

Innocence Lost, Understanding Gained, Unfortunately: A Reading of Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019)

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In the film *Little Women* (2019), the plot structure and lighting communicate a contemporary parable for how to navigate lost innocence with principled growth in the face of growing adversity presented by social pressures, especially as one grows older. Viewers come to know the protagonist, Jo March, both in her youth and her maturity through repeated use of flashbacks. The plot structure is built from juxtapositions between Jo's youth and womanhood. The structure helps to show how a loss of innocence can open a woman's eyes to the social issues she may face on a daily basis. The reliance on flashbacks helps the audience to identify directly with how powerfully Jo's early experiences shaped her adult behaviors, experiences she can also nevertheless face with strength, tenacity and purpose rather than resignation to social conventions expected of a woman of her time. The time of the film is the late 1800s during the civil war in a small rural town in Massachusetts. The time-period retains contemporary resonance due to the continued struggle of women against patriarchal conventions hindering women's dreams of social equality. The director, Greta Gerwig created another modern depiction of the classic book to create a new, feminist parable for women in 2020. The relatable nature of the film set in the 1800s, and recreated in 2019, goes to show women are still facing similar issues today that were experienced hundreds of years ago. Even so, the contrasting lighting and plot structure along with other mise-en-scene elements throughout the film, create a triumphant message of feminist power and the ability of women to overcome the social challenges still faced in today's society. The final scene of the film culminates the theme's shift to show how even

with a greater understanding of the barriers against women, one can still move past the difficulties placed in her way. Despite the loss of innocence and the cumbersome process of developing an unfortunate understanding of the social barriers posed against women, they can still emerge successfully from seemingly insurmountable odds.

The opening scene of this film shows a long shot of Jo standing in front of the door to a New York City publisher. The lighting is dark and lowkey. This adds to the oppressive nature of the male dominance felt in the publishing room. The low-spirited grey tones in the room contribute to the fear Jo must feel as she looks for approval on her work. She looks down as she anticipates entering a threatening room full of men. The scene starts completely silent, until Jo opens the door and the room fills with the ambient diegetic sound of men speaking amongst themselves. The camera tracks forward, following Jo's movements as she approaches the publisher's desk. As Jo takes a seat, the camera zooms in to a close-up shot of her hands as she anxiously crosses her ink stained finger tips. Stained from the hard-won dedication she shows in her writing. Jo watches as a loud *slap* is heard as the publisher slams the pages down handing them back to her, unamused. After paying her twenty dollars for this piece of writing, he continues to say "if the main character is a girl next time, make sure she's married by the end... or dead." Jo exits the publisher, running down the busy streets of New York rejoicing. What seemed like a rejection in the moment, viewers see Jo's contrasting view as she appreciates the small victory and rushes back to her boarding house to continue writing.

This scene is set in the present of Jo's young adulthood. It is the late 1800s and at this point in her life, she is trying to make a living as a successful writer in New York City. Her young innocence has been lost and viewers watch Jo in these present scenes struggling to work through the challenges placed against her as a woman. Throughout this film a majority of the

scenes in the present have dark, cold, low-key lighting. The lighting of these scenes adds to the painful emotion felt as a result of a woman's inferior position in society at this time. As soon as Jo walks into the publisher's office, she knows she will be taken less seriously as a woman. She introduces her own writing as if she is bringing it in for a friend, out of a fear of rejection. One can see her anxious presentation as she looks for approval of her beautiful writing from a man who shows very little respect for women. Jo remains seated on the edge of her seat. Her legs shaking feverishly as she awaits the feedback on her writing. She continues to take deep breaths, in and out, calming her nerves so clearly presented in this scene. With her eyes looking down at her feet, she takes a deep sigh as the publisher speaks on her writing. This scene could be interpreted differently by men and women, even today. Misogynist men may have viewed this interaction as one that maintains women's inferior positions. A woman attuned to feminism, on the other hand, may see this interaction as one of the many examples of the blocked opportunities, but also a chance to show persistence and strength as a woman in the face of adversity. The statement made by the publisher as he requests Jo's exit from the building exemplifies the entire conflict Jo experiences as she continues to mature. The pressure placed upon women to marry a man and become dependent is something faced by many women at this time and, to some extent, a similar kind of pressure is still felt by women today. Contrasting with this scene, during flashback scenes in Jo's childhood, these pressures do not take a toll on her daily life as they do since she began to lose her innocence and mature.

The placement of this scene at the start of the film contributes to its parabolic nature, creating a modern feminist message from a century old story. As discussed in class, a parable reorients us to our imagination of new possibilities and finding a new way to view or approach something. Gerwig adapted this film for a new version in 2019 to create a modern view of

feminism within the film. In older depictions of this film the opening scenes show Jo March as an integral part of her family. She is attached to the nuclear family unit and working around her household. In this recreation of the film, the opening scene already begins with Jo's movement away from the stereotypical female position in society. She is pursuing her dream to become a successful writer and the movie opens with this plot line. Gerwig is trying to place an emphasis on the barriers Jo attempts to overcome throughout the film. The emphasis on family and relationships still exists throughout the film, but Gerwig creates a new dynamic to present modern feminist messages. By reorganizing the presentation of the plot to start with Jo's attempts to make it in New York as a female writer, this version of the film creates a greater emphasis on opportunity for women. Gerwig, herself can accurately create these changes in the film even based on her own life experiences. Being one of the few female writers and directors to win an Oscar, she has faced her own barriers to become a successful female director in Hollywood. She builds on her personal experiences to be able to incorporate a modern view of these challenges through the film. The flashbacks to Jo's childhood will create a strong contrast against the social challenges she faces as a woman. The lighting in these scenes changes the feeling portrayed of her childhood and shows her lack of understanding of the unfortunate hardships faced by women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; idealism meets reality, but in a woman full of willful determination to press on to a more just and equitable reality, guided precisely by that idealism.

A flashback scene later in the film is from Jo's life as a young girl. She meets her friend Laurie at a ballroom dance. They decide to leave the party and dance together on the porch. The lighting in this scene is golden, angelic and bright. The glow of the scene contributes to the bright, bubbly nature of Jo's childhood. The candles light up Jo and Laurie's faces with a

beautiful glow. As they exit the house, the golden light shining through the windows onto the porch brightens their bodies as they waltz past the windows. The camera tracks behind Jo and Laurie as they dance playfully across the porch.

Their innocence in this scene is clear as compared to Jo's sister Meg and the rest of the individuals peacefully attending to the event inside. The bright glow of the scene mimics the golden glow of Jo's unknowing childhood. At this point in the film, Jo's lack of awareness of the pressure placed on women to marry does not impact her relationship with her friend Laurie. Jo is unlike the other young girls of this time period. Superficial things fail to draw her attention, so she can put her energy into her writing and relationships with friends and family. The pressure placed on women to marry rich so they did not have to work in the future failed to motivate young Jo. Her innocent nature kept her focused on what was truly important to her. This flashback, juxtaposed with the scene of the present, as discussed previously, contributes to a theme of recognizing lost innocence while gaining a realistic understanding of the social struggles to be faced by women.

The portrayal of innocence here also contributes to Gerwig's parabolic message for modern feminism through a new depiction of the novel. This film is relatable for women of all ages. Seeing Jo as a young girl, unphased by society's expectations for her future creates a sense of hope for young women. Rather than creating this expectation that girls should act a certain way and boys will be boys, Jo shows her independence as a girl, from a very young age. The film is reminding girls across the world of their ability to be who they strive to represent, even with the social struggles they may face in the future. Jo's innocence helps her to dive deeper into herself. Without any external influences, simply through her writing and individuality, she is able to discover how she wishes to represent herself eventually as a woman, influenced by her

childhood experiences. The film's lighting of her childhood with this beautifully glowing, high-key luminescence depicts a visual representation of beauty, in Jo's own individual way. She does not let the pressures of marriage or expectations placed on women influence her childhood, mainly due to her ignorance to any issues that may come her way. Later in the film, these pressures almost weigh Jo down, but she stays true to herself and her dreams to keep that from happening. This plot structure comparing her struggles as a young woman to her beautiful childhood as a young girl, still leading to her success in the end, creates a message of hope for females of all ages. Gerwig's organization of the plot's flashbacks and scenes of the present help to contribute to the modern feministic nature of the film's most recent recreation. Contrasting the golden glow of childhood with the darker scenes of adulthood, Gerwig can present Jo's nostalgia for innocence lost yet also the strength from which she draws as it gives her tools of imagination that enable her to envision a more just and hopeful future, which she can bring about by her own dedication.

Further contributing to the theme and feminist parable of this film is another flashforward later in the film. Jo and Laurie are much older in this point of the film. The lighting, as all other present scenes, is much darker and less golden than scenes of her childhood. The darkness creates a more depressed and melancholy feeling. This lighting of the present scene will have viewers anticipating some kind of challenge put in Jo's path. Jo and Laurie are walking in the hills of Massachusetts and Laurie begins to confess his love for Jo. The aspect ratio of this scene becomes narrower as the tension builds. Starting as a wide angled, long shot of Jo and Laurie peacefully walking, the aspect ratio becomes more closed in as deeper emotions are expressed in their dialogue. The shot/reverse-shot pattern between Jo and Laurie's emotion creates a stark contrast between a vulnerable representation of man and strong representation of a female

character. In this scene, Laurie becomes emotionally drained as he continues to confess his love and convince Jo she must marry him. Jo, on the other hand, stands strong knowing it is not what is right for her. Speaking of marriage with Laurie in this scene, she proclaims: “I love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up.” While Jo still maintains her position against marriage in this scene, one can see how the pressure to become married is beginning to take a toll on her relationship with her dear friend Laurie. Their entire childhood lit up like a golden ray of sunshine as they spent all of their time together as friends. Youthful innocence shielded them from any influence from societal pressures placed on women to be married.

Many of the scenes of the present are dark and dreary due to some kind of challenge Jo will face. The darker tones in the lighting contribute to the feeling of fear felt by Jo when faced with adversity as a young woman. Whether it be a sexist publisher or society’s pressure weighing down a friendship of early origin, the present scenes, as contrasted with her childhood, often created some kind of sorrow and upset. In the present scene discussed previously, however, the lighting is still darker and low-key, but the portrayal of a strong woman who challenges society’s expectations placed upon her begins to shine through. The lighting is darker than childhood scenes to maintain the feelings of stress and anxiety while watching their friendship crumble under the pressure for marriage and commitment. Even though their friendship is in fact impacted by this weight as they lose their innocent nature, Jo does not let it impact her strength and vision for her future. Their position vis-a-vis one another on the screen further emphasizes this point. Jo maintains a warm, peaceful representation as she has no intent to change her stance on marriage in this moment. Contrastingly, Laurie is much colder and seems as though the rejection from Jo is leaving him in shambles. As he cries and pulls his hair, he continues to show

his loss of control in response to this rejection. This scene shifts the film's focus to Jo's strength in the face of adversity and the expectations that would weigh most women down at this time.

This scene further contributes to Gerwig's modern feminist message. In many films, the woman may be seen submitting to the needs and desires of a man. In this case, though, Jo keeps the idea of her dream to become a writer in mind as she denies the proposal from a man, something of which most women of the time wish to receive so greatly. The presentation of this scene creates a new viewpoint for women in 2020 to see the capabilities women have to put their own desires before someone else. It creates a representation of hope and strength in the face of adversity, often created by man. The film begins to show how even with the loss of innocence and increased recognition of the hardships faced by a woman in modern society, a woman need not submit to these expectations. A woman can question these expectations. She can go against the expectations of what a woman "should be." As Jo says, she "loves her liberty" too strongly to give it up for marriage at this point in her life. No woman should have to give up this liberty, simply because society may expect her to. While this pressure for marriage may not be the focus of challenges faced by woman in the twenty-first century, Gerwig created this scene knowing the powerful message can still resonate with women today. Being able to veer off the pathway created by society for a woman to follow, and create their own journey without the pressures of men is a powerful statement. This message goes against the norms of the time period this film is set in and, unfortunately, the norms for many women in the twenty-first century as well. In recreating this film for a 2019 representation, all the struggles faced by Jo in the late 1800s are still related to and experienced by women in today's society. The film gives another presentation of what a resilient woman looks like and how women need not submit to the needs of another man, or anyone for that matter. Specifically, Jo's resilience can be seen as she reaches a low point and



comes close to submitting to these societal expectations for a woman to marry. She returns home after a long stretch away and speaks to her mother of her regret in rejecting Laurie. She says she may not love him, but she desires so greatly to be loved. Laurie returns home and Jo writes a note to him, confessing her apparent “love” and “regret” in rejecting his proposal. If it were not for Laurie already being taken by another woman, Jo would have reached the lowest point and submitted to these societal expectations for marriage. However, this low just motivates Jo to reach a high in writing and she embarks on the journey that will eventually create her novel *Little Women*.

The lighting in the final scene of the film also helps to create the shift in the theme of the film. It contributes to the message on how the loss of innocence and greater unfortunate understanding for the hardships faced by women does not need to be something to keep a woman from reaching successes. The final scene of the film is not a flashback but a scene in Jo’s present life as a young woman. Unlike the rest of the present scenes, the lighting is glowing and golden. The camera moves graciously tracking behind Jo as she walks through her school she has recently created. The camera pans to the right to bring into focus each member of her family who is now working at the school with her. The non-diegetic musical sounds in the background contribute to the beautifully peaceful and optimistic nature of this final scene. The backyard is filled with children running in from off screen left as Jo moves peacefully through her newly created school. The long-take of Jo walking through her school shows the essence of her success, despite a number of barriers she had to face as she matured into the prosperous woman she is today. The scene ends with Jo’s entire family circling around a table selling her newly published novel. Despite her experience of the social struggles posed against women in the structure of society, Jo was able to maintain her focus on the dream of becoming a writer. The golden glow

of this scene creates this message of hope, despite the understanding of society's walls which tend to be stacked against women. Throughout the entire film, the scenes of ambient golden glow were those of Jo's childhood. Her childhood scenes exemplified Jo's individuality and personality that often went against the expectation for a woman in "elegant society." As the scenes in the present were interspersed among those of her childhood, it showed the contrast of her innocence against a new anxiety felt by being a woman in this "elegant society." The fact that the final scene is one in the present time with a golden glow shows a more optimistic light of Jo's life and her ability to break down the social barriers placed on her as a woman. Even with the challenges seen in the darkest of scenes, her experience ended with a golden luminescence, similar to the feeling created by her childhood scenes.

So, what is the point in Gerwig recreating yet another film representation of Louisa May Alcott's Novel *Little Women*? In this course, the working definition of parable was explained as a way to reorient ourselves through our imagination. Looking at something with new possibilities and opportunities, different from those of the tradition or expectations of the past. In creating a new representation of this famous feminist novel, Gerwig has reworked the representation of the novel to create a vision of the true potential of women in 2020. Starting the film with Jo's attempt to be accepted for her writing is just one of many examples. The traditional expectation for women in the past was never to make a living for herself. In starting the film with this plot line, it emphasizes the capability of a woman to make a life for herself, even as she matures and is introduced to the realistic social struggles she may face in the future. This film was set in the late 1800s and the challenges presented to Jo March as a woman throughout the film resonate with many women in today's modern society. This shows how Gerwig's new adaptation can create a new feminist parable for the novel.

The final scene and its optimistic nature created through its golden lighting helps to create the parabolic message of this modern depiction of the film. In all the scenes of Jo's present life the lighting is dark and dreary. They show all of her hardships and challenges she faces as a woman. The challenges are represented more intensely when contrasted with the flashback scenes to Jo's childhood. These scenes are filled with golden glowing light and examples of Jo's independent unique experience as a young girl. Before the pressures of being a woman in society influenced her life experiences, her innocence kept her from submitting to the expectations of what a lady should be like. She was friends with a young boy, with no intentions of marrying him. She dressed in dark baggy clothes unlike her sisters who wore makeup and hoop skirts each day. She lived for adventure. Although Jo did not represent the "ideal" girl that would be expected by the "elegant society" she so deeply despised, she was still able to fulfill her dreams. She faced difficulties, especially being a young woman trying to make it as a writer in New York. Even through hardship and the realization of the unfortunate reality faced by many women to be able to succeed, she was able to move past these barriers. This story, while set in the 1800s, can still be something so inspiring and important for women of all ages. As Gerwig adapted this film, she helps to recreate the messages created by Louisa May Alcott for women in 2020. Fear of facing the media making them keep their voices on lockdown. Fear of speaking up keeping women from speaking out. Fear of failure keeping women from fulfilling life long dreams. Fear of poverty and lower income forcing women into a marriage. Challenges reflecting these fears were beaten down and conquered by Jo in this 2019 version of *Little Women*. It creates the new imagination and reorientation of ourselves to the new possibilities of what a woman is fit for in modern society. As Jo contemplates her life choices to refuse marriage with Laurie, later in the film, she says women "have minds and they have souls as well as just hearts. And they've got

ambition and they've got talent as well as just beauty, and I'm so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for. I'm so sick of it!"

Gerwig was able to create an emphasis on the need to reorient how many view women and their position in society. While modern feminist movements have helped society to move away from these traditional views on what a woman is fit for, there are still challenges that keep them from fulfilling their full potential. Many fears of failure or repercussions for their actions may keep a woman from participating in something they truly can be "fit for." The plot structure of this film helps to create this modern feminist message, showing how a woman may become aware of the social challenges posed against her in society, but they can still be overcome to accomplish goals that may be outside of the realm of expectations. The contrast between low-key lighting in the difficult scenes of the present to the lighthearted golden scenes of Jo's childhood creates a view on how society's expectations could strip the luminescent light radiated by women. In the 2019 recreation of this novel, Jo March is created into a modern feminist symbol. A woman of strength, perseverance and success. Gerwig created a film to bridge a connection between the struggle of the average woman in traditional society to now in 2020. There is much more that can be done in terms of equal opportunity for women in all areas of life. This film creates a golden symbol for the hope of a new future, a message to reach the minds as well as hearts of women across all ages.