

History 2065 Teamwork Project: Little Women

Synopsis (Hannah Connely)



Greta Gerwig's rendition of the classic tale *Little Women* follows the story of four sisters in Concord, Massachusetts during the later years of the Civil War. Gerwig directs this coming of age film even more light-heartedly by making it more of a comedy than other versions. While Louisa May Alcott's original novel is told in chronological order, Gerwig opts for a series of scenes from various points in the book. This organization creates a sense of organized chaos, similar to the rambunctious nature of the March household. The film begins with the main protagonist: Jo March, the playwright and author of the family, selling one of her stories to a publishing company. Then the other sisters are introduced: Amy, the wide eyed artist; Meg, the eldest and actress of the family; and Beth, the quiet pianist. The girls and their mother, Marmee embody a patchwork, uplifting tale of generosity and financial struggles. The little women, led by their wise and generous mother give to their community even as their own finances deplete with the absence of their father to the Union Army. The sisters enjoy a childhood full of plays, shenanigans, and nearly fatal folly when Amy almost drowns in a lake, but is saved by Jo and their neighbor Laurie. This savior mends Jo and Amy's feud after Amy burned Jo's novel for going to the theater without her. The movie progresses with the marriage and child bearing of Meg with John Brooke and Laurie's profession of love to Jo. Jo rejects his proposal and reinforces her desire to make something of herself beyond being a wife and mother. Later in the film, Amy is painting in Paris while pursuing a wealthy husband under the guidance of their jaded Aunt March. Amy has grown since her spiteful childhood days and has become incredibly self aware of her position in society as a woman. She perfectly describes the female experience in a single monologue discussing their lack of independence and the economic propensity of marriage. While in Paris, Laurie professes his love for Amy and she resists his advances at first, but ultimately rejects the wealthy man who proposes to her. As the film progresses Beth becomes ill with scarlet fever after visiting an impoverished family. The death of Beth reinvigorates Jo to write her novel as she grapples with the harsh criticism of Friedrich, her companion from the boarding house she teaches at in New York. Laurie and Amy return from Europe and announce their engagement to their family, disheartening Jo who has second thoughts about her rejection of him. Jo returns to her writing with a vengeance, drafting her

novel day and night. This is accompanied by the return of Friedrich to Jo's life when he arrives at her family home igniting their unspoken romance. Jo rushes after Friedrich in the rain as a simultaneous scene shows the frantic cries of young women over her novel *Little Women* inducing the film's climax. Jo expresses her love to Friedrich as the complementary scene shows her conforming to the publisher's desire that her main character marry at the end of her novel. The film ends with Jo's novel going to print and her using the house she inherits from Aunt March to open a school for boys and girls. The entire March family is instrumental in the schools teachings of the arts and literature.



Little Women is a timeless coming of age film that when directed by Gerwig presents as more of a comedy than previous versions. This film is revisionist as most Civil War films are serious and tragic, whereas Gerwig directs this as a heartfelt, uplifting story of family and positivity in hard times. The mise en scene of *Little Women* is energetic and light hearted by its use of bright, aesthetic colors and instrumental music mostly in a major key. The film is also given this atmosphere by use of bright lighting throughout almost the entire movie making every color very saturated. The film has elements of realism through its female perspective as it does not shy away from expressing the immensely dependent position of women in society. The film finds redemption and validity for each character despite their juxtaposing ideals and positions in a way that truly exemplifies women supporting other women. There is some type-casting at play as all the characters are played by incredibly famous actors, particularly Saoirse Ronan and Timothee Chalamet who create a certain expectation of the film. These two actors have been used by Gerwig in her other film *Lady Bird* and as such draw the audience in by their previous chemistry. This coming of age film is classic in every way making it applicable to every generation and beloved by both adults and young people.

Critical Appraisal (Amy Verway-Cohen)



A lot of attention and detail was put into making sure small details in *Little Women* were historically accurate all the way down to the books that Aunt March has on her bookshelves. Even the journal that Jo March writes in is marbled which is identical to the type of journal Louisa May Alcott used. The outfits were also very accurate; besides the fact that they were made of cotton, special attention was made to the fact that synthetic dyes were developed in the 1850s and the most popular colors were blue, green, and purple. These are the main colors represented in the girls' outfits, specifically in Jo's green scarf. We also see multiple times in the film that the girls are putting on corsets, which was normal for women to wear in the 1860s. Travel is also accurately portrayed by the fact that we see the girls travel by carriage which was the common way to travel locally, besides travelling on foot. Trains were also a popular mode of transportation during this time, which we see at the end of the movie. Much larger historical issues were also very accurately portrayed, like how Jo had issues getting her writings published since she was a woman, causing her to originally publish her works under a pseudonym, just as Alcott had to. The 1860s was a time where feminism was on the rise with the beginning of movements to help women gain equality in education and labor pay. Although the girls do go to school in the movie, only Laurie goes to college. Still, all of the girls are very willful, especially Jo, and in the movie they each express their own air of feminism. One inaccuracy, though, is the fact that Jo struggled so much to get her book published while Alcott had no troubles at all and her publishers were very supportive. In the movie, Jo had to advocate for herself and fight for the copyright to the book along with the percentage of royalties she will receive. In real life, Alcott's publisher encouraged her to keep the copyright and paid her very fairly. Other inaccuracies, like how the publishing house was in New York City not Boston, were small enough so as to not take away from the purpose of the film. Overall, although this film is modernized in its style, it still includes many historical accuracies that makes you feel immersed in 1860 Massachusetts.

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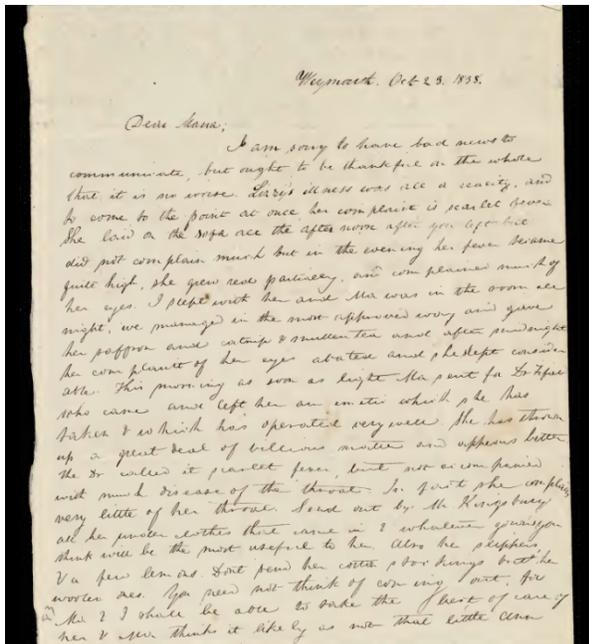
"Feminism in the 19th Century." *Atria*, institute-genderequality.org/news-publications/feminism/feminism-19th-century/.

Grow, Breanna, and Charlie Schlenker. "ISU Alcott Scholar: Gerwig's 'Little Women' Not The Definitive Adaptation Critics Say." *WGLT*, 12 Jan. 2020, www.wgl.t.org/post/isu-alcott-scholar-gerwigs-little-women-not-definitive-adaptation-critics-say#stream/0.

Jacobson, Christine. "Little Women - Greta Gerwig's Love Letter to the 19th-Century Novel." *Perspectives on History*, 4 Mar. 2020, www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2020/eml-little-women/em-greta-gerwigs-love-letter-to-the-19th-century-novel.

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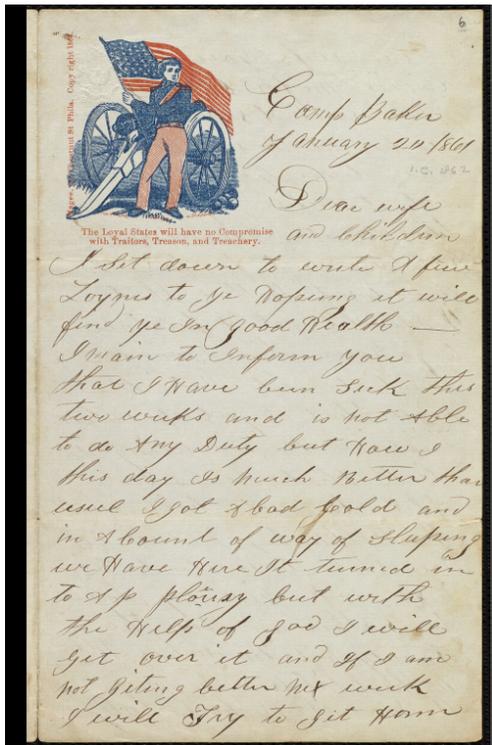
A Letter Describing the Symptoms of Scarlet Fever in 1838 (Zoey Verway-Cohen)



<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/little-women-by-louisa-may-alcott/sources/168>

While this letter was written about twenty years prior to when *Little Women* (2019) takes place, it gives an accurate description of the symptoms of scarlet fever from the point of view of a young girl, Elizabeth Bates Chapman from Massachusetts. Not only does *Little Women* take place in Massachusetts but in the movie and book, Beth, one of the four sisters, dies of scarlet fever. The letter is written by Anne Warren Weston and received by Maria Weston Chapman, Elizabeth's mother; both Anne and Maria were American abolitionists. In the letter, Anne writes to Maria about Lizzy's symptoms which includes red, itchy eyes, vomiting, and high fever. Anne also mentions that the doctor diagnosed Lizzy with scarlet fever, even though she was not exhibiting any severe problems with her throat. The symptoms illustrated in the letter match pretty closely to what is shown in *Little Women*, though Beth also exhibits delirium and coughing.

A Letter from a Massachusetts Soldier to His Wife and Children (Zoey Verway-Cohen)



<https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/little-women-by-louisa-may-alcott/sources/164>

Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy's father is fighting in the Civil War during part of the movie/book; at one point the family receives a letter from him similar to this primary source. The husband and father writes about his cold of two weeks and how he is going to try and come home by the next week. He also sent them some money, but not as much as he wished he could. This letter is similar to the one of the letters shown in *Little Women* (2019). In the movie, the family receives a few letters, one of which writes about the sisters' father being sick, wherein their mother travels

to see him well. Much like this letter, the father is described as having a cold that hasn't gotten much better after a few weeks of suffering from it. While we do not know if the father depicted in this letter arrives home, we do know that the father returns home to his little women in the movie.

Women in the late 1800's (Morgan Harrison)



<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/progressive-era-to-new-era-1900-1929/womens-suffrage-in-progressive-era/>

After the Civil War, women's rights activism rose into prominence in America. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, women's rights organizations worked to gain the right to vote, fought for economic and political equality, and demanded social reform. Also during this time period, more women began to seek employment of their own and sought to gain more independence in society. In the film *Little Women*, Jo, the second oldest daughter, is portrayed as determined, independent, and educated. Jo is actively pursuing a career in writing and is not interested in getting married or having children. The character Jo is an example of the more progressive mindset women started to have during this time in history.

Marriage after the Civil War (Morgan Harrison)



http://users.hist.umn.edu/~ruggles/Articles/Fitch_and_Ruggles.pdf

The median age of marriage for women stayed steady right after the Civil War ended, but the median age of marriage for men decreased quite a bit. There are conflicting opinions to why men's median marriage age decreased amongst historians. One theory was southern men lowered that median age because of high mortality rates in the south. Another theory was the declining availability of land restricted family formation, so men wanted to get married younger. Either way, the character Theodore 'Laurie' Laurence from the film is young when he proposes to long time friend Jo. Although Jo declines the proposal, the portrayal of Laurie wanting to get married at a young age aligns with marriage trends at that time in history.