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The Realization of Authentic Artistry Through Maturation in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*

1. Introduction

Greta Gerwig's 2019 film, *Little Women*, adapts Louisa May Alcott's novel of the same name with innovation, responding to history and the cultural understandings of the story to produce contemporary feminist knowledge on authorship, identity, and authenticity. The film depicts protagonist Jo March's character arc as centered on her struggle in achieving authenticity in her artistry as a writer, culminating in the publishing of her book at the end of the narrative. Gerwig weaves the history of the publication of Alcott's novel and Alcott's own biography into Jo's character, reflecting the difficulties of publishing a girls' story in the mid-19th century and the perseverance of a woman's independence as she achieves success and happiness outside of a typical marriage plot.

Most notably, Gerwig's screenplay adopts a non-linear chronology and places an emphasis on the March sisters' adulthood as the framing device for the childhood chapters of the story; beginning in adulthood and featuring flashbacks to the childhood years of the March household, the film's narrative depicts the difficulties that the March sisters face in their adult years, forefronting the difficulty of economic struggles. Gerwig's 2019 film responds to previously established knowledge of the *Little Women* story that exists in the cultural sphere, through Alcott's novel and previous popular filmic adaptations of the work, eschewing the nostalgia of American girlhood that the childhood chapters promote by juxtaposing them with

the realities of adulthood (Grasso). Further, the film resists heteronormativity in Gerwig's ambiguous and inconclusive ending that extends Jo's queer narrative middle of an independent childhood desirably into adulthood by subverting the expectation of her marriage with Professor Bhaer.

Greta Gerwig's 2019 film, *Little Women*'s, use of non-linear chronology draws parallels between the childhood and adulthood of Jo March, creating a memory narrative that highlights the character's struggle to find authenticity as she matures. The film responds to cultural knowledge and past adaptations of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* in changing the ending to realize Jo's "literary spinsterhood", the feminist resolution and rejection of heteronormativity that Alcott herself couldn't realize for the character in her own time. Gerwig's *Little Women* produces knowledge in the postmodern feminist realization of Jo's authentic artistry, valorizing independence and the self in the cultural narrative of *Little Women*.

2. Narrative Theory: Queer Narrative Middle and Time

Queer narrative theory's conceptualization of chronology allows for *Little Women* to be understood through the terms of "queer narrative middle" and "queer narrative time".

The queer narrative middle refers to the "space of 'narrative arrest'...that paradoxically serves as a counter-traditional model of narrative desire" (Quimby 5). As a space that "delays, through sometimes perverse subplots, the ultimate climax," the queer narrative middle, in reference to the *Little Women* story, exists as one in which, "children probe a range of identities and desires," in both gender and sexuality (Quimby 16). Quimby argues that, in Alcott's original text, the queer narrative middle of the childhood years of exploration in Jo's character arc allow for her independence from the heteronormativity of adulthood, fulfilling the archetype of a

literary tomboy. The queer narrative middle lends an understanding of Gerwig's film's non-linear chronology as an eternal middle of exploration in Jo's character arc.

Queer narrative time refers to the queer individual's experience of chronology in maturation. Queer lives often experience a prolonged state of adolescence or a second adolescence in stepping into the living experience of their true identity after facing oppression and invisibility in a heteronormative society; thus, queer narrative time reflects the non-linear chronology of adolescence and maturation as experienced by queer lives (Jaffe). Queer time focuses, instead of on linearity, on transformation (Erin; Bovard). Gerwig's queer coding and non-linear chronology in the narration of Jo's character arc characterize her struggle as one of maturation and identity.

In considering Gerwig's *Little Women* through the lens of queer chronology, the queer narrative middle and queer narrative time allow for a conceptualization of Gerwig's non-linear chronology as representative of Jo's maturation and edify the queer subtext and coding related to Jo's character, as depicted in the film.

3. Artistry

Gerwig's introduction to her film, *Little Women*, distinguishes it from other adaptations in establishing the point-of-view to be Jo in adulthood and the central question of Jo's character arc to be her identity as a writer in search of authentic publication.

Gerwig opens the film with a quote from Louisa May Alcott, "I've had lots of troubles, so I write jolly tales," introducing the narrative as one of challenges that will be solved through the symbolic action of writing, foreshadowing the resolution to Jo's character arc, (*Little* 0:56-1:03).

The opening shot of the film features Jo March, her head bent in a shadowed silhouette and framed by the door to a publishing room, communicating the character's self-doubt and her position as trapped in the masculinist world of publishing and authorship (*Little* 1:07-1:23). Inside the room, Jo's tense dialogue with the publisher situates the character's main conflict as that with the dominant patriarchal power structure in her goal of finding publishing (*Little* 1:40-4:11). The publisher's words to Jo, "And if the main character's a girl make sure she's married by the end. Or dead, either way," allude to the possibilities of the ending of a 19th century woman's story and create narrative desire in the audience in anticipating the ending with the question of how Jo's own character arc will end in a 21st century film (Gerwig, *Little Women: The Screenplay*, 3).

Following Jo's agreement to compromise on her artistry for publication, the introduction sequence's final shot, the title card, showing the title of the film and Alcott's name embossed in gold on a red book, establishes the dominant question of the narrative to be Jo's search for authenticity in writing, the achievement of publication as an act of independence in a patriarchal world (*Little* 4:40-4:43). Gerwig creates narrative desire by introducing the story and Jo through conflict with her publisher and the establishment of publishing, creating the questions of if and how Jo will be able to defeat the rules of the establishment and publish her own work with the full range of her artistry.

4. Jo and Laurie: A Genderless Childhood

Gerwig's film depicts Jo, in her relationship with Laurie, in an ideal friendship, finding companionship and understanding in the independence of a genderless childhood without the demands of heterosexual romance; as Gerwig articulates it, "[Jo and Laurie] find each other

before they've committed to a gender." The evolution of the friendship resembles a courtship that remains strictly and ardently platonic. When they meet at a ball, Jo's aversion to dancing in front of others due to her scorched dress prompts the two to dance, instead, outside, where, in contrast to the image through the windows of men and women dancing formally inside, Jo and Laurie engage in a gleeful frolic (*Little* 15:15-16:13), "making fun of the typical courting ritual instead of participating in it" (Kim). Where Jo and Laurie do not eschew gender roles completely, for a uniform equality between the two, they exchange them; in a playful moment, Jo, as Meg is leaving by carriage for her debutante ball, gets down on one knee to give a ring to Laurie (*Little* 54:26-54:53), one which he wears into their adulthood years (*Little* 1:43:46-1:43:48).

Gerwig's film also uses the costuming of Jo and Laurie to communicate the fluidity of their identities; according to Gerwig, the two end up "switching vests the whole movie" as each are the other's "androgynous other half" ("Saoirse Ronan" 9:33-9:38). In comparison to the dresses of her sisters, Jo's lack of a corset and underskirt gives a fluidity to her motions, freeing her from the poise demanded of femininity, and throughout the movie, she is seen sporting cropped hair and a military jacket, coding her as queer through the semiotics of style (Kim; Van de Kemp).

Employing queer coding in what exists as the explorative years of the queer middle of the film's narrative and Jo's life's journey, Gerwig's flashbacks in the film's non-linear chronology distinguish the childhood years from the adult to focus on the gaiety that the exploration of desire offers.

5. Maturation

In using the March sisters' adulthood lives to frame the events of their childhood, Gerwig's non-linear chronology creates a memory narrative that suggests that Jo is trying to work through the remembrance of her childhood in order to make sense of it for her maturation as an adult. The freedom and gaiety that the genderless childhood promised lost to time, Gerwig's juxtaposition of similar events in the childhood and adulthood chapters of the narrative positions the childhood ones in nostalgia and the adulthood ones in a harsh, realistic present (Gerwig, "Greta Gerwig Interview").

In the first flashback to the childhood of the March sisters, the film depicts Jo's slumped head, asleep, on a train leading to her waking up on Christmas morning in their childhood, the beginning scene of Alcott's novel and most adaptations of it (*Little* 24:54-25:40). Shot in a golden filter, the childhood scenes contrast with the adulthood scenes' blue filter, characterizing the former as warm and desired and the latter as stark and realistic.

Gerwig employs direct juxtaposition of shots to demonstrate the loss of joy that has transpired with time. For example, Jo is depicted as having woken up one morning in the golden light of childhood to find a sick Beth absent from bed, rushing downstairs to see her healthy after a broken fever on a Christmas morning; subsequently, adult Jo wakes up from sitting at Beth's bedside to walk slowly down the stairs to a kitchen table with a lone Marmee (*Little* 1:27:59-1:30-31). The film uses Jo's return to childhood moments in her sleep to convey their function as an idealized dream.

Gerwig communicates Jo's personal struggle in maturing through the evolution of her friendship with Laurie; begging him not to ask her about marriage, "No, Teddy—please don't," Laurie's proposal strikes her as a betrayal of their friendship, him moving on to adulthood

without her and asking a sacrifice of her independence, “I’m happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up” (Gerwig, *Little Women: The Screenplay*, 96, 97).

Gerwig highlights the tension between the idealism of her childhood friendship with Laurie, as portrayed in the original novel, and her desires as a writer growing up in emphasizing Jo’s emotional state, “Women have minds and souls as well as just hearts, and they’ve got ambition and talent as well as just beauty. And I’m sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for. I’m so sick of it! But – I’m so lonely!” (Wadsworth 390; Gerwig, *Little Women: The Screenplay*, 100).

The juxtaposition of Jo’s struggle with maturation in her childhood and her experience of her adulthood communicates Jo’s attempt, in adulthood, to rectify the conflicts of her childhood and to achieve both maturation and authenticity in the present. Featuring two comings-of-age, Jo’s character arc utilizes queer narrative time, creating representation for the queer individual and communicating the character’s dual experience of time.

6. Authorship

Gerwig’s retelling of the ending of *Little Women* in her film, allowing for Jo to realize the “literary spinsterhood” that Alcott could not give the character in her own time, proposes a model for 21st century independence in womanhood through the resolution to Jo’s maturation and artist’s dilemma. Following Beth’s death, the clear deviation from childhood, Gerwig depicts Jo throwing herself into writing in the attic of the March family home, turning her experience from maturation into her novel and establishing her artistry and identity as a writer on her own terms (*Little* 1:50:46-1:53:58; Simons 281).

Gerwig’s notable change of the ending of the *Little Women* story intercuts Jo’s reuniting

with Professor Bhaer at the train station, a typical romantic-comedy ending in film, with Jo's negotiating for her book deal with her publisher, creating an engaging pacing of events. The juxtaposition of these moments in the story creates a narrative discourse that implies that the kiss-in-the-rain with Bhaer is not reality but part of the plot of the novel, changed to satisfy the publisher's demand for a married heroine (*Little* 2:01:30-2:06:18). In the epilogue to the story, the film depicts Jo as having opened a co-ed schoolhouse, surrounded by friends and family, holding a copy of her published book, "Little Women", now with the author name, "J.M. March" (*Little* 2:06:19-2:09:42).

The inconclusive ending extends the queer middle of the story to realize Jo's queerness in resolution, eschewing the heteronormative ending. Gerwig's postmodern feminist retelling of the story allows for Jo's writing to be symbolic of the achievement of a public voice; still, the ending reflects a need to compromise the artistry of Jo's story in order to get it published, reflecting the realities of trying to achieve independence as a woman in the 19th century, (Dewi and Medina 114). However, on a meta-textual level, the epilogue allows for Jo to achieve independence in Gerwig's 21st century adaptation, signifying progress that has been made and can still be made in marginalized people's achievement of a voice through narrative.

7. Conclusion

Greta Gerwig's 2019 film, *Little Women*, responds to existing cultural knowledge of the *Little Women* story, forefronting Jo's journey to authorship, to demonstrate the value of the personal narrative in a 21st century era of evolving understandings of the role of identity.

Through queer subtext and Jo's subversion of the expected heteronormative narrative, especially in her ambiguous ending, Gerwig's film creates cultural representation on film for

non-heteronormative identities and lives. In Jo's owning of her own narrative, as she pens it to create the titular novel, the film encourages the queer audience and artist to embrace and champion their own story and perspective. Through the nonlinear chronology's emphasis on the adult chapters of the story, the film transforms the children's story of nostalgic idyl into one that illustrates the validity of non-normative images of maturation and adulthood, addressing the complexities of maturation in maintaining a sense of the self in a harsh reality. Gerwig's rewrite of the ending of Alcott's *Little Women* to reflect Alcott's own bibliography, the history of the novel's publication, and the realization of Jo's authorship creates validation for and representation for the autobiographic tale of personal narrative for female, queer artistry, (Gerwig, *Greta Gerwig On Her*).

Ultimately, Gerwig's realization of Alcott's hope for her protagonist's "literary spinsterhood" serves to address the past injustices of history and encourage hope for representation, for now and for the future, in the meta-textual understanding of the film that demonstrates a female auteur writing an unmarried, independent, loved and beloved writer of her own voice.

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- Erin, Grogan. "Chronology." *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, 11 June 2020, pp. xiv-xxiv, doi:10.1017/9781108699396.001.
- Gerwig, Greta. "Greta Gerwig Interview - *Little Women* (2019)." *YouTube*, 7 Jan. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtWosqIy2Bg. Interview. The source describes Greta Gerwig's personal experiences in why she chose to pursue adapting *Little Women*—the draw to Volume II of the novel, that depicts the maturation of the March sisters, and the exigence for bringing that part of the novel forward in her adaptation being that the culture at large seemed to, similar to her in childhood, focus on the childhood chapters of *Little Women*. This is important to my topic in how it situates Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* as a story told from the adult perspective, reminiscing on March sisters' childhood experience. I will be using this source to discuss the story as a memory story, as a story that questions what did happen in the past through the nostalgia and temporal distance of memory; I will use the source in discussion of marrying the idea of authorship, in writing what did happen, with the emotional journey of remember what did happen.

---. Interview. Conducted by Michel Martin. *Greta Gerwig On Her 'Little Women' Film*

Adaptation, NPR, 22 Dec. 2019,

www.npr.org/2019/12/22/790631863/greta-gerwig-on-her-little-women-film-adaptation2.

This source is important to my topic as it discusses the portrayal of authorships and artistry within the film, specifically the experience of women writers in interactions, by the director-writer of the 2019 film; the source informs me of the screenwriter's aim in adapting Alcott's life and original *Little Women* novel. The source helps me to understand, through the non-linear chronology of her film that leaves the impression of an amalgam of experiences, Jo's primary character arc as developing her artistry, and that one way to interpret her resolution is the achievement of authorhood. The source informed my knowledge of the plight of the woman artist and how Jo's bold nature speaks to that experience. I plan to use this source in my paper to give background on how the author chose to rewrite Jo's character arc and the implication for the ending of the story.

---, director. *Little Women*. Performance by Saoirse Ronan, Emma Watson, Florence Pugh, Eliza Scanlen, Laura Dern, Timothée Chalamet, Meryl Streep, Tracy Letts, Bob Odenkirk, James Norton, Louis Garrel, and Chris Cooper, screenplay by Greta Gerwig, produced by Amy Pascal, Denise Di Novi, and Robin Swicord, Sony Pictures, 2019.

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Grasso, Linda. "Louisa May Alcott's 'Magic Inkstand': Little Women, Feminism, and the Myth of Regeneration." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1998, pp. 177-92. *University of Nebraska Press*, doi:10.2307/3347148. This source is important to my topic as it informs of the background of previous *Little Women* filmic adaptations, specifically

director Gillian Armstrong's 1994 film, and where the film and novel exist within the cultural context. The source speaks of criticisms of Louis May Alcott's novel and the 1994 film, such as racist implications and the film's work to both sanitize the novel and the history of Alcott's life and novel's publication, pioneering and normalizing a white, middle-class heterosexual girlhood and womanhood that eschews the historical work of feminists. This source is integral in understanding the tensions of portrayal of the March sisters and their story, allowing me to understand the innovation of Greta Gerwig's adaptation and the cultural context it responds to. I plan to use this source to inform the introduction of my paper, in which I will introduce the subject of Greta Gerwig's film and my argument by discussing the strains of thought and power dynamics that the film runs contrary to.

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Quimby, Karin. "The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, Little Women, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1-22. *Duke University Press*, drive.google.com/file/d/1VTrRn3ZX-bot0psWdWFjZiSKoulKV-JZ/view?usp=sharing.

"Saoirse Ronan, Timothée Chalamet, Laura Dern & Greta Gerwig Break Down a Scene from 'Little Women.'" *YouTube*, uploaded by Vanity Fair, 17 Dec. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li9ff4rQlck.

Simons, Judy. "The Afterlives of Louisa May Alcott: Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*." *Adaptation*, vol. 13, no. 2, 18 June 2020, pp. 279-81, doi:10.1093/adaptation/apaa014. The source is important to my topic as it characterizes Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* within the cultural and narrative context of other works and the novel; the source speaks to the film as the 21st century dose of realism in a narrative often bound to nostalgia. It informs my knowledge on the topic by drawing attention to the aspects of the story that counterpoint the idyl of the girlhood joviality, such as Aunt March's realistic-cynical presence in the girls' lives, and giving me information on how Gerwig's *Little Women* counters the image of "girlhood aspiration" present in the culture through other filmic adaptations. The source serves as the foundation to my argument's inspection of Greta Gerwig's reinvention of *Little Women*, Alcott's children's story, as the 2019 film, *Little Women*, a story for adults; I will be using the source to aid the characterization of the film as a realist response to the current moment and to the film's paratexts.

Van de Kemp, Jessica. "'I Intend to Make My Own Way in the World': Queer Female Artistry and the Noble Nature of Gerwig's *Little Women*." *University of Waterloo*, Spring 2020, drive.google.com/file/d/1adq2KyscZWaaYhT5p2hTruPNHRhzneL6/view?usp=sharing. This source is important to my topic as it discusses the queer artistry subtext and text within the film that dovetails with my topic's consideration of understanding the film through queer narratology. The source is significant as it concerns how Jo's journey as a writer and her artistry convey a sense that she, as a questioning individual in the process of developing a worldview and identity, have finally found a voice and can proudly narrate herself. I will be using the source to speak to Jo's search for authenticity and her driving force, in connecting Jo, the artist, with Jo, the growing individual from child to

adulthood. I will be using the source as evidence in discussing the connections made between queer narrative theory and queer coding for the 21st century—such Saoirse Ronan's cropped hair, military short jackets, and androgynous stylings. I will also be using the source to supplement Quimby's "The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, *Little Women*, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire", which, in discussing Jo through the lens of strictly a tombody can conflate sexuality and gender; thus, this source will elucidate an interpretation of Jo as questioning.

Wadsworth, Sarah. "New Friendship Flourished like Grass in Spring': Cross-Gender Friendship in Moods and *Little Women*." *Women's Studies*, vol. 48, no. 4, 19 May 2019, pp. 379-92, doi:10.1080/00497878.2019.1614870.