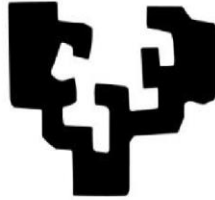


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Gender Stereotyping in *L.M Alcott's
Little Women and Its 1949 And 1994
Film Versions.*

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Abstract

The present paper aims to analyze two of the films based on *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott: *Little Women* (1949) directed by Mervyn LeRoy and *Little Women* (1994) directed by Gillian Armstrong. In particular, I intend to examine the presence of stereotypes in both of the films by focusing on the main female characters: the four sisters (Jo, Beth, Meg, and Amy), Margaret March and aunt March. Indeed, I shall contend that the presence or the absence of these stereotypes will influence the overall meaning of the novel and the two films. Furthermore, taking into account Tori Moi's distinction of the words 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist', as well as Susan Bordo's feminist discourse, I shall attempt to prove that the use of the most common gender conventions, in a mid-20th-century western cultural context, plays a particularly crucial role in the representation of womanhood in the 1949 adaptation of *Little Women*, and that, on the contrary, the film directed by Armstrong avoids the use of stereotypes, thus highlighting the subversive potential of Alcott's text and confronting the rules which a patriarchal community may impose on women.

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1. Introduction

Little Women, one of the most popular novels of the nineteenth century, belongs to the *genre* of “*Bildungsroman* (the novel of education)”, which focuses on the characters’ process of growing up (Cartmell and Simons 227). In accordance with Alcott’s own beliefs, the novel could be described as socially progressive, as far as gender representation is concerned, especially considering the time and place in which it was written (Cartmell and Simons 78-83). The book was divided into two volumes; the first one was published in 1868, and the second one in 1869. As we shall see later on, Alcott was a great supporter of abolitionism and the suffragist movement, and this is portrayed in her narratives (Gheorghiu 39-43). Her compositions are known for dealing with taboos or topics restricted in that period. The novel in question portrays powerful women who embody the importance of being independent, which is also a central theme in both films. Being one of the most successful works of her time, it is no surprise that the novel has been translated into various languages and has had two sequels—all of which seem to have been equally successful—as well as several cinematographic adaptations. *Little Women* narrates the everyday life and the growing up of the four March sisters, having her mother as a guide, while their father is fighting at war. The majority of characters, main and secondary, are women. This gives the opportunity of analyzing the presence or absence of stereotypes and exploring femininity in depth. As I shall content, each sister represents a different kind of womanhood: Jo will show the masculine side of females; Meg depicts the concept of maternity; Amy symbolizes beauty, and Beth represents the angel of the house (Cartmell and Simons 80).

The 1949 version of *Little Women* is a remake based on the adaptation of 1933 directed by George Cukor (Cartmell and Simons 83), which highlights the charitable actions of the March family, yet minimizes the quest for economic and spiritual independence of the leading female characters. On the one hand, the reason why I have opted for analyzing the film directed by Mervyn LeRoy instead of the one premiered in 1933 is related to the poor quality of the audio and image; it is the first sound film, and the last black and white film version of *Little Women*. Moreover, the fact that in the 1949 remake there are extraordinary actresses, the likes of Elizabeth Taylor or June Allyson, whose enthusiasm and joy help to create a moving performance, also influenced my choice. On the other hand, Armstrong’s adaptation of the novel includes personal

information about the author, which gives the opportunity not only of studying the literary work but also the author's ideas. Indeed, casting Susan Sarandon, an actress known for promoting the feminist movement, as Marmee can be read as a deliberate attempt to win over the more decidedly progressive audience of the Clintonian era (Cartmell and Simons 84-85).

In keeping with the initial hypothesis, the analysis that I will conduct will be deductive. Assuming that the presence of gender stereotypes is more noticeable in LeRoy's version, I will verify this hypothesis by analyzing the dialogues and scenes of both of the films, as well as the different clothes, gestures or even expressions used in each work. Paying particular attention to gender roles, and comparing both of the cinematic texts, to study the consequences they may have on each film. The ultimate goal is, therefore, that of assessing to what extent the discrepancies found in these adaptations change the meaning of the novel. First of all, and before focusing on the analysis, it is essential to clarify relevant theoretical issues, as well as to elaborate on the definition of such fundamental notions as film remake, adaptation, and stereotype. Subsequently, I will focus on the March sisters, as each of them represents femininity in a different way, and I will then move on to the older generation of female characters, paying particular attention to Margaret March, who plays a crucial role in her daughters' education by instilling non-traditional values in them.

2. Theoretical Framework

As it is the case with any country, U.S. mainstream literature and cinema represent and reproduce the basis of the culture which is hegemonic in its geographical and political territory, as well as the roles which said dominant culture imposes on the different members of its society. Surprisingly, *Little Women*, a text considered as mainstream and, as such, as appropriate for generations of impressionable, young girls, seems to challenge 19th-century hegemonic stereotypes related to gender, as we shall see in the literary analysis. Alcott was born in a period in which the feminist movement had not arisen yet, therefore, and despite being characterized by some as feminist, she simply could not be called one with any historical accuracy. Inasmuch as Alcott was born before the political movement began, she could be defined as proto-feminist, an advocate for a certain degree of gender equality, but it is doubtful that she would have agreed with the

whole spectrum of political, social and philosophical tenets of, say, third and fourth wave feminism. This proto-feminist philosophical tradition, which counts among its members many intellectuals from earlier days, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, was relevant during her time and especially from 1848 onwards, as it fought for females' equality, as did, for example, the women's suffrage movement. Louisa May Alcott herself appears to have not been conforming with the gender roles society imposes, is known, indeed, for fighting against them, as well as for her involvement in movements related to women's rights. In particular, she has taken part in different activities related to the improvement of women, such as promoting the aforementioned suffragist movement by organizing meetings, attending and supporting Women's Congress of 1875, as well as aiding financially (Gheorghiu 39-43). What is more, although Alcott's social views cannot and should not be confused with the 20th-century political movement known as feminism, I believe it is certainly arguable that Alcott's *Little Women* is a text in which the tension that arises from dichotomist gender constructions is expressly evident. It is, therefore, a text that is particularly susceptible of being approached from the theoretical framework of Gender Studies and feminist literary criticism. If we consider that Alcott's main character's Josephine March's rebellion is firstly fought on the physical dimension of her own body, it seems appropriate to begin by exploring the feminist take on the social construction of the body.

People's need to belong to a group fosters a tendency to follow the rules society establishes without questioning their power and their function (Bordo 90-91). This is particularly evident if we observe the process of domestication of the body to which women seem to subject themselves. As Susan Bordo convincingly argues, women are constantly trying to control their gesticulations and body movements in order to fulfill the role they have been imposed. Our bodily standards, our clothes, gestures, actions, and thoughts are determined by the culture in which we are raised. Namely, habits which are not frowned upon in men—perhaps they are even encouraged—such as sitting down with one's legs apart, swearing, spitting, or that break cultural taboos about the amount of female skin that can be seen—from the length of hemlines to nursing in public—are heavily criticized in women and, more often than not, cause them to gain a bad reputation. In patriarchal societies, women have been taught that their natural bodies are not good enough. Consequently, they attempt to tame them and enhance their appearance through makeup or clothes (90-93). Although the obsession for bodily appearance has

been spread to masculine heterosexual communities as it is notably reflected online in such spaces as Instagram or the makeup community on YouTube, I believe, as does Bordo, that 'body-domestication' is still an issue that affects women more than it does men: "contemporary preoccupation with appearance [...] still affects women far more powerfully than men [...]" (91). Therefore, as will be seen further on, in the narrative and the two cinematic adaptations, one of the points that will be highlighted will be the torturous restrictions (corsets, gloves, hairstyle, etc.) to which the female body is subjected. However, and since I have already used the words feminist, female and feminine it is vital to clarify first these three terms, which tend to be used interchangeably, in order to avoid confusion during the analysis.

Let us take femininity, a term that should be distinguished from the fact of being a female. All women are female¹ but not all women are feminine. This first term is closely related to the standards culture imposes and to the education people receives (Moi 122). The confusion between these terminologies is linked to patriarchal power. "Patriarchy, in other words, wants us to believe that there is such a thing as an essence of femaleness called femininity" (123). In fact, femininity is born out of the dichotomist construction of femininity and masculinity. Due to this, women are habitually represented as caring, sweet and meek personalities, which is the way Coventry Patmore presents his first wife, in the narrative poem *The Angels of the House*, which provided the popular term for the quintessentially 19th century representation of femininity as domestic and angelical (Coventry Patmore). According to these standards, women are expected to repress anger in every situation and to be docile. They have been deprived of a voice and the ability to protest against inequalities, a condition which facilitates the dominance of the male over the female. Hence, when they emerge from the idealized place to which they are supposed to belong and shout in rage as Jo does in the novel and in the film adaptation, women are accused of being hysteric. "As Elaine Showalter points out, the term "hysterical" itself became almost interchangeable with the term "feminine" in the literature of the period" (Bordo 94). Therefore, being categorized as hysteric when they show resistance is a measure of the patriarchal system aimed to command their power, to control females and to minimize the threat posed by the feminist movement.

¹ From a legal point of view, transsexuals can change their legal sex, and identify legally as 'women' only once they have undergone male-to-female gender reassignment surgery.

Secondly, a distinction between female and feminist needs to be made, as these two terms cannot be used synonymously. It should be noted that being female does not make you feminist, just as being male does not prevent anyone from being feminist. Thus, the term female is applied to refer to biological features, while the word feminist holds a political and social connotation, insofar as feminism is the political women's movement that started in 1960, which fights for women's rights, socially, economically, educationally and politically speaking (Moi 122). The lack of distinction between these two terms may be associated with the belief that a work written by a female and focused on women must need to represent a feminist approach. "This is particularly true for many early (pre- 1960s) works on women writers, which often indulge in precisely the kind of patriarchal stereotyping feminist want to combat" (120). Toril Moi cites Rosalind Coward to explain that it is expected from a book to be feminist whenever it deals with experiences which are usually deemed to be associated with females (21). Such a mentality is internalized on grounds that any contradictory act to the patriarchal doctrines, including female writers, was considered part of the feminist movement. Most importantly, *Little Women* may have been often thought to be a feminist novel with no further arguments but the fact that it was about women and it was written by a woman. This is as much of a fallacy as it is to say that LeRoy's adaptation must be anti-feminist because it was directed by a man. Hence, my goal is not that of proving that Alcott novel and its films versions represent female characters in a feminist or non-feminist way, but to analyze the way in which they are represented as genderised and the extent to which their genderization adheres to or defies cultural stereotypifications of gender.

American director Mervyn LeRoy, who was born in 1900 in California, directed a significant number of films, which promote women as protagonists, and among them, it is necessary to highlight his 1949 success *Little Women* ("The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica"). He portrays female characters as courageous women who, thanks to the help of relatives and friends, overcome the various obstacles that they may find along the road. He also represents femininity differently from what people were used to at that time, by emphasizing that women do not necessarily have to be feminine to be females, dressing characters in trousers instead of dresses (Cartmell and Simons 83-88). Additionally, in some of the films he directed, e.g. *Heat Lightning*, female characters are able to perform 'men's works' and dressed with comfortably 'men's clothes' ("The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica"). Thus, his notions, quite contemporary for 1949, were

against the traditional gender roles people were used to, something perceived through Jo's characters. However, due to the fact that the film was realized in an economically, politically, and socially complicated period, Hollywood film industry will avoid drama and will omit the most arduous themes of the novel, to center its attention on events that exude optimism (Cartmell and Simons 83). An instance of this could be found in the importance given to the Christmas celebration in the 1949 version of *Little Women*. Nonetheless, this is not the case of Gillian May Armstrong who stays truthful to Alcott's writing and reasoning style.

Known for emphasizing distinctive female viewpoints, Australian Gillian May Armstrong directs *Little Women* (1994) by presenting a different perspective of this autobiographical story that has gained public's affection. She declared that although she was doubtful at first, she opts for directing the film in the view of how Alcott constructs characters and stories without idealizing them, and by creating strong females (Cartmell and Simons 81-85). Despite the fact that her works are characterized by the portrayal of authentic and complex characters, and that her feminist ideas have always been an issue of debate among critics, she does not want to be labeled as a 'feminist director'. In an interview she gave in 2016 to *The Guardian*, she stated that she "got branded as a feminist director because it was a feminist story, but then that's all [she] was offered." Armstrong does, however, show support for some tenets of the so-called equality feminist: "There won't be equality until there are as many mediocre women directors as there are mediocre men" (*The Guardian*). Being, against defunding stereotypes related to gender roles, Armstrong displays women in a more realistic perspective by stressing the scene of Jo being furious and aggressive, an event avoided in other adaptations (*The Guardian*). She also abstains from describing women as calm and beautiful body that have no voice. Being opinionated and voicing one's opinion were two characteristics not commonly associated with standard femininity when the written composition and the cinematographic adaptations were released. Consequently, Armstrong will challenge gender stereotypes, unlike Leroy, whose context was shaped by patriarchal forces. Yet, in both Leroy's and Armstrong socio-cultural context, the reduction of the individual to a social role can often be embodied by the way in which gender stereotypes are constructed and represented. Therefore, and since my purpose is to find out whether or not each work challenges or reinforces stereotypes and whether the stereotypification is due to the

conformism or anti-conformism with the gender system corresponding to a certain historical moment, the clarification of the term stereotype is necessary.

Stereotypes play a significant role in any given culture, as they are collective identity markers which construct an image that helps people understand differences between individuals. However, as they are based on generalizations, they do not represent all the members of society (Dyer). Dyer also states about stereotypes: “behind its defense, we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy.” According to him, stereotypes are a way for “the Ones” to protect themselves from assimilation into “the Others” and to try to become more powerful than “the Others”, whoever these might be. Thus, it is not the actual stereotype that is important, but rather the factors that shape them and their intentions. When it comes to literary compositions and the film industry, stereotypes tend to be commonplace, as it is impossible to construct different characters that depict in detail each community member. The term ‘stereotypified’ is commonly used to refer to characters that are undoubtedly recognizable and who do not evolve (Dyer). The ‘dumb blond’ is one of the clear examples that Richard Dyer provides to explain that it is not enough to take into account the color of one's hair and her intelligence to understand the stereotype: "It refers immediately to her sex, which refers to her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave or think rational, and so on" (Dyer). Furthermore, as asserts Nancy Kress' quote “A stereotype may be negative or positive, but even positive stereotypes present two problems: they are clichés and present a human being as far more simple and uniform than any human being actually is.” However, works like *Do the Right Thing* or *Death Man* present a diverse range of moral position and avoid reinforcing racial stereotypes. This could also be the case of remakes and adaptations, which depending on their socio-cultural background, may differ from the original version by introducing or getting rid of stereotypes.

Film remakes and adaptations are not only recognized for being successful works but also for giving watchers and readers the opportunity of reliving stories that already may captivate us. These works are not seen as mere repetition but as a new opportunity of watching a film based on a plot previously known and fancied. One of the reasons for recounting stories again may be commercial. After success, it is likely that a remake will not only seduce viewers of the previous version, but also win over new spectators, which, in turn, would guarantee a financial gain, as in many cases the director focuses on

providing the spectator with better sounds effects or images. Indeed, in many cases, the plot and dialogues are similar or subjected to little modification. Even though these two terms, adaptation and remake, are thought to be used interchangeably in some circumstances, they have a different meaning (Verevis 1-5). On the one hand, the version of *Little Women* released in 1994 is a cinematographic adaptation of the novel by the same title and not a remake of any previous film version. It is commonly expected from a more contemporary version to depart from the novel due to the social, political and economic developments that the passing of time may have brought. However, this adaptation is quite close to the original text. "Every film adaptation is defined by its legal sanctioned use of material from an earlier model, whose adaptation rights the producers have customarily purchased" (11-12). According to Dudley Andrew, all the films are based on any previously written work, but as it takes an extended sense, it is commonly applied to describe the connection of a film based on a novel. On the other hand, remakes could be defined as films based on previous cinematographic works (1-5), as is the case with 1949 *Little Women*, which was based on *Little Women* (1933). From now on, I shall use the term 'remake' to refer to the 1949 film and 'adaptation' to refer to the 1994 film. Even though film remakes have been part of the Hollywood industry for such a long period, experts have not yet fully explored this field. This may be due to the fact that series and films are constantly being remade. For instance, foreign works are not only translated from the native language but also include added or transformed cultural elements with the intention of adapting the original text to a different cultural context. This remade works may rely on unknown films or successful and well-known stories that had already gained the public's acceptance. Although some of those films are not blockbusters, they may become relevant after some modifications, for example, by casting famous actors or through director's choices that showing a different point of view.

3. Analysis

3.1. Josephine March

Josephine, the protagonists of the novel, embodies rebellion and stubbornness. Far from being interested in romantic love, Jo pays hardly any attention to relationships. Her character fights against the injustices found in daily life, especially those related to the restrictions society imposes on women. Indeed, Jo, who dreams of being a writer, will

work hard to reach her goals and overcome the various obstacles she finds along the way. However, as we are about to see, she is portrayed differently in the novel and in the films that I am analyzing.

In the novel and the film version of 1949, Jo is represented as a stereotypical tomboy. As she sees her gender as an obstacle to be a writer and to live as she wishes, she avoids looking feminine and behaves in way opposite to what 'being a lady' implies. She tries to modify her speech by speaking with a deep voice to sound like a male, significantly highlighting the fact that 19th century women's voice was silenced by the patriarchal discourse. These masculine manners arise as she associates the term female with femininity. Considering that femininity and masculinity are two opposing notions and that femininity is regarded to be all that masculinity is not, she opts for masculinity, as this is the only way she has to achieve her purposes in a masculinist society. In 1949, as well as in the novel, the physical appearance of the sisters, especially Jo's aspect and her looks, will be a matter of concern to her, and she consistently underrates a few key elements that could mark her body as 'ladylike'. Namely, gloves which were one of the accessories women needed to attend to major events do not seem to be of interest to her as when she realizes that she does not have a pair of clean gloves to wear to Laurie's party she does not worry about it.

By contrast, in the film version of 1994, gloves and uncomfortable clothes are only mentioned briefly: "Blast these wretched skirts!" laments Jo while playing with Laurie and her sisters. The fact that there is no much attention devoted to this topic gives the opportunity of analyzing how Jo's character is not remarkably focused on being a boy as she is on promoting gender equality. In fact, Jo does not want to be touted as feminine nor does she strive to be regarded as a male. This is also related to the fact that Armstrong's adaptation is not only based on Alcott's novel, but the author's biography as well: "Her own struggles as an author are reflected in the struggles experienced by Jo March in *Little Women*, which in its narrative progression expresses the difficulties that beset the female artist in the mid-nineteenth century" (Cartmell and Simons 78).

One of the principal symbols of femininity is long hair. Acknowledging the influence of the hairstyle in her appearance, in both the novel and its version of 1949, Jo will style her hair in a particular way as a means of achieving her goals: "If turning up my hair makes me one, I'll wear it in two tails till I'm 90. I won't grow up and be Miss

March. I won't wear long gowns and look like a China aster" (*Little Women* 0:04:45-00:05:20). Although her sisters try to convince her that there is nothing wrong in being a lady, or what is more, they encourage her to be one, she refuses to change her mind: "Jo, now that you turn up your hair, you should realize you're a young lady" (*Little Women* 0:04:00). As it can be observed in both films, Jo decides to cut her hair instead of begging aunt March for money. This is a remarkable scene as short hair has always been associated with masculinity in the Christian western world. As stated in the bible, "[d]oes not nature itself teach you that if a man wears his hair long it is a disgrace to him, whereas if a woman has long hair it is her glory, because long hair has been given [her] for a covering?" (Bible Gateway Passage: 1 Corinthians 11). Even currently, we refer to women's short hair as *garçon* (young man in French) hairstyle. In the novel and both of the films, she seems to be happy and proud of her decision. Nevertheless, in the literary work and its film version of 1949, apart from her sisters' compliments for her bravery, Marmee states a quote closely related to one of the bases of transcendentalism, a philosophical movement that was extremely influential in Alcott's life as his father was a transcendentalist educator: "Your hair will grow back, and it'll be as lovely as ever. But you will never be more beautiful than you are now." With it she makes allusion to Jo's soul and kindness, but not to her physical appearance, that is to say, Marmee ultimately refers to the belief that we should transcend this world with our soul rather than with our body, and as a proverb from the bible states: "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (Berean Study Bible 31:30). Conversely, in the 1994 adaptation, Amy tells Jo that the cut suits her well, by which she means to compliment her looks and not her soul, thus challenging the biblical ideal that women need to have long hair to be feminine or beautiful.

Regarding her attitude, more differences between the three texts can be found. The first scenes of a film usually create an impression which may persist throughout the film, and, as it happens in real life, first impressions tend to be crucial for shaping an opinion. The fact that LeRoy's first scene of the film displays Jo jumping a fence to get in the house and not by opening the door, which will be the most common thing to do, is remarkable and when she stumbles, instead of giving up, she tries again. By contrast, in the novel and in Armstrong's adaptation, this first scene does not appear. Accordingly, this inclusion may be related to LeRoy's attempts to represent Jo as a tomboy. In the remake, it is understandable that she may dream of being a boy, as she does not only

declare that she will behave as she pleases, but she also adds “I'll never get over my disappointment at not being a boy” (*Little Women* 0:04:00), a statement also found in the novel. In light of this, it could be argued that one of the main discrepancies between both films is that in the novel and in 1949 remake Jo wants to be a boy above all, without noticing that she underestimates women’s role and position, while in the latest film version, although Jo does not want to be characterized as a young lady, she does not see the need to act “boyishly” to be free.

This is confirmed when in the remake she admits wanting to be like Laurie to live the adventures he has experienced; “Well, I'm glad he's a boy. I'd like to know a boy for a change and have a little fun” (*Little Women* 0:08:50). She does not actually need to *become* a boy herself: being in the company of a boy is enough to share his freedom. In fact, any male role model becomes her model. On account of her aspiration to become a hero and demonstrate her bravery, she admits looking up to her father, and adds; “I'm the man in the family while Papa's away” (*Little Women* 0:20:05). This statement is also meaningful because she does not mention her mother at all. It can be taken for a sign that she underestimates women's position and, more precisely, her mother’s role. Not satisfied with resembling a male, and due to her desire for freedom, and to have the same rights and chances males have, she utters one of the most meaningful quotes of the 1949 film: “I wish I was a horse” (*Little Women* 0:58:05-0:59:00). Horses are the representation of freedom, and they are usually regarded as a symbol of wilderness, strength, and masculinity. It follows that she is not transsexual and that she never actually wanted the *body* of a boy, as she will as easily identify with an animal if that grants her the freedom she so desperately longs for.

In the 1994 adaptation, however, Jo promotes a more feminist approach, which makes it possible to frame the film within the 1990s rekindling of the movement for women’s rights. Freedom of movement is one of the rights that is present in the three texts in question, and in all three texts Jo is given the chance to go to New York to embrace her liberty. Yet, Armstrong’s adaptation presents an inclusion (a scene not present neither in the novel nor in 1949 remake), in which Jo deals with women’s right to vote: “It's poor logic to say that because women are good they may vote. Men do not vote because they are good. Women should vote, - not because they are good, but because they are human beings” (*Little Women* 1:15:00-1:15:45). Interestingly, in the 1994

adaptation as well as in the novel, instances of women's progress towards emancipation can be found, which are absent from the 1949 film: "My aunt left me Plumfield. It isn't a field. It's a rather large house. All it's good for is a school. And I want a good school. One that's open to anyone who wants to learn" (*Little Women* 1:48:00). This scene was excluded from the remake for the following reason:

"In this version, the director Gillian Armstrong will underline the authorship of Jo as main theme; furthermore, the subversive subtext will be more explicitly voiced. The close feminine community will be stressed throughout the entire film. As the two other versions were produced in a time when women were not fully emancipated, different from ours, they tend to almost neglect this subversive subtext." (Cartmell and Simons 86).

By the same token, the 1949 film version excludes the scene where Jo gets notably angry and even aggressive when her sister Amy burns her work, a scene present in the novel and its adaptation: "I'm going to kill you! Jehosephat!", "I hate you!", "You're dead! You're nothing!", "I never want to see you again!" (*Little Women* 0:31:00-0:35:00). These sentences denote fury and rage, an attitude that women could not exhibit publicly. Fire could be used as a symbol of Jo's anger or disagreement with particular actions, as it can be seen in the aforementioned scene. This symbol is also present when Jo unintentionally burns her dress, an action present in all the versions, which may suggest that she is passionately against the stereotypical dressing code women were confined in at the time. She also confronts the idea that all female need to be feminine and this can be seen through the subversion of roles between Jo and Laurie, the next-door neighbor who becomes a good friend of the March sisters.

One of the clearest instances of gender subversion is related to their names, as they are usually associated with the opposite gender, and yet neither Jo nor Laurie seem to be surprised by each other's name. As it is explained in the novel, Jo's real name is Josephine, but she insists on being called Jo, which sounds more masculine. In the remake, Laurie is portrayed with feminine characteristics when Jo ambiguously uses the term sister in this statement: "Just tell him that I love him like a sister" (*Little Women* 1:38:00) or when the professor asks Jo if Laurie is her sister, presuming that he is a female (*Little Women* 1:11:40). Nevertheless, and contrary to what is seen in the remake, in the novel and in the adaptation, Jo refers to Laurie with the affectionate name, Teddy. The reason for this exclusion in LeRoy's work could be related to the fact that the

nickname Teddy may sound too feminine and hence, it may have been unthinkable to use it for a male character when the remake was released.

The subversion of roles can also be seen in Laurie's interest in romantic love, as according to social standards, women are the ones expected to be interested in it, but this is not the case of the novel and specially its 1949 film versions. Once again, the stereotype of Jo as a tomboy is reinforced in Leroy's work. While Laurie finds romantic the fact that Brooke has taken Meg's glove to keep it in his pocket, Jo does not only refer to it as "sentimental rubbish", but she also affirms knowing it all about girls in love "I write about girls who are in love, so I know. You have none of the symptoms" (*Little Women* 1:10:00-1:15:00). However, this only seems to be a stereotypical definition, as she has not been in love nor she has ever known girls in love. In the 1994 version, she definitely feels more comfortable playing the 'masculine bachelor' and does not seem to be interested in marriage: "Why marry? Why can't things stay as they are?" (*Little Women* 0:56:45). She declares that she wants her experience in New York to be strictly literary (*Little Women* 1:19:00). Ironically, it is in New York that she will meet her future husband. A large number of viewers and readers firmly believed that Jo would end up having a romantic relationship with Laurie. However, this was never included in Alcott's plans: "I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone!" (Cartmell and Simons 84).

"Alcott's rejection of the romantic format could not, however, be sustained by Hollywood, and the different screen versions of *Little Women* incorporate the sequel to the novel, first published as *Good Wives*, which takes the girls through to their ultimate destinies, glamorized by the cinematic conventions of their respective periods" (Cartmell and Simons 84).

This is connected to one of the most common social beliefs which suggest that a friendship relationship between men and women is not possible, but as can be seen in Alcott's work, she challenges the stereotyped relations between female and male: not only is Laurie accepted in the sister's "society" but they referred to him as a brother: "We're man and woman now... but we can be brother and sister. And love and help each other for the rest of our lives" claims Jo in the adaptation (*Little Women* 1:52:00) or "You're my dearest friend" admits Jo in the remake (*Little Women* 1:04:00). Nonetheless, in Leroy's adaptation, Jo also declares that she would have married him, because she admits that even though she considers him a friend, to feel loved is more important for her than what it used to be. Therefore this may suggest that she no longer wants to be

alone, thus suggesting that she may be eventually starting to think more in accordance with the stereotype that wants women hungry for love and stability.

3.2. Meg March

Meg is represented as behaving the way it is expected from a nineteenth-century young girl. Being the oldest of the March sisters, caring Meg is usually responsible for the other three sisters. She will encourage them to do what is socially correct, by reprimanding Jo's boyish style or Amy's shellfish behavior. It can be said, therefore, that she embodies the concept of maternity and, in fact, she will be the first one to marry and have children. Particularly in the novel, she is portrayed as the perfect wife: "Meg learned that a woman's happiest kingdom is home, her highest honor the art of ruling it not as a queen, but as a wise wife and mother" (701-702). Nevertheless, as is the case with the different characters in the story, Meg will also have to overcome various obstacles. Her conformism to social normativity will be one of her flaws and the reason she will not always stay true to herself. However, as it happens with Jo's character, this conventional individual will be represented differently in each version of the plot.

Both in the novel and 1949 film, Meg will obey the rules society imposes as far as both a woman's physical appearance and her manners are concerned. Being really influenced by people's judgment, she will not only be concerned with her looks, but also with her sisters' public image and, specifically, with Jo's nonconformist personality. Consequently, in the remake she will try hard to make the stubborn tomboy see senses and teach her the requirements society demands: "Look at you! No hairpins, no combs, running down a public road", "don't put your hands behind your back or stare" (*Little Women* 0:58:05-0:59:00) or "Don't stride about or swear. And don't say, "Christopher Columbus" (*Little Women* 0:39:00). Meg's attitude may arise not only because she wishes the best for her sisters, but also because she wants to meet social expectations, especially in front of upper or high-middle-class people.

By contrast, in the 1994 adaptation, and although she will still want to create a good impression, she will not mindlessly follow all social rules. In some scenes, she will be concerned or really invested in being perfect for the situation, but she does not seem consumed by this desire, nor does she devote all her time to her own and her sisters' physical appearance. As mentioned in the framework many women feel the necessity of

acting according to the standards society imposes on them. One of the commands was the strict dress code expected from women, and despite wearing corsets or make-up was not common in conservative circles, it was a must to belong to the fashionable lot. In the adaptation Meg will challenge the standards and will avoid wearing corsets even in exceptional circumstances, for which she will be criticized by her friends. They will convince her not only of wearing a corset and dress more appropriately for the occasion but also of using makeup. Feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed, she will regret her choices: “This ridiculous dress! I keep tripping over it”, as she realizes that even though corsets and make up may be part of the dressing code it does not represent her real personality (*Little Women* 0:37-00:42). Hence, she, too, will break some conventions and show a more human Meg, who will try to do what is morally correct, but will also make mistakes.

What is more, in all the three works that are being analyzed, she seems to have clear views regarding love and friendship that may not fit in the standards of the period in which the story is set. Like Jo, Meg too will assert her personality and beliefs by refusing to follow others’ impositions, more precisely her aunt’s impositions. In the remake, aunt March threatens to leave Meg no inheritance if she marries Brooke, a calm and quiet young man who works as Laurie's tutor and who soon seems to be interested in Meg, to which Meg replies: “I shall marry who I please.” She then goes on to defend Brooke by saying that neither of them will marry for money: “My John would no more marry for money than I would” (*Little Women* 1:16:00) Additionally, when Brooke mentions her that she may not love him at that moment but that she will learn to love him, she gets angry and replies that she does not want to learn it, but to feel it (*Little Women* 1:15:00). Thus, in the novel and its 1949 version she will be portrayed as stereotyped character, as she always does what is moral and correct, but without sacrificing her happiness, while in the adaptation is clearly seen that Meg is not a stereotyped.

3.3. Beth March

Beth March, the delicate and shy sister, is affected by a disease that weakens her. This condition forces her to stay at home while the other sisters move on with their lives. Despite this, she seems to be satisfied with her life and likes the tranquility and comfort of her family home, as she experiences great anxiety when she has to socialize with

people. Due to her premature death, she is also represented as an eternally young girl, who is consequently also infantilized, at least in the cinematic text from 1949. Yet, she is also recognized for her charm; "You're a dear, and nothing else," said Meg to Beth (*Little Women* 6). Similar examples can be found in the films: "sweet Beth" is the way in which her sisters address her in the adaptation of 1994. In the novel and in Mervyn LeRoy's film the only gift she desires for Christmas is the end of the war and the return of her father.

In light of this, it could be argued that she is the stereotypification of "the angel of the house." An expression that makes reference to the Victorian ideal of womanhood: docile, sweet and submissive (Coventry Patmore). This could also be considered a paradox as the Angel of the House is an expression generally associated to adult women, mothers, wives, but Beth is regarded as an eternal child because of her premature death and her general disposition throughout her short life. Nevertheless, despite being characterized as an extremely innocent girl who dies very early, she is not a flat character. As it happens with the other sisters, she will also demonstrate having characteristics that identify her as a round character, such as her capacity for self-improvement, exemplified by overcoming her fear of socializing with people. After an initial diffidence, Beth forges a close relationship with Mr. Laurence when he gave her his dead daughter's piano and by playing it, she finds a way of communicating.

In the 1949 film version, the figure of the eternal child is reinforced not only because viewers are not aware of her last days on earth, but also because in this version she is the youngest of the sisters. In the novel, in fact, Amy is the youngest and Beth is 14 years old. The deletion of Beth's death could also be associated with the social and political circumstances of the period, such as the effects of war that had not been overcome yet. Therefore, such a sad scene was not what viewers wanted to watch, as they had already witnessed too much suffering and pain in real life.

On the contrary, in the novel and Armstrong's adaptation, the stereotype of the eternal child is dismantled. Not only is the scene of Beth's death present, but she will also declare of not being afraid of death. Instead of being presented as a child in pain and wanting to be comforted, Beth is shown consoling Jo when she finds out about the sad news, a very mature position for such a young girl, and a scene in which once again, she will be portrayed as a reassuring angel. In Alcott's narrative, this scene is also used to

highlight Beth's insecurity to the point of almost painting her as lacking self-esteem: "I couldn't seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there"(657). The fact that she did not see herself as a grown-up woman could be intimately associated with her death. Alcott may be suggesting that when a woman devotes all her time to the domestic sphere her only option was to die literally or spiritually speaking. In this sense, I believe that Beth's death may be intended as critique of domesticity as the ideal sphere for a lady. Indeed, according to Virginia Woolf, "[k]illing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Shihada 124). Be as it may, it could be nevertheless argued that there is a subversion of the initial idea of a stereotyped Beth, content at home, childlike and unwilling to grow, especially in the novel and the film adaptation, as she shows to be more mature as the story goes on.

3.4. Amy

Amy, the youngest member of the family, who could be identified for her beauty, is interested in romantic love. At the same time, her obsession with conjuring up material possessions by finding a handsome and wealthy man to marry will be one of her flaws. Indeed, she refers to herself as "mercenary" and admits hating poverty, something that makes her sound exaggerated because, even though they do not belong to a high class, their social status certainly could not be defined as working class. As we are about to see, at the beginning of the novel and its 1949 version, she is represented as the stereotypical spoiled brat, but this will change as the plot unfolds.

In 1949 film, Jo strongly recommends Amy to change her attitude as she considers her "too prim", in other words, she gets "easily shocked by rude behaviour" (Cambridge Dictionary). Instances of her old fashioned personality are to be found in her good relationship with her conservative aunt (1949). Similarly, in the adaptation, Amy reprimands Jo for saying "blast", to what Jo states: "Amy, don't be such a ninny-pinny" (*Little Women* 0:04:00). However, despite their differences, they will both grow to become strong, determined women who are actively trying to get what they want. They just have opposite points of view and use opposite strategies. Therefore, Amy may adopt her "prim", "ninny-pinny" attitude not only because it may be the only way out the system gives her, but also because she has clearly defined ideas: she wants to have a

romantic relation: “I don't want to die. I've never even been kissed. I've waited my whole life to be kissed. What if I miss it?” asks Amy when she is just a little girl (*Little Women* 0:42:42). At the same time, as described in the novel and displayed in both films, she avoids costs being poor at all and knows that a woman's ‘career’ in the world is mostly limited to marrying a good match: “one of us must marry well. Meg didn't, Jo won't, Beth can't yet, so I shall, and make everything okay all round” (*Little Women* 560). For some time it seems as if she had left those romantics ideas to one side, her desire for power and money overcoming her childhood fantasies of love:

Laurie: You do not love Fred Vaughan.

Amy: He's stable and well-mannered...

Laurie: And has 40,000 a year.

Amy: I've always known, I would not marry a pauper (*Little Women* 1:23:12).

Eventually, however, Amy's entrepreneurial spirit will help her to achieve both her goals: to become “a true gentlewoman in mind and manners”, and to marry Laurie. Therefore, not only will she eventually marry for love, as her mother wants, but she will also marry a wealthy man, as aunt March advices.

Even though she is depicted similarly in the three works that I am analyzing, there are some differences between the films. While in the 1949 text there will be more situations in which her spoiled, “prim” and girlish attitude is visible, in Armstrong's adaptation some scenes will force us to rethink her stereotypification. In the former work, Amy and her sisters are having fun while playing with Laurie. Even though Amy is a young girl, she remains polite and keeps her forms. It also may help the fact that the scene is set in an ideal environment, as it is a sunny day and they are playing in the yard. Conversely, in 1994 the four sisters are running wildly all around the place. As can be expected from teenagers, they play on the floor and make noises without paying too much attention to maintaining their composure. Therefore, while in 1949 text the stereotypification is done through the caricature and hyperbole, in 1994 film adaptation, characters are more relatable, which makes it easier for the viewers to identify with them.

All in all, even though, at the beginning of the three works, she is considered to be a stereotyped character, Amy, too, like her elder sisters will become a more complex character as the story goes on, leaving the initial stereotypification aside.

3.5. The older generation

Marmee, Hannah and aunt March show different perspectives of the preceding generation, as each of them belong to different generations and have different beliefs. Marmee, the mother and guide of the March sisters, conveys to her daughters values that were not common in the period of time in which the story is set. Among them, marrying for love and not for money or encouraging them to stay true to themselves. She will also be in charge of running the house, as Mr. March, her husband and the father of the four girls, is at the front during the war. “We haven't got Father and probably won't have him for a long time” (*Little Women* 0:03:12). Consequently, most of the information we know about him is provided and filtered by the March sisters, who seem to be very proud of him. His absence lies bare Marmee's ability to handle all the obstacles she finds along the way, however, she is portrayed slightly differently in each text.

In the novel, as well as in the 1949 film adaptation, the most revolutionary topic Marmee proposes has to do with marriage, as, she does not want their daughters to be married to rich men just for the improvement of their social status; “I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented than queens on thrones, without self-respect or peace” (*Little Women* 0:48:12) Yet, in the novel, she also contradicts herself by saying: “To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman” (*Little Women* 170). Thus, indicating that the opinion that a man has of a woman is ultimately more important than the opinion that she has of herself. By contrast in 1994, Marmee will try to educate her daughters on the basis of modern-day feminist tenets. For example, self-sufficiency will be an issue of great concern in this film adaptation; she shows her daughters how to cater to the family and take care of domestic duties by themselves. When she leaves her daughters at home to take care of her wounded husband, the March sisters will demonstrate their self-sufficiency by taking care of all domestic issues, including finances.

In the adaptation, Marmee also promotes equality by comparing boys' freedom to flirt with whenever they want and act freely, knowing people will not judge them, with

the consequences a girl must face if she acts similarly: “Nothing provokes speculation like a woman enjoying herself” (*Little Women* 0:37:42). She also comforts Meg saying that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be beautiful and liked when she feels vane for having such desires (*Little Women* 0:37:42). Marmee will not only be concerned with all the constraints society imposes on women, but she will also be brave enough to talk about them openly and to publicly disagree with others, even with men. When Mr. Brooke claims that “[t]he young ladies are unusually active”, to which she answers that women also need to exercise their bodies (*Little Women* 0:19:42), or when Amy lets them know that her teacher Mr. Davis said that “it was as useful to educate a woman as a cat” (*Little Women* 0:22:42) he is strongly criticized and Marmee takes action, by taking Amy out of that school and writing a letter in which she condemns him for his attitude.

Marmee’s feminist streak is definitely more evident in the 1994 film than it was in any of the preceding texts.

“Consistent with postmodern Hollywood, Armstrong’s film is highly self-reflexive. In part, this introversion is conducted through the figure of Marmee; in her repeated musings on female independence, she becomes Alcott’s spokeswoman in the film. The shift of emphasis is exaggerated by the casting of Susan Sarandon, an actor well known for her feminist sympathies, in the role” (Cartmell and Simons 85).

Indeed, depending on the text, Marmee is represented as “either domestic goddess (Cukor and LeRoy) or as prototype feminist (Armstrong)” (Cartmell and Simons 85). In the novel and the remake of 1949, she will be portrayed as a ‘domestic goddess’: “[d]on't you feel that it is pleasanter to help one another, to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when it comes, and to bear and forbear, that home may be comfortable and lovely to us all?” (*Little Women* 209). Likewise, the first scenes of the film highlight the fact that she combines her domestic responsibilities and the education of her daughters with her work. However, this topic will not be of significant concern in the 1994 film, as it was already normal enough to see women working outside of the domestic sphere in the 1990s. For example, in this adaptation, Meg has a job from the start.

If Marmee symbolizes the spiritual world, aunt March represents the material world. As the well-to-do, elderly widow she is, she sides with the most conservative social values of the period of time in which the story is set, especially those related to a patriarchal distribution of roles and to the importance of money as the ultimate source of

happiness and comfort: “it is your duty to marry a rich man and help your family” claims in the remake (*Little women* 1:16:00). Unlike other characters that have been analyzed, she will be a stereotyped character in the three works that I am examining. This opinionated old woman will try to teach an old-fashioned sense of propriety and good manners to her nieces, and to sternly impose her ideas: “She can't go without gloves, they're society” (*Little women* 0:37:02). Moreover, besides not supporting the March sisters' more progressive aspirations, such as Jo's dream of becoming a writer, she always tries to actively sabotage any of their projects, something that will create more than one dispute between her and Meg, to whom she refers as “miss independence.” Furthermore, she adds, “the one hope for your family is for Margaret to marry well” (*Little women* 0:37:02). However, she tends to be ignored as any of the characters pay attention to her, what may signify that her attitudes and values have become too conservative even for their time.

4. Conclusion

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that the two cinematographic versions I have chosen depart from the original representation of gender roles and identities since they are each designed to match the gender policies enforced by hegemonic cultural forces from the period of time in which the films were released. Therefore, it could be argued that scenes were included, deleted or altered in the cinematic text from 1949 in order for the stereotypification to be stronger than in the novel or the 1994 adaptation. Jo will be characterized as a tomboy, Amy as a spoiled girl, Beth as the eternally young girl, Meg as a maternal figure and Marmee as a domestic goddess. In the case of aunt March, she will be described as a stereotyped figure in the three works. By contrast, Armstrong's version breaks with the conventions, by emphasizing on Beth's maturity in her last days of life, Jo's feminist ideas, Amy's moral progress, and Meg's resistance to some of the more conventional standards. Yet, it needs to be taken into account that both of them are Hollywood productions, an industry known for its “ethos of heroism, romance, and harmonious resolution” (Cartmell and Simons 79). Hence, we could suggest that there are two possible reasons for the differences between the cinematic narratives: economic and socio-cultural. As already mentioned remakes and adaptations are usually based on well-known stories and designed to secure financial gain. They seek to gain the largest possible number of spectators, which is why

different updates and adjustments are required, such as the introduction of revolutionary or more contemporary ideas.

In order to understand said changes, the socio-cultural circumstances of the period in which the novel and each film were produced must, therefore, be taken into consideration. Regarding the novel, even though Alcott is known for her proto-feminist views, which were ahead of her time, she was born in a period in which women had not the same rights as men and their unequal status was attributed to essentialist differences in their nature.. This explains why, in some cases, Alcott's characters behave according to the conventional standards of that period. LeRoy's version "was made under the restrictive and firmly established Production Code that dictated the content of Hollywood films from 1934 to the mid-1950s" (Cartmell and Simons 83). The conservative 1950s, gender representation is depleted of any potential for subversion. Indeed, even though in the first half of the 1940s the rigidity of the U.S. essentially patriarchal social system had been altered due to the role women had played while men went to war, women's position was still far from being one rooted in equality, and it became even more unequal with the vigorous reactionary wave that shook the country after the end of WWII. Therefore, LeRoy's film deliberately caricatures femininity through the mocking of gender stereotypes (the butch, the femme fatale, the weak conformist, and the childish angel) as a moralizing cautionary tale against any departure from the 1950s very rigid cultural definition of womanhood. On the other hand, in the adaptation of 1994, characters like Mrs. March or Jo will be rewritten in order to patently and deliberately challenge the rules and principles of 19th century society so as to please the tendency towards political correctness that was one of the hallmarks of the Clinton administration (Cartmell and Simons 83). Consequently, the socio-political context of this adaptation will also leave more freedom to portray characters and discuss diverse topics, such as feminism, more openly. It follows that the former will portray more realistic characters and move away from the more obvious stereotypes found in the latter.

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