Adapting Alcott: An Intertextual Dialog of Feminisms through Jo & Amy in *Little Women*

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Many readers list *Little Women* (1869) by Louisa May Alcott as a favorite piece of classic literature, often declaring the novel as an early feminist text. This idea mainly exists due to the character Jo March, who famously struggles to thrive within nineteenth-century gender norms. However, the presence of Jo's struggle does not ultimately categorize the beloved novel as the pinnacle of feminist literature. In truth, a feminist-centered, close reading of the novel reveals larger conservative themes at play, such as a reinforcement of female altruism, obedience, and an ending that ultimately favors female domesticity. It is often noted by various scholars that these elements seem to muddle the subversiveness present in the text, walking back any progressive themes that are established. To add to this confusion, the presence of these themes does not align with Alcott's character, who largely led a protofeminist life.

According to the book *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism,* a protofeminist is defined as "writers and activists whose thinking, writing and 'living' challenged the tenets of patriarchal social organization and questioned the prescriptive gender norms" (Plain & Sellers, 7). This definition is fitting for Alcott, as she advocated for women's suffrage, never married, and maintained her family's financial status through her writing, all of which were unorthodox for a woman in her time (Hollinger & Winterhalter). The summation of this conflicting information creates a vast divergence in scholarly opinion over present themes, with perspectives ranging from one end to the other. Author Ann B. Murphy speaks to this, describing the text as a "tarbaby, a sticky, sentimental, entrapping experience or place rather than a knowable object," noting that the complicated existence of the work pushes scholars either to take a stance of regression or progress when discussing *Little Women* (Murphy, 563-4). The overall conflict seems to hinge on the knowledge of Alcott's life and the overall ending of the book. As a result of this, many scholars have worked to understand the juxtaposition between the author and her work.

Regarding the creation of the novel, a collection of her written letters and journals shed some light on her potential motivations for ending the story on a domestic note. The original book was published in two parts, *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, both of which Alcott proceeded with apprehensively. Her father, who was an avid transcendentalist, encouraged her to write a

moral story for young girls. Begrudgingly, she decided to write the first part based on her own childhood. In her personal journal she wrote: "So I plod away, though I don't enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it" (Alcott 199). This unenthusiastic entry gives the impression that she wasn't fond of the material that she was writing. In spite of her initial outlook, *Little Women* became a big hit, selling two thousand copies in the first two weeks. Her publisher then commissioned a second book due to the popularity of the first. Alcott wrote in her journal that she felt pressured to end the book "in a very stupid style," as both her publisher and audience demanded that all the sisters be married off in the end. Thus, *Good Wives* was born, completing the novel as we understand it today (Rioux). Her journal entries suggest that she felt pressured by outside sources to include certain elements or even write about young women in general.

With this given context, it can be surmised that Alcott included an overarching moral instruction that pointed towards marriage as a result of the cultural pressures of her time. Evidence of these themes can be specifically viewed in the characterization of Jo and Amy. Jo is often noted to be a projection of Alcott herself, who uses the character as an avatar to voice her own discontent of being born a girl (Rioux). Jo is an ambitious writer who struggles with her anger along with finding a place in the world (Alcott). Similarly, the character Amy, noted as being based on Alcott's younger sister May, is a vain artist who struggles with her selfish impulses (Hollinger & Winterhalter). These two sisters mirror one another, portraying two sides of the same coin. By the end of the novel, both sisters have their passions bridled and new last names, as they learn how to be content in adulthood and fulfill their gender roles (Alcott).

Regardless of the novel's conflicting themes, *Little Women* remains popular today. It has inspired many adaptive works, including plays, films, and television shows. Specifically focusing on film productions, the novel has inspired a total of eight movies to date (Rioux). Each of these adaptations made changes to the plot that mirrored the cultural climate of their time, creating a steady stream of observable material. For example, the 1933 adaptation was made in response to the Great Depression, as audiences yearned for simplistic innocence. Similarly, the 1949 adaptation was released in the aftermath of World War II, where women resonated with the March girls who maintained a home while the father was away (Rioux). This trend continues up until modern times, with the most recent film adaptations being released in the years 1994 and 2019.

Arguably, the 1994 and 2019 film adaptations were created during prominent moments of feminism, with 1994 released at the beginning of the third wave and 2019 towards the end of the fourth. In this way, these

adaptations serve as a cultural litmus test of modern feminism, while also allowing for reflection on the protofeminist elements present in the novel. In order to show how feminist rhetoric has shifted over time, this paper examines the evolving characterization of Jo and Amy in *Little Women*, focusing specifically on their representation in the original 1868 novel and making comparisons to their representations in both the 1994 and 2019 film adaptations. By comparing these portrayals, the analysis reveals how past and present narratives shape feminist discourse, offering deeper insight into historical contexts, contemporary strategies, and future interpretations.

Adaptation Theory

In order to successfully observe and communicate the adaptation works in this paper, it is important to discuss and define the methodologies of adaptation theory being applied. To start, scholar Robert Stam states in the novel *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* that "just as any literary text can generate an infinity of readings, so any novel can generate a number of adaptations. An adaptation is thus less a resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing dialogical process" (Stam, 4). This idea that adaptation work serves as an intertextual dialog between works aligns with the "Transformation" paradigm outlined by scholar Karen E. Kline in the journal *Literature Film Quarterly*. In her article, she states that "[c]ritics adopting this approach consider the novel raw material which alters significantly, so that the film becomes an artistic work in its own right" (Kline). Rather than viewing changes made from the source material in film adaptations negatively, they are viewed as an artistic expansion. With this in mind, this paper will be looking at changes made from the original novel in order to better understand the cultural landscape of each adaptation. Changes made from the original novel will not be noted as fidelity, but as meaningful dialog between the proto feminist narrative of the past and the ongoing development of feminism today. By doing so, an understanding of the evolution of the dialogue between feminist values can be observed through the lens of *Little Women*, while also shedding light on how the conversation between works may continue in the future.

1994 Film Adaptation

Before analyzing the 1994 adaptation, it is important to map the cultural climate in which it was produced. An article from the *Chicago Tribune* states that 1994 impacted women's progress greatly, describing it as "a year when there was not only a lot of bad news for women, but when women simply looked bad" (Chicago Tribune). The article, which was published in January of 1995, went on to list several feminist issues and failings from the previous year, such as domestic violence, women's health, pay equity, and politics. They also cited the scrutiny that Hillary Clinton received

during her time serving as first lady as a significant blow to feminism (Chicago Tribune). Barbara Berg, a historian and feminist author, expanded upon this in *The New York Times*, stating that Hillary Clinton "had been vilified because she worked, wanted to keep her maiden name and refused to bake cookies" (Bennett). This critical climate brewed a storm that would produce the third wave of feminism (Alexander).

This new emergence of feminism created interesting waters for launching the 1994 adaptation of *Little Women*. Screenwriter Robin Swicord and director Gillian Armstrong were dealt an interesting hand for telling the story of the March family, because their production company was adamant that this was not a women's film, and pitched the project as a "family film for Christmas" (Rioux). Author Jessica Bennet explains that Sony executives were not excited to review the initial script and that the project was only greenlit due to Winona Ryder's agreement to star in the film. Ryder was at the top of her game, and executives thought that her addition would ensure a bigger audience. Even with this insurance, the culture war of 1994 left the director worried about creating a film that would be perceived as "too feminist" (Bennett).

In spite of this foreground, the 1994 adaptation of *Little Women* was received well by audiences. Even though both Swicord and Armstrong expressed apprehension towards making a feminist film, some subversive lines made their way into the script. However, not every choice resulted in a win for the third wave. For example, some interesting choices were made in regard to the casting, characterization, and the overall evolution of these two March sisters. These choices both hindered and elevated the various feminist rhetoric present within the film, drawing attention to the influence that the cultural climate had on the portrayal of Jo and Amy.

Casting

For example, the audience's reception of Jo and Amy was largely influenced by the casting choices made within the film. Author Suzy Woltmann argues that casting holds an important role in the making of a film in her article "How to Cast a Film (and Why Casting Matters)," which outlines the process of successful casting in a "how to" format. She notes that "[c]asting matters because performance influences perceptions" (Woltmann). This sentiment holds true and remains a crucial element when discussing literature to film adaptations. Regarding the characterization of Jo and Amy, the 1994 cast altered the audience's perception in a way that both obstructs and reflects feminist rhetoric from the 90s.

To start, Winona Ryder was chosen to portray Jo March. It was noted by the film's producer, Denise Di Novi, that "[p]hysically, Jo was supposed to be plain and gangly, but Winona was a *Little Women* fanatic and so understood the character" (Spencer). In truth, Jo is described in the novel as being

awkward and having "the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it" (Alcott). Alcott goes on to paint her as having long limbs that got in her way, a "comical" nose, and large hands and feet with rounded shoulders (Alcott). This description couldn't be further from Ryder, whose enchanting demeanor gives the impression of a beautiful girl who doesn't realize that she is beautiful yet. This aligns with various "rom-com" plotlines, arguably leading the audience towards a less-feminist rhetoric that diverges from the author's original intent. This can be observed in many scenes, such as the borderline flirtatious grins that she gifts Laurie or dodging unwanted suitors at the local Christmas dance (Armstrong).

However, the most notable scene where Ryder's beauty overrides the novel's description of Jo is the scene where Jo announces the sale of her hair in order to help Marmee pay for her travels. In the scene, Ryder announces what she has done and dramatically removes her hat to reveal a chic, French-style bob. Ryder appears like a Victorian pixie, with a tasteful look that many women might take to their hairdresser for inspiration in modern times (Armstrong). This scene strongly differs from the novel, as Alcott describes her new hairstyle as a "brown bush" with "short rough ends" and notes that it should grow out into a "curly crop" at some point (Alcott). With Jo's hair being noted as her "one beauty," it is arguable that the 1994 adaptation did not create the same impact as the book, as Ryder remained beautiful in the aftermath of the haircut.

In an essay titled "A Feminist Romance: Adapting *Little Women* to the Screen," it is pointed out that "when Jo sells her hair in the film, her action does not carry with it any significant sense of loss" (Hollinger and Winterhalter). The essay then goes on to concede that Ryder's "effervescent" smile in the scene signals a sense of female determination that rises above societal norms. In addition, they also note that this post-structural revision eliminates "Alcott's, morally stalwart nineteenth-century woman, who is torn between her desire to serve and her need to express herself, and is replaced with a more contemporary one who sparkles with female independence and pragmaticism" (Hollinger and Winterhalter). This subtle change in portrayal is a reflection of the feminist era that the film was released in.

For example, an article by Vogue discussing the evolution of the "pixie" haircut specifically references Ryder from this very era. In 1994, Ryder sported a pixie cut in her personal life that challenged beauty standards. The article states that her haircut had evolved into a statement of "individuality" and described Ryder as a woman who "chopped off [her] hair as a means of empowerment, free from shackles of the narrow beauty ideals that were dominant at the time" (Bateman). Something as simple as the

portrayal of a haircut can lend to a rhetorical argument and portraying the character of Jo as proud and unscathed defied gender norms in that moment. By surviving the chop with beauty and grace intact, the gendered weight of long locks was released as well. While this move arguably negated Alcott's original portrayal of Jo and her own methods of defying nineteenth-century norms with the character's appearance, Ryder's performance created space for a modern conversation surrounding female determination and empowerment that better reflected the values of feminism in the 90s.

While Ryder's natural beauty brought a new likeness to the character of Jo, the double casting of Amy drew special attention to the character's age and maturity. In the 1994 adaptation, Amy was played by both Kirsten Dunst and Samantha Mathis. Dunst was 11 at the time and played the part of Amy in her adolescence. Mathis was 23, the same age as Ryder, and was chosen to play Amy in her adult years ("*Little Women*"). When asked to explain this choice, the film's producer noted that "[i]t just was weird to have someone be a little girl and then a grown-up. It didn't work" (Spencer). At face value, this seems an understandable thought process until comparing the ages of the March sisters from the novel to the screen. In reality, all of them were little girls who then became grown-ups over the course of the novel.

At the beginning of the novel, Amy is 12, Jo is 15, and Laurie is 16 (Alcott). While an age difference of 3 to 4 years can be considerable in regard to maturity during adolescence, the physical differences aren't as dramatic as what was portrayed on screen. Kirsten Dunst appears substantially younger when acting alongside the 20-something year-olds who are meant to portray a similar age group. Whether it was intentional or not, this created the perception that Amy was much younger than the rest of her sisters and her eventual love interest, which ultimately infantilized her character. Author Anne Boyde Rioux speaks to this in her novel *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why it Still Matters* and states, "Unfortunately, Mathis's prim Amy contrasts too markedly with Dunst's much more playful one." Ultimately, the justification of double casting feels odd, as Ryder was allowed to portray 15-year-old Jo at the age of 23. If it was too "weird" to cast Amy as one actress, how was it not weird to cast the rest of the sisters the same way? Why not cast a more middle-ground Amy?

Essentially, the choice in casting allowed Jo a steady timeline of maturation, which arguably aligned her more to the audience's favor. Amy was not allotted the same courtesy, causing the audience to become distant from her, much like the distance between the ages of the two actresses who portrayed her. An article published by the Smithsonian Magazine speaks to this, stating that Amy March often serves as a "fly in the ointment," or as the sister that everyone loves to hate (Blakemore). While Amy is notably described as immature, she is also described as being talented and ambitious, much like

her sister Jo. The choice in double casting the role of Amy chooses to focus on her youthful immaturity and skips her coming of age, a notable divergence from the original bildungsroman novel, which heavily impacts the character's reception by audiences.

Portrayal of Character & Setting

In addition to casting, perception is also altered by how the character is portrayed through performance and how the setting is depicted through shots. In regard to the setting, many specific choices were made that altered the audience's perception. Rather than focusing on any intrinsic complexities present in the original novel, the writers chose to focus on ambiance instead. The opening scene sets the tone for this, as the audience is presented with a curated picture of a romanticized past, which is hard to do for a story set during the Civil War. The March cottage sits surrounded by blankets of snow, drawing the viewer into the storybook setting of Concord, Massachusetts. A score of trumpets, flutes and strings flutter between scenes, evoking a sense of sweet longing and harkening for the return of simpler times. The inside of the March home is just as quaint, decorated in muted warm tones and full of textures that reflect the nineteenth century- quilted throws, smoky chimneys, creaky wooden floors (Armstrong).

While the novel also depicts a quaint home, dialog of poverty is also present, giving the impression that the family has been heavily affected by the Civil War. The girls often talk of old gowns, shoes that don't fit, not being able to afford gloves, and the heavy presence of their absent father (Alcott). Even though they strive to remain positive and find joy, the presence of poverty is there. This element is lacking in the 1994 setting, where it is hard to understand the March family as poor and suffering consequences of the Civil War in such a quaint home.

To build upon this, author Anne Boyde Rioux notes that the writer for the film, Robin Swicord, unfortunately opted more for nostalgia and consequently "dulled the power and emotions of the original work" (Rioux). As described previously, the studio pitched the movie as a Christmas film for the whole family. This purposeful move, paired with the sterilization of heavy themes, was a clever marketing tactic. An article published by Fielding Graduate University, titled "Why Christmas Movies Make Us Feel Good," speaks to the psychology involved in creating the sense of nostalgia through Christmas. It explains that Christmas films often orbit themes of romance, family, and friendship, which speaks to the human need for social connection. When these themes are paired with the warm atmosphere of the holidays, a sense of escapism and nostalgia are often invoked in the audience (Rutledge). This proved successful in the film, with many audiences associating the 1994 adaptation with the Christmas holiday in present times (Rioux).

Ultimately, the heavy themes of poverty and politics in the Civil War were successfully sidestepped in the 1994 adaptation. This purposeful choice largely reflects the cultural landscape of the 90s. Both Swicord and Armstrong were hesitant to lend ammunition to the ongoing culture war and decided to lean into the "lightness" spearheaded by the studio's marketing strategies. This choice to evade the depth of the original novel had an impact not only on the setting but also on the portrayals of Jo and Amy March.

Arguably, the 1994 adaptation serves a version of Jo who is vexed but never angry and a version of Amy who is selfish and never ambitious. For example, in the 1994 adaptation, Jo's anger only seems to take center stage during the scene where Amy burns her manuscripts in retaliation for not being invited to the theater. In the scene, Jo savagely pounces on Amy when she discovers what she's done, screaming that she hates her and wishes she was dead. It takes both Marmee and Beth to separate the two. Marmee encourages Jo to let go of her anger and forgive her sister, but she refuses. The next afternoon, Jo ignores her sister while ice-skating with Laurie. Amy attempts to skate on the lake on her own and falls through the ice. After her rescue, the sisters lay in a warm bed surrounded by kittens. A few words of forgiveness and remorse are exchanged, and it appears that all is forgiven (Armstrong).

This scene differs greatly from the novel, as Jo basically blames her own anger for her sister's almost-drowning. Following this, there is a long scene where Jo pleads for Marmee to help her with her anger, explaining that she fears someday she will do something awful that she can't take back. She states, "It seems as if I could do anything when I'm in a passion. I get so savage, I could hurt anyone and enjoy it" (Alcott). This pivotal scene in the novel marks Jo's anger as a temptation that she battles throughout the duration of the story. In response to this, Marmee often reprimands Jo for her anger, encouraging her to stifle it whenever it arouses. This element is missing from the film, as Jo rarely appears angered or troubled by it after this event. Instead, she appears playfully vexed by the constraints of her time, bearing them all with a brave smile or a gentle tear.

Admittedly, the idea of female rage was not culturally embraced in the 90s and certainly was something to be repressed in the nineteenth century. Historically speaking, female anger was often defined as a form of "hysteria" and, if not controlled, like Jo learned to do, would send a young woman to a dark fate (Ng). Therefore, the lack of this aspect in the film is a missed opportunity to add to the feminist discourse Alcott may have been trying to build—an angry Jo is a feminist Jo within a nineteenth-century context. However, it could also be argued that the removal of this scene is evidence of third wave feminism, where a harsh focus on atonement might have been seen as unnecessary.

Similarly, Amy is painted as a one-dimensional, bratty little sister. As mentioned above, the casting choice played a large part. However, the script didn't allow for much growth either. The adult version of Amy, Samantha Mathis, only appears an hour into the movie and receives little screen time. This caused the characterization of Amy to heavily lie upon Dunst's 11-year-old shoulders. In addition to this, the script gives little insight into Amy's ambition for painting. Only a few lines at the beginning of the movie show her wanting new drawing pencils, and a single scene is shown of her painting in France (Armstrong). In contrast to this, the book speaks more to her seriousness for art, describing a young girl getting lost in doodles and later a young woman concentrating on bettering her artistic skills. Alcott writes that "she persevered in spite of all obstacles, failures, and discouragements, firmly believing that in time she would do something worthy to be called 'high art'" (Alcott). This determination is lost in the film, and, instead, there is a greater focus on her role as a child, her ignorance, and later as Laurie's wife.

While these portrayals feel disappointing, it is arguable that they reflect the director and writer's desire to not have the work dubbed as a "feminist film" during the culture war of the 90s (Rioux). Swicord herself expressed regret that they didn't push the envelope further in an interview with *The New York Times*, stating, "I wish that "Little Women" had shaken things up a little more than it had" (Spencer). She went on to reiterate that Hollywood was not ready for female driven films and did not believe that there was a profitable audience to receive them (Spencer). This, paired with the missed opportunities discussed in both setting and character portrayals, reflects the same patriarchal line that Alcott toed when writing the original novel. While the creators broke some gender norms for their respected times, pressures from the cultural landscape curbed potential gains. To build upon this upset, missed opportunities also appear in both of the girl's endings.

Character Resolution

For example, an important element of the "coming of age" theme is the character's resolution. This resolution caps the period of growth and self-discovery being described, allowing readers to witness the arch and development of each character. It is specifically noted in the article "The Bildungsroman: Form and Transformations" that for female characters in the nineteenth-century, the elements of a Bildungsroman often consist of "a young woman [who] undergoes a process of worldly or sentimental education and becomes reconciled to her destiny, sometimes in the form of marriage" (Frowet al.). The article goes on to later state that it is possible for female characters to also achieve success in "writing or artistry" (Frow et al.). With this in mind, it is important to analyze how both Jo and Amy's resolutions

were portrayed in the 1994 adaptation, as their end achievements mark the lessons learned.

To start, the 1994 adaptation decided to follow the story of Jo more closely than the other sisters and ultimately ties the film's ending with her own. Many adaptations have taken this route, as she is arguably the main character and the one to whom most women identify with. In a *New York Times* article from 1996 titled "Amy Had Golden Curls; Jo Had A Rat. Who Would You Rather Be," it is stated that "[w]e are all supposed to have worshiped Jo, identified with her, found in her a role model for our writing lives. Louisa May Alcott clearly adored Jo, her idealized self, and generations of readers have fallen in line behind her" ("Amy had Golden Curls…"). The article goes on to argue that the 1994 version of Jo receives a more traditional storybook ending that mirrors Amy's from the original novel. In truth, Jo receives a very different ending in the film than what Alcott had originally wanted or even wrote for her.

For example, in the film Jo moves to New York to make a name for herself as a writer. While there, she is swept away by Professor Bhaer who connects with her on her work. He gives writing advice, encourages her to write from the heart, and seems to nurture her intellectual curiosity. This is all true to the novel. However, a few additional alterations were made. The 1994 version of Bhear does not only connect with her intellectually but also sweeps her off to the Opera, successfully wooing her and building a romantic connection. In contrast to this, the novel distinctly notes that Bhaer is an unattractive, older man. This new version of Bhaer is notably handsome, and, while he appears older, the age difference feels excusable due to their connection (Armstrong). The *New York Times* notes that "this sentimental courtship is a perversion of the novel…the fairytale romance is the most appealing part of a movie that labors to make Alcott seem more modern than she really is" ("Amy had Golden Curls…"). The article then argues that Jo, being made "pretty" by the performance of Ryder, with the addition of the fairytale romance with the Professor who lives next door, aligns Jo to Amy in a way that hasn't been seen before ("Amy had Golden Curls…"). While many readers and viewers enjoy a happy ending, the distinction made by the *New York Times* rings true. By giving Jo a romantic ending, the 1994 film adaptation ultimately alters her character as a whole.

It is important to note that some scholars disagree with this opinion. Authors Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter state in their paper, "A Feminist Romance: Adapting Little Women to the Screen," that Jo's romance with Bhaer reconstructs the institution of marriage to something positive and more equal, which is a notable divergence from the original novel. They state that:

> Most significantly, unlike her novelistic counterpart, the film's Jo never subordinates her will to Bhaer's; therefore, when she finally does agree to marry him, she can stand beside him undiminished, as his equal in intellect, artistry, and personal integrity. In the film's final scene, Bhear and Jo join hands- interlocking fingers- signaling that in their life together they will be joined as equals. (Hollinger & Winterhalter)

In contrast to this, the novel's version of Bhear comes off more critical and the novel version of Jo seems to crumble under his harsh opinion over her "sensational" works (Alcott). The 1996 adaptation alters these conversations and, as stated above, portrays a fairer argument between two equals.

In summation of this, both of these clashing opinions can be held true at the same time. The 1996 adaptation worked to change Jo's ending by giving her romance. While the romance portrayed mirrored the equal partnerships women advocated for in the third wave of feminism, it also slightly diminished the power of an independent woman. There is something left to be desired for the feminist who does not wish to see the female heroine married off in the end. Alcott herself did not want Jo to get married in the second half of her novel but ultimately felt forced to by her publishers and audience (Rioux). This historical truth, paired with above opinions, leaves a gap for progress in the resolution for Jo.

Similar to Jo's ending, Amy's resolution was slightly altered. Her storyline remains mostly true to the novel with minor adjustments that work to compare her to Jo. For example, following the plot of the novel, Amy is chosen by Aunt March to accompany her to Europe instead of Jo. There, she catches the eye of Laurie while being courted by another man (Armstrong). However, there are not many scenes that show the development of Amy and Laurie's romance, and it all happens very suddenly. This leads audiences to compare Amy to Jo, as the majority of the movie depicts Laurie's falling for Jo, making it seem as if he settled for Amy instead.

To add to this, the film takes several liberties within the script, which consequently creates a "love triangle" narrative. Specifically, the film diverges from the novel when depicting the scene where Amy criticizes Laurie's lack of ambition. In the film, the conversation takes more of a turn towards comparing Amy to Jo. Amy explains that she does not want to be courted by someone that is still in love with her sister. Laurie argues that he is not in love but that he always wanted to be a part of the March family. In response, Amy states that she does "not wish to be loved for her family" and storms away (Armstrong). These lines are void from the original novel, which centers the focus of the conversation on Laurie's heartbreak over Jo instead. At this time,

there is no mention of a romantic relationship developing between Amy and Laurie, as it is not present yet in the novel's storyline.

This subtle change left a big impact on the perception of Amy, as the script created a love triangle that wasn't heavily focused on within the original novel. In the novel, Jo is unbothered when she learns of Amy and Laurie's engagement through a letter. She doesn't love Laurie in that way and is happy that she didn't accept his proposal in the past. She is given space to process their engagement from afar (Alcott). In the 1994 adaptation, Jo is caught off guard by the news which is delivered by the couple in the flesh. She appears shocked but is ultimately happy for the couple (Armstrong). However, the faux pas of blitz-attacking your sister with sensitive news has not gone unnoticed by past and modern audiences.

Author Erin Blakemore states that due to this portrayal in the film, Amy is often scapegoated, as the scene depicts "a supposed betrayal that has created generations of Amy haters" (Blakemore). Amy does appear to be unjustly blamed for Laurie's shifting affections by many. An article published by Slate, titled "Amy Sucks," tells readers that it is okay to hate the character of Amy March, as it is never okay to marry your sister's best friend. It also argues the narrative that Jo and Laurie were meant to be together and that Amy ultimately ruined that for Jo (Schwedel). Perhaps this negative perception could have been shifted if the script had not included lines pitting the sisters against one another and instead focused on a resolution for Amy that was void of comparisons to Jo.

While the 1994 adaptation didn't invent the idea of a love triangle, they definitely added to the trope of women competing against each other for men. Later in that same decade, movies such as My Best Friend's Wedding (1997), Ten Things I Hate About You (1999), and She's All That (1999) serve several plots that mirror this. This trend continued into the early 2000s, when movies like Mean Girls (2004), She's The Man (2006), and 27 Dresses (2008) really took this idea and ran with it. The summation of these films creates a narrative that women must compete against each other for the approval of men. In support of this idea, Dr. Noam Shpancer argues in an article published by *Psychology Today* that female competition is driven by social mechanisms, stating that women raised in a male-dominant society often adopt the male perspective. They state, "As women come to consider being prized by men as their ultimate source of strength, worth, achievement, and identity, they are compelled to battle other women for the prize" (Shpancer). This idea persisted for quite some time and arguably is still present at the time this paper is being written. However, it wasn't until 2010 that movies began to push a new narrative that was arguably inspired by a new wave of feminism.

2019 Film Adaptation

In order to describe the feminist climate of the 2010's, the debate of whether the third wave of feminism has ended and a fourth has begun must be discussed. An article written in 2013 by scholar Ealasaid Munro, titled "Feminism: A Fourth Wave," explains that the argument mainly hinges on how the internet has transformed activism. She states that the internet provides more space for intersectionality within feminism, which is a hallmark of the third wave that must be carried over into the fourth (Munro). To build on this opinion, the National Women's History Museum asserts that the twenty-first century ushered in new forms of activism, highlighting "hashtag activism" on social media as a specific tactic. For example, the hashtag circulated various feminist topics around the world, such as the "Me Too" Movement, Black Lives Matter, and Time's Up—all of which called for social justice, an end to sexual harassment, and equal pay in the workforce (Alexander). An article by Forbes, titled "The 2010s: The Decade Women Fought Back," further outlines these feminist movements, stating that fourth wave feminism generated new terms, such as "mansplaining," and a new ability for women to challenge men in power. The article specifically references gender equality remaining on the forefront of activism, as women continued to struggle to be taken seriously next to their male counterparts in the workplace (Elting).

This new surge in feminist activism was spurred on by a tumultuous political landscape. A *New York Times* article, titled "The 2010's Were the End of Normal," suggests that the biggest losses of the decade were trust, hope, and unity. The article then goes on to explain how this distrust trickled into technology, as the internet became a tool used for misinformation alongside activism, causing mass confusion and anger. As a result, America began to long for simpler times. The article states that: "In fact, immersion or escape into compelling fictional worlds seemed to be one strategy people were embracing to cope with political outrage fatigue" (Kakutani). This fatigue dominated the 2010s, where the nation cycled between outrage and complacency, finding a short escape in entertainment only to restart when the credits rolled.

With that said, the 2019 adaptation faced a similar premise as the *Little Women* adaptation produced in 1949 after World War II. The country was asking for an escape to a better time and place. This, coupled with the eruption of a new wave of feminism, gave director Greta Gerwig a unique opportunity to expand upon the classic novel. Rather than create a sugar-coated storybook adaptation, Gerwig opted to tap into the grief of nostalgia while shining a light on the historical subjugation of women. To accomplish this, specific choices were made that diverted from both the novel and past

adaptive works, such as storytelling, characterization, and the overall focus of the film.

Story Telling

The most noticeable move that Gerwig made when creating the 2019 adaptation was the choice to tell the story nonlinearly. This was a bold choice that dramatically changed the perception of the film and, notably, had never been done before for *Little Women*. She sets the present day during the adult years of the March girls and cycles through reflective scenes from their childhood in a past-tense format. Scenes depicting the present day are edited in cool-toned hues. The score for these scenes is often marked by an emotional, slow, staccato piano. This is vastly different from scenes depicting the past, which are filtered with a golden light paired with a quickened variation of the previously mentioned piano score (Gerwig). This choice creates a noticeable contrast between past and present for the audience and is a purposeful component of the film.

All of the above adheres to the nonlinear storytelling method. Scholar Linda J. Cowgill explains the strategies behind nonlinear storytelling, stating that each scene is linked by "cause-and effect," which develops the plot through characterizations, often by illustrating consequences of events. This causes the plot to be tied to the character, as the directors work to build a sense of inevitability for the end (Cowgill, 10). Gerwig's choice to implement this mode of storytelling created an opportunity for a new focus on perspectives. Instead of focusing on Jo like previous adaptations, we are able to focus on each March sister and witness their emotional development and growth. This transforms the story from a plot-driven piece into a character-driven film, as the audience is made to appreciate each sister's motivations and choices. Congruently, telling the story of the March sisters in a nonlinear fashion pays homage to the bildungsroman style of the original novel, reflecting on the growth of each character and centering the story around them in a new way.

In addition to refocusing the drive behind the story, Gerwig's production of past and present creates a narrative of somber nostalgia, often pairing scenes of conflict from the present with reflections of simpler times in childhood. For example, a notable scene shows Jo confiding in Beth about her struggles with writing on a grey, dreary beach in present time. Beth's health is failing, and Jo is left feeling worried and uninspired. Beth encourages her to write for others, like how Marmee encouraged them to do things for others in their childhood. The audience is then taken backwards to a warmly lit home, where Marmee is preparing to travel to her wounded husband. Jo offers money for the train, and when they ask how she got it she reveals that she has cut her hair. Unlike the 1994 adaptation, the scene doesn't center around Jo. While the rest of the characters are surprised that she cut her hair, the focus

remains on sending Marmee safely off (Gerwig). The nonlinear structure of pairing these two scenes reframes the focus—dying. Beth works to inspire her sister to write something meaningful for others, and Jo remembers the last time that she did such a thing for her family. This shifts the focus from vanity lost to a moment of selfless sacrifice. Consequently, this also shifts the audience's perception of Jo, as she is seen as reflective and mature in these moments rather than the whimsical tomboy of her youth.

Similar to Jo, Amy's character is also reframed through nonlinear storytelling. A great example is when Amy is sent to live with Aunt March after Beth falls ill with Scarlet Fever. The audience starts in a scene from the past, where exasperated Meg states that she wishes they had money to afford to send Beth to a hospital. Because they can't, young Amy is sent to stay with Aunt March while Beth gets better, as she hasn't had the fever yet. While there, Aunt March decides that Amy is going to be the "new hope" for the March family, explaining to Amy that she is her family's only chance at financial security. She must marry rich. The audience is then taken to present time, where adult Amy has just declined Fred Vaghn's hand in marriage in favor of Laurie. Aunt March informs Amy that Laurie has left for business in London. A somber score plays, and Amy looks frightfully sullen (Gerwig). Linking the March family's financial struggle with the constant pressure from Aunt March allows the audience to understand Amy's motivations. She is not a girl wanting to marry rich for her own comfort but for the sake of her family's well-being.

The nonlinear storytelling method allows the audience to make deeper connections with Jo and Amy. Jo is seen as more than a rebellious, headstrong teen who struggles with being a girl in the nineteenth century. She is also shown as a resilient, young woman who handles loss and heartbreak through the inspiration of her family. Similarly, Amy is reframed as more than a bratty younger sister who wants to marry rich because she is materialistic. She is also a young woman, burdened by the constraints of her times, wanting to take care of the people that she loves in the only way that she knows how. Each of these new perspectives is built upon the original novel, taking liberties when needed and highlighting strengths when the opportunity arises. Essentially, the audience watches each sister reflect upon their childhood as they learn to adapt to their present.

Arguably, this method of storytelling also spoke to the cultural landscape of the 2010s. Greta's ability to describe the unique grief that is felt when looking back on simpler times tapped into the nation's need for nostalgia in an important way. Dr. Krystine Batcho explains in her article, published by the *American Psychology Association,* that there are several forms that nostalgia can manifest in: one being an idealized longing for a

historical past, and another being a reflection on a meaningful period in one's life. She states that historical nostalgia is often triggered by a dissatisfaction with the present, stating that "someone could become enamored [by] a period in history such as Victorian days, not because they've lived through them, obviously, but because they have become romanticized and idealized in a way in literature and in film" (Luna). This seemed to be the angle that past adaptations, including the one in 1994, took with *Little Women*. However, the latter form of nostalgia, which is connected to personal aspects of childhood, prompts a different sort of reflection. Bacho explains that "[i]n a way, Nostalgia is like a measurement. It's a way we keep track of things, we monitor progress through life, not just for ourselves, but even for other people to whom we are very attached" (Luna). This appears to be how Gerwig approached the storytelling of this film, as she moves away from a simple escape to an idealized past and instead prompts a personal reflection from the March sisters and, by extension, the audience.

Characterization

In addition to storytelling, perceptions of the characters were also altered through how each character was portrayed. To do this, Gerwig took several liberties in order to expand upon the novel and better reflect the life of the author who wrote it. Gerwig expressed in several interviews that this adaptation was meant to reflect Alcott just as much as the March girls. She specifically spoke to this in an interview published in an article by *The New York Times*, where she states that she relied on Alcott's personal writings for her construction of Jo. The article explains that "Gerwig's film is less an update than it is an excavation—a kind of literary investigation of the characters, their writer, and what they all really wanted" (Hess). In investigation of the writer, Gerwig leaves several easter eggs in the film, paying homage to the author through the character of Jo. For example, Jo is filmed writing ambidextrously, the same as Alcott. Additionally, the majority of filming took place in Concord, Massachusetts where Alcott actually grew up. However, the most notable is the opening scene in the film, which explains why *Little Women* ends the way that it does in spite of Alcott's proto feminist beliefs—with all of the March sisters married or dead.

The movie starts with a nervous Jo standing outside of a publisher's office. Jo takes a deep breath before entering. The room is filled with only men, smoking cigars and taking no notice of her presence. She approaches the editor's desk, stating that she would like to submit her stories anonymously to *The Daily Volcano*. The editor laughs, not taking her seriously, but agrees to take a look. He takes a pen to several pages, slashing through her work, finally exclaiming that she can be paid less than average for this sort of thing (Gerwig). This scene is present in the book, and the dialogue follows almost

word for word. However, Gerwig added a specific line that changed the context of their conversation.

In the book, the editor advises that she removes "morals" from the story, instructing her to make it "short and spicy" (Alcott). Gerwig changes this up, having the editor add, "and if the main character is a girl, make sure that she is married at the end. Or dead, either way" (Gerwig). This line was placed purposely and is a clear reference to the instructions that Alcott received from her own publisher when writing the second part of *Little Women* (Rioux). Opening the film with this scene set the tone, letting the audience know that this is a representation of Alcott's work and hinting that liberties taken were made in honor of her. This line also references concepts from fourth-wave feminism, as women demanded a social revolution in the workplace during the 2010s. They were more vocal in calling out sexism in the work environment and no longer wanted to be seen as "frivolous" or "lesser than" due to their sex (Elting). By including a scene showing Jo getting paid less for her work, while inserting an additional line that devalues women, Gerwig addresses the sexism of her time showing that not much has changed.

In addition to mirroring Alcott through the character of Jo, Gerwig also focuses on portraying the depth of her character. The always happy, whimsical, effervescent Jo from 1994 is gone, and instead we are served a version with sorrows, regrets, and anger. This is shown in various scenes, specifically in a dramatic dialogue that Jo gives to Marmee shortly after Beth's death. Jo is at a personal crossroads in her life at this point in the story. She is grieving the loss of her sister, while also struggling to see how she can move forward as an unmarried woman in her time. With angry tears, she exclaims: "I just feel like women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as hearts. And they have ambition, and they have talent as well as just beauty. And I'm so sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for. I am so sick of it. But, I am so lonely!" (Gerwig). While this monologue is not in the original novel, it carries the essence of Jo and, by extension, Alcott herself.

According to an interview published by USA Today, Gerwig confessed that she stole the line from Alcott's lesser-known novel, *Rose in Bloom.* However, she admits that she tweaked the original line to add "I'm so lonely" and later explained that Ronan's performance of the line encapsulated the feeling and left her weeping. In this same interview, Amy Pascal who was the producer of the project, explains that "[Gerwig] wanted to make it about women and economic independence, and she wanted to intermingle Louisa May Alcott's real experience with writing the book" (Mandell). While Alcott did not write this bit for Jo, and the original lines did not include an additional declaration of loneliness, these elements appear to be a part of a breadcrumb trail that leads us to the heart of the author. Some part of Alcott was

tired of being reduced to her gender, and Greta is connecting that tiredness to how fighting against the patriarchy can feel lonely.

Including this specific monologue in the film also spoke to modern times and the complexities of being a feminist during the fourth wave. While the sentiment of wanting to be seen as more than your gender is often shared, the pressure to "have it all" is surmounting and can leave feminists feeling defeated. Feminist scholar Roxane Gay spoke to this in her novel *Bad Feminist* (2014), offering a voice to those who feel guilty for struggling with feminism in certain aspects of their life. In the opening of her book, she speaks on the pressures to "lean in," be a powerful person at work and at home and having to appear to never grow tired of the fight. She states that "like most people, I am full of contradictions, but I also don't want to be treated like shit for being a woman" (Gay). She concludes the chapter by noting that she would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all (Gay). Greta echoes this sentiment in Jo's monologue and specifically does so by adding a line speaking to loneliness. Jo wants to be valued for things outside of her gender and is tired of being reduced to "just" a girl. However, the way things are still causes her to feel lonely, and, as an early feminist, she's angry about it.

While Gerwig uses Jo's characterization to simultaneously reflect Alcott's life and the values of modern feminism, Amy's characterization is also altered to shed light on sexism and gender roles on various levels. Similar to Jo, Amy also receives a feminist-coded monologue that is not wholly present in the novel. In a present-day scene, the audience views Amy in an art studio, cleaning brushes and appearing displeased. In walks Laurie, and they start their clever banter. Amy explains that she wishes to be "great or nothing" in regard to her art, a line plucked directly from the novel (Alcott). However, Gerwig diverges from the original novel with the next few lines, where Laurie challenges this mindset. He asks her what she will do with her life after she quits art and mocks her for her courtship to Fred Vaughn for his money. Amy takes a moment to deliver the following, fiery monologue:

> Well, I'm not a poet. I'm just a woman. And as a woman there is no way for me to make my own money. Not enough to earn a living, or to support my family. And if I had my own money, which I don't, that money would belong to my husband the moment we got married. And if we had children they would be his, not mine. They would be his property. So don't sit there and tell me that marriage is not an economic proposition, because it is. It may not be for you, but it most certainly is for me. (Gerwig)

This addition to the script completely alters the portrayal of Amy. In the novel, Amy expresses that she does not actually love Fred Vaughn but must accept his proposal if he makes one. She states: "One of us must marry well. Meg didn't, Jo won't, and Beth can't yet, so I shall, and make everything okay all

around" (Alcott). This passage from the novel shows that Amy was aware of nineteenth-century constraints on how women can earn money for themselves, which was through marriage alone. However, there are no explicit passages from the novel where those constraints are expanded upon. Gerwig takes the liberty to do so in her adaptation, painting a clearer picture of the caveats of marriage for women during that time. This addition fleshes out an Amy that is motivated for marriage at a self-sacrificial level but also as a woman who is angry that things are the way that they are.

This extra element of anger which expresses being upset with societal constraints reflects the feminist topics of the 2010s. When Amy expresses her limits as a woman, she also highlights the need for agency. The audience would have been familiar with his, as women acted with agency and used their voice to tell powerful men "No" during this decade (Forbes). A great example of this would be the public take-down of Harvey Weinstein by actresses Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd, who came forward with details of their sexual harassment in 2017. Because of their bravery, several women came forward between 2017 and 2019 to share their stories, lending to his eventual conviction in 2020 for rape and sexual assault. This public and vocal fight was an important moment for the decade, as women worked together to stand up against a predator in power ("Harvey Winstein…"). The liberty to do this was not something that was allotted for women in the past. In fact, Amy's monologue highlights the many ways that power has been used to subjugate women throughout history. With this specific monologue, Gerwig is reminding a modern audience why it is important for women to continue to use their voices and fight for agency. A world where women lack independence harbors room for variations of Weinstein to germinate and multiply, leading to unsafe power dynamics for all.

Overall, Gerwig took several liberties in her portrayal of events. This consequently affected the characterization of both Amy and Jo, highlighting their strengths and evoking sympathies for their weaknesses. Both characters were able to be explored in depth, and new nuances were created to reflect fourth wave feminism. Jo was molded to better represent Alcott, while also giving her a feminist voice that Alcott wasn't able to give her herself. Amy was handed a microphone that she used to call out nineteenth-century subjugation of women, creating a new narrative for the character that the audience could relate to. Gerwig arguably also solidified the importance of modern feminism through Amy, as time-traveling to the nineteenth century shows the limitations we have overcome and the importance of modern activism.

Focus of the Film

These changes did not only alter the perception of characters but also updated the overall theme and focus of the film. Gerwig shakes things up by choosing a nonlinear storytelling approach and incorporating an ending that is not a part of the original novel. For example, in the novel Jo marries the much older professor Bhaer based on friendship and intellectualism. Jo becomes a mother to sons and trades in her love for writing to become a teacher, opening a school for boys. Similarly, Amy's fate consists of her marriage to Laurie, becoming a mother, and giving up on painting as a whole (Alcott). Each of these endings hinge on the women finding happiness as wives and ultimately leaving their personal passions behind. Most adaptations follow this framework, with the 1994 adaptation closing on Jo's union with Bhaer. Gerwig pivots from this passed down formula for both women and provides an ambiguous ending for Jo and a new perspective on Amy.

Starting with Amy, Gerwig further solidifies her sisterly bond with Jo, while also allowing her character to continue with her artistic passions. After Aunt March passes, there is a scene where the girls discover that Aunt March has left her estate to Jo. The sisters walk idly through the grounds, where Jo decides that she wants to open a school for boys and girls. Amy prompts Jo about her writing. She encourages her to continue with her passions and explains that writing about trivial matters helps make them important. The sisters are shown to be united, happy, and in full support of one another (Gerwig).

As noted, the relationship between Amy and Jo has often been lost in the drama of the plot. Many readers and watchers alike have never gotten over the Laurie love triangle, pitting the two against each other and picking their personal winner, often championing Jo. This scene specifically pivots from that narrative, showing two siblings who naturally butted heads in their youth and support one another in adulthood. This also reframes the narrative of pitting women against each other, offering an updated version for the feminist viewer.

As for Jo, Gerwig leaves her romance with Bhaer open-ended, letting the audience guess if they end up together or not. After a lovely surprise visit to the March home, Bhear leaves for the West Coast without Jo. The scene is abruptly cut, and the audience is transported to the editor's office at *The Weekly Volcano*, where the editor expresses that he doesn't understand why the heroine did not end up with anyone in the end. He states that "If you decide to end your delightful book with your heroine a spinster, no one will buy it. It won't be worth printing." The editor and Jo go back and forth, and the audience is given a supposed ending that the two agree upon, where Jo chases

after Bhaer and they kiss in the rain at the train station (Gerwig). This change was monumental, leaving it up in the air how Jo's story really ended.

This creative choice is also another subtle nod to Alcott, as she was hesitant to marry Jo and only did so due to her publisher's advice (Rioux). The writings from Alcott's personal journal reflect this, as she wrote: "Publishers won't let authors finish up as they like but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me" (Alcott). She also expressed her need to not marry Jo to Laurie, stating "I *won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one" (Alcott). These sentiments are displayed creatively in Gerwig's ending, offering a new version that Alcott herself may have approved of. Jo's ending centers on her identity as a writer and not on her relationship with Professor Bhaer.

After this scene, the audience watches Jo advocate for her own copyright, which was something that Alcott actually did in her own career (Rioux). This move is noted in her journal where she writes, "An honest publisher and a lucky author, for the copyright made her fortune, and the "dull book" was the first golden egg of the ugly duckling" (Alcott). It is often noted that this decision is what allowed Alcott to maintain her family's financial security, allowing her to take care of them with her writing (Rioux). By adding this discussion, Jo is further fleshed out as an independent author who advocated for herself in a clever negotiation, a reflection of the real-life woman she was modeled after.

While this scene describes Jo's ending, it is not the actual ending of the movie. A very happy and blissful montage knits together scenes of the sisters working collectively to start a school and of Jo who watches the printing of her book with a proud smile. The scenes of the present are finally shown in a warm light. They flutter back and forth between the binding of Jo's book and the transformation of Aunt March's mansion into a school. Amy is present, and there is no evidence that she has given up painting after her marriage to Laurie. Instead, we are shown a short moment that appears to show Amy teaching children how to paint at the new school. The movie cuts with Jo holding her personal copy of her novel close with the same slow piano rift chiming idly in the background (Gerwig). This change in resolution completely reframes the themes of the film, centering the film on who the March girls were.

Rather than a movie following women on their way to being wives, we witness human growth. We start with Jo, watching her struggle as a writer in adulthood. We end with Jo by watching her publish her first novel on her own terms. Similarly, we start with Amy who is creatively ambitious but is unable to make her own choices due to financial pressures. We end with Amy getting a choice in her partner without sacrificing her

independence or her relationship with her sister. These subtle shifts speak volumes, as they reframe the story from focusing on the sister's roles as wives. Instead, the audience is redirected to focus on their identities as women: their vocations, passions, and growth.

The summation of the liberties taken in Gerwig's adaptation create an entirely new perspective, updating the film for modern audiences and showcasing the many nuances of *Little Women*. Specific choices were made in regard to storytelling, which ultimately echoed the sentiments of nostalgia that can be found in the classic coming of age film. This shift caused the focus of the film to reside on the character's emotional growth, allowing the audience to connect with characters on a deeper level. This provided a new narrative for characters such as Amy, who had been slotted unfairly by past portrayals. In general, the entire narrative of the film was ultimately reframed, as major changes to the ending re-centered the plot around what the March sisters wanted, rather than who they married. While accomplishing this, Gerwig made several references to Alcott herself and arguably created a version of the story that she may have written without societal restrictions.

Conclusion

In general, fans tend to pick their favorite version of *Little Women*. For certain viewers, they find connection in both the 1994 and 2019 adaptations. Many still cling to the original plot from the novel written in 1868. Regardless, there is no denying that Louisa May Alcott touched many lives through her work in *Little Women*. The coming-of-age story connects to readers of all generations, leaving a prominent mark in literature. For some, a feminist reading surfaces contradictions that can be troublesome to resolve. The most notable being the ending, as the March sisters are either ushered off to marriage or tucked into a casket by the end of the novel. A look into Alcott's personal letters and journal suggests that she was also not fond of this ending either and would have written something much different if she could (Rioux).

In regard to adaptations, there was a long status quo adhering to the original novel. The 1994 adaptation followed this recipe, focusing on the escapism that can be found within the original text. This film created an immersive, storybook portrayal that ultimately romanticized the times and shirked any heavy themes that Alcott included. Arguably, this was done to avoid adding to a culture-war conversation at the time. Jo's story remained largely the same but did receive a slight evolution in reflection of the third wave of feminism. On the other hand, Amy was further separated from the March sisters through the portrayal of two actresses, which ultimately infantilized her character (Armstrong).

The 2019 film adaptation took the most liberties thus far in regard to film. Gerwig chose a completely different mode of storytelling by creating a nonlinear narrative. There was also the distinctive choice to expand upon the

similarities between Jo and Alcott by adding specific scenes and details that paid homage to the writer. These additions also reflected fourth wave feminism, speaking to modern issues of agency, equal pay, and overall equality. Amy was also specifically reframed in order to cultivate a unified sisterhood, while also expanding upon her motivations to marry rich and take care of her family's financial needs. This helped shed light on nineteenth century gender norms in new ways through dialog and plot (Gerwig).

Both of these adaptations made specific choices, reflecting the feminism of their time. The third wave of the 90s struggled to be defiant against a firm patriarchy, with sources suggesting that women appeared to look bad in this era (Chicago Tribune). On the other end of the spectrum, the arguable fourth wave seemed to be a moment when feminism flared. Whether due to political outrage or personal experience, women actively spoke up against a system that pushed back (Elting). With this contextual information, we are able to look at the changes that were or were not implemented in each adaptation and make connections to the cultural foreground of their time in regard to feminism.

The summation of these works creates an intertextual dialogue between feminisms. Through the novel, we are able to view the cultural pressures of the nineteenth century. There is ample evidence to see how this impacted early feminists such as Alcott, who snuck in subversive lines in her moral instruction for young girls. The conversation continued into the 90s, and later into the 2010s through adaptation work. The third and fourth waves of feminism, along with current events and pop culture heavily impacted the creation of each film, causing subtle changes to appear. The study of these changes over time is important, as this allows society to reflect on both historical and contemporary strategies for feminism. Adaptation work is the ultimate celebration of prominent authors such as Alcott, who specifically noted the limiting factors she had to work with when publishing her novel. Through the expansion of her work in film, we are able to imagine and create the version she may have written if she were not bound by the constraints of her time.

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