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JO MARCH IN THE BOOK AND ON SCREEN: LITTLE WOMEN AND GENDER

STEREOTYPES

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

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## **Poděkování**

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisor doc. PhDr. Mariana Machová, Ph.D. for her guidance throughout writing this thesis and for providing me with insightful comments on my work.

## **Anotace**

Cílem bakalářské práce je zanalyzovat nekonvenční chování postavy Jo March vystupující v románu *Little Women* od americké autorky Louisy May Alcottové. Její genderová opozice vůči stereotypům 19. století projevující se v románu je srovnána s populární filmovou adaptací od režisérky Greta Gerwigové, která román převedla na filmová plátna v roce 2019. Protože vytváření filmových adaptací známých literárních děl je napříč historií filmové tvorby oblíbenou činností, byl i tento román převeden do filmové podoby již několikrát, ať už s více či méně počtů úprav. Klíčovou otázkou práce vycházející z analýzy vystupování postavy Jo v románu ve srovnání s jejím filmovým ztvárněním je, zdali se zobrazení opozice vůči normám doby výrazně odlišuje od její knižní předlohy a může tak ovlivnit naše vnímání celé postavy.

**Klíčová slova:** gender, opozice, společenské normy, očekávání, ženská role, filmová adaptace

## **Annotation**

The aim of the bachelor thesis is to analyse the unconventional behaviour of the character of Jo March appearing in the novel *Little Women* written by the American author Louisa May Alcott. Jo's gender opposition against the 19<sup>th</sup>-century stereotypes surfacing in the novel is compared with the popular film adaptation by the director Greta Gerwig, who transformed the novel into film screens in 2019. Since creating film adaptations of well-known literary pieces has always been popular among the film industry, it is no exception that even this particular novel has been made into life action several times, with more or less altered changes. The key question of the thesis, which is based on the analysis of Jo's behaviour in the novel in comparison with her film version, is whether the display of the opposition towards the set of norms considerably differs from the original book script and therefore whether it might influence our perception on the character itself.

**Keywords:** gender, opposition, social norms, expectations, woman's role, film adaptation

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## Introduction

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel *Little Women* is a beloved literary piece created by Louisa May Alcott that won its place in the American canon throughout history. The storyline captures the domestic atmosphere and fate of the members of the March family, who each in their own specific way deal with the burdens of the period. Besides including topics such as the importance of a family bond or the question of love, Louisa May Alcott also explored one of the topics close to her heart – the position and role of a middle-class woman in American society. Because the novel inscribed itself into the hearts of many generations, it is understandable that it has been picked up and transformed into life-action films several times since the creation of the film industry. The most recent adaptation which caught the attention of the public and overall received a positive reception is the 2019 Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*. Gerwig followed up on her predecessors and continued with the tender portrayal of the novel, while also adding her own personal fresh touch.

The thesis will focus on the character of Josephine March, through whom Alcott embodied her own views on the mentioned position of women in America. The aim of this thesis is to compare the ways in which Jo opposes the roles prescribed by society in the novel and in Gerwig's film, as there are numerous evident instances in which Jo openly rebels against fixed conventions. After pointing out and comparing the depiction of Jo's gender opposition, it will be discussed whether Gerwig's adaptation could alternate the perception of an audience on Jo's stance as well as on her character.

To understand and to fully grasp the way in which Jo opposes the gender stereotypes, it will be necessary to lay out the most crucial norms of 19<sup>th</sup>-century society and expectations towards women. After pointing out the expectations in the first chapter, the thesis will shift its attention to the author of *Little Women* herself. Because of the tight connection between the plot of *Little Women* and Alcott's own life, the second chapter of the thesis will explore

and emphasise the parts of Alcott's persona that are most essential for understanding the background of the novel – and especially for understanding Jo's unconventional behaviour. The final part of the thesis will summarise and discuss the specific parts of the novel and the film in which Jo's gender opposition is manifesting. After comparing the depiction of some of the most crucial scenes, it will be debated whether Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation and her portrayal of Jo March's defiance towards expectations could possibly influence the way in which the audience perceives the character itself.

## **1. 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Society's Norms and Expectations**

To understand the problem of Louisa May Alcott's stand against American society's norms and expectations, and therefore to understand the opposition of Alcott's semi-autobiographical character Jo March in the novel *Little Women*, we need to first discuss the general 19<sup>th</sup>-century norms and expectations of an American middle-class woman. By exploring the general problematics of the subject, we will get a better view of how exactly Alcott stood against social standards and how it was reflected in her literary work.

Some of the topics that were essential to American women with a middle-class background include the question of marriage (expectations to marry, duties and obligations of a married woman, unmarried women having more rights than married ones, etc.), childbearing, expected female domesticity and submission, or the pressure on women to fit into the image of an angel figure.

Certain parts of the female sphere of American society, however, did not see themselves in the position they were ascribed to by others. It was not only the American suffrage and emancipation movement, but also the women writers, who were often connected to the movement itself and who according to some opposed the set of standards by being active in the literary sphere. To understand the whole set of issues Alcott had to face, the pressure on women writers will be discussed in this chapter as well.

### **1.1 Women's Roles in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America**

A woman in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America was facing numerous obstacles she had to overcome in order to succeed in the judgmental eyes of society. According to Barbara Welter, if you wanted to be seen as a true and proper 19<sup>th</sup>-century middle-class woman – whether you complied with the set of standards expected from the general public – you had to live up to four major criteria: “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152).

### 1.1.1. Marriage

Submissiveness and domesticity are terms tightly connected to the idea behind the institution of marriage. Getting married belonged to one of the major expectations society put on women's shoulders – becoming a wife and a mother was often seen as the ultimate goal in one's life.

However, the act of marriage was sealed under the terms of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century common law, and therefore it came with a number of restrictions, duties, and obligations. In her article, Sara L. Zeigler lists some of these duties a married woman had to follow through:

Wife ceded control of her person and property to her husband; she was also obliged to take care of his home, provide him with exclusive access to her body, bear and rear their children, and generally serve as his 'helpmeet'. (65)

Once a woman became a wife, she stopped being independent in many ways and fell under her husband's influence. What were once her own possessions now belonged solely to her husband. She ceased to be a girl and became a grown woman with responsibilities. To put it simply, married women became "employees within their homes" (Zeigler 68).

Alcott; however, did not marry and stayed as a spinster her whole life. The decision to not marry and to remain independent is one of the ways Alcott was in opposition to the expected way of living. To remain unmarried in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America was for a woman in a way more convenient than to become a wife, since she could earn money as well as own and manage her possessions, all of which a married woman had to give up (Ziegler 71).

On the contrary, we cannot say that once a woman became a wife, she completely and fully stopped being her own person and simply became a slave to her husband. Middle-class women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century played an important part in many social activities, such as maintaining good neighbourly relationships (and by that, maintaining good social status), and as Elizabeth Langland states in her article, "in a class politics of power, they cooperated and

participated with men in achieving middle-class control through the management of the lower classes” (294). She also mentions that although men were the moneymakers in their families, it was the wives who administered the funds when taking care of the household while their husbands were at work (Langland 291).

### **1.1.2 Female Domesticity**

Whether a woman had decided to get married or not, she was expected to act in a way to fit into the image of female domesticity. This stereotypical picture painted a woman as a figure locked inside a house, performing a large scale of domestic activities suitable for her position. According to Watkins, Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century “agreed that something eternal about women required female domesticity” (116).

The general view was that a woman should concern herself purely with feminine pursuits around the house. If she was married, it meant to bear children and to stay at home to take care of them and her husband – also, generally speaking, she was supposed to create the atmosphere of an ideal home. Other expected womanlike activities were nursing the sick people, preparing them for their death and then burial, visiting and courting the neighbours, or gift-giving (Watkins 118).

As Watkins puts it in her journal article, a woman’s life was a cycle of “marriage and pregnancy, childbirth and weaning, sickness and death” (118). All of these are taking place in the domestic sphere – a middle-class woman was not expected to travel the world or to take part in intellectual activities; she was to stay at home.

The power of a woman, therefore, came from the responsibilities she had around her household, and she also took a great part in maintaining the social status of her and her family (as we can see in the listed ladylike activities Watkins mentions in her article, by courting the neighbours, she was flashing a good light on the face of the whole family).

To hint a bit at Alcott's life again, the domestic life full of ladylike activities was not something around which she would centre her existence (as it will be described in the following chapters).

### **1.1.3 Submission**

What stands next to domesticity as another typical 19th-century ladylike quality is submission. According to Welter, "submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women" (158). There is a logical connection between these two – to be domestic also meant to be submissive. The proper woman knew her place, and that was at home by the side of her husband, to whom she was deeply devoted and to whom she submitted her belongings (if she had any before marriage), her mind, her body, and overall her whole person.

As Barbara Welter states in her journal article, the proper woman of the past was supposed to use her qualities and talents to contribute to her family's and husband's well-being; "she was to work only for pure affection, without thought of money or ambition" (160).

### **1.1.4 Angel in the House**

"Angel in the House" is a term used to describe the general image of what a woman figure was meant to represent back in 19<sup>th</sup>-century society. The term itself gives out the impression of what was expected from someone who fell under this specific expression – to act in line with female domesticity and to be an angelic figure. "Angel in the House" can also be taken as a summary of the points briefly mentioned and described in the previous subchapters, as it includes both the thought that a true place for a woman is inside a house pursuing feminine activities as well as the female submission to the opposite gender.

In connection to the relationship between a man and a woman and her submission to him, Gilbert and Gubar describe “the arts of pleasing men” as “not only angelic characteristics”, but they argue that most of all “they are the proper acts of a lady” (24). Generally speaking, a woman taken as an “Angel in the House” was supposed to have angelic characteristics such as being pure, innocent, gentle, or soft-speaking.

### **1.1.5 Pushing the Norms**

American society was pushing the norms and expectations across the population by putting these angelic ideals into the heads of both men and women. There were women’s magazines writing about and supporting the stereotypical 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman image, such as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Woman’s Home Companion*, or *Good Housekeeping*. People created not only magazines but also whole books for young ladies to read so that they could educate themselves in the domestic sphere. In these books and magazines, writers promoted and encouraged their readers to act in a ladylike way – according to Gilbert and Gubar, they promoted “submissiveness, modesty, selflessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic” (23).

However, despite numerous magazines and books promoting the ideal lifestyle and regardless of the pressure from society, there were particular groups of women who did not want to adhere to such norms and stereotypes. At any given point in human history, we would always be able to find some individuals who would be going against the trends of their time – and they would often be sanctioned for it (either socially or they would even be punished by law).

When a woman rejected the traditional norms, she would often be given backlash and a lack of understanding from her surrounding community. As Gilbert and Gubar put it in their work, “women who reject the submissive silences of domesticity have been seen as terrible

objects” (79). To simplify, if a woman rejected the image of the “Angel in the House” and did not act in a way an angelic figure should, she was often seen as a monster rejecting the long-running traditions of the society (Gilbert, Gubar 53).

## **1.2 The Pressure on Women Writers**

Women who abandoned the image of the “Angel in the House” were not the only ones who were seen as intruders of the ideal image of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century women’s sphere. It was the women writers as well, who according to some, also did not exactly fulfil the stereotypical ladylike qualities.

Although the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought us the rise of the novel, and with that the rise of female readership as well as the rise of the number of women writers (which relates to the spread of women’s education in the US), the notion of writing was seen as a purely manly activity for a long time. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we can find instances of male authors criticising and putting down female authors. If a woman wanted to pursue a literary career, she would often find herself in the spotlight of the judgmental eyes of her male colleagues. In their work, Gilbert and Gubar give us some examples of such criticism against female creativity – in a letter from Robert Southey to Charlotte Bronte, he writes that “literature is not the business of a woman’s life, and it cannot be” (Gilbert, Gubar 8).

By the time Alcott started to write, the notion Southey expressed in his letter was not as actual as it was at the beginning of the 19th century. However, when society lives under such norms and conditions for some time, people in it then find it hard to get rid of the deep-rooted traditions. Even though American women established a better position for themselves after the Civil War and proved to be useful, the thought that a woman should concern herself with feminine pursuits around her family still remained a widely spread opinion. Therefore,

women who wanted to establish themselves as serious authors still carried prejudices and the burden of the past.

Male literary figures such as Rufus Wilmot Griswold described the writing talent a woman possessed as “anomalous, freakish, because as a ‘male’ characteristic it is essentially ‘unfeminine’” (Gilbert, Gubar 10). Many male authors saw writing as a strictly male-dominant field, and the idea that a woman would want to create in the same way as they did seemed unnatural. To become a scholar, and more so a writer, was denied to women for a long time; women did not have the same educational opportunities as men did. The denial of education might be one of the reasons why many men saw writing (taken as a skill connected to being educated) as solely their field.

Although the situation improved by the time Alcott became a widely known author, it was not that long before her life that some of the male authors had openly attacked their female colleagues. They often voiced their opinions not only out loud in the public sphere, but they also caricatured women in their literary works. As Gilbert and Gubar state in their work, male writers such as Henry Fielding or Tobias G. Smollett portrayed women as “cartoon figures” (e.g. Fielding created characters like Mrs. Slipslop) and they “implied that language itself was almost literally alien to the female tongue”; to be more specific, they showed their reader that “in the mouths of women, vocabulary loses meaning, sentences dissolve, literary messages are distorted or destroyed” (30–31).

When readers were exposed to images like these for generations, it was then hard to distance themselves from such ideas, and it took a while before female writers got the recognition and acknowledgement they deserved (and before they were taken seriously by male authors).

However, the unserious picture of women that male authors painted in their works is not the only problematic one. Many writers oversimplified their female characters (which

then negatively affected the image of real women), and they simply sorted them out into two basic categories – the angel and the monster (Gilbert, Gubar 17). Angelic characters were the ones who fulfilled the stereotypical picture of a woman in the given period (in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America it would mean being domestic or submissive). On the opposite of that, we have characters who were going against these images and therefore were seen as monsters. Because men produced most of the mainstream literary works for a very long time, and because of the creation of these archetypes, women were sometimes perceived not as complex human beings, but simply as either an “angel” or “monster” – these terms are not just to say that one is good or bad, but they set up a whole bunch of expectations a woman must carry (like being domestic or submissive, in the case of being an angle figure). According to Gilbert and Gubar, a female author had to “examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” (17).

Women writers struggled to get rid of these stereotypical images, which were deep-rooted in the literature and in the public eye. In connection to being portrayed as the “Angel in the House”, Virginia Woolf declared later after Alcott’s period that before women start to write, they “must ‘kill’ the ‘angel in the house’”; they “must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art” (Gilbert, Gubar 17). To be seen as complex intelligent human beings who can produce literary works as good as men can, women must get rid of all of the prejudices and stereotypes they were given over the course of time. This, without a doubt, was not an easy task and in her writing, Alcott herself felt the weight of overcoming this struggle.

To sum it up, being a woman was often seen as an obstacle that shaped the way female authors could express themselves in the environment moulded by years of prejudice and oppression. For a long time, a woman writer “had to choose between admitting she was

‘only a woman’ or protesting that she was ‘as good as a man’” (Gilbert, Gubar 64). There were many ways one could deal with this obstacle of constantly having to prove themselves to be worthy of the same attention and validation their male colleagues were receiving. To not have to be directly connected with their writing and to put out their work without any prejudices from the readership, women could choose to publish their work anonymously.<sup>1</sup>

Another solution a woman could have while facing this obstacle was simply to present herself as a male, which Gilbert and Gubar describe as a protest not about “that they were ‘as good as’ men but that, as writers, they were men” (65). Whether it was having a male pseudonym or literally shaping themselves into the figure of a man, such women wanted to reject their given female roles to embrace the publicly admired male writing genius in their writing. When women wrote under male pseudonyms, they were not judged according to their gender, but when writing, they could also focus on much broader subjects – not only on those that were seen as subjects worthy of being discussed by a lady. As Gilbert and Gubar put it, “disguised as a man, after all, a woman writer could more vigorously away from the ‘lesser subjects’ and the ‘lesser lives’ which had constrained her foremothers” (65). It did not necessarily mean that women who rejected their gender while creating art had the urge to literally become men (from today’s point of view, we cannot say they were necessarily

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most famous instances of a literary piece which was at first published anonymously was Marry Shelly’s *Frankenstein* – by publishing the first edition of now such an iconic story without any name on the cover, Marry Shelley saved herself from having her story be judged not only by how well it was written, but also according to who wrote it. By this doing, *Frankenstein* could be read without any name or a face connected to it. It was free of any criticism which could arise if only some of the narrow-minded critics wanted to judge a book only by its cover (or only by the name on the cover to be precise)

transgender). They might have felt the need to separate their gender and everything that was connected to it only on the occasion of writing and presenting their work.

### **1.3 Setting Expectations**

To summarise the most crucial social constructs of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America that shaped the life and work of Louisa May Alcott, we must pinpoint terms such as expected female domesticity, submission, or the idea of a woman being an “Angel in the House”. All of these terms define women’s roles and the expectations society puts on their shoulders. Women were mostly expected to be quiet, to not speak their minds loudly, and to be at home where they could express themselves in a manner that was appropriate to their gender.

Even though Louisa May Alcott grew up in the environment of Transcendentalists, who as a very specific group of people had a different view on the world and its order (that includes the stand on women’s rights as well as the rights of black or native people), she still felt the weight of the norms society around her has built over the years, and she formulated some of them in her literary works (more about how Transcendentalists influenced Alcott’s life will be discussed in the second chapter of the thesis).

By listing the expectations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and introducing the obstacles women writers had to face in Alcott’s time, we should get a better understanding of Alcott’s life and work, as well as a foundation for exploring her novel *Little Women*, in which she portrayed a stand against some of the presented gender roles. However, before we can start to explore the novel and the opposition of the character of Jo March against these roles, we must first outline the life and work of Alcott herself (after all, the novel and the life of L. M. Alcott in some ways mirror each other, so to understand the opposition of Jo March, we must firstly understand the opposition of the author).

## 2. The Birth of the Novel *Little Women*

After laying the grounds for further discussion by explaining the background of the stereotypical American middle-class woman's life, we need to shift our attention to Alcott's life itself. As it was implied in the previous chapter, the novel *Little Women* is loosely based on real-life Alcott's family accounts. Therefore, to fully grasp the character of Jo March, who in many ways mirrors the figure of Alcott herself, it is necessary to give an introduction to Louisa May Alcott's life and work.

By discussing her way of life, which was strongly affected by living in the ahead of its time Transcendentalist community, we will get a clearer understanding of what the personality of Alcott was; and, furthermore, why she created the character of Jo in her novel in the way that she did (how Jo in many ways resembles Alcott's own gender opposition).

Not only is Alcott unforgettably linked to her most famous novel *Little Women* for which she is frequently praised, but she is also recognised for her human rights activism, which is another significant element that needs to be mentioned in order to truly understand her character and life decisions – that is why this significant part of her life will be pointed out in this chapter as well.

After introducing the most crucial information about Alcott that is relevant to understanding further discussion about the gender opposition of Jo March in the novel and Greta Gerwig's film *Little Women*, we will shift our focus from the author and the novel itself. Because the following chapter will discuss the differences in portraying Jo March's gender opposition in the novel and in the 2019 film adaptation, the film itself will also be introduced in the second chapter.

## 2.1 Louisa May Alcott

Novelist, poet, playwright, human rights activist, but most importantly, a woman who managed to rise from the inauspicious conditions American society created for middle-class women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All of these terms could be used to define a memorable writer Louisa May Alcott, whose beloved novel *Little Women* went down in literary history.

Louisa May Alcott's life went in a direction not many women in her time decided to go in. Alcott decided to break from the long-running stereotypes which were inscribed by others throughout American history in many ways. She was well-educated (having it easier than some women as she was living in the community of Transcendentalist intellectuals), spoke her mind, her personality was far from the "Angel in the House", and she also rejected the idea of marriage by becoming a literary spinster, who dedicated her life to writing in her own company.

According to early records captured by Alcott's father, who kept notes on his daughter's manners since her early age, Louisa's personality had always been slightly distinct from some of her contemporaries. One of the details that Louisa's father Bronson Alcott reported about his daughter's behaviour, and which Harriet Reisen mentions in Alcott's biography, is that "her violence is at time alarming", indicating that her boyish rebellious side had been showing itself since being a little girl (33). As she grew up, Louisa herself even admitted that she "was born with a boy's nature", battling "for nearly fifteen [years] with a boy's spirit ... and a boy's wrath" (Reisen 188). This specific struggle is one of many that Alcott projected into the character of Jo March in *Little Women*, as we can often notice throughout the novel how Jo struggles to fulfil the gender expectations while suppressing her boyish wild nature. Both Alcott and Jo had trouble keeping this unsuitable side of their nature hidden and not letting it take over their actions.

However, the boyish anger is evidently not the only characteristic that created Alcott's complex personality. In her book, Harriet Reisen reports a description from one of Alcott's contemporaries Clara Gowing, who talks about Louisa as a person with:

a strange combination of kindness, shyness, and daring; a creature loving and spiteful, full of energy and perseverance, full of fun, with a keen sense of ludicrous, apt speech and ready wit; a subject of moods, than whom no one could be jollier and more entertaining when geniality was in ascendancy, but if the opposite, let her best friends beware. (4)

Louisa May Alcott quieted down her wild spirit when pursuing a greatest passion of hers and that is writing, to which she devoted her entire life – and that is precisely what makes Alcott and her character Jo March so similar to each other. Literature and Alcott's imagination “was her greatest comfort, and her refuge even in her last days” and she captured this feeling of refuge in her personal journal, writing that her mind is “a happy world to go into when the real one is too dull or hard” (Reisen 4–5).

Since her early age, Louisa had been “developing the verbal talents” and she had made “rapid progress in spoken language” which would soon be transmitted into written form (Reisen 25). When she was just eight years old, Louisa uncovered her literary talents to the public when she “responded to the beauty of a Concord spring with a poem, ‘To the First Robin’” (Reisen 66). Her first book would then be published thirteen years later, making Alcott just twenty-one years old (Reisen 155). Her rich imagination with the guidance of her surrounding intellectual environment would soon become a tool for money making, and gradually, as Louisa was growing up, “she wrote almost everything at high speed and for money” (Reisen 4). Going back to the character of Jo March, this is also another similarity between Alcott and her mirroring *Little Women* character.

Because of Alcott reportedly writing “almost everything at high speed”, we are able to find many different features, motives, and themes appearing throughout her works (Reisen 4). However, as Harriet Reisen writes in her biography capturing Alcott’s life and work, “Louisa’s strongest tales featured battles for power between the sexes” (127). The capture of differences and imbalances between men and women in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America was a theme appearing not only in Alcott’s literary works, but it was present and relevant in her real life as well.

### **2.1.1. Alcott’s Human Rights Activism**

Throughout her life, Louisa was spending her time not only by taking care of her family and writing but she was also involved in human rights activism. She was engaged in dealing with the overshadowed position women had in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American society, and she also spoke on behalf of some of the minorities living in the US. As Reisen reports in her book, Louisa May Alcott advocated for “complete racial equality”, which needed to be accomplished through accessible and racial inclusive “right to literacy, still legally denied to enslaved people” in the times of Alcott’s efforts (230).

The “battles for power between the sexes” were not only happening on paper in some of Alcott’s works, but she also led the fight in real life while participating in the American suffragette movement, which is another indicator of how Alcott opposed the given gender social order (Reisen 127). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the suffragists operating in America gave themselves the task of making progress in demanding voting rights for women, and as Ellen DuBois states in her article, “the demand for the vote was the most radical program for women's emancipation possible in the nineteenth century” (63). However, the task they put on their shoulders was not an easy one, given the historical circumstances together with the deep-rooted stereotypes living in society’s consciousness. Traditionally, disregarding their

age or social class, women were not considered to be suited for any position in the public sphere, and they “remained almost entirely within the private sphere, defined politically, economically, and socially by their familial roles”, letting men take over (DuBois 64). Suffragists wanted to break from the woman’s stereotypical family role and position, and as DuBois claims, they wanted the powers to be shifted from the private sphere to the public one, demanding “for women a kind of power and connection with the social order not based on the institution of the family and their subordination within it” (64).

Louisa May Alcott became associated with the suffragette movement operating in New England, in which “New England Women rallied around the campaign for the right to vote as the battle that would lead to complete gender equality under the law” (Reisen 329). Louisa herself took part in educating potential female voters about the importance of the voting right, and in the “summer of 1879 Louisa organized reading groups to raise consciousness” about the act, as well as distributing and circulating “petitions to encourage registration” (Reisen 329). Alcott later proudly took part in the voting, and she became “the first woman” in her region who registered her “name as a voter” (Reisen 329).

One of the things that might have influenced Alcott’s personal human rights activism was the fact that she grew up in an environment that was strongly dictated by Transcendentalist values. As it is generally known and acknowledged, the Transcendentalist movement has been close to our current modern liberal thinking and values, which now also include the longing for racial and gender equality. Growing up in such ahead of its time environment had a great impact on Alcott’s personality as well as on her creative side, as she was often surrounded and guided by well-known Transcendentalist authors. Harriet Reisen mentions in Alcott’s biography that Louisa and her sister Anna were being educated in the house of Ralph Waldo Emerson, where “they met their father’s and Mr. Emerson’s friend Henry Thoreau” – both Emerson and Thoreau being probably the most recognised

Transcendentalist writers (55). As Reisen states in her work, Thoreau was the one who “taught Louisa to see, read, and appreciate nature” (55). However, it was not only Emerson and Thoreau who influenced young Louisa, as she also looked up to a major Transcendentalist woman figure Margaret Fuller, the author of the essential feminist work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*; and when Fuller came for a visit, Louisa “could picture herself a grown woman like Fuller, independent, romantic, and literary” (Reisen 114).

Some of the inspiring people Louisa had the chance to encounter throughout her life even became models based on which she created some of her literary characters. One of the examples of such depiction is in Alcott’s novel *Little Men*, in which she “portrayed Thoreau at this age as Mr. Hyde” (Reisen 55–56). Thoreau together with Emerson also “inspired the characters Sylvia Yule loves in *Moods*”, which is a novel Alcott wrote prior to *Little Women* (Reisen 3). Having them immortalised in some of her works, it is clear that these influential Transcendentalist figures had a great impact on Alcott’s thinking, values, and the whole course of her life in general.

If we start to examine Alcott’s lifetime in a wider context – with whom she was surrounded, what were their values and stances, etc. – it comes as no surprise as to why she decided to portray some of her characters and their personalities in her works in the way that she did (and also where she took inspiration and themes for her stories). Having some of the most iconic American 19<sup>th</sup>-century freethinkers as her gurus, it becomes clearer why her mentioned social activism (which includes gender opposition) played a key role in her life and some of her work. By explaining the Transcendentalist and suffragist background of Louisa May Alcott, we have received a foundation for the following Jo March’s analysis, which follows Alcott’s own fight against gender stereotypes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2.2 The Background of Creating *Little Women*

Authors sometimes find themselves in a position where they are pressured to create and write pieces of literature they would otherwise never imagine they would write. One of the reasons for such situations might be the need of an author to make money, so they would not struggle in life and simultaneously could continue to earn a living by writing – for instance, they write according to current market demand for magazines, and in exchange they receive financial reward. Louisa May Alcott had also found herself in a position in which she was asked to write a novel far from her liking.

In the case of Alcott, it was not the need to suddenly make money, but as Cheever mentions in Alcott's biography, it was the pressure from her publisher Thomas Niles, who wanted Louisa to write a book for a readership of young girls (2). However, despite the insistence from Niles, Alcott was resisting the urges for over a year, for the reason that “she did not want to write a girl's book” (Cheever 2). According to Susan Cheever, Alcott even wrote in her journal that she “never liked girls or knew many except” her sisters – and as we can see from *Little Women*, her sisters and their bond were precisely the needed inspiration that allowed Alcott to finish writing the novel, despite presumably knowing very little about other young women and their tastes (4).

The pressure on Alcott to write the novel was gradually escalating. Thomas Niles even got together with Louisa's father Bronson with the intention of persuading him to talk his daughter into accepting Niles's proposition – in exchange for persuading Louisa, Niles offered Bronson Alcott to publish one of Bronson's own books *Tables* (Cheever 2). And so, after a year of persuasion, Louisa May Alcott finally decided to try to create the novel that was so eagerly demanded by her publisher. Paradoxically, even though Alcott did not want to write a novel that would target the readership of young girls, she created a predecessor to *Little Women* long before she was asked to. To be precise, it was “The Sisters Trial”, which

was published in 1856 and that also follows the “fates of four sisters, who roughly corresponded to the Alcott girls” (Reisen 163).

As Alcott herself even suggested, having little knowledge about other girls, she had to search for inspiration in her own memories and experiences. For the reason that the novel was supposed to be read by a younger audience, Louisa decided to select and take inspiration from a particular period in her lifetime in which she had made the fondest memories; and as Cheever even claims, “she reached for the happiest times she could remember” (3). The subjects on which she modelled her characters in the novel were taken directly from her family circle, and so her sisters are now forever imprinted into the beloved March sisters. And, as it was implied multiple times throughout the thesis, Jo March became the mirroring character of Alcott herself, having similar character traits and beliefs, including gender opposition, which will be discussed later. Additionally, Louisa May Alcott set the plot of the novel in a place she was very familiar with during her girlhood, and thanks to this decision, she “became associated forever with Concord after she wrote *Little Women* in 1868” (Reisen 54).

As Cheever states in her work, Alcott considered the scenes inspired by her own family life to be “dull and ordinary”, and even her publisher, who talked Louisa into writing the novel, shared a similar opinion (4). However, despite the initial scepticism about the novel’s quality and attractiveness for the readership, we are now able to claim that it is precisely the ordinary side of the plot focusing on the family bond, which makes the novel so lovable. The fact that Alcott decided to model her characters on real people also adds to the final impression, which earned *Little Women* the position in the American literary canon as the “early work of ‘domestic realism’” (Reisen 266).

### 2.2.1 Gender Opposition and Other Real-Life Similarities

As it was suggested earlier, the novel *Little Women* takes some of the motives, themes, and characters directly from Alcott's own life events and experiences. As Harriet Reisen describes in her book, "*Little Women* is a charming, intimate coming-of-age story about family love, loss, and struggle", which Alcott set in the environment of "mid-nineteenth-century New England", reflecting her own time she had spent in Concord (2). Louisa captured the spirit of her time spent in Concord and modelled the March family based on her own – as Reisen puts it, Alcott presented us with "a wise and good mother, idealistic father, and four sisters whose personalities are a sampler of female adolescence" (2).

Even though the plot of the novel is centred around the storylines of all four March sisters, one plotline stands out above the others. As was stated before, Alcott "never liked girls or knew many", which might be exactly the reason why the character that the novel is most focused on is actually the one that resembles Alcott herself – logically so, as we know ourselves better than we can ever get to know the others, making Alcott the ultimate subject based on which she could create a literary character (Cheever 4). Of course, at the end of the day, the character of Jo March is just a character in a book, but as Harriet Reisen puts it, "her name is Jo March, but her character is Louisa Alcott", suggesting the tight connection between the two of them (Reisen also states that the descriptions of Alcott's contemporaries match the description of Jo March, making the parallel even more evident) (2). Reisen describes Jo March as following:

Jo March is dazzling and original invention: bold, outspoken, brave, daring, loyal, cranky, principled, and real. She is a dreamer and a scribbler, happiest at her woodsy hideout by an old cartwheel or holed up in the attic absorbed in reading or writing, filling page after page with stories or plays. (2)

Outspoken, cranky, or a dreamer are terms many of her contemporaries would have surely used to describe Alcott as well. However, the side of Jo March that resembles Louisa May Alcott the most (and which is ultimately the most obvious one, based on many actions in the plot of *Little Women*) is that both Jo and Louisa are writers; and Reisen claims, Jo is the most similar to Alcott “in the fertility of her imagination” (4). Same as Alcott, Jo has “burned with genius” since being a little girl, making her spin “tales of murder and treachery one minute, fairy tales and sentimental poetry the next” (Reisen 4).

On the other hand, another source that examines Alcott’s life argues that the connection between Alcott and her character Jo March is not completely identical. Susan Cheever claims that “Louisa May Alcott is not Jo March”, which is a statement that needs to be emphasised even in terms of this thesis (5). She then argues that one of the differences between Alcott and Jo is that “Jo is a rebel who is nevertheless beloved”; Alcott, on the other hand, “was the rebel who often seemed genuinely disappointing to her parents and who found scant love from them or their friends” (Cheever 5).

Besides the contrast in lovability, which is pointed out by Susan Cheever, we need to address probably the main and most crucial difference between Alcott herself and the character she created, which otherwise resembles her own person in many directions. Louisa May Alcott never married and decided to spend her lifetime in her own company, pursuing ambitions she set up for herself. As Harriet Reisen puts it, Alcott “chose an independent path” and in contrast, “Jo March marries and is content within the family circle” (2). However, if the novel’s ending was written purely based on Alcott’s own intentions, Jo’s path would have followed the same one as hers – that is, she would have stayed unmarried, as Alcott herself even stated that “‘Jo’ should have remained a literary spinster” (Reisen 271). The blame for such a decision, which went against Alcott’s primal intentions with Jo’s character, falls on the heads of publishers, who insisted “on having people married off in a

wholesale manner” (Reisen 271). It was not only publishers, who expected a female character to be married off by the end of a story, but in the case of Alcott and her *Little Women* (taken as a work including both *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, as it is now predominantly published as one novel), it was some of her female readership as well, writing Alcott letters and “demanding that she [Jo] should marry Laurie, or somebody” (Reisen 271).

However, Alcott did not like the idea of marrying Jo to Laurie, which some of the readers of her novel so eagerly demanded and asked for. As Reisen mentions in her work, Alcott herself even complained that she “*won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone”; and moreover, she stated that being married is not “the only end and aim of a woman’s life”, which hints at her own opposition to gender stereotypes, in which a woman was expected to find a husband and be a proper housewife (271). Even though Alcott and other women opposing the stereotypical idea of women’s lives would have much more preferred to have Jo and her story in the novel as a message of independence and opposition, Alcott had to eventually yield to her publisher and marry off Jo. To make the marriage a little more unpleasant, Louisa decided to give a hard-time to her readership by not having Jo marry Laurie (as many readers would probably want to), but instead, she went and “made a funny match for her” (Reisen 271). To mock her audience and still have her way in saying what Jo’s fate will be, she came up with the character of Professor Bhaer, who was a mixture of important male figures in Alcott’s life (such as Emerson and Thoreau), and according to Reisen, “was not exactly a man after a teenage girl’s heart, unless the girl was Louisa Alcott” (271).

It is clear that Louisa May Alcott imprinted many of her traits and values into the character of Jo March in the novel *Little Women*, either by making Jo a scribbler, a girl with a short temper, or later a woman with the desire to be independent and free. Not only did Louisa immortalise parts of herself in the novel, but she also captured some of her most

precious memories of her family and their time in Concord. By introducing the ordinary life of the fictional March family, she created a place that is a comfort to many of its readers, making *Little Women* a memorable piece in the American literary canon.

### **2.3 Film Adaptations of *Little Women***

On account of the mentioned position of *Little Women* in the American literary consciousness, it is only natural that there have been many attempts to picturize the novel over the last decades. Whether it was in the form of a film, a play, or a television series, producers evidently always knew that *Little Women* is a story that can be picked up and redone in a time of need for women-focused audience work. J. E. Smyth discusses some of the remakes and their distinctiveness in her article “Outgrowing *Little Women*” and makes some important points about previous and most recent adaptations. Smyth writes that “the film industry has always been as obsessed with young girls as it is with remakes”, and therefore it is no surprise that directors and producers are still making more and more *Little Women* adaptations “since the first British feature appeared in the late summer of 1917” (8).

The novel *Little Women* is often seen as feminist literature with a focus on female empowerment, as embodied in the character of Jo March (Smyth 12). According to Smyth, it is therefore only logical that in the past century “every one of *Little Women*’s screenplays had female authors and was released in a period of female activism and change”, suggesting the importance of feminist motives in the novel itself (9). Even though some of the people familiar with the story of the March family (and Jo especially) surely hoped for a different ending of the sisters’ storylines that would embrace independence and female activism more, the most known remakes did not dare to go in a direction of change and stayed true to the original (Smith 8). However, as time goes on and society progresses, we are now able to say that this notion of the monotony of remakes has changed.

Unarguably, the most recent screen adaptation that captured the attention of the public and that won praise from many of its viewers was made by American director Greta Gerwig, who wrote and directed the 2019 *Little Women* film. Smyth writes that “Gerwig’s film is radically, unashamedly different from other film and television version”, in the sense of being “innovative, idiosyncratic”, and in addition, it is distinct in the form in which it is filmed – meaning “wayward camera, and rapid chronological shifts” in the plot (13). Gerwig herself even stated that her adaptation was created “for a new generation”, hinting at the changes, and according to Smith, it is “challenging in its feminist complexity” (13).

As it was mentioned above, one of the main differences that sets apart Gerwig’s adaptation from the previous ones is the change in the narrative structure. Greta Gerwig did not follow the traditional chronological layout of the plot, which is both in the novel and the previous adaptations, but she “dared to play with the narrative’s timelines” and opened the film with a different frame – the 2019 film *Little Women* does not start on Christmas Eve but begins several years later, “when the girls are grown women who look back at their childhood with regret” (Smyth 10). Throughout the film, we are presented with the March family and their storylines in time shifts, as Gerwig’s “entire narrative repeatedly switches backward and forward from youth to adulthood” (Smyth 10).

Another distinctive feature, which makes Gerwig’s adaptation stand out above others, is the film’s focus on the feminist issue. As Smyth writes in her article, of all the adaptations that have been made in the last decades, “possibly only two have offered some hope that women can grow up and rid themselves of their attachments to adolescent prettiness and perfectly copied ideals, to cease the endless little-girls navel gazing” (13). Even though the films that preceded Gerwig’s *Little Women* also portray the plot with its feminist themes and motives, Greta pushed this side of the novel even further and presents her audience with a more straightforward picture.

Gerwig stated that as time passed since the first *Little Women* adaptation, “the culture has changed around women in Hollywood” as well; so now that she was making her own film, she tried “to capture the new feminist audience”, presenting them with “untapped themes of women’s historical experiences and the struggle to be independent” (Smyth 9; 11). In Greta Gerwig’s version of *Little Women*, the director focused the attention of a spectator on “aspects of women’s writing, careers, and artistry”, emphasising the inequality and female struggle in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America while putting the feminist issue above other themes appearing in the novel (Smyth 10). However, it is important to mention that Gerwig might have gone a bit over the edge with her effort to emphasise this particular theme, as “some of her most fervently feminist dialogue is invented rather than drawn from the novel”, making us question the original intention and meaning of the novel (Smyth 12).

Not only did Greta Gerwig bring new inventions into the film in the form of a different time perspective and feminist dialogues, but she also made other changes that might affect our perception of the adaptation. One of the main differences is the blending of the character of Jo March with the author of *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott. As was described in the previous chapters, it is clear that Alcott brought some experiences from her real life into the novel itself, making it semi-autobiographical. However, Gerwig took this aspect of the novel and made it even more evident to the viewers. As Smyth states in her article, Greta “makes Jo’s connection with Alcott stronger by opening and closing sequences that emphasise themes of authorship and accentuate the staginess of Jo’s marriage of publishing convenience to Professor Bhaer” (13). The 2019 Gerwig’s adaptation also focuses on how “male publishers forced Alcott to marry off Jo and explores her frustration in attempting to craft her work on her own terms” (Smyth 12). By blending Alcott’s real-life experiences with the plot of the novel, Greta Gerwig might be alternating the perception of the audience on not only the character of Jo but also on the whole feminist theme appearing in the original.

### **3. Jo March's Opposition Against Gender Stereotypes**

The introductory chapters mapped and summarised the most crucial stereotypes laid upon women's shoulders in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, together with an introduction to Louisa May Alcott's life, both of which are essential for the third chapter of the thesis. By depicting the issues women had to encounter in the times of the creation of *Little Women*, we laid the foundation for the upcoming Jo March analysis, in which the mentioned stereotypes will be discussed with a link to the character itself. The terms on which the next chapter will build are the "Angle in the House" figure, the submissives and female domesticity, and the expectation of getting married and becoming a housewife – all of which are taken as the most crucial characteristics women were expected to fulfil in Alcott's lifetime.

In this chapter, the thesis will focus on the specific portrayal of the opposition against the listed stereotypes in the novel *Little Women* by the character of Jo March. After discussing excerpts from the novel in which the author put Jo into such positions, attention will be moved onto the 2019 Greta Gerwig's film adaptation – and, most importantly, onto the changes Gerwig made in her film, which could essentially alternate the viewer's perception of the original Jo's resistance. After examining the original Jo's stand in the novel and its alternation in the 2019 film, the discussion about the changes will try to decide whether Gerwig's differences could truly influence the perception of Jo's or not.

#### **3.1. Jo's Opposition in the Novel**

The image of acting in a way that opposes gender stereotypes in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America is possible to be displayed in several different ways. In the novel *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott put this idea into the character of Jo March, who shows numerous distinct instances of rebelliousness against these conventions throughout the novel. Whether it is explicitly stated,

shown, or just hinted through some of the actions in the plot, a reader is able to recognise this notion of opposing in the plot.

One of the ways in which Jo March opposes stereotypes is by behaving in a way a proper lady in her lifetime should not – that being, she acts in a boyish manner and even states her desire to become one. Starting from the beginning of the novel, we can find such an instance of an “inappropriate” unladylike manner right away. In the first chapter of *Little Women*, a reader receives an insight into the dynamic of the March family for the first time and also follows a scene in which Jo’s boyish side makes an appearance. We see a short quarrel between the sisters about Jo’s whistling and use of slang words, both of which are perceived as not suitable behaviour for a girl in her position. Jo then laments about her personal struggle of being a girl and even explicitly says that “it’s bad enough to be a girl” when she likes “boy’s games, and work, and manners” – Jo also adds: “I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy.” (Alcott 4) Surely, someone may have a contradictory view on the issue and may prescribe Jo’s behaviour to her age (in which case she might not fully understand her position and expected behaviour), rather than understanding her whistling and talking as a way of trying to break free from the cage society locked women into. However, given the plot that follows, one can acknowledge this initial example as an introduction to the complexity of Jo’s resistance, which is deepened later in the story.

To list even more specific examples in which Alcott puts Jo into the position of a man, it is worth mentioning another instance from the opening of the novel, in which Jo comments on her role in the March household, which currently functions without any male figure (Mr. March volunteers in the Civil War, leaving his wife and daughters to take care of themselves). Jo comments: “I’m the man of the family now papa is away, and I shall provide slippers, for he told me to take special care of mother while he was gone.” (Alcott 7) Jo is proud of her male role in the household and her ability to take care of the family when their

father is away at war. She might see this as an opportunity to help her family when she could not go to fight in the war herself with her father like she wanted. When commenting on her disappointment in being a girl, Jo says to her sisters that she is “dying to go and fight with papa”, but she sadly must be at home “like a pokey old woman” (Alcott 5). (Of course, in Alcott’s lifetime, it was not possible for a woman to fight in a war, and the closest way women could interfere in a conflict was to become a war nurse, which Alcott herself decided to be at one point in her life.) Jo is not only claiming to have a male role in the family, but she also proves her position several times – one of such examples is in dividing the chores around the March’s house while both Mr. and Mrs. March are away, as we can see Jo insisting “on doing all sorts of hard jobs” while her sisters pursue more ladylike activities (Alcott 267). After Mr. March returns from the war, Jo still carries the role of a man and the main provider on her shoulders, and in times of struggle exclaims “I’m your man.” to her relatives to assure them of her taken responsibility (Alcott 508).

Another example in which Jo is put directly into a male figure is when the March sisters perform plays Jo wrote for them. Being a scribble like Alcott herself, who wrote anything from poetry to novels, Jo also composed plays the sisters could perform together, and in those plays, it was Jo who “played the male parts” as “no gentlemen were admitted” into their exclusive drama club (Alcott 25). If not fully and completely in real life, Jo could at least express herself freely in her dramatic production, in which she proudly emphasised her boyish nature by writing herself male characters to play. However, it was not only Jo who occasionally titled herself a man, as we can notice examples in the novel in which other characters speak about Jo and prescribe her male characteristics. One of these instances is when her sister Beth calls Jo a “tom-boy”, suggesting her unladylike nature (Alcott 5). To give another example, let’s take a look at the passage describing Mr. Laurence’s opinion about Jo: “He liked Jo, for her odd, blunt way suited him; and she seemed to understand the

boy [Laurie] almost as well as if she had been one herself.” (Alcott 83) Mr. Laurence links the way Jo understands his grandson Laurie to her nature, which is in opposition to the stereotypical 19<sup>th</sup>-century girl image – and therefore is closer to understanding the boy. Alcott describes Jo in one of the early chapters of the novel as a girl whose “quick temper, sharp tongue, and a restless spirit were always getting her into scrapes, and her life was a series of ups and downs”, making her a perfect ally for the young boy (Alcott 58). Later in the novel, Aunt March states that Jo possesses “blunt manners and independent spirit” (Alcott 486).

Not only is Jo putting herself into the figure of a man, and therefore is opposing the stereotypical view of gentle womanhood, but her actions and descriptions from others are just another proof of her rebellious nature, which is not in line with the general picture created by society. This part of her character would certainly be in conflict with some of the expected roles (such as the “Angel in the House”), in which she would be otherwise expected to obediently sit at home while letting men take over. Aside from having a rebellious boyish spirit, Jo’s greatest desire in life is to be independent and achieve great accomplishments, which also opposes the image of an ideal woman. As it was discussed in the first chapter, in most cases, women were not expected to thrive on their own accounts. However, Jo as well as her creator wished and aimed for a different path in their lives, as they did not want to settle with what society had prepared for them.

In *Little Women*, Jo is described as someone who carries “her love of liberty and hate for conventions”, suggesting her vocal opposition to conventions set upon women (Alcott 408). Her dislike of traditional conventions will be discussed later in the chapter in connection to her sisters, who approach the subject differently, making them good examples to show Jo’s opposition upon. Alcott writes in one of the early pages of the novel that “Jo’s ambition was to do something very splendid”, even though she does not have a clear picture of what it is supposed to be (Alcott 58). She wants to achieve something “that won’t be

forgotten” even after her lifetime (Alcott 224). Throughout the novel, a reader gets the idea that what Jo wants is to be an independent woman with liberty and destiny in her own hands, and the splendid achievement might be connected to her literary career. However, Jo herself knows that the journey to accomplishing her wishes is not an easy one. In the chapter titled “Castles in the Air”, the March sisters discuss their wishes in life, and when Jo talks about her own castle in the air, she understands the little possibility of her achieving it. She states: “I’m the one that will have to fight and work, and climb and wait, and maybe never get in after all.” (Alcott 222) Eventually, at the end of the novel, Jo’s predictions of never achieving her goal come true, as she never wrote any breakthrough literary work and became dependent on her husband (despite the marriage being presented as her happy ending, it is generally known that Alcott wanted Jo to remain unmarried and be independent, which would furthermore support the argument about her opposition).

The aim of being independent is related to Jo’s actions in the plot, in which she takes the matter into her own hands and instead of relying on others, she proves her ability to financially support herself and her family. She views her literary talent as a means of making money, and once she starts to sell her stories to the papers, she proudly declares: “*I am so happy, for in time I may be able to support myself and help the girls.*” (Alcott 246) Jo’s ambition of becoming a writer is gender opposition itself, as women were expected to pursue domestic activities and not aim to create careers for themselves. Besides supporting her family via her scribbling (instead of letting herself be supported by a man, which would otherwise be expected), Jo’s other gender opposition occurs when she cuts off and sells her hair to give money to her mother, so she can travel to see sick Mr. March. Her sisters are horrified over her action and do not understand Jo’s will to do such a thing, which paints us another picture of the difference between the traditional girly sisters and strong-willed Jo. This action also connects to Jo’s role of a man which she takes upon herself, as she is putting

herself in the position of the main provider in the March household instead of their father.

Although Jo cries for her hair later, her comfort is that now her hair “looks very boyish and nice” (Alcott 266). Later in the novel, Jo even explicitly voices her aim for independence: “‘I don’t like favors; they oppress and make me feel like a slave; I’d rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent.’” (Alcott 469)

Jo’s longing for being liberated and being able to support herself are another examples of Jo’s gender opposition, as it was not common for a woman to express such a free spirit. Jo, unlike some other women clenching in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century rules, does not want to rely on finding a man who would take over her person – the instances of her strong actions are proof of that.

### **3.1.1 March Sisters and Fulfilling the Expectations**

To further demonstrate Jo’s opposition to the expected image of a young lady, the behaviour of the March sisters will be used as an antipole to Jo’s actions. Throughout the novel, it is possible to find several instances of Meg’s and Amy’s disagreement with Jo’s manners. Meg and Amy could be taken as examples of proper girls who have always understood their position in society and who have been fulfilling the stereotypical image of a woman since the beginning of the novel – they are trying to be proper in their manners and they understand the expectations set upon them, as Meg even states that “men have to work, and women to marry for money”, showing the shared belief amongst the general public (Alcott 248). As the oldest sister, Meg puts herself in a position in which she tries to guide Jo in the right direction and often corrects her manners. At one point in the novel, Meg laments over Jo’s behaviour and says: “‘What shall we do with that girl? She never *will* behave like a young lady,’ signed Meg, as she watched the race with a disapproving face.” (Alcott 243)

Meg’s effort to mould Jo into the figure of a proper lady is shown in the chapter titled “The Laurence Boy”, in which the girls are invited to attend the New-Year’s-Eve dance.

Meg, being the sensible older sister who tries to follow the rules, wants to be a proper young lady and gets herself ready according to it – while doing so, she tries to persuade Jo to do the same. However, when Jo stains her glove with lemonade, she brushes aside any social conventions and intends to attend the ball without gloves entirely, despite Meg’s exclamation that she must wear gloves. Jo answers Meg’s laments: ““Then I’ll go without. I don’t care what people say.”” (Alcott 37) Again, her resentment of the social conventions and dismissing her sister’s advice might be attributed by some to her young age, in which she might not entirely understand the situation and traditions connected to it. However, it may also be an indicator of her free boyish spirit and her rebelliousness, by which she intentionally opposes the given stereotypes and conventions.

Later in the novel, after the incident with the gloves, we receive another clash about a piece of clothing between Meg and Jo. This time, their dispute is not about Jo not wanting to wear something Meg suggests, but it is quite the opposite. At one point in the novel, Laurie gifts Jo a big unfashionable hat, which Jo (unlike Meg) adores very much. When Meg spots her sister wearing the hat, she cries out ““Oh, oh, Jo! you ain’t going to wear that awful hat? It’s too absurd! You shall *not* make a guy of yourself,”” to which Jo apposes and declares ““I just will, though! it’s capital; so shady, light, and big. It will make fun; and I don’t mind being a guy, if I’m comfortable.”” (Alcott 192) Through this statement, a reader gets another instance of Jo’s gender opposition in which she rebels against social conventions, as we can notice her ignorance and intentional stance against her sister’s opinion. Unlike ladylike girls, who accept the norms and who would not want to seem unfashionable and boyish, Jo embraces the so-called ugliness of her hat and proudly anticipates wearing it in public. Jo also states that she does not “care for fashion”, and earlier in the novel, she also emphasises that she is not interested in “girls and girlish gossip”, making her distance from the stereotypical female population and her opposition to its standards even more evident (Alcott 187; 40).

While describing Jo's character and her attitude, Alcott makes a point about Jo's unladylike side and states that Jo "found it very difficult to refrain from imitating the gentlemanly attitudes, phrases, and feats which seemed more natural to her than the decorums prescribed for young ladies" (Alcott 378). This statement ultimately summarises and simplifies one of the ways in which Jo opposes the standards set upon females in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. Jo much more prefers to be in a position in which she does not have to act in an expected ladylike manner, since she feels more comfortable and like herself when she takes upon the mentioned "gentlemanly attitudes" (Alcott 378).

Moving from one sister to another, Jo's unconventional behaviour will now be contrasted with her younger sister Amy, who can be taken in many ways as a polar opposite to Jo and who is therefore another great figure to illustrate Jo's opposition upon. The difference between Jo and Amy is noticeable throughout the whole novel, but it is possible to pinpoint one chapter of the novel in which their distinction is most conspicuous. In the second part of *Little Women* (which is also sometimes published separately as a sequel named *Good Wives*, even though nowadays the novel *Little Women* commonly contains both of the novels), the chapter "Calls" demonstrates the contrast between the stereotypical picture of a young lady and an individual taking the opposite stand against it – Amy's and Jo's attitudes towards fulfilling the expected stereotypes are strongly distinct. In the chapter "Calls", Amy and Jo pair up together to visit and court their neighbours, and from the beginning, it is clear that both of the girls have conflicting perceptions of how the calls should go.

The first clash occurs when Amy sees in what state Jo wants to go to make the calls, and she is shocked by this sight. She outrageously states: "Jo March, you are perverse enough to provoke a saint! You don't intend to make calls in that state, I hope," – to which Jo answers: "If people care more for my clothes than they do for me, I don't wish to see them. You can dress for both, and be as elegant as you please; it pays for you to be fine; it

doesn't for me, and furbelows only worry me.'" (Alcott 453) Amy dresses up for the occasion, as many other proper young ladies would, but as in the previously described incidents, Jo does not care one bit about her appearance (and essentially does not want to go to make the calls at all). In the first chapter of the thesis, it was mentioned that one of the women's duties was to keep a respectable image of the family in front of the public, and besides being domestic housewives, they were also expected to maintain friendly neighbour relationships. Amy fulfils this social duty and tries her best to maintain a good look in front of their social circle, and expects Jo to follow her lead. She asks Jo to be "calm, cool and quiet", which she sees as "safe and lady-like", and Jo answers Amy's plea with the following statement: "'I've played the part of a prim young lady on the stage, and I'll try it off.'" (Alcott 456) Acting in the way Amy asks of her is an unnatural thing for Jo. Therefore, Jo performs this task as a portrayal of a role in one of her plays – but this time, instead of playing her favourite male figures, she has to put herself into a character far from her nature. To act like a young lady means for Jo only imitating the characters of girls and not being one naturally (she does not ordinarily act in a way a stereotypical girl should act according to society, so she needs to help herself in her own special way). Another request Amy asks of her sister is to be "sociable" and "gossip with other girls, and be interested in dress, and flirtation, and whatever nonsense comes up", to which Jo mockingly replies that she will therefore perform the role of "a charming girl" (Alcott 457).

However, as was stated before, Jo is not interested in any of Amy's suggestions, as it is unnatural for her to make such a pretence. Jo does not feel comfortable in the company of young ladies with whom she was advised to discuss stereotypically girly topics. Instead, her most pleasant moments while making the calls arise from finding comfort in a group of boys, in front of which she does not have to pretend to play the part of a lady. When the sisters visit the house where the boys are, Jo finally happily states: "'Then I'll enjoy myself. The boys are

at home, and we'll have a comfortable time. Goodness knows I need a little change, for elegance has a bad effect upon my constitution," (Alcott 462) Once Jo starts to associate herself with the boys, Amy is slightly outraged because of how "Jo sat on the grass with an encampment of boys about her, and a dirty-footed dog reposing in the skirt of her state and festival dress" (Alcott 464). Her socialisation with the boys ended up being more pleasant and successful than interacting with her girl peers.

Last but not least, what also needs to be emphasised in connection with the chapter "Calls" is the final talk between Amy and Jo, in which their clashing natures and Jo's intentional rebelliousness are ultimately displayed. Amy comments on the social standards and expectations of women and states that "it's the way of the world; and people who set themselves against it, only get laughed at for their pains", while also adding that she does not "like reformers", and she hopes that Jo "will never try to be one" (Alcott 467). Amy understands the way of the world and the restrictions women were locked into. During her life, she learned to accept the situation and does not want to fight against it – she rather embraces it and tries her best to act in line with it. However, Jo opposes this idea society holds against women and answers Amy the following: "I do like them, and I shall be one if I can; for in spite of the laughing, the world would never get on without them. We can't agree about that, for you belong to the old set, and I to the new.'" (Alcott 467) Jo emphasises the difference between her and her sister, meaning that in her eyes, Amy is stuck in the old way of life in which women are expected to be obedient and respect social boundaries, while Jo herself is more visionary and wants to rebel against these conventions. She also adds that she would rather "enjoy the brickbats and hooting" for her liberated stand than not be opposed to the outdated social standards at all (Alcott 467).

Throughout the whole chapter, the instances of the differences between the stereotypical girl who aspires to fulfil the given expectations and the rebellious tomboy are

evident and easy to identify. Amy came prepared to make the social interactions, she dressed up, knew what topics were safe to talk about, and had a clear image of how a lady should behave in this type of situation. Jo, on the other hand, acted passively even before the calls started. She did not want to participate in the courting, she did not dress up suitably for the occasion, and despite Amy's advice, she did not manage to perform her role of a young lady successfully. The girlish side Amy wanted to wake up inside of Jo was kept intentionally hidden and suppressed, showing Jo's gender opposition even more explicitly. Finally, as Jo and Amy have a talk about their stances against social constructs, we receive the last affirmation about the reason behind Jo's behaviour – she seeks liberty and revolution.

As it was stated before, the characters of Meg, Amy, and Jo (together with Beth, who was not mentioned in the analysis but who also in many ways fulfils the image of a domestic moderate woman) offer a great opportunity for displaying a contrast of different perceptions of womanhood. Besides the distinct behaviour and manners, another major point on which the sisters do not agree is the view on marriage. Since the beginning of the novel, Jo has shown no interest in the idea of finding a good husband who will keep her in comfort and scorns on the entire idea. However, in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American society, a woman was expected to settle down and marry, and as it was stated at the beginning of the thesis, finding a husband was in most times seen as an ultimate goal in a woman's life. In one of the monologues of Mrs. March in the novel *Little Women*, this notion is also displayed as Mrs. March tells her daughters that “to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman” (Alcott 151). Throughout the novel, Jo does not aim for this expected path in life and behaves more like a friend than a potential spouse towards the opposite sex (as it is possible to notice in her platonic relationship with Laurie). In one of her early comments from the novel in which she talks about marriage, Jo states: “‘Nobody will want me, and it's a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in a family.’” (Alcott

389) This declaration might be a projection of the author herself (on whom the character of Jo is loosely based), who in real life actually stayed as a spinster. Jo also emphasises that she does not “like that sort of thing” and states that she is “too busy to be worried with nonsense” – calling the idea of getting married nonsense is a great example of her mentioned gender opposition because it furthermore exhibits her ambition and aim for liberty (Alcott 390).

Once the characters get older, the relationship between Jo and her friend Laurie evolves as well, and it gets to the point in which Laurie declares his love for Jo with the intention of proposing to her. However, because of Jo’s disapproval of marriage and her value of their friendship, she decides to immediately turn down his offer. While reasoning her refusal, she confesses: “[...] I don’t believe I shall ever marry; I’m happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man.” (Alcott 579) This statement further deepens the argument about Jo’s aim for independence and therefore refuses the stereotypical conventions which would bind her. Alcott later describes Jo as a person who “never would act like other girls” (which is another comment supporting the gender opposition argument), making her refuse Laurie instead of accepting his proposal, as many young women in her position would.

However, as the novel gets to its end, Jo’s opinion on marriage (and on Laurie’s proposal as well) starts to change, which might be caused by the pressure on Alcott to marry Jo off at the end of *Little Women*. While discussing Amy’s marriage to Laurie with her mother, Jo confesses that she feels lonely and “perhaps if Teddy had tried again”, she might have accepted – she would do so not because she loves him but because she cares “more to be loved” (Alcott 692). Another excerpt from the novel, which also seems more like Alcott herself talking, states that Jo “was mortally afraid of being laughed at for surrendering, after her many and vehement declarations of independence”, which supports the argument about forcing Jo into marriage by real-life general public (if it was not for the pressure of Alcott’s

publishers and readership, Jo would have likely stayed as a literary spinster in the same way as Alcott did, and it would even more support the claim about Jo's gender opposition) (Alcott 739). By the end of the novel, Jo is married without having written any major literary work, which for many readers means demolishing her independent stance she has been building throughout the novel. However, this unsatisfying ending (as many of its readers see it to be) receives an adjustment in the 2019 Greta Gerwig's adaptation, which will also be discussed in the following chapter.

After listing examples of Jo's gender opposition in the novel *Little Women*, we now have grounds on which the next part of the thesis will build. Several different instances of the opposition have been identified, and now Gerwig's film will be subjected to analysis, after which it will be decided whether her adaptation might change our perception of Jo's character and her rebellious stance or whether it remains the same.

### **3.2 Greta Gerwig's Film Adaptation**

As has been mentioned in the previous chapters, there have been many different adaptations of the novel *Little Women* throughout the years, with most of them staying true to the original plotline. Greta Gerwig adapted the novel to film screens in 2019 and breathed fresh air into the American beloved domestic story. According to *The New Yorker* article, Gerwig's version of the novel "is the tale of the birth of an artist" in an environment "that's hostile to woman" (Brody). While making her film, Gerwig changed the chronological portrayal of the storyline, making the storytelling parallel, and she also decided to put the focus on the aspect of Jo's literary ambition and her aim of liberty – the main plotline of the film is circled around "the decisions and event that lead to Jo becoming a successful author" (Brody). Even though Gerwig took many of the scenes and dialogues straight from the novel, she made several alternations in the film that significantly differ from the novel. She decided to change some of

the aspects “to embody her own passionately analytical view of the story’s era” and focused on topics such as “women’s lack of civil rights, the legal constraints placed on women by marriage”, or “the obstacles faced then (as now) by women in the arts”, which is the most evident and crucial of them all (Brody). The following chapter will focus on excerpts from Gerwig’s film adaptation, in which she shows the discussed Jo’s gender opposition. Any important changes that are relevant to the topic will be highlighted and discussed in terms of their importance to the perception of the character of Jo March.

### **3.2.1 Jo March’s Gender Opposition in the Film**

In the previous part of the thesis, it was explained how one of the ways in which Jo March opposes gender stereotypes in the novel is by putting herself into the figure of a man (and with that, taking on male responsibilities). Men were seen as the main providers in their families, but both in the novel and Gerwig’s film, Jo takes on the responsibility of being the moneymaker for the Marches. Gerwig made no changes in this area and supports Jo’s independent stance by showing it to the audience. In one of the opening scenes, Jo right away comments on this topic: “Money is the end and aim of my mercenary existence.” (*Little Women* 0:05:45-0:05:48) She also further adds: “My sister Amy’s in Paris, and until she marries someone obsessively wealthy, it’s up to me to keep the family afloat.” (*Little Women* 0:05:53-0:05:58) Just these two statements explicitly reveal the situation of the March family to the audience and emphasise Jo’s position. By making these straightforward comments at the beginning of the film, Gerwig establishes the ground rules on which the film will continue (she openly sets Jo’s character as being an independent hardworking woman, on which she collaborates as the film goes further).

Throughout the film, there are more instances in which Jo is rejecting the traditional female characteristics and is putting herself into more boyish positions. One of these

examples occurs at the beginning of the film when the audience receives a brief exchange between Amy and Jo while preparing to go to the ball in Concord: Jo: “Don’t touch me. I already feel ridiculous. I don’t wanna look it.” Amy: “You could be pretty if you tried.” Jo: “Don’t want to. Won’t.” (*Little Women* 0:12:20-0:12:26) Jo’s opposing stance towards female beauty conventions is portrayed by this interaction, as we receive her short and firm opinion on the matter of beauty (many other young girls would certainly want to look their best when going to a social event, but Jo refuses to break down upon such expectations). Another difference between the stereotypical “Angel in the House” figure and rebellious Jo March is her wild spirit, which is often driven by anger – women were expected to be quiet and moderate. Gerwig shows this difference in Jo’s character by having her confess to Marmee: “When I get into passion, I get so savage. I could hurt anyone, and I’d enjoy it.” (*Little Women* 0:52:17-0:52:25)

Same as in the novel, there are also instances of Jo being directly connected to the figure of a man in Gerwig’s film (either by herself or by others). The scene that Gerwig took straight from the novel, and that reminds the audience of Jo’s boyish tendencies, is when the March sisters talk about their father fighting in the Union Army and Jo sadly states: “And I wanted to go fight with him. I can’t get over my disappointment in being a girl.” (*Little Women* 0:14:44-0:14:50) Jo does not want to sit at home as was expected from women, but she wants to take part in the fight as her father does. She further elaborates on her wish when the family receives a letter from Mr. March. Jo disappointedly says “Don’t I wish I could go?”, to which Amy answers “Jo, we can’t give up our only brother.” (*Little Women* 0:32:06-0:32:09) Amy openly calls Jo a brother, which is additional proof of Jo’s unconventional boyish character, which in many ways opposes traditional gender stereotypes. In another scene, it is Amy again who points out her sister’s behaviour and states “Jo, that’s so boyish.” – Jo does not take this comment negatively, but looks at it more as a compliment, as she

answers “That’s why I do it.” (*Little Women* 0:26:51-0:26:54) Similarly, as in the novel, Gerwig mentions Jo’s plays, where she creates and performs male characters. In the early scene of the film in which Mrs. March talks to Laurie, she invites him to take part in her daughters’ plays while emphasising that Jo is the one who plays men: “You must be part of their theatricals. They could use an extra player. Although you’ll have to fight Jo for the male roles or play a girl.” (*Little Women* 0:17:11-0:17:18)

It was mentioned in the previous chapters that besides being boyish, one of Jo’s gender oppositions in the novel *Little Women* is her strong aim for being independent and not having to rely on anyone else. Greta Gerwig portrays this crucial part of Jo’s character in connection to her literary ambition as well. Jo is pictured as someone who wants to make a difference in the world and leave behind something to be remembered – she emphasises that “No one will forget Jo March.” (*Little Women* 0:24:00-0:24:02) Her wish for having liberty and being independent is similarly shown in her comment, saying: “I intend to make my own way in the world.” (*Little Women* 0:35:23-0:35:25) Jo’s most obvious act of independence and her desire to leave a legacy behind appear at the end of the film when Jo creates her ambitious literary work (because the distinct ending of the film is a topic that needs a deeper discussion, it will be described separately later in the chapter).

Having liberty closely connects to the idea of marriage, which is one of the bigger topics discussed both in the novel and in Gerwig’s film. In the first chapter of the thesis, it was explained that once a woman became a wife in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, she stopped being independent in many directions, and her life circled around her husband and their household. However, there are strong suggestions of Jo’s dislike of this institution appearing across the whole film. Unlike her sisters and many other young women at that time, Jo’s ultimate goal in life is not to find a husband, and she vocally expresses her objection to such a decision not only in connection to herself but also to her sisters. When Meg is getting married in the

second half of the film, Jo disapproves of the marriage and pleadingly says to her sister “You will be bored of him in two years, and we will be interesting forever.” (*Little Women* 1:31:59 – 1:32:04) She also intensifies her aversion by declaring “I’d rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe.”, which Alcott truly did in her real life (*Little Women* 1:32:48 – 1:32:51). When the film gets to the point in which Jo rejects Laurie’s proposal, Gerwig copies the novel nearly word for word and in an emotional theatrical way emphasises Jo’s outlook on never getting married – “Teddy, I don’t believe I will ever marry. I’m happy as I am, and I love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up.” (*Little Women* 1:39:01 – 1:39:09) However, there are some aspects and scenes that differ from the novel. One of the examples of such a difference is the scene in which Jo talks to her mother about marriage at the end of the story. Alcott wrote this part of the novel with less evident emotionality, and it does not include declarations discussing the pressure on women – in the novel, Jo says:

No, mother, it is better as it is, and I’m glad Amy has learned to love him. But you are right in one thing: I am lonely, and perhaps if Teddy had tried again, I might have said ‘Yes’, not because I love him any more, but because I care more to be loved, than when he went away. (Alcott 692)

In comparison, the monologue that Jo delivers in the film is full of emotions and makes Jo’s frustration about her struggles as well as the struggles of other women even more evident:

You know, I just – I just feel – I just feel like – women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just heart. 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. (*Little Women* 1:42:23 – 1:42:48)

Jo emphasises her feelings about the women’s struggle and the pressure put on their shoulders. By adding this monologue, Gerwig painted Jo in a slightly different light in comparison to the novel. Gerwig’s version of this particular scene makes the audience think

about women's situation in a wider picture, and Jo is perceived as a woman with much stronger opposition to the expectations – she does not just talk about herself, Amy, and Laurie, but she points out the wider frustration surrounding the view on marriage.

Another difference occurs when Jo talks about wanting to open a school for children. In the novel, Jo opens a school purely for boys, but in the film, she also includes girls – “I’ll open a school for boys and girls both.” (*Little Women* 1:55:16 – 1:55:18) While discussing the future of the inherited aunt’s March house, she says to her sisters: “I’d like to open a school. We never had a proper school and now there are women’s colleges opening. There should be a school. For Daisy.” (*Little Women* 1:55:07 – 1:55:15) By acknowledging women’s education, Jo might be perceived as more progressive and more interested in the position of women in American society, making her opposition even more noticeable.

However, the most crucial changes Gerwig made in her adaptation, which might influence the view of the audience on the character of Jo and her gender opposition, are concerning the blending of the character of Jo with Alcott herself, together with the ambiguous ending of the film. One of the less important details hinting at such a connection are scenes showing Jo’s ambidexterity (being both right and left-handed), for which Alcott is known – she taught herself to be able to use both hands in order to write faster when one of her hands got tired (Bennet). The major distinction shows itself right in the opening scene and then concludes the whole film. In the interview for the *Film Comment*, Gerwig comments on the changes she decided to make and states that she knew she “could not do the ending just as the book”, because Alcott herself “didn’t really want to end it that way” (Girish). The opening scene captures a dialogue between Jo and her publisher Mr. Dashwood about her literary work. When commenting on her story, Mr. Dashwood says a statement that Gerwig probably imagined sounded like between Alcott and her own publisher – “And if the main character’s a girl, make sure she’s married by the end. Or dead. Either way.” (*Little Women*

0:03:51 – 0:03:56) Alcott was pressured to marry off Jo at the end of *Little Women* and just this opening statement suggests blurring the lines between Jo and her creator, which alternates our view on the character of Jo, who is now essentially perceived as Alcott herself.

Blending these two women is then sidelined for a while but is later picked up at the end of the film when we see Jo passionately writing her novel in the attic of her home and then sending the draft to her publisher. She breaks the fourth wall and says to the camera: “Dear Mr. Dashwood, enclosed are the first few chapters of a piece I’ve only begun working on. It could suit as a story for young people, but I think it is probably quite boring. However, I’m sending it to you just in case it has something of value, though I doubt it.” (*Little Women* 1:54:00 – 1:54:16) After Alcott had sent *Little Women* to her publisher in real life, she noted in her journal a similar statement – her publisher found the story dull, and so did she, which makes this scene seem like Alcott herself talking to the camera instead of Jo (Reisen 268). As the film proceeds, Gerwig portrays a scene with Jo (now essentially Alcott herself) and Mr. Dashwood discussing the novel, which is actually *Little Women*, in his office. Viewers see the exchange in which Mr. Dashwood asks Jo “So who does she marry?”, meaning her main character (which is herself), to which Jo answers “No one. She doesn’t marry either of them.” (*Little Women* 2:02:53 – 2:02:58) Because of the beginning of the film, in which Mr. Dashwood says that a female character must be either married or dead by the end of any story, he opposes Jo’s intentions, and the audience sees the following interaction:

Mr. Dashwood: “No! No, no, that won’t work at all.”

Jo: “Well, she says the whole book she doesn’t want to marry.”

Mr. Dashwood: “Who cares? Girls wanna see women married, not consistent.”

Jo: “No, it isn’t the right ending.”

Mr. Dashwood: “The right ending is the one that sells. Trust me, if you decide to end your delightful book with your heroine as a spinster, no one will buy it. It won’t be worth printing.”

Jo: “I suppose marriage has always been an economic proposition even in fiction.”

*(Little Women 2:03:00 – 2:03:29)*

The whole final interaction between Jo and her publisher ultimately blurs the border between Jo and Alcott, sets the possible ambiguity of the ending, and shows one of the major Jo’s gender oppositions in the film. It leaves viewers questioning the passage which follows this particular scene, in which the original ending of the novel is displayed (we see Jo with Professor Bhaer surrounded by the March family in her school). The reality of the film’s ending comes out as ambiguous, and we question “whether what we just saw ‘actually’ happened”, meaning “whether Gerwig’s Jo truly married Bhaer” or “if she just wrote a proposal scene into her book because she had to” (Grady). By breaking the borders between Jo and Alcott, and essentially making Jo to be Alcott herself by the end of the film, Gerwig sets a whole different image of Jo in people’s minds – Jo publishes her novel, becomes even more independent, and possibly does not marry Professor Bhaer while remaining a literary spinster, as she declared she wanted all along. However, when we take a look at the novel’s ending and Jo’s final words about her life’s outcome, we receive a completely different image – Jo marries, has children, and states that the life she wanted before “seems selfish, lonely, and cold”, while additionally concluding that she has not “given up the hope” about writing a book someday (Alcott 774). The contrast between these two endings, which are essentially the biggest distinction in portraying Jo’s gender opposition, gives out the possible difference in the interpretation of Jo’s character.

In most parts of the film, Gerwig follows the novel and stays true to the original portrayal of the characters, painting Jo’s gender opposition in a similar light as it is in the

novel. However, the ending of the film introduces an entirely different course of action and makes major distinctions in Jo's character and her storyline. By blending Alcott with Jo, Gerwig essentially swapped the character of Jo with Alcott at the end of the movie, making it seem like Jo stood up to the expectations of settling down and getting married while reaching her goal of becoming an independent writer with a published novel.

### **3.3. Alternating the Perception of an Audience**

After discussing how Gerwig adapted the novel, and more importantly, how she depicted the character of Jo, there is a question that remains to be answered – that is, whether the changes regarding the ending of the film could mean a difference in perceiving Jo's opposition to the female stereotypes. Because the film Jo is in most cases depicted in a similar way as in the novel, the discussion will focus solely on the most crucial difference, which is the ending of the film, where the audience is presented with an ambiguous interpretation of Jo's faith.

As Gerwig stated in one of her interviews, she refused to make the film's ending copy the novel, because she wanted to point out Alcott's real intentions and struggles against pressure while creating *Little Women* (Girish). While doing so, she intentionally blurred the lines between the author and her literary character, by which she might have alternated the perception of the audience on the character of Jo itself. In the novel, Jo ends up breaking some of her beliefs, which makes it seem like she submitted to the social conventions she has been fighting against throughout the whole plot. By making Jo get married and not writing her big literary work at the end of *Little Women*, a reader might get the idea that Jo's gender opposition might have been just a rebellious phase of a young person all along. Many of the readers of *Little Women* are disappointed by such an ending, because Jo voices out loud her wishes for independence and longing for becoming a successful writer throughout the whole novel, but then is robbed of her dream at the end. If Jo would be judged solely based on her

final outcome in the novel, she might not be perceived by some as this strong-willed, ambitious woman who wants to oppose social stereotypes.

Gerwig did justice to those disappointed readers in her film by alternating the ending and introducing two possible outcomes from which the viewers might choose based on their idea of a happy ending. By creating the ambiguous ending in which Jo and Alcott are joined into one person, she supports the discussed Jo's gender opposition – Alcott is known for her independent way of life and her link to the suffragette movement, to which Jo is suddenly connected as well. In Gerwig's *Little Women*, Jo's final discussion with Mr. Dashwood even further elaborates on the stance, claiming that Jo is a progressive woman with great ambitions who is not willing to break down under social pressure. Even though Jo obeys her publisher and alternates the ending of her novel by making her heroine marry in the same way Alcott had to do with Jo in real life, one of the possible interpretations of the ending offers a reality in which Jo did not truly marry and stayed a literary spinster in the same way as Alcott. When we interpret the ending in this particular way, meaning that Jo did not marry and the final scene with Professor Bhaer is just an image from her novel, we get a completely different perception of Jo and her decisions. In Gerwig's version of *Little Women*, Jo stays true to her beliefs, which makes her seem more strong-willed in her opposition than in the novel. To put it simply, the novel's ending, in a sense, tears down Jo's whole effort of becoming a progressive liberated woman by making her break one of her loudest beliefs of not getting married; and on the contrary, Gerwig's film emphasises Jo's opposition to the expectations by possibly having her stay as a literary spinster with a successful novel.

After we summarised and explained the major changes Gerwig made in her adaptation regarding its ending, it becomes clear that because of these differences, the audience might have an alternated perception of the character of Jo March. Gerwig's Jo appears to be firmer

in her stances and beliefs and in some ways more openly voices her concerns regarding the social pressure she stands against – all of this makes Jo’s gender opposition even stronger.

## Conclusion

In the introductory chapter, it was stated that the aim of this thesis was to compare the ways in which the character of Jo March opposes the norms set by 19<sup>th</sup>-century America in the novel *Little Women* and in Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation. The novel as well as the character were introduced and explored in the wider picture of the historical period (with connection to the norms and expectations) and additionally were connected to the life of Louisa May Alcott, whose life events greatly affected the plot of the novel itself. The main element that shaped this thesis was the exploration of women's position in Alcott's lifetime and the ways in which Alcott's semi-autobiographical character of Jo March is set at defiance against it.

After listing and explaining the general atmosphere of the period towards women in the first chapter, the thesis laid the foundation for the follow-up discussion in which the author of *Little Women* was introduced in connection to the novel and the character of Jo. The key part of the thesis was focused on one of main Jo's attributes – her rebellious nature and unconventional behaviour towards social norms. As it was explained in the beginning, for the reason that the novel has been picked up and adapted many times over the course of years, the perception of the novel, and especially of the character of Jo, could have been influenced in the eyes of an audience. Therefore, the main question the thesis was supposed to help answer is whether one of such film adaptations made in 2019 by Greta Gerwig might have alternated the view of an audience on Jo March's opposition.

In the final third chapter, the specific cases of Jo's gender opposition taken from the novel were discussed in connection with general 19<sup>th</sup>-century norms. After summarising the key instances from the novel *Little Women*, the attention was shifted towards Gerwig's film adaptation and her portrayal of Jo March's attitude towards society's expectations. It was pointed out that some of the most powerful emancipation quotes that are said in the film are

not taken from the novel, but they are rather invented by the director to paint a stronger picture of women's struggle at the time in which the plot of the story takes place. Not only did Gerwig add some completely new dialogues to her film adaptation, but as the film progresses, she also ultimately blurred the lines between the character of Jo March and her creator. By doing so, Gerwig created a distinct image of Jo's character in the mind of an audience, since by breaking the borders between the two, she automatically prescribed Alcott's characteristics to the film version of Jo. In her real life, Alcott was in many ways a stronger and more vocal supporter of women's emancipation, and in comparison to Jo, she appears to be more apparent in her gender opposition. For this particular reason, it is possible to suggest that Gerwig's adaptation of *Little Women* influenced the perception of many of its audience, and because of her distinct portrayal of some of the key elements from the novel, she ultimately alternated the character of Jo and her unconventional personality.

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