

Women as Commodities: An Analysis of Little Women Adaptations

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the portrayal of women as commodities and their agency in the adaptations of *Little Women* through the lens of Luce Irigaray's "Women on the Market." By analyzing the 2019 film adaptation, the limited economic agency of women is highlighted, emphasizing the economic implications of marriage and the commodification of women's bodies. However, the actions of Aunt March present a compelling contradiction, demonstrating women's potential to challenge societal norms and assert control over their assets. Additionally, the unique qualities of the four sisters challenge their objectification as commodities, aligning with Irigaray's observations. While the 1994 adaptation adheres to traditional expectations, the 2019 adaptation by Gerwig introduces alternative and ambiguous endings, emphasizing women's agency beyond romantic relationships. This research contributes to the field by providing a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between gender, class, and women's agency in these adaptations of *Little Women*.

Keywords: women, gender, class, commodities.

INTRODUCTION

The 1994 and 2019 *Little Women* movie adaptations, directed by female directors—Gillian Armstrong in 1994 and Greta Gerwig in 2019, offer a profound exploration of gender and class issues as depicted in Louisa May Alcott's classic novel under the same title in 1868. Set during the American Civil War era in Concord, Massachusetts, the film follows the lives of the four March sisters—Jo, Meg, Amy, and Beth—as they navigate the constraints imposed by their gender and social class. Through their individual journeys, the

movie delves into the complex intersectionality of being women from low economic backgrounds.

The story's central theme revolves around pursuing personal and artistic fulfillment amidst a society that restricts women's aspirations. Each sister faces distinct challenges linked to their social standing. Jo, the independent aspiring writer, battles against societal expectations that deem her ambitions as unladylike and a threat to traditional gender roles. Meg, grapples with the desire for both love and financial security, confronting the limited opportunities available to women of her class. Amy, driven by a yearning for artistic success, faces the reality of her family's economic struggles and the pressure to marry into wealth. Beth, the gentle musician, copes with her own dreams being overshadowed by her sisters' pursuits while battling her declining health.

The fact that *Little Women* novel has been made into multiple movie adaptations over time indicates a desire to cater to the cultural preferences of different audiences during specific periods.

"They all have a context—a time and a play, a society and a culture. ... when an adapted text migrates from its context of creation to the adaptation's context of reception. Because adaptation is a form of repetition without replication." (Hutcheon, 2006: 14)

Furthermore, Hutcheon suggests that adaptation involves both repetition of a source text and a critical difference that arises from the act of adaptation itself. The process of adaptation requires making choices, interpretation, and re-contextualization. Therefore, I am keen to investigate the unique perspectives of Gillian Armstrong and Greta Gerwig in their cinematic adaptations of *Little Women*. It is worth considering how societal influences may have shaped their approaches, specifically in relation to their portrayal of gender, class, and agency within the context of the time, place, society, and culture when their adaptations were produced.

Previous research focusing on *Little Women* has been conducted over time. Hollinger and Winterhalter (1999) reveal that in an interview with the *Village Voice*, Robin Swicord, screenwriter for the 1994 film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, explicitly said, "I wanted to do a true adaptation," and she also expressed her hope that her script would convey "what was important today ... to say what was not being said, particularly to young women and about young women." In an effort to express certain ideas that were not explicitly addressed in Alcott's original text, Swicord turned to historical sources outside of the novel. She sought to uncover the

history of women's progressivism in the nineteenth century, focusing on areas such as educational reform, abolition, and women's suffrage. By drawing from these historical sources, Swicord aimed to showcase the "politics of the times" for women and to enrich and elaborate upon the underlying progressive sentiments that she believed were subtly conveyed in Alcott's text.

On the other hand, one of the latest studies on *Little Women* by Smyth (2020) continues the discussion from a different perspective. It suggests that out of all these adaptations, only two have provided a sense of hope that women can mature and move away from their fixation on youthful beauty and the pursuit of idealized standards. These adaptations challenge the tendency to focus excessively on self-absorption. He goes on to mention that one of these two options is Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women*. It describes Gerwig's approach as radical and unapologetically distinct from other previous adaptations. In other words, Gerwig's film takes a fresh and unique perspective on the story compared to other versions that have been produced for film and television.

Furthermore, Foote (2005) discusses the portrayal of gender relations and class dynamics in *Little Women*. She highlights the emergence of the middle class and its impact on women. Middle-class women, excluded from professionalized white-collar positions associated with the middle class, become particularly sensitive to the societal changes and injuries that accompany middle-class ideals. As they are targeted by advertisers and faced with limited economic opportunities, middle-class women become the arbiters of the differences between economic class and social status.

In "Women on the Market", Irigaray (1985) delves into the idea of women being treated as commodities within a patriarchal society. She explores how women are objectified, reduced to their physical and sexual attributes, and subjected to oppressive social structures that perpetuate their subordination. Irigaray challenges the dominant phallogocentric discourse and explores the ways in which women's bodies and desires are controlled and commodified within a capitalist and patriarchal framework. This text is important to support my argument as Irigaray advocates for a reevaluation of female subjectivity, emphasizing the need for women to reclaim their own bodies and especially desires.

Despite the extensive research conducted on the movie adaptations of *Little Women* by many scholars, an aspect that has yet to be fully explored is the depiction of middle-class women, considering the constraints and aspirations specific to their socioeconomic status. Can we not have another discussion that hangs

on to issues of class as tenaciously as those of feminism? This unexplored dimension adds a valuable contribution to the existing discourse surrounding gender and class dynamics. What is presented to you, represents something. In this case, through a comprehensive examination of the 1994 and 2019 movie adaptations of "Little Women," with a particular focus on the intricate dynamics between gender and class.

METHOD

This paper uses Hutcheon's (2006) theory on adaptation and Irigaray's (1985) theory on women as commodities to analyze gender and class, and how financial and social status circumstances can shape the choices and aspirations of women. This paper also uses the previous studies of journal articles from Hollinger and Winterhalter (1999), Foote (2005), and Smyth (2020) to support the arguments that this paper presents. The method I am using is watching *Little Women* adaptations of both 1994 and 2019, taking notes by focusing on how gender and class intersect and trying to understand the shifting societal perspectives on these intersecting issues during the distinct time periods of 1994 and 2019, lastly, I read the previous researches to broaden my viewpoint.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In *Little Women* (2019), the portrayal of women as commodities is effectively captured in Amy's poignant statement,

"I am just a woman and as a woman, there is no way for me to make my own money. Not enough to earn a living or to support my family. And if I had my own money, which I don't, that money would belong to my husband the moment we got married. And if we had children, they would be his not mine. They would be his property. So don't sit there and tell me that marriage isn't an economic proposition because it is." (Little Women, 2019)

This line emphasizes the limited economic agency and dependency faced by women during that time period. Amy further highlights that even if she were to acquire her own money, it would ultimately belong to her husband upon marriage, reinforcing the notion of women's economic worth being tied to their marital status. The film's exploration of marriage as an economic proposition resonates with Irigaray's perspective on women as commodities.

"Women-as-commodities are thus subject to a schism that divides them into the categories of usefulness and exchange value; into

matter-body and an envelope that is precious but impenetrable, ungraspable, and not susceptible to appropriation by women themselves; into private use and social use." (Irigaray, 1985: 176)

This notion is reflected in Amy's words, as she acknowledges that her financial well-being and the ownership of her potential children would be determined by her husband. The scene effectively underscores the commodification of women, illustrating how their value is often reduced to economic considerations within a patriarchal system. Furthermore, in the context of the story, when the March family faces financial constraints due to their father's injury in the war, compelling Marmee to travel and care for him. However, they lack the funds to purchase a \$25 railway ticket. In a selfless act, Jo decides to sacrifice her hair by selling it. This act certainly can be viewed through the lens of Irigaray's concept of "women and their bodies as commodities," where Jo utilizes a part of her own body as a means to obtain financial resources.

This notion is also reflected in Aunt March's suggestion to Marmee, "The one hope for your family is for Margaret to marry well," which emphasizes the pursuit of advantageous matches for women. Aunt March embraces this definition of "women-as-commodities" but interestingly, her action provides an intriguing contradiction to this belief. Although she seems to pass on this idea to Jo when she gives her the monologue about rich women, she also seems to challenge this notion by giving her house to Jo after she dies. This act of passing on inheritance rather than relying on marriage as a means of financial security showcases Aunt March's defiance of her own beliefs. It suggests that women have the power to transcend societal norms and actively participate in shaping their own destinies outside of the conventional expectations placed upon them. Through this action, Aunt March offers a counterpoint to the idea of women as commodities, demonstrating that women can assert their independence, control their own assets, and make choices that challenge the traditional patriarchal structures.

Not only Aunt March, but each of the four sister's unique qualities is also a challenge against their objectification to become commodities where "each one looks exactly like every other" (Irigaray, 1985: 175). However, the paradox is that in the 1994 adaptation of *Little Women*, all four sisters end up either married or dead. Gerwig challenges this ending by showing two alternative yet ambiguous endings, one in which Jo's happy ending is seeing her novel published rather than ending up with Friedrich. By presenting this alternative ending, Gerwig offers a fresh perspective that challenges

the notion that women's narratives must revolve around romantic relationships or conform to societal expectations of marriage.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of *Little Women's* adaptations through the lens of Luce Irigaray's "Women on the Market" illuminates the depiction of women as commodities and their agency within patriarchal systems. The 2019 film effectively captures the constricted economic agency experienced by women, underscoring the economic aspect of marriage and the commodification of women's bodies. However, Aunt March's actions present a fascinating contradiction to this notion, showcasing women's potential to transcend societal norms and exert control over their own assets. Moreover, the distinct qualities of each sister serve as a challenge to their objectification as mere commodities, aligning with Irigaray's observations. While the 1994 adaptation aligns more closely with traditional expectations, the 2019 adaptation by Gerwig introduces alternative and ambiguous endings, emphasizing women's agency beyond romantic relationships. This research significantly contributes to the field by deepening our comprehension of the intricate interplay between gender, class, and women's agency.

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