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Owning Your Story: Agency, Power, and Freedom in Greta Gerwig's Faithful and Radical Little Women Adaptation

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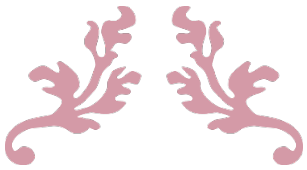

Owning Your Story:
Agency, Power, and Freedom in Greta Gerwig's Faithful and Radical *Little Women* Adaptation

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Introduction: The Legacy of *Little Women* and Its Adaptations

One novel. Two parts. Five theatrical stage productions. Four opera and musical performances. Four television miniseries. Ten literary retellings. Forty-eight radio dramatizations. Seven feature films. Since its original publication in 1868, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott has captured the hearts of generations of readers and adaptors. The seventh, most recent cinematic adaptation of the novel was written for the screen and directed by Greta Gerwig. Her adaptation is both faithful and radical to Alcott's original novel. A close examination of art imitating life, the epistolary and intertextuality, and cinematography and storytelling illuminates the transformative nature of her film. For the first time, a *Little Women* retelling offers adult women agency, power, and freedom in a way that most previous adaptations, and even the original novel, never have.

Before analyzing the film as an adaptation, it is important to establish the context of the original novel. Released during what American film critic and historian J.E. Smyth calls the "great popular wave of women's fiction" of the nineteenth century, *Little Women* has "survived the canonization/cull of worthy American literature" (8). However, Alcott herself was uncertain of the project in the early stages of development. She only penned the manuscript at the behest of her publisher, who pressured her to write a story for young girls. While she at first claimed a lack of time and ideas, she ultimately completed the novel in a few months. She used inspiration from her own childhood experiences growing up with three sisters, though she was reluctant to do so. Ironically, this element of the story that made Alcott most anxious is what has contributed the most to its success and longevity: "Never out of print, its powerful themes of sisterhood and family loyalty make it durable" (Hooper 422). Finishing the project even led Alcott to a change in heart, as she convinced herself of her own female authorial influence: "lively, simple books

are very much needed for girls, and perhaps I can supply the need" (Cauti xviii). According to American literary historian Sarah Elbert, *Little Women* not only established Alcott as a prominent player in American literature, but it also marked the beginnings of the girl's story, a new genre conceived from romantic elements of children's literature and other sentimental works of the time.

Over the years, the novel has been criticized for its sentimentality and heavily emotional language. Nonetheless, American literary critic Jane Tompkins champions sentimentalism in nineteenth century literature, maintaining that

> Once in possession of the system of beliefs that undergirds the patterns of sentimental fiction, it is possible for modern readers to see how its tearful episodes and frequent violations of probability were invested with a structure of meanings that fixed these works, for nineteenth-century readers, not in the realm of fairy tale or escapist fantasy, but in the very bedrock of reality. (127)

Anne Boyd Rioux, an American author specializing in women writers, expands on the ideas of Tompkins in her bestseller *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why It Still Matters*. Rioux maintains that "while the novel's image of home may seem essentially conservative, there is something rather subversive about it as well. It is this tug-of-war between traditionalism and modernity that continues to make *Little Women* such a vital, living text" (145). Gerwig uses this dichotomy as a springboard for her adaptation. By honoring and subverting the *Little Women* narrative, she offers a new reality of adult women agency, power, and freedom.

This is a hefty undertaking, considering Alcott's original novel is one of the most adapted works of literature in the world, spanning an extensive breadth and depth of mediums and translations. The sheer frequency of feature film adaptations further purports the novel's

significance in American literature and culture. Smyth, on the other hand, offers a more cynical explanation: "The film industry has always been as obsessed with young girls as it is with remakes…These days, *Little Women* might appear, to a certain extent, as nothing more than another franchise, recycled, rebranded, and rebooted as easily as Spider-Man" (8). While Smyth's analysis is oversimplified and fails to acknowledge the thematic legacy of *Little Women*, it does speak to a larger issue in the field of adaptation: the pressure to honor the original while creating something new in the process. According to literary and adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation*, "with adaptations, we seem to desire the repetition as much as the change" (9).

To date, including Gerwig's film, there are seven feature film adaptations in *Little Women*'s roster. The first two were silent films produced in 1917 and 1918. The next adaptation would come 15 years later with the emergence of "talkie" films. This 1933 adaptation starred Katherine Hepburn in the role of Jo. In 1949, the next adaptation was in brilliant technicolor and matched by a star-studded cast that included Janet Leigh and Elizabeth Taylor. In the 1994 adaptation, Gillian Armstrong directed performances from Winona Ryder, Claire Danes, and Christian Bale (Masterpiece PBS). In contemporary discussions of Gerwig's film, the first point of comparison is usually Armstrong's adaptation. However, there was a *Little Women* adaptation released in 2018 during the 150th anniversary of the original novel's production, set in the twenty-first century. No one talks about this one. In fact, Mary Sollosi disqualified the film from her ranking of *Little Women* adaptations in *Entertainment Weekly* "for undermining the integrity of the novel, denying us the pleasure of period costumes, and forcing in really awkward soldier-Skype scenes where there ought to have been lovely letter-readings" (par. 2).

Author Elise Hooper's 2019 analysis of four recent *Little Women* adaptations features two novels, including Anna Todd's *The Spring Girls*, and Laura Schaefer's *Littler Women*. She asserts that these recent adaptations have a shared emphasis on the "modern" (423). At the time of her article's release, Gerwig's film had not yet reached theatres. So, in the conclusion of her essay, Hooper offers high hopes for the latest retelling:

> Gerwig's adaptation will be forging new territory, as most *Little Women* adaptations, both cinematic and literary, more predominantly have focused on part one. It should not come as a surprise that Alcott…would become newly relevant in 2018 to feminists seeking trailblazing independent-minded historical figures for inspiration. It seems that almost every generation receives its own film adaptation of *Little Women*, and each reflects the time in which it was produced. (430)

Hooper's insights anticipate several key features of Gerwig's radical adaptation: remixing of the original novel's timeline, revival of Alcott's authorial voice, and reflection of the contemporary female social landscape. These elements buttress the film's message for this generation, the idea that adult women have agency, power, and freedom.

With this, Gerwig enters the conversation and joins a long lineage of *Little Women* adaptors, faced with the challenge of making her adaptation stand alongside and stand apart from its predecessors. Film critic Justin Chang serves as the Chair of the National Society of Film Critics and as the Secretary of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. In his NPR review of the 2019 film, Chang writes that Gerwig

> wants to give us all the warm homespun pleasures and emotional satisfactions of *Little Women*: the period costumes, the sisters' fireside chats and scuffles, their verbal and emotional sparring matches with the boy next door, Laurie.

> But Gerwig also wants to hold this well-worn text up to the light, to approach it from a fresh perspective and even consider some of its flaws and compromises. (par. 2-3)

Gerwig's film is still radical, but it checks enough of the right boxes that saved it from disqualification from *Entertainment Weekly*'s rankings.

In other words, this most recent adaptation looks, sounds, and feels like the *Little Women* that has been cherished for decades. Gerwig fulfills our aesthetic expectations to subvert our understandings of domesticity, individuality, and the relinquishment of childhood among other "flaws and compromises" of the original novel. Thus, her film faithfully honors the spirit of the Alcott's work while offering a radical reinterpretation. Emblematic fine arts, intertextuality, and unorthodox storytelling rekindle the embers of sentimentalism that spark into contemporary understandings of adult female agency, artistic empowerment, and the freedom to create one's own story.

Chapter 1: Art Imitating Life

Rioux cites an early review of Alcott's *Little Women* that likened its plot to photographs, "a technology then in its infancy but already changing audiences' expectations about art's relationship to reality" (137). A little more than 150 years later, Gerwig brings the idea of art imitating life to the forefront of her adaptation. In fact, this concept is fundamental to the study of adaptation theory. According to Hutcheon, "adaptation joins imitation, allusion, parody, travesty, pastiche, and quotation as popular creative ways of deriving art from art" (109).

In Alcott's *Little Women*, the fine arts (writing, painting, music, and dancing) are objectified to the point of representing a means to an end. However, the film radically imbues these artistic practices with life, giving them characteristics of their own. In other words, the fine arts speak for themselves, and not just the characters to whom they are assigned. Whereas the novel dedicates attention to each March sister's relationship with the arts, Gerwig focuses on writing and painting as they apply specifically to Jo and Amy and the construction of their identities. These forms of fine art are less performative and more interactive, adding a new layer of agency, power, and freedom to Gerwig's adaptation.

Professional Writing as a Narrative Frame

Gerwig establishes the significance of the art of writing from the onset of the film. In the opening scene of her adaptation, an adult Jo, portrayed by Saoirse Ronan, lives in New York City and meets with Mr. Dashwood, portrayed by Tracy Letts, editor of the *Weekly Volcano*, in the hopes of selling her stories for print in the newspaper. When the scene opens, her back faces the camera, and she is silhouetted by the light through the office door (Appendix A). Her shadowed, incomplete figure visually signifies that she is not yet fully a part of the world of professional writing. After taking a few deep breaths, she enters the print office, and the scene

transitions from silence to clamor. Jo appears even more out of place, as she stands out in a room filled with men at their desks. While discussing her work with Mr. Dashwood, she holds her portfolio close to her stomach and with her arms wrapped around it (Appendix B). This instinctive nonverbal behavior suggests that Jo is protecting the very core of her being. Her hesitancy and reservation are further juxtaposed with Mr. Dashwood's overbearing presence, defined by his lackadaisical posture at the desk and the way in which he peels through her papers, slamming them on the desk and marking them up. After they finish their deal, the scene switches to Jo running freely through the streets of New York, completely liberated.

This opening sets the stage for Jo as a writer more so than the original text's sentimental opening of the young March girls lamenting over a less-than-ideal Christmas. From a genre standpoint, films have an arsenal of storytelling tools at their disposal to make strides in character and plot development simultaneously. This allows otherwise abstract objects and concepts, such as the art of writing, to come alive. American film theorist and leading adaptation scholar Robert Stam argues that, compared to novels, film possesses an "inescapable materiality" with "its incarnated, fleshly, enacted characters, its real locales and palpable props" (6). In this scene, Gerwig ascribes material, corporeal characteristics to the publishing industry through the contrast between Jo and Mr. Dashwood, the commotion of the newspaper office, and the portfolio of Jo's writing projects. By opting for a cold opening without excessive exposition, Gerwig cinematically establishes a foundation for Jo's future artistic agency.

As the film progresses, Gerwig equates writing with identity development and power dynamics. In the parlor of the boarding house in New York, Jo asks Professor Bhaer to read some of her stories that have been printed in various newspapers. At the start of this scene, Bhaer and Jo are both seated facing one another. They appear on even visual footing, suggesting each

perceives the other as an intellectual equal. Jo's work is spread out on the table, a visual manifestation of pouring out her heart's contents and putting her soul on the line. However, once Bhaer reveals that he does not think her published stories are good, Jo stands and her mannerisms shift to those of defiance: pacing, putting her hands on her hips, and wagging her finger. In contrast, Bhaer does not move from the chair (Appendix C).

In this scene, Gerwig employs intrinsic weighting within the cinematic composition, described by film critic and screenwriter Roger Ebert as, "a process that gives all areas of the screen complete freedom, but acts like an invisible rubber band to create tension or attention when stretched" (par. 13). On one hand, Bhaer is framed statically and carefully in the foreground, demonstrating his steadfast, calm character. Although Jo operates in the background of the frame, her dynamic action and visual tension draws attention to her struggles as a writer character. According to film historian Paul Arthur,

> Part of the cachet surrounding stories centered on writers, whether real or fiction, is that they illuminate personal struggles between an "inner" world of the creative psyche and particular "external" circumstances that fee, inhibit, or otherwise inform the writing process. (332)

Therefore, when Bhaer attempts to have a rational, professional discussion to take Jo seriously about her work, Jo takes it as a personal offense. The dissonance between Jo's inner creative drive and the external circumstances of the competitive world of publishing and need of money to support her family is visually manifested in the cinematic arrangement of the scene.

In both this exchange with Professor Bhaer and the opening scene with Mr. Dashwood, Gerwig sets Jo in contrast with male figures that challenge her creatively, intellectually, professionally, and personally with her writing. Moreover, this adaptation establishes writing as

more than a means to an end for Jo. It is part of her identity; her stories and herself are one and the same. This kind of character development has metafictional applications for an audience. Regarding the legacy of Alcott's *Little Women*, Rioux argues that young girl readers "couldn't get enough of this novel that illuminated a path to a newly imagined future, one in which they could, like Jo March, spend their hours alone honing their craft and becoming that hallowed, mystical thing: 'an author'" (121). Gerwig's reinterpretation of Jo's professional journey as a writer illustrates Rioux's analysis. She uses art to showcase adult female power and creative agency.

Gerwig blurs the lines between writing and writer when Jo drafts the first chapters of her new manuscript. The scene begins with a disheartened Jo burning her own writing (in a sense, a part of herself) after Beth's death. Then, she discovers something "For Beth" written in a red notebook, and suddenly identity duress subsides to artistic inspiration. In her article about domestic objects in Alcott's novel, Holly Blackford says that "Jo identifies with the male realm of writing and language, as well as the maternal; thus, returning life objects to the home, combining domestic creativity and earning power, reconciles the two worlds that she straddles and deeply respects" (30). In both the novel and the film, Jo possesses a particular fondness and nurturing instinct for Beth. Thus, a story dedicated to her sister inscribed in an object that is metonymical of writing demonstrates Gerwig's marriage of sentimental, familial bonds and artistic agency.

Equipped with newfound motivation, Jo dons her green writing jacket, lights a candle, and primes her pen with ink. In this moment, the jacket functions as a second skin, as she reassumes this part of her identity as a writer that had previously been dormant. In a similar vein, ink becomes a lifeblood for not only the pen, but for Jo as well. Before she begins working, Jo

hesitates over a blank page (Appendix D). While this scripted behavior for a writer character in film may come across as predictable or even trite, Arthur argues that this familiarity serves a greater purpose:

> Every film is punctuated by obligatory scenes in which a wordsmith cogitates or paces, hesitates, then commits thoughts to paper. A seemingly trivial gesture, the motif of blank surfaces beginning to bristle with words and sentences in fact undergirds a larger, meta-thematic discourse concerned with relations between word and image, page and screen. (332)

Likewise, Gerwig animates the relationship between medium and message as this form of art imitates life. Pen scratches punctuate the scene's hopeful piano accompaniment, giving the act of writing vocal qualities. Thus, Gerwig adds a new layer of meaning to our understanding of authorial voice. The intersection between art and artist reaches a boiling point in the scene when Jo adds to the growing collection of paper that she lays out across the floor (Appendix E). This fragmented imagery mirrors Gerwig's own storytelling. Pages, whether blank or filled, are the nucleus of writing and, subsequently, the puzzle pieces of a writer's identity. Gerwig cinematically illustrates a sense of restored agency and renewed creative spirit as Jo quite literally maps and writes her way to her own destiny. Gerwig, unlike previous adaptors, makes Jo the primary driver of the story's narrative.

There is so much on the line for Jo: her sense of self and her family. Her craft, however, helps her come into her own and balance these elements of her life. In her analysis of the 2019 film, Judy Simons maintains that

> Jo must also struggle, not just for acceptance in a male-dominated profession, but also between her desire for autonomy and her equally powerful love of family. Ronan looks

> perfect, all unpinned hair, flying skirts, and unbridled enthusiasm. If she doesn't quite capture the anguish and continual self-doubt that obsesses Alcott's Jo as she tries to please everyone while remaining true to her artistic vision, she is nonetheless a compelling figure, who helps Gerwig rewrite a classic myth of girlhood for a post-feminist age. (281)

Moreover, just as Jo is ambidextrous in her ability to write, she also manages these two dimensions of her life. The art of writing not only reflects but facilitates the code switching between family and career. Her dexterity supplements those traits listed by Simons to breathe new life into Jo's onscreen portrayal. While Simons is not fully convinced that Ronan's Jo captures the heartbreak and outward turmoil as originally penned by Alcott, I argue that Gerwig does this intentionally. By emptying out the "anguish and continual self-doubt," Gerwig makes room for a more contemporary sentimental narrative. Yes—Jo becomes impassioned about her craft and experiences periods of identity crisis, but she channels her outward expressions of emotion into artistic agency. She learns to love her writing, and, consequently, love herself. The art of writing has an invaluable, metafictional presence in Gerwig's *Little Women*, and Jo holds its power in her ink-stained hands.

Empowered in Art and Love

Just as writing imitates life, so too does visual art. While Jo's writing constitutes the film's narrative through line, Amy's art punctuates the timeline with its own creative arc. Art aside, her character development as a whole represents another transformative aspect of Gerwig's adaptation. Despite being the youngest sister, Amy, portrayed by Florence Pugh, finds herself on equal cinematic footing with her older sisters, especially Jo. In his review of the film, Chang describes this tension as "a fierce tug-of-war between Jo and Amy, and Ronan and Pugh

are blazingly good as two highly competitive sisters who are more alike than they care to admit. Both are equally determined to forge their own paths in art and in love" (par. 10). Such paths are anything but parallel in the geography of the film. While Jo's journey with writing imitates her identity struggles and self-love, Amy's artistic endeavors help her navigate the boundaries of romance and her place as a woman. In this vein, Pugh's Amy departs from the sweet sentiment of not only the original novel, but of previous film adaptations as well.

Like Alcott, Amy is not a little girl anymore. In her essay in *The Atlantic* on the film's portrayal of the youngest March sister, Shirley Li describes how "In the previous major film adaptation of *Little Women*, the apology is delivered, well, apologetically, with Dunst's Amy humbly expressing remorse. But in Gerwig's version, Pugh's Amy is defiant, arguing that she truly wanted to hurt Jo—a move that retains Amy's cheekiness from the book." (par. 11). The scene in question not only animates Amy's character development, but also makes a statement about art's imitation of life. While Meg and Jo are at the theatre, Amy burns Jo's manuscript one page at a time, watching each flame with intense focus (Appendix F). When later questioned by her older sister, she maintains a smug disposition before the sibling conflict reaches its boiling point in the form of intense fighting. Shrouded in darkness and illuminated only by the angry flickering flames of the fireplace, Amy admits that "[she] really did want to hurt [Jo]" (Gerwig 53).

This concession rejects previous notions of the youngest sibling's sentimentality as prescribed by the novel and adopted by previous film adaptations. However, while the obvious reading of the scene reflects Amy's newfound ferocity bestowed by Gerwig, a closer examination reveals the consequences of an artist destroying the work of another. Gerwig instills Amy with the kind of agency that Jo possesses, but also a level of fierce intentionality that

translates into her perceptions of herself as an artist and her attitudes towards painting itself. Like the relationship between Jo and writing, this adaptation's new approach to Amy's character development has salient implications for her roles as an aspiring artist and blossoming young woman.

Stam's discussion of the significance of film's corporeal characters, settings, and objects carries over into Gerwig's portrayal of Amy as an artist. The scene of Amy in the Parisian art studio opens with her cleaning paint brushes. She wears a simple white blouse and a painter's smock to protect her skirts. Laurie stops in for a visit, and when he asks "Raphaella" when she will begin her next great work, Amy says that she never will. Comparing herself to Jo living out her writer dreams in New York, she believes herself a failure: "Rome took all the vanity out of me, and Paris made me realize I'd never be a genius, so I'm giving up all my foolish artistic hopes" (Gerwig 66). Once Fred Vaughn arrives, Amy removes her painter's smock and exchanges it on the rack for a beautiful shawl (Appendix G).

Once again, objects operate as vessels of identity. However, whereas Jo's objects helped her actualize her role as a writer, Amy's objects help her negotiate a transition from artist to society's vision of a woman. Regarding the differences between the novel and film genres, American film scholar and adaptation theorist Thomas Leitch affirms that "the pleasures of many non-novelistic media are based to a large extent in the invitation they extend to audiences to infer what characters are thinking" (158). Likewise, Gerwig saturates this scene with artistic media that reflect Amy's inner identity struggles. The studio is filled with blank canvas and sculpting stone, stand-ins for untapped potential and beauty. Amy resumes packing up her pieces and cleaning out the studio when Laurie asks what she will do with her life instead of art. She replies that she will simply "polish up [her] other talents and become an ornament to society" (Gerwig

67). Rather than adorn herself with the artifacts of the life of a professional artist, Amy leaves it all behind to ornament her conventionally plain clothing with the intricate, beautiful shawl. Thus, she essentially sheds one skin for another, facilitating her transition from painter to woman and shifting her power dynamic in the process. When she realizes she cannot be great in art, she chooses to be great in love: "Well, I believe we have some power over who we love, it isn't something that just happens to a person." (Gerwig 68). Rather than be discouraged by the image of the artist she cannot be, she is empowered by the idea of the woman she knows she can become.

Amy's art and female power intersect once more during the scene in which she sketches Laurie in the park. Amy sits upright wearing a beautiful dress and matching hat, while Laurie reclines on a blanket (Appendix H). After Amy gifts Laurie the drawing of him in that moment in addition to the one she made as a child, Laurie tells her not to marry Fred. Amy becomes overwhelmed, even calling out Laurie for acting "mean." In this more traditional expression of sentimentalism with overly emotional language, Gerwig sets Amy up for a monologue that speaks more to her agency: "I have been second to Jo my whole life in everything and I will not be the person you settle for just because you cannot have her. I won't do it, not when, not when I've spent my entire life loving you" (Gerwig 79). Amy drops her sketches, and as she leaves the park her skirts billow behind her as she appears to float away.

Leitch's discussion of non-novelistic media can be applied to this climax in Amy's character arc as well. Gerwig offers "a more nuanced and subversive approach to the same stifling societal expectations for women" as Amy "embraces femininity and uses it to her advantage" (Li par. 16). Her wardrobe reflects a completed transition from artist to woman. She trades in her simple shirt and smock for a gown adorned with florals. However, she also employs

the tools of art with her sketching. Moreover, visual art, namely drawing and painting, in this adaptation functions as a bridge between Amy's two roles. Despite having given up art as a potential profession, it is still part of her character's identity. Like a sculptor, Gerwig fashions the youngest March sister in the likeness of the woman Amy wanted to be. Art is no longer Amy's entire life, but it helps her get what she wants: love (with Laurie). Though she may exude ethereal feminine energy, she is not submissive. The pencil places the power of love in her hand.

*

By constructing scenes that bridge emotional gaps between art and the artist, Gerwig fosters a sense of sentimental empowerment. In the novel, we accept the emotional implications of these fine arts as they are prescribed by Alcott. Blackford argues that within the original text, "the displays Jo and Amy construct point to the potential power and freedom behind artistic creativity" (26). However, the film transforms this potential into reality. Gerwig adapts the fine arts with the slight contemporary twist of emotional realism, priming the audience to assign their own emotional attachment in addition to Alcott's meaning. Essentially, writing and painting serve as stand-ins for something more than themselves in Gerwig's film. They crystalize identity struggles, role negotiation, and reclamation of agency. As adaptation theory suggests, the medium is the message, and art imitates life.

Chapter 2: The Epistolary & Intertextuality

The presence of the epistolary and intertextuality in Gerwig's film furthers both her adaptation's fidelity to and departure from the novel. According to Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation*, "for the reader, spectator, or listener, adaptation *as adaptation* is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality *if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text*" (21). In the case of a timeless story such as *Little Women*, adaptors like Gerwig must facilitate the complicated transition from page to screen. In the process, the film takes on a voice of its own formed through an interconnected, communicative relationship to Alcott's text. Intertextuality in adaptation operates in such a way that medium is emblematic of message. Hutcheon further argues that "texts are said to be mosaics of citations that are visible and invisible, heard and silent" (21). The epistolary mode of writing also adds an intertextual element to Gerwig's adaptation. Traditionally, this style refers to letters and other types of correspondence. However, the form also extends more broadly to include diary entries, blog posts, and other unconventional documents. Gerwig leans into the experimental and radical as she conveys the spirit of the novel through the primary vehicles of Alcott's words from outside of *Little Women*, letter-writing, and Jo's manuscript.

Alcott Between the Lines

The importance of intertextuality is established from the onset of the film. Preceding the opening scene is a simple black and white epigraph: "'I've had lots of troubles, so I write jolly tales.' Louisa May Alcott" (Appendix I). Considering film as a visual text, this creates an immediate dialogue between Gerwig's adaptation and Alcott. However, this quote is not from the pages of *Little Women*. In his article in *The Atlantic*, writer David Sims deems this inclusion "a perfect summation of the sharp but wistful tone that defined Alcott's work. Gerwig captures

that mood with this film, a sparklingly clever new take that remixes the book's timeline while maintaining its perfect balance of joy and sadness." However, the intertextual implications are far greater than mere mood. There is a deeper intentionality hovering in the margins. Rather than opening with a line from the adapted text, Gerwig instead opts to resurrect Alcott's words from beyond the boundaries of *Little Women*'s covers to capture the spirit of her classic story. This suggests a deep-seated relationship between author and text, an intertextual connection conveyed between the lines. To stay true to the story of *Little Women* is to stay true to Alcott. Even in the process of adaption, the coveted author has a place at Gerwig's table.

Following the epigraph, another significant manifestation of intertextuality via Alcott culminates in Jo's emotional monologue with Marmee. This scene alone has garnered acclaim and recognition, referred to in conversation and critique as "Jo's speech." Marmee enters the room apologizing, not wanting to disturb Jo's writing. Immediately, the setting is established as Jo's sanctuary. However, Jo claims she does not write anymore as we see her packing away childhood items. This emptying of her sacred space echoes her inner turmoil and desolation. Jo paces the room and wrings her hands, eventually succumbing to her tears. Marmee's seated position in the middle of the frame, at the center of Jo's storm, anchors the scene (Appendix J). Gerwig's screenplay sheds more light on the intertextual complexities of the monologue:

JO

(crying, trying to explain
herself to herself)
Women have minds and souls as well
as hearts, ambition and talent as
well as beauty and I'm sick of

being told that love is all a woman

is fit for. But… I am so lonely. (Gerwig 100)

In her review of the 2019 film, journalist Clarisse Loughrey reveals that Jo's monologue, what she describes as "the quivering heart of Gerwig's *Little Women*," in fact comes from another Alcott novel, *Rose in Bloom*. She also argues that Gerwig "is less bothered with preserving the original text than with capturing the mind and spirit of the woman who wrote it" (par. 3). I maintain that one does not preclude the other. Rather, this kind of intertextuality allows Gerwig to push the boundaries of what exactly it means to *preserve* a text.

Gerwig argues that preserving a text and its spirit is not limited to the words on the page. She is also committed to the woman behind the words. Gerwig takes this notion beyond the scope of the epigraph, which only illuminates the author's words on the screen. During the above speech, Jo ventriloquizes Alcott's ideas and voice. The stage direction also contributes to this intertextual complexity: "(trying to explain herself to herself)." Essentially, Jo makes sense of her character and identity using the words of her creator. Lurking beneath the monologue's veil of feminism, the final line about Jo's loneliness conveys a lasting sentimentality about the heroine that previous adaptations have not captured. Yet, this still feels like Jo, even if a little more sensitive than the expected spitfire. Above all, the monologue conveys ideas that were important to Alcott in her time, but, due to the conditions of the novel's publication, were not expressed explicitly. Nevertheless, these ideas run through the veins of *Little Women*. Gerwig imbues them with new life in her adaptation while borrowing the words from another Alcott work. Thus, as was the case with the opening epigraph, including words outside of the novel does not diminish the significance of the novel itself. This sets the stage for words that have the power of agency.

Letters of Agency

Another source of intertextuality in Gerwig's film is correspondence between characters. Letter-writing reflected the social milieus of the time, particularly gender roles. Women were the governors of the sentimental, expressive epistolary, whereas their male counterparts had more commercial, instrumental motives in their letters. Linda Mitchell addresses general categories that consistently appeared in traditional English epistolary writings: "parent-child relationships, education of youth, marriage proposals; changes of fortune, including financial reversals and the challenges of illness; the course of friendship; business matters" (332). Although *Little Women* is not formally an epistolary novel, letters have an unequivocal presence in the plot, from Father's words of love and wisdom from the army to Amy's glamourous recounting of her European adventures. Gerwig takes Alcott's letters and uses them more intentionally and to a new end in her adaptation. She transforms the role of letter-writing yet stays faithful to its presence in the source text.

Gerwig's most interesting use of letters occurs in three distinct scenes in which a character breaks the fourth wall. This theatrical and cinematic technique involves an actor's direct address of the audience. Mitchell explains that epistolary manuals included "more model letters intended for women responsible for the details of social and domestic affairs, as well as more business correspondence useful to men engaged in commerce and trade" (333). In each of Gerwig's scenes, the function of the letters graduates from passive to active and simultaneously fulfils and subverts these gendered expectations. She accomplishes this by establishing a visual rhythm for these letter scenes: the recipient reads the letter, paired with visual cut scenes of the sender narrating directly to the camera.

The first scene that follows this pattern is when Jo discovers a gift from Professor Bhaer, the complete works of Shakespeare, outside of her room in the boarding house in New York. We see Jo reading the note while the cut scene shows Bhear himself narrating the letter to the camera (Appendix K). In this instance, a man is doing the gift-giving and expressing traditionally feminine sentiments of fondness and friendship. Standing with hands clutched and wearing a warm facial expression, it is as though he is in the room watching her open the gift. In the second scene, Jo prepares a letter to Mr. Dashwood that accompanies the first parts of her manuscript. Unlike Professor Bhaer's scene, we see Jo writing the letter actively, a sense of agency restored to her hand. Her direct address is given from the attic, her place of comfort and power, and she is sitting confidently upright, as though on the other side of the editing desk (Appendix L). This exchange is essentially a business deal, thereby casting Jo in a more traditionally masculine light. The third scene exhibits Mr. Dashwood's response to Jo's manuscript. Like Jo, he is shown to be actively writing the letter while leaning over his desk in his place of power (Appendix M), thus fulfilling the expectations of his profession and gender.

Aside from the content of the scenes, the differences in the letter-writing mode between Alcott's *Little Women* and Gerwig's are attributed to fundamental notions of genre. On one hand, movies simply rely on "visual and verbal performances in a way literary texts don't" (Leitch 154). On the other hand, Leitch also reminds us that "the ability to enter the enter the minds of fictional characters directly is of course one of the glories…of prose fiction" (158). However, Gerwig's adaptation forges new ground when she breaks the fourth wall. This confers enhanced intimacy with the letters and makes them, as well as the characters, more accessible.

An Epistolary Meta-Manuscript

As exhibited through the presence of letters, texts are catalysts for major plot events and character development in both the source novel and Gerwig's film. While the epistolary is mostly viewed in the context of correspondence, this form of writing is actually more inclusive, defined broadly as a story told through documents. Gerwig embraces this ambiguity and thrives in the gray area, creating a new type of epistolary communication in her film.

Jo's novel serves as a framing device for Gerwig's reconstruction of the *Little Women* narrative. After Jo has her first meeting with Mr. Dashwood about printing her stories in the paper during the opening scenes of the film, there is a cut to a leatherbound copy of *Little Women* by LM Alcott on a hardwood table (Appendix N). This three-dimensional title card suggests that the film's identity is rooted in the physical object of the book. Not only is this an extension of the theme of art imitating life, but the image also has metatextual implications when it makes a reappearance at the end of the film.

After Beth's death, Jo describes her new novel as inspired by the lives of her and her sisters, their "little life" full of "domestic struggles and joys." The lines between fiction and reality are blurred even further once the manuscript reaches Mr. Dashwood's desk. Compared to the opening scenes in which she was more reserved, in this second meeting Jo exhibits more confident mannerisms. She leans forward on the desk, pressing her hands into the wood as Mr. Dashwood has done. Jo also sports a traditionally masculine top hat, further solidifying her place in a male-dominated profession (Appendix O). This time she also holds her own in the conversation, negotiating contracts, payment, and copyright: "I want to own my own book" (Gerwig 121).

In her review of the film in *MR Online*, Ginger Jentzen describes Jo as taking on "an Alcott-like narrative role" (par. 14). She also highlights this specific scene as

> a mirror of Alcott's experience: because Alcott retained the rights to *Little Women*, the novel's success sustained her family for a generation or more. The movie's ending stays both authentic to the book and authentic to the actual life Alcott lived. (par. 14)

Once again, Gerwig's adaptation is being remembered for text authenticity and authorial authenticity. However, many of the film's critiques, such as this one, still define these concepts as two separate entities to be achieved. I believe that Gerwig is making a case that the two are connected, and that true source fidelity comes from having both. Since Alcott's own livelihood was so entangled in the creation of *Little Women*, preserving her personal voice in the retelling of the story not only makes sense, but it is imperative to Gerwig's adaptation.

Again, art's imitation of life confers the notion that the medium is the message. Jo's breakthrough into the writing profession acts as another framing device for the film. Gerwig sets out to wrap up Alcott's story by entwining it with Jo's story, particularly through the publication of Jo's manuscript, her own edition of *Little Women*. According to Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation*, "the political, aesthetic, and autobiographical intentions of the various adapters are potentially relevant to the audience's interpretation. They are often recoverable, and their traces are visible in the text" (107). In Gerwig's case, she makes her biographical intentions clear beyond mere traces.

The ending of Gerwig's film celebrates the fine details of the printing of Jo's book, scenes that I will explore more intimately in the next chapter about storytelling and cinematography. Nevertheless, the final product is a pink leatherbound novel resting on a wooden table. At first glance, this visually echoes the opening title card. Suddenly, a gentle hand

comes in from the side of the screen to brush away the gold foil, revealing a seal that reads *Little Women* by JL March (Appendix P).

This moment not only confirms Alcott's authorial voice, but it also serves a greater purpose in bringing the art of adaptation to life. Gerwig not only calls upon the familiarity of seeing a source text, but also follows through and delivers the transformed product. Adaptation is made corporeal and tangible. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon reveals that "an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing" (9). This notion of palimpsest has literal implications in terms of intertextuality, particularly through the act of wiping away the foil to reveal the impression of the title and author name underneath. Although Gerwig, in the process of adaptation, has transformed and even excluded certain parts of the *Little Women* novel to make room for the radical parts of her retelling, she pays tribute to Alcott and her writing through Jo. Leitch writes:

> Dozens of adaptations that open with screens showing copies of the books on which they are based, from *A Christmas Carol* to *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, invoke not only their specific precursor texts but the aura of literature as such to confer a sense of authority. (165)

Gerwig not only assumes that her audience will follow the trajectory that Leitch describes; she counts on it. The film's title card confers the importance of the original *Little Women* novel, and when she transforms this image in the end for Jo's manuscript, she wants the audience to do the same thing. Essentially, this intertextual, palimpsestic imagery does for us what it does for Jo. The object of a novel is not only a vessel and framing referent, but a through line that fosters an open line of communication and exchange between Jo, Alcott, and the audience. Jo's manuscript,

her own *Little Women*, takes the form of an epistolary document that sheds a new light on the classic story.

*

The epistolary mode and intertextuality equip Gerwig with the tools to tackle larger issues of creative authority. Specifically, Alcott's resurrected words work in confluence with dynamic letter-writing experiences and Jo's meta-manuscript. The adaptation simultaneously exists beyond the page and between the lines of the *Little Women* narrative. Gerwig accounts not only for her voice as an adaptor, but also the voice of the woman who gave her the source text. Moreover, while texts are major catalysts for plot events and character development in Alcott's original novel, Gerwig expands on this role and endows texts with communicative properties that foster a dialogue between the page, the screen, and the viewer's eye. Although her adaptation is in some ways a radical transformation of the text, she makes the viewers believe that this is still the *Little Women* they know and love.

Chapter 3: Cinematography & Storytelling

Taking a step back from the larger contextual themes of the work, the efficacy of Gerwig's adaptation rests in its overall cinematography and storytelling. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon contends that "Being shown a story is not the same thing as being told it—and neither is the same as participating in it or interacting with it, that is, experiencing a story directly and kinesthetically" (12). In other words, an adaptation cannot simply be a re*telling* of a beloved story. Rather, adaptors, particularly those in film, are expected to use the tools of their genre to transform the narrative. Gerwig's adaptation especially thrives in the areas of interaction and kinesthetic experience, right from the onset of the film.

Whereas one anticipates a *Little Women* film to start at the beginning with Christmas morning, just as every other film adaptation of the novel has, the audience's expectations are immediately violated when, after the opening epigraph, Gerwig's film starts with an adult Jo in a publishing office. Nevertheless, she spends the rest of her screen time justifying her non-chronological storytelling with captivating cinematography that carefully treads the line of sentimentality and agency. She sets out to change the landscape of *Little Women* with her own radical rhythm, a risk of which she is well aware.

Not-So-Sentimental Cinematography

Gerwig's cinematography demonstrates a strong control of visual composition and lighting, allowing her to simultaneously fulfil and subvert the novel's romantic and sentimental roots. These picturesque qualities are grounded in Gerwig's own artistic inspiration. In a *New York Times* interview with the director herself, Amanda Hess reveals how Gerwig studied works of prominent painters from the 1860s, particularly oil paintings by Seymour Joseph Guy that "evoked the very hue of childhood" (par. 3). Harkening back to the ideas of art's imitation of

life, Gerwig's cinematography explores color and strategic lighting in both its literal and interpretive forms. Gerwig further explains that once the March sisters reach adulthood, the light turns white in such a way that "isn't cold" but is "less magical" nonetheless (par. 3). The inherent juxtaposition between the golden light of childhood and the white light of adulthood is an ongoing motif in the film.

In his film editorial in *The New Yorke*r, Richard Brody examines the "documentary-centric elements" of Gerwig's film:

> largely interstitial, a sort of imaginative cinematic punctuation of sequences, by means of glances and gazes, that also reflects a quasi-documentary ardor for settings and their influence on characters' thought and action. Such grace …connect[s] disparate places and events and convey[s] a sense of a large dramatic space that's filled with emotional energy. (par. 9)

This review captures the emotional poignancy of Gerwig's adaptation. Although a departure from Alcott's nineteenth-century sentimentalism, love and heartache, joy and sorrow, still course through the film's veins. Art as an imitation of life as well as the epistolary and intertextuality create thematic interstices, allowing Gerwig to fill the gaps with her own cinematic cadence. Furthermore, Brody's references to a documentary style of filmmaking also imply a greater true-to-life purpose, specifically through a strong emphasis on character as well as emotional complexity and transformation.

Gerwig is not simply retelling a classic novel for the sake of adaptation. Instead, she is bringing *Little Women* out of the public imagination and reintroducing it to the public eye to show that these characters, and their joys and struggles, are not confined to the pages and the time in which they were conceived. Rather, they are very much relevant to our contemporary

world. This relationship is conveyed in the scene in which Jo rejects Laurie's proposal. Gerwig's screenplay explicates the helpless overlapping of dialogue, signaled by a forward-slash:

JO	LAURIE
I wanted to save you from	(not listening to her)
this, I thought /you'd understand.	/I've worked hard to please
	you, and I gave up billiards
	and everything you didn't
	like, and waited and never
	complained for I hoped you'd
	love me, though I'm not half
	good enough– (Gerwig 97)

Laurie, portrayed by Timothée Chalamet, continues his plea for Jo's acceptance while Jo remains steadfast in her independence: "I don't believe I will ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up" (Gerwig 98). After this heart-wrenching exchange, Jo plants herself in the wide-open field and hangs her head dejectedly between her knees (Appendix Q).

Gerwig reveals the inner truth of Jo's isolation with a coalescence of dramatic imagery and verbal context. On the surface, Jo's assertion coupled with the vast landscape around her would suggest female empowerment and the ability to tread one's own path. However, the overall emotional saturation of the exchange alongside her final placement in the bottom of the composition signifies her true feelings of uncertainty with her place in the world. Also, while the foreground field exhibits golden brown hues, the sky in the background has a lighter white tint,

signaling a turning point in her coming-of-age. The golden light of childhood is starting to fade away.

Gerwig also manipulates sentimental expectations with documentary-style cinematography during the iconic reading of father's letter. In the novel, this scene is defined by its overt outpouring of emotions and alignment with epistolary traditions, in which "the conventions of moral authority are both distributed and enlarged" (Mitchell 345):

> only at the end did the writer's heart overflow with fatherly love and longing for the little girls at home.
>
> "I know they will remember all I said to them, that they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women."
>
> Everybody sniffed when they came to that part; Jo wasn't ashamed of the great tear that dropped off the end of her nose, and Amy never minded the rumpling of her curls as she hid her face on her mother's shoulder and sobbed out. (Alcott 18)

Alcott's original scene clearly harkens to the old style of sentimentality. As Mitchell's explanation of epistolary models suggests, Father's letter calls his daughters to their duties. In the process, it makes them melancholy. At first blush, Gerwig's adaptation of this scene is a translation of how it appears on the page, including both the content of the letter as well as the women's visual arrangement in the parlor (Appendix R). Cast in the golden light of childhood by the fire, Marmee anchors the composition in the chair; Jo stands behind her to shield her own emotions; Meg sits on the floor, leaning on her mother for support; Beth sits next to Meg, underneath her family's protection; Amy reclines in Beth's lap.

However, instead of sniffles and sobs, Gerwig pivots the remaining cinematography of the scene to transform the meaning of father's letter. Initially, she provides the painting-like comfort of the women reading the letter, but she does not let the audience sink into the sentimentalism. Rather, she focuses on feminine agency. As Marmee narrates the letter from her husband, her voice shifts from live reading to voice-over. In turn, the action of the scene depicts the March sisters preparing for their performance of Jo's play. The camera briefly highlights each girl following a phrase from the letter: Amy being laced into a costume concurrently with "loving children"; Beth peering from behind the curtain with "do their duty faithfully, fight their enemies bravely"; Meg and Jo adorning each other in accessories alongside "conquer themselves so beautifully." This intentional camera work makes father's letter less preachy and less saccharine by imparting virtue directly back to the girls. And even though this scene is set in the childhood home, traditionally a place of innocence and wonder, the March sisters are not mere objects of the domesticity. While father wishes the best for his own little women, his daughters perform for an audience of young girls, inspiring another generation of little women just as Gerwig aims to do with her film.

Elliptical Storytelling

This idea of restoring female agency is buttressed by the fact that Gerwig tells the story out of order, a radical departure from the novel's linear structure that traces the sisters' relational development from adolescence to adulthood. Historically, critical theory surrounding the *Little Women* novel has taken issue with the nineteenth-century female bildungsroman. According to Eve Kornfeld and Susan Jackson, Alcott, as a member of the century's matriarchal culture, "is bound by the constraints of domestic fiction and the need to create a credible facsimile of life. The parameters of this world are set by a social reality over which even an author cannot

exercise complete control" (74). These so-called parameters trace the path of a heroine from the sweet joy of girlhood to the resignation of womanhood. Essentially, girls have a freedom that women do not. Once childhood is over, it is never looked upon again.

This notion, consequently, has carried over into the previous six feature film adaptations that follow the letter of the novel chronologically. However, what has long been considered a problem in text has become a familiar expectation in film. In an interview with *Boxoffice Pro*, Gerwig attests to why viewing this classic tale of female bildungsroman has more personal implications for an audience than merely reading about it:

> I think that so much of our collective memory of what that book is, is who they are in their teenage years, their childhood… The thing that they are yearning for, that they are nostalgic for, is childhood. It exists in a snow globe of memory. It's this thing that the audience is also yearning for and aching for. And it's that ache of the fact that it's gone. (Pahle par. 8)

Nevertheless, Gerwig rejects the "grow down" female bildungsroman theory, and seeks to solve this historical problem with her film. Rather than telling the *Little Women* story linearly through the prism of adolescence, her adaptation employs elliptical storytelling that inherently places more emphasis on part two of Alcott's novel, rather than part one. It is the first thing the audience notices after the epigraph. Her cold opening of Jo as an adult immediately launches the story with conflict and allows the exposition to develop in stages.

This is a radical departure from the novel's iconic opening scene on Christmas morning. The beginning of Alcott's novel sets the scene of the young March girls gathered around the living room, lamenting over their poverty and wishing for a better situation:

> "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

> "It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.
>
> "I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.
>
> "We've got Father and Mother and each other," said Beth contentedly from her corner. (Alcott 11)

For lifelong lovers of the novel, Gerwig asks her viewers to take a leap of faith and suspend their disbelief to follow along in her adaptation. In fact, the Christmas morning scene does not occur until about halfway through the film. From a genre standpoint, her strategy taps into film's ability to convey temporality with more creative fluidity than a novel. Adaptation scholar Sarah Cardwell describes how "Within the terms of the narrative, 'real' past—as represented through dates and some images—is interwoven with memory, and memory overrides, but does not eliminate, the present, in ways that only an audio-visual medium could achieve" (11). Gerwig establishes the "present" of her film when the March sisters have already reached adulthood. From there, she stitches a vibrant timeline of memory and flashback to demonstrate how part one of the novel thematically and contextually feeds into part two. Childhood and adulthood are not as diametrically opposed as the novel and other film adaptations have led us to believe.

Moreover, Gerwig's opening scenes show each "little woman" where she is (Appendix S). Jo, having just sold a story to the newspaper, returns to her teaching job at the boarding house where she encounters Professor Bhaer. Amy is living in Paris, painting, traveling with Aunt March, and ultimately reconnecting with Laurie. Meg, a married woman and new mother, tends to her small children while running a plain, little house. Beth finds solace at the piano, alone in her childhood home.

During the same *Boxoffice Pro* interview, Gerwig explains the relational catalyst of sibling nostalgia that inspired her decision to start in adulthood:

> Something that's incredibly moving to me is that once Amy goes to Europe, the four girls are never again together. Whatever that was that those four girls had together, it will never happen again. And that, to me, was so heartbreaking. And to start from the place of being separate and then, through this time travel that you are able to do in film, to bring them together again—that was the thing I wanted to do, because it struck me so much in rereading the book. (Pahle par. 9)

To develop this connection between the sisters and facilitate her unorthodox chronological structure, Gerwig's film employs visual parallelism in which scenes from the past bleeds into the present, and vice versa. American film critic Seymour Chatman describes how "all narratives, in whatever medium, combine the time sequence of plot events, the time of the histoire ('story-time') with the time of the presentation of those events in the text, which we call 'discourse-time'" (122). Chatman maintains that narratives of any medium must keep these two time orders independent of one another. Gerwig, on the other hand, makes it so that they are interdependent. Kate Erbland writes in her review of the film that "the movie illuminates the way memory and emotion can collapse into each other" (par. 10). Childhood and adulthood may feed into one another, but this overlapping demonstrates how history does not always repeat itself.

One of the most poignant examples of the relationship between memory and emotion occurs in the parallelism between the flashback of the beach picnic to the present moment of Beth and Jo's visit to the seashore while Beth suffers from her second bout of scarlet fever. In the past, it's a picturesque sunny day while the March sisters and their friends play games, fly kites, splash in the ocean, and engage in carefree childhood frivolity. The last shot depicts Jo and

Beth laughing and running together, which transitions to the present of Jo and Beth laying down on a blanket (Appendix T). Gerwig's screenplay describes the scene as "emptier, darker, colder -- the beach of their adulthood, without the gloss of memory" (71). Jo reads to Beth as they reflect on their current realities.

Sims argues in his review that Gerwig's film "puts Alcott's sunnier and sadder sides in conversation with each other" (par. 4). Though he speaks to the film as whole, his succinct observation resonates for this pair of scenes. The beach picnic conveys the golden light of free-spirited childhood, whereas the seashore trip casts a white-tinted shade of melancholy. Beneath the surface, the juxtaposition of cinematic lighting illuminates deeper dialectical tensions that form the bedrock of Gerwig's adaptation. Jentzen expands on this idea in her review:

> While a chronological retelling accentuates the character's [*sic*] loss of girlhood, Gerwig divulges the story of the March sisters based on the emotional impact of the girl's [*sic*] memories, quietly linking moments so adeptly that the seams are sometimes invisible. (par. 6)

Jentzen's reference to "seams" animates the tightly woven texture of Gerwig's non-linear narrative structure. Because of this, she can address emotional themes, such as loss, from multiple dimensions. Loss is not limited to girlhood. Rather, it includes the loss of family and even the loss of self. During the picnic, all four March sisters are together, but Jo struggles with the budding romance between Meg and Mr. Brooke, as she does not want to let her older sister go. During the seashore visit, the sisters are spread apart, and this time Jo fears losing Beth to illness. The narration that unites these scenes is an excerpt from George Eliot's "The Mill on the Floss" (Gerwig 71). As Jo reads the work of such a prominent author, she questions the regression in her identity as a writer.

Like Sims says, the sad cannot exist without the sunny. As much as grief and loss shadow memories for the Marches, Gerwig still celebrates other golden moments in the characters' lives. She ends the film as it began, with Jo in the driver's seat. During the last scenes, the audience is gently led through Aunt March's home that has been transformed into Plumfield Academy, a setting filled with children, family, love, and life. This is visually entwined with the intimate details of the final production of Jo's manuscript: printing, stitching, and binding. As Jo, Meg, and Amy gather alongside their mother and father with Professor Bhaer, Mr. Brooke, Laurie, and a new baby in tow, their makeshift family portrait fades into an image of Jo's manuscript, the same copy that she clutches in her ink-stained hands (Appendix U).

Gerwig visually argues that as the pages come together, so too do the details of a perfect world. However, missing from the scene are Marmee's iconic parting words of domestic bliss. At the end of Alcott's novel, daughters, husbands, babies, Marmee, and Father gather around on Marmee's birthday:

> Touched to the heart, Mrs. March could only stretch out her arms, as if to gather children and grandchildren to herself, and say, with face and voice full of motherly love, gratitude, and humility—
>
> "Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!" (Alcott 472)

By omitting these lines from her film, Gerwig clears space for a more flexible farewell. The viewer can choose their own ending, whether professional or sentimental.

Tucked away within this sequence is a brief flashback in which Jo recalls a childhood game that she would play with her sisters. According to Brody's review, this moment "suggests that this carefree time, without responsibilities, is also one of irresponsibility; that childlikeness

is also childishness; and that adulthood and maturity in art is a matter of renunciation" (par. 10). This interpretation may seem to confirm a long-explored issue with the female bildungsroman. As described by Kornfeld and Jackson, men grow up and into power while women grow down. However, I assign a different meaning to the fleeting childhood flashback. Rather than ending on the cold light of adulthood, Gerwig brings childhood back for one last moment in the sun. It shows that despite the inevitability of growing up and adapting to life as a professional, Jo has not relinquished her childhood. No—she keeps it close to her heart, preserved in her book just as Gerwig preserves it in her film. This speaks to the legacy of the novel as well as the legacy of Alcott. As the last shot of the March family, old and new, visually fades into the book cover, it shows that it is possible to have both.

Even before the ending arrives, Gerwig fashions a scene that functions as a visual validation of her cinematic parallelism. After discussing her plans to transform Aunt March's estate into a school for boys and girls, Jo walks in the company of Amy and Meg (Appendix V). When her sisters ask her about her writing, Jo apprehensively discloses that she is working on a project "about [their] little life." Jo and Amy's subsequent dialogue exchange thematically reflects meta-intertextuality as well as art's imitation of life:

JO

Who will be interested in a
story of domestic struggles
and joys? It doesn't have any
real importance.

AMY

Maybe we don't see those things as

important because people don't

write about them.

JO

No, writing doesn't confer

importance, it reflects it.

AMY

I'm not sure. Perhaps writing will

make them more important. (Gerwig 109)

Just as Gerwig strategically arranges the events in her film, she also positions her characters in the scene to reflect the mosaic of her film's underlying argument about female agency. Jo, the writer who struggles with the relationship between her craft and personal life, stands in the middle of her two sisters: Amy, the failed painter turned agent of feminine power through love; and Meg, who represents a woman's choice for a life of familial love and domesticity. Together, they represent three different possibilities of a female bildungsroman. By the end of this scene, Gerwig ameliorates any lingering doubts about the efficacy of her non-linear storytelling. She speaks through the March sisters and articulates how those moments of "domestic struggles and joys" were instrumental to understanding her intentional and dynamic reconfiguration of the plot.

*

The fabric of Gerwig's film is a hand-crafted coalescence of perceptive cinematography and non-chronological narrative structure. Emotionally charged lighting and scene composition facilitate a contemporary blend of sentimentalism and agency, while elliptical storytelling keeps childhood in conversation with adulthood. Gerwig undertakes an impressive endeavor, as she departs from not only the letter of the novel itself, but also the nostalgic precedent set by the

previous six feature film adaptations. Nevertheless, she remains steadfast in her claim that part two of the novel is where power is restored to the little women, especially Jo. Rather than conform to the either/or dichotomy created by the resignation of the nineteenth-century female bildungsroman, Gerwig creates a both/and situation in which her heroine can have domestic connection and empowered artistic authority. In doing so, she fashions an impregnable ending to her radical, yet faithful, adaptation.

Conclusion

In order to tug at the heartstrings, you need to have access to them. Since its publication in 1868, *Little Women* has been revered as a sentimental text with a heartbeat that has resonated for decades. However, such sentimentality does not fit today's contemporary feminist scripts. So, Gerwig empties out the sentimental language from the novel, working with real people and their raw emotions. Unlike Alcott's novel and previous film adaptations that made us melancholy about the loss of girlhood innocence, Gerwig breaks the pattern of this unhappy fairy tale ending. She furnishes her film with meta-messages about identity, love, and life that illuminate the honor in owning one's story.

Adaptors of beloved classics walk a tightrope, balancing expectation with innovation. Gerwig's adaptation is a labor of tradition and transgression. She reclaims the *Little Women* narrative by working around and through the classic tropes of a bildungsroman, arguing that childhood is not a chapter that ends when adulthood begins. Despite its flaws and compromises, *Little Women* remains a beloved and integral part of American literature. Gerwig's film is a textual artifact of the novel's legacy that not only participates in a generational conversation but shifts it in a new direction. Alcott had already modernized sentimentalism from its original literary tradition when she created the first girl's story. Gerwig uses sentimentalism and turns it on its head to show that when those little girls grow up, they can become little women with agency, power, and freedom.

Appendix A

(*Little Women* 00:01:09)

Appendix B

(*Little Women* 00:02:06)

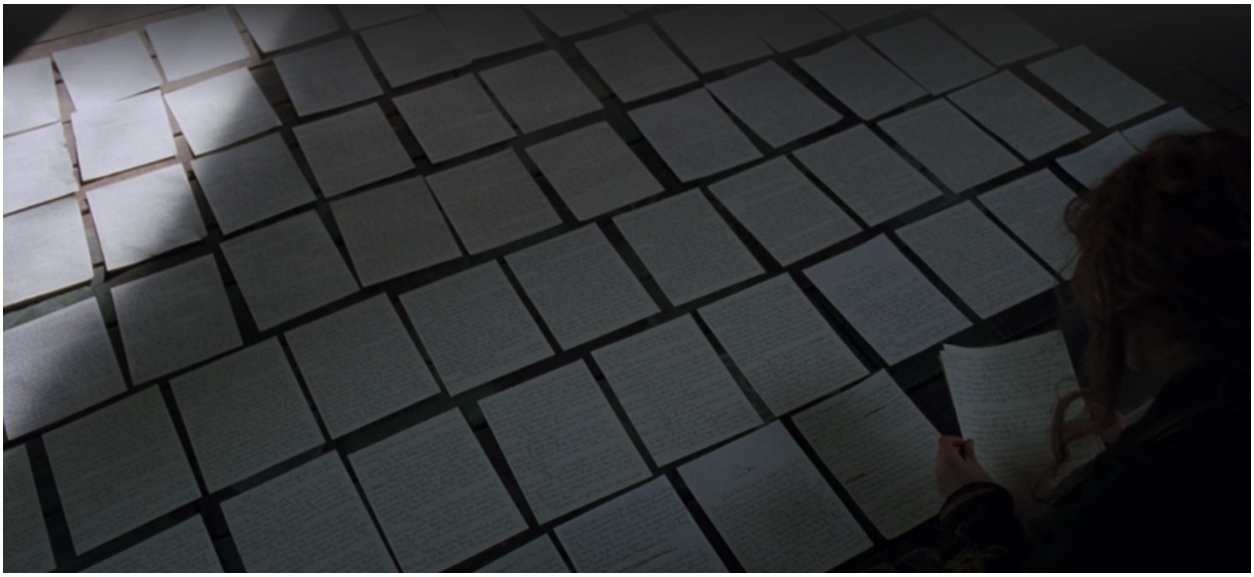
Appendix C

(*Little Women* 00:23:20)

Appendix D

(*Little Women* 01:52:19)

Appendix E



(*Little Women* 01:53:15)

Appendix F

(*Little Women* 00:47:02)

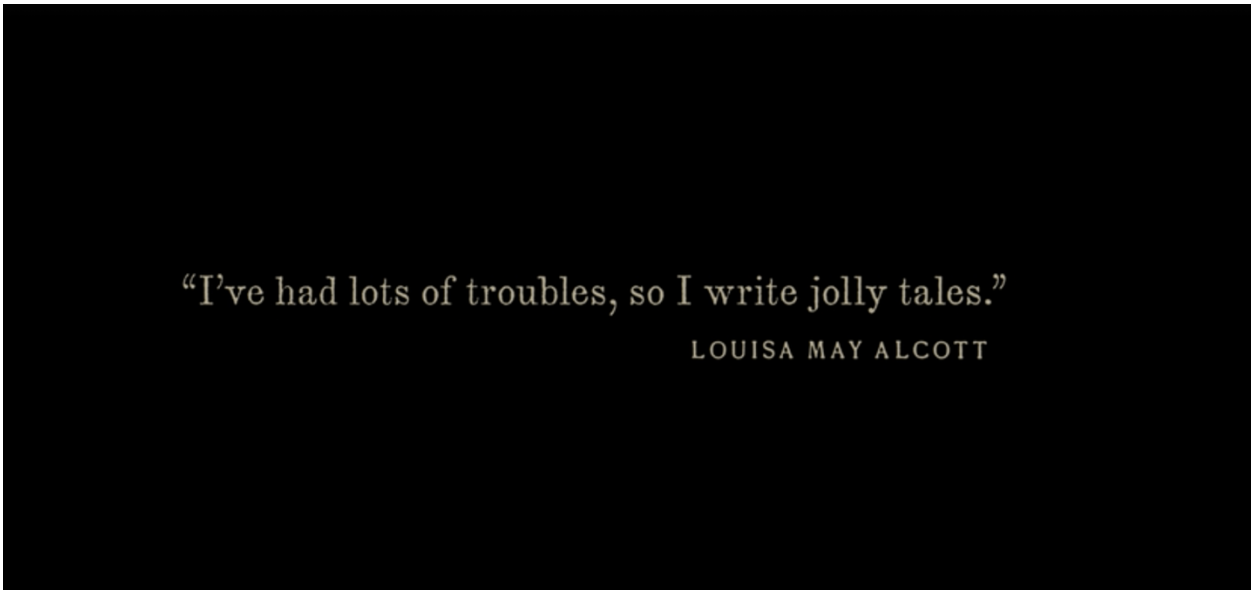
Appendix G

(*Little Women* 01:06:46)

Appendix H

(*Little Women* 01:13:42)

Appendix I

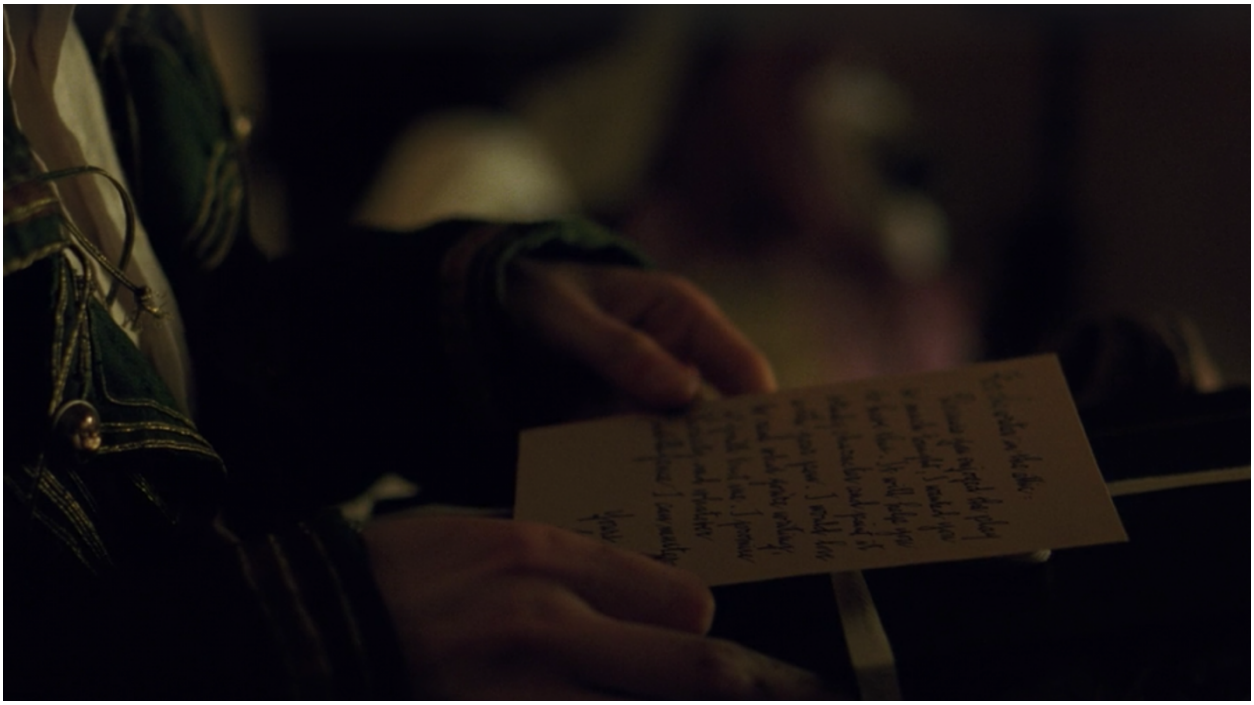


(*Little Women* 00:00:58)

Appendix J

(*Little Women* 01:42:57)

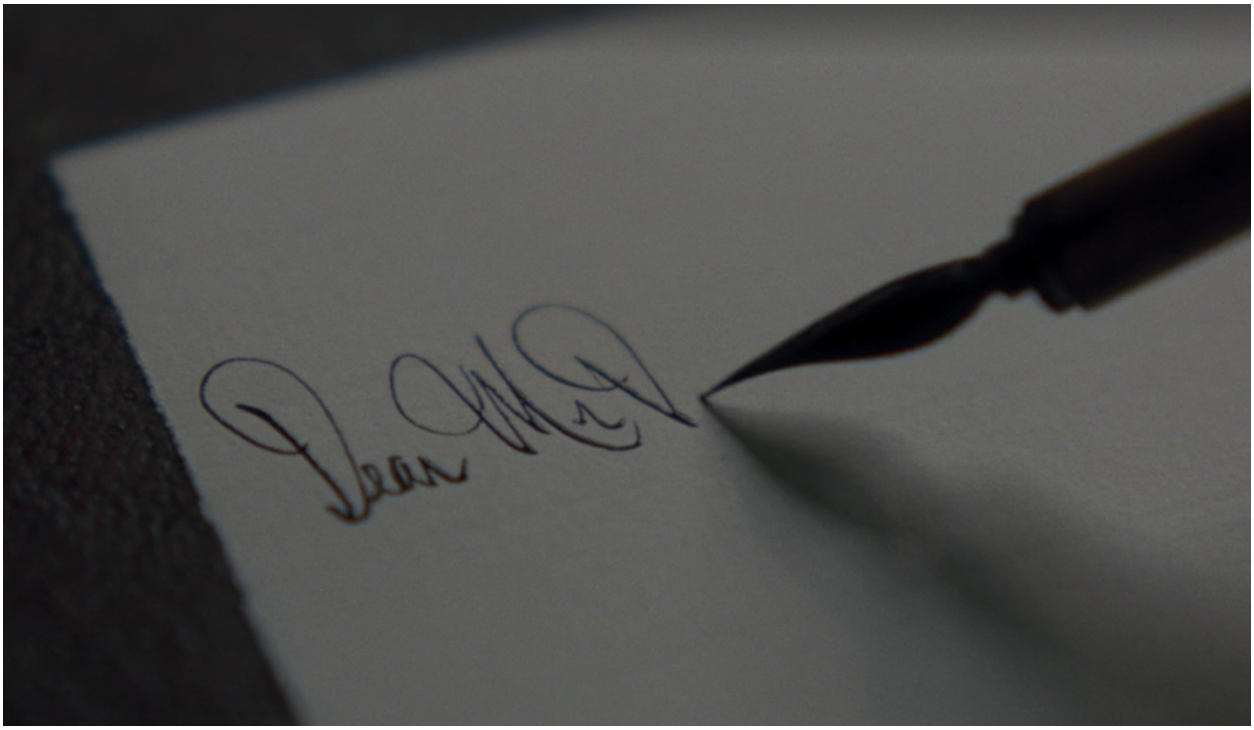
Appendix K



(*Little Women* 00:18:52)

(*Little Women* 00:18:54)

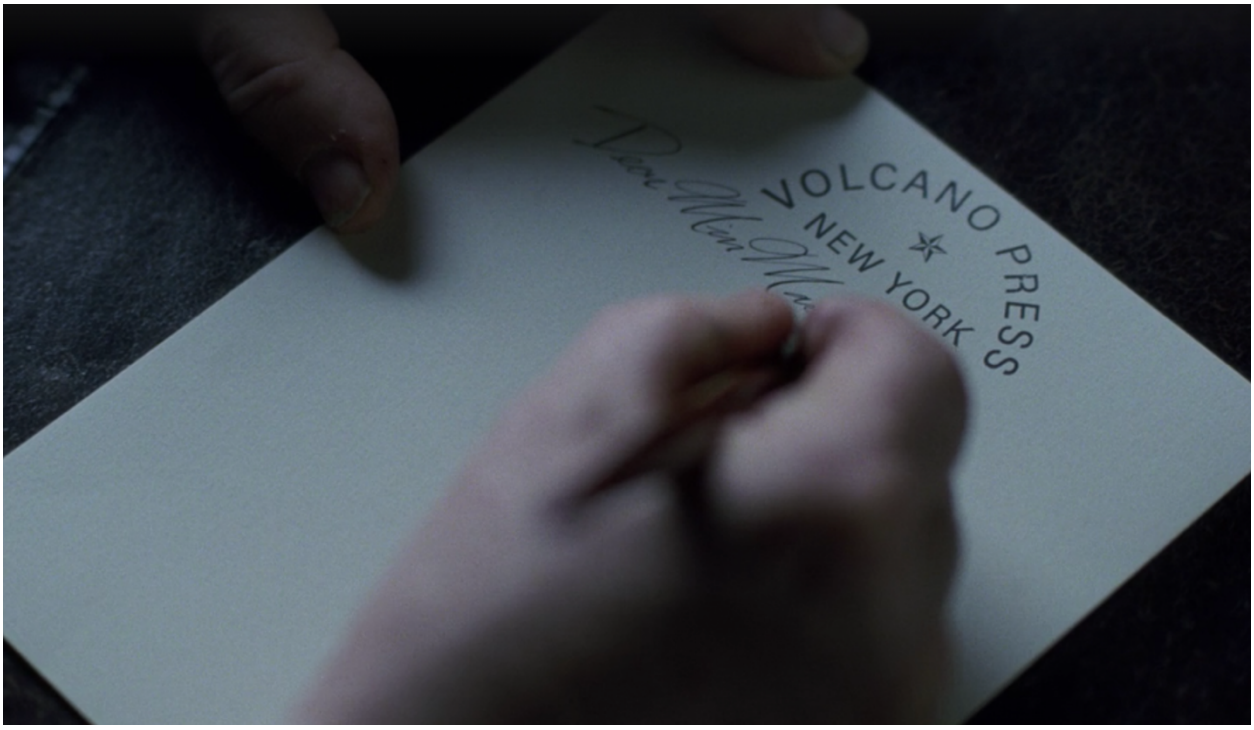
Appendix L



(*Little Women* 01:54:02)

(*Little Women* 01:54:05)

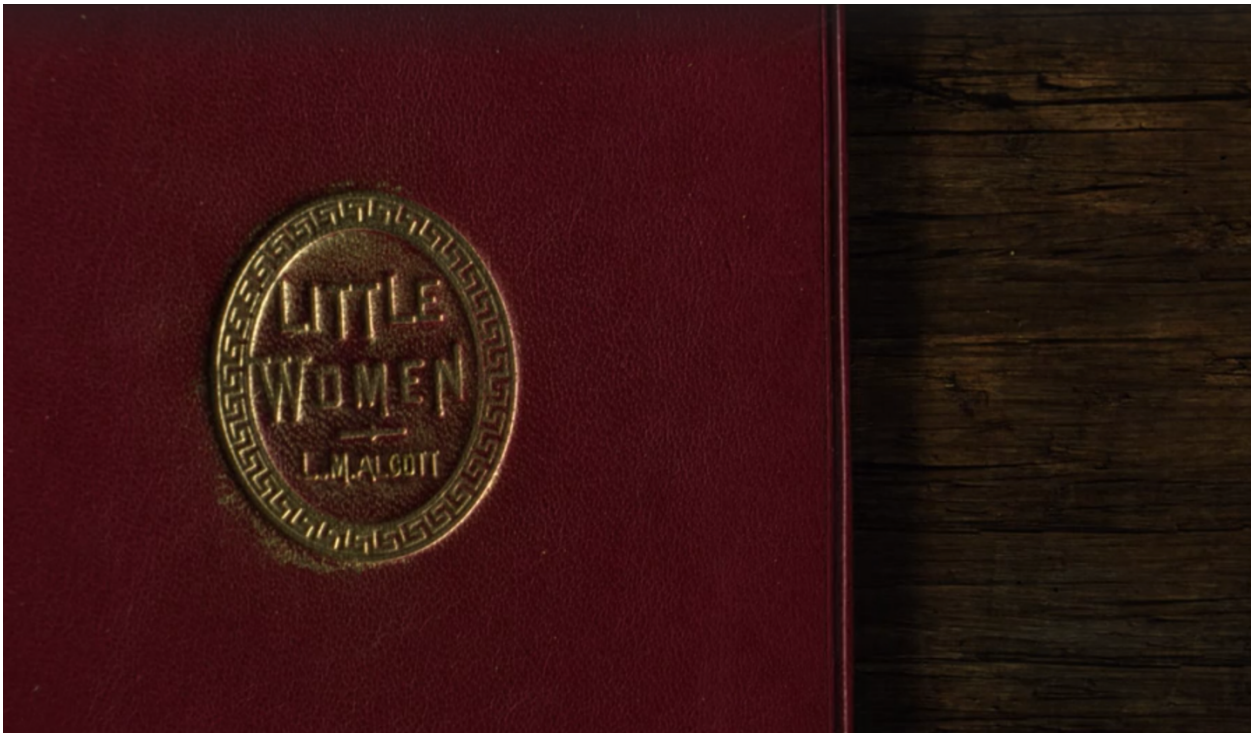
Appendix M



(*Little Women* 01:56:22)

(*Little Women* 01:56:24)

Appendix N



(*Little Women* 00:04:40)

Appendix O

(*Little Women* 02:05:49)

Appendix P

(*Little Women* 02:08:48)

Appendix Q

(*Little Women* 01:39:46)

Appendix R

(*Little Women* 00:32:38)

(*Little Women* 00:32:47)

Appendix R (cont.)

(*Little Women* 00:32:51)

(*Little Women* 00:32:55)

Appendix S

(*Little Women* 00:05:07)

(*Little Women* 00:06:09)

Appendix S (cont.)

(*Little Women* 00:09:29)

(*Little Women* 00:09:51)

Appendix T

(*Little Women* 01:09:02)

(*Little Women* 01:09:09)

Appendix U

(*Little Women* 02:08:42)

(*Little Women* 02:09:28)

Appendix V

(*Little Women* 01:55:40)

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