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LITTLE WOMEN AND THE AMERICAN NUCLEAR FAMILY  
ROMANCE, 1868-1994

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**"WE HAVE FATHER AND MOTHER AND EACH OTHER": LITTLE WOMEN  
AND THE AMERICAN NUCLEAR FAMILY ROMANCE, 1868 – 1994**

**By**

**Mary Hughes**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to Michigan State University  
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## ABSTRACT

### **“WE HAVE FATHER AND MOTHER AND EACH OTHER”: LITTLE WOMEN AND THE AMERICAN NUCLEAR FAMILY ROMANCE, 1868 – 1994**

By

Mary Hughes

People acquire values, attitudes, and beliefs from a number of sources, including families, schools, and churches. One set of values, attitudes, and beliefs concerns the notion of the nuclear family as it is understood in the United States; and this set of ideas is perpetuated as much in the popular media as it is through other, more traditional institutions. As was the case in other industrialized countries, notions about nuclear family in the US developed in tandem with industrialization (primarily in the nineteenth century in the US) in major urban areas. The middle-class definition of family wherein the father/husband went out to work and the mother/wife managed the private home became the ruling paradigm, one which continues to exert its influence into the present day, even though most families do not fit the paradigm. This study examines how the nineteenth-century ideology of the nuclear family is reproduced by way of popular media, specifically Louisa May Alcott's novel Little Women and three of its later film adaptations (1933, 1949, and 1994). For more than 133 years, the story and its adaptations have reproduced nuclear family ideology, and the ideology remains virtually unchanged despite substantial social change over time.

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To Bruce and Christa, who never stopped believing in me, thank you.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every generation in a culture acquires its values, attitudes, and beliefs from a number of sources. The most commonly discussed mechanisms are the family and the school, both of which are aided (and sometimes obstructed) by the media in their many guises. This study is an examination of one way that a particular ideology has been transmitted from one era to later ones, even though much of that ideology has become culturally “dysfunctional.” The notion of the nuclear family – two heterosexual parents and their children living in their private home and supported by the wage-earning father – developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a concomitant to industrialization and the emergence of a capitalist class, first in Europe and then later in the United States.

Households in the middle class had the financial freedom to spare wives and children from wage labor outside the home, and home was transformed from a locus of production to a haven from the stresses of the outside world. The definition of family noted above depends upon this separation of the home from the world of work and the ensuing privatization of the home and family. Martine Segalen's discussion of the changes in family structure resulting from industrialization comments on attitudinal positioning in the middle and upper classes. She notes that the upper classes were concerned about their social position, particularly in their ability to distinguish themselves from wage laborers and their families: “The family lay at the heart of the bourgeois pattern and was defined as the place of order, the conveyor of a powerful normative model, every

discrepancy from which was considered a dangerous form of social deviance" (392). Wage laborers were most likely to deviate from this model, and reform efforts regularly focused on eliminating this deviance. The term "friendly visiting" was applied to some approaches to this reform effort. One such "visitor" declared:

No one who knows anything of tenement-house life can wonder at the inability of those who share it to cope with the emergencies of life. The first necessity of human endeavor – a true home – simply does not exist. There is no room in a tenement apartment for the expansion of love, for the growth of sympathy; there is none for the practice of the common arts of life. Gregarious to the limit of existence, these people are essentially solitary; they have no community of interest with their neighbors, and therefore no realization of the solidarity of society. (Horton 478)

The undeclared content here is that "these people" lack the accoutrements of middle-class life because an apartment doesn't qualify as a home, not to mention that a "true home" demands the full-time presence of a mother and the full-time employment of the father, neither of which were typical of tenement life.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of the nuclear family represents a combination of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Horton's answer was to enroll these children in kindergartens which would supply the deficiencies of their home lives. Kindergarten meant three years of schooling which would result in "an awakened intelligence [. . .] a delight in duty [. . .] a stability of character [. . .] a warmth of heart which will keep him true to his family and social pieties; a sense of obligation which will make him a conscientious citizen" (478)."

An earlier means of solving this kind of problem had been implemented by the Children's Aid Society of New York whose purpose according to founder, Charles Brace, was to remove "as many poor children as possible from the 'contaminating influence' of their families to 'good Christian homes' in the Midwest" (qtd. in Gish 121).

'givens' that, since its popular codification, has continued to impose the values of a minority, the middle class, on a culture that cannot provide the economic means for all of its households to subscribe to those values. In order to maintain a "traditional nuclear family," a household must meet income levels that the majority of the population cannot achieve. For many others, a middle-class lifestyle can be achieved only if both parents work. Although Americans in general are now more accepting of women working outside the home, some stigma still attaches to women (and the households they belong to) when Mother goes out to work. This division of labor into male/outside labor force and female/home labor was fully codified (if not fully implemented) by the nineteenth century, and its representation in Little Women has come to be one of the definitive statements about appropriate family organization and management – and this despite the fact that the book features women working outside the home and virtually no male involvement in the household.

A key component of the definition of the nuclear family is its designation as belonging to the middle class. When Alcott wrote Little Women, the idea of a middle class was only beginning to develop in the United States. During the eighteenth century, there were people classified as the "middling sorts" who were neither rich nor poor; they were not considered members of a class. Rather they were identified as persons who were reasonably successful at supporting themselves and their families, usually by means of their own physical labor, but who were not likely to become wealthy. Stuart Blumin discusses the social changes that accrued to the development of new modes of production in the late



eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, noting that a distinction arose between those who labored with their hands and those who managed to acquire capital and then pay those who labored with their hands. These entrepreneurs at the lower end of the economic scale who now worked with their heads and their capital began to distinguish themselves from the manual laborers who worked for them; working with one's head became a symbol of one's elevated status over those who could "only" work with their hands. Another element in the development of an identifiable middle class was consumption, an activity that was defined as woman's work. Women who no longer spun thread and wove cloth or otherwise contributed to the family economy became household purchasing agents and they used their purchasing power to help clarify their new class position. As Blumin notes: "Events on the other side of the retail sales counter, and in the 'separate sphere' of domestic womanhood, were influential, perhaps even crucial, in generating new social identities. To this extent, middle-class formation was woman's work" (191). The other side of the counter was where the middle-class woman made her purchasing decisions, thereby establishing which products fulfilled middle-class needs. However, income was not the sole determinant of middle-class identity. The kind of work one did was equally important.

The idea of working with one's head opened the way for "the class of merchants, clerks, and ministers. . . to think differently about themselves and their families," something that had happened as early as the seventeenth century in Europe (Baritz xi). This was accomplished in part because of their ability to

earn a living without resorting to physical labor. It was also accomplished in part by their aligning themselves with a set of attitudes and ideals espoused by this middle group. These were “certain common values, such as individualism, industry, domesticity, and piety. It is through the influence of these values that are more or less shared by its members, rather than through action, that the middle class achieves moral dominance in Victorian culture” (Young 3). To the extent that class is a matter of perception, personal or social, anyone who subscribed to these ideals and could maintain a private home could and, usually would, be considered a part of the middle class. Thus by the mid-nineteenth century, a genteelly poor family like the Marches could retain their middle-class status even while the women of the household were forced into the world of work.

Because it has been adapted more often than virtually any other piece of sentimental/domestic literature, Little Women has carried nineteenth-century notions through the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century. The story has been produced as a play, an opera, in comic and cartoon forms, in abbreviated novel form for younger readers, as a television series, and in several film versions. This study examines three of the full-length film versions. Film versions of this story have retold the tale, clearly modified by and for their own cultural contexts. However, to remain relatively “accurate” as adaptations, they must retain enough particulars of the original to make the story recognizable to their audiences. So even though later audiences lack the nineteenth-century context of the original, something of that era is still represented to later

audiences. As James Monaco notes, "Film does not suggest . . . it states" (159), and in this case the statement includes the values and beliefs Alcott wrote into her work, albeit modified by adaptation. As a result, the films serve as transmission mechanisms for the reproduction of nineteenth-century values in later periods. The various interpretations reveal much about the particular times when they were produced; they also reveal the degree to which much of the ideology in the original has been transmitted virtually intact for more than 130 years. Regardless of the specific effects achieved by various adaptations, at least some of the themes from the original find their way to the screen and then to the audience, whether the film achieves true fidelity with the novel or not. In determining the success of a film adapted from a novel, Brian McFarlane suggests that critics consider "just what it is possible to transfer or adapt from the novel" as well as "what key factors other than the source novel have exercised influence on the film version" (22 emphasis in original). A story like Little Women is easily mined for scenarios and vignettes transferable to film; these scenarios and vignettes become the specific transmission mechanisms both for ideas from the original and for ideas inserted by the adapters.

In order to understand the film adaptations, it is necessary to know the original story. Thus, chapter 1 is a discussion of the novel itself, placed in its original context. It is set during the Civil War, although it was actually written four years after the war's conclusion; there is only passing reference to war, though. Instead, the focus is definitively domestic. All of the issues addressed in the novel are related to concerns about the home circle, some directly and some

indirectly. The importance of the private home is established early in the text. It is a place of instruction, both moral and practical, and of protection from undesirable influences. That it is peopled exclusively by women through most of the first part of the novel reinforces the idea that the home space is the appropriate sphere for womanly activity. That Marmee looks to the absent Father for guidance in guiding her daughters (as well as for guidance for herself) establishes that patriarchy, which relies on a nuclear family model, is a part of the social matrix Alcott explores. Immigration is addressed by way of the March's charity work for the immigrant Hummels, the uncouth Irish children who taunt the girls at Amy's school, and the German immigrant professor whom Jo eventually marries. Only the class-appropriate professor ever sees the inside of the March home. The urban/rural divide is alluded to indirectly. The March home is in the suburbs where the girls can spend plenty of time outdoors, free of the grime and crassness of the city. Although the Marches don't live on a farm, they do keep chickens and a garden, both practical and wholesome activities not easily managed in a full-fledged city.

Other issues arise at various times throughout the novel, some of which later find their way into the films. Specific incidents or ideas that show up in the films will be addressed in the corresponding chapters. Otherwise, the analysis of the text will be confined to chapter 1 and the points listed above. Criticism of the novel as well as scholarship on Alcott informs this section.

The novel, written in the episodic style common to illustrated newspaper serials of the era, offers a self-contained vignette in each chapter. The chapters

in the first part of the novel are named (analogously) after the chapters in Paul Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, and they, just as the chapters in Bunyan's work, each contain some part of the moral lesson that inheres in the novel.

Additionally, most of the episodes do not rely on a specific chronology in order to make sense. This structure is the novel's most important characteristic in terms of its easy replication in other forms and other eras.

The discrete episodes within the novel also contribute to its particularly protean character. Because it is not dependent on a linear time frame, and because adapters can choose whichever episodes they wish, they are also free to focus the story any way they wish by simply selecting the material that will work best with their specific approaches. Chapter 2 examines this protean character in the 1933 film version. Although the film depicts competent women managing their own lives and earning their own keep, it manages to retain much of its domestic/sentimental focus. The women face the hard times of a war economy without the breadwinner, and they rise to the occasion by finding suitable means for supporting themselves. At the same time, the women retain their faith in the value of a family with Father as its head and Marmee as its heart. Women working to support their households was a growing reality in the Depression year of 1933, and the film presented this necessity as a virtue at the same time that it depicted the women as being in full accord with the patriarchal ideology that kept the man "in charge" of the home regardless of who supported it financially. The film combines images of feminine power with reassurances about the sanctity – and achievability – of the private, middle-class, nuclear

family home. Thus, each of the surviving March girls finishes the film appropriately married (or engaged to be married) and eager to replicate her happy childhood home in a similarly organized home of her own.

Chapter 3 expands on the episodic nature of the novel and the way that the vignettes, particularly when translated into later adaptations, serve as tropes – tropes for family, for home, for femininity, for moral character. These tropes, these common sense notions, contribute to the sense that the depiction is somehow correct, socially, morally, even sometimes personally. Some of these tropes are that a good home is a comfortable, middle-class home; that women can not be friends with the men they love (Amy notwithstanding; she was not really old enough to be friends with Laurie the way that the other girls could); that serious decisions and serious situations require the involvement of male judgment or guidance; that mothers can claim any good moral decisions their children make as their own.

Although the 1949 version used most of the 1933 screenplay, the changes revealed substantial shifts in attitude from sixteen years earlier, particularly as regards women and their independence, their proper sphere of activity, their social power. Despite the fact that this film was a virtual clone of the earlier one, much of its feminist vision has been replaced by the cultural need for the wives and mothers to be at home, making the message in this version more like that in much of the novel. Women who had been managing their own lives, and earning their own keep, were being encouraged, and sometimes forced, to turn over their public roles and their jobs to the returning soldiers. So long as their work had

been necessary for the war effort, women were welcome in the work force. Once the soldiers came home, they were expected to step out of the way and assume household duties – much the same situation that faced nineteenth-century women at the end of the Civil War. The post-war sensibilities of the US made nineteenth-century ideology right at home in the mid-twentieth century.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the 1994 film of Little Women. The screenplay for this version does not draw directly on either of the earlier films. It mixes incidents from the novel with incidents recorded in Alcott's journals, and it incorporates scholarship on Alcott's work. In its celebration of women and what they can do, it appears to be a more fully feminist version of the story than even the 1933 film. However, its ultimate message is one that re-places women in the home, a move that brings nineteenth-century ideology forward to the end of the twentieth century. It does seem to fairly represent Alcott's domestic feminism, and this is precisely the reason that it serves so well as a transmission mechanism for nineteenth-century ideas. The kind of strong women the film depicts are strong women who find their way to their appointed place in the home, reinforcing the notion of separate spheres for a culture that, generally, can not afford the separation. The tropes are here in full force: tropes for family, for home, for femininity, for moral character. Despite its valiant attempt to bring a realistic depiction of nineteenth-century home life to the screen, the film manages to conflate late twentieth-century feminism with Alcott's domestic (or sentimental) feminism. Marmee makes a few bra-burning speeches, supported by a valley girl Jo (and shushed by a too-proper Meg), but the net message is still that "his"

empty hand is best filled by “hers”. In the end, this version of the story promises the same idyllic family life that the novel depicts, a life that depends on women at home (where they belong) guided by the (right) men in their lives.

It is my contention that the case studies of these particular film versions, in comparison with the novel, create a sort of roadmap for the transmission of nineteenth-century notions into the twentieth century. Along the way, the ideas stretch and bend, but they retain – or regain – their original senses as if they had a life of their own. Perhaps, as ideas, they do. Certainly, varying interpretations of the messages in Little Women manage to promote an ideal of home and family that is at odds with modern experience. That private, nuclear family sanctuary where mother is infinitely patient and father is infinitely wise and the outside world stays outside where it belongs is long past resuscitation – assuming that it ever existed on any sort of scale. The boundaries of the ersatz private family home are even more permeable today than they were in the nineteenth century, and fewer and fewer households live on the “family wage” supplied by the husband/father. While the idea of a “traditional nuclear family” may be comforting on one level, it fails as a practical ideology in an age of multiplicity. Its values are commendable and should be salvaged; its formulaic application needs adjustment. However, so long as adaptations are made of “old” material, the “new” patches of interpretation will continue to pull away from the fabric, bringing bits of the old forward with it.



## Chapter 1

### Little Women Then

Sentimental/domestic literature of the nineteenth century inscribed a woman's realm whose heart pulsed around her husband and her children (as well as non-family members remanded to her maternal care, whether living in the household or objects of charity). In this realm, affection reigned supreme. What mattered most was not how one thought or how wealthy one was but how one felt; and feeling, the ability to have sensitive reactions to other human beings, was defined in terms of goodness. However, this sentimentalism was not mere mawkishness: "Sentimentalism as construed by American women in the nineteenth century, [Joanne Dobson] would suggest, is a complex imaginative phenomenon comprised, yes, of feeling, but of feeling constellating around and valorizing a distinctive set of emotional priorities and a specific moral vision" (170).

Little Women supports Dobson's suggestion that sentiment for nineteenth-century women writers was feeling of a controlled, even rational sort. As with other sentimental novels, its emotional priorities revolve around the home and the woman's role as moral guide for her family; this woman's role is perceived to be important to the individual home and to the larger community. In the larger culture, as historian Jan Lewis notes, "[a]lthough a mother's work was performed at home, in private, it had enormous public importance; it was, fundamentally, of a political and religious nature, for it aimed at preparing children for entry into a

particular society” (56). While that society – nineteenth-century, United States, middle-class – is generally characterized as a world of separate spheres, what women wrote about in that society indicates that they saw themselves as active participants in the life of the republic, even if it was from their parlors.

Sentimental fiction implies a particular kind of moral sensitivity both on the part of the writer and of the reader. Such works were meant to be edifying as well as entertaining. Most sentimental fiction of the mid-nineteenth century was written by women, and much of that was centered on home and hearth. Thus the term “domestic fiction” came to describe a kind of fiction that combined the moralizing of the sentimental with the pragmatic realities of domestic life.

Little Women is one of these domestic novels; it is solidly planted within the March home, and within the world of the novel, the primary goal is the development of good women from young girls who need to learn how to manage their own domestic spaces. As a piece of writing meant for public consumption, the book fulfills the social expectation that writing for young ladies should impart lessons for life, both moral and social, since “in the 1850’s . . . critics still believed that literature’s main purpose was to be edifying” (Tompkins 120), a notion that continued to inform the practice of novel writing into the later nineteenth century. Ultimately, the intent, implicit and explicit, is the reproduction of a particular social arrangement involving the private home, a wage-earning father, and a morally suitable mother. The surface story is simple and direct, a series of vignettes describing the lives of four young women and their eventual development into good adult women. The surface trappings are typical for the genre: middle-class

family (albeit in reduced circumstances), comfortable, if not luxurious home, congenial family relationships. In the novel, the girls do, indeed, learn how to be proper young women who will eventually run good, Christian homes of their own. Elaine Showalter describes this genre of story as “[e]ssentially moralistic . . . designed to bridge the gap between the schoolroom and the drawing room, to recommend docility, marriage, and obedience rather than autonomy or adventure” (50), and this is an apt characterization of Little Women, with the possible exception of the obedience over autonomy part. For example, feminist critic Madelon Bedell considers the idea of female autonomy a key focus of the text, stating that “Little Women is not about ‘being good,’ nor even about growing up, but about the complexities of female power and the struggle to maintain it in a male-dominated society” (147). However, there is much more emphasis throughout the text on cooperation than there is on struggle. Throughout the novel, ideas about companionate marriage and male/female cooperation predominate. Although she never fully cedes the home realm to male dominance as such, Alcott does describe a family structure recognizable as typical of nineteenth-century, middle-class patriarchal notions of the family. Within that framework, she depicts powerful women who amicably compromise with the men in their lives—in other words, she depicts the mutuality of purpose that men and women were supposed to exhibit in their family relations, in companionate marriages.

The main characters in the novel are Marmee, the mother of the little women; Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, eldest to youngest of the girls; Laurie

(Theodore Laurence), son of wealthy Mr. Laurence who lives next door to the Marches; Aunt March, sister of the girls' father; Mr. Brooke, Meg's love interest and later husband; and Professor Friedrich Bhaer, the German immigrant whom Jo eventually marries. For the first twenty-one chapters of the book, Father is away at war and exercises paternal authority by way of the letters he sends. Once he comes home, he is most often encountered indirectly, sitting in his pastor's study or as part of a scene where the family is gathered. The story follows each of the girls as they grow into adult women; all of them marry, except Beth who dies near the middle of the book.

The novel opens with the girls grumbling about not having any presents for Christmas, a letter from Father admonishing them to be good, and the gift of their Christmas breakfast to the poor Hummels. The girls then make the acquaintance of Laurie, the orphaned grandson of their wealthy neighbor, Mr. Laurence. Other key incidents in the novel include Mr. Laurence's gift of a piano to Beth, Marmee's trip to Washington to nurse Father, Meg's wedding to John Brooke, the publication of Jo's first novel, Amy's trip to Europe, Jo's sojourn in New York, Beth's death, Amy's marriage to Laurie, Jo's engagement to Professor Bhaer, Aunt March's death and bequest of her home, Plumfield, to Jo. The novel ends in rather a rush in the last chapter with Jo and the Professor marrying, opening a boarding school for boys, and having two sons of their own. The last scene in the book is of all the March sisters and their families gathered at Plumfield to harvest apples with the boys from the school.

Throughout the novel, Alcott combines ideas about proper behavior with ideas that stretch the boundaries of propriety, most radically in the way Jo and Friedrich marry and then open a boarding school where they take in what one philanthropist of the nineteenth century termed “waifs and strays” (Brace qtd. in Gish 121). Jo and her professor display most ideally the kind of marital mutuality of purpose that Alcott weaves throughout the story. This mutuality of purpose, despite its apparently radical reworking of a patriarchal approach to marriage, is a good fit with the notion of separate spheres. Advice manuals of the mid-nineteenth century laid out family responsibilities in neat categories. As the caption to an illustration from Samuel Goodrich’s Fireside Education put it, “The mother sways the dominion of the heart, the father that of the Intellect” (qtd. in Frank 40). Compare this to Alcott’s own words: “The girls gave their hearts into their mother’s keeping—their souls into their father’s” (232). (All citations from the novel are taken from the Modern Library edition.) The mother’s sway over the heart was predicated on her innate love for her children and their inevitable response to this exemplary love (Lewis 58), and from this reciprocal love a mother acquired her authority over her children. This was the kind of authority that Marmee exercised over her household of women. Marmee loved her daughters into submission, a submission that they didn’t recognize as such because it was the inevitable response of the well-brought up young woman whose mother loved her. However, Father could not love Marmee into submission in like manner because, as a man, his faculties were rational and of the sort “necessary to check woman’s emotion,” while Marmee’s womanly

“affection was required to socialize [his] masculine rationality” (Lewis 56). Within the home, affection reigned supreme, and the woman had the edge there. The separate spheres were neatly defined (if not neatly applied and experienced), but they did not so thoroughly disadvantage women as modern critics often claim, particularly not in fiction. For Little Women this means that the novel balanced uneasily between its designation as a sort of tract for female propriety and its relatively radical (for nineteenth-century readers) egalitarian notions about women’s place in society and within marriage and the family.

The focus on the primacy of the mother’s role in the home is the nineteenth-century incarnation of Republican Motherhood. Linda Kerber said of the eighteenth-century version that “the Republican Mother’s life was dedicated to the service of civic virtue: she educated her sons for it, she condemned and corrected her husband’s lapses from it” (qtd. in Zagarri). Zagarri further notes that “Republican motherhood preserved traditional gender roles at the same time that it carved out a new, political role for women” (192). This role was assigned, by definition, to the home, thus helping to reinforce the notion of separate spheres, at least ideologically. Amelia Howe Kritzer suggests that Susanna Rowson’s eighteenth-century plays attempted to make the ‘sphere barrier’ less restrictive by presenting stories about women whose actions allowed “the free infusion of information and actions relating to public issues—a basic condition for the exercise of republican motherhood.” She further suggests that the plays “privilege the private sphere, bringing the public one within its scope” (160), and this is way that Marmee and the little women attempt to affect their surroundings.

Their work outside the home and their corporal acts of charity are premised on the notion that the more the outside world resembles the home – more specifically, their home – the better the world will be.

The aspect of the text that is most often noted (besides its focus on the family) is its female frame of reference. According to Elaine Showalter, Nina Auerbach depicts this as a self-sustaining community of women (43), which is exactly how the women functioned, both before and after Father went to war. Related to this is the notion that domestic fiction is well-rooted in the material aspects of women's daily lives, and this seems natural since women bore the primary responsibility for the material concerns of daily life. Discussing the characters in Little Women, Auerbach comments on the physicality of the descriptions of the women and the way that Alcott uses specific material objects to help define her characters (132-5). This descriptive mode is typical of domestic literature. Where purely sentimental literature tends to dwell on the extraordinary, descriptions in domestic literature tend to be more firmly rooted in the quotidian, rather than the exceptional, aspects of materiality. This is clearly the case with Little Women. Thus readers know Jo by her writer's paraphernalia, Amy by her hair ribbons and other little vanities, Meg by her fine gloves, and Beth by her music. In like manner, Alcott describes each of the girls by her garden plot:

Hannah used to say, "I'd know which each of them gardings belonged to, ef I see 'em in Chiny," and so she might, for the girls' tastes differed as much as their characters. Meg's had roses and heliotrope, myrtle, and a little orange tree in it. Jo's bed was never

alike two seasons, for she was always trying experiments. This year it was to be a plantation of sun flowers, the seeds of which cheerful land aspiring plant were to feed Aunt Cackle-top and her family of chicks. Beth had old-fashioned fragrant flowers in her garden, sweet peas and mignonette, larkspur, pinks, pansies, and southernwood, with chickweed for the birds and catnip for the pussies. Amy had a bower in hers, rather small and earwiggy, but very pretty to look at, with honeysuckle and morning-glories hanging their colored horns and bells in graceful wreaths all over it, tall white lilies, delicate ferns, and as many brilliant, picturesque plants as would consent to blossom there. (98)

Except for Jo's writing tools, which could as readily belong to a man as to a woman, all of these markers carry essentially feminine connotations.<sup>1</sup> That the markers are so thoroughly feminine helps establish the text's credibility as an "edifying" story; that Jo's writing tools are ambiguous markers help establish her conflicted position as a young woman straining against convention. While her writing implements do not suggest that she is trying to trespass on male turf (indeed, most popular writing of the period was produced by the "scribbling women" who gave Hawthorne such distress), Jo exhibits male behaviors such as whistling, using slang, and "toasting" herself in front of the fire. She also, during her sojourn in New York, expresses the desire to write something of real worth,

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<sup>1</sup> In the home context, the piano, which could also belong to a man, is generally portrayed, as in this instance, as something for a woman to "master" so that she might provide suitable evening entertainment for her husband and family and/or accompany evening hymns during family devotional time.



something a Goethe might have written. Taken together, these markers create the image of a young woman who is eager for a taste of the things that, for her, make a man's life appealing, what she perceives as its freedom as well as its power to act on the world. It is these same characteristics that make Jo so appealing to readers; here is a woman who is acutely aware of her middle-class position and its constraints but one who, nevertheless, "pushes the envelope" without losing either her "femininity" or her identity as a thinking human being.

If there is an overarching theme in Little Women, it is one of struggle, but struggle of a particular sort – the struggle to overcome personal faults; and the faults are not always, or even usually, of the sort that imply a male influence. Instead, the failings and the overcoming of those failings depict a desire to have power over one's self. This is, perhaps, the primary power Jo seeks in her determination to be on equal footing with men and, later, with her husband. Jo seems quite able to retain her independence, even after she is married, but she does it from within the existing system. However, she does not ever seem to be struggling to retain power, and her sisters don't really seek power except of a derivative sort. While Little Women contains a sub-text of resistance to male domination, the real focus is on female "self" control, and it is here that the reader can see most clearly the push for egalitarian relations between the sexes. The goal is for the women to take charge of themselves in order to be suitable spouses/helpmates/ partners for their husbands, and concomitantly good mothers to their children. This was the essence of domesticity. The associated message of female responsibility for social housekeeping stressed its basis in the

individual, private home. As a popular nineteenth-century women's magazine noted: "Let [woman] not look away from her own little family circle for the means of producing moral and social reforms, but begin at home" (qtd. in Welter 163).

Elaine Showalter asserts: "Alcott's novel of female development dramatizes the Transcendental dream of sexually egalitarian lives of love and work" (57). However, Charles Strickland claims that "[b]eginning with Little Women, most of the families of which Alcott approved were families dominated by women, and they are families that are curiously insulated from the larger world. [. . .] masculine influence is scarcely visible in the work of Little Women" (145). Both of these ideas can be supported by the text, and they co-exist in a precarious balance among readers, modes of criticism, biographical interpretations of Alcott and her work, and the culture from within which the text is reproduced. The fact that these ideas can readily be supported by the original text helps make Little Women the protean vehicle it is for producing, and reproducing in later eras, the underlying ideology that informs the entire story: that woman's realm of the home is a good place from which to make a better world and that that realm is constituted by a middle middle-class, nuclear family.

Alcott's semi-fictional family is a perfect specimen of the "typical" American family, peopled by the sort of typical Americans who make up the class. Its message is the sanctity of the private family home, and despite its depiction of female power, it is described by Foster and Simon as "the archetypal family novel" (17-8). Madeleine Stern makes a similar observation: [T]he American countryside of the midnineteenth century was unfolded here, historic

notes of life and letters in New England were written, and under the roof of a single new England home could be discovered all the homes of America" (Louisa May Alcott 259). The public representation of the Alcott family's fictionalized personae as an intensely private concern was also fairly representative of Alcott's own concerns about family issues and the proper care of children. Parents, especially mothers, were responsible to "insulate their children from the world of adulthood, shielding them from the workplace and from the adult experience of sex, drugs, and alcohol" (Strickland 163). This focus on the protected child is, however, problematic because the girls in the story are growing up; soon they will be adult women with adult responsibility. They need to learn how to cope with the world outside the home. The book is more than a tale of how to keep children safe from outside influences; it is a blueprint for how to help good girls become good women.

Even though it was classified as a children's story, one that was suitable for mothers to give their daughters, contemporary reviewers saw the book as good for adults. Authors of sentimental children's literature expected their audience to encompass "a wide age range" and "[c]ontemporary reviews of Alcott's Little Women (1868) illustrate this: the Nation saw it as 'not only very well adapted to the readers for whom it is especially intended, but [it] may also be read with pleasure by older people'; Harper's considered it "a rather mature book for the little women, but a capital one for their elders"' (Foster and Simon 9). In part because Little Women never seriously transgressed the bounds of Victorian American propriety, the novel could be employed as a realistic blueprint for

training girls to be good women - American women who could be both individuals and nurturing wives and mothers.

The nineteenth century saw the final stages of a shift from a corporate family economy to one where labor was “divisible into the wages, salaries, and profits of individual workers,” and this, in turn, contributed to a greater sense of individualism in family members (Ryan 231). Such a social shift made the individualistic elements of Little Women more palatable to middle-class readers - especially since those elements were cloaked in the garb of “cottage industry.” True, “little women” went out to work, but that work was not allowed to intrude on the home where they sewed, knitted, cleaned, and cooked, to all appearances independent of the marketplace. The girls do not bring their work home with them. While they might complain about the tedious jobs they have and wish that they didn’t have to do them, they take comfort in the fact that they can come back to the haven of the family home at the end of the day. Alcott merged a rural (although not agrarian) family life with the March girls’ individual wage-earning pursuits creating a neatly balanced amalgam that appealed to the desire for individuality at the same time that it reinforced the primacy of home life over the marketplace; it reinforced the notion that “the individualistic self inheres in its difference from the market” (Brown 60). It also glorified sub-urban life while it acknowledged the cultural advantages possible in larger urban areas. Thus Concord, in the nineteenth century, apparently fulfilled every possible need, material, spiritual, and cultural, that a person might have.

Notably, none of the work the Marches did was in an industrial setting where any of them would be forced into daily contact with working class wage earners. Indeed, the only persons who regularly interacted with the working class were Beth and Marmee who looked after the Hummels, and that interaction was the genteel pursuit of dispensing charity. To complete the retreat from the outside world, Amy is removed from school to study at home where she will not be subject to bad teaching practice and the negative influence of the other girls in the school. This restriction of activity to genteel pursuits centered in the home reinforced the boundaries between the inside and outside of the family. Safety and propriety and comfort abode within the confines of the family. "Alcott thus lent the power of her pen to the drift of opinion begun by the sentimental revolution, a drift that can be called the privatization of Utopia. Pinning her hopes on the nuclear family, Alcott ultimately rejected her father's dreams of a 'consociate family' broader than the ties of blood and marriage" (Strickland 145). Nevertheless, she has Jo and her husband, Professor Bhaer, open a boarding school for boys – including their own sons who are thus being raised with the children of non-family members, a distinctly "consociate" arrangement at odds with the rest of the depictions of family in the novel.

Concern about family boundaries was common to nineteenth-century novels, with their depictions of "missing heirs, secret marriages, and long-lost relatives as routine ingredients in a novelist's plot." Penny Kane notes that these elements "suggest a fundamental unease about the boundaries of the family and one's ability to order or preserve those boundaries against arbitrary fates" (154).



The nineteenth-century, middle-class family lived a precarious existence which was embedded in a larger matrix of precarious social and political interactions. The Marches, like many of their real-life counterparts, had experienced the precariousness of middle-class fortunes, having lost their money through a bad business deal their father had financed. The marketplace was volatile, and social forces including industrialization, urbanization, and immigration threatened always to intrude on family life. As Groves and Groves note:

The rapid urbanization of the country was in itself a great social problem and of great significance in its effects on the domestic life of the American people, and its evils also were increased by the establishment of European groups in our chief cities who unlike earlier immigrants did not lose themselves by mixing with the natives but to a great extent maintained an alien cultural existence.

(174)

These external forces had the potential to destroy a family's financial position, its private boundaries, even the gender relationships within the family. If a family's fortune was lost, children might be forced to find work outside the home. In some cases they might be placed in orphanages or with other relatives, removing them from the immediate influence of parents – especially mothers – and subjecting them to the vicissitudes of non-(nuclear) family influences. If the children didn't have to work, often the women did, with the result that men lost their status as breadwinners. Concern over these potential disruptions profoundly altered perceptions of the boundaries of the family, and middle-class families came to

rely upon the clear division between inside and outside to help maintain their sense of both class and family.

Colleen McDannell asserts: "The Victorians were not a private people concerned with constructing a hiding place in the world; they were a public people who sought to define themselves through display of their sense of 'election.' The domestic environment was not only created for the good of the family, it had to be presented to the public as evidence for the goodness of the family" (153). Nevertheless, there were specific rules for how people outside the family were made privy to that "evidence of goodness," and those rules limited access to the domestic space to persons of the same class as the family and to their domestic help. More realistic is Ellen M. Plante's characterization that "[Women] were expected to live their lives comforting work-weary husbands, devoting themselves to molding young children into moral, upright citizens and fashioning homes that were at once a retreat from the outside world as well as a cultural inventory of refinement, social standing, intellect and honor" (xi). In Little Women, when Mr. March comes back from the war, he comes home to just such a haven, retreating into his study where people flocked to hear his words of wisdom while Marmee maintained the kind of home where he could be wise in peace.

Although the story is set during the Civil War, the war intrudes very little on the home. Indeed, when Marmee receives a letter from Mr. March on Christmas Eve, it says little "of the hardships endured, the dangers faced, or the sickness conquered; it was a cheerful, hopeful letter [. . .]" (14). Instead, the war is used



as a convenient means for removing Mr. March from home without eliminating his patriarchal presence. Thus, when Marmee decides to remove Amy from school, she determines that Amy will study at home with Beth until such time as Father has advised her about what to do next (71). Marmee may be strong, but she also depends upon Father in his role as head of the family, even though she appears to be perfectly capable of making decisions on her own.

When Father does return from the war, one year after the beginning of the novel, his first extended speech reinforces the patriarchal structure of the household. Although Marmee had earlier given the girls their copies of Pilgrim's Progress to use as guides for self-improvement, Father pronounces judgment on what his 'little women' have accomplished over the past twelve months. He tells Meg "I value the womanly skill which keeps home happy more than white hands or fashionable accomplishments"; he tells Jo "I see a young lady who . . . moves quietly, and takes care of a certain little person in a motherly way which delights me (216). For a country working through the aftermath of the Civil War, this was reassuringly normal. While the girls might strive for the egalitarian ideal Showalter describes, they are also acquiring the womanly traits necessary for good nineteenth-century middle-class homes, the same traits that Marmee exhibits and which follow the approved patriarchal path.

Another issue Alcott's treats is immigration and here she demonstrates both the concern for maintaining family boundaries and the ambivalence many Americans felt about the masses of immigrants crossing national borders. As noted above, a particular problem concerned those immigrants who failed to

become fully Americanized. The plot line that follows the Hummel family is cautionary, showing how difficult it is for certain classes of immigrants to integrate into American culture. The plot line that follows Professor Bhaer is, if not celebratory, at least a positive representation of an immigrant story, showing that America really is the land of opportunity and that hard work is rewarded. Indeed, prior to imposing immigration quotas in the 1920s, “there were several enactments by Congress that attempted to improve the quality of the immigration coming to the United States” (Groves and Groves 174). The point was not to keep out immigrants, but to be more selective about the kinds of immigrants who were admitted.

The immigrant Hummels are the poor mother and her six children who receive the March girls Christmas breakfast at the beginning of the novel. The reader knows that they are classed as “deserving poor” because Marmee has elected to help them. Nineteenth-century charity was always monitored to assure that receiving aid did not result in dependence on that charity and also to assure that the recipients were not somehow “cheating” on the system. Because Marmee chose to help them, the reader can be certain that she did the appropriate screening first; the reader can also vicariously dispense charity. Although Little Women was not part of the literature of philanthropy that Deborah Carlin discusses, its approach to philanthropy relies on the same kind of social distinctions she discusses. In particular, Little Women demonstrates the kind of philanthropy that “stresses good will, generosity, and monetary contributions as the agencies of social welfare” without considering what social and economic

reforms might be more effective (204). She further notes that “these narratives conceive of women reformers within an essentially conservative ideology; the home, for American women in the late nineteenth century, was the world” (emphasis in original 208). This agglomeration of home and world provided women of the upper and middle classes with an opportunity to act on their environment without losing their status as true women. It also exposed them to segments of the population they would not otherwise have associated with, an association that necessarily challenged their preconceptions about how the world works and how they themselves fit into the world. Barbara Berg notes that women’s involvement in voluntary associations helped women, individually and collectively, in their “quest for identity.” At the same time that women were discovering themselves as individuals, their activities also “formed a plausible response to urban problems” (156). Their quest for individual identity was reciprocally reinforced by the work they did outside of their own homes. In Alcott’s fiction, identity is intimately associated with activity, a sort of you-are-what-you-do approach to self, and that identity relied on, in part, “[a] set of traditions and folklore [that] tied middle-class groups together and upheld their world view. In a nation with no formal aristocracy, the ‘best people’ had a profound sense of their own moral leadership.” These ‘best people’ constituted what is necessarily loosely termed the middle class. They shared a social sense of their place in the world, one that they could see as egalitarian because “all Americans could enter the respectable community provided they lived according to its norms” (May 4-5).

The Hummels give the little women the opportunity to prove themselves charitable, and Marmee is sufficiently determined to help the Hummels that she enlists the aid of a wealthy acquaintance who can better afford to continue the task of philanthropic reform that the Marches have begun, reform that should make the Hummels part of the respectable community.

The Hummel's situation is similar to the March's in that both families are without the support of a male breadwinner. The Marches, of course, could take employment and thus retain control of their lives (family). However, for the Hummels, wage work could not substitute for the father's lost income. First, Mrs. Hummel spoke only a little English, a major impediment to a job search. Second, she was a mother whose first duty was to her home and young children. Even if she had been able to find work, she would have had to leave her children unsupervised while she was away from the house. Therefore, it was much better that she rely on the kindness of others than that she should take an active role in providing for herself and her children. That role belonged to the father who had left.

The difference between his leaving and Mr. March's leaving is that the former was desertion - implicitly for the selfish reason of not wishing to care for his family - whereas Mr. March was selflessly serving as chaplain to men fighting in the Civil War. This difference justified the necessity for the March women to work outside the home. Mr. March was criticized for not providing properly for his family, but not because he had left for the war. He was criticized for the poor financial judgment that forced his family into genteel poverty, the sort that

allowed for a housekeeper if not for new dresses. However, Mrs. Hummel, although a victim of desertion, is also a victim of her gender. Aside from the fact that she is physically too weak to work, having just borne her seventh child, she bears the stigma of being a woman who has been deserted. She is thus forced to carry some of the blame for her husband's bad behavior while Mrs. March is implicitly commended for her efforts in support of the war effort.

The Hummel family serves as a trope for problems surrounding immigration. The factories relied heavily on immigrant labor as a means of keeping wages as low as possible. Although immigrants "glutted the labor market, lowering wages and causing greater unemployment," it was to the advantage of factory owners to have an excess of laborers to draw from, and heavy immigration provided that excess labor force (Berg 42). Heavy immigration also gave reformers another target for reform efforts: Americanization of the aliens. In addition to the need to train workers to function in a factory setting and according to set hours and days of work, the newcomers had to learn to function within the American system of social organization and government. Reform efforts took many guises, but the focus of reform efforts was the family. The rationale was, apparently, that if the family could be made to fit the American middle-class mold, then the individual members of the family would better fit their appropriate roles as American workers, in the case of the men and boys in the household, and as "domestic angels," in the case of the women and girls. Immigrant families would then more closely resemble their middle-class mentors, having been safely homogenized into middle-class American culture.

There was sufficient concern about the kinds of immigrants who were being admitted to the US that in 1856 there was a naturalization bill before Congress that required “proof of character both before and since the applicant emigrated” (Hoffman 1213). Not only were the applicants for citizenship supposed to be the right sort of people; they also needed “an extended period of republican schooling” in order to be able to properly participate in the political system (1214). This was the same sort of concern for proper Americanism that the philanthropically-minded exhibited when they sought to train new immigrants in the American way of life.

Alcott’s immigrants fall into two categories: those who “melt” and those who don’t. The Hummel family never quite succeeds in becoming American. With no breadwinner in the home, they are forced to remain objects of charity. Since one of the most sacred tropes of middle-class Americanism is self-sufficiency, and the Hummels are unable to be self-sufficient, they can never be truly American. A further impediment to their assimilation is the language. They can barely communicate their needs to English speakers, and there is no indication later on that their English skills improve sufficiently to help them find work. They are effectively infants who must be cared for, rather than good candidates for citizenship by reform of their ethnic practices and acquisition of American characteristics. Professor Bhaer is in quite a different category.

The Professor has a thick German accent and sometimes has trouble thinking of just the right English word to use; nevertheless, he has a good command of the language and is demonstrably well-educated, a fact that is

proven by his small but well-chosen library of works by German philosophers and poets and the complete works of Shakespeare. Additionally, he is self-supporting, although in the feminized profession of teaching children. He also works hard at learning the correct way to do things in America rather than relying solely on his middle-class European manners. His only fault is that he is male and therefore in need of someone like Jo – that is, someone female – to perform simple tasks for him such as sewing on buttons and darning socks.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the Hummels, the Professor is a good example of a well-assimilated immigrant, so good, in fact, that he is actually allowed to become a part of the March family by marrying Jo.

Not only were Americans ambivalent about allowing immigration, but they were also anxious to prevent the erosion of distinctly American characteristics that exposure to aliens with different social conventions might cause. Post-bellum restrictions on immigration slowed the influx of newcomers, but there were many ethnic enclaves already established in the cities. Accordingly, reform efforts intended for those immigrants who were not necessarily charity cases focused on teaching the newcomers how to become American in their speech, eating, dress, and work behaviors. Men and women entered into charity work intent on bringing middle-class values to the largely immigrant working class. The juxtaposition of the Hummels and Professor Bhaer in Little Women gave readers the message that immigration could be managed from the home. At the same time, as Barbara

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<sup>2</sup> This is another place where Alcott subverts the potential of the story for working as an agent of change; Jo, the not-at-all-domestic, nevertheless can provide feminine service for helpless men and does so gladly (Alcott 329). Where there is need, Jo becomes the selfless 'domestic angel' her mother hoped to train.

Sicherman notes, for certain immigrant women, and some men as well, the book was a blueprint for how to become a middle-class American (263). With its focus on the home, and with no real external markers to position that home in a particular time or place, any reader could identify with the characters and the situations they found themselves in.

One external marker absent from the text is modern (nineteenth-century) technology, either in its industrialized form or within the home. The level of technology available in homes was fairly limited, since most homes still had their own wells and outhouses, and there was little or no central heating or gas lighting, and stoves burned wood or coal. Because most actual housekeeping chores were never mentioned in the story, there were no references to what might later be seen as old-fashioned. People still do hand sewing and knitting and baking, but today they do these by electric light or they use electric or gas stoves. If the story says that the girls sew by lamplight, there's no indication that the lamp in question is not electric. In film adaptations of the story, the periodicity of the representation contributes to a romanticized picture of nineteenth-century home life. Candles and oil lamps provide as much light as 3-way, 50-75-100 watt bulbs, and fireplaces evenly heat entire rooms - or whole houses - as efficiently (and cleanly) as central gas heat. Even though the accoutrements of the nineteenth century are evident, none of the inconvenience that would make them seem old-fashioned is apparent.

The problems of urbanization are kept at some distance from the March household. Most growing urban centers were growing because of



industrialization, and the combination of increased numbers of people in the cities and the dirt associated with industrial production made urban areas prime targets for complaint as well as reform efforts. However, the March's, suburban situation protected them from the ills of city life. Except for Mrs. March's journey to Washington, D.C. to nurse her husband, the only city exposure any of the women have is Jo's sojourn in New York. She lives, appropriately, in a respectable boarding house – complete with young children – while she tries her hand at earning a living by writing. Yet her exposure to the city is limited to her trips to various publishers and occasional outings to classical music events and intellectual evenings with Miss Norton, one of the other boarders in Mrs. Kirke's house. It is as if there were no city but rather an invisible infrastructure that allowed for expensive propositions such as operas and symphonies and publishing houses that existed apparently independently of the substructures necessary “in real life” to make these things possible. The result is another non-marker, a city in the abstract that can become any city in any time or place. Jo never encountered ethnic enclaves, factories or factory workers, or tenement conditions. There is nothing about her experience to mark this city as New York except the naming of the city in the text.

Another result of the “unmarked” city is that the city need not have anything to do with the family, either the Marches or the Kirkes with whom Jo lives. Families in cities, unless they were at least in the upper middle class could not live in that ideal family space, the private home. Most city dwellers lived in boarding houses or tenements, neither of which provided the kind of safe

bounding for the boarding family that a private home was presumed to provide, although a boarding house afforded the landlord or landlady the option of keeping their children away from the other boarders in private quarters.<sup>3</sup> In a boarding house, most of the residents were single individuals; any family would normally be children of the (usually) landlady who still lived at home (as with the Kirkes). Tenements afforded families multiple rooms, even if not necessarily enough space, but at a price that included sharing, among other things sanitation facilities, clotheslines, noise from the neighbors and noise and dirt from the city. There is evidence that for many city dwellers tenements functioned as neighborhoods within the larger, impersonal city space, and in this context, Christine Stansell discusses the interconnectedness of tenement life and the fluidity and permeability of home boundaries. She notes: "These shifting communities of cooperation and contention had none of the counterbalancing elements of the female domestic sphere of calm and affection that bourgeois men and women prized" (62). It was this sort of deviance from the middle-class standard that much domestic literature sought to correct, at least fictionally.

The March family was apparently apolitical and thus could stand for any family that aspired to middle-class domesticity. Within that definition, however, Alcott inserted several ambiguities. For one thing, she incorporated some of her father's notions of egalitarian marital relations, leaving open the question of just how much equality was desirable. She likewise emphasized the desirability of

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<sup>3</sup> Marc McCutcheon's dictionary of the 1800s quotes T.C. Grattan's Civilized America and Edward Martin's Secrets of the Great City descriptions of living arrangements in urban and industrial areas. Their then current (nineteenth-century) observations are strikingly similar to many of the points Christine Stansell makes in her 1987 study of women in New York.

education for women without suggesting that they take their education outside of the home. She made fun of the ostentation of upper middle-class attitudes about propriety while representing middle-class notions of propriety as the more desirable norm. Women, obviously, worked outside the home, but that work was treated as a temporary aberration rather than normative. Alcott allowed Jo, as a relatively young woman, the freedom to play the "tomboy," but ultimately she had to make Jo a wife and the mother of sons to legitimate her expression of the 'masculine' side of her nature as an adult.

These ambiguities can be read as anything from simple questioning of the status quo to radical suggestions for social reform, particularly in gender-related issues. Nevertheless, the text is clearly grounded in idealized and relatively conservative nineteenth-century social and cultural norms. The fact of these ambiguities, along with a very comfortable and relatively stress-free, representation of the family, allows for easy translation of the story into later ideologies of society and the family. The lack of distinctive external markers is another factor easing this transition, as is the simplicity of the plot. The multitude of anecdotes makes adaptations easy, as does the fact that there is little in the way of linearity in the telling of the story. Thus, most of the incidents can be arranged, or rearranged, to suit the dramatic fancy of the playwright or screenwriter. This ease of transition from one time period to another results in a text that brings nineteenth-century thought into the present with little or no sense of anomaly arising in the reader of the text. The several film adaptations to be discussed will demonstrate this more clearly.

The novel itself ends in rather a rush in the last chapter with Jo and the Professor marrying, opening a boarding school for boys, and having two sons of their own – all in the space of ten pages. The last scene in the book is of all the March sisters and their families gathered at Plumfield to harvest apples with the boys from the school. None of this chapter is included in the film versions of the story; omitting it establishes the romantic nature of the film versions by keeping the focus at the end of these films on Jo's and the Professor's love for each other. It also avoids the difficulty of fitting the atypical Bhaer household/school into the private family protocol so painstakingly established in the other forty-six chapters of the book and later so faithfully rendered on screen.

## Chapter 2

### Unto the Third and Fourth Generation

In 1933 Little Women was made into a sound film for the first time. The film opens with the image on screen of an avenue of oaks leading to a spacious home – not a mansion, of course, but a comfortable, private space at the end of a long drive. The musical score playing during the opening credits has a vaguely Stephen Foster sound to it, as if it should be familiar, yet it is not. (The title of the music is, appropriately, “Josephine.”) Within moments of the beginning of the film, anyone familiar with the story will realize that things on the screen are going to be different from things in the novel. Aside from the necessary changes to the story that any adaptation of a novel to film will entail, the director and/or screenwriters have aurally and visually changed the venue of the story. The novel is set in Concord, Massachusetts during the Civil War. The avenue of oaks, however, belongs to the plantations of the South, as does the Stephen Foster sort of music which recalls strains of “The Old Folks at Home.” Since the story opens on Christmas Eve, a light snowfall is added as the credits roll, re-placing the story in Concord, complete with snow and a very New England-style of middle-class cottage.

There seems to be no reason for the dislocation evidenced in the opening of this Oscar-winning screenplay; however, one possibility that suggests itself is that the studio wanted to be sure the film did not offend any potential moviegoer, North or South. In 1933 there were still living veterans of the Civil War, and many

Southerners still harbored ill-feelings about that conflict.<sup>1</sup> As the fourth generation incarnation of an extremely popular story, and as an adaptation from a novel, it was easy enough for screenwriters and director to blur the distinctions and keep the focus on the story of the girls and their mother. Of course, other explanations are possible, but tying North and South together in the opening certainly proclaims a national unity that the original did not, a unity that was severely taxed by the Depression. Alcott never discussed the politics of the war in the story, but her depiction of a family stressed by the separation caused by war would have made the war very present to her original readers. By the fourth generation of readers – and now viewers – of the story, the Civil War was not as present as it had been in 1868. Nevertheless, it was not as far removed from them as it is from present day audiences. Blurring the markers distinguishing North from South only made sense.

One reason the conflation of venues worked is that the film was an adaptation of a novel. Many viewers of the film would have read the novel, a fact that works both to the advantage and to the disadvantage of the adapters. For example, a particular viewer's recollection of the descriptions in the novel may not include an avenue of oaks, primarily because there is no specific description of the environs surrounding the March home; but the possibility of such a stand of trees certainly exists. So it would be easy enough for a viewer to accept the image as "accurately" portraying the way the drive up to the March house looked. A viewer could, however, as easily reject the image, thus refusing to suspend

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Writer's Project interviews include several with veterans or the children of veterans that were recorded between 1936 and 1940.

disbelief sufficiently to be drawn in to the writer's vision. Nevertheless, the comfortable home at the end of the avenue is unmistakably of New England provenance. Whether it looks the way a viewer might expect it to look, it resonates with other homelike images – ads in magazines, pictures in story books, house plans in newspapers, for example. The mix of images offers virtually every viewer some idea of home to connect with.

This opening is as much a part of the adaptation of the novel as the dialogue and action in the film proper. Where novels can spend pages describing settings, a film must accomplish description with images and sound; in this case the images and sound help place the story in a specific “home” even though there is only the most cursory description of the house in the novel. Willemen identifies language as having primacy among “all other systems of communication” and that, as a result, “verbal signifiers are present in, and have a structuring effect on, the very formation of images (camera angles, the figuration of characters and events in narrative film)” (27-8). These verbal signifiers function here to make the image of home in the film serve as a trope for home for the audience.

Part of the artistry of translating a novel to the screen involves realizing visually what had been available only verbally, something this opening accomplishes. Another part of that artistry involves making a story written for a particular audience (in this case, adolescent girls) appeal to a larger, more diverse audience that includes women (as well as men) older than eighteen. Some of the factors that gave the novel broad appeal work for the film as well:

the little women act older than their purported ages; they are allowed a great deal of personal freedom; they deal effectively with real life issues; they are portrayed as intelligent people who are respected by the men in their lives; and they manage all of this while retaining their femininity. Most of these ideas make their way into the film, although the perspective is often different from that in the novel.

The film was produced in 1933 by Merian C. Cooper for RKO/Radio and directed by George Cukor. The screenplay was written by Sarah Y. Mason and Victor Heerman. Marmee was played by Spring Byington, Meg by Frances Dee, Jo by Katharine Hepburn, Beth by Jean Parker, and Amy by Joan Bennett. Other characters included Douglass Montgomery as Laurie, Henry Stephenenson as Mr. Laurence, John Davis Lodge as John Brooke, Paul Lukas as Professor Bhaer, and Edna May Oliver as Aunt March.

The film begins with a scene showing Marmee at work at the United States Christian Commission, and Jo is first shown reading to Aunt March. Aunt March gives Jo one dollar each for herself and her sisters as a Christmas gift, and Jo hurries home to share the good fortune. The sisters plan what to do with their money and then begin to practice Jo's play for the party they are planning for Christmas day when Marmee arrives with a letter from Father. The letter makes each of the girls decide to be unselfish about Christmas and give Marmee gifts instead of buying things for themselves. On Christmas day they give away their breakfast to the poor Hummel family.

From this point on, the story revolves around the various love interests that develop as the girls grow up. First they make the acquaintance of Laurie, the



orphaned young man who is the grandson of their neighbor, the wealthy Mr. Laurence. Through him, Meg meets Mr. Brooke, whom she later marries. Meanwhile, Laurie develops a strong romantic attraction for Jo, which she rejects. He goes off to college and then to Europe where he meets Amy who is traveling as Aunt March's companion. Jo goes to New York to try her hand at a writing career and there meets Professor Bhaer, whom she eventually becomes engaged to. While she is in New York, Beth becomes seriously ill and Jo returns home to help nurse her. Beth dies, and Jo writes her first really good work, which Professor Bhaer manages to get published. He comes to Concord to give her the book and when the two of them meet, he stumblingly proposes to Jo and she accepts. Here the film ends, with the Professor going home with Jo.

True-to-the-book school of film adaptation critics will always be disappointed in a film adaptation because the film cannot ever "show" all that the novel includes. Brian McFarlane notes that each reader of a novel will bring a different image of that novel's contents to his or her reading of the film – just as the screenwriter and director will – and that the best of adaptations are bound to displease as many people as they please. The essence-of-the-story critics will inevitably be disappointed because every reader's "essence" will necessarily differ from other readers' versions (8-11). The degree of difference will determine the level of dissatisfaction, but no one reader will ever be fully satisfied with someone else's interpretation of a novel become film. Thus each film version of Little Women must traverse the gulfs both of time and of prior incarnations, whether on paper, on film, or in the reader's or viewer's mind. Later film versions

of Little Women necessarily appear to “adapt” earlier film versions as well as the novel itself. Later versions are also subject to the social and cultural realities of the era when they are produced, resulting in period-specific adaptations of the story.

Considering the 1933 film version of Little Women as an entity unto itself, additional insights present themselves. The most obvious reason for depicting the avenue and the house at its end is to create the sense of a safe and secure home. The trees of the avenue are old; they speak, visually, of stability and a long-term commitment to their care. The house is charming, inviting, a place that can rightfully be someone's home. The music, with its sweet, old-fashioned sound played on violin, is evocative of old, familiar things, such as one's own home or memories of someone who might have played or sung such music. In a very few moments of film time, the director has engaged the audience, creating in them the desire to enter this archetypal home and to engage with its inhabitants. These elements would undoubtedly have been reassuring for audiences who were all too well aware of the fragile hold on stability they themselves had during the Depression year of 1933. As Dixon Wecter observed in his 1948 history of the Depression, “Those who still clung to jobs or oscillated between spells of work and idleness were haunted by the same bogey of insecurity” (33). In the language of this particular film, the still picture behind the rolling credits becomes an anchor, reminding the audience of what they would like to remember – a golden past with a warm and welcoming family home. Indeed, one contemporary commentator noted that the film itself depicted

“hardship test[ing] the good, sturdy traits of character possessed by the men and women who had to rebuild a stricken nation” and continued with the idea that “[p]ossibly the theme finds its analogy in the need of people today for the strength of character with which to meet the demands of more modern times” (Noble 213) – times that included mass unemployment and the specter of poverty.

The idea of family created by the film’s opening sequence mirrors precisely that idea as it is presented in the novel. Despite the hardships the Alcotts actually lived through, Little Women portrays a very stable environment where no one need fear losing her home or her place in that home. That stability is only threatened when the members of the household assume new roles and move into other households. Thus the film shows, later, that Jo’s greatest distress, aside from Beth’s death, results from Meg’s marriage disrupting this harmonious arrangement. However, the basis of the film remains the family anchored in the family home.

The action of the film begins with Union soldiers marching through Concord to a martial setting of “Jesus Loves the Little Children.” In much the same way that the avenue of oaks described above helped to blur the divisions between North and South, this conflation of a Sunday school song serving as a marching tune for an army unit tends to sanitize the notion of war and fighting. The implication is that these soldiers intend to protect “all the little children of the world,” rather than to engage in the business of war. Following the soldiers, the viewer comes upon the United States Christian Commission where Marmee is

working on Christmas Eve giving what aid and comfort she can to soldiers and their families. It is here that mention is first made of the terrible cost of war when an old man comes in looking for an overcoat so that he can visit the last of his four sons who is dying in a hospital in Washington. Marmee finds him a coat and also generously gives him some cash for the journey. The screenplay also gives her the first of the many little [morality] speeches in the film.

She tells her co-worker that she is ashamed of how little she contributes to the war effort compared to the old man who has just left – on the surface, a simple statement of sentiment. On another level, though, it easily fits the rhetoric of the day, intimating that everyone could do more than they were doing to make things better simply by sacrificing a little more. During a time of crisis such as the Depression, sentiments like Mrs. March's helped viewers retain their belief in the efficacy of individual effort. Additionally, Marmee is exercising her womanly responsibilities by giving the old man some extra help and by sounding a call to action that any woman could respond to. This particular scene is only reported in the novel; in fact, aside from this incident, Marmee's work outside the home is only alluded to, never experienced, except for the time she and the girls give away their Christmas breakfast. By adding the opening sequence, from the soldiers through the fade from the Christian Commission, the director and screenwriters have established a much more direct connection with the outside world than the novel portrays. This seems fitting at a time when the realities of the outside world were making themselves felt inside the homes of even the relatively comfortable middle class. At the same time, the film reinforces the

notion that women have a special capacity for nurturing, a nineteenth-century notion that is here reinvented to fit the sensibilities of the 1930s.

Jo March explodes into this fairly predictable environment, apparently bent on the complete renovation of all rules of etiquette and behavior applying to young women. She dusts Aunt March's banister by sitting on it and sliding down. When she meets her sisters on the way home, she insists on hailing and waving at the neighbor boy who is watching from his window. Once home, she chooses to jump the fence rather than walk through the gate. Inside the house, she stands in front of the fire and warms her backside in a fashion reminiscent of men holding their split-tail coats open while they stand before the hearth. When Meg tells Jo that she ought to behave more like a lady, now that she has "turned her hair up," Jo rips the pins out of her hair and lets it fall over her shoulders. Clearly, this is a young woman straining against the rules of behavior that bound her life; yet she also a young woman who wants very much to please her parents. Again, in this sequence the screenwriters combine elements of description from the novel combined with scenes of their own invention (Jo does not slide down the banister at Aunt March's house nor does she jump the fence at home) to create Jo's persona. The tomboyish behaviors tend to modernize Jo while the sentiments her sisters express during the sequence promote the nineteenth-century values and sensibilities the novel promotes.

The next sequence prepares the way for the signature *mise-en-scène* of the film version of Little Women, one that is repeated in one form or another in virtually every later film incarnation of the story, a scene that is copied directly

from the description in the novel. All of the girls are home from their various enterprises and are awaiting Marmee's return. After some sibling sparring, the girls heed Beth's cautionary statement: "Birds in their little nest agree." Not necessarily accurate zoologically, it nevertheless serves to make the point that the family is supposed to serve as a haven from the stresses outside the home. This is one of many "utopian" moments in the film – and in the novel. The mere reminder that they ought to be loving and considerate of each other is enough to make the group harmonious again, something even Eleanor Roosevelt promoted during the Depression, noting: "In spite of everything, it is the homes of America which still form the basis of our civilization. [ . . . ] if families keep their love and affection for each other, and will try to be tolerant and understanding of each other's problems, in the end, I think our civilization will not suffer" (Women 259). In the film, the table is set for tea, Marmee's slippers are warmed by the fire, and when she returns she brings with her a letter from Father. For this brief moment, the entire family is reunited, at least in spirit, and the stage is set for the "photo op."

Marmee is ensconced in her chair in front of the fire and each of the girls assumes her position around the chair, creating a sort of halo around Marmee. The result is the visualization of an American Victorian image of heaven: the sacred hearth attended by the angels of the house. The image, however, goes further. After hearing just a bit of the very moving letter from Father, each of the girls resolves to be just what Father wants her to be. Heaven turns out to be in the charge of "the Father," after all, as the girls each pledge to strive for the

perfection of person that Father has urged on them, not least of whom is Jo whose pledge to behave like a “little woman” comes in such striking opposition to her earlier behavior. Thus does an independent young woman fall under patriarchal sway.

The mise-en-scène, slightly altered, is reprised later when the women gather around the piano with Amy, Marmee, Meg on one side and Jo, still fighting the constraints of Victorian femininity, singing tenor on the other while Beth accompanies the evening hymn. After one chorus of “Abide With Me,” the scene fades out and everyone gets back to the business at hand – everyday life – ‘sanctified’ by pure nineteenth-century Christianity at work: the sort of home religion that put women both in competition as well as cahoots with the nineteenth-century clergy. This is one of the “church” scenes in the film, the nineteenth-century, Protestant American, home church. Family devotional books of the 1930s encouraged exactly this sort of behavior, complete with nineteenth-century hymns and prayers. Typical of these is Devotional Talks for women’s Organizations which urged mother’s to “real Home Missionary work” with their own children, especially when those children were out of school for the summer (Ivy 30).<sup>2</sup> While the scene might seem to show something old-fashioned, it would not have seemed especially dated to moviegoers – particularly those who were members of Protestant churches. (The other home church scene is Meg’s garden wedding, a scene later in the film, with Father officiating and the sisters radiant all

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<sup>2</sup> This booklet is part of a collection of similar works with titles such as The Place of Help, Sparks of Truth, The Star Promise, and By the Still Waters published between 1925 and 1940. The collection is in the library of First-Trinity Presbyterian Church in Laurel, Mississippi.

round. In this case, though, the emphasis is on Jo's mourning of the passing of an all-female ménage rather than the Christian home.)

The image of family inscribed in this film is a masterful reworking of the image derived from the novel. Alcott's vision combined the Victorian middle-class sense of the propriety and privacy appropriate for a single family with certain progressive notions about the acceptability of women having ambitions that reached beyond the household. Nevertheless, her rendering of the family retained its patriarchal focus along with the roles inscribed for its female members: women were to create a physically and spiritually harmonious environment and eschew any activities that might threaten that harmony. The film, although it attenuates this vision of home and hearth, manages to maintain a sense of the primacy of the family while making the vision more modern.

Showing the girls at work is one of the modernizing moves the screenwriters make. Many women who would not or might not have chosen to work outside the home sought employment during the 1930s in order to maintain their households (Wecter 25-26). Since the sisters in Little Women were also forced to seek employment, viewers could readily identify with the screen action. The necessary changing of scenes in order to move the story breaks down the sense of the family home as the center of the girls' lives, but the girls' actions keep home a central concern. For example, when Jo is in New York, her letters to the family serve to keep her connected with home in spite of her new friends and experiences. In the film, the family is not mentioned as often as it is in the novel, but when the letter arrives telling her about Beth's serious condition, home



becomes more important than what she is doing on her own. In like manner, Amy's pleasure in the trip to Europe is lost to the same concern for her sister at home.

The difference between the novel and the film in this regard is that in the novel the references to home and family keep the action grounded in the home while in the film individual settings show the girls apparently independent of home – until a crisis draws them back. Part of this has to do with the exigencies of adaptation: It is not possible to provide every clue to the home tie in the film that is contained in the novel. Also, when scenes change, the visual images do not usually include reminders of home. The viewer is not likely to be thinking of what she cannot see, particularly if there is no aural clue to bring the image to mind. However, the relationships among the family are so well-established at the beginning of the film that, when home calls, it seems only natural that each of the girls would give up what she is doing and return. The home tie takes precedence over anything else that is happening so that, despite the portrayal of female independence, the women remain bound to the home. What the screenwriters have done is to translate the Victorian version of the private nuclear family into a twentieth-century model, retaining the sentimentality of the earlier version while portraying some of the realities of modern life.

Another of the modernizing moves the screenwriters make is to allow Jo to go on outings with Professor Bhaer, outings which are pure film fabrication. In the novel, she never goes anywhere in public with him except when Miss Norton, one of Mrs. Kirke's boarders, invites both of them out for a "literary evening." As

Anne Hollander notes: "No well-bred young woman of the 1860s would ever have gone out with a strange gentleman in a strange city" (100). The outings with Professor Bhaer, however, provide the opportunity for the development of a romantic interest many moviegoers would have expected. Viewers are made aware of the Professor's attraction to Jo well before she becomes aware of it herself. Having only the most honorable intentions, and realizing that he can't support a wife and family as he would want to, the Professor refrains from making any hint to Jo about how he feels. Here sentimental notions about courtship and male roles are overlaid on the modernized relationship Jo and the Professor have in the film, bringing more nineteenth-century notions into the twentieth century.

The most far-reaching adaptive move that Heerman and Mason make in this film is making the story revolve around Jo. Noble claims that "all the simple events that happen in this family are brought into the story for the purpose of showing their effect on Jo" (214). This is something of an overstatement, given the number of key scenes the other girls have and which do not affect Jo. The sequence dealing with Mr. Laurence's gift of a piano to Beth is one example. Jo first meets Mr. Laurence after he has overheard her telling Laurie exactly what she thinks of the old gentleman, based on his portrait hanging over the mantle. Rather embarrassed to have been overheard, she nevertheless holds her ground and wins the old man's respect. The situation with Beth is much different. After having come to Mr. Laurence's house for several weeks to play his grand piano, Beth makes him a pair of slippers by way of a thank-you gift. The gesture has a

tremendous effect on him, and he repays her thoughtfulness by giving her his dead granddaughter's piano. Overcome at his generosity, the painfully shy Beth goes immediately to Mr. Laurence's house to express her gratitude. The scene is a classic moment in film family-making.

In a long shot, the audience sees Mr. Laurence seated with his back to the door reading a newspaper. Beth comes through the door and comes forward at his gruff-sounding "Come in." As Beth comes closer, the camera also pulls in until Beth and Mr. Laurence fill the screen, Beth having kissed the old man on the cheek and he having pulled her into his lap. The scene is as close to a quote from the book as is possible:

I came to thank you, sir, for..." But she didn't finish, for he looked so friendly that she forgot her speech and, only remembering that he had lost the little girl he loved, she put both arms round his neck and kissed him.

If the roof of the house had suddenly flown off, the old gentleman wouldn't have been more astonished. But he liked it. Oh, dear, yes, he liked it amazingly! And was so touched and pleased by that confiding little kiss that all his crustiness vanished, and he just set her on his knee, and laid his wrinkled cheek against her rosy one, feeling as if he had got his own little granddaughter back again. (65)

In the novel it is clear that part of Mr. Laurence's hard-heartedness was due to his having lost his daughter to a man he deemed unsuitable, and part was

due to the loss of his grandchild. Beth, having entered the house, transformed it into a home again, something Jo was not quite innocent enough to do and that Laurie was too old to do. The notion of the redemptive child was not a new one; Jane Tompkins discusses Harriet Beecher Stowe's Little Eva; the saintly child who is "naturally" good and whose influence is effective on all but the most determinedly wrong-headed, and who must die because she is too good for this world (129). Like her literary predecessor, Beth seems to have a natural goodness; and, also like Eva, she is too good for this world and is dead near the middle of the story. There is a noteworthy difference, though. Beth actually complains, albeit mildly, on occasion. She also actively does good, something that Eva is too young and too frail to do. This agency makes Beth a more fully developed character than Eva; its depiction also makes the story more realistic. As is true for so many domestic/sentimental novels of the nineteenth century, Little Women is part morality tale and part realist fiction, and realistic portrayal of at least some aspects of everyday life could only make readers believe more completely in the characters who were somewhat like themselves. In like manner, the film shows Beth acting on her world in a relatively realistic manner. She is someone the audience can identify with.

According to Alex Neill:

achieving 'internal understanding' of another, be she a fictional character or an actual person, requires that I imagine the world, or the situation that she is in, from her point of view. She becomes the 'protagonist' of an imaginative project, a project in which I represent

to myself her thoughts, beliefs, desires, feelings, and so on as though they were my own. (185 emphasis in original).

Much of this internal understanding, or empathic response, is evoked in the film version through scenes like the one described above. Identification with the characters on screen is an important part of reading a film, and although the movie focuses more on Jo's development than on the other girls', scenes that feature the other girls offer alternative models with which to identify, thus expanding the audience appeal of the film.

Consider Amy's trip to Europe. She was making the trip not because she was wealthy enough to afford it, but because Aunt March wanted a reasonably refined companion. Amy's qualifications were sufficient middle-class gentility and a willingness to be pleasant to an old lady. Any girl with a middle-class background could envision herself in such a role, and any girl with aspirations to middle-class status could perceive this as a model for both appropriate behavior and for the rewards of meeting middle-class expectations. The lesson of Amy's getting the trip instead of Jo is not as apparent in the film as in the novel. Jo is, naturally enough, distressed that Amy is going in her place, but the moral of the vignette – that bad temper such as Jo is prone to can make one lose things one desires – is not completely clear. Instead the change in companions seems more a caprice of Aunt March's than a difficult lesson that Jo learns. Still, the notion that good behavior (i.e., middle-class gentility) can net rewards pervades the atmosphere, perhaps a sufficient message for an audience faced daily with the reality of bread lines and soup kitchens. Amy's gratitude for the opportunity

redeems her earlier materialistic behaviors/attitudes, establishing her later right to land a wealthy husband for the right reason – because she loves him rather than because she craves wealth.

Meg's life choice is even more “realistic” and attainable than Amy's; Meg marries the poor but honest tutor purely because she loves him. Her decision is rewarded with a comfortable clone of the life she knew at home. She lives in a sweet little cottage (something that is never shown in the film) and has, almost immediately, twin babies to fill out her home and her life. The joys and tribulations of the newlywed life are described in some detail in the novel, but little of this is presented in the film. What is added to the film, though, is Meg's opportunity, as the young and newly wise matron, to counsel Jo through some of her sorrow over Beth's death and to forewarn her that Amy may well come home engaged, if not married to, Laurie. But Meg is a little late with the intelligence, since Jo, reading between the lines of Amy's letters home, has already divined the budding romance. Jo is philosophical about her situation as a single woman, and Meg is presented as a woman to be envied since she is securely married and has therefore acquired the status and respect due a person in her position.

Jo's adventure in New York offers a somewhat different character type to relate to. Having obtained permission to leave the family nest, and having the security of her position as nanny/teacher to Mrs. Kirke's children, Jo is free to pursue her literary goals. She needn't worry about housing or food, both of which come with her job, so she can spend her free time writing; and she has free time because there are servants to attend to the daily drudgery of cooking and

cleaning. She writes for the popular press, and is pleased that she can make money to send home. In the most genteel manner imaginable, Jo is a single, career-woman on her own in the big city, and she is successful. The message would not have been lost on audiences: Working in the city is as honorable as working in a small town or on the family farm and single women can succeed just as readily as single men. Although there was considerable concern during the 1930s about women taking jobs away from men, a single woman doing the woman's work of caring for children would not have been a particularly threatening image. Even married women could relate to Jo's work with children as well as her drive to be financially independent. Self-sufficiency thus proves a virtue for women, a bit of film reassurance for married women who found themselves breadwinners when their husbands were out of work and also for single women who needed to support themselves or help support their families. Jo combines independence with being an artist, and at the same time is responsible for children, a most enviable combination of traits sure to appeal to women with ambition or simply a need for income who also had family responsibilities.

Because of her somewhat atypical behavior and her apparent disinterest in landing a husband, Jo is the pivotal character of this film. One of her functions is to reinforce for the audience the value of virtue. This particular function, however, gets a powerful overlay of patriarchal authority absent from the novel. In both film and novel, Jo chooses to give up writing for the sensational press because Professor Bhaer shows her how bad it is. In the film, she asks his

opinion of her writing and he lectures her about misusing her talent. Ashamed that her friend thinks badly of her, she renounces writing altogether, until she feels she can write something worthier. However, in the novel Jo's decision is only indirectly influenced by the professor. She doesn't seek his opinion, but she learns how he feels during a conversation about one of the sensational newspapers he finds in the parlor. Professor Bhaer declares the contents to be damaging to readers who don't recognize that artificial characters and stories with their lost fortunes and heiresses and murders and poisonings do not build good "inner" persons. Jo is relieved that he doesn't know that she is responsible for some of those stories (although the reader is made to understand that he suspects what kind of writing she has done), and in a bit of private soul-searching reaches her decision to quit writing until she can write about something worthy, that is, uplifting for readers. What Alcott had originally made an interior incident dependent on Jo's own good character and good sense is changed in the film into an opportunity for the audience to see that a woman needs a man to keep her headed in the right direction.

At least some readings of Little Women identify the story as determinedly patriarchal, and there is no doubt that Father is a key player in the novel, whether he is physically present or not. This centrality is somewhat less obvious in the film. Certainly, the mise-en-scène and resolutions that follow the reading of the Christmas letter from Father bespeak a household under patriarchal sway. However, once the scene is finished, there is virtually no mention of him until Marmee goes to Washington to nurse him in the hospital. When he finally is able



to return home, he is affectionately welcomed and then kept around to dress a scene now and then; and even then, he is not always present. After Beth's illness, when Jo wants to go away to New York, Marmee agrees to discuss it with Father – a discussion we never see. Nor is he present when Jo actually leaves. The only active thing he does is officiate at Meg's wedding to John. (Interestingly, this specifically church-related function, performed by an ordained clergyman, is placed outside of the "church home" in the garden, rather than in the parlor where Alcott placed it.)

Oddly, this "passive actor" is vital to the construction of the March home, especially in its film incarnation. He is legitimately unemployed, as were so many men in 1933, yet he retained his status as head of the household, a point that is unlikely to have been missed by the audience. At a time when the middle class faced the possible (and sometimes actual) disruption of their homes, a stable, genteel-ly poor home would surely have been a reassuring sight. Not only was Father legitimately unemployed, but also the women of the household were depicted as legitimately employed. Of course, when he returned home, the implication was clear, but never stated, that Marmee would no longer need to go out to work because Father was ready to re-assume his role. Also, once the war was over, Marmee's job was eliminated. And the girls each solved their employment woes in other ways – Meg through marriage to Mr. Brooke, Amy with a trip to Europe compliments of Aunt March and subsequent marriage to Laurie, and Jo with her governess position in New York.

As noted in chapter 1, when Alcott wrote Little Women, massive social change was underway in the US. The Civil War was only four years in the past and Reconstruction was still in process, masses of immigrants were concentrated in urban areas where they needed to be “Americanized,” and industrialization had created a working class unlike any that had previously existed in North America. Especially in Northern cities, immigration and industrialization created social change on a scale almost as extensive as the changes caused by war. Urban crime, city sanitation, living conditions for the poor, immigrant ghettos, in other words, the quality of life in the city, became a major concern; and the middle and upper classes had a vested interest in correcting these urban problems.<sup>3</sup> Particularly the newly emerging middle class sought to strengthen its sometimes tenuous class position. As the self-proclaimed arbiters of taste and morality (Stansell 66), and abetted by clergy who were learning under duress to market themselves (Douglas 117), women (and men) of the middle class undertook to correct the problems created by social change, and one of the most pressing was maintaining the class standing and the sanctity of the middle-class home (Ginzburg 211-2; May 4-5).

The boundaries defining home and family became, perhaps inevitably, much less permeable than they had been in earlier times, but in a dichotomous fashion. Removing production from the home effectively removed women from the workplace, at least insofar as that involved gainful employment. Instead, women became consumers of goods, who went out to shop in order to be able to

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<sup>3</sup> Christine Stansell's study of New York City epitomizes the kinds of problems endemic to most Northern cities that were feeling the effects of industrialization and immigration.

supply her family's needs and create the physical reality of the home sanctuary (Blumin 191). The home became the place to escape the stresses of the world outside, and the woman in it the became responsible for seeing that it functioned as that sanctuary; but she was also the one who had to go out into the marketplace to acquire the goods no longer produced at home. This constant crossing of the boundary between the inside and the outside of the home often made it difficult to maintain the physical distinction between the two, something which undoubtedly contributed to the development of relatively elaborate social rituals such as formal calling and sending tradespeople to the back of the house to make their deliveries. The ideology of the private nuclear family home grew out of social changes such as these. Serving as a buffer against the vagaries of life in a world whose most salient feature was its instability, the home boundary became the first (and last) line of defense against outside world.

In the 1930s, home boundaries were again a concern. Many families were forced to share housing, sometimes with their married children sometimes with unrelated persons or families (Wecter 29). A film like Little Women declared visually that the ideal of the private family home was alive and well despite the economic realities of the period. It didn't matter that many families could not achieve the ideal; what mattered was that families could believe in the ideal, could believe that the depiction showed how life should be, no matter what it was like in actuality. The ideal remained the independent, private family home.

Books and films such as Little Women served a reinforcing function in maintaining this ideal. They presented plausible scenarios of middle-class life

(even if that middle class was currently living in genteel poverty) along with just a touch of what might happen if something unusual chanced on the scene. Thus an Amy could marry the wealthy neighbor next door, and a Jo could write a first novel that proved immediately successful. Meanwhile, readers were given a treatise on proper behavior for women, that key to a proper home life. Having been ensconced as the angels of the house, women young and old were reminded in chapter after chapter that they had a special role in maintaining and reproducing this private family space. They were responsible for the moral atmosphere of the home and for its correct function, and all of this was reinforced in the film.

By 1933 the immigrant question had been settled thanks to the quota system. Industrialization was also “under control.” Although concerns over immigration and industrialization were relatively hidden in the novel, in the film they were effectively made non-issues. Industrialization had become a normal part of the urban landscape, and immigration was being managed. However, on the personal level, the primary social problem was the economic crisis. One result of the crisis was that multiple generations were forced to share housing, and according to Stephanie Coontz, it wasn’t a happy necessity; rather these “reinforced extended family ties . . . were experienced by most people as stultifying and oppressive” (26). One method for dealing with these difficulties was consuming popular entertainment. Comic strips such as Blondie, for example, depicted young families living on their own, usually without benefit of parental assistance and usually without grandparents in evidence. The extended

family disappeared from many popular expressions, and this was true for Little Women as a novel and on film. What was not always possible in real life could be experienced vicariously. Women could work 'freely'; the private home was private; the middle-class ideology of the private family could prove itself workable, even though it was nearly impossible for much of the population, under depression conditions, to achieve these things.

One thing that the film depicts, sympathetically to be sure, is class difference. The difference between the March home and the Laurence mansion, or even Aunt March's upper middle-class home, speaks volumes to the disparity between the wealthy and everyone else. That the relations between these social groups was depicted as amicable speaks to the American ideology of equality and, perhaps, to the desire to minimize the real class differences apparent in real life. The March household embodied what was truly desirable in a home atmosphere: close family ties, a solid grounding in the Christian faith, the freedom for family members to be themselves, sanctuary from the outside world. Part of the message, more evident on film than in the novel, was that, unless the wealthy exhibited these characteristics, they were personally bankrupt no matter how much money they had. The film also depicted the working class as part of this continuum, although somewhat less sympathetically than it depicted the "better" classes. The maid at Mrs. Kirke's boarding house reads the Volcano, where Jo publishes her sensational stories, as if it were high art. She also speaks with an unrefined nasal quality, the New York equivalent of a Cockney accent. However, she is clean and neat and, therefore, acceptable as a housemaid in

this middle-class boarding house. So even though class differences were acknowledged and, in the case of the working class, magnified in the film, there were no real boundaries between the classes evident. No one need envy anyone else, and all can live in harmony.

The final set of scenes in the 1933 film finds the entire (extended) family reunited. Meg and John are visiting Marmee and Father with the twins when Amy and her new husband, Laurie, arrive with Aunt March and Mr. Laurence. Hannah, the ever-faithful family retainer, is on hand to fuss about feeding everyone. Jo is napping in her garret when they all arrive, and it takes Laurie's presence to awaken her. This scene is an interesting twist on the sleeping beauty story. Laurie at first just watches Jo sleep and his mere presence is enough to rouse her. But there is no romantic kiss, just the chaste embrace of "brother and sister" as Jo explains to Laurie that she knew all along that he and Amy were meant for each other. Jo having thus settled the family mantle on his shoulders, the two of them join the rest of the relatives downstairs. Jo gives Amy the sister-to-sister version of what she just told Laurie, and all is love and light at home.

The only person missing is Beth, but the screenwriters work that one out in the last of the "home church" scenes. Jo is overwhelmed with joy at having the family reconstructed in the homey March parlor, but in her typically independent manner, she doesn't want to display her emotions in front of everyone. Instead she slips around a corner into the hall and leans against the wall. Clasping her hands together as if in prayer, she lifts her face heavenward and whispers her gratitude to Bethie that the family is all together again. The saintly sister, who had

learned her angel of the house role so well that she had to die, is now a direct connection between heaven and the March house. Jo's theme plays, hymn-like, in the background. However, this gathering of the clan is not quite complete because Jo has yet to be paired off with her soulmate. Nevertheless, the stage is set for the final addition to the household, Professor Bhaer, who will help complete the family circle.

When the Professor comes to the door and sees all the people in the parlor, he leaves Jo's book with Hannah and beats a hasty retreat, hesitant to intrude on Jo's company. This melodramatic "near miss" is such a staple of film language that the audience hardly bothers to hold its collective breath. Despite the fact that Jo has left the house and the Professor is headed down the road alone, their meeting is so certain that it comes as no surprise. Aside from the film's setup, there is the reader's knowledge that in the novel Jo and the Professor do marry. What would have been a surprise, a disappointment, and an occasion for audience outcry, would have been for the meeting not to happen. This was never a likely twist for the screenwriters to introduce. Instead they include a moment of commitment and a last laugh to close the film.

The moment of commitment is quoted from the novel (and repeated in later film versions). The professor asks Jo to marry him, all the while proclaiming his shortcomings, both social and financial. Jo, of course, is too good a person to be concerned with anything but his personal characteristics, and those are impeccable. When he says that all he really has to offer is a full heart and empty hands, Jo's response is to put her hands in his and say "Not empty now." The

one thing not in the script that is in the novel is that Jo actually kisses the Professor, a surprising omission in a romantic film – except that it makes the romance seem sweeter and more old-fashioned. In this instance, the film is more “sentimental” than the novel. Nevertheless, the Professor is sufficiently overcome by her enthusiastic response that he provides one last bit of comic relief by forgetting to close his umbrella on the way into the house, so that it turns inside out while he and Jo go in to tell the family their news. This scene performs a number of tasks necessary to a satisfying denouement.

First, it provides a clear statement about the importance of women getting married (particularly to the right man). No matter how happy Jo claimed to be now that the family was back together, she was decidedly more than happy once she knew that Fritz Bhaer loved her enough to want to make her Mrs. Bhaer. Second, it demonstrates that even the best man needs a woman to look after him, as evidenced by his absentmindedness about the umbrella. Third, it reinforces the importance of maintaining the sanctity of the home. The Professor would have been treated graciously had he come in earlier when Hannah invited him, but he would have been an outsider, no matter how good a friend to Jo he was. Coming in as Jo’s affianced, however, meant coming into the family as already part of the family.

Not only is the family circle complete now, the film itself comes full circle. After the final scene the theme music plays into a final still of the avenue of oaks leading to the comfortable home. Now the season is spring, just as it is in the movie; the music is back in major, and the still fades into the final cast list. The



final sequence recapitulates the nineteenth-century ideology incorporated in the film. The foundation for a good and happy life is the nuclear family home, which foundation will inevitably lead to other happy nuclear family homes. The concomitant messages – that women are responsible for the home and thus should center their energies there; that the home should be a haven for family members, especially the men who support the home; that a woman can contribute to her family's support without threatening her husband's authority – reinforce ideas established in the nineteenth century but in twentieth-century guise.

### Chapter 3

#### Once More, Into the Breach

Only sixteen years after the RKO version of the movie garnered the Cannes Film Festival best actress award for Katharine Hepburn for her portrayal of Jo, MGM did a remake produced and directed by Mervyn LeRoy. The script was a virtual clone of the earlier version, with only minor changes made by Andrew Solt, in collaboration with Sarah Y. Mason and Victor Heerman who had written the original screenplay. However, those minor changes made a significant difference in what the story was saying. Where the earlier film depicted essentially independent, self-reliant women (young and old), the later one played on the youth of the girls and their need for guidance from Marmee who was in turn guided by Father. The 1933 version portrayed strong women who were not averse to male influence but who were also quite capable of functioning without it. The 1949 version, however, was awash in the return to home and hearth characteristic of post-World War II America and the early days of the Cold War, a return that was marked by a revived patriarchy as well as the return of the soldiers who had been away fighting or occupying enemy territory.

Although the script was essentially cloned for this remake, the cast was not. Not only did they not resemble the earlier cast – with the exception of Mr. Laurence – they also did not resemble the descriptions in the novel. Instead, it seems that MGM was more concerned with star power. In this film, Jo is played by June Allyson, Marmee by Mary Astor, Meg by Janet Leigh, Amy by Elizabeth

Taylor (in a blond wig), Beth by Margaret O'Brien, and Laurie by Peter Lawford. Mr. Laurence was played by Sir C. Aubrey Smith, and Rossano Brazzi, an Italian, played the German Professor Bhaer. Casting for this film resulted in a voluptuous Amy who looked older than Beth, a Marmee who was so self-assured that she was almost smug in her wisdom, and a Jo who was diminutive but spunky. Physically she looked nothing like the tall, gangly Jo of the novel and the earlier film although she did display the sort of intense spirit associated with Jo.

Color filming was still a relatively expensive proposition in 1949, and its use was associated with grand epics such as Gone With the Wind or with lavish musical productions such as The Wizard of Oz. Little Women was neither, but it did boast a star-studded cast worth the expense. Certainly color film was meant to increase public interest in the film, adding to the visual value of the commodity. The interior scenes were particularly enhanced by color, where the sets, costumes, makeup, and lighting could be carefully controlled for effect. For example, much of the visual (and, therefore, psychic) appeal of the March parlor derives from its inviting colors and the way that the characters' costumes fit into the décor. The Society of Motion Picture Technicians and Engineers guidelines that Mary Beth Haralovich discusses, note that "the female lead has primacy in color planning" (64 emphasis in original). In this case five female leads must be accommodated at various times throughout the film. Color is especially effective when they are all in the same scene because the color coordination contributes to the sense of unity and solidarity the women share with each other.

Additionally, Haralovich notes, "color should contribute to unobtrusive realism" (63 emphasis in original). This does work in the interior scenes, but the exterior scenes were not so well-served because, for the most part, they were filmed on sound stages with painted backdrops and potted plants and trees. The background in the exterior scenes generally looked as false and flat as it was, imparting something of the sense of watching a stage play rather than a film (a nearly inevitable consequence of filming outdoor scenes in color on a sound stage). However, by 1949, film acting no longer relied on the mannerisms of the stage that had permeated Hepburn's performance in 1933. Dramatic poses, exaggerated dialogue, and sweeping motion had been replaced with close-ups and conversational exchanges intended to add to the realism of the film.

This more realistic acting style meant that even though the household depicted was idealized, the Marches could, nevertheless, be experienced as a normal family dealing with normal family concerns. Each of the women, "big" as well as "little," was revealed more by way of her spoken words and her actions, than by melodramatic poses. The modest home was old-fashioned but comfortable in a manner reminiscent of what grandmother's house was supposed to have been like. The tight-bodiced, full-skirted dresses played as romantic accompaniments rather than encumbrances, although they did retain some of their constraining characteristics, preventing Jo from playing boy's games (but not from being able to run as well as, or better than, a boy). Each of these elements helped make the antique story fit the modern sensibilities of 1949. After the somewhat Spartan clothing women had worn during the war

years, softer looking clothes with full skirts and fitted bodices were making a comeback. In women's magazines of the late forties, women were depicted as comfortably settled in comfortably furnished homes, just as the Marches had been in the late 1860s. Direct, straightforward communication – provided it was delivered politely – was expected from women as well as from men. In this film version of the story, apparently, 1868 was just like 1949 but without electricity and with long skirts.

The film opens with the same theme music as the 1933 version; the music is played, however, more in the big band style of the 1940s than the music hall style of 1933. The result is a tune a person could dance to, perhaps with one of the March sisters. Credits this time run against a cross-stitched sampler still of the little women outdoors. Instead of a picture that immediately evokes thoughts of the secure family home as in the earlier film, this still focuses on the girl-women, presenting them as wholesome, old-fashioned, all-American girls –the sort that any lucky man would be happy to have as wife and mother in his own home. Color serves to idealize this picture, adding to the romantic possibilities for the audience as well as the girls.

In this version of the story, as in the 1933 version, the screenwriters make full use of the episodic nature of the novel, freely mixing and matching scenes to suit their narrative needs. Indeed, the episodes themselves seem to provide some of the cutting for this story; once a scene is completed, the story can pick up nearly anywhere without disrupting the narrative. Nevertheless, the narrative manages to maintain much of its faithfulness to the book by way of the dialogue

lifted from the book, period-appropriate costuming, and visual references to such things as the illustrated newspaper to which Jo sold her first story. One odd result of playing on the episodic elements in the original text is that this film version mimics the format of the Hollywood musical: virtually every scene could serve as the setup for a song and dance number. Indeed, there is almost a sense of regret at the end of some scenes that there is no such display.

In 1949 the US was in a fairly comfortable situation. The woes of the Depression had been cured by the economic boost of arming for WW II, most of the soldiers were back home, and the baby boom was well under way. The single world threat was our former ally, the USSR, and to read the propaganda of the era, the best defense against that threat was the all-American home. Little Women, fresh-faced, straightforward, and out for nothing but good, served as the ideal prototype for that home. Only minor changes to the 1933 screenplay transformed that tale of independence, female independence in particular, into a tale of home retreat (removing this film version even further from the subtexts in the novel than the earlier film had been) creating a very neatly “contained” story. Alan Nadel’s reflections on the post-war years, Containment Culture, outlines myriad ways that Americans withdrew into the confines of their homes, and Little Women’s focus on the nineteenth-century version of the private, middle-class household was a perfect vehicle for reinforcing the wisdom of such a retreat. Indeed, the interior scenes in the March home were set up to reinforce the idea that the most important things in life could only happen at home.

The minor changes to the original screenplay noted above included one that was especially effective in this regard. As few scenes as possible take place outside the March home. The few that do are included as much for the contrast they provide to the atmosphere of that worthy establishment as for the development of various plot lines. The scenes are also clearly focused to insure that the characters retain their solid grounding in the home. The suburban setting of the original story also helps reinforce the modern sense of the importance of the private middle-class home, a sense that was evident in “the justification for the postwar housing boom [that] was part of a one-dimensional frame of mind that stressed the possibility of creating the perfect society” (Clark 171). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, many new subdivisions were being developed, well away from urban centers; that distance was reflected in the film and treated as a most desirable way of life.

Significantly, the audience never sees Marmee at work, providing aid and comfort to soldiers and their families. Her work is only indirectly addressed in the novel, but the 1933 screenplay showed Marmee at her job. Not only could she distribute goods, but she was also able to provide much needed cash to an old man in need. This demonstrated her “ability to act, to act as an individual, to have an impact on others in what the nineteenth century called the public – by which it meant white male – sphere” (Harris 273). Harris defines this ability to act as power, and by 1949 power had been effectively restored to the white males who had come home after the war. So Marmee is not connected with the world beyond the home by showing her in the public sphere. Instead, at the beginning

of this film version, all the girls but Jo are at home waiting for Marmee, just as they are in the novel. In a single stroke the film is made more true to the novel at the same time that it subverts the notion of female empowerment the novel presents. Similarly, rather than showing Jo at work in Aunt March's house, the audience sees her first as she returns home from an ice skating outing. These two moves help to center the action of the film immediately in the home, a focus of the novel that does not come across as clearly in the earlier film. In this version, Jo has not yet begun her employment as Aunt March's companion and so is still a carefree late adolescent free to entertain herself in the afternoon. This break with the novel helps establish the girls and women as home-focused with, apparently, little interest in the world outside.

As in the earlier film, instead of walking through the gate, Jo tries to jump the fence and falls flat on the ground. Her pratfall makes the girls laugh, even prim Meg, and that is all the challenge Jo needs to go out through the gate and attempt the jump again, this time successfully. Once inside, Jo is again chided for not behaving like a lady.

While June Allyson's Jo responds the same way Jo did in the earlier film, her performance lacks the fervor of Hepburn's and instead suggests irritation or the petulance of an adolescent girl who is not ready to quit being a child but who nevertheless wants to be an adult rather than the desire to somehow break out of the social constraints of her class and gender position. This is the first place where Jo's character on screen diverges from Jo's character in the novel, despite the fact that the screenplay here is identical to the 1933 original. Two reasons for



this change are apparent. First, Jo is being played by an all-American girl-next-door type, the sort in the late 40s and early 50s who could play softball in the afternoon and serve cocktails at seven. Second, the director plays on the vision of women promoted after the second world war as well-rounded, selfless, and committed to domesticity. Jo's discontent fit quite readily with what Eva Moskowitz terms "a discourse of discontent" evident in women's magazines between 1945 and 1965 (67). While women were supposed to find complete fulfillment at home, the magazines Moskowitz examines "documented on an unprecedented scale the difficulty women had in finding satisfaction in their homes and personal lives" (78). Jo could easily be perceived as figuring this domestic discontent, despite her supposed youth in the film. Nevertheless, she manages find the solution to her problems within her home and family. Allyson's Jo is played as a thoroughly charming, all-American young woman who displays none of the overlay of gentility or awareness of class position that Hepburn's Jo evoked.

With the girls all gathered in the parlor, the interaction among them begins exactly as it does in the novel and in the earlier film – at home complaining about there being no presents to make this Christmas a real Christmas. The scene continues with the rehearsal for Jo's play and Marmee's return with the letter from Father. Here the screenplay takes an interesting twist. The girls all gather around Marmee's chair to hear the letter, but the activity is interrupted by Aunt March's arrival with Christmas money for the girls. In a flurry of consumer-driven desire, the girls obtain permission from Marmee to go off at once to the store to

buy themselves Christmas gifts. The scene closes on the open letter lying on the arm of the chair, unread and forgotten. That the letter is unread makes Father's presence almost palpable; he is present in spirit, ready to guide his family, and they have all dispersed, intent on their own selfish desires.

When they return and the presents are all laid out under the tree, the girls finally gather around Marmee, again in the signature *mise-en-scène*, to hear what Father has to say. This time there are no tearful resolutions spoken. Instead, each of the girls reflects silently on the missive, a reflection that is more pointed because Marmee is called away at that point to provide charity to the Hummels. One by one the girls pick up their gifts, resolved to exchange them for gifts for Marmee. They have internalized the message from Father and observed Marmee's exemplary behavior; thus they are able to overcome themselves enough to be selfless, part of the "true" meaning of Christmas that they had momentarily forgotten. All it took was Father's admonition rather than Mother's permission to make clear what they needed to do. As in the 1933 film, "it is the spirit of the absent father that is evoked as the basis for all activity" (Kuntz 989). When Marmee returns later that evening and finds their gifts for her under the tree, she is appropriately touched, satisfied that her girls have demonstrated their ability to behave as good women should.

For all the motherliness that Mary Astor exudes as Marmee, it is a pragmatic, almost self-absorbed, motherliness, one that is as self-satisfied as it is satisfied in her children's behavior. This portrayal of Marmee is more accurate than that in the earlier film in that it is more akin to the kind of portrayal of women

in domestic/sentimental novels which Joyce Warren discusses. These novels stress the importance of women and their place in the home and in them “[t]he concerns of women are portrayed as positive and redefined from a new perspective, where they are not seen as trifles at all but as important instances of human involvement and moral power” (7). Woman’s work was effectively “professionalized,” as an endeavor requiring skill, intellect, and training, even as it was circumscribed by domestic concerns.

The early Cold War version of wife and mother bears a striking resemblance to the nineteenth-century True Woman, one reason that Mary Astor’s *Marmee* is so similar to the one in the novel. In her analysis of nineteenth-century women’s periodicals and gift books, Barbara Welter says “[t]he attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman” (152). This is the kind of woman Astor portrayed in the film, and this is the kind of womanliness promoted by woman’s magazines of the 1940s. The 1949 Little Women promoted the same sort of ideology other elements of the culture promoted, and that ideology was simply the mid-twentieth century version of True Womanhood, the foundation for the private nuclear family. While “magazines normalized their readers’ feelings of discontent” (Moskowitz 69) with some of the restrictiveness of suburban living, marriage counseling columns also served to reinforce and report experts’ successful efforts to “impos[e] domestic ideology on their female clients”

(84). Astor's Marmee balanced the discontents with the ideology and proceeded to encourage her daughters to do the same.

In the next sequence of the film, the girls come down for Christmas breakfast and Marmee has already gone on a mission of mercy, having given up her own breakfast for the Hummels. She has left instructions for the girls to have breakfast and then go to church. This last instruction is a significant, although apparently minor, change from both the novel and the earlier film. In both earlier versions of the story, the few church-like activities described take place at home, a part of the nineteenth-century "home church" described in chapter 2. However, in 1949 the USSR was being characterized in the US as a nation of "godless Communists," and good religious training had come to be recognized as a part of the strength of character of the American people. The Christianity of the post-war era was treated as a political force as much as a spiritual one and thus had to be institutionalized in a way that had not been true before.

This re-institutionalization of religion was in keeping with a national culture that had retreated into the private family home while paying homage to experts – religious, psychological, economic, academic, political – who were supposed to have the answers that even the best household could not manage alone, answers about how to handle the modern era, about how to train children for an uncertain nuclear-ized future, about how to tell whether the new neighbor was a communist spy. The Church (in all its denominational guises), long a bastion of dogmatic truth, was the natural place to turn to for comfort and guidance. That meant taking worship out of the home and making it a conscientious citizen's

duty to take part in the private/public hybrid of the church service. Of course, the novel offered no real foundation for such behavior, thus the admonition to “go to church” and the subsequent justification for failing to do so. Here the nineteenth-century concern with good Christian formation acquires mid-twentieth century garb, a representation that allows for active Christianity while avoiding addressing doctrinal concerns – exactly as nineteenth-century home-focused religion did.

Despite the significance of the admonition to attend church, the audience never sees the girls in church. Instead, they do the more Christian thing of giving up their breakfast for the Hummels, as Marmee had. This accomplishes two things. First, the screenwriters do not need to create a generic church scene that might be read as favoring one or another denomination, something that would point up differences rather than national unity. Second, the girls' behavior demonstrates that the strength of the Christian US is its willingness to treat others in a Christian manner, something that was probably not lost on an audience that was also reading and hearing about US efforts to assist Europe in rebuilding after the war. Ultimately, the message brings nineteenth-century sensibilities into the twentieth century: women can do as much from home (i.e., provide practical assistance to the poor) to improve the world situation as politicians and statesmen can. The difference is that what the women do is personalized and, therefore, more obviously and immediately effective.

The fact that the poor family the Marches were helping happened to be German is something else that would not have been lost on a 1949 audience.

That they were poor and suffering from cold and hunger was not much different from the conditions many Germans in Europe were experiencing. In their weakened and relatively helpless condition, they were no longer a threat but were rather objects of pity. The Hummels served admirably as this pitiable trope, one that was so ineffectual that the ministrations of women and girls were sufficient to manage it. Amy's (Elizabeth Taylor) feeding bits of popover to the Hummel children gave the visit a comic twist; the children sat in row, like so many hungry fledglings, while Amy broke off bits of the popovers and popped them into their open mouths. While charming on one level, this image could only have helped to reinforce the idea that the Germans were a defeated, subject people. Even Beth's tender cradling of the newborn, which clearly demonstrated proper maternal instinct and behavior, was also a statement of power: Mrs. Hummel was too weak to hold the child. One is left wondering who cared for the baby once the Marches left. The German immigrants Alcott depicted are here transformed into harmless, ineffectual people who need be of no serious concern to true Americans. Immigrants and immigration have ceased to be an issue.

Despite these home-focused, self-contained episodes, the film concentrates as much on Jo's journey of self-discovery, her search for her unique place in the world, as it does on home and hearth. She turns down Laurie's marriage proposal, goes to New York to improve her writing, and later, as a means of therapeutic grief management, writes her masterpiece novel, a story about the too-early death of a too-sweet sister. Despite the individualistic character of these activities, they fail, in this instance, to ratify the notion of

female empowerment many critics have read into the novel. Each incident does serve as a part of Jo's self-discovery, but that self-discovery ends by firmly situating her within the conventional frame of woman in love and about to marry. First among these is her rather implausible rejection of Laurie's marriage proposal.

Even in the novel, this decision is rather puzzling, unless it is read as Jo's stand for female independence. Otherwise it becomes a somewhat clumsy plot twist, albeit one that must remain in the film unless the screenwriters choose to rewrite a major theme from the novel. Jo and Laurie have been as close as friends can be, sharing good times, hopes, and dreams with each other. Only child Laurie has been adopted into the March family circle, reconstituting for himself his own lost family. All of this is made possible by Jo's impetuous decision to get to know him and thus acquire for herself a boy to play with. Jo's actions might best be seen as a mild sort of adolescent rebellion, her desire to put off as long as possible the responsibilities of adult womanhood. With Laurie for a friend, she can romp in a much less ladylike fashion than playing with her sisters generally allows. Laurie becomes for her a surrogate brother. But for Laurie there is more to the relationship than familial restoration; he develops feelings for Jo that she, incredibly, doesn't notice or chooses to ignore until the fateful day of the proposal.

Her refusal (tearful because she knows she is hurting Laurie) functions as an additional instance of adolescent rebellion. She has already expressed her unhappiness over the way that Meg's marriage has broken up her happy

childhood family. Now she has the opportunity to develop a family of her own and chooses not to, claiming that she doesn't love Laurie the way a wife should love a husband and adding that she doesn't ever expect to marry. Although she is unhappy that Meg will be moving away from home, she is also concerned about the way that marriage impinges on a woman's personal autonomy. In part this is through observation of Meg's (and Marmee's) behavior; in part this recognizes the social realities of the nineteenth century, in part it recognizes the expectations of Americans in 1949. Once Meg has decided to marry John Brooke, she determines to create a perfect home for him. Her sole ambition is to make theirs an ideal marriage, and she has no aspirations beyond her own home. She has decided to do what Marmee has done, only better (although she never suggests this directly). Marmee has consistently demonstrated that, for all her awareness of her own intellect and her own abilities, she acquiesces to Father and looks to him for guidance. These are admirable nineteenth-century qualities in a woman, and they were back in vogue, and thus quite acceptable, in 1949. Jo's quest for personal autonomy does not fit this mode of relationship; she would like to marry someone – perhaps – but not if marriage impinges on her as a person.

Certainly this ambivalence mirrored the ambivalence many American women experienced at the end of WW II. Women who had been fully self-reliant and had been earning good wages filling "men's" jobs were reluctant to surrender their autonomy to the men returning home. Some women were glad to have husbands and fiancés back so that they could stay home and have families, but



some would have been just as happy to keep their jobs, with or without families added to the equation.

Empathy for Jo's situation could derive as readily from identification with her desire to retain her autonomy as it could from identifying with her concern for propriety and the probability – laid out so graphically by Laurie – that she would inevitably marry. Alex Neill's discussion of empathy in film audiences relies on just such identification. Neill notes that "the imaginative activity characteristic of empathy both presupposes and is constrained by belief. Not only does empathizing with actual persons involve imagination as well as belief, but empathizing with fictional characters involves belief as well as imagination" (191). This reciprocal activity draws the audience into the fictional world of the screen, allowing viewers to project their own feelings and ideas onto the screen characters and thus to "believe" in the reality of the dilemma facing Jo. One result of this empathic reciprocity is that the values inherent in the original story are reinforced within a new social reality. So even though the film was produced in 1949, it promotes the values of 1868. In part this reinforcement inheres in the story itself; in part it results from production decisions about what to put in, what to leave out, and whom to cast in the various roles in the film. Regardless of the basis for the ideology expressed, the net message is that women will only find true happiness when they find true (male) love and establish their own happy homes.

Before Jo can settle her dilemma, she must make a hero's journey of self-discovery, but she must do so within the bounds of nineteenth-century propriety.

Jo's trip to New York is a "safe adventure," something any young woman might wish to do and something any mother and father might be willing to allow a daughter to do, particularly since this daughter was going to be working as a governess for Mrs. Kirke – a safe job in a protected environment. Jo does have to make contact with some relatively crude individuals in order to sell her stories to the illustrated newspapers, but the rest of her experience in New York is bounded by the gentility of Mrs. Kirke's boarding house and the equally genteel boarders who live there. Jo's trip involves none of the realism of a Stephen Crane whose Maggie lived in the slums of the city. Instead, Jo spends her time exclusively with people of her own class. Rather than new situations to enliven her imagination, she encounters only slight variations on what she is used to in Concord: conventional people who occasionally do unconventional things. Her writing remains the same florid, sensational stuff she wrote before.

One event, the trip to the opera, was invented for the earlier movie and was retained in this and later versions. In the novel, Jo never goes to the opera while she is in New York. Instead, she and Professor Bhaer are invited by Miss Norton, one of Mrs. Kirke's boarders, to attend salon evenings where she meets some of the intellectual society of New York. The screenwriters replace this insight into Jo's intellectual development with the romantic interlude where Jo's heart is won by beautiful music. This singular incident, especially Jo's reaction to it, along with its references to other artistically focused outings with Professor Bhaer, is presented as insight into Jo's deeper, more thoughtful self, something that shows her artistic sensitivity. Nevertheless, these artistic outings fail to find

their way into her writing. While the film shows a modern young woman behaving as an independent adult, the subtext, as far as her relationship with the Professor is concerned, is that it takes a man to guide a woman's development, intellectually, artistically, emotionally. Jo's decision to cease writing sensational literature is part of this subtext. In keeping with the earlier screenplay, as well as with the post-war social emphasis on men's responsibility to look out for women who might not be able to look out for themselves, Jo gives up writing because the Professor tells her what she writes is bad for people, not because she decides on her own that she should use her talent for better things than sensationalism.

This is a significant change from the novel. In the original, the Professor does tell Jo his opinion of sensational literature, but he never directs his criticism specifically to her. Instead, he discusses the bad influence such writing has, especially for the less educated who have no way to know better than to indulge their baser natures reading such things. Jo takes his words to heart and struggles with her conscience on her own, weighing the bad she might be doing against the money she has been earning. Ultimately, she allows herself to keep the money for all the work she did writing the stories. However, she burns all of her manuscripts, and resolves to give up writing unless what she writes will be edifying to her readers. While the net result is the same in both the film and the movie, the message is decidedly different. In the novel, her more spiritual, womanly nature, her natural goodness, guide Jo to do the right thing. In the film, the wise man not only points out the error of her ways, but he also is given the voice of conscience that really decides Jo to give up bad writing. Rather than

showing the triumph of a woman over her own faults, the film shows a woman who needs a man to show her how to behave like a woman.

These two conflicting notions are endemic to nineteenth-century sentimental literature, and they are usually reconciled by affirming the notion that women are more emotional and men are more intellectual. Thus women's emotions need men's intellectual direction just as men's intellectuality needs the "softening" of women's tender emotions. This is precisely the message that the film promotes, and despite its nineteenth-century provenance, it made a comfortable fit with post-war desires for a return to a golden age of family, one where mother is the heart and father the head.

In the film, Jo's return home to nurse Beth could be interpreted as additional sentimentalism, and was probably experienced that way by modern audiences. Certainly, the mood of the early post-war years would have encouraged this home-focused selflessness and the attendant emotional involvement it entailed. As Hartmann notes:

Soap operas validated both the practical and psychological contributions of housewives; they also conveyed the message that the traditional female activities of helping others and attending to relationships were more important than the masculine standards that stressed success in the public world. While the daytime dramas confined women to conventional roles, they gave those roles some power, virtue and significance. (198)

Many films functioned the same way, and Little Women was no exception.

Jo's action, both in the novel and in the film, was as pragmatic as it was domestic. Modern viewers would expect a seriously ill person to be nursed in a hospital by professionals, but nineteenth-century nursing care was usually administered at home and was usually the duty of the women of the household. Thus Marmee and Jo were the designated care-givers; in the film as in the novel that care was rendered at home. The realities of housekeeping in the nineteenth century demanded as much work as two full-time domestic laborers could provide, particularly when nursing care was involved, but none of this was even hinted at—either in the novel or in the film. With none of the distractions of real life cooking and cleaning and laundering, the entire focus of the action could center on the emotional elements of the interpersonal relationships.

The expert doctor comes only to make pronouncements about Beth's condition, and Father and Mr. Laurence have no role in the nursing care Beth needs. The expert directs what the women do, the other men pace and wait, and the women do the work – a neatly ordered, patriarchal arrangement that obviates the notion of gender parity, even if that parity were understood in nineteenth-century terms of separate spheres. In the novel, the doctor is summoned to confirm the women's suspicion that Beth is seriously ill. In the film, he makes pronouncements about her condition because the women don't really know how serious things are and it takes specialized training to make that determination. Here, "woman's sphere" is controlled by the illness and the expert, in much the same way that modern households were under the sway of experts such as Dr. Spock with his advice on parenting and the psychologists who wrote marriage

advice columns for women's magazines. In the 1940s (and into the 1950s), experts were becoming ever more important in American culture, particularly those experts who dealt with the home and family. It was these experts who made determinations about how women should behave and what the ultimate consequences of their actions would be for their children and husbands. This attitude tightened constraints for women even more than the nineteenth-century notion of separate spheres. At least during the nineteenth century, women were considered “expert” in their realm of home. By the late 1940s, their expertise was reduced to what they could glean from articles in women’s magazines and advice books, many of which were written by male experts or by unmarried women.

Where Little Women gave moviegoers examples of “good” womanhood, Mildred Pierce (1945) is an example of a movie that “condemned two kinds of women under attack by experts in real life—the sacrificial mother and the career woman. . . . [B]y the late 1940s, women found significantly fewer screen models for female strength, self-sufficiency, and satisfying experiences beyond domestic and romantic life” (Hartmann 201- 2). Women who had been successful wage-earners during the war were confronted on all sides with images of women whose lives were constrained by, if not confined to, the home, the only place women should hope for success. Little Women in 1949 provided a comfortable image of the kind of success deemed culturally suitable for women. It sidestepped issues of female self-sufficiency in favor of romance and confined satisfying experiences for women to those they could realize from or within the home. In spite of using dialogue almost identical to the 1933 version, the

emphasis in this later film is on the thoroughly domesticated, romantically satisfied woman, not the one who could, and did, manage her home without male assistance when she needed to. By 1949 Jo, who epitomizes the independent woman in the novel as well as in the film versions, has become a woman in need of a love interest who will let her create her own domestic haven.

A turning point for Jo is the lecture she gets from the Professor about writing sensational stories. Without Father to guide her during her stay in New York, Professor Bhaer fills the void, assuring that Jo will not have to manage on her own. Jo is becoming “domesticated” even though she is away from home. The novel Jo writes after Beth dies adds one more layer to her ultimate domestication. Following the Professor’s admonition that she should write from the heart about things that she knows, Jo retreats from sensational fiction into domestic realism. In part, her trip to New York was about escaping from the typical constraints of the home, including getting married and being bounded by the woman’s sphere of the home. Her sensational fiction also served as an escape. Just as the woman-centered home creates a boundary, cutting women off from most active work socially and politically, so Jo’s retreat into home-centered fiction creates a boundary. Instead of being able to write about the great things a Goethe might expound upon, she dwells on the personal sorrow of losing a sister. The implication, based on the Professor’s admonition, that what she writes from the heart involves the same sort of deep truth or philosophy Goethe embodies doesn’t hold. Although she writes from her heart, she limits herself to what can only be considered a platitudinous discussion of home life

and home sorrows in terms of the modernist literary criticism informing notions of literary value in 1949. The title of the book, My Beth, establishes her work as a piece of domestic sentimentalism and thus not serious literature.

While Alcott's story about the March family promoted a domestic and feminist message in 1868, the second part of that message did not translate successfully to film. Sentimental literature incorporated a moral vision that was generally perceived by women of the nineteenth century as part of a continuum wherein the home and women's concerns balanced relatively equally the world and men's concerns outside the home. However, by 1949, this ideological split lacked the political and social puissance of the mid-1800s. Anything with the aura of sentimentalism or sentimentality hovering around it had been effectively devalued by modernist criticism. As Suzanne Clark notes: "It left women out of the literary canon, and it made sentimental into a term of invective. The modernist criticism also posed a problem for feminism which persists to this day, separating literary style from rhetoric and political practice" (34 emphasis in original). The sort of novel Jo writes in the film (and which she never writes at all in the novel) is sentimental grief therapy and is valued by the Professor because it is emotional rather than intellectual.

There is ample evidence that Alcott never intended to suggest that women limit their productive labor to the "women's work" of housekeeping and nursing. According to Ruth MacDonald, after the failure of Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands experiment (and his subsequent breakdown), Louisa's mother took on the responsibility for providing for her family. When she was older, Louisa assisted



with the financial support of her family (3). She held many jobs, including that of domestic servant, but writing ultimately brought her the greatest financial success. Writing allowed her to support her family, which she did for essentially all of her adult life. Alcott and her persona of Jo both managed, eventually, to maintain their families from within the home. Strickland claims: "Even her endorsement of women's organizations had its justification in the protection of the home more than in the alteration of the community. Alcott thus lent the power of her pen to the drift of opinion begun by the sentimental revolution, a drift that can be called the privatization of Utopia" (145). This privatized Utopia fit perfectly with a cold war containment mentality; what had in the nineteenth century been part of an understanding of woman's sphere as a place for the right exercise of power became, instead, a pretty reflection of the neatly bounded private family home. Alan Nadel identifies 1946 – 1964 as "peak cold war America" where there "was the general acceptance [. . .] of a relatively small set of narratives by a relatively large portion of the population. It was a period [. . .] when 'conformity' became a positive value in and of itself" (4). Ultimately, the 1949 version of Little Women tells a tale of conformity to a small set of middle-class narratives concerning courtship, marriage, and family; and those narratives were more restrictive in many ways than those Alcott had put in her novel. Their restrictiveness, however was mitigated by their presentation in a sugar-coated tale of love and marriage.

While there is little to suggest that Alcott would have approved of the modern two-wage-earner family, it is equally unlikely that she would have

approved of ending the story she had written with Jo and the professor holding hands and gazing adoringly at each other. While there was ample hand-holding as well as other sorts of “loving” in the novel, Alcott tied these activities to fairly unromantic notions of commitment and personal responsibility. The novel itself finishes with the Bhaers’ own experiment in extended family – Plumfield – the boarding school for boys wherein they put into practice the middle-class notion of improving individuals by exposing them to the influence of a good family. This conclusion allows for womanly efficacy beyond the home; the film version does not.

Where a film focus on the strength of the women in or out of the home worked in 1933, the realities of life in 1949 demanded a rather different approach. Women could still be strong, but they needed also to be able to easily accede to the needs/demands of the men in their lives. These same expectations were held for women in the larger culture. Even Eleanor Roosevelt, who was known for her support of women's issues, would write in 1944: “An ever-growing number of young women in every walk of life are taking jobs as they finish school or college, but the main job of the average woman in our country still is to marry and have a home and children” (“Woman’s” emphasis in original). In the late 1940s, only the exceptional woman was supposed to have interests beyond her own home, a notion evident in the film.

To reinforce this idea, Jo once more meets her Professor, by accident, after he has left her newly published novel with Hannah. Standing in the rain, under an umbrella, he makes his fumbling declaration of love and she responds

in the predictable manner. Holding his hand, they walk to the house as the rain ceases and a rainbow arcs over the happy Alcott homestead where the rest of the family are assembled. This dénouement leaves the audience with the promise of a happy future for Jo as a wife and mother, and unless the viewer has read the novel, he or she would have no reason to suspect that the Bhaers will have anything but a typical married life, the sort where he goes out to work and she stays home with the children. As noted above, the actual finish to the novel is much different from this.

So, instead of the domestic feminism Alcott wove into her novel, the film provides popular sentimentalism and romance subplots, making this Little Women a faint shadow of the original. As a contemporary reviewer noted: "Metro has managed to contain a pretty agreeable assortment of period fun and sentiment." Nevertheless, he finishes the review with the comment: "There is a perceptible deflation in the spirit of "Little Women" toward the close, which even a Technicolor rainbow over the home at the end does not dispel" (Crowther 2317-18). This is the review of a "nice" rather than a compelling story, which is what the 1949 film version is.

## Chapter 4

### Beyond Feminism: Little Women in the Postmodern Idiom

The 1994 film version of Little Women followed not only the two earlier Hollywood film versions but also several television adaptations - including a cartoon series and a British made-for-television film - an opera version, comic books, and audio books. With so many adaptations available to them, among the probable audience for this film, even viewers who had never seen a copy of the book would most likely have a personal idea of what the story was about; and since it was promoted as a truly new adaptation, viewers would be less likely to expect a version similar to the earlier versions, even if they had seen any of them. What they would reasonably expect would be Jo, her sisters, Marmee, and the rest of the cast to take them back to the 1860s for a bit of escapism. The audience did get to escape; they also got a heavy dose of twentieth-century realism mixed with nineteenth-century ideology along the way.

In the forty-five years following the cold war manifestation of Little Women, the US had experienced the Korean conflict, war in Viet Nam, war protest, student campus activism, feminist revivals, "white flight" and its concomitant new suburban development, and Reaganomics, just to name a very few key social and political forces that affected American culture. Many things called into question "traditional" values and beliefs, and this questioning made 1990s America a postmodern paradigm. Every value or belief was subjected to scrutiny under any or all of a set of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-factional lenses, and

charges of relativism and factionalism were leveled at anyone who either tried to make connections among the many factions or who focused exclusively on a particular concern. Perceiving American culture to be in a state of dangerous flux, some politicians, sociologists, and church leaders, among others, declared that the US was in a state of moral decay and that the cure for this problem was a return to “traditional” family values. Much of their rhetoric reiterated the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas that strong, patriarchal families were necessary for the maintenance of a strong nation.<sup>1</sup> The 1994 version of Little Women, while purporting to be a feminist version of the story, ultimately is a fairly standard, though postmodern, love-and-marriage-leading-to-a-happy-family film which ultimately reinforces ideas of the “traditional” (read: appropriate) middle-class nuclear family, complete with the restrictiveness associated with it.

This version was directed by Gillian Armstrong, noted for her films with a woman-centered theme. The screenplay was written by Robin Swicord who also co-produced the film with Denise DiNovi for Columbia Pictures. As in both earlier versions, much of the appeal of this film is predicated on its star-studded cast. Winona Ryder plays Jo, and Susan Sarandon is Marmee. Meg is played by Trini Alvarado, Beth by Claire Danes, and Amy by Kirsten Dunst (young Amy) and Samantha Mathis (adult Amy). Christian Bale plays Laurie and Gabriel Byrne is Professor Bhaer. The cast of attractive women who have appeared in other films rife with romance and handsome male leads promises a good, romantic story, an

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<sup>1</sup> Sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead, for example, argued that healthy families demanded a wife/mother be in the home – not working. While Popenoe acknowledges that the modern ideal of the family is only as old as the mid-nineteenth century, he argued that it is now the tradition and that altering that arrangement is, de facto, dysfunctional. Whitehead's position

expectation bolstered by quotes from reviews that call the film a “handcrafted Valentine” (Newsweek) and “a glorious example of the very best in Family Entertainment” (Sneak Previews) both of which grace the cover of the video version.

The romantic focus is established during the opening credits. Against a black background, intricate arabesques in white or blue actively curl around the still pictures and names of the stars of the film. In typical 1990s fashion, the stars are named but not the parts they play in the film, the implication being that the viewers are just supposed to know the actors well enough to figure that out for themselves. The musical score composed by Thomas Newman for this film is new, although it bears a striking resemblance to Aaron Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man”; Copland’s music is distinctly modern, and so is this score. For viewers familiar with this musical idiom, the music would feel as thoroughly American as the Stephen Foster style the two earlier films had used. For those unfamiliar with the idiom, the music would sound “classical” but not too heavy, making the score very effective as an aural aid to entry into a pre-rock and roll era of American life. The classical-sounding music is also an indicator of the romance to come; it is sedate but not so slow as to be boring, suggestive of hand-holding and hugging, those somewhat outdated, but gentle and respectful, modes of relating between men and women. The final bit of romanticism before the film actually begins is a brief clip showing someone putting a Christmas

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corresponds with Popenoe’s; her major concern is keeping women out of the work force so that they can devote more time to their children.

wreath on a front door. All these markers establish this as a film based on sentiment, and the opening sequence does not disappoint in this regard.

It is true that the opening sequence retains the sentiment promised in the opening credits; it also makes the statement that this is to be a realistic film. First, it shows Marmee returning home, kicking real snow off her boots, and being engulfed by her four daughters. The group retires to Marmee's chair where the signature *mise-en-scène* is established. In this version, however, the girls are not dressed in their lovely (if restrictive) nineteenth-century garb. Instead, viewers are treated to the more realistic picture of four young women ready for bed, complete with rag curlers in Amy's hair and long-sleeved white night dresses on all the girls. Father's letter is produced and read, but with little apparent effect except to make the girls miss Father. Almost as a non sequitur Amy admits to being a selfish girl, although she is no more nor less selfish in this version than any of her sisters. After reading the letter, the family sings Christmas carols and then they head up to bed, each carrying her own candle – another realistic and romantic touch. In the 1990s, candles do not represent practical lighting but soft mood lighting, reserved for special occasions, church services, and romantic moments.

Aside from the romantic nature of the film, this sequence establishes immediately that this is not a remake of the earlier Hollywood version. It is clear that screenwriter Robin Swicord has taken full advantage of the episodic and non-linear nature of the novel, changing details and freely re-arranging plot elements. For example, the novel, as well as the two earlier film versions, shows

the girls dressed, rehearsing Jo's play, and making tea for Marmee when she comes home. In other words, they are shown at home actively doing things and in a fit state for greeting callers, should there be any. Having the girls ready for bed emphasizes their vulnerability and, therefore, their youth; and in the late twentieth century, youth and romance are virtually synonymous. Another altered detail is the singing around the piano. In all three earlier versions, the song is a hymn and the net image is of the sacred hearth served by the angels of the house. In the 1994 film, they sing a sprightly religious Christmas carol not likely to evoke thoughts of religion so much as of angels and Santa Claus. The only other possible allusion to the sacred home, if it is fair to read it that way, is the candles the girls carry; this is, at best, an ambiguous symbol. Nevertheless, the final impression the opening sequence gives is of the private family home as the center of all things good, a safe haven that is proof against the ills rampant outside the home. Similar notions had long been reified in urban and, especially, suburban homes whose design offered room for entertaining guests but created, à la Frank Lloyd Wright, a private family area isolated from the outside (Wright 33+). (Actually, the Victorian parlor functioned the same way, keeping visitors out of the kitchen and the private family areas of the house. However, poorer households did not have the luxury of a parlor, often consisting of only one or two rooms where all household activities occurred. Then as now, class standing determined a family's ability to achieve the ideal of a truly private home.) By the 1980s and 90s this extreme privacy had translated into the development of planned communities with restrictive covenants and, more pointedly, into the



development of planned and gated communities. The comforting image of the March home evokes memories of a mythical golden past where neighbors need not lock their doors against each other, and viewers want to believe in that myth. Planned and gated communities offer the promise of a modern version of that myth; the film image connects it to its largely nineteenth-century roots.

Most of the incidents included in this film also appear in the earlier versions, but, as noted above, they are considerably re-arranged. The first Christmas simply shows the family headed for bed singing a religious Christmas carol. In this version the girls do agree to give their Christmas breakfast to the Hummels, but we only see them leaving their home, not at the Hummels. There is no Christmas play in this version. The fancy dress ball in this version is held at the Gardiner's, not the Laurence's. A key addition to this film is the incident involving Amy's burning of Jo's manuscript and Amy's subsequent near drowning in Walden Pond during a skating outing. Marmee is called to Washington, D. C., to nurse Mr. March and is again accompanied by Mr. Brooke. Beth's first illness and eventual recovery is conflated in this version with Mr. Laurence's gift of the piano to her and Father's return from the war – at Christmas. Meg later marries Mr. Brooke, Jo turns down Laurie's proposal of marriage, Amy gets the trip to Europe that Jo wanted, and Jo goes to New York. Swicord's script includes many more scenes in Europe than either earlier film, giving viewers a chance to watch the budding romance between Amy and Laurie. Another episode not in either earlier film is Aunt March's bequest of her home, Plumfield, to Jo. This film

finishes as the others with Beth's death, Jo's novel, and Professor Bhaer's proposal under an umbrella in the rain in the middle of the road.

In a review by James Berardinelli, director Gillian Armstrong is quoted as saying, "But [Little Women is] actually a wonderful epic tale about family where men's roles are just as important and deeply involved in the story." However, except for Laurie, who has fewer scenes than any earlier Laurie, and Professor Bhaer, who 'lectures' Jo intermittently, the other men, including Father and the doctor who attends Beth, share perhaps ten lines among them. The story is clearly about family, whether it actually qualifies as an epic or not, but it is about family as a female enterprise. Men are important in this version in the same way that they were in the novel – as the overseers who guide emotional women and thus keep the family stable, and as love interests for the younger women who have yet to begin their own families. The difference between the novel and the film is that men are even less visible on screen than in the novel. This would certainly tend to support a feminist reading of the film, except that the women are not depicted as powerful social actors except when they are exercising their feminine influence on men.

Other reviews contribute to romantic perceptions of the film. For example, Roger Ebert notes that "'Little Women' may be marketed for children and teenagers, but my hunch is it will be best appreciated by their parents. It's a film about how all of life seems to stretch ahead of us when we're young, and how, through a series of choices, we narrow our destiny." This reading adds a dimension to the film that can best be perceived by a parent rather than a child or

teenager. It is also a reading that raises questions about whose destiny is narrowed, since the focus is on the sisters and their choices (except for Laurie's European sojourn while he pulls himself together after Jo's refusal of his marriage proposal). If the film is about choices narrowing one's destiny, for women that destiny is quite obviously to become wives and mothers, after finding suitors who set the heart aflutter. Interestingly, Ebert's idea that adults will appreciate the film more than children echoes reviews of the original novel. Reviewers of the novel saw Little Women as an exemplary text that parents might use as a guide for their own family concerns, whereas Ebert's analysis appears to be a response to the nostalgia engendered by a film that looks back to a golden past. Part of that golden past includes the romantic notion of the happy family comfortably ensconced in a well-run home.

The gift of their Christmas breakfast to the Hummels demonstrates the "too goodness" of the sisters. In this film, the girls hear that Marmee had left early to attend to Mrs. Hummel whose baby was coming. Hannah's description of the sorry state the Hummels are in gives the girls pause and before they eat a bite they agree – without any discussion or disagreement – to take their breakfast to that poor family. They head out, on foot, singing a secular Christmas carol, "Here We Come A'Wassailing," while Mr. Laurence and Laurie are shown in their carriage on their way to church. What is interesting about this scene is that it excises any direct association between Christmas and religious faith, something that was very important in Alcott's novel as the foundation upon which the girls must build their own good characters. The too-easy decision to give away their

breakfast reflects “[t]he tendency to shy away from the more difficult moral questions that nineteenth-century novelists like Alcott regularly raised” (Marchalonis 266). Without the struggle between selflessness and self-interest, all that is left is the sentimental picture of nice girls doing a nice thing. This creates a sense of natural goodness in the girls, an idea that is quite out of keeping with the nineteenth-century Protestant understanding of sin and human failings. The audience gets the sentimental depiction of self-sacrifice without any explanation of the basis for their (now sentimentalized) behavior.

Marchalonis also notes that “this tendency by contemporary filmmakers, as well as literary critics, to reject or refuse to see the moral and religious belief that informs Alcott’s world and to impose current values and concepts on her texts goes to the heart of any real discussion of adaptation” (268). Leaving religion out of the picture, literally and figuratively, makes it much easier to modernize the story as well as to promote an agenda, whether political, social, feminist, or simply romantic. Each adaptation of Little Women moves not only further away in time, but also in philosophy, from the original. Yet each adaptation inevitably incorporates the sentimental ideas that inhere in the episodes used to retell the story. This is more true, in many ways, for Armstrong’s and Swicord’s feminist reading of the novel than for either of the earlier film versions, most likely because some modern feminist ideas are so similar to nineteenth-century sentimental ones, especially the importance of strong woman-to-woman bonds and the sense that women “know” things in a different way from the way men do. This may explain why screenwriter and

director incorporated no discussion about whether to take breakfast to the Hummels. The girls just “knew” what the right thing was, and they did it. “Knowing” of this sort is one of the most consistently applied nineteenth-century conventions in the film.

Two scenes in this version bear a striking resemblance to parts of the 1953 film How to Marry a Millionaire: getting Meg and Jo primed for the party at the Gardiner’s and packing Meg’s bags for her stay with Annie Moffat for Annie’s coming out party. Both are exemplary representations of female solidarity. In the first, when Jo inadvertently burns off a lock of Meg’s hair with the curling iron, Amy offers her hair ribbon. The girls have also raided the rag bag to find a pair of dancing pumps for Meg to wear. In the second, each of the girls and Marmee offer some supplement to Meg’s meager wardrobe, including sashes, ribbons, hankies, and gloves. Both recall the machinations of Marilyn Monroe, Lauren Bacall, and Betty Grable sharing a Manhattan apartment as well as one fur coat and one fashionable wardrobe among them with which they hope to snag wealthy men for themselves. As in the 1953 film, the sisters’ efforts are directed toward making Meg attractive to the young men who will be at the parties. The message is clear: women need to attract men and to do that they need to be suitably adorned. This was not a part of Alcott’s agenda, but it resonates with late twentieth-century sensibilities: relationships are founded on attraction, and women should do the attracting. In spite of Marmee’s mini-lecture after the first party where she says “I will not have my girls being silly about boys,” Meg and Amy continue to devote much of their energy to appearance and to assessing its

effect on the young men they meet. If marriage was the middle-class woman's ultimate goal in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth it is essentially the same. The only difference is that in its modern manifestation, attracting a man does not need to involve marriage, even though viewers know that it will in this film. Audiences also know that Beth will die before she can develop any such relationship and that Jo will eventually marry her Professor. Finally, they know that the marriages will be fairly conventional; this version does not offer even a suggestion that married life for the little women will differ much from Marmee's.<sup>2</sup> Their husbands will provide for them and they will manage their homes and any children they might have.

The episode involving Amy and her school demonstrates a dearly held American belief in action, the belief that children belong (rather in a proprietary sense) to/with their parents. Marmee, who disagrees with corporal punishment as a means of discipline, removes Amy from school and determines to have her study at home. This can work in the film because it is a manifestation of nineteenth-century social reality; but in the twentieth century, the state controls schooling more than parents do. While it is true that parents with the financial means can purchase private schooling and those with the academic and financial means can elect home schooling, the majority of parents send their children to public schools because they must. Their children have a right to education, and the state obliges them to get that education, regardless of what their parents believe. This is a logical outgrowth of the ideology of the individual; every

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<sup>2</sup> Audiences for this film will also have seen many years of television situation comedies ranging from "Father Knows Best" to "All in the Family" as models for the sort of conventionality the little

individual, even one with parents, has rights that transcend even the bonds and bounds of family. Anthropologist Hervé Varenne argues convincingly that the American ideology of family, based as it is on the ideology of independence, militates in favor of such a notion. Children are taught, almost from birth, to be individuals and to recognize their parents as individuals, and this separation is maintained in law in that “[n]o aspect of a family transcending the unit made by the marrying couple is recognized in legal documents” (421-23). The sentimental ideology of family claims its own transcendence, that of emotional bonds over legal ones – and this despite the fact that more and more aspects of family relations are determined by law rather than by attachment. Nonetheless, the film here affirms the primacy of feeling over any other characteristic of family organization, and it is feeling that assures that children belong to their parents, especially their mothers, a distinctly a nineteenth-century notion that informs modern ideals for families.

An incident from the novel included in this film version but absent from the two earlier films is Amy’s burning of Jo’s manuscript. The vignette includes Meg and Jo going off to the theater with Laurie and refusing to be sympathetic to Amy’s desire to go with the older girls on this special outing. Jo is particularly abrupt, almost mean, as she consigns Amy to the position of child, too young to go out for the evening. Amy vows revenge, and she exacts it by burning the manuscript Jo has been working on for several months. The next day, when Jo and Laurie go for a last skating outing before the ice is too thin on Walden Pond, Amy follows. Jo fails to warn Amy about a patch of thin ice, Amy falls through,

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women can expect.

and Laurie and Jo have to rescue her. Subsequently, Jo is remorseful because she did not heed Marmee's admonition the night before: "Don't let the sun go down on your anger," and her obstinacy nearly cost Amy her life.

In the novel, incidents like this one are intended as object lessons for the readers. They function to delineate the parameters of appropriate behavior and/or appropriate feeling. In this case, anger is a bad feeling which needs to be controlled, and that control should come from the strength of good feelings – love, especially. In sentimental literature nothing is as powerful as love; properly understood and properly applied, love amends all problems. However, love of this sort demands an interiority, a personal stillness, so that the individual can be receptive to love's influence. Jo's character in both novel and film lack this quality; part of the maturation process for Jo is that she acquire this interior quiet so that she can become a thoughtful adult rather than a flighty adolescent. However, in the film there is no perceptible change in Jo's character after this traumatic event. Instead, there is a reconciliation that barely escapes mawkishness before the sisters go on with business as usual. Rather than a step in Jo's growth as a woman, this episode serves as a vehicle for display of as many intense emotions as possible, once again focusing the audience on the sentiment rather than the story or any message the story might contain. Indeed, in this film version, none of the sister's appears to change during the course of the film, no matter what the provocation, except that they get older. The personalities they display in the opening scenes don't grow; instead different aspects of their already formed characters are revealed throughout the film.



Consider Beth. Throughout the film, Beth plays the part of the wallflower, nicknamed "Cricket," the sister who is "shy and quiet, sitting in corners till needed [. . .] that no one sees [. . .] till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping, and the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow behind" (Alcott 42). In the course of the film, Beth manages to hide, or be hidden, even when she is the center of attention, as when Mr. Laurence gives her the piano for Christmas. Almost overcome by emotion, she does find the strength to play for the assembled friends and family while the scene shifts from her to them. In the novel and both earlier films, Beth, the painfully shy, does the extraordinary thing of going by herself to Mr. Laurence's home to thank him for his kindness. Overcoming shyness hardly ranks as major character development; nevertheless, her behavior does indicate a willingness to act on her own, something adults must learn to do. What this film does, instead, is create a near-perfect "Hallmark moment," complete with decorated tree, lots of lighted candles, and people in holiday garb singing carols. Beth remains the child, perhaps foreshadowing what has already been suggested by her illness and long recovery – that Beth will die before she has the chance to grow up.

The shift in emphasis from one who acts to one who is acted upon plays on only one aspect of the sentimental, that of feeling, in this case feeling for a child who will never have the chance to grow up. It also plays on the twentieth-century hyper-concern for children and their well-being, an outgrowth of what Bernard Wisby characterizes as the idea "that only the pure and innocent could save the world" but that "the world might be too much for the pure and innocent"

(93). In the modern era that translates into protecting children from the world, much as Beth was protected by the boundaries of the March home. It is contact with the outside world that ultimately caused her death, after all.

When Marmee is called to Washington to nurse Mr. March, who has been wounded in action, she leaves the girls instructions to help Hannah and to mind her and to take care of the Hummels. Each of the girls is so intent on her own pursuits outside the home that Beth is forced, by the weight of her conscience, to go out to care for the Hummels. The Hummel children have developed scarlet fever and Beth contracts the disease after the infant dies in her arms. In the single sequence in the film where Beth acts on the world, the world, indeed, proves to be too much for her. She is permanently weakened by the disease, and later in the film dies because of another illness she contracts in her weakened condition. One of the tenets of sentimental literature is that self-sacrifice is a key component of female power, but it is a conflicted tenet in that self-sacrifice often leads to self-loss. So, while Beth has exercised her power as a woman, albeit a little one, she has also given up her own future, in much the same way that a woman gave up any sort of legal or social autonomy in nineteenth-century marriage. Although Beth never gets to marry anyone, she does get to give up any potential for autonomy. Women, in this film, are never fully realized individuals until they, paradoxically, give themselves over to others, whether to the men they will marry or to persons outside of the safe precincts of their childhood home. In sentimental literature, the trope of the redemptive child is a powerful statement of one of the tenets of domesticity, that self-sacrifice is a key

component of domestic power. Descriptions of women who fit the model for the goodness domesticity dictates are virtually indistinguishable from the descriptions of good children. Beth gets to be both in the film.

Of interest in this film version is the way the role of the expert is modified during Beth's first illness, which happens while Marmee is in Washington. The sisters hesitate to send for her because they know that she will have to leave Father to the care of whoever happens to be available, yet they feel helpless to do anything about Beth's condition. By the time they are ready to send for her, Marmee is already on the way because Laurie has sent for her. When she comes into Beth's sick room, she begins immediately to issue commands about what to bring in and what she intends to do – "draw the fever from her head." The doctor has done nothing that seems to have helped, but after Marmee's ministrations, Beth is revived and gets well, at least, well enough to come downstairs for the Christmas scene described above. There is a double message in this sequence, the net effect of which is to confirm that women have a place and that place is a home where there is a strong man. When the sisters are indecisive, it takes a man, Laurie, to make the decision that the girls cannot, thus restoring the mother to the home. When she comes home, where she is in her realm, she takes charge of the situation, accomplishing what even the doctor cannot. However, Marmee's decisiveness, while it indicates a strong, intelligent woman, does not indicate an especially liberated one. She functions within the confines of her own home, performing duties that were considered women's work. All the women,

young and old, are bound by their natures (emotional) and by their sphere (the private family home).

Perhaps the most notable “adjustment” is in Jo’s character; she is no longer a tomboy, just an irrepressible young woman. In this film, Jo does, indeed, scorch her dresses in front of the fire, and she does use slang. However, she never seems to be importuned by being a girl, just a little aggravated by full skirts from time to time although she does tend to make threats of violence against anyone who causes problems for her sisters. Thus, when Meg goes to Sallie Moffat’s coming out party and returns with town gossip about Mrs. March trying to set up her daughters with wealthy suitors, Jo has the opportunity for a rant. Where in the novel this incident, presented in the chapter entitled “Meg Goes to Vanity Fair,” serves as the vehicle for Meg to learn for herself the dangers of feminine vanity, in the film this lesson comes from Marmee’s didactic speech about beauty fading and how important it is for women to be educated and accomplished. Meg and Jo receive this speech as a reminder of what they already know. Their acquiescence subverts the opportunity for character development in this screenplay. Instead of learning a lesson, Meg and Jo just seem to “know,” in that peculiarly feminine manner, that Marmee is right and they have to accept their place in the grand scheme of things – married or not.

Marriage is Meg’s life goal, and she and Mr. Brooke do marry. This is one place where Father might have had a more prominent role as the minister who performs the wedding ceremony. However, the audience never sees the ceremony; Father becomes here only one of the guests at the wedding who

dance in a circle around newlyweds standing in the arbor and sing "For the Beauty of the Earth" (the closest thing to a religious moment in the film). Yet the purpose of the scene is not so much to exemplify the solemnity of the occasion as it is to give the lovely bride a lovely wedding. The hymn's imagery stresses the beauties of the physical world and the love with which that world is imbued, neither of which is clearly related to the responsibilities implicit in taking marriage vows. The responsibilities of marriage are subsumed by the romantic elements of the celebration: a bride, a groom, and lots of flowers and friends. The scene is not suggestive of the lasting nature of the marriage vow; rather, it suggests that the community – all those people on the outside looking in at the couple – will be watching to see whether they will be successful. Marriage is a compact between two individuals, but it has long been one which the community presumes to oversee, whether in the name of morality or order. In the film, it is clear that the couple may be able to establish a private home, but it is not clear that they will be able to protect that privacy from the outside world, a very postmodern concern dressed in nineteenth-century ideology. The world (family and friends) are outside; the newlyweds are "alone" inside.

After the wedding, when Amy is selected as Aunt March's traveling companion for the trip to Europe, Jo feels her childhood family slipping away from her. She becomes restless, although she is not sure why, and determines that she needs a change; Marmee arranges for her trip to New York. It is in this section of the film that the screenplay is most like, as well as most unlike, the novel. In the earlier films, the action in New York was played in fairly typical

fashion; characters came and went, having scenes with each other as the story line demanded, and there are plenty of such scenes in this film. There are also, however, several sequences where the audience gets to see the action on the screen with voiceovers spoken by Jo. This device both shows and tells the audience about Jo's experiences in New York. In the novel, the entirety of Jo's trip is related through the letters she writes home, keeping the focus more on home than on what Jo is doing on her own; and with the voiceovers, some of that sense comes across in the film. What also comes across, though, thanks to the screen action, is a good sense of Jo's individual endeavors. Her individual activity is further spotlighted by the dialogue and action that goes on in New York. Part of this individual activity is earning money by selling her sensational fiction; part of it is her "flirtation" with Professor Bhaer.

In New York, Jo allows herself the freedom to write the kinds of stories that she used to put into the family theatricals she and her sisters produced. Since her adolescent stories fit the sensational mode popular at the time, she had no difficulty selling her work and amassing funds to send home for payment of various bills and purchase of necessities (and even some luxuries) for her family. Oddly, this pursuit of her sensationalist literary career meshes almost seamlessly with her "flirtation" with Professor Bhaer. His critique of her work demands that she "sweep mud in the streets" rather than prostituting her talent – a decidedly modernist critique and one that classes her abilities with those of "great" writers such as Goethe, whom Jo admires. She also respects the Professor and, since they are not engaged in an intimate personal relationship –

they are merely friends – she is free to seek his counsel, which she does on a regular basis. He is seen at least once during the voiceovers leaning over Jo as she writes at her small desk, presumably offering editorial comments.

As in the earlier film versions, Jo attends the opera with Professor Bhaer, but this time they do not sit in public seats. Instead, they are seated on a catwalk in the wings. Not only is Jo unchaperoned, but she is also in a distinctly bohemian space, not just in a theater but in a section of the theater usually reserved for the persons who work in theaters. It is true that Alcott “trod the boards” herself; it is equally true that “theater people” were not the stuff of which sound families were constructed in the nineteenth century. Most modern audiences either would not be conscious of this bias or would not recognize its social puissance as nineteenth-century ideology. Instead, they would tend to think of the backstage experience as part of the romance of the theater, part of the exoticism of being in a space outside the constraints of everyday life. This may explain the liberties the screenwriter takes here with the story.

First, Swicord has an unchaperoned young woman in a public space with an unmarried man. Second, the two are sitting closer together than they would be in typical theater seats. Third, the Professor translates the opera fairly literally for Jo, including the passion the lovers on stage declare between them. The technique is fairly standard: the action on the (filmed) stage mimics or presages the action on the film screen. Given the relatively liberal politics the Alcotts professed, it is not inconceivable that Louisa herself might have been in some similar situation at some stage in her life. Nonetheless, under no circumstances

would Alcott have been induced to write a scene where Jo and the Professor kiss in this sort of public setting and long before any sort of commitment is made between them. For one thing, even sensational literature had no convention short of rape to accommodate such activity. For another, Little Women, in its children's literature guise, would never have breached convention that way. It would have been the height of indelicacy for Jo to hear about romantic/sexual passion in the manner depicted in the film. Also, no self-respecting, middle-class lady would have allowed Professor Bhaer the liberty of intimate physical contact, any more than anyone as refined as the Professor would have suggested such a thing. What appears to be a charmingly innocent interchange at one and the same time misrepresents the nineteenth-century ideology intrinsic in the story while it makes the story seem romantically old-fashioned to a modern audience. Things aren't necessarily done that way nowadays, but they seem charmingly antique, as do the values that inform them, when portrayed in a modern film. In part, it is that charm that constitutes the appeal of the scene itself; it is also that charm that makes nineteenth-century ideology so appealing, thus mitigated by the irrepressible Jo and her handsome (in this version) Professor behaving in a decidedly late twentieth-century manner.

In her discussion of Uncle Tom's Cabin and institutionalized racism, Gillian Brown notes "that sentimentalism works both to alter and to emphasize dividing lines" (60). In the present instance, the dividing lines include an acceptable/unacceptable split and an old-fashioned/modern split; the issue here is morality rather than race. In the sentimental tradition, legitimate emotion purifies both the



emoter and the object of the emotion, creating the possibility for the open expression of affection. For example, when Friedrich proposes to Jo in the novel, she responds by kissing him on the public road. The behavior is not exactly “proper,” yet it is not “wrong” either, since these two adult individuals have agreed to a future together. The behavior is excusable, even within the sentimental framework. If the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior can be altered in the novel, there is no reason that a modern adaptation should not extend that alteration to a chaste kiss following the realization of true affection. That there are no overt sexual overtones makes the moment seem old-fashioned despite its historical inaccuracy; the scene manifests the sentimental ideology promoting sexual purity while satisfying the modern audience’s expectation that two people in love will, and should, kiss.

Jo’s return to Concord to help care for Beth interrupts this budding romance although Jo thinks often of the professor. Jo does write to him, but they do not correspond regularly – for reasons that are not really clear, and Jo next sees the Professor when he stops in Concord on his way West, after he has had her book published. It is surprising that in this film it is still the Professor who has Jo’s book published rather than Jo doing it herself. She sends the book to him, seeking his approval for what she has written from the soul, to prove she can produce the kind of writing he had earlier instructed her to do. In this film, as in the novel and the earlier films, heterosexual romance takes precedence over feminist sensibilities. The most important thing Jo can do (despite Marmee’s

admonitions to her daughters to make the most of their lives and intellects) is to successfully “land” her man.

In the novel, Jo doesn’t write a book after Beth’s demise. She takes up writing again at Marmee’s suggestion because Marmee thinks that it will do Jo good to write again. Writing from the heart, Jo sells several pieces to magazines and newspapers. Professor Bhaer determines to see Jo again because he sees one of her pieces, a piece he considers “good” because it is written from the heart, in a newspaper. The fact that he approves of her work makes Jo happy, but she has not been writing for him but for herself. It would have been fairly easy for Swicord to write this scenario into her script, yet this film adaptation does exactly what the earlier films have done: it makes Jo’s writing for publication contingent on Friedrich’s approval. At the moment when this ostensibly feminist version of the story might have most clearly explicated some of the feminist leanings of the novel, Jo is once more consigned to writing to “please” a man. This romantic move obviates virtually all the feminist subtext of this film, concomitantly setting up the final scene where the two “plight their troth.”

The Professor leaves the galley proofs of Jo’s novel with Hannah, and Jo discovers them just in time to chase him down the road. She thanks the Professor for getting her book published, makes clear to him that she is not married to Laurie, and assures the Professor that she cares for him by uttering the line the audience has been waiting for. In response to his statement that he has nothing to offer but his empty hands, she puts her hands in his and says “Not empty now.” With those three words, Jo aligns herself with her two married

sisters and Marmee as one more nineteenth-century female who understands that her ideal place in the world is as a wife and mother. She is a woman in love, glad to be loved by the man she loves.

The final sequence amalgamates a number of images in a last effusion of sentimentality. First, Jo is pictured in the kitchen, up to her elbows in flour as she kneads bread, a supremely domestic chore outdone only by Meg's bathing of the twins in the kitchen at the same time. Jo has finally become sufficiently domesticated to perform purely domestic tasks, whether bread baking or playing the aunt. This scene allows the audience to see how much Jo longs for the kind of security her sister has in her marriage and family. She has no thought for her book, the one she sent to Professor Bhaer for his approval, and so is overcome with emotion a short time later when she opens a package from him containing the galley proofs of her book and when she learns that he has left without speaking to her. Visually, at least, this sequence lays out one of the most fervently promoted tenets of the novel: that nothing in life – even publishing a novel – can be “satisfactory substitutes for wife [or husband] and child, and home” (Alcott 347).

The Professor, believing that he has lost his chance for domestic happiness with Jo, is leaving for a job where he will live the solitary life of a bachelor. Jo, unwilling to give up her last chance for happiness or to live the solitary life of a spinster, follows him. Once she catches up with him, their fumbling conversation sounds quaintly antiquated as each attempts to glean the truth from the other without asking indelicate questions. The sequence is

unapologetically romantic and equally non-feminist. It doesn't matter here (as it did in the novel) whether Jo and Friedrich will have an egalitarian relationship. What matters is that they are in love and that Jo can bake bread and care for children. The opportunity to demonstrate the strengths of domestic feminism is lost to idealized depictions of domestic activity, and the realistic elements of the film fail to stand for the relatively radical notions Alcott incorporated into her book. In fact, most of the realistic depictions are either so brief as to leave no notable impression or are so romanticized as to seem like fun or at least appealing pastimes.

At the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, women continue to struggle for many of the rights and privileges Alcott suggested that they should have in Little Women. A good many of those rights and privileges are defined in relation to a woman's role as wife and mother. Alcott wrote about woman's social power as a natural concomitant to her domestic function as moral guardian of the home, and some twentieth-century feminist theorists "[assert] women's greater moral strength in the face of a troubled world and their own subordination," a subordination dependent upon the patriarchal organization of the middle-class family (Ginzburg 218). At the same time, at least one self-described non-feminist suggests that the gains women have made as a result of twentieth-century feminist activity have only succeeded in disrupting families and intensifying competition between men and women and that women can and should be less selfish in their decisions regarding marriage and family (Crittendon 188-91). One might conclude from these that women, as the morally

better class of human, ought, as Christopher Lasch suggested, accept the fact that if sacrifices are to be made in life, women ought to be the ones to make them. If one were to understand this latter view as “feminist,” then Armstrong’s Little Women might also be considered a feminist statement. However, there is very little to distinguish this notion of feminism from what right wing proponents of a return to the “traditional” family values of America in the 1950s advocated – a mother in every home and a father at the office. Notwithstanding Marmee’s advice to Jo: “Go and embrace your liberty and see what wonderful things come of it,” the film can not reach a satisfying dénouement until one of those wonderful things turns out to be Jo’s engagement to Friedrich. The final fade to the March home in the background, safely nestled in a stand of mature trees, assure the audience that Jo will not be long in creating her own family in her own home.

While hardly anyone really believes that it is possible to change the world from the comfort of one’s own hearth, the home and family continue to be the site of conflict over women’s proper place in society. The concept of separate spheres – women socializing children and providing emotional support to men who experience “the alienation of the workplace” and men going out of the home to provide for the family are “two of the main functions of the family according to functionalist sociologists” (Whelehan 17). These functions are not substantively different from the gender-assigned functions of the nineteenth century, and now, as then, the functions depend on a middle-class lifestyle. According to Whelehan, “feminism’s chief problem is to ascertain whether one feature –the representation/positioning of women as subordinate/other – remains the same” in

the postmodern era as it was in prior eras. Additionally, she posits that “the cultural logic of sexual difference has gained momentum from its historical longevity, resulting in the ‘fact’ of difference being entrenched in experience” (200-1). In large measure, this positioning and difference are endemic to the conditions of a postmodern ideology of family that is not substantially different from that ideology as it developed in the nineteenth century.

The ills of society continue to be laid, figuratively, at the hearth, and the mother continues to be identified as the key player in keeping that hearth happy and healthy. Domestic feminism was predicated on the perception that a woman could exercise power from her own home and thus be an active member of society at the same time that she fulfilled her domestic function; modern feminism treats the home as only one site along a continuum of social institutions where power is unequally distributed, whether on the basis of gender or class or race. Feminism in the postmodern age is multifarious, engaging as it does issues of race, heterosexuality, power relations, identity politics, and oppression.

Whelehan “would not wish to suggest that a single unifying feminist discourse is either possible or desirable, but rather that feminisms can thrive upon such a diversity of approaches (146). If there is a feminism that informs the 1994 film of Little Women, it is one that harks back to the era of the hoop skirt. It is a depiction of sentimental feminism, a “weak sister” to domestic feminism, because it has no foundation other than feeling, and feeling, in twentieth-century terms, is nothing but sentiment. For all practical purposes, with the 1994 film version of Little Women, the sentimental is incarnated in the twentieth century not as a

moral force but as foil for romance in the kind of film that has come to be termed a “chick flick.”

## Chapter 5

### What It All Comes To

“Literature . . . is a set of social conditions and its analysis consists in identifying the effects of these conditions – on the uses and functioning of writings produced in earlier periods just as much as the uses and functioning of the forms of writing they support and call forth” (Bennett 284 emphasis in original). If one accepts Bennett’s characterization, literary products must be seen as intrinsic elements of history, both the historical past that they inhabited and that history as we understand it in relation to our own present. The social conditions surrounding the production of the novel Little Women included, among others, the Civil War and its aftermath, the effects of rapid urbanization and industrialization, the growth of the middle class, and concerns about how best to Americanize immigrants. In one way or another, each of these issues is addressed in the novel, and they are addressed from within the framework of that proper institution, the middle class, nuclear family, American-style. If, as H.R. Brown says of sentimental novels, “the primary function of the novelist was to teach” (169), Alcott’s book serves admirably as social pedagogy.

This pedagogical impulse is inevitable, if “the sentimental imagination at its core manifests an irresistible impulse toward human connection; sentimentalism in its pure essence envisions – indeed, desires – the self-in-relation” (Dobson 170 emphasis in original); and the novel consistently shows the home in relation to, even though separated from, the larger society. Thus, when



Marmee must go to Washington, Jo braves the marketplace to sell a part of herself – her hair – to pay for the train ticket. When Amy is punished physically for an infraction of the rules at school, she is removed from that public relationship to demonstrate that corporal punishment is not appropriate to the kind of social ordering the sentimental agenda promotes. When Meg marries John Brooke, her failure to be hospitable to one of his bachelor friends is represented as her personal failure to maintain a properly hospitable parlor – that one place where outsiders were supposed to be welcomed into one's home and where they could experience its civilizing effects. When Laurie is discovered to be orphaned and living alone with his grandfather, he is “adopted” into the March home where he is subject to the edifying effects of good women in a good family. As a text in dialogue with its time and with its readers, Little Women demonstrates both Alcott's position on social realities as they relate to the family as well as the socially constructed position such novels were expected to fulfill.

In each later incarnation of the story, the historical position of the novel has been re-envisioned as social conditions change and as adapters interpret the story for their contemporaries. To borrow Tony Bennett's formulation, “the significance of how [Little Women is] now represented within discourses of power and resistance depends on how [it was] earlier represented in such discourses” (49). By 1933 those discourses of power and resistance had, to a degree, imploded. Too many workers found themselves without the means to maintain a reasonable standard of living, let alone to “resist” the inequities of a capitalist system of production. Concomitantly, it was in the best interest of the empowered

to suggest to the working class that everyone was suffering from the effects of the Depression, and this was the standard message from Washington, D.C. At the same time, in corporate propaganda, on radio, in newspapers, on the silver screen, in novels, in short stories, virtually every popular medium avoided addressing the most pressing concerns of the day by focusing on the positive aspects of living in America. Not all the media ignored the realities of the Depression all the time; nevertheless, popular forms tended to present upbeat depictions of the social and economic situation, even when they were critical of the social realities of the day. While Little Women was not unabashedly “upbeat,” neither did it directly address the social realities of 1933. However the Depression left its mark on the adaptation – as did the history from which the original story arose.

As noted in chapter 2, the opening of the 1933 RKO film conflated visual and aural images of the North and South, deflecting any focus on the Civil War as such and contributing to a sense that all Americans were in the same boat and should be committed to working out the problems of the day together. Here the reality that there were still living veterans of the Civil War impinges on the representation of the novel on screen, tying the modern film to the past that gave rise to it and inflecting the telling of the story with a sense, if only indirect, of the discrepancies between the film and lived reality. The image of a comfortable family home also ties the film to the past, an imagined past of the yeoman farmer and “his” self-sufficient family within the self-sustaining small town. History, here, becomes an interpretation of the past that will most comfortably sustain the

reassuring image of the safe and secure home, a reaction, no doubt, to the fact that more and more people were losing their homes because of the economic emergency of the day.

While the film evoked images of the past, it also incorporated elements of its own social reality, imperfectly bound by the confines of the novel. All the older women work – Marmee, Jo, and Meg – and this is presented as the natural response of good women dealing with an emergency. It is also true that this complies exactly with the novel. The first half of the film, especially, could even be read as encouragement for women to willingly work outside the home. After all, three of the women do so and still manage to maintain a suitable home environment. What is almost completely eliminated in the film, though, is the presence of the father/husband. His convenient absence at the beginning of the story, because of the war, is translated on film into his ineffectuality. He says almost nothing, even after he comes home, and he does even less. His position within the household, however, is treated respectfully, and all of the girls express the desire at one time or another to reproduce their own versions of their happy childhood home – complete with husband to guide them and children for them to guide. So in spite of the self-sufficiency the women exhibit while Father is away, the film ends with all the women but Beth married or engaged and on their way to creating homes of their own in the manner of the novel.

The interpretation of Little Women produced by Heerman and Mason inscribed home as a continuity over time. It was portrayed as the stabilizing center of the women's lives, especially, even as it suggested the disassembly of

the original home in the service of creating new homes. In the novel that home was depicted as the site of moral development; in the film morality was still treated as a virtue, but stability, both physical and personal, replaced moral uprightness as the key concern. As a concomitant to the morality portrayed in the novel, stability admirably complemented the original story while it acknowledged, however indirectly, the exigencies of the 1930s.

One other aspect of this film bears comment here. The original story is rightly classed with other sentimental/domestic novels, but in its film incarnation it was treated as a classic, just as the stories of Dickens, Hawthorne, Melville, and Shakespeare were treated as classics. Although Suzanne Clark's assertion that "[h]igh modernism meant that the works of a few male writers stood for a whole period of literary history" that "left women out of the literary canon (34) is a valid concern, Little Women was treated by the film studio with the same respect that any of the other "classics" enjoyed. It was carefully cast and photographed; it had its own original musical score; the screenwriters were among the best, even winning an Oscar for their efforts; the screenplay attempted a high degree of fidelity to the novel. In the popular medium of film, the academically disdained "sentimental" was accorded a social place equal to that enjoyed by any of the productions of the male writers ensconced in the American canon.

Although the academy had excised sentimental novels from the history of literary production, corporate America, in the guise of the movie studio, recognized them as a part of American social history, a part that could be exploited to corporate advantage, to be sure, but a part that could also enhance

the image of the studio. This is exactly what happened when the film was released. Katharine Hepburn was already recognized as a talented stage actress, and her performance in the film won her the Cannes Film Festival award as best actress, and, as already noted, the screenwriters won an Oscar for their adaptation. In much the same way that Alcott's novel had been recognized by reviewers of the day, this film was recognized for its merits as a representation of that novel. While public approbation for the film did not (nor could it) suffice to instate Alcott in the literary canon, it was sufficient to assure that her literary contribution to collective American history would remain vital. Her story, transformed and yet retaining much of its original character, was insinuated into current history and was thus revitalized as an informing reality in American culture.

By 1949, the end of the Second World War had created its own set of historical conditions that focused attention on the public concerns of re-integrating returning soldiers into American society and "fighting the spread of communism." These concerns made a story like Little Women useful in ways that it had not been before. Its focus on the home was readily pressed into service as a vehicle for promoting the idea that women should give up their jobs for the returning soldiers and content themselves with keeping house for those soldiers. Where the novel had suggested that women could exercise social power from within the home – Alcott's expression of domestic feminism – the film suggested that women need only retreat to the home and let their men worry about the outside world. In service of these notions, the film was produced in

color and in a style more akin to the elaborate Hollywood musical than to more serious films, whether those serious films had happy endings or not. These directorial decisions effectively reinterpreted the novel to suit the historical reality of the year when the film was produced, even though the screenplay was only slightly altered from the one used in 1933. Thus, part of the historical reality of the 1949 film is the gloss on the novel inherent in the older screenplay. Instead of beginning with the novel, this film began with the earlier film.

One of the changes in the 1949 screenplay is the way that consumerism is enacted. The viewer actually sees the little women go on their shopping expedition for Christmas presents for themselves, something that is only noted in the novel and in the earlier screenplay. The effect of showing the girls in the general store is twofold; it creates more sense of nostalgia for the “good old days” of the general store, and it establishes more completely the outside world of the marketplace. Showing a general store helps create a sense of community. This is the store in the small town where everyone knows the neighbors and where the storekeeper gives credit. This store also creates a sense of the marketplace as manageable (or perhaps the word should be “containable”) because it is portrayed as a place where everything a person might need, from drawing pencils to hats, was available under one relatively small roof. The image of the girls shopping also “sanitized” it. The marketplace that had threatened to intrude on the nineteenth-century home here becomes more akin to a neighbor’s house where one has gone to make a call. If shopping is like going visiting, it is a safe activity for the girls and so the external marketplace, part of the outside

world, is transformed into a space that women can negotiate safely and reasonably. The consumer's freedom to consume after the deprivations of the Depression and the War is also transformed into something of a sacred trust. While the initial impulse to spend is selfish, the girls choose to turn their consumption to the service to someone else by trading their things for gifts for Marmee. Shopping thus is constituted as a concomitant to the home, a task women undertake in order to reinforce the internal strength of the household by providing necessary consumer goods for use by the household. (All of the gifts for Marmee were necessities except for Amy's gift of cologne which was characterized as a justifiable luxury because it was not too expensive.)

In its insistent home-centered focus, this film demanded that women seek and find their happiness only within the confines of their own homes (rather like Dorothy's realization in *The Wizard of Oz* that "There's no place like home."). The difference between this representation and the two earlier ones is not the focus on the home, but the way that home encloses its inhabitants. The poor Hummels, whom we see enjoying the March girls' Christmas breakfast, are completely contained within their rather miserable hovel. Laurie, until his honorary membership in the March family, is contained within his grandfather's grand mansion. The March sisters and Marmee are equally contained within their home. Even when the girls leave home, it is to other homes where they can be appropriately held. Meg marries and sets up housekeeping; Amy marries and moves into the mansion; Jo lives in Mrs. Kirke's house while she tries her hand at writing, eventually returning to Marmee and Father—until the Professor comes

and they go off to create their own home. What Alcott had represented as independent women whose homes constituted the world in microcosm (at least the world as it should be), in the historical moment of post-WW II America becomes women who know when it is time to give up their independence and stay home where they can teach their children to resist the political dangers of the world outside. The notion of transforming the world from the hearth is evident in both formulations, as are their very different emphases.

With the 1994 version of Little Women, there is a clear attempt to break with past adaptations and create a completely “new” film. In this version, the novel is treated more as a resource for episodes than as the actual basis of the film. There are scenes which might be considered borrowings from the earlier films, such as the visit to the opera; however, these scenes are either sufficiently modernized or else visually altered to make them seem different from the earlier versions. The rest of the film is a pastiche of incidents from the novel and borrowings from Alcott’s journals arranged to realize the world from a woman’s perspective. This perspective is read as a feminist rendition of the story, yet the film does a better job of promoting domesticity than feminism. Alcott’s vision of domestic feminism becomes, in this instance, a late twentieth-century romantic vision of happily-ever-after.

In the attempt to make this film true to the spirit, if not the letter, of the novel, many of the material realities of the nineteenth century are incorporated into the screenplay. The audience is treated to the sight of Jo kneading bread and covered in flour. Meg has to bathe her babies in a tub on the kitchen table,



without benefit of running water. Women's skirts actually get muddy when the women walk outside in the rain. Outdoor scenes in the winter feature red noses and people's breath on the air. Going upstairs to bed means carrying a candle to light the way. These function in a similar manner to the general store in the 1949 film; they create a sense of nostalgia for the past, but a nostalgia that embraces the past selectively. Generally, women will agree with Jo that long skirts are a nuisance; some will consider bread-baking a similar nuisance, while others will see it as an art worth reviving. All of these, as well as the other material markers in the film, contribute to a sense of realism: This is how things "really" were in the mid-nineteenth century, even though these material realities were peripheral to the message in the novel. Nevertheless, a history of "realistic" films has made these markers a part of the film idiom, and even the less desirable of these historical realities lend a romantic air to the film. This move makes the film correspond more closely with the romantic aspects of the book but without enhancing its correspondence with the domestic feminism that informed the novel. At every turn, what appear to be feminist moves – or at least modernizations of an old-fashioned story – finish as affirmations of nineteenth-century sentimental notions, privileging those ideas and giving them determinant power in a modern narrative.

In this film, the complex relationship between literature and history contributes to an artifact that is neither really the story of Little Women nor really the fictionalized biography of Louisa May Alcott.<sup>1</sup> The screenwriter's use of

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<sup>1</sup> This is true of any film adapted from a novel, but it is especially evident in this film which tries to incorporate Alcott's journals into her fictionalized account of her family.

Alcott's journals lends an air of authenticity to the story but at the expense of being "true" to the novel, and the free-wheeling re-arrangement of episodes from the novel does the same. Envisioning the nineteenth century as a time when, for example, respectable single women could kiss men in the wings of opera theaters requires that the audience suspend disbelief not in the story being told but in the history being portrayed. Alternatively, it assumes that the audience will not be sufficiently aware of the conventions of respectable nineteenth-century behavior to recognize the anomaly. Either way, at these sorts of junctures, the story becomes more Robin Swicord's than Louisa Alcott's; and the history within which the original story was written, the "actual" past, enters into dialogue (an exchange) with the past as interpreted for a modern audience.

The process of renewing an old story for successive generations involves continual re-visioning of the past within the realities of present history. In the process, some elements of the re-visioned past acquire the aura of elements of the present and some elements are elided, essentially eliminated from the present understanding of the past. One example of this is Alcott's treatment of immigrants. Throughout the novel, these outsiders serve as tropes for both the good and bad things about newcomers to the US, particularly as those outsiders are portrayed as becoming Americanized (Professor Bhaer) or not (the Hummels). These many references are reduced in the films to only a couple of scenes, some of which make reference to the immigrants rather than showing them. In the 1933 and 1949 films, for example, the Hummels are only shown enjoying the Christmas breakfast the girls give up. The Professor has his scenes

in New York while he gets to know Jo and the final scene where he proposes. By 1994, the Hummels are, literally, out of the picture; all the audience gets is the girls carrying the food and singing about going “awassailing” (with the exception of Beth’s last visit where she holds the sick baby and contracts scarlet fever). However, the Professor is given more screen time and the opportunity to encourage Jo to enter into an intellectual debate and promote woman suffrage. No longer the outsider regarded with suspicion, the Professor, as the trope for the foreigner, is now the exotic, and therefore desirable, other.

Louis Althusser posited Institutional State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as school, church, and family, and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), such as armies, police, and courts, as the means by which subjects/citizens learn their place in society, learn the ideology informing their culture, and pass that knowledge on to their offspring. However, what might be termed Popular State Apparatuses (PSAs) can have as much or more influence on the attitudes and beliefs of those subjects than either the ISAs or the RSAs, in part because PSAs appear to function outside of hegemonic constructs. Popular commodities, such as films and novels, may incorporate many of the same ideas promoted by ISAs and RSAs; however, resistance to these ideas also appears. Consumers who agree with the dominant ideology will reject the resistant ideas while those who disagree with it may well embrace resistance. Because the producers of commodities have very little control over what consumers do with their products, the mere act of producing consumer goods introduces the possibility of resistance. This is not to suggest that Althusser’s characterization of the way any

society functions is flexible enough to theorize life in the twenty-first century. Rather it is to suggest that all state apparatuses, by virtue of their insertion in history, are subject to the same sorts of use modification that popular artifacts are.

Besides the uses of popular commodities made by consumers, there is the additional complex relationship between the commodity and its producer. The market relationship between production and consumption is always a factor; consumer products are produced with the intent of making a profit for the producer. In the case of a novel (or other “re-manufactured” goods), the producer first must function as a consumer of the product, determining her or his relationship to the commodity before deciding how to modify the commodity for consumption by others. Even if Little Women were not such a malleable text, each reader (consumer) of the novel brings to the reading a quite personal set of attitudes and assumptions that will color the reading. The understanding engendered by that reading will determine the uses to which the reader will put the novel. Thus an adapter who responds to the feminist possibilities in the novel will reproduce those possibilities in his or her adaptation. The consumers of the adaptation, in turn, will respond to this new text based on their own positioning, culturally, socially, and personally, as well as their understanding of the original.

Alcott produced Little Women as a means to an end: earning money. The autobiographical basis for much of the text makes this more a commodity, in some ways, than a completely fictitious story would be because Alcott sells herself, in a sense, when she sells this story. After the fact, she has her own text

as the basis for the later books she writes that follow the later careers of the Marches as well as their offspring, both natural and adopted. In order to write these later stories, she must make use of her own earlier production, and she does so in ways that reclaim something of her text from her audience. Most particularly, she subverts the wishes of her readers by refusing to have Jo marry Laurie in the “Good Wives” section of Little Women. As both producer and consumer of her own work, she imposes her own interpretation/understanding of her earlier work on her later ones.

The more obviously feminist aspects of her work demonstrate more of this complexity. While Alcott championed a somewhat radical form of feminism, this was blended so carefully into her popular productions that it could easily be read as support for the “status quo.” For example, when Jo rants about wishing she had been born a man and not pinning up her hair if that meant becoming an adult woman, Meg sets her straight with a few well-chosen words. The net message is that the way things are is the way things should be. Women have their place and men have theirs and they shouldn’t envy each other any of their unique privileges. Alcott’s production of a resisting female in the person of Jo is tempered by her own consumption of the popular ideology of her own day. Ultimately, Alcott makes Jo the meta-Mother of the narrative, the woman who can mother the neediest of boys, including a “little quadroon.” The domestic fiction ends by indeed being able to reform the world from the home, even if that home is a boarding school for boys; and Jo is able to be a “true” woman even as “the wise Professor steer[s] her safely into calmer waters” (Alcott 469). More than

133 years after the novel was first published, film versions of the story continue to promote the notion that woman's place is in the home. Despite the many nods to changed mores and fashions, the little women always end up the married or engaged women in love whose first and last thought is the wonderful homes they will create with their chosen companions.

No single theory is expansive enough to explain how ideologies move through time, how they retain certain characteristics, and how they change over time. What is clear from this examination is that change is not a neat linear progression from point A to point B but rather that it is a dialectic process in the Marxian sense that, by its nature, involves conflict and contradiction.

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