***Little Women*: “Lots of Troubles; Jolly Stories”**

**Summer 2020**

**Newberry Library**

**Susanne Dumbleton**

“*Women have minds and souls as well as hearts, ambition and talent as well as beauty, and I’m sick of being told love is all a woman is fit for.”*

Jo March

The Arc of the Course

*Little Women*took the publishing world by storm in 1868, and has remained one of the world’s most-read novels for more than 150 years. In speaking of her writing life later, Alcott commented, “I’ve had lots of troubles, so I write Jolly Stories.” Little Women is filled with both. More than a rousing coming-of-age saga, Alcott’s rendering of four sisters making their way in the turbulent Civil War years addresses tensions equally relevant today—social responsibility vs. self-absorption, for example; money, gender and power; independent vs. prescribed thinking, and of course, the right of women to live autonomous lives.

This mix of seriousness and fun has been rendered on screen, never better than with Greta Gerwig’s 2019 film adaptation.

In this seminar, we will study the book and films and explore the sources ofLittle Women’s wisdom and its lasting appeal.

Reading Assignment for Week 1

*Little Women,* Part I, chapters 1-8, (pp. 11-86).

*Little Women: The Official Movie Companion:*

Chapter 1, “Louisa May Alcott and the Legacy of *Little Women* (pp. 1-13).

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Week I (July 9): Characters and Setting—Real and Imagined

*Overview of the Seminar: reading, viewing, discussion, and use of the course website, including reference to Newberry materials, to be explored at* [*http://www.susannedumbleton.com*](http://www.susannedumbleton.com)

*Historical context: New England during and immediately after the Civil War: Transcendentalism; activist and pacifist tensions; abolitionism; feminism; birth of social service; other writers: Emerson, Thoreau; Twain; Stowe; Douglass; Fuller; Bunyan.*

*Louisa May Alcott: Early years: the personal and the imagined. The Alcott sisters; the often-absent father; the social pioneer mother; Orchard House; the omnipresent financial constraints; “Blood and Thunder Tales.” Later years: writer, and activist: the art of going with the flow while writing against the tide. “I have had lots of troubles, so I write jolly tales.”*

Close reading of Chapters 1-8:

Discussion and appreciation of characters, setting, plot, themes, and language.

Characters: Marmee, Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, Laurie, Mr. Laurence; Hannah, Aunt March.

Setting: Concord, Orchard House; Laurence House; Aunt March’s house.

Themes: Relationships; Money; Generosity; Responsibility; Work; Mutuality; Affection.

Language: Small, self-contained chapters; descriptive passages mixed with “instruction;”

occasional authorial voice.

Plot: Father away; Mother engaged in social service; girls teaching and caring for one

another; enviable fun; theater; pairings; notable incidents such as Amy burning

Jo’s writing; Amy corporal punishment at school; Laurie; Meg and Jo going to

dance; Beth and Mr. Laurence.

Reading Assignment for Week II (July 16):

*Little Women:*

“The World of Louisa May Alcott and *Little Women,”* (pp. xi-xv).

Part I, Chapters 9-23, (pp. 86-229).

*Little Women: The Official Movie Companion:*

Chapter 4, “The Women (and Men) of *Little Women*, (pp. 31-101).

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Week II (July 16): Dilemmas, Choices and Growing Individuation

*As the sisters mature, while they retain playful fantasies, they are invariably drawn into tensions outside the home and struggle to redefine their individual identities. Meg, while attentive to life at Orchard House, is drawn to imagine life as a wife; Jo, while eager to plunge headlong into adult autonomy, resists forces threatening to disrupt the nest—suitors, for example. Beth, shy, provides anchor for affection and family integrity. Amy, drawn to beauty, weighs Aunt March’s marriage for wealth dictum.*

Close reading of Chapters 9-23:

Discussion of the impact longed-for and dreaded changes make on each character.

Meg, for example, faces into worldly society, enjoys it a bit but turns away when she questions the sincerity of those with whom she must engage. Marmee acknowledges her goals for her daughters include good marriages but not at any price.

Games at home become highly sophisticated, as in the Pickwick Post, the “Mailbox” and the strike against work. But the deep poverty of a neighboring family and the sudden illness of Mr. Brook and then Beth accelerate their maturation. Complex relationships develop among the sisters and their “adopted” brother Laurie. Financial concerns deepen, Jo continues to write and is rewarded with her first paid publication.

There will be some discussion of the art of adaptation of novel to screen in preparation for watching film.

Reading Assignment for Week 3 (July 23):

*Little Women* the film by Greta Gerwig

Watch Film and read Screenplay

*Little Women: The Official Movie Companion:*

Chapter 2, “New Impressions” (pp. 13-21).

“Good Strong Words,” (pp. 23-29).

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Week III (July 23): The Film: Money, Women; Power, Autonomy, Imagination and Aesthetic

*Greta Gerwig’s screenplay, drawn verbatim from Alcott’s books, journals or letters, not surprisingly, given Alcott’s activism, emphasizes themes that retain meaning in the 21st century: the right of women to work and create lives of individual meaning; the importance of family as a source of identity; and the complex relationship of money, power, and individual meaning, among others. Joe Morgenstern of the Wall Street Journal wrote, “The adaptation is faithful to its historical roots, yet it runs on contemporary energy.” Discussion will allow participants to compare their experience reading the text with their experience watching the film, acknowledging that while film has unique tools to influence imagination, it is of necessity selective (in this case compressing a 470-page book into a two-hour film).*

*With access to the screenplay, we will be able to consider Gerwig’s intention.*

*Screenplay, Opening Scene:*

*Editor: “… Tell her to make it short and spicy. And if the main*

*character’s a girl, make sure she’s married by the end.*

*(Casually) Or dead, either way.”* Screenplay, p. 3 (opening scene).

*Screenplay, Closing Scene:*

*Jo: “If I’m going to sell my heroine into marriage for money, I might*

*as well get some of it.”* Screenplay, p. 120 (final scene).

Reading Assignment for Week 4 (July 30):

*Little Women:*

Part II, Chapters 22-33, (pp. 233-335).

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Week IV (July 30): Reaching to Meet Their Potential, while Accepting Their Limits.

*In a decision that tortures them both, Jo turns down Laurie’s repeated proposal and returns to New York. Meg, Jo, Amy, and Laurie leave home, and move the plot forward through youthfully enthusiastic letters—Jo from the boarding house and Amy, with tales of Laurie, from Europe. All assess their progress in considering ways to “be,” describing each stage with youthful certainty, though often adding new ideas. Jo, for example, when first in New York, is a confirmed capitalist.*

Discussion will focus on the struggle to become thoughtful, responsible adults. We will also look at excerpts from other film renderings.

Week IV: Reading Assignment for Week 5 (August 6)

*Little Women:*

Part II, Chapters 34-47 (pp. 336-472).

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Week V (August 6): Alcott’s Compromise: Happiness, Success and Identity

*The March family are devastated by the loss of Beth, who dies after years of struggle against the scars of Scarlet Fever. After the sudden death of Aunt March and Jo’s success writing, Jo is able to institute a radically progressive school and provide positions for John Brooke, Professor Bhaer, Meg, Amy, and her father. Her sisters move to happy married lives--Meg and John whose twins provide love and laughter; Amy and Laurie who encourage and corral one another; and Jo and Frederich. The book ends with Marmee’s pleasure,*

“*Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this” (p. 473).*

Summary discussion based on overview of the text, films, participant observations, and secondary sources, particularly those within the Newberry Collection.

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**Required Readings:**

Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women.* New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004. ISBN 978-1-59308-108-9. (*Little Women* was published in two volumes, in October 1868 and April 1869, then combined into a single volume in 1880.) I have chosen the Barnes and Noble Classics text because I find the design, font, and price ($8.95) friendly. Seminar participants may choose any edition, but assignments refer to this edition.

Gerwig, Greta. *Little Women.* SONY Pictures, 2019.

Gerwig, Greta. *Little Women: The Screenplay: Based on the Novel by Louisa May Alcott.* Screenplay is on course website <http://www.susannedumbleton.com> and here: <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/12/little-women-greta-gerwig-screenplay-1202199536/>

McIntyre, Gina, with photos by Wilson Webb. *Little Women: The Official Movie Companion.* New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2019. ISBN 978-1-4197-4068-8.