 270, and an analysis of the respective scene in the film, starting at 1:02:23 and ending at 1:03:11. For both of these chapters, some excerpts from other chapters and scenes will be discussed in short as well. Secondly, the chapters will compare the close-reading to the analysis of the novel and the film, and will illustrate if and how the prominence and characterisation of Meg has changed. Since Beth's storyline is shorter in both the novel and the film because of her untimely death, and therefore consists of less source material, her analysis will be discussed in one chapter. Unlike Meg's chapters, Beth's chapter will generally discuss several chapters and scenes, such as 'Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful', ranging from page 55 to page 61 and from 56:29 to 1:00:19<sup>2</sup>, and 'The Valley of the Shadow', ranging from page 389 to page 394 and from 1:26:37 to 1:31:18. Additionally, Beth's chapter will focus on the symbolism surrounding her character, and analyse how and if the adaptation was able to translate this symbolism to a different medium. Furthermore, it will include a general analysis of Beth's character in both the novel and the film, and discuss Beth's prominence in both mediums. All of the scenes and chapters included are chosen because they are represented in both the novel

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<sup>2</sup> Beth's scenes and Meg's scenes intertwine in the film, as seen by the timestamps of both scenes (Meg's scene starting at 54:22 and ending at 1:02:22, and Beth's scene starting at 56:29 and ending at 1:00:19). Gerwig's adaptation is not set in a chronological order, and moves back and forth between the past and the present. Additionally, multiple scenes often intercut each other, as seen by the example above. Therefore, other scenes might be included in between the timestamps given in the introduction. In this case, the timestamps given provide the beginning and ending of the overall scene, while also possibly including some other scenes.

and the film Furthermore, these scenes also depict both Meg and Beth's passions, thoughts, and obstacles in life.

## A Brief and General Theoretical Background

In order to understand how certain female characteristics, like Jo's rebellious nature or Beth's shy character can either grow or fall in popularity depending on their audience, it is essential to compare which female characteristics were deemed important and popular to US women in the 1860s, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One approach to this is to generally compare the values of American women in the nineteenth century to values regarding American women in the present.<sup>3</sup>

According to Marriley, the first wave of feminism in America started after the Civil War, around 1865, which would place the composition and publication of *Little Women* at the beginning of this wave. This wave of feminism fought for education and legal equality for men and women alike. It is important to note that, although the first wave of feminism might have officially started after the Civil War, certain values for equal rights that came with first wave feminism were already emerging before the American Civil War. According to Rendall, the first wave of feminism emerged in America during the middle of the nineteenth century (276). The fight for women's independence as wives and as individual citizens had emerged (Rendall 276). In this wave, these women fought for "legal reform", for women's education, for employment, and for the part women could play in their public life. In short, they fought for the right to citizenship (Rendall 276). Women wanted to gain more independence, or more autonomy. Therefore, women like Jo and Amy, who seem more assertive than Meg and

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<sup>3</sup> To keep the comparison between the characters in the novel, the audience in the nineteenth century, and the audience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as close to each other as possible, the theoretical background will focus on the emancipation of (white) women in the US. Therefore, while it might not always be written down in the theoretical background that the emancipation of women is American based, most of the sources are written about the American emancipation. Moreover, whenever feministic values and ideals are connected to a specific era in the text, it is linked to the progression of that era in America. Therefore, while not always mentioned, it is important to keep in mind that the emancipation, and progression of feminism in the Theoretical Background takes place in America, since the progression and emancipation of women varies around the world, in the past, as well as in the present.

Beth, would also gain popularity amongst *Little Women*'s readers. Rendall further explains that "[t]he demand for the vote was not a single demand, growing out of the envy of propertied women for their husbands' rights, but one which grew from decades of action" (276). Additionally, aside from the hope for equality for men and women, women's rights movements also aimed for equality in marriage, and options for divorce for women as well for men (Marilley 66). However, Scott and Tilly express that, although women's rights movements started growing in the nineteenth century, most women only gained rights in America in the twentieth century (37).

In contrast, Aune and Holyoak explain that "[i]n the second decade of the twenty-first century, feminism is seen as having achieved its goals of gender equality and as something that can now be repudiated" (184). Whereas a career driven woman, like Jo, could be quite rare in the nineteenth century, the concept has become more common in today's society. Certain issues, like trying to find a balance between work and life, already existed in the nineteenth century. However, the "happy work-family balance", where both men and women work and take care of their children is seen as a feminist ideal, and an image of emancipation (Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg 14). Additionally, nowadays, women in the US are able to live on their own, can vote for themselves, and continue to fight for equality by 'smashing the glass ceilings' they have been blocked by before (Aune & Holyoak 184). In short, an independent, career-driven woman is more common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than it was in the nineteenth century. Therefore, a nineteenth century audience might have seen themselves reflected in both characters like Jo and Amy, and Meg and Beth. However, nowadays, characters like Meg and Beth might be unfamiliar to 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences, which could mean that recent adaptations of *Little Women* would favour characters like Jo and Amy.

This statement is further reinforced by Hutcheon's adaptation Theory. "Fidelity" and faithfulness to the original work is valued by audiences for an adaptation (Hutcheon xv).

However, according to studies, young women prefer to see adapted stories that “overlap with their own lives and their personal issues” (Hutcheon 115). Therefore, it would be important for an adaptation to provide both repetition of the original work, and familiarity with their audience (Hutcheon 114). According to Hutcheon, an adaptation will be framed in time, place, and culture, similar to the original work it adapts (142). Contemporary popular ideals and morals, such as those present in modern times, might therefore be included in the adaptation, depending on the type of adaptation . One example of a feminist work that has been revised through multiple adaptations because of the development of the feminist movement from its original publication to its last adaptation is *The Taming of the Shrew* (147). Similarly, adaptations of *Little Women* can provide different perspectives of the four March sisters according to the era they were published in. Furthermore, Gerwig’s film-adaptation provides a different medium for the story to be told in. The novel has more space to include character development, storytelling, and the inner thoughts of characters. The film has to interpret the same story in about two hours of runtime. On the other hand, the film also provides background music and a visual representation of the characters and the era they live in. In short, both mediums come with their own advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, characters like Meg and Beth, who might be more suited for an audience in the 1860s might not be as present in modern adaptations.

### **Meg's Trip to 'Vanity Fair': A Change from Childhood to Womanhood**

At the beginning of the novel, Meg is still a young woman. She is bright, she is familiar with the “proper ways” to adhere to societal rules, and lastly, she is well able to govern her sisters (Alcott 26). Yet, despite her young age, Meg often acts as a second mother to her younger sisters, and seems to already have a knack for motherhood. In short, Meg seems to have all that is required to rise in wealth and status. Nevertheless, her family has to come by with less money than they had in the past. As Meg still remembers a time in which her family was wealthy, she longs for wealth and status in her future. These virtues and troubles formulate Meg's dreams. In the first part of the novel, Meg dreams of becoming a wealthy, upper-class woman. In the second part of the novel, after Meg is married, her dreams consist of becoming a proper wife to John and a good mother to her children. Meg's dreams and life differ greatly from the lives and dreams of Jo and Amy, who want to pursue their talents, and become independent. Still, the dreams and the efforts Meg has to go through to make these dreams reality included important messages and morals to girls and women reading the story in the 1860s.

Starting from the first page of the novel, it becomes clear that Meg detests being poor, and works hard to become wealthy and a woman of status. The first thing she says in the novel is that it is “so dreadful to be poor!” (Alcott 3). With these words, Meg's biggest hurdles in the novel are summarised. Meg dreams of a house “full of all sorts of luxurious things”, with “plenty of servants”, and most importantly, “heaps of money” (Alcott 134). As mentioned before, Meg is well prepared and works hard to achieve this dream. She is familiar with societal rules and aristocratic taste, as seen when she lectures Jo to “hold [her] shoulders straight, and take short steps, and don't shake hands if [she is] introduced to anyone: it isn't the thing” when they go to a part on New Years Eve (Alcott 26). Furthermore, when Jo asks

for Meg's help by winking at her when Jo does something wrong, Meg reminds her that "winking isn't ladylike" (Alcott 26). Additionally, the reader comes to know what Meg is able to sacrifice for wealth and status. To look proper at the party, Meg dances the entire night in shoes that are too small for her and sprains her ankle as a result. Altogether, Meg knows how to behave properly and makes sacrifices to make her dream of becoming a wealthy housewife come true. This is, until she arrives at the Moffat's for a fortnight of parties and a chance to improve her social relations. Beforehand, Meg uses her sense of style to combine certain clothes to look as respectable as she can be. Nevertheless, Meg's preparations and the lessons her family have taught her prove to be insufficient (Foote 71). She is "daunted [...] by the splendour of the house and the elegance of its occupants" (Alcott 81). Still, Meg manages to behave well and enjoys her stay at the house.

Despite Meg's present enjoyment of her stay, several circumstances will change Meg's view on high society, and her place as an adolescent woman in society. One evening, as Meg is sitting alone, she overhears a conversation between Mrs Moffat and another member at the party. In this conversation two topics arise. Firstly, the two individuals discuss whether or not Meg will marry Laurie due to their compatibility. Secondly, Meg's lack of fine clothes due to her poverty are brought up. This conversation, albeit "well meant", had "opened up a new world to Meg" (Alcott 84). Her life as she knew it beforehand, along with her friendship with Laurie, is corrupted. Meg and Laurie's households are seen as socially unequal, and therefore, their friendship is believed to be the foundation for a possible marriage, not one that originated from similar interests and a genuine liking from one household to another (Foote 72). Despite this conversation, or because of it, Meg decides to accept her friends' help to transform her into 'Daisy'. After this transformation, Meg blends in perfectly with the crowd and plays the part of 'Daisy' flawlessly. However, Laurie soon arrives at the party, and looks at Meg "with undisguised surprise, and disapproval also",

reminding Meg of her original self (Alcott 87). Furthermore, as Meg is sullen from her conversation with Laurie, she overhears Major Lincoln, a guest at the party, say to his mother that “[t]hey are making a fool of that little girl; I wanted you to see her, but they have spoilt her entirely; she’s nothing but a doll tonight” (Alcott 88). Despite all of this, Meg is still able to enjoy the party with Laurie, yet these conversations have changed Meg’s perspective on her dreams. She now understands that wealth and status come with consequences, and a new world of gossip and romance has opened up to her. She still wants to become wealthy, yet as she discusses the event with her mother afterwards and confesses to her what she became during her stay, her mother teaches her a very valuable lesson. She tells Meg to “learn and value the praise [...] worth having [...] by being modest as well as pretty”, and tells her daughters that she would rather see them as “poor men’s wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace” (Alcott 93). And it is this last quote in particular that Meg will keep close-by for the rest of her life.

Broadly speaking, Meg’s trip to ‘Vanity Fair’ in the novel consists of four crucial plot points. The two conversations that Meg overhears, Meg’s conversation with Laurie, and the conversation with her mother afterwards. In the film, three of these plot points are no longer present. The only plot point that remains is Meg’s conversation with Laurie. This begs the question as to why certain events were deleted in the film. One reason could relate back to Hutcheon’s adaptation theory, which explains that adapters who adapt the original story into a different medium, like Gerwig, can make “simplifying selections” to incorporate as much of the original work as possible, while also working with the advantages and disadvantages of a new medium (3). In Gerwig’s adaptation, this concept can be related to the omission of certain plot points during Meg’s stay at the Moffat house, and explain how and if these plot points are rewritten to fit the medium. The two conversations Meg overhears show her how the upper-class at the Moffat House perceive her. Meg either looks poor or dolled up

according to different people present at the party. In the film, the only plot point present is Meg's conversation with Laurie. It is no longer the approval of the upper-class that is most prominent and most valued. Instead, the approval of Meg's friends and family, those close to her, is valued most, which is emphasized when Laurie asks Meg; "What would Jo say" (*Little Women* 58:28-29). Meg's embarrassment and disappointment no longer stems from a lack of recognition, or respect, from the society she is trying to impress. In this instance, Meg is embarrassed because the persona she has taken to impress others is unlike her, and unrecognisable to Laurie and her family. The alteration of this plot point can once again be explained by looking at Hutcheon's adaptation theory. The cultural and social meanings of this scene are conveyed and adapted to a new, modern audience (Hutcheon 149). This is not to say that the cultural and social meanings in an adaptation with a modern audience must be changed to suit this modern audience, especially if the adaptation conveys morals and values of a different time period, like Gerwig's *Little Women*. Still, the alteration and omission of certain plot points in 'Vanity Fair' can be explained by the new, modern audience. While women can still feel pressured to gain the approval of society, especially with the recent rise of social media, it is no longer the norm to come out to society in events such as the party in 'Vanity Fair'. Additionally, women in the US are generally no longer required to marry to gain financial rights. Instead, the approval of close groups, such as friends and family have become more valued in modern times. "Girls have to go into the world and make up their own minds about things", yet the way in which girls are treated presently when they become adults is vastly different from their treatment in the nineteenth century (*Little Women* 54:56-59). Therefore, the shift from society's approval to the approval of friends and family, seen in the form of Laurie's approval, and the omission of other plot points such as the overheard conversations overlap with the shift from a nineteenth century audience to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. Additionally, Meg's conversation with Marmee after her stay at the Moffat's is

deleted, and therefore, Meg no longer learns about the value of love in marriage from Marmee. Still, Meg marries John, a poor man, for love, and not for wealth. Therefore, while these values are no longer present in the conversation, they are still present in the adaptation because of Meg's storyline. In short, several important plot points, such as the overheard conversations and Meg's conversation with Marmee after her stay at the Moffat house are excluded. However, by looking at Hutcheon's Adaptation Theory, and the modern audience of the film, it becomes clear that, while certain tropes and plot points are excluded or rewritten, Meg's development is altered to suit modern audiences better.

### **Meg's Domestic Troubles: A Glimpse of Married Life and Poverty**

Meg's character continues to grow after her introduction to the upper-class in 'Vanity Fair'. She has taken her mother's advice about love in marriage close to heart, and is now married to John Brooke, a man she truly loves, instead of marrying someone for their status. Both her and John have their own duties in their household, and Meg makes sure that "John should find home a paradise, he should always see a smiling face, should fare sumptuously every day, and never know the loss of a button" (Alcott 257).

Despite Meg's efforts, she still finds herself in difficult situations. Keyser argues that marriage in *Little Women* proves to be confining to all three sisters, and that Meg's talents and strengths might be diminished and belittled in this marriage (71). With a lack of wealth in her marriage, something which goes against Meg's previous dreams of becoming a wealthy, upper-class woman, and her struggles with keeping her home 'a paradise', seen in scenes such as Meg's messy attempt at making jelly, one might argue that Keyser's point proves to be true (Alcott 259-261). However, as the reader comes to know, Meg and John are able to discuss their problems and openly communicate with each other. Furthermore, Meg does not seem to mind living in a smaller house at first, and her wish for wealth and status is not discussed, for "[t]he little house ceased to be a glorified bower, but it became a home, and the young couple soon felt that it was a change for the better" (Alcott 257). However, as soon as Meg is confronted with the life of someone with wealth and a higher status, like her friend Sallie, she struggles to be content about her own life; "Seeing Sallie's pretty things made her long for such, and pity herself because she had not got them" (Alcott 264). Therefore, although Meg has chosen love over wealth and status and seems to be satisfied, she starts to

pity her lack of wealth when she is confronted with a lifestyle she once dreamed about. Therefore, just as Meg detested her lack of wealth in her youth, she starts to dislike it again when presented with a wealthier life, “Meg [still] didn’t like to be pitied and made to feel poor (Alcott 264). The scene also shows that other people’s opinions regarding Meg’s wealth still matter to her. Meg chooses to buy some expensive fabric after Sallie encourages her, to keep up the appearance that she is not a poor man’s wife.

In ‘Vanity Fair’, similar actions to blend in with the upper-class did not have direct consequences for Meg. While she is either disapproved by the upper-class in the novel, or her friends and family in the adaptation, Meg is still able to make the choice to marry John. This time, however, Meg’s actions lead to a serious problem, for the fabric is too expensive. Therefore, Meg anxiously reveals her spendings to John. It becomes clear in the novel that John trusts Meg to spend their money well: “[Meg] knew her husband’s income, and she loved to feel that he trusted her, not only with his happiness, but with what some men seem to value more - his money” (Alcott 264). So when Meg reveals her spendings to John, he disapproves of her actions, yet stays calm. However, when Meg says that she “tr[ies] to be contented, but it is hard, and [she’s] tired of being poor”, blaming him and his poverty in the process, albeit unintentional, it creates a rift between them (Alcott 267). Once again, in contrast to ‘Vanity Fair’, where Meg is eventually comforted by Laurie and her mother, this time she has to solve the problems she created with John on her own. After a week in which she could think about the consequences of her actions and possible ways to solve it, she and John have a long talk, from which she learns to “love her husband better for his poverty” (Alcott 268).

Later on in the novel, Meg and John are able to solve their problems regarding parenthood in a similar matter. Meg first chooses to take care of her children and the household on her own, which proves to be too much of a burden. After some advice from her

mother, she trusts John to take care of the children as well, and the overwhelming situation Meg put herself into is resolved. Still, Wester argues that Meg's domestic skills are not as developed as her talent of acting, hinting that Meg perhaps should have pursued her talents, like Jo and Amy (26). Furthermore, Keyser argues that Meg's marriage leads to her downfall, and her submission to the patriarchal system (562). However, during Meg's life as a married woman, she develops as a person and grows from the mistakes she makes. Poverty can be troublesome at an older age, especially for someone like Meg March, yet the way in which she grows to accept love over status is a good moral for those reading *Little Women* in the nineteenth century. Meg's struggles regarding wifehood and motherhood are relatable, and her relationship and communication with John are a good example of a healthy marriage, not her downfall.

In contrast to Meg's chapter on 'Vanity Fair', the scenes surrounding the purchase of the fabric, and the confrontation with John in the film overlap greatly with the chapter in the novel. Similarly to the novel, Meg is encouraged by Sallie to purchase the fabric. While Meg argues that her husband and children need clothes, and the fabric is too expensive, Sallie states that Meg "needs a new dress", and that John will be pleased with Meg's appearance in the new dress, and therefore forget about the expense (*Little Women* 8:49-59). Like in the novel, Meg is self-conscious about the way in which society, and mostly the upper-class, perceives her. This is further supported by Gerwig's script, which describes Meg as "beautiful but with the melancholy of yearning emanating from her", while Sallie is described as "a rich young woman who possesses an air of casual boredom that comes from never having to work for what you have", something that Meg dreams of in the novel (Gerwig 9). Therefore, the overall message of the novel and the film overlap greatly.

Similarly, the confrontation between Meg and John about her purchase in the film is comparable to the scene in the novel. While certain sentences differ, the most important part

of the scene, Meg's confession about her struggles with poverty, is included in the film as well. After Meg has told John about her expense, she tells him that she "can't resist when I see Sallie buying all she wants and pitying me because I don't" (*Little Women* 1:02:06-14). However, whereas John's disappointment about Meg's confession was silent in the novel, he replies to her confession and says that he is "very sorry that you've had to do without so many beautiful things and that you're married to someone who can't give them to you" (*Little Women* 1:03:00-10). As explained before with Hutcheon's adaptation theory, adapters can make "simplifying selections" and omit certain scenes because of a change in medium. In this case, previous scenes in the novel, such as Meg's jelly incident and other quarrels are not included. Therefore, Meg and John's long talks, and their close bond cannot be as thoroughly shown in the adaptation as it was in the novel. Instead of adding more scenes, and making the film longer, such problems can also be solved by combining certain elements of scenes together. Therefore, Meg and John's conversations about their marital problems in previous chapters in the novel are now combined in one scene of the film to adhere to the film's runtime. Meg's troubles with motherhood, along with her conversations about parenthood with Marmee and John, however, are completely excluded from Gerwig's film. Only one throwaway line by John about taking care of the children while Meg takes care of Beth is kept (*Little Women* 1:24:58-59). The scene in which Meg and John reconcile is changed as well. In the novel, Meg sells the fabric to Sallie after her long conversation with John. In the film, however, Meg has already sold the fabric before she and John have talked. Like the previous scene, John gets extra lines, saying to Meg that she can send her fabric "to the dressmaker as soon as possible", not knowing that Meg already sold her fabric (*Little Women* 1:25:03-06). Meg's scene at the Moffat house omitted certain plot points to better suit a modern audience. In this case, however, certain chapters of the novel are excluded, while the important elements and plot points of those chapters are combined in one scene, namely

Meg's revelation about her spendings to John. Therefore, while the previous chapter is an example of the omission of certain plot points in a scene, this chapter is an example of the inclusion of plot points in a scene to adhere to the two hour runtime of the film, which gives less space for overall character development than a 500 page novel gives. Whereas Meg and John bickered and made up several times in the novel to explore their relationship, the adaptation brings these situations together in one scene. Therefore, certain scenes could have been excluded to prevent the repetition of similar plot points. This in turn would be beneficial for the film's runtime. In short, while certain chapters have been excluded from the film, important plot points of those chapters are included in scenes that have been incorporated into the adaptation. Therefore, the character development of Meg, and her relation to John can be described in less time, both to adhere to the change in medium, and to prevent repetitive scenes from happening.

### **Beth's Passions and Passing: Music in *Little Women***

Akin to Meg's introduction, the reader learns about Beth's values on the first pages of Alcott's novel. Beth's first words are that "[w]e've got father and mother and each other", and later on, in the same conversation with her sisters, Beth says that she wants to spend the money she is given on new music (Alcott 3). Beth's family is important to her, and like her sisters, she is talented. This concept is further clarified in the novel, because "[n]o one but Beth could get much music out of the old piano [and] she had a way of softly touching the yellow keys (Alcott 12). Her passion for music is most prominent in 'Beth finds the Palace Beautiful', where Beth is invited to play on the piano in Mr Laurence's house. Seeing that Beth feels most comfortable with her family, it feels natural for her to stay at her childhood home for the rest of her life. Beth's dream is to take care of her parents in her childhood home. Additionally, in contrast to Meg, whose dreams change as she grows older, Beth's dream remains unchanged until her death. It is also important to note that, similarly to Meg's dream, Beth's dream is not as career-oriented or ambitious as Jo and Amy's dreams. Still, Beth's desires and passion, and Beth's passing away provide important morals and messages to those who have dreamt of a 'simple' life as well, and to those who have dealt with the passing of a loved one, both for readers in the nineteenth century, and for readers in the present.

Beth's passion for music shines throughout the novel. When Beth is not helping her family with chores, she is seen talking about and playing the piano; "[s]he loved music so dearly, tried so hard to learn, and practised away so patiently" with the piano standing in her house (Alcott 38). The chance Beth gets to play at Mr Laurence's house is a welcome change to the old piano sitting at her home, and it is no surprise that one of the few times Beth responds to an outsider, is when she is invited to play the piano at Mr Laurence's house.

Additionally, when Beth plays Mr Laurence's piano, she describes the music coming out of the piano as "the voice of a beloved friend", further illustrating the close bond Beth has with her talents (Alcott 58). In contrast to Jo and Amy, Beth stays at home, and is therefore unable to start a music career. Moreover, Beth cannot afford to take music lessons, or buy a better piano, and is therefore stuck with the old piano she currently has, until she is given Mr Laurence's piano. Therefore, while Beth could further improve upon her talents, she rather stays at home with her parents (Alcott 134). Beth's story differs from her sisters' stories, because she has decided not to enter society at all. Still, she is happy to stay home, and readers who might find the change from childhood to womanhood frightening might find comfort in Beth's character, and her decisions.

Beth's character, and the sorrow she leaves behind after her death are explored through the symbolism of spring. The greatest difference between Beth and her sisters is Beth's early death in the novel. Although Beth's development into a young woman is cut short by her death, she was still able to live her dream life. Beth is surrounded by her family as she passes away, which is all she ever asked for, as mentioned before. Since Beth is shy in nature, and therefore does not speak as much as her sisters, Alcott explains Beth's character with springlike symbolism, and states that she will live cheerfully "till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping, and the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow behind" (Alcott 38). The themes of sunshine and birds are mentioned several other times in the novel as well. After the first night in which Beth survives the chicken pox, Alcott describes that the sun has never risen so beautifully, "and never had the world seemed so lovely as it did to the heavy eyes of Meg and Jo", after they have taken care of Beth all night long (177). Furthermore, right before Beth's death, "the spring days came and went, the sky grew clearer, the earth greener, the flowers were up fairly early, and the birds came back in time to say goodbye to Beth" (Alcott 393). When Beth finally passes, "a bird sang blithely,

[...] snowdrops blossomed, [...] and the spring sunshine streamed in (Alcott 394). The theme of spring, a time for renewal, brings life to the difficult topic that arises in *Little Women*. Furthermore, the symbolism gives the reader a chance to further explore Beth as a character, despite her shy nature. Therefore, while Beth's story might seem lacking in comparison to the stories of her sisters, Beth's story provides the reader with a greater understanding of the passing of a loved one, and the symbolism used by Alcott helps the reader understand Beth as a character.

Greta Gerwig uses the medium of her adaptation to combine Beth's passion, music, to the symbolism of her character and death. Before the film's audience is introduced to Beth, they are introduced to what's truly important to her, her passion for music, and the house she wishes to live in forever.. As stated in the script "we hear sounds of a beautiful Bach piano sonata being played [...] the music grows louder as we see empty rooms of the childhood home[...]. Finally we find BETH MARCH, alone at the piano" (Gerwig 10). After that, the audience finally meets Beth. This is the first instance in which music, something provided through the medium of the adaptation, plays a part in Beth's characterisation. As mentioned before, Beth, who is shy in nature, talks less than her sisters. In the film, Beth also talks in a softer tone than her sisters. Her softer tone, combined with Gerwig's directing choices, make it difficult to explore Beth as a character. Gerwig often lets multiple characters talk at once, which creates a huge commotion in which softer talking characters, like Beth, are easily missed or overlooked. Most of Beth's scenes in the adaptation are also quite short, some scenes lasting less than a minute. Therefore, using symbolism to further explore Beth's character could be beneficial for her prominence in the adaptation.

Similar to the novel, Beth would be content if she had her father, her mother, and her sisters around her, and wishes for her family to be together for Christmas (*Little Women* 26:04-29). She is happy in the presence of her family, and does not interact with outsiders,

with the exception of Mr Laurence and Laurie. Beth's visit to Mr Laurence in the film is similar to the novel, yet due to the runtime of the film, as described in the previous chapter as well, certain scenes of Beth are combined to form one scene. Additionally, Mr Laurence is now secretly listening to Beth's music while she is at his house, showing the effect Beth's music has on others, which is not described in the respective chapter in the novel. As mentioned before, Gerwig's adaptation provides a medium in which music can be used and expressed differently than in a novel. Alcott uses symbolism of springtime to further explore Beth's character, and to focus on the theme of loss and renewal in the novel. This symbolism might be difficult to translate to the medium of a film, therefore, Gerwig uses Beth's music to explain the effect of Beth's character on others, as seen by Mr Laurence's reaction to her music at his house, as well as symbolise her presence after her death as well. Therefore, while the novel uses symbolism to explore Beth as a character, the film uses music to show the influence Beth's character had on others, even after her death. Beth's piano music is used multiple times in the film, and easily recognisable. While Gerwig uses other instruments, like violins and a harp, to include themes for different occasions in the film, Beth's theme mostly consists of piano music. The piano music is often heard before the audience sees Beth, the only exceptions being instances in which Beth's theme is heard after her passing. Jo finds out that Beth has not made it through the night, and all the audience can hear is Beth's music. Similarly, when *Little Women* is being made and published at the end of the film, instruments like the harp and the violins slowly lower in volume, until the piano is most prominent, and plays Beth's theme once more, while also showing a forlorn look on Jo's face. Therefore, while Beth's character and storyline might be illustrated the least out of all four sisters in Gerwig's adaptation, her presence even after her death, and the impact she had on her family is most prominent through the music heard in *Little Women*.

## Conclusion

Both Meg and Beth have become less prominent in the film adaptation than they were in the original novel. Moreover, While the characterisation of both women in Gerwig's adaptation is quite similar to Alcott's novel, certain scenes have been changed, omitted, or combined, which gives the characters less space to develop in certain situations.

In the novel, Meg dreams of becoming a wealthy, upper-class housewife in her youth. Meg's stay at the Moffats portrays her change from childhood to womanhood. Meg's self consciousness regarding society's perception of her is illustrated in 'Vanity Fair'.

Additionally, Meg is confronted with the person she has become through a conversation with Laurie. Lastly, a whole new world about the gossip and fashion surrounding the upper-class has opened for her. After she confesses how she behaved at the party to her mother, she learns that, while money is valuable, love can be more valued in a relationship, and that it is more important to live a happy life, than a wealthy life.

In Gerwig's adaptation, most of the important events in the novel are excluded from the scene in the film. Therefore, the focus shifts from society's perception of Meg, to the approval of her friends and family. Meg is no longer embarrassed because she has failed to please both her rich friends and older people at the party. Now, she is embarrassed because Laurie, someone who represents her family, is disappointed in her behaviour. By looking at the modern audience of the film, and the different societies present in the 1860s and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it makes sense that certain plot points in the scene have been omitted, and that the focus of the scene has changed from society's perspective on an individual, to the perspective of one's friends and family. In this case, several plot points have been altered or deleted to adhere to a modern audience.

Later on in Meg's life, she still lives in poverty. While happily married to John, she is confronted with the life of someone with a higher status, and falls back into old habits. These habits might not have had dire consequences in her youth, however, in adulthood, they create a rift between her and her husband. Certain sources, therefore, argue that Meg's married life is confining to her, or that her talents and strengths are subdued because of her marriage. However, her communication with John, and their solutions to their problems, prove that both see each other as equals in their marriage, and are able to divide their duties equally.

In the film, the scenes given are quite similar to its novel counterpart. Meg's behaviour in both the novel and the movie is similar, and the problems she has to go through do not change with the later adaptation. However, certain scenes are excluded in the film, or combined with each other because the film gives less space for multiple scenes than the novel does. Furthermore, repetition is omitted, so that the audience can understand the dynamic between John and Meg in less scenes and less time.

Beth's character seems less developed in the novel, yet her passion and her love for her family still provide an important lesson to women pursuing their hobbies or passions at home. Similarly, those who might find the change of childhood to womanhood frightening might find comfort in Beth's story as well. Unlike her sisters, Beth decides she wants to stay in her childhood home forever, and to not enter society. Additionally, Alcott uses symbolism of springtime to further explore Beth's character, and to make it easier for readers to understand the grief that comes with the loss of a loved one. Lastly, her symbolism creates a peaceful atmosphere surrounding Beth's death, giving her departure a positive message, that Beth is well at last.

In Beth's case, the focus of the film lies more within the symbolism of Beth's passing than her character. Her shy character is difficult to explore in the adaptation, especially with the directional choices Gerwig made. While her character is still portrayed in the movie,

certain scenes have been combined, similar to Meg's previous scenes, to fit the film's runtime. However, while Alcott symbolises Beth's passing with images of springtime, Gerwig symbolises Beth's influence on others, even after her death, with background music. This is an element which can only be used with the medium of the adaptation, the medium of the original work cannot provide background music. Therefore, the adaptation uses its new medium to explore Beth's character with background music, as the original novel did with symbolism of springtime. Whereas the novel used symbolism to explore Beth's character, the film uses music to portray the influence Beth's character had on others.

Shortly, Meg and Beth's characterisation is not as prominent in the adaptation as it was in the original novel, however, their characters are quite similar in the film and novel alike. Parts of their stories that were relatable in the nineteenth century, such as Meg coming out to society, have been altered to better fit a modern audience. Furthermore, several plot points have been deleted to better suit the change in medium, or the change in audience as well. While the change in medium provides disadvantages over the original novel, such as the lack of space to explore characters, it also provides advantages, which are used to symbolise certain elements which the original work was unable to do. Lastly, parts of their characteristics which have become less popular nowadays are omitted or altered, to better suit a modern audience.

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