

Little Women 2019: Another Feckless Feminist Rendering

There's a lot to love in Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's timeless classic, *Little Women*. The film boasts a stunning score by Alexandre Desplat, breathtaking cinematography, and a star-studded cast including Emma Watson, Meryl Streep, Laura Dern, and Saoirse Ronan. But by taking Alcott's heartwarming story to "[new feminist heights](#)," Gerwig has abandoned some of the critical themes that made the original 1868 novel so important, and timeless.

These messages cannot be glossed over or forgotten if women today want to remain true to what Alcott was trying to convey with her landmark work.

Little Women is the story of the four March sisters – motherly Meg, independent Jo, selfless Beth, and artistic Amy – and their heartaches, joys, triumphs and failures as they grow up against the backdrop of the American Civil War. In Gerwig's adaptation, it's the strength of the March sisters that takes center stage: their wit, their independence, and their determination to succeed against all odds. But Alcott's novel reveals that the true source of the sisters' endurance and stamina was their faith in God.

In one of the novel's earliest scenes, mother Marmee gifts her girls copies of the Bible. She draws an analogy to the book *Pilgrim's Progress*, telling her daughters that just like the characters in the book, they each have their own burdens, or their own weaknesses, to overcome. She explains that the Bible will be their guidebook for navigating life's difficult journey, and that God will be their friend whom they can look to for joy, consolation, and power.

A key scene in the 2019 film – borrowed from the novel – shows

Jo discouraged because she has failed to control her temper once again. Marmee admits, "I am angry nearly every day of my life." When asked by [Time](#) magazine if the line was meant to be emblematic of feminist rage, Gerwig commented: "If you strip away this pre-Victorian morality, what you have is ambitious, passionate, angry, sexual, interesting women who don't fit into the boxes the world has given them."

However, it seems Alcott wanted a different message to shine through the scene in her novel. In the book, Marmee doesn't focus on the fact that she *is* angry, but rather on what helps her overcome her anger: her faith in God. She explains that it was turning to her "friend," her Heavenly Father, that saved her when she lost a parent and when her husband went away to war. In the novel she tells Jo:

My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning, and may be many; but you can overcome and outlive them all, if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father as you do that of your earthly one. The more you love and trust Him, the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will depend on human power and wisdom. His love and care never tire or change, can never be taken from you, and may become the source of lifelong peace, happiness, and strength.

In the original classic, it is not in the fact that the March sisters experienced injustice, sickness, and pain that is remarkable, it is in *how* the sisters overcame these trials that is important. And yet, the deep religiosity of Alcott's novel has been erased from modern retellings of Alcott's classic. Gerwig's 2019 version is no exception.

Moreover, In Gerwig's adaptation, brilliant women seem to burst at the seams of their domestic roles more than they celebrate them. Jo is constantly punching Laurie and Amy flippantly reprimands him on multiple occasions for his

idleness and poor decisions. After love interest Professor Bhaer tells Jo he doesn't like her work, she flies into a rage that feels a bit melodramatic compared to previous film versions. Gerwig also chooses to highlight messages through the characters' dialogue that have more to do with self-fulfillment than self-sacrifice: Amy delivers an impassioned lecture to Laurie about marriage being an "economic proposition" in which men own it all, and Jo rants to Marmee that she is "sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for."

Conversely, Alcott shows readers of her classic novel that though women can accomplish anything they set their minds to *and* find the most joy and fulfillment in family and marriage. In fact, *Little Women* was originally published as two volumes, and the second was entitled *Good Wives*. The latter spends significant time on Meg's relationship with her husband John. Here, Alcott writes about the blessings of sacrificing self to create a home:

This is the sort of shelf on which young wives and mothers may consent to be laid, safe from the restless fret and fever of the world, finding loyal lovers in the little sons and daughters who cling to them, undaunted by sorrow, poverty, or age; walking side by side, through fair and stormy weather, with a faithful friend, who is, in the true sense of the good old Saxon word, the "house-band," and learning, as Meg learned, that a woman's happiest kingdom is home, her highest honor the art of ruling it, not as a queen, but a wise wife and mother.

More fitting to today's *zeitgeist*, Gerwig's rendition of *Little Women* intimates that women were, by and large, unhappy in their roles as wives and mothers, and that women were domestic because people at that time thought that homemaking was simply "all a woman (was) fit for."

Alcott's own words, however, suggest that women took on the work of rearing a family by consent, and that they chose to do so out of conviction, not oppression. Though she herself never married, Alcott called being a wife and mother a woman's "highest honor" and the home a woman's "happiest kingdom."

Alcott's characters exemplify this positive view of marriage and sacrifice again and again, not because they are oppressed, but as an expression of love. In the novel, Amy's love for Laurie motivates her to give up vain habits and pursuits. In Alcott's words, "she didn't care to be a queen of society now half as much as she did to be a lovable woman."

When talking about her own problems with her temper, Marmee cites Mr. March's cheerful temperament and patient endurance as a saving grace. Meg learns to do without pleasures and pretty things to take care of her husband and children. Alcott even uses the character of Beth, who dies before having the chance to be married, to comment on the irreplaceable role of women in the home. During Beth's illness, willful and independent Jo learns to appreciate "Beth's unselfish ambition, to live for others, and make home happy by the exercise of those simple virtues which all may possess, and which all should love and value more than talent, wealth, or beauty."

It is interesting that Alcott is characterized as a feminist because she never married and chose to pursue writing, and yet made such bold statements about the importance of marriage and motherhood. It is difficult, 150 years later, to imagine these messages given top billing in today's popular culture, which is perhaps why Alcott's words have been excluded in tributes made to her own work.

Readers have traditionally turned to characters in literature, not just for entertainment, but to find truths in humanity and history. It is imperative that the messages in classic books like *Little Women* not be sampled buffet-style, with those that

are politically correct highlighted and others forgotten. Religion and traditional family relations may not be in vogue with today's writers and film directors, but it is important that *all* of Alcott's convictions are allowed a voice if today's women want an honest and complete picture of who she was and what she believed.

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