

Shifting the Focus:

A Comparative Analysis of the Protagonists of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Greta

Gerwig's *Little Women*

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the way in which the four main characters of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) compare to those in Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of the novel. Using adaptation theory to delineate what an adaptation is and, subsequently, show the importance of social context in adaptations, this thesis demonstrates that, especially in adaptations of classic stories like *Little Women*, the way in which characters are portrayed is important. Through a close reading of the text and the film, this thesis focuses on changes made to the four sisters as a result of changes in social context. By showing how each sister's central flaw is portrayed, it illustrates how the four sisters are characterised in the novel and film, and reveals the hardships with which they deal that contribute to their characterisation. This thesis draws on theory on bildungsromane and characterisation for its analysis. By comparing the characterisations of the protagonists in both works, this thesis demonstrates that Gerwig's adaptation highlights the sisters' struggles differently than Alcott's novel, demonstrating how views on women's position and their role has changed. Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy are updated for a 21st century audience, which is of importance because characters like *Little Women's* protagonists may function as role models for many young viewers.

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1. Introduction

Louisa May Alcott's classic novel *Little Women* (1868) has been adapted for the screen many times. The tale of the sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy has been an important story for many young readers since its publication. Through the many adaptations of the novel¹, every generation of young girls grows up watching its own version of the story and, significantly, of the characters. As the four main characters of *Little Women* have long been part of the literary canon, they serve as role models for many fans, who grow up reading the novel and watching the film. The way in which these characters are portrayed in film is, therefore, important, especially since much has changed since its first publication. Director Greta Gerwig puts her own modern spin on the story in the most recent adaptation from 2019. Analysing how the four protagonists have been adapted can reveal much about the changing norms and expectations, in particular for young women.

The academic debate on the novel and its adaptations has been prolific due to its many adaptations. The focus of the debate has also changed over time. Previous discussion on the novel has looked at questions involving the sentimentality and morality of the work. Ann Murphy writes that these questions included whether *Little Women* is “adolescent, sentimental, and repressive, an instrument for teaching girls how to become ‘little’, domesticated, and silent?” or rather “subversive, matriarchal, and implicitly revolutionary, fostering discontent with the very model of female domesticity it purports to admire?” (564). Critics seem to focus on the morality of the work and the lessons it presents to the reader, emphasising the way in which the book teaches its readers how to act accordingly. The way

¹ Before Gerwig's 2019 adaptation, *Little Women* had been adapted into three major film versions. Anne Hollander succinctly describes the different versions: “The 1933 version had the Sweetheart and the Siren trumped by the Enthusiast, with Mother an aging character part. The 1949 version had the Girl Next Door take precedence over two types of Prom Queen, and Mother was Still Lovely. And the current [1994] version offers a range of Self-Realized Women of all ages” (97). Apart from these, two silent-film versions were made, as well as multiple productions for the small screen.

in which the work and, in particular, the characters are adapted can therefore have a great effect on how the story is received and what it teaches its audience.

Previous adaptations have portrayed the characters in different ways. For instance, Anne Hollander, who discusses the 1994 adaptation, writes that “[e]nergy and strength of will, not a credible 19th-century speech, seem to be the desired qualities in a 90’s Jo” (100). In this 1994 adaptation, female independence and “modern female virtues, the properties of a contemporary woman who can take charge of all aspects of moral and practical life without depending on male support or advice” are the most important and valued qualities in the characters (Hollander 100). Similarly, Cartmell briefly discusses the way in which tragedy is treated in the 1933, 1949, and 1994 adaptations. She writes that “each deals with the Civil War [...] and the tragic death of the third sister, Beth, in a manner suited to their different audiences” (169). As an example, she writes that “an audience recovering from the recent effects of World War II needs a different *Little Women*, one which will not re-awaken any unpleasant memories”, which is why the backdrop of the civil war is not mentioned and Beth’s death is not presented on screen (169). This is an instance that clearly shows that the context in which a story is adapted matters and has an effect on the subsequent adaptation.

Classic stories can provide comfort through their depiction of timeless themes as they are considered to “have stood the test of time” (“classic”). These stories are often adapted multiple times as their themes provide fruitful soil for adaptations through their universality. The appeal of adaptations can be ascribed, according to Linda Hutcheon, to “their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty” (114). She writes that “[l]ike ritual, this kind of repetition brings comfort, a fuller understanding, and the confidence that comes with the sense of knowing what is about to happen next” (114). Adaptations are, therefore, useful to study, and, as Hutcheon highlights, “[l]ike evolutionary selection, cultural selection is a way to account for the adaptive organization, in this case, of narratives. Like living beings,

stories that adapt better than others (through mutation) to an environment survive” (167).

Little Women is one such story.

Poole and Trandafoiu discuss their perspective on often-adapted texts and the effects of this on such works. They write that “[a]ny text that has endured various adaptations, sequels, and mash-ups, can be considered a migrant on a journey of exile, resettlement, adaptation, and cultural translation, resulting in [...] multiple embodiments, and shifting identities” (194). This view highlights the change of social background which an adaptation undergoes. They argue for the importance of taking the social and cultural context into account when studying an adaptation: “[w]hile most adaptation studies focus on textual analysis, our approach is socio-cultural and historical and opposed to formalism; we aim to place the texts in their social contexts, thus illuminating social change and identity shifts” (195). This emphasis on social context is also important in this thesis.

Because the characters of *Little Women* are so ingrained in the literary canon and their personalities are so distinct, it might not make sense to change them drastically in terms of their behaviour and actions when adapting the story. This aspect refers to their personality, which reveals “the type of person you are, shown by the way you behave, feel, and think” (“personality”). Rather, since the novel is so popular and the main characters may function as role models to many readers and viewers, what is more interesting to analyse is the way in which they deal with their struggles. Hutcheon highlights the fact that both the source text and its adaptation are “always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture” (142). This thesis will, therefore, look at changes to the characters as a result of the change in social context. In particular, it will analyse the way in which their central flaws and struggles are represented, and how they have shifted. Analysing these shifts will reveal how struggles for young women have changed. Thus, studying how the four protagonists are portrayed in Gerwig’s adaptation can reveal how the protagonists have changed to fit a 21st

century perspective. Therefore, the question that this thesis endeavours to answer is: What effect does the change in social context have on the main characters in Gerwig's *Little Women* compared to those in Alcott's *Little Women*?

To answer this research question, a comparative analysis of Alcott's and Gerwig's *Little Women* will be performed. First, however, a working definition of adaptations will be provided. This definition will highlight the importance of social context in adaptations to delineate the angle of this thesis. Furthermore, theory on characters will be discussed to demonstrate the different ways in which characters can be characterised in novels and films. The analysis will also draw on theory on bildungsromane, which will be useful in interpreting the characters. Alcott's *Little Women* is divided into two parts, with part one telling the story of the sisters' childhood and part two focusing on the sisters' adulthood or adolescence. Part two is published separately in the UK as *Good Wives*. For the purposes of this thesis, I will refer to these two separate sections as part one and part two of Alcott's *Little Women* respectively. Subsequently, a close reading of Alcott's and Gerwig's *Little Women* will be performed, focusing on each sister's central flaw and highlighting the way in which their struggles are represented in both the novel and the film. This thesis concludes by showing the effect that the change in social context has on the protagonists.

2. Situating the Narrative

2.1 Adapting in Context

Adaptations are an important part of the cultural canon. As Dennis Cutchins writes, “[w]e live in a world of adaptation, and a failure to study that world means we must ignore an increasingly important part of contemporary culture” (2). Adaptations are crucial in ensuring certain stories continue being told, as Cartmell writes that “literary texts adapted numerous times tend to have a classic status” (169). Similarly, Lisette Szwydky writes about the importance of adaptations in the canonisation of texts. She calls literary classics “culture-texts,” which “exist beyond the scope of their respective ‘original’” and argues for a historical approach to adaptations and canonical texts (131). She shows the great impact that adaptations have (had) in the canon formation and the making of classics, and writes that “[a]daptations largely determine which texts experience a long cultural life and which ones eventually fade from cultural memory” (139). After all, many people are introduced to classic novels through film adaptations of classic texts. Szwydky illustrates this with the example of *Frankenstein* and points out that the number of people who have encountered a version of *Frankenstein* is larger than those who have actually read Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (132). She emphasises the fact that this text has been adapted numerous times, even just after its first publication, as “[t]he vast majority of nineteenth-century novels that have attained culture-text status have rich adaptation histories dating back to their original publication” (136). Thus, adaptations play, and always have played, an important role in the constitution and perpetuation of the canon.

What exactly constitutes an adaptation has been a point of discussion within adaptations studies. A widely accepted definition states that adaptations are “deliberate, announced, and extended revisitations of prior works” (Hutcheon xvi). However, this definition provides some limits. Many adaptations are not deliberately announced but are still

considered adaptations as they are based on another work of art. This definition is therefore constraining, and it excludes adaptations that are less straightforwardly based on another work. Cutchins argues that what is considered an adaptation, therefore, needs to be reconsidered. He suggests that “[i]t may be more fruitful to consider adaptation as a way to think about all sorts of texts, rather than as a particular kind of text” (3). Broadening the definition of the term enriches the field and would allow for more creative ways to view adaptations. A work can be an adaptation even if it is unacknowledged and implicit. These definitions, however, illustrate that defining an adaptation is not as clear-cut as would be expected and it is, thus, useful to have a clear definition to work with in this thesis.

A different strand of adaptation scholars argues for the importance of the audience in defining and interpreting adaptations. Hutcheon argues that, ultimately, the audience is vital in whether a work is regarded as an adaptation: the audience must experience the adaptation as an adaptation. In an interview from 2009, she emphasises the role of the audience in the reception of an adaptation, saying that “inevitably our experience of the adaptation is a kind of oscillating experience where we move between the text we know and the text we’re experiencing” (Zaiontz and Hutcheon 2). This reception theory refers to the fact that “literary works are received against an existing horizon of expectations consisting of readers’ current knowledge and presuppositions about literature and [...] the meanings of works change as such horizons shift” (“reception theory”). While reception theory is not strictly speaking about adaptations, it provides a useful framework for defining the term as it stresses the importance of the audience and its reception. This demonstrates how the reception of adaptations is always affected by the social context in which adaptations are received.

The time and place, the historical and social context, in which a story is adapted can have a great effect on how and which changes are made to a source text. According to

Hutcheon, adaptations are influenced by multiple factors, such as technological, economical, and contextual factors:

The contexts of creation and reception are material, public, and economic as much as they are cultural, personal, and aesthetic. It explains why, even in today's globalized world, major shifts in a story's context—that is, for example, in a national setting or time period—can change radically how the transposed story is interpreted, ideologically and literally (28)

Thus, there are different reasons for changes to be made to stories when they are adapted, but particularly shifts in context can have a great effect on the interpretation of a story by those who adapt it. Emphasising the role of social context in my working definition of adaptations will be important for the upcoming analysis.

While there are different aspects that can be emphasised in defining adaptations, there are some aspects which are true for every adaptation. What is clear is that adaptations are always intertextual and palimpsestuous: “we experience adaptations [...] as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation” (Hutcheon 8). While this depends on the audience's awareness of older versions, for the adapter at least, the older work always shines through. Thus, because adaptations, by definition, refer back to older works, they always come with a new or changed environment, context, or medium. Furthermore, a different medium requires different techniques for telling a story, and there are different elements that can be adapted better than others. This can depend on medium and context. In the case at hand, the story is no longer told verbally on a page but mostly cinematically, through a screen and soundtrack. Each adaptation, therefore, requires different changes to the story. This thesis will specifically focus on differences between the source text and adaptation that are caused by changes in social context.

While defining adaptations has been a topic of discussion in the field, how to analyse and interpret adaptations is for scholars also a subject of debate. A much-discussed way of looking at adaptations is through the lens of faithfulness to the source text. This perspective was often used prior to the publication of George Bluestone's text, *Novels into Film* (1957), which was influential and stated that it is futile to compare novel and film to see which is better "as there is no medium-specific equivalency between the two" (Griggs 2). Indeed, Griggs writes that "each adaptation is a new thing in and of itself, but it evolves from a complex web of adaptive processes related to existing narratives, cultural mores, industrial practices, and to the agenda of those engaging in its construction" (5-6). A comparison can then be used to consider why and how certain changes have been made. This perspective on the fidelity discourse within adaptation studies is useful as it does not confine interpretations to mere compare and contrast analyses where only one conclusion can be drawn: whether an adaptation is faithful enough to its source text or not. Rather, it is more fruitful to consider *how* certain elements in an adaptation are changed from the source. This can tell us much more about how times have changed, especially when the text concerns an older classic that has been adapted many times, like *Little Women*.

Thus, while adaptation theory has demonstrated that defining adaptations is not as clear-cut as expected, the current thesis analyses an adaptation that is quite evidently a "deliberate, announced, and extended revisitation" of a prior work (Hutcheon xvi). Apart from sharing the title, the trailer announces that the film is "based on the novel by Louisa May Alcott" (*Little Women* – official trailer), making the intertextual connection undeniable. This thesis analyses Gerwig's adaptation as a self-sufficient work without comparing it in terms of quality to Alcott's original. Emphasising the role of the audience in a definition of adaptations highlights how adaptations are always created and received in a certain context.

In the next section, a working definition of character will be provided and the different ways in which characters can be represented in novels and films will be discussed.

2.2 Character

Characters are often the most memorable parts of stories. As Kelly Mays points out, it is usually a “‘someone,’ or the who of a story, that sticks with us long after we have forgotten the details of what, where, and how” (218). Certainly, in classic stories that are told over and over again to different generations, some characters have not just remained in their own fictional world, but “sometimes seem to take on a life of their own” (Mays 218). It is only a small number of characters, though, that is attributed such cultural importance, and that are “so clearly and memorably etched that they enter a very small gallery of people, real and imagined, who become fixed points of reference for life” (Schreiber). The way in which we talk about these characters, as if they are part of our world, shows how important such characters are.

Character analysis, however, has often been disproved of. According to Lis Møller, the argument against character analysis, “in particular the sort of character analysis that deals with fictional characters as if they were real people” is that it is “a naively mimetic undertaking” (56). The concept of analysing fictional characters as real human beings can be considered irrelevant as characters are not part of our world. However, this idea disregards not only the cultural importance of some fictional characters, it also overlooks how reading about characters can have an impact on the real world. The access that fiction provides readers to different characters’ minds and multiple perspectives is a valuable experience. As Mays points out, “[t]he skills of observation and interpretation, the enlarged experience and capacity for empathy, that we develop in reading fiction can help us better navigate our real world” (221). Reading about fictional characters can, therefore, benefit us in our daily lives

as well, as it can “sharpen our ability to understand others’ minds” (Møller 57). Thus, character analysis is important as characters can play a larger part outside their fictional universe.

According to E.M. Forster, “[novels] suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power” (46). This is partly due to the fact that reading novels gives us a chance to gain insight into minds other than our own, which is impossible in real life. Forster writes that

In daily life we never understand each other, neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confession exists. We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy. But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. And this is why they often seem more definite than characters in history, or even our own friends; we have been told all about them that can be told (35).

Fictional characters can provide us a sense of understanding which is never achievable in real life. This is also why learning from characters can be useful for our daily life.

A character is defined as “a personage in a narrative or dramatic work” (“character”). Characters are the actors in a work. They are the personages which the story follows. Mays writes that, “[a] character is any personage in a literary work who acts, appears, or is referred to as playing a part” and she points out that personage does not necessarily refer to only human beings (219). There are characters who play a larger role than others in a story. The characters with the largest roles in the story are the protagonists or main characters.

An important distinction regarding characters, according to Foster, is whether they are flat or round. Flat characters are “constructed round a single idea or quality” (48). Forster writes that “they are easily recognized whenever they come in,” which makes it easy to

understand the character and their motivations (49). On the other hand, round characters are more difficult to recognize and sum up as an idea. Mays writes that “[s]ometimes characters seem round to us because our impression of them evolves as a story unfolds” (220). When fictional characters have lived inside someone’s head for a long time, they also seem to evolve and become more real. This can certainly be the case for characters that have become part of the literary canon and are well-established in the cultural landscape. However, as Forster points out, a round character “is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat” (55). Forster argues that “a novel that is at all complex often requires flat people as well as round, and the outcome of their collisions parallels life” (51). Thus, a novel requires that characters are characterised in many different ways for the story to mirror real life.

It is important to remember, however, as Mays also points out, that characters are a product of “careful, deliberate **characterization**” by the author (222, emphasis in original). The way in which a character is written and portrayed is through characterisation, which is defined as “[t]he representation of persons in narrative and dramatic works. This may include direct methods like the attribution of qualities in description or commentary, and indirect (or ‘dramatic’) methods inviting readers to infer qualities from characters’ actions, speech, or appearance” (“characterisation”). Different media also require different methods of representing characters. In a novel, the narrator can contribute through direct characterisation. In Alcott’s *Little Women*, the omniscient narrator is particularly present in the characterisation. For instance, in the beginning of the novel they point out that “As young readers like to know ‘how people look,’ we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters” (5) after which the narrator gives a brief description of each of the sisters. In films, direct characterisation like this can be done through a voice-over. In Gerwig’s adaptation, however, this is not present. Films can contribute to a character’s representation

in different ways, such as visual techniques by showing a character's emotion. Additionally, an important part of a character is their motivation. It can tell much about what drives a character and explain their actions and behaviour. It can also show what is important for that character and in that context. Therefore, particular attention will be paid to the motivation of the sisters in both the novel and the film.

In *Little Women*, the four sisters differ from each other as each has her own distinct personality. However, especially in the beginning, every bit of information which the story provides the reader seems to solidify the character's main personality trait, which characterised them as rather flat. Jo is the only sister who can sometimes defy the reader's expectations in this way. This is also the reason why Jo is sometimes seen as the only main character of the story. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the four sisters are all considered to be protagonists. This will give a good overview of the different struggles that they go through. This is particularly interesting since the story follows the girls growing up into young women and analysing how the different hardships which they have to overcome have changed can reveal much about how their struggles have changed over time. In the next section, theory on bildungsromane will be discussed, as this will be useful in my analysis of the four main characters.

2.3 Bildungsromane

As will become apparent, Alcott's *Little Women* can be interpreted as a coming of age story, or a bildungsroman. The *OED* defines bildungsroman as "[a] novel that has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person" ("bildungsroman"). Kelsey Bennett writes about the origins of the bildungsroman and also stresses the importance of religion in this type of novel in her analysis. She writes that "self-formation, or bildung, originated as a religious exercise in the context of discrete Protestant theological traditions associated

through the international revival movements in eighteenth-century Germany, England, and America” and “these spiritual traditions found ways into the bildungsroman” (2). Thus, the focus of a bildungsroman is on the growth and development of the characters as they grow up, which is prevalent in *Little Women*. Stressing the role of religion in this definition is also important for the analysis below.

Several characteristics of a coming of age story are present in *Little Women*. The division of the story into two stages of the sisters’ lives makes the coming of age aspects clear. As the story follows the four main characters grow up, the plot illuminates the different stages of their development. Bildungsromane also often include a guide who helps shape the characters and help them reflect on themselves and society. In *Little Women*, this role is fulfilled by Mrs. March, or Marmee, as the girls call her. Brigid Lowe writes that “the plots of English *Bildungsromane* are driven by the external constraints that attend their protagonists’ growing up – a process that is posed as inherently problematical, reflecting, perhaps, the anxieties of a modern age increasingly at the mercy of an ever-accelerated rate of growth and change” (Lowe 406). While Lowe writes about the English bildungsromane, the qualities she describes are also prevalent in the US. She highlights the importance of external constraints that are placed on the protagonists. In the case of *Little Women*, the most prominent constraint that the main characters face is gender norms and expectations that they have to live by. This forms an important issue with which they deal as the characters learn to perform and navigate within the limits of society, through the help of Marmee. Kornfeld and Jackson highlight similar themes in their discussion of the female bildungsroman. They write that “[s]tudy of the female Bildungsroman is thus particularly interesting because it was written by women and for girls, and illuminates the social expectations of female life as well as the secret hopes and dreams which might not be revealed in another format” (140).

Additionally, they suggest that “[t]he moral frameworks provided by the author reflect social assumptions about behavior, including gender relations” (139). One such assumption, for instance, is that “women heroes of the genre encounter disapproval when they display a wide range of talents and capacities” (Pratt). Similarly, the *Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States* specifies that in the American woman’s bildungsroman, protagonists often try to develop qualities according to values that women enjoy. However, “Although novels of male development perceive these values as good when men pursue them, women authors show female heroes punished for trying to achieve the same goals” (Pratt). Rather, women were expected to be dutiful and not be too wilful and ambitious. This also suggests that it was not expected for female protagonists in bildungsromane to hold much agency over their choices and their aspirations. The struggles and issues with which the sisters deal are, therefore, indicative of the time in which the story is published.

3. Analysis of Alcott's *Little Women*

3.1 Introduction

Alcott's *Little Women* includes some typical genre conventions that are present in every bildungsroman. The story follows the four sisters as they grow up and learn to navigate within the social limits. This is, therefore, an important theme of the novel: the four characters are taught how to behave. This theme is highlighted in the first part of the novel through explicit references to Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for example in the game that the sisters play when they are young. Mrs. March compares the game to the process of growing up and becoming a better person, during which "the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City" (Alcott 15). This frames the narrative as a novel of growth, in which the sisters grow up and learn to be virtuous young women. During this process, the sisters, like Bunyan's Christian, have to try to shed their burdens. That is, they need to confront their flaws and work on them to grow up. Mrs. March encourages them to better themselves before their father comes home from the war: "Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before father comes home" (15).

The sisters are characterised in direct and indirect ways through their actions and the dialogue, but also through the narration. In the very first chapter, each sister's first line of dialogue illustrates their principal flaw. Jo's lament that "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents" shows the importance she places on tradition and on how she likes things to stay the same for her. This, as will become clear, is a big part of Jo's motivation and explains much of her character. Similarly, Meg's sighing that "[i]t's so dreadful to be poor!" reveals her desire for riches and wealth which is a central theme in Meg's storyline. In the next line, Amy compares her circumstances to those of other girls and bemoans the injustice of her situation, which betrays her immaturity and need to overcome her envy. In contrast,

Beth is optimistic and grateful for what they have, as they've "got father and mother, and each other, anyhow" (1), seemingly without flaws. In these first lines, each character reveals an important part of their personality, which they will subsequently work on and learn to better as the novel progresses. These flaws and struggles will be discussed in more detail for each sister individually.

3.2 Nineteenth-Century *Little Women*

3.2.1 Meg

Meg, the eldest, is characterised as the beautiful, older sister. She often imparts sisterly advice to the younger sisters and lectures them when they do not behave properly, taking on the role of motherly figure. In the beginning of the novel, we learn that Meg was "'fond of luxury,' and her chief trouble was poverty" (55). This is Meg's main struggle as she is the only sister who remembers a time when they were rich and did not have to think about money, before "Mr. March lost his property in trying to help an unfortunate friend" (55). As a result, Meg can often come across as conceited and materialistic, as she laments that "[p]eople don't have fortunes left them in that style now-adays; men have to work, and women to marry for money. It's a dreadfully unjust world,' said Meg, bitterly" (248), referring to the time when they had money. Quickly, it is made clear that this is what Meg has to learn throughout the novel.

When Meg stays at the wealthy Moffat's, she is confronted with her weakness and she learns a key lesson. The wealth with which Meg is confronted leads her to feel bad about her own situation: "[t]he more she saw of Annie Moffat's pretty things, the more she envied her, and sighed to be rich" (132). She then succumbs to the allure of all the riches with which she is surrounded and lets the other girls dress her up, call her Daisy, and consequently succumbs to the temptation of which her mother was afraid: to come back "more discontented than she

went” (131). However, after seeing Laurie, their wealthy neighbour, at the ball and overhearing her being called “nothing but a doll” (144), she realises that she felt “uncomfortable and ashamed” of herself (144). The lesson taught here, to Meg and the readers, suggests that being grateful and staying true to oneself is more commendable than succumbing to the allure of materiality. Meg learns that succumbing to peer pressure and seeking validation from people who do not accept her for who she is, is less satisfying than being herself and being grateful for what she has. After Meg’s time at the Moffat’s, Mrs. March tells Meg and Jo that she wants her daughters “to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected, to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives” (151). The lessons that Meg learns in the story and Mrs. March’s desires for her daughters reveal what is sought for in a young lady and what qualities are valued.

Eventually, a romance develops between Meg and John Brooke, Laurie’s teacher. Meg’s defining moment in the novel is when she accepts John’s proposal. The moment demonstrates that she has learned to choose love over money, which is what she initially had to learn. In her first line of dialogue in the novel, Meg laments being poor, but when, in the end, she chooses to marry a husband who is not rich, it is the greatest testament to her growth as a person.

However, not only has she grown in this respect, she also shows that she is in charge of her own life. While she promised not to marry before she is twenty, she ends up defying her parents’ wishes. When Mr Brooke proposes, Meg listens to her mother by keeping to her promise and says, “I *don’t* choose” (358). However, when her overbearing Aunt March has her say, Meg, “as she was peremptorily ordered not to like him, [. . .] immediately made up her mind that she would” and accepts Mr. Brooke’s proposal (361). In the next line, Meg shows a sense of agency she has not shown in the novel before: “I shall marry whom I please,

Aunt March, and you can leave your money to any one you like” (361), leading Meg to pass up a future of wealth for agency and love. The decision demonstrates that Meg has shown growth in overcoming her materialistic weakness and can resist the temptation of wealth, choosing a life of hard work and love that is considered more satisfying. The novel teaches its readers that this is what is ultimately more fulfilling. Thus, Meg’s development tells the reader what is valued most in Alcott’s time.

3.2.2 Jo

Of the four sisters, Jo is most often discussed, likely due to the fact that she can be considered the roundest character of the four sisters. While Meg’s main concern is being poor, Jo has multiple flaws and insecurities. One of them, for which she is also most often discussed, is her resistance to traditional gender norms. Throughout the novel, she can be seen lamenting the fact that she has to conform to the rules that her gender has set out for her: “[i]t’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys’ games, and work, and manners. I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy” (4). Similarly, when the sisters want to buy a present for their father, Jo says that she is “the man of the family now papa is away” (7), as she shows the most traditionally masculine traits. Her cutting off her hair for money shows she is the least vain, also cementing her role as the tomboy. Additionally, when the family receives a letter from their father, Jo ensures that “no one would see any sign of emotion if the letter should happen to be touching” (12), coinciding with Jo’s role as the tomboy sister and the traditional view that showing emotion is not masculine. Thus, through her actions and dialogue, Jo is characterised as boyish, but in a way that conforms to rather outdated views and norms, as her statements all assume traditional gender roles and manners which could be considered traditional from a 21st-century perspective.

Another struggle for Jo is her temper, “the fiery spirit which was continually getting her into trouble” (114), which is depicted as a major flaw and causes the most trouble for her. This is illustrated during the fight between Jo and Amy. After Amy burns Jo’s manuscript, Jo’s temper leads her to ignore Amy, even when Amy follows her to go ice skating. When Amy then falls through the ice, however, Jo blames herself for the accident. The novel depicts the incident as if Jo’s temper is the cause of the accident by highlighting Jo’s feeling of guilt: “[i]t seems as if I could do anything when I’m in a passion; I get so savage, I could hurt any one, and enjoy it” (122). This suggests that Amy falling in the lake is a direct result of Jo’s anger. Even after this confession, Mrs. March does not suggest that it was an accident, but tells Jo to “remember this day, and resolve, with all your soul, that you will never know another like it” (122). Greta Gaard writing about the repression of anger in *Little Women* argues that the novel “shows that good little women who cheerfully practice self-denial will be loved by friends and family, and will be able to marry. But as it also illustrates, cheerful self-denial implicitly requires the suppression of anger” (4). This suppression of anger can also be seen in Mrs. March, who has to suppress her anger to be agreeable to the people around her. She, in turn, has to teach Jo how to accomplish this.

During this heart-to-heart, Mrs. March confesses her own struggles with her temper, and we learn that she is most similar to Jo in this respect. This fact, “the knowledge that her mother had a fault like hers, and tried to mend it” greatly reassures Jo (122). When asked how she has learned to manage her anger, Mrs. March confesses Mr. March helped her to teach her to be patient. This information sheds a new light on Mrs. March and suggests that the strong woman is more reliant on a husband than Jo or the reader previously thought. If Marmee is the guide for the sisters, it is because she has learned to be so from their father, who function as a role model to the sisters and Mrs. March: “[h]e never loses patience,—never doubts or complains,—but always hopes, and works and waits so cheerfully, that one is

ashamed to do otherwise before him” (124). Similarly, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* refers to Mr. March as the “chaplain/hero character” who “has abandoned the family for the greater good of serving in the Civil War,” also emphasising his virtuousness (“Alcott, Louisa May”). This information highlights the role of the father, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.3.

The lessons Jo learns also demonstrate another concern of hers: her fear of growing up. Throughout the novel, Jo can be seen resisting change. This is partly due to not wanting to lose her loved ones: “Jo loved a few persons very dearly, and dreaded to have their affection lost or lessened in any way,” referring to Meg marrying Brooke (367). However, another reason is suggested when Jo laments, once again, being born a girl: “Oh, dear me! why weren’t we all boys? then there wouldn’t be any bother!” (319). Jo is sad about the fact that Mr. Brooke is in love with Meg and that finding an eligible husband is such a cause of trouble in the lives of the sisters. For Jo, especially, the fact that women are expected to marry worries her, as her struggle to accept this demonstrates. Furthermore, Jo mourns the fact that she cannot up and leave with Laurie because she is a girl: “If I was a boy, we’d run away together, and have a capital time; but as I’m a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stop at home” (334). This illustrates that Jo laments her role as a girl and the expectations to which she has to conform, which partly explains her fear of growing up. Thus, the fact that Jo so often laments being a girl is a direct result of rigid gender norms. Consequently, Jo’s character provides fruitful ground for discussion, especially to show the impact of gender norms on a young woman’s life in nineteenth-century America.

3.2.3 Beth

Beth is the timid sister, characterised as hard-working and dutiful. She is a relatively flat character, as every bit of information we receive about her cements her role as shy sister who

is afraid of people outside of her own little bubble. When, in the beginning of the novel, each sister reveals her flaw, Beth remains quiet: “Beth said nothing, [...], while she resolved in her quiet little soul to be all that father hoped to find her when the year brought round the happy coming home” (14). This characterises her as not having to overcome any flaws in the novel but is also highlights the importance of Mr. March in her motivation to be good and well-behaved. However, though Beth seems to be a perfectly virtuous character, she is human as well: “Beth had her troubles as well as the others; and not being an angel, but a very human little girl, she often ‘wept a little weep,’ as Jo said, because she couldn’t take music lessons and have a fine piano” (59). Thus, through direct characterisation from the omniscient narrator, Beth is made a bit more human as she has her own longings, though she does not act on them. The omniscient narrator contributes a great deal to Beth’s characterisation, while her actions and dialogue is less prominent.

Beth’s main flaw is her shyness. Though she remains shy throughout the novel, she grows and learns that people are not as scary as she thinks they are. Mrs. March recognises that she is trying to be less shy: “That’s my good girl; you do try to fight off your shyness, and I love you for it; fighting faults isn’t easy, as I know” (190). During a party, Beth speaks with Frank Vaughn when she feels sorry for him: “Beth forgot herself, and was quite unconscious of her sisters’ surprise and delight at the unusual spectacle of Beth talking away to one of the dreadful boys, against whom she had begged protection” (214). This simultaneously shows Beth’s growth, as well as her selflessness, as she defies expectations and confronts her fear to please other people, which is what makes her happy. Still, there seems to be the least development in Beth’s character, partly because the novel sets her up from the beginning as someone who does not have to overcome many faults.

The major incident in Beth’s storyline is her illness and eventual death. Beth contracts scarlet fever after dutifully visiting the poor Hummel family and nearly dies in the first part

of the novel. Through Beth's near-death, all the other characters learn to appreciate her value and worth. Beth's illness shows each sister learning something from this situation and also learning to be grateful for what they have:

Then it was that Margaret, sitting alone with tears dropping often on her work, felt how rich she had been in things more precious than any luxuries money could buy; in love, protection, peace and health, the real blessing of life. Then it was that Jo, living in the darkened room with that suffering little sister always before her eyes, and that pathetic voice sounding in her ears, learned to see the beauty and the sweetness of Beth's nature, to feel how deep and tender a place she filled in all hearts, and to acknowledge the worth of Beth's unselfish ambition, to live for others, and make home happy by the exercise of those simple virtues which all may possess, and which all should love and value more than talent, wealth or beauty. And Amy, in her exile, longed eagerly to be at home, that she might work for Beth, feeling now that no service would be hard or irksome, and remembering, with regretful grief, how many neglected tasks those willing hands had done for her (287-8)

This is another way in which the omniscient narrator contributes to Beth's characterisation. Additionally, this illustrates that Beth, indirectly has taught her sisters a great deal during her illness, again highlighting her selflessness. It is this ultimate selflessness, however, that also leads to Beth's death. Murphy writes that Beth's "death is the clearest message in the novel about the ominous dangers of selflessness" (572). Because Beth always dutifully serves others, she falls ill, which eventually leads to her death. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser writes that Beth "literally fails to attain adulthood" ("Whispers" 69). When each sister tells of her ambitious aspirations for life, Beth's goal is "to stay at home safe with father and mother, and help take care of the family" ("Whispers" 225). This selfless and humble goal is no longer what women should strive for in America in the 1860s, as the novel seems to suggest. Keyser

writes that “If the goal of playing pilgrims is indeed to reach the Celestial City, Beth is well ahead of the game” but because of this, the novel leaves her no room to grow and reach adulthood (“Little Women” 45).

3.2.4 Amy

Amy is the youngest sibling, characterised as immature and spoilt as she is coddled by her parents. She learns to overcome her selfishness and grow up to be a respectable, charming young woman. Amy acknowledges herself that selfishness is her main fault: “I’ve thought a great deal lately about ‘my bundle of naughties,’ and being selfish is the largest one on it” (316). It is this selfishness that Amy tries to overcome in the first part of the novel. A major learning opportunity for Amy is the time she spends at Aunt March’s. When Beth contracts scarlet fever, Amy is sent off to Aunt March to avoid contracting the illness too. Under these circumstances Amy grows and learns to be less selfish. In the beginning of her time at Aunt March’s she complains much and wants to go home, as “[s]he felt her exile deeply, and, for the first time in her life, realized how much she was beloved and petted at home” (299). Amy has to adapt to a new situation in which she is not coddled. She has to please Aunt March who makes her work hard and is strict for her. Amy feels her situation is unjust and laments that she has to stay at Aunt March’s. The contrast between her relatively quiet time at Aunt March’s and the suspense of the sisters’ time at home, where Beth is taken care of, reveals Amy’s conceitedness and her immaturity. She is simply too young to fully grasp the situation yet.

In the end, however, Amy learns much from her time at Aunt March’s. Through Aunt March’s maid, Esther, religion begins to be an important part in Amy’s life and in her growth. Amy sees how important religion is to Esther, and, taking her as an example, Amy learns to resort to religion in difficult times, “for, being left alone outside the safe home-nest,

she felt the need of some kind hand to hold by so sorely, that she instinctively turned to the strong and tender Friend, whose fatherly love most closely surround His little children” (305-6). It is here, when Amy is not surrounded by her sisters and her mother who can guide her and teach her to be good, that she resorts to religion to find motivation to work hard and not complain. All these virtues are already known and practiced by Beth, while Amy is taught these virtues at Aunt March’s. Amy thus learns to appreciate Beth’s quiet role in the house and how important Beth is to her.

Amy is also considered the artist of the family. Throughout the novel, she can be seen making mud pies, drawing, and making a mould of her foot. While initially her ambitions are ridiculed and depicted as immature, as Amy grows up, her ambition is taken seriously and appreciated. In the first part, Amy’s aspirations are portrayed as mere childish fantasies. She has “lots of wishes; but the pet one is to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world” (225). While this is certainly ambitious for a young woman in the nineteenth century, we see Amy work hard to achieve her goal throughout the novel. It is only in the second part that it becomes clear how diligently she has been working on her painting skills: “It takes people a long time to learn the difference between talent and genius, especially ambitious young men and women. Amy was learning this distinction through much tribulation; for mistaking enthusiasm for inspiration, she attempted every branch of art with youthful audacity” (401). This highlights Amy’s ambition and willingness to work hard for what she wants. She is, together with Jo, arguably the most ambitious of the bunch.

3.3 Mr. March’s Presence

While all sisters and their central flaws differ, multiple larger themes can be seen which are important for the sisters and constitute a big part of their motivation in growing up. Among

the most important ones are the role of religion and the role of Mr. March. They lead the sisters to work hard and be virtuous. Throughout the novel, Mrs. March teaches the sisters that a life without hard work and only lounging and laziness is not fulfilling, as “it is better to have a few duties, and live a little for others” (183). Indeed, after a week of lounging, the sisters long for some work to be productive and not just live their lives for themselves. The novel teaches the sisters and the readers that “[w]ork is wholesome, and there is plenty for every one; it keeps us from *ennui* and mischief; is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion” (184). While this advice initially seems to come from Mrs. March, who acts as the guide on the journey, on closer reading, her true motivation reveals more about the position of women in the time in which the novel was published.

While Mr. March is absent for most of the first part, throughout the novel, his presence is undeniably important to the girls. Often when Mrs. March teaches them a new lesson, it is ultimately to please their father and to make him proud. His influence in the home is implicit: “To outsiders, the five energetic women seemed to rule the house, and so they did in many things; but the quiet man sitting among his books was still the head of the family, the household conscience, anchor and comforter” (374). The novel only occasionally alludes to this quiet power of Mr. March in the house, but it certainly has a great influence on the sisters’ acts. For instance, when Mr. March arrives home from the war, it becomes clear that he plays an important part in the sisters’ development, even though he was absent. When they sit down for dinner, he observes that each sister has grown and changed during the time that he has been absent. Starting with Meg, he praises her for the way in which her “white hands” have become “industrious little hands” as he lets her know that he values “the womanly skill which keeps home happy” (348-9). The approval of the skills that a housewife needs lets the reader know that this is what was valued in young women.

Furthermore, when Mr. March addresses Jo, he approves of her having shed her boyish ways and becoming “a young lady who pins her collar straight, laces her boots neatly, and neither whistles, talks slang, nor lies on the rug, as she used to do” (349). These qualities were not considered proper for a young lady and are met with disapproval throughout the novel. In order to become a respectable young woman, Jo has to acquire proper manners. In this way, Mr. March has gained “a strong, helpful, tender-hearted woman in her place,” of whom he approves (349). Jo casting off manners which were considered boyish teaches the reader that in order to be considered a proper woman, one has to act accordingly to fit gender norms.

Through Amy’s assessment, we learn that she has grown and learned the lesson which she had set out to learn. Mr. March recognises that she has become less selfish: “I conclude that she has learned to think of other people more, and of herself less, and has decided to try and mold her character as carefully as she molds her little clay figures” (350). This assessment teaches the reader that living for other people is approved in a young woman. It also highlights Amy’s youthfulness: she is not a young lady, but she is starting to carefully construct her identity as a young woman.

As for Beth, Mr. March does not say much about her or her growth: “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” (350). Beth has indeed managed to overcome some of her shyness, but her lack of growth in any other way, cements her characterisation as being too good to be true altogether. Mr. March is pleased by her, as she already possesses those qualities which are valued most in young women, such as selflessness and gratitude. Through Beth’s character, the importance of Mr. March is most evident: “she resolved in her quiet little soul to be all that father hoped to find her when the year brought round the happy coming home” (14). Her

reliance on her father's approval reveals that her own values can be considered the most traditional of the sisters.

Thus, when Mr. March comes home, his influence on the girls' motivation becomes evident. The household, which initially is depicted as a home that is completely run by women, seems to be much more influenced by the absent father than first thought. This becomes clear when he comes home, as "[l]ike bees swarming after their queen, mother and daughters hovered about Mr. March the next day" (353). The conversation when Mr. March is finally home suggests that his judgement and approval is needed in the sisters' development. Murphy writes that Alcott "portrays the entire pilgrimage itself as an act, a game; the progression of the girls' roles is objectivized, viewed, and judged by a benevolent, absent patriarch. The sisters are learning not simply to be selfless, but to be objects, viewed by patriarchal subjects" (572). In this way, the mostly absent Mr. March plays an important role in the motivation of the characters as they come of age, mirroring the way in which the sisters will be regarded later on in life.

While Mr. March, their earthly father, is important, the heavenly father plays a crucial role in the development of the characters as well. *Pilgrim's Progress*, the game which the sisters play, has clear religious undertones as the goal of the game is to reach the Celestial City. The goal for the girls used to be to reach the attic, but at the beginning of the novel, Mrs. March parallels the game to real life. In order to reach the Celestial City, the sisters have to be virtuous and learn to be good. Each sister learns to resort to their faith in a different way. Beth is the most faithful Christian, as she also helps her sisters remember to pray and read the bible. Jo and Amy both need to be reminded of the role of religion in their lives. When Marmee helps Jo to overcome her temper, she refers to religion as a source of strength: "My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning, and may be many; but you can overcome and outlive them all, if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your

Heavenly Father as you do that of your earthly one” (126). Interestingly, the omniscient narrator suggests a link between Mr. March and god to encourage the sisters to overcome their flaws. Because of this, Jo “had drawn nearer to the Friend who welcomes every child with a love stronger than that of any father, tenderer than that of any mother” (127).

Furthermore, Meg, too, demonstrates that religion is important to her as she says that, “There is a lovelier country even than that, where we *shall* go, by and by, when we are good enough” (222), implying that religion, especially in the form of a heavenly patriarch, is important motivation to act virtuously and overcome one’s flaws.

4. Analysis of Gerwig's *Little Women*

4.1 Introduction

Gerwig's *Little Women* is a modern-day adaptation of Alcott's classic novel. There are two important changes made to the story which are interesting to analyse as they affect the story a great deal. The first noticeable change is that the adaptation works with a frame narrative. The film starts with Jo selling a story to her publisher, Mr. Dashwood. This interaction establishes Jo's willingness to edit her stories and the concessions she is willing to make to sell her stories to be of help to her family. At the end of the film, we see Jo discussing her novel with Mr. Dashwood. The story that Jo is writing focuses on the sisters' lives, and, as becomes clear in the end, it is the story of the March sisters that the film has just told. In this way, it is Jo who is telling the story, which marks an important narrative difference from the source text. The film, however, is not told through a voice-over, in contrast to the novel, which has an intrusive, omniscient narrator.

The second element that Gerwig has decided to change is the film's chronology. The adaptation is told in a non-chronological fashion, with jumps in time, and, as a result, the film is less structured like a story of growth for the characters. The themes that are present in a coming of age story are also less prevalent in this adaptation because of this change. The film switches between the sisters' childhood and adulthood (parts one and two of the novel, respectively), and the lessons that the sisters learn are, therefore, less prominent. In the beginning of the film, when the sisters are introduced, they are all grown up, each in their own place, apart from each other. Meg is married and lives with Mr. Brooke in a cottage together with their twins. Jo is in New York writing stories for newspapers at a boarding house. Beth is at home, contentedly playing the piano and Amy is in Paris working hard to develop her painting skills. John Matteson writes in *The Atlantic* that "[b]y telling the story out of chronological order, it shows the extent to which the childhood self is part and parcel

of adulthood.” It is also a way for the film to highlight the differences between the younger and older selves and to contrast them.

4.2 Twenty-first Century *Little Women*

4.2.1 Meg

The film starts by showing grown-up Meg in the cottage with Mr Brooke. Their struggles of being poor are a constant topic in Meg’s storyline. This is also a lesson that Meg has to learn. In the beginning of the film, we see her splurging on materials for a dress, which showcases her weakness of succumbing to the allure of riches. Later on, when she confesses the indulgence to Mr. Brooke, her motivation becomes clear: “I know you are angry, John. I don't mean to waste your money, but I can't resist when I see Sallie buying all she wants, and pitying me because I don't. I try to be contented, but it is hard, and I'm tired of being poor” (Gerwig 1:02:07-1:02:22). This establishes the main struggle of Meg and a point of constant discussion with Mr. Brooke. This scene is also in part two in the novel, and it shows that her central flaw is similar in the novel.

When young Meg goes to the Moffat’s for the debutante ball, she learns a similar lesson to the one she is taught in the book. Mrs. March wants her to go because “[g]irls have to go into the world and make up their own minds about things” (54:56-58). In contrast, in the novel Mrs. March is reluctant to let Meg go the ball. This illustrates that Mrs. March sees this as a lesson for Meg in staying true to herself and being independent. Though Mrs. March wants Meg to consider things on her own, she has taught Meg what she values most. When Meg is at the Moffat’s, she displays her flaw of needing validation through superficiality but subsequently learns a lesson by feeling uncomfortable. Thus, this incident plays the same role for Meg in the film as in the novel, but Mrs. March’s aims for Meg’s visit are different; she wants Meg to think independently.

Similar to the lesson taught in the novel, Meg's falling in love with Mr. Brooke demonstrates that she has become less superficial and places more importance on love than money. While Mr. Brooke is constantly unsure about how he can make her happy, Meg reassures him by demonstrating that her love for him is more important:

John: I don't want you to be unhappy.

Meg: I couldn't be, John Brooke is my husband and I am his wife. (1:25:31)

Through her marriage, Meg is able to display how she has grown and learnt to place less importance on money.

The film highlights the different aspirations of the sisters, and illustrates that Meg's dream of having a husband, a home, and a family, is a valid aspiration, though it might seem traditional in today's context. When Meg is about to marry Mr. Brooke, she has a conversation with Jo which points to the importance of choice: "[j]ust because my dreams are not the same as yours doesn't mean they're unimportant. I want a home and a family and I'm willing to work and struggle, but I want to do it with John" (1:32:04-1:33:08). Meg's defensive response to Jo highlights the fact that this is what Meg wants, emphasising her agency and the validity of her wish. The fact that she ends up choosing to marry a poor man and does not rely on marrying a rich man to take care of her also shows her independence, indicating that she has learnt not to live by the traditional gender expectations set for women in her lifetime. In the end, Meg is content with her life in a cottage with a husband who loves her, which demonstrates her growth. The main focus of Meg's storyline is not necessarily her character growth as the film is not told as a story of growth. Rather, the film emphasises her agency in choosing the life she leads with Mr. Brooke.

4.2.2 Jo

Gerwig's Jo is characterised as a hardworking writer who wants to provide for her mother and sisters. In the beginning of the film she can be seen writing in New York to earn some money to send back home. In the novel, Jo visits New York as well, but this only happens in part two. In the adaptation, it is quickly made clear that, for Jo, "[m]oney is the end and aim of my mercenary existence," as she tells Professor Bhaer, highlighting the monetary nature of her writing aspirations (5:45). Jo feels responsibility for keeping the family afloat and in the beginning of the film she sells her stories with alterations, even though she does not fully support them. Writing stories has simply become a monetary activity for her to help her family out. In this way, Jo can be seen playing a traditionally male part in the family as she provides for them. Jo's way of taking care of her family has never been traditionally feminine, by working in the home doing domestic duties. This is emphasised in the film when she wants to run away with Meg before Meg's marriage: "I can make money: I'll sell stories, I'll do anything. I'll cook, I'll clean, I'll work in a factory. I can make a life for us" (1:31:41-48). While she also mentions tasks that were traditionally done by women like cooking and cleaning, she emphasises that she would provide for the two of them. This contrasts with the novel as this conversation is not present there, but it demonstrates that she wants to fulfil the traditional male role in the household by taking care of Meg in a financial way.

Similarly, when Jo tells Laurie where her father is, she says: "[h]e volunteered for the Union Army. And I wanted to go fight with him. I can't get over my disappointment in being a girl" (14:43-14:49). This, too, illustrates Jo's unhappiness with the traditional gender expectations she is expected to meet. By lamenting the fact that she cannot join the army, she is characterised as a tomboy, with a preference for traditionally masculine qualities. This can also be seen when a letter from Mr. March arrives and Amy teases Jo by saying that "Jo sits

in the back so we can't see her cry" (32:12-32:14). This aversion to traditional gender norms and expectations can also be seen in the novel.

Jo's reluctance to growing up is also prominent in the film. Just before Meg's marriage, she has a conversation with her which reveals her aversion to the end of her childhood:

Jo: I just hate that you're leaving me. Don't leave.

Meg: Oh, Jo, I'm not leaving you. And besides, one day it will be your turn.

Jo: I'd rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe. I would. Can't believe childhood is over.

Meg: It was going to end one way or another. And what a happy end.

(1:31:41-48).

This, as can also be seen in the novel, is Jo's greatest struggle. Jo constantly makes clear that she does not want to marry as she loves her "liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up" (1:39:00-1:40:09). However, Jo starts to doubt her decision of not wanting to marry when Beth dies, Amy is in Europe and Meg is married. In a conversation with Mrs. March, Jo can be seen lamenting the restrictive reality of women in her time: "I just feel like... 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 and I'm so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for. I'm so sick of it. But... I'm so lonely" (1:42:25-1:42:52). Here, for the first time we can see her longing for independence clash with her sudden loneliness. Adulthood has confronted her with the reality of life as a single adult woman, something which she was sheltered from in childhood and in fiction. John Matteson writes that "[t]he quest of Gerwig's Jo for a career makes her lonely, but she is made lonelier still by the realization that love in real life does not greatly resemble the love she describes in her potboiler stories." Indeed, Jo realises that "If I was a girl in a book, this would all be so easy. Just give up the world

happily” but this is not fiction and Jo realises that it is, therefore, difficult to remain happily independent or to just submit to what is expected of her (1:40:52-1:41:00). Richard Brody writes about Gerwig’s Jo that “[t]he spectre that hangs over Jo’s literary ambition is bohemianism—the rejection of the settled domestic life and its morality in favor of being independent and unmoored, freethinking, and, above all, poor.” This is what Jo is confronted with in adulthood. This emphasis on her reluctance of growing up is framed as Jo’s greatest struggle in the film, in contrast to her temper which is more prominent in the novel.

At the end of the film, it becomes clear that the story is actually told by Jo: it is the novel she has been writing throughout the film. Jo’s aspiration of becoming a writer is emphasised as we follow her writing and publishing her book. Richard Brody writes that “In this way, Gerwig’s *Little Women* is the tale of the birth of the artist—a female artist at a time that’s hostile to women and the telling of stories of women’s point of view.” At the start of the film, when Jo is trying to get her story published, we quickly learn what is expected of women in Alcott’s society, as Mr. Dashwood says that “if the main character is a girl, make sure she’s married by the end. Or dead” (3:50-3:54). This is ironic, as Jo is, of course, set on not being married. However, Jo makes concessions to have her story published. When Jo wants her novel to be published, they have a similar discussion. Mr. Dashwood asks who the heroine marries, and Jo answers: “No one. She doesn’t marry either of them” (2:02:50). Because this is too radical and the novel would not sell, Jo is told to make alterations. She then says, “I suppose marriage has always been an economic proposition. Even in fiction” (2:03:25). This shows that Jo has learnt to operate within the boundaries and expectations of society. In the end, Jo negotiates the profits and decides she wants to own the copyright, making her the owner of her own story, as she tells Mr. Dashwood that “if I’m going to sell my heroine into marriage for money, I might as well get some of it” (2:06:05). This suggests that Jo has learnt to be in charge of her own story, and her own affairs, and that she is able to

display agency. She has accepted her fate gracefully but has also learnt to operate to her satisfaction. Thus, the frame narrative that the film has added reveals the realities of life as a woman in the nineteenth century, but also shows the concessions that (women) writers had to make.

4.2.3 Beth

Beth's main flaw in the film is her shyness. Throughout the story, she can be seen trying to overcome this flaw and be less scared of people. Whereas the omniscient narrator contributes a great deal to Beth's characterisation in the novel, in the adaptation, this can be done visually. Beth's character growth is more visible as her silent way of communicating can be made more visible on screen. For instance, the hesitation with which she approaches the Laurences' house to secretly play the piano is more present in the film. Subsequently, Beth's silent way of thanking Mr. Laurence for the piano is reinforced on the screen. She silently leaves the house to go over to the Mr. Laurence to hug him. Her quiet, non-verbal way of communicating can be highlighted by just showing, rather than telling. This can be seen in the instructions in the screenplay: "[b]ut words are lost, and she throws her arms around him. He accepts the hug like he's been waiting for it his whole life" (82). Her development with regards to her central flaw remains similar in the film.

Beth's aspiration is to be content at home with her parents: "[m]y wish is to have us all to be together with father and mother in this house. That's what I want" (26:29-26:32). Amy mocks her by saying that "Beth is perfect" when Beth tells everyone of her humble dream of staying at home with mother and father (26:34). She is then asked what she is going to do with her talent for music, upon which she says that it is only for her family to enjoy and no one else needs to hear it. Amy tells her "you must not limit yourself" (26:39), but Beth's dream demonstrates her main aspiration in life. While it can be seen as a traditional goal, it is

portrayed as her own choice, paralleling Meg's storyline. She has the support of her family to go out into the world, but she chooses to stay at home and be a dutiful daughter. Thus, emphasis is placed on Beth's agency in the film.

Beth places much importance on traditional family values. When Mrs. March suggests taking their Christmas breakfast to the Hummels, the girls sit silently, showing their reluctance. Then Beth speaks up, asking, "[i]s this where you say that father would want us to?" (29:13-29:16). This shows the importance that Beth places on Mr. March's influence. While the other sisters hardly acknowledge his role in the film, Beth can still be seen keeping him in mind, even when he is largely absent. Therefore, in both the novel and the film, Beth is the sister most dependent of her father and placing the most importance on his influence. This highlights Beth's traditional character and the traditional values that are meaningful to her.

4.2.4 Amy

While in the novel, Amy's greatest struggle is framed as her selfishness, this is absent in the film. Rather, in the childhood parts of the film, she is characterised as the immature youngest sibling who is sometimes ridiculed by the others. She provides some comic relief when she takes herself too seriously: "I'm making a mold of my foot for Laurie to remind him I have nice feet" (1:16:25-1:16:27). Her ambition of being an artist in Europe is not taken seriously yet, though she works hard to practice her skill. The film also emphasises the importance that Amy places on manners and being respectable. After Jo throws a cushion, Amy reprimands Jo by telling her "Jo that's so boyish. I detest rude, unladylike girls" (26:51-26:54). This demonstrates the importance she places on conforming to traditional gender roles. While in the novel her principal fault is framed as her selfishness, less emphasis is placed on this trait and her overcoming it in the film.

From a young age, Amy is told by Aunt March that she will have to marry a rich man, and she is the only one of the sisters who seriously keeps this in mind. During her time at Aunt March's, her aunt imprints this in her mind. Aunt March is disappointed in the rest of the family and says that Amy is their hope now and “[i]t’ll be up to you to support them all, and your indigent parents in their old age. So you must marry well and save your family” (1:22:40-1:23:15). Amy’s time at Aunt March’s does not focus on her growing in a spiritual way. While in the book the emphasis is on Amy resorting to religion to find strength in a difficult time, this is not present in the film. Rather, Amy is taught the importance of money in a marriage, and this scene establishes this as an important theme in Amy’s storyline and development.

Amy grows up to be a respectable young woman who is graceful and pragmatic. She always knew she would marry a rich man, as that is the only way to live a comfortable life. In Paris, she realises that she is not destined to be an artist. After this realisation, she is asked by Laurie what she is going to do with her life, to which she replies “[p]olish up all my other talents and become an ornament to society” (1:04:56-1:05:00). Amy is well aware of her position as a woman in her time and what is expected of her. The film shows she accepts her fate with grace, no matter how painful it might be to submit to this. The extent of Amy’s realistic outlook becomes clear when she tells Laurie about her view on marriage:

Well. I’m not a poet, I’m just a woman. And as a woman there’s 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 were married. 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 isn’t an economic proposition, because it is. It may not be for you, but it most certainly is for me (1:05:45-1:06:18)

In this way, Gerwig explicitly comments on the harsh realities that Amy has to consider growing up. Subsequently, when Laurie proposes to Amy, we learn that it is too painful for Amy to accept his proposal as she does not want to be Laurie's second choice after Jo has refused his proposal. Amy is in love with Laurie as well, as the film makes apparent through Amy's facial expressions, for instance. However, in the end, she does consent to marrying Laurie. This shows the extent to which Amy has to be realistic in her outlook on marriage. Despite it hurting her that Laurie settles for Amy, she knows that this is the best option she has. Amy has learnt that marriage for women is not always an idealistic and romantic, but that, for a woman of her circumstances, it is a choice, one that has to be carefully considered for women, as their means of making money are meagre.

4.4 Mr. March's Absence

The role of the father in the film shows that Gerwig has reduced his importance in the sisters' motivation. Though Mr. March is absent a great deal in the novel, he is even more absent in the film. We see the daughters longing for his return when he is out at war, but not in the way they do in the book. His absence becomes especially clear when looking at the motivation of the sisters. For instance, this can be seen when Jo has a talk with Mrs. March, after Amy falls in the lake. In the novel, Mrs. March confesses she is often angry but has learnt to be more patient with the help of Mr. March. In the film, Mrs. March says: "I'm not patient by nature, but with nearly forty years of effort I have learned to not let it get the better of me" (52:43-53:55). There is no mention of Mr. March's help here, and this suggests a more independent Mrs. March who does not need the help of her husband to become more patient. This also implies that Jo will not be motivated to be more patient to please her father. A more independent, matriarchal household is emphasised here.

Similarly, when Mr. March returns home from the war in the film, we see him wishing his daughters merry Christmas. However, Mr. March's lines in the screenplay specify him saying: "My little women. How you've grown, and how proud I am of you. Each of you. Merry Christmas, my dears" (90). In the film, these lines have been reduced to him saying "Merry Christmas, to each of you" (1:28:53). The father, therefore, does not express his pride in his daughters and does not say that they have grown, unlike the screenplay specifies. Thus, while his influence is already downgraded as he does not have many lines, his importance is further reduced by the women's lack of dependence on him. In contrast, in the novel Mr. March assesses each sister, establishing how they have grown in the year that he has been gone, illustrating that his approval is important for their development. John Matteson writes that Gerwig's adaptation highlights that "[a] considerable source of pain in Alcott's world is the disapproving masculine gaze, so often clad in the guise of moral judgment, that can bruise a woman's self-esteem and steal her self-expression." In Gerwig's adaptation, the sisters are less influenced by this male gaze through the omission of Mr. March.

5. Little Women Growing Up: Then and Now

5.1 Introduction

Social context has a great effect on the way in which a novel is adapted. Many changes have to be made when adapting a novel to a film, as “being shown a story is not the same as being told it” (Hutcheon 12). This chapter will explore in what ways the sisters from Alcott’s *Little Women* differ from the sisters in Gerwig’s *Little Women*, focusing on the effect that the change of context has on the characters and how their struggles are represented. The most important shift in the main struggles of the characters is due to the changed perspective on the position of women. As a result, the film highlights each sister’s struggles differently from the novel. The major shifts reveal the way in which a patriarchal household has shifted to a matriarchal household, and how the focus of the sisters’ struggles has changed. This will be discussed in more detail in this chapter.

5.2 From Patriarch to Matriarch

The novel’s main focus is on each sister overcoming her central flaw. As discussed previously, from the start of the novel, the story is presented as a coming of age story through the game of Pilgrim’s Progress which the sisters play and the focus on their central flaws. Even before the novel starts, though, Alcott refers to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* in a preface, suggesting the moral nature of the novel and implying the importance of religion in the sisters’ journey. The film does not refer to Bunyan and is also not structured like a story of growth for the main characters. In the film, while the character’s flaw is of course present because it is a prominent part of their character, the main focus of each sister’s storyline is not on them overcoming their principal flaw. This is, in part, due to the structure of the adaptation. Gerwig has decided to not tell the story chronologically. Rather, the story switches between the sisters’ childhood and adulthood. The characters’ storylines are broken

up and told through scenes in the past and the present, seven years later. As a result, the struggles that the sisters have to overcome in order to grow up are framed differently and they are not necessarily typical of the struggles that protagonists deal with in a bildungsroman. For instance, as previously mentioned, female protagonists who displayed a great many talents were met with disdain while their male counterparts were praised for this, showing how women's bildungsromane deal with specific issues (Pratt).

The reference to Bunyan also highlights the importance of religion in the characters' coming of age. As previously mentioned, religion plays an important role in bildungsromane, which can be seen in Alcott's *Little Women*. The four protagonists frequently seek guidance in their Bibles and Mrs. March often encourages her daughters to seek guidance in their faith. In contrast, Gerwig's *Little Women* does not make any mention of religion and it can therefore not be seen as important motivation for the sisters to behave virtuously. This objective is not present in the film. An explanation for the absence of religion in the adaptation is that for a general 21st-century audience it may be less relevant than for a 19th-century audience. As discussed in 2.1, stories, neither source text nor adaptation, exist in a vacuum. The social context greatly influences the decisions that an adapter makes when adapting a novel. As a result, excluding the influence of religion on the sisters in the novel could make the film more relevant for its secular audience.

Furthermore, as discussed in 2.2, motivation is an important part of a fictional character. Through pieces of dialogue the novel and the film make clear how important Mr. March as well as the Heavenly Father are in the sisters' motivation. In Gerwig's adaptation, however, both play a less central role. Holly Blackford writes that "[i]mbued with the authority of God, the male writer Bunyan, and Alcott's father Bronson Alcott, who used the book in his daughter's education, *The Pilgrim's Progress* stands in for the absent father in the March house" (6), showcasing how Mr. March and religion are important factors underlying

the sisters' coming of age. In the novel, in spite of his physical absence, he seems ever-present, as he motivates the sisters from afar to become better persons. The result can be observed when he arrives back home from the war, and he observes how well each sister has behaved and overcome their central flaw. Significantly, the novel also suggests a link between the sisters' father and the Heavenly Father. Thus, Mr. March and religion share a similar role in the novel as they both motivate the sisters to grow up and be virtuous young women.

This change to the sisters' motivation can be seen as an update of the sisters' struggles. The household in the film is completely female-based, matriarchal rather than patriarchal. The absence of a patriarch in the film suggests that the sisters are not dependant of male approval to be good people. It is no longer important to be judged by a patriarchal figure, whether it be a father or a Heavenly Father. In the film, Mr. March does not take up the role of an absent patriarch; he is devoid of an important role in the family altogether.

5.3 Shifting the Focus

The film's main focus is on how each sister learns to navigate the limits that society has set on them, in particular, due to their gender. Ultimately, many of the struggles of the protagonists in the film are caused by their gender and the rigid gender norms which are upheld in the nineteenth-century society in which the story takes place. All sisters struggle with their acceptance of gender norms, in both Alcott's and Gerwig's version. A major difference is that Gerwig's protagonists comment on them explicitly from a 21st century perspective, which makes their struggles more apparent. According to Clark who writes about the novel, "the surface message in *Little Women* is that the March sisters should aspire to domesticity and moral goodness" (82). Similarly, the four main characters are encouraged

to be virtuous young ladies in the novel to eventually become good wives. This message is prevalent in the novel, but it is not the focus of Gerwig's adaptation.

The role of gender norms becomes most evident when analysing Jo. This is both the case in the novel as well as the film. Jo is just as strong-willed and boyish in the adaptation but Gerwig gives her more leeway in her treatment of gender norms. For instance, Jo's temper was framed as her greatest struggle in the novel which she had to overcome, but Gerwig's Jo is allowed to not be pleasant all the time. Jo's boyishness is often emphasised, and her story arc reveals the value which is placed on young women being ladylike and elegant, according to traditional gender expectations. Clark writes that "[b]y the end of the first volume, though, Jo becomes more object than artist", referring to the assessment of Mr. March, when he approves of the way in which Jo has learned to act and look a certain way which is considered proper and feminine. The novel makes a point to emphasise the way in which she has overcome her tomboyish traits, showing that part of growing up is conforming to gender norms and, usually, marrying.

In Gerwig's adaptation, less emphasis is placed on this conforming to gender norms. Rather, the film highlights the way in which the sisters deal with and eventually learn to navigate the rigid gender norms that their social context upholds and the expectations that they ought to live by. This is in part due to the frame narrative of the film. Hutcheon writes that, in adaptations, "it might be the point of departure or conclusion that is totally transfigured in adaptation" (12). This can be seen in Gerwig's adaptation through the frame narrative with which it works. It is Jo who tells the story, highlighting how Jo is in control of the narrative. This contrasts with the narration of the novel, where the omniscient narrator is present in the sisters' storylines and characterisation.

Furthermore, the film highlights that for many women marriage is financially motivated. This becomes apparent through Amy's character as she marries Laurie, but Jo's

storyline suggests this as well, through her selling her heroine into marriage. They have been taught this by Aunt March, as becomes evident through a conversation she has with Jo:

Aunt March: "You mind yourself, dearie, one day you'll need me and you'll wish you had behaved better."

Jo: "Thank you, Aunt March, for your employment and your many kindnesses, but I intend to make my own way in the world."

Aunt March: "No one makes their own way, not really, least of all a woman. You'll need to marry well."

Jo: "You are not married, Aunt March"

Aunt March: "Well that's because I'm rich and I made sure to keep hold of my money. Unlike your father."

Jo: "So the only way to be an unmarried woman is to be rich."

Aunt March: "Yes."

Jo: "But there are precious few ways for women to make money."

Aunt March: "That's not true. You could run a cat house. Or go on the stage. Practically the same thing. Other than that, you're right, precious few ways for women. That's why you should heed me." (35:15-36:03)

Through Aunt March, Gerwig is able to comment explicitly on the position of middle-class women in Alcott's time. Additionally, Aunt March's mention of running a brothel points out that women, either figuratively or literally, had to prostitute themselves to make a living. The film also highlights Jo's struggle in being a writer as she wants to provide for her family when this is only possible by writing sensational stories for newspapers rather than the kind she wants to write. The film emphasises that she has to "sell her heroine into marriage" (2:06:05) because of the society in which she lives. Society wants to see girls married by the end.

Similarly, the film emphasises Amy's realistic view on marriage for a nineteenth-century woman. While in the novel, the focus is on her becoming less selfish, this is not present in the film. Amy demonstrates that in order to be happy, she has to come to terms with the fact that she will have to marry for money as she is not destined to be a genius in art. Amy's storyline in the film highlights her considerations for marrying Laurie. Her rational view on marriage is stressed as this shows the reality of being a 19th-century middle-class woman who has to marry or be rich to live a comfortable life. Thus, the harsh realities of life for a nineteenth-century woman are emphasised most prominently in Amy and Jo's storylines: both characters have to come to terms with the fact that their idealistic, ambitious artistic aspirations are unrealistic for a woman in their age in America. The way in which both deal with this shows much about their characters, but they can also be seen dealing with it gracefully, however painful it might be.

In contrast, Meg's and Beth's storylines are adapted most faithfully to Alcott's novel. Meg learns similar lessons to the ones she learns in the book, like placing less importance on wealth. The difference with Alcott's Meg lies in the emphasis that is placed on Meg's agency in choosing the life she leads. While nineteenth-century Meg displays agency when she defies Aunt March and her parents' wishes by marrying Mr. Brooke, twenty-first century Meg teaches the audience that her aspiration of wanting a husband and a family is a valid choice. While this could be considered a traditional outlook on life for today's standards, Gerwig places emphasis on the fact that this is Meg's choice. Similarly, this is also the case for Beth in the film. While she displays the most traditional values, the film highlights her agency in this.

As discussed in 2.3, female protagonists in bildungsromane who showed much agency were received disapprovingly. While the characters in Alcott's novel are allowed some agency, illustrated, for instance, by Meg who decides of her own accord to marry John

Brooke, there is not much emphasis placed on the agency of all the protagonists. In Gerwig's *Little Women*, each sister is granted more agency in the outcome of their life. In the novel, Mrs. March specifically encourages her daughters to marry when she mentions that "To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing that can happen to a woman" (Alcott 151) so they eventually can become good wives, as the title of the second part of the novel suggests. This is not present in the film, as Gerwig emphasises that each sister's aspirations are valid, even if they seem old-fashioned. Thus, the sisters are allowed greater freedom in who they are as they do not have to fit the mould of what a good woman is supposed to look like. In this way, the film highlights a more liberal perspective on women's aspirations, which emphasises the restrictive realities for young women growing up in 19th-century America. Thus, Gerwig's changes as a result of social context in the adaptation reveals how the position of women has changed.

6. Conclusion

This thesis analysed how the four protagonists of Alcott's *Little Women* differ from the four protagonists in Gerwig's *Little Women*. By focusing on changes which were made to the characters as a result of change in social context, the analysis provided highlighted each sister's main flaw and struggles to see how they have changed over time. Drawing on adaptation theory, this thesis illustrated the importance of social context in adaptations. Moreover, theory on character and bildungsromane were used for the analysis of both works. This revealed how the characters are characterised differently in novels and films and emphasised the differences in structure of the novel and film.

While the novel's main focus is on the sisters overcoming their central flaws, the film's focus is on the way in which each sister learns to navigate society within the limitations that are set for them through gender norms and expectations. This is partly because the adaptation is not told chronologically, resulting in less focus on each sister's flaw and development in Gerwig's *Little Women*. In contrast, the novel is more structured like a story of growth for the sisters. During this process, the sisters are motivated by two different fathers to act virtuously and overcome their central flaw, even though both are mostly absent. In the film, Mr. March does not play an important role for the sisters as he is even more absent. As a result, a more matriarchal household is depicted. Similarly, the absence of religion demonstrates how this part of the sisters' motivation is updated to make the film relevant for a more secular society.

Futhermore, less emphasis is placed on qualities that are considered traditionally feminine in Gerwig's adaptation. For instance, the novel often makes a point of Jo's boyishness and frames it as a flaw that Jo has to work on. In the film, Jo's boyishness is less seen as a problem for her to overcome, and her temper is not her principal flaw in the film. Rather, Jo's struggle to come to terms with the expectations that are set for her is emphasised

in this version. Amy's storyline in the film also shows how she grows up and accepts her position in society. She is not destined to be a great artist, as her plan was originally, so she has accepted that she will have to marry a rich man. Through different instances of dialogue, the film places emphasis on her rational view on her position in society, highlighting how her compliance to gender norms is, to some extent, her own decision. She chooses to give up her dream and settle, illustrating how she has learnt to navigate the limitations that are set for her. In this way, Gerwig comments explicitly on the position of 19th-century middle-class women. In contrast, the novel focuses much on Amy's younger self who has to overcome her selfishness.

Furthermore, Gerwig places emphasis on each sister's agency. Meg's dream of having a family is respected, just like Beth's humble resolution of staying at the March's home. The film points out that each sister's dream is valid, emphasising that agency is the key factor here. While Meg's dream would have been considered normal in Alcott's time, in 21st-century America this would be seen as a rather old-fashioned aspiration for a woman. Since third wave feminism, however, the acceptance of different aspirations for women has become important, as it emphasises the role of agency, which is valued more than a certain role that women have to fulfil. This idea is highlighted in the film when Meg says, "Just because my dreams are not the same as yours, doesn't mean they're unimportant" (1:32:04-1:33:08). Instead of focusing on Meg's flaw of being too superficial sometimes, the film makes a point to emphasise her agency in her aspiration. Gerwig stresses the importance of agency by showing that each sister's goal in life is her own decision.

Thus, the adaptation reveals the way in which different values are appreciated today, showing the importance of the representation of the characters as role models to the viewer. Comparing Alcott's and Gerwig's *Little Women* has shown how the different social contexts affect the characterisation of the protagonists. A reason for these shifts might be that the

lesson that the novel teaches is outdated for a twenty-first century audience. While both versions show to some extent how the sisters grow up and learn to navigate the limits of society as young women, Gerwig is able to comment on these limits explicitly, by updating each sister's main struggle, from battling a central flaw to coming to terms with gender norms. Thus, the film updates the story by shifting the focus of the sisters' struggles.

Unfortunately, the scope of this thesis does not allow for a comparison of all adaptations of *Little Women*. Moreover, more scholarly articles have yet to be dedicated to Gerwig's *Little Women*, which would offer more interpretations of the characters. Because of time and space constraints, the current thesis did not allow for a comprehensive overview of women's societal position throughout the centuries, so further research might explore how the characters compare in different adaptations and seeing how these coincide with different ideas about women's position in society. While Anne Hollander has already written about the portrayal of the sisters in three previous film versions, Gerwig's adaptation has not been written about yet in an academic context. Gerwig's 21st-century Jo, strong-willed and taking her story into her own hands, recalls the qualities which were appreciated in women in the 90s adaptation, when the audience valued "a contemporary woman who can take charge of all aspects of moral and practical life without depending on male support or advice" (Hollander 100). Comparing the newest versions of Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy to previous adaptations of the sisters would offer an interesting insight into how these role models have changed over a broad expanse of time.

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