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LITTLE WOMEN AND FEMINISM: BOOK AND MOVIE NARRATIVE

Abstract
Little Women by Louisa May Alcott portrays the lives of four March sisters in 19th-century America, grappling with societal expectations. It delves into gender roles, domesticity, marriage, and feminism. This analysis examines each sister's conformity to societal norms and Alcott's depiction of femininity, notably through protagonist Jo March. Additionally, it explores Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation, emphasizing narrative theory and contemporary relevance. Gerwig's adaptation highlights the timeless themes of the original work while offering a fresh perspective for modern audiences. Through both the novel and its adaptation, Alcott's exploration of women's struggles and societal constraints continues to resonate, sparking conversations about gender and identity.

Key words: gender stereotyping, gender roles, femininity, society, feminism, marriage, domesticity

1. Introduction

Little Women, a novel by American author Luisa May Alcott published right after the Civil War, depicts women's lives in 19th-century America. The story follows the lives of the four March sisters – Meg, Jo, Beth, and

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Amy – from their childhood to adulthood, focusing on the typical challenges women faced at the time, mostly related to the conflicts between their familial duty and desire for personal growth. The novel was originally published as two books – *Little Women* (1868) and *Good Wives* (1869) – and while the first part is semi-autobiographical and based on Alcott's early life in New England, the second part was written upon audience request and it did not mainly rely on Alcott's life, as she remained unmarried and could not apply her own life experience to the lives of her protagonists.

More than 150 years since it was first published, *Little Women* remains popular among readers of all ages. It has been frequently adapted for stage and screen, as well as translated into numerous languages. The novel expresses pro-feminist attitudes and addresses some social issues that unfortunately remain unsolved even today, such as gender stereotyping, class distinction, and the struggles of women in a male-dominated society. In addition, the novel has a didactic tone, as each individual experience of the March sisters carries a message on the importance of work, family, forgiveness, and being genuine, grateful, and modest. Sara Elbert claims that with *Little Women* Alcott created a new form of literature by combining elements from romantic children's fiction with other elements from sentimental novels (Elbert 1987). She also argues that the novel focuses on three major themes: "domesticity, work, and true love, all of them interdependent and each necessary to the achievement of its heroine's individual identity" (Elbert 1987: 200).

The seventh movie adaptation, written and directed by Greta Gerwig, came out in 2019. Gerwig's approach and interpretation were in many ways different from all previous adaptations, given that she took several liberties with the original text, for which she received particular praise. Gerwig played with the narrative and, as some claim, highlighted the feminist aspects of the novel. The movie received numerous accolades, including six Academy Award nominations.

This paper will try to identify and study in detail the main topics of *Little Women* and the ways they are addressed in the novel and the 2019 movie adaptation. It aims to provide insight into what *Little Women* tells us about gender roles, women's family duties, domesticity, marriage, women's dreams and ambitions, and the importance of work.

2. Story Narrative

In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality,* Richard Walsh explores how narrative is interpreted in the process of reception and presents interpretation as a creation of a new cognitive structure. As he says, "the distinction between fabula and *sujet* is, according to various commonsensical definitions, the distinction between what happens in a narrative and how it is told" (Walsh 2007: 52). Walsh and many narrative theorists aim to explore how stories help people make sense of the world, while also studying how people make sense of stories. The audience, according to many, plays a crucial role in any story interpretation, given that we make sense of our world through the lens of our own culture, education, upbringing, and other individual factors. Being the seventh adaptation of *Little Women,* Gerwig's movie displays a different perspective on characters and events and this part of the paper aims to take a closer look into some choices made in the movie, the possible reasons behind those choices, and their effects.

The novel itself has a completely linear narrative, told in the third person by an omniscient narrator. The first part is set in the March family home and takes place over the period of one year, while the second part takes place three years later when three sisters leave home to pursue work or have a family of their own. Gerwig's take on the book narrative was a bit different, as she decided to depart from the traditional structure and begin her film during the events of part two. She chooses to constantly cut back and forth between the timelines, as she wants to "play with the idea of is this what happened or is that how you remembered it? Is that what happened or is that how you wrote it down?"[1] Gerwig argues that by doing this she could look into the notion of nostalgia and the frailty of human memory. David Sims suggests another reason for this might be Gerwig's wish to balance the rather innocent struggles the girls face during childhood with the more serious issues they encounter as adults: "The clever twist of this new film ... is that it puts Alcott's sunnier and sadder sides in conversation with each other. The action cuts between whimsical larks and their more sober parallels."[2]

[1] "*Little Women*: The Heartbreaking reason Greta Gerwig Changed the Book", Showbiz CheatSheet. (2 September 2020) <https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/little-women-the-heartbreaking-reason-greta-gerwig-changed-the-book.html/>

[2] "Little Women is a sparklingly clever new take on a classic", The Atlantic. (2 September 2020) <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/12/little-women-review-saiorse-ronan-florence-pugh/604114/>

This narrative structure allows Gerwig to introduce us to the protagonist – Jo March – as a grown, 21-year-old girl, already struggling to make a living as a writer in New York. In his book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting,* Syd Field states that the purpose of the opening scene is to set up the main theme of a movie, i.e. to establish what the movie is about (Field 2005: 90). Gerwig's movie opens with Jo trying to sell her short stories to the publisher in New York, who tells her to make her stories short and spicy, and if the main character's a girl, she should end up either married or dead. This scene foreshadows one of the main obstacles the March girls will face, as their options regarding this question appear rather limited. The opening scene foregrounds another important aspect of *Little Women* and that is writing. Jo spends most of her time writing, either for profit or for pleasure. Gerwig chooses to further blur the lines between Jo March and Luisa May Alcott by underlining the context of the patriarchal literary industry that Alcott had to deal with when publishing her work while claiming that "as a child, her idol was Jo March, but as an adult, it is Louisa May Alcott".[3] This connection between the two culminates at the end of the movie, when Jo publishes her novel called *Little Women*, having rejected the publisher's advice to write pompous stories and instead writing a more naturalistic story based on her own experiences – a story about girls, for girls.

In addition, the movie never gives us a clear indicator of the time shift, yet somehow it is always clear whether a certain scene is set earlier or later in the novel. Many scenes are also mirrored, so we are presented with the same setting, but the circumstances are contrasted. For example, happy and excited girls playing and running at the beach vs. Jo and Beth at the beach just before Beth's death; the sisters and Laurie acting out plays in the attic, vs. Jo writing her novels there alone; Jo coming downstairs to find Beth feeling better vs. Jo coming downstairs to find Beth had passed away; Jo and Laurie dancing playfully at a party vs. Laurie and Amy arguing at a party. This change of context and tone amplifies the passing of time and contrasts the images of a rather carefree childhood with the issues of adulthood.

[3] "Greta Gerwig on Little Women: Reel Pieces with Annette Insdorf", 92nd Street Y. (5 September 2020) < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vG906HuUz38&list=WL&index=20>

3. The March sisters

As Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark, editors of *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*, claim, "to engage with *Little Women* is to engage with the feminist imagination. There's the text itself, with its four sisters embodying four models of femininity, possibly even four models of feminism, four ways of authorizing the self" (Alberghene and Clark 2013: xvii). Each of the March sisters is developed as a unique, separate individual who faces obstacles that may be the result of her own respective character traits. We get an insight into each of their characters at the very beginning of the novel, which starts with the sisters making statements that reflect their personalities. We find out that every sister is gifted in some way and has her own ambitions and desires to achieve something greater than the limited existence 19th-century society offered young women. Although feminists have generally been most fully engaged by Jo, the other sisters also play out themes that feminists still struggle with and this part of the paper will try to explore the personalities of the four March sisters and provide answers to how and why they changed over the course of the novel, as well as how Gerwig perhaps changed some aspects of their personalities in her movie adaptation.

3.1. Meg March

Meg is the oldest March sister and some argue that she is a typical 19th-century American girl from a good family. She is loving, caring, and good-natured, but also materialistic. She remembers the days when her family used to be wealthy, so she longs for luxury and wants to marry rich. It takes her a while to set aside her envy and forgo luxury, as she marries a poor, hard-working professor Brooke. Meg submits wholeheartedly to being a good wife, mother, and homemaker and she gradually starts to value simple things, having become aware of the hard work it takes to get them.

Gerwig's movie could not follow all the aspects of Meg's development, as it focused on other, *less typical* sisters. Nevertheless, we get to see her struggles with poverty and comparing herself to her more affluent friends, but even so, she chooses love for her husband over materialistic things. However, there is one scene in which Meg makes a case for her relevance just before her wedding, when Jo tries to convince her to run away, and Meg responds in the following way: "Just because my dreams are different from

yours doesn't mean they're unimportant" (*Little Women* 1:32:06–1:32:10). This very powerful statement reminds us that, even with feminism on the rise and women fighting to have equal opportunities as men, having more traditional desires does not make someone less of a woman. Alcott never underestimated the role of a woman as a homemaker, quite the opposite, as we will see further on in the paper.

3.2. Josephine Jo March

Jo March, the main character of *Little Women*, is largely based on Alcott herself. She is a rather unusual character for 19th-century didactic fiction, as she is adventurous, rebellious, outspoken, and independent. She does not fit the feminine archetype and she often complains about being a woman and having to wrestle with the limitations the society places on women. Jo writes her plays in which she can take on the role of a hero, she wishes to fight with her father in the Civil War, she doesn't like her name, Josephine, as she deems it too feminine, she wears a burned dress and stained glass to the party, i.e. by rejecting typical symbols of femininity she rejects traditional femininity as well. At one point, she even cuts off her hair and sells it to help her family. By doing so, she sheds off her traditional femininity and takes on a stereotypically male role of providing for the family. Jo aspires to be a writer (traditionally a male profession), and she detests the idea of marriage, as marriage threatens to break up her family and separate her from the sisters she adores.

To understand why Jo March is so special, we should elaborate on gender construction conducted in the late 19th century in the U.S. At the time, female behavior was regulated by a social system known as *The Cult of True Womanhood*. Barbara Welter argues:

> The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, was all ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (Welter 1966: 152)

Back at the time, non-religious women were not considered to have dignity. Religious studies were seen as compatible with femininity and appropriate for women, while other types of education were thought to detract from women's femininity. These other types of education included studying through formal means and even reading romantic novels – either of which might lead women to ignore religion, become overly romantic, and lose their virtue or purity (Welter 1966). The girls' mother, Marmee, teaches them the values of Christianity, but Jo has issues when it comes to controlling her temper and her anger, which goes against the value of piety. Welter also highlights the importance of marriage, as it was a way for women to keep their purity for their husbands. Jo never cared about marriage and she wanted to become successful: "I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle – something heroic, or wonderful – that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all, some day. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous; that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream."

Submissiveness was perhaps most valued when it comes to feminine virtues. Men were to be movers and doers – the actors in life. They were supposed to be wise, and forceful, while women were expected to be passive, dependent, submitting to fate, to duty, to God, and to men (Welter 1966: 152). Unlike her sister Amy, who considers marriage an obligation for a woman, marriage was not in Jo's plans. Alcott never married herself, and she states in her journals that she would never marry Jo to Laurie to please her audience. Nina Auerbach argues that "the real rightness" of Jo's refusal to marry Laurie "springs from the fact that Laurie can only make his comrade a lady, but professor Bhaer, an educator, can make her a cosmic mother – the greatest power available in her domestic world" (Auerbach 1976). Jo did end up getting married, but she did so out of love, to a partner who was equal to her, and while she did become a wife and a mother, she also opened up a boarding school, connecting her homemaking skills with education and literature.

Gerwig at times blurs the lines between Jo March and Luisa May Alcott to the extent that it is not always clear which one we are watching. The movie begins with a copy of *Little Women* with Alcott's name on it but by the end, the author is changed to Jo March. Also, Jo contemplates her loneliness in the movie more than she does in the book. She writes a letter to Laurie expressing her regret for having rejected his proposal and his marriage with Amy comes as a real surprise to her. While in the

novel Jo sometimes feels pressured to make compromises when it comes to accepting her femininity and she appears perfectly fine by herself until she falls in love, in the 2019 movie Jo seems torn between wanting to be independent and admitting to herself that she feels alone: "Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for. I'm so sick of it... But I'm so lonely" (*Little Women* 1:25:49–1:26:13). Jo realizes that there is a different side to her decision to remain single. Whereas before it may have seemed like a bold rejection of social expectations, she now possibly starts to realize that such a life might be lonely and that her sisters might not have married due to economic necessities, but also out of love and desire for companionship. Women's position in society has forced them to make cruel compromises, but with feminism growing stronger, they get more rights to make their own choices. However, even though the conditions have since improved, many women today still feel that they must choose between their family and career, or at least greatly sacrifice one of the two. Still, just like it is completely natural for a woman to desire only one of the two, it is also normal for a woman to want both. Jo's statement reflects a desire to share a life with someone, but also her fear, or even shame to feel that way, as she does not want to appear weak or not self-sufficient. Gerwig managed to present this feeling, shared by many women today, perfectly.

3.3. Beth March

Beth is the third March sister who often serves as the conscience of the group. She is modest, shy, and satisfied with what she has. Her flaws are minor, such as resenting the housework she must do and wanting a new piano. Beth symbolizes everything women were supposed to be in the second half of the 19th century in America – patient, understanding, submissive, and domestic, while her angelic aspects are highlighted by the fact that she never wants to leave her parents' home and get married. Unfortunately, Beth dies as soon as she reaches adulthood, suggesting that this profile of women was not strong enough to enter the 20th century. With Beth's death, Alcott lets an old type of heroine die off, as she does not belong in her more realistic fictional world. Scholar Elizabeth Lennox Keyser suggests that Beth's illness is symbolic of her being the most conforming March sister (Keyser 1993). Beth caught scarlet fever by visiting a poor family

and trying to help them, so it could be argued that her selflessness led her to death. By *punishing* Beth for her selflessness, Alcott is condemning a society that idealizes women who put everyone else above themselves. That type of society, along with its traditional values to which Beth clings become outdated and she cannot survive in a world where women begin to demand more from life than housework, so by extension, she cannot survive to be in the second part of the novel (Keyser 1993).

However, Beth's death does impact the lives of other characters, especially Jo who used to nurse her during her last days. While caring for Beth, Jo realizes the importance of domestic work, she becomes softer and more feminine and she decides to take over Beth's role in keeping the family together. Also, Jo's style of writing changes as well, as after Beth's death she starts to write about more realistic topics. Gerwig places importance on this aspect of the book, as in the movie Jo writes her novel after Beth asks her to write for her and the novel ends up published, proving that stories about women and their ordinary lives also matter.

3.4. Amy March

The youngest March sister arguably undergoes the biggest change along with Jo, but unlike Jo, she does not put up so much resistance. In the very beginning, we can see that Amy March fits the stereotype of the youngest, spoiled child in the family. She is vain, self-centered, and at times shallow, she despises poverty and she conforms to the norms of society. Amy longs to be a wealthy gentlewoman and to possess the finest things. However, even though Alcott presents Amy as the most difficult sister, she presents her flaws in a somewhat charming way, suggesting that her heart is in the right place and that she has the potential to improve as she matures. Also, Alcott never glorifies poverty, nor does she judge Amy for her love of luxury. Instead, she shows that Amy can live a wealthy life and remain a good person.

When Amy departs to Europe with her aunt she leaves behind her old, humble life, but she still manages to keep the most important lessons she learned from her mother. She contemplates the idea of marrying a rich and titled Fred Vaugh, saying that "one of us must marry well". But at last even Amy adheres to her mother's ideals and rejects Vaugh's proposal since she does not love him, and she marries Laurie, having realized that she is in love with him. She also bravely reprimands Laurie for wasting his life

on pleasurable activities, which shows that she is not afraid to speak her mind and confront a man. Amy proves herself to be outspoken, brave, and ready to work hard for what she wants. Additionally, she does not want to be only average when it comes to her artistic abilities, which shows that she too has high ambitions. Finally, Alcott does not seem to judge Amy for her wishes to find a wealthy husband, as she suggests that Amy feels the obligation to take care of her family.

Gerwig makes Amy highly likable in the movie and she establishes the dynamic between her and Laurie from the very beginning, possibly to avoid the impression that she is second-best to him, or that this couple does not deserve to be supported. In the movie adaptation, Amy states that she wants greatness or nothing, just like in the book, but Gerwig adds a powerful speech in which Amy expresses her awareness of the fact that marriage is an economic proposition. Amy says to Laurie that she is not ashamed of the fact that she wants to marry rich even if she is not in love, as she "is not a poet, but just a woman". This speech helps us see Amy not only as a shallow girl who wants to live in the lap of luxury but as a woman aware of the social context she lives in.

Girls related to the March sisters and followed the lead of the *Little Woman* heroines, by assimilating aspects of the story into their own lives (Sicherman 2010). While *Little Women* appears to be a simple story about the sisters' journeys from childhood to adulthood, it actually contrasts two main parts of a young woman's life – her domestic duties and her personal desires and growth. At the time when Alcott composed the novel, women's status in society was improving, but at a slow pace. Through the four different sisters, she offers four possible ways to deal with being a woman bound by the constraints of 19th-century social expectations: marry young and have a family (Meg), be submissive and dutiful to one's parents (Beth), focus on one's art, pleasure and personal development (Amy), or struggle to live both a dutiful family life and a meaningful professional life (Jo). While Meg and Beth conform to society's expectations of the role that women should play, Amy and Jo initially attempt to break free from these constraints and nurture their individuality. Nevertheless, both Amy and Jo eventually marry and settle into a more customary life. Even though Alcott does not suggest that one of these paths is more desirable than the other, she does recognize that some are more realistic.

4. Marriage

Alcott does not idealize marriage or present it as a simple happily-ever-after ending of a story, but instead portrays it realistically, showing the struggles couples face and underscoring the importance of a partnership in which both sides must work hard to create a home and raise a family. The first part of the novel ends with Meg's wedding, suggesting that despite the wedding being a happy occasion, it is also the event that causes the family to break apart, with one sister leaving home.

Marmee has taught the girls to never strive for material comforts when looking for a husband: "Money is a needful and precious thing – and, when well used, a noble thing – but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contended, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace" (Alcott 146). However, even though all of her heroines marry out of love, Alcott does not try to convince her readers that love is all that matters and that poverty does not impact a loving marriage, quite the contrary – she does imply that marrying poor is a heavy burden for a 19th-century woman to bear. We see that Meg and her husband face financial challenges which result in quarrels and stress. They have other issues as well, such as different opinions on how to raise children. Meg also struggles to find time for her husband and manage the household, so at one time she and John are growing apart until they reconnect and gradually improve their relationship.

Alcott presents us with a new model of marriage by uniting Amy and Laurie. They develop their feelings for each other after leaving home and getting to know each other in a more isolated context far from everyone. Amy brings out a new, more mature side of Laurie and their marriage holds promise in the way that they are in a more or less equal position. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser suggests that the two have the most egalitarian marriage in the novel, citing the fact that they row together as symbolic of their cooperation (Keyser 1993).

The main love triangle in the novel, however, is the one with Jo, Laurie, and Professor Bhaer. In the first novel, it seems certain that Jo and Laurie will end up together. Ever since the book was first published, its readers have been tormented by Jo's refusal to fall for Laurie, which is an extremely unusual literary event for the time period. Jo's rejection of his proposal came as a shock to the audience since society judged the women

who turned down eligible men. Back then women were expected to *fulfill their destiny* as wives and mothers and to dismiss any ideas of living an independent life that rejected these conventional roles. For this reason, very few female characters from this period and earlier display the sort of assertiveness and expression of individual ambitions. Laurie is the type of man most women wish for – handsome, loving, wealthy, and kind, but Jo simply does not love him as a man and therefore rejects him. This decision is brave and admirable, as not only the characters expect the marriage to happen, but also everyone in the reading audience.

Unlike Laurie's proposal, which appears a bit childish, Bhaer's proposal to Jo is more mature and touching. Furthermore, by being the one who goes after him, Jo demonstrates that she has a say in the affair. The scene does not seem traditionally romantic, as mud and rain prevent Bhaer from going down on one knee, but it makes no difference, so they stand literally on an equal footing. This marriage, which begins with equality and primacy of the heart rather than primacy of appearances, is promising. Nevertheless, the decision to see Jo get married must have not been easy for Alcott and in the second part of the novel the similarities between Jo and herself start to fade. At the end of the novel, Alcott presents us with at least three different versions of Jo's attitude toward marriage and a career: firstly, she finds it difficult to "give up her own hopes, plans and desires, and cheerfully live for others"; secondly, she is happy to renounce ambition because "the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely and cold"; and, thirdly, she hints that she may yet find a way to combine marriage and family life with her career as a writer (Strickland 1985).

In the 2019 adaptation, it is stressed that marriage is an economic proposition as much as a romantic one. As Amy suggests to Laurie – as a woman, she can hardly live an independent life and make enough money to earn a living and support her family. However, the most brilliant contribution Gerwig makes to the topic of marriage is at the end of the movie, when Jo runs after Bhaer to tell him she loves him. Gerwig intertwines two scenes, one where Jo talks to the publisher determined to leave her main character a spinster, while he tries to convince her the story will not sell, and the other where Jo declares her love to Bhaer. The publisher argues that the audience wants to see the heroine married and that even though it may not be the right ending, it is the one that sells. The movie then cuts to Jo and Bhaer kissing and, while we enjoy the happy ending, this sequence also provides a broader context about how the novel came to have the ending

it does, i.e. why Alcott relented to having Jo married. Gerwig incorporates this aspect of the novel into the movie ending, which makes us view this marriage through a more critical lens. This ending makes us realize that this ending was not always the intended outcome of the story, but rather an economic decision. Even so, the approach is subtle and it allows us to still be genuinely happy for Jo and her finding someone who she wants to spend the rest of her life with.

Another important change that Gerwig makes is that she ends the movie with Jo observing her novel being printed, which may suggest that although Jo ends up happily in love, her real happy ending is that she manages to publish her work.

5. Gender roles and stereotyping

Throughout the entire novel, Alcott questions the validity of gender stereotypes. Two characters who struggle with gender stereotyping the most are Jo and Laurie. Their nonconformity to gender roles can be observed in their names – Jo dislikes her given name, Josephine, as she deems it too feminine and sentimental, while Laurie objects to his given name, Theodore, as his friends tease him and call him "Dora". As a result, they both take on androgynous nicknames. Furthermore, just as Jo wants to be a writer, a soldier, or to provide for her family, Laurie desires to pursue music (which was considered a feminine pursuit at the time) instead of business. Laurie does not appear to be manly enough to fulfill his grandfather's desires, much like Jo does not seem to be feminine enough for her sisters. Both of them go against societal norms and that is why to many people they seem to belong together.

Jo is continually described as a tomboy, an unfeminine girl, or sometimes even as the "son Jo" that Mr. March never had. She frequently expresses her desire to be male and believes it would make her life much easier. Austrian psychologist Adolf Adler introduced the term *masculine protest* to describe the behavior of women who reject traditional feminine roles in favor of more masculine ones, to gain power and dominance in specific situations (Adler 1997). Jo spends most of her time fighting against society's expectations of how a woman should act. At the very beginning of the novel, each of the sisters says that they want more out of life than what they have, after which they receive a letter from their

father. Upon hearing his words, they each decide to be content with what they have, demonstrating that the renunciation of their material dreams is learned, rather than natural behavior, which results from male dominance. Surprisingly, in Bhaer's presence, Jo voluntarily becomes nearly conventional, conforming to a more accepted code of female behavior. She darns the professor's socks, for example, in order to show him her affection and we can see her willingness to engage in such domestic and traditionally female chores growing. Additionally, whereas before she used to take on male roles in her plays, she now dresses as a female character, Miss Malaprop, at the New Year's Eve masquerade, revealing an ability and willingness to check her unconventional desires.

We mentioned Jo's inability to control her temper, which also makes her far from a perfect woman. Even though at first it seems that she is the only one in the March family who struggles with her emotions and femininity, Marmee surprises us by telling Jo that "she is angry nearly every day of her life". Since Marmee always seems composed, we can only assume that she suppresses her anger as it is not right for a woman to express it. Marmee's confession makes Jo feel better and less isolated, but at the same time it suggests that Jo will never get over her anger, she can just learn to hide it better. Many feminist critics have interpreted this sentence as the expression of female anger due to their oppression and the message implied in this dialogue is that "women must learn to repress or redirect their anger, even if their anger is, in the world of the novel, just and reasonable" (Foote 2005: 67).

5.1. Woman as the pillar of the family

Although women's position in 19th-century American society is far from equal, Alcott does stress how important the role of a woman is in every family. Marmee represents the pillar of the March family, which is most obvious when she leaves home to nurse the wounded Mr. March. The girls miss their Marmee and her absence is portrayed as far more significant than that of Mr. March. The girls cry over Marmee's departure, suggesting that it affects them more than Mr. March's condition. The relationship of the girls with their father is never as highlighted as the bond they have with their mother. Alcott placed importance on domesticity, family, and work. The novel demonstrates the importance of the Puritan work ethic and transcendentalist teachings with which Alcott grew up. She ultimately

recommends work not as a means to a material end, but rather as a means to the expression of inner goodness and creativity through productivity.

6. Conclusion

Little Women has remained valuable for the reading audience, especially since the problems women used to face when this book was written are still very much present in today's society. Alcott adequately displays the process of girls growing up and struggling to find their place in the world around them. Besides that, she also legitimizes their desires to set off on a different kind of journey and explore their options, i.e. she *normalizes* their ambitions. *Little Women* repeatedly explores notions of individuality and female vocation, and whereas Alcott never questions the value of domesticity, she does challenge social constructs that view spinsters as outcasts simply because they choose not to marry. Nevertheless, some criticize Alcott and accuse her of breaking under the pressure of society, especially since she married Jo to Bhaer, as well as the fact that neither of the characters succeeded in fulfilling their dreams or achieving their full potential. However, Amy, Jo, and Laurie, who wished for fame and success, realize they do have talent, but not the genius they need to achieve their goals. These realizations are the consequence of growing up and adjusting to real life by learning how to accept small defeats. It is a natural process that nearly every one of us goes through while growing up, and it is not always related to gender stereotyping and society's expectations. We also need to bear in mind that the novel was written over 150 years ago, and even though Alcott's perspective may seem mild to some today, it was in fact extremely progressive and shocking to the reading audience at the time.

As for Gerwig's adaptation, she made some brave, risky, and controversial moves in the movie, but the result is truly something special and completely different from the previous adaptations. Of course, she could not explore all aspects of the novel due to the movie's length, but she did an exceptional job playing with the timelines and narratives, making the audience think harder about key motifs that might have gone unnoticed in the novel. Gerwig made the movie contemporary by highlighting Jo's fight to own her work and by honoring Alcott through Jo's character.

Little Women remains a timeless novel as it sends extremely progressive messages, such as that women should be able to choose the course of their

lives without being judged for their choices, that gender equality is crucial for creating a strong family, and that only democratic relationships result in happy endings.

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