Historical Factors Show How Themes of Career and Romance Evolve from George Cukor's to Greta Gerwig's Adaptation of *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott

Louisa May Alcott's semi-autobiographical, critically successful novel *Little Women* (1868) has had many filmic adaptations over the years. It is a story about sisterhood, focusing on the domestic struggles and joyous moments in the lives of the March sisters, Margaret (Meg), Josephine (Jo), Elizabeth (Beth), and Amy. The novel is set in the 19th century in New England during the Civil War. All throughout, it has a dominant theme of Christianity and connects to the "angel in the house" ideal that was prominent during the 1860s. In 1933, during the Great Depression, George Cukor released the first talking filmic adaptation of the novel, incorporating messages of patriotism and Christian work ethic and moral structure in his film. His film begins during the March sisters' childhood and it centres on Jo as the main character and follows her authorly ambitions, domestic life, and romance throughout the film. More recently, Greta Gerwig released a non-linear filmic adaptation of the novel in 2019, beginning from the March sisters' adulthood struggles in which the women reflect on their happy childhood memories through flashbacks. Gerwig's film favours Jo as well and chooses to emphasize Jo's career and journey to becoming an independent writer rather than on her domestic life and romance. This essay will focus on the distinctions in the portrayal of Jo March's independence as a writer and in the use romantic themes as a product of Cukor and Gerwig's varying historical conditions; these distinctions will inform us how the two adaptations reflect the changing representations of women in film.

To begin, the themes and ideas central in Cukor's and Gerwig's adaptation of *Little Women* (1868) were heavily guided by the historical influence of the Great Depression in Cukor's period and the increase in producing films about women's empowering stories in Gerwig's period. Firstly,

the Great Depression shapes the centrality of Cukor's story, as one of its key themes is patriotism and it deals with the personal and material hardships of the March family and their country on account of the Civil War. The film opens with a patriotic instrumental music and then introduces us to Marmee March who is volunteering to help the American men in war (Cukor 01:16 – 03:33). To open the film in such a manner was done to strongly resonate with the longing for better times and with the personal and material struggles that Americans were facing during the Great Depression (Kirkham and Warren 84). To offer Americans some escapism and in an attempt to keep their spirits afloat during the trying times of the Depression, Cukor shaped his film to focus on the domesticity and romantic lives of the March sisters.

Similarly, the rise in films about women's empowering stories during Gerwig's period played a huge role in shifting the focus from domesticity and romance to Jo and Amy's career-driven passions. In her adaptation, Gerwig tailors Jo's ending in the novel where she is supposed to be romantically involved with Professor Bhaer into one where Jo marries off the heroine of her novel as a savvy business tactic; moreover, Gerwig gives an economic rationale behind Amy's desire to marry rich and chase her talents. These adjustments in Gerwig's adaptation are done to provide a deeper understanding of the women's characters and careers as well as to better serve the women-centred pattern of films in the 2010s, minimizing the romantic aspect of the story and increasing the women's artistic ambitions. Gerwig sets the movie to be career-focused by opening the film with a backshot of Jo standing outside her publisher's office which she later enters to find a room full of men who do not take any note of Jo's presence, indicating men's domination in the workspace (01:09 – 01:50). Right from the beginning, Gerwig lets the audience know that the centrality of the film will be focused on Jo's career. With that, it can be concluded that the themes of domesticity, romance, and career that are present across both adaptations are influenced by the

historical factors of the Great Depression period and the upsurge in women-centred stories in film in the 2010s.

Moreover, after establishing that both Cukor and Gerwig favour Jo as the main character in their adaptations, it can be examined that their portrayal of Jo's authorly ambitions are similar in many ways but they also differ grandly, reflecting the changing representation of women's careers in film per the views of society. Staying true to the novel, Cukor and Gerwig incorporate Jo's writing as a core part of her personality along with her recklessness, tomboyishness, and her eagerness in challenging social norms and gender conventions. Cukor's adaptation progressively shows us that Jo dreams of becoming a famous writer to make a living for herself and to aid her family when she tells her sisters, "Wait until I become a famous author and make my fortune. Then we'll all ride in fine carriages, dressed like Flo King …" (14:08 – 14:19). Working towards her dream, Jo publishes her stories in the newspaper before Cukor follows Jo's ambitions to New York where she works on her writing while teaching for Mrs. Kirke. There she meets Professor Bhaer, her romantic interest. However, her commitment to writing derails after learning about Beth's illness and hearing that her work does not meet Professor Bhaer's standards; as a result, she gives up her authorly ambitions to focus on her domestic tasks instead. Her writing in New York is the last bit of writing Jo does in Cukor's adaptation. As Wang states, Jo's actions here are closely related to the gender expectations for women to prioritize their homely lives above their careers in both Alcott's and Cukor's time (22).

In a similar manner, Gerwig introduces us to Jo as a writer from the very first scene of the film and, through flashbacks, shows us Jo's growing passion for writing since her childhood. Gerwig also follows Jo's ambitions to New York where she works at a boarding school and writes stories for publication, primarily because "money is the end and aim of [her] mercenary existence,"

as she tells Professor Bhaer (05:45 – 05:49). After receiving harsh criticism from Professor Bhaer, Jo lectures him and gets very upset, as she feels that her talent, hard work, and need for money were extremely belittled by him. However, both with the news of Beth's illness and Professor Bhaer's harsh criticism, she decides to not write anymore. Although she puts her ambitions on hold, Jo finds encouragement again in her now late sister, Beth's, advice on continuing to write, and she sets out once again to write a memoir in the name of Beth. Unlike the novel and Cukor's adaptation, Jo does not let go of her ambitions to settle down and take up domestic tasks for the rest of her life purely because she is expected to; rather, over the years, she completes her memoir by the title "Little Women" and has it published, bringing much success to her career. Here, Gerwig reflects empowering values in her work, as social expectations for women in workspaces were not as strict in the 2010s as they were during Cukor's period. Thus, the changing views of society revolving around women's careers are reflected through the portrayal of Jo as a writer in Cukor's and Gerwig's adaptations of *Little Women* (1868).

In addition, the themes of romance surrounding Jo also inform us of the social views revolving around women's independence during Cukor's and Gerwig's period of production, as romance affects Jo's decision to continue writing in two distinct ways: taking Jo further away from her career or bringing her more success in her career. As mentioned above, Cukor makes a point to prioritize Jo's romantic feelings over her passion for art in the third act of the film, and the theme of romance is carried strongly after Jo meets with Professor Bhaer. When Professor Bhaer criticizes Jo's writing, she listens to him and seeks his affirmation. Here, Jo puts Professor Bhaer's opinion of her writing over that of her family's who have always acknowledged her talent; this mirrors women's dependency in acting according to men's opinions during both Alcott and Cukor's times. Further, when Professor Bhaer brings Jo her published book, she tells him "Oh

never mind what [the publisher] thinks. Did *you* like it?" (Cukor 01:53:15 – 01:53:30). Once again, Cukor proves since the budding romance between Jo and Professor Bhaer, she depends on his opinion and tailors her writing to meet his standards, undervaluing her own judgement. Contrarily, the themes of romance in Gerwig's adaptation are not as prominent and are not used to halt Jo's writing, rather they are used to further Jo's career. Unlike Jo in *Little Women* (1933), Jo in Gerwig's adaptation does not become the subject of Professor Bhaer's lecture when he criticizes her, rather, Jo lectures Professor Bhaer when he presents his prestige opinions on her writing. Although affected by the harsh criticism, Jo does not allow any alleged romantic feelings for him to shape the quality of her writing. Rather, in Gerwig's film, Jo seeks affirmation from her sisters, especially Beth to whom she dedicates her memoir "Little Women." Here, Gerwig does not allow Jo to undervalue her self-judgement and her family's opinion by putting a potential romantic interest's opinion above theirs. Moreover, Gerwig uses romance to further Jo's career; we see this during Jo's visit to Mr. Dashwood who is to publish her memoir where she informs him that her heroine will not end up married to which he replies, "The right ending is the one that sells … just end it [with the heroine married], will you?" (02:02:59 – 02:03:35). In ultimately deciding that her heroine will marry at the end so that her novel may sell well and bring Jo success, Gerwig attunes Jo's character in the film by incorporating her and Alcott's experiences in an industry dominated by men where men in positions of power would decide the route of women's works (Pahle 40). Thus, it can be examined that Cukor uses the theme of romance in his adaptation to drive Jo into domesticity, ultimately quitting her writing, while Gerwig uses the theme of romance as a business tactic that aids in bringing Jo success in her career; the changing use of romance inform us of how society's view on women's independence evolved between Cukor's and Gerwig's production periods.

To conclude, the historical factors revolving around the production of *Little Women* (1933) and *Little Women* (2019) affected how Cukor and Gerwig portrayed Jo March and implemented themes of career and romance to either falter Jo's authorly ambitions or bring her closer to achieving career success. The distinctions in the adaptations inform viewers of the changes in society's views on women's careers and independence over time. Cukor was influenced by the Great Depression to create a film that stayed true to Alcott's inclusion of domesticity in her novel and give a hopeful ending where Jo resolves her unconventional behaviour by falling in love. Whereas Gerwig tugs at how Alcott's experience is similar to her own where women are dominated by men in the workspace, hence, showing more of Jo's ambitions and efforts in making her own way in the world without the aid of a husband or allowing romance to get in the way of her career. This essay concludes that Cukor's adaptation stays closer to the source material than Gerwig's and that society's views on women's ambitions and independency are less strict during Gerwig's period than Cukor's, allowing us to see how women's stories in film have evolved.

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