

## **Queering *Little Women* Part Two:**

### **Jo March Goes Hollywood**

By Megan Baker

#### **Introduction**

Louisa May Alcott published her novel *Little Women* in 1868. It is the coming of age story of the March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, as they move from childhood to womanhood. The main character is Jo March, and she expresses discomfort with femininity and the expectations of womanhood. Through scholarly research, I discovered that scholars have misunderstood Jo March's gender, as she persistently demonstrates masculinity throughout the story. In fact, throughout the entire novel, gender is not cut and dry: it is fluid. In this video, I will explore these same concepts in the 1933 and 1949 film adaptations of the novel to see how the queerness of *Little Women* is portrayed on-screen.

#### **Hollywood and Film Background**

During the mid-twentieth century, roughly 1930s to 1970s, there was this widespread dismissal of Louisa May Alcott and *Little Women* in the scholarly community. Apparently, a young George Cukor, who would go on to direct the 1933 film adaptation, "did not consider Alcott worthy of notice" (102). However, even though scholars were ignoring Alcott, *Little Women* remained very popular among the general public, especially among children and young women. In the 1930s, the novel was frequently a favorite book among children. In a high school poll in Milwaukee in 1931, the novel was the favorite book among the girls surveyed. One girl wrote that "if Jo March could come alive the world would be a much gayer and cheerier place than it is today" (106). "*Little Women* was still read frequently in schools; even if a boy preferred boys' books, he could nevertheless 'pretend Jo is a boy' and like it pretty well" (109).

#### **1933**

An RKO film, 1933's *Little Women* was directed by George Cukor and starred Katharine Hepburn as Jo March. The screenplay was written by Sarah Y. Mason and Victor Heerman. Uncredited producer David O. Selznick had a difficult time convincing the RKO executives to produce this film. This is due in part to a belief in Hollywood at the time that costume films

based on classic novels were not popular, especially one that centered on women during the Civil War.

The film opened on November 16, 1933, at Radio City Music Hall. Despite the fact that it was the coldest November 16th in 50 years, this film broke opening day records with 23,073 people attending and it earned over \$100,000 during its first week of release. Worldwide it made a profit of \$800,000, and it was the ninth most popular film at the U.S box office for 1933. There are two important contexts that influenced how the novel was interpreted as a film for 1933 audiences: the depression, and women's independence.

This film was released following a decade of advancements for women's independence. The filmmakers, critics and audiences of this time were keenly aware of the ways the book and this film spoke to independence for women. The women who were starring in and viewing this film had grown up during the 1920s, a period of great advancement for women's rights which began with suffrage for white women in 1920. When the Great Depression struck in 1929, women's rights became a less trendy topic of conversation as other concerns took over. While the depression caused a lot of social and economic backsliding, the ideals of feminism did not vanish from the minds of American women.

Perhaps more relevant to this film adaptation than women's advancement was the Great Depression. The Depression Era lasted from 1929-1939, and throughout that time people were struggling through a severe worldwide economic depression. Making *Little Women* into a movie at this time was no accident. The story of the March family had a lot of relevance for depression era audiences: the Marches struggle with poverty and war-time strife, so there are a lot of ways in which depression era audiences could connect to them. The filmmakers were aware of this. Cukor even vetoed a version of the script where Jo's book becomes a smash success because he wanted "to present a less idealized view" to audiences. Despite that, this film resonated positively with most audiences. It was seen as an uplifting example of how virtue and love triumph over material necessities and poverty. The poverty of *Little Women* is a poverty without "breadlines and Hoovervilles" but rather bathed in "the comfortable glow of nostalgia" (125). Nostalgia certainly played a huge role in the making of the film and its perception. RKO stressed authenticity in its production of the film, specifically when recreating Concord and the Orchard House, the long time home of Bronson Alcott and his family. Cukor was very proud of the set design: "We reproduced the Louisa May Alcott house with great taste and detail" By playing up

authenticity, the studio satisfied the public's desire for an authentic, historical picture of early American life, which they looked back on as a "simpler time." (MAGA joke?) The film provides these incredibly picturesque, Christmas-Card shots of New England in the winter that really romanticized the location and time period, just playing up the nostalgia as much as possible to basically comfort audiences. And it was a triumphant success.

It's also important to note that this film was released in the pre-code era of Hollywood. Pre-Code Hollywood refers to the brief era in the American film industry in between the introduction of sound in films in 1929 and the enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code censorship guidelines in 1934. These censorship guidelines were more commonly known as the Hays Code, after Will H. Hays, who was the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America from 1922 to 1945. This code was the set of industry moral guidelines for the self-censorship of content that was applied to most United States motion pictures released by major studios. The Production Code spelled out what was acceptable and what was unacceptable content for motion pictures produced for a public audience in the United States, and as you may be able to guess, any element of queerness was off the table. Of course, determined filmmakers found ways to sneak queerness into their films. This is where we get phenomena like queer-coding and queer-baiting from. Filmmakers who wanted to portray any queerness on screen had to do so in a way that wouldn't alienate conservative audiences or defy the code. So, if it seems like a lot of what I observe is really subtle or I'm "just reading too much into it" - I have to. Subtle forms of queerness were the only forms of queer representation in mainstream movies for the better portion of Hollywood's history..so, there ya go. The film business had come under fire in 1932 and 1933 for presenting an abundance of violent and sexually titillating material. Little Women, despite Jo's queerness, was considered a cleaner, family-friendly film which proved that the public still liked clean, dignified films. Cue decades of an Agenda of Wholesomeness and strict censorship to follow.

## **1949**

1949's Little Women was greatly influenced by the 1933 version, and I'm not just saying that because the script and the music were taken directly from the earlier 1933 version. MGM produced this version, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, and if there was one thing MGM was known for at the time, it was big budget, technicolor, large scale films with big name celebrities. So this film was going to look like a Massachusetts dreamscape and it would be loaded with stars, which

is why the strange choice was made to cast Elizabeth Taylor as Amy, which required the sisters' ages to be rearranged, making Beth the youngest. It starred June Allyson as Jo, and even though the characterization was pretty much the same, her performance and the reception of her performance were very different from that of Katherine Hepburn. But we'll talk more about that later.

Originally intended as a 1948 release, the premiere of *Little Women* was delayed until March 1949, when it was presented as the Easter attraction at Radio City Music Hall in New York. It was one of the top-grossing films of 1949, with a profit of \$812,000. While it made profits and was generally well received, it truly existed in the shadow of the 1933 version.

John McCarten of *The New Yorker* wrote that unlike the previous film version, the remake left him "dry-eyed" and agreed that Allyson "tries hard to be as diverting as Miss Hepburn was years ago, even to the extent of imitating her peculiar vocalizations every now and then, but somehow she isn't quite as persuasive as her predecessor."

Despite its many similarities to the 1933 version, this *Little Women* was released in a very different context. This was post-WW2. This affects the film in a few different ways. First, audiences had fresh memories of the war and the sacrifices made, so military themes are stronger in this film compared to the previous one and even the novel. Laurie is given a storyline where he ran away from school to join the army, and the film frames this as a noble and admirable act. Also, America saw a lot of economic prosperity after the war. The depression was over and consumer confidence had increased. This is reflected in the film with moments like Aunt March giving the sisters \$1 each for Christmas. In the novel and 1933 film, they debate whether or not it'd be right to spend it before deciding to get gifts for Marmee. In this one, the gift pulls them away from listening to a letter from their father who is in the war, and they go on a shopping spree and buy things for themselves. Eventually, they go on a second shopping spree to return their items in exchange for gifts for Marmee. Finally, this film never shows the March women at work. It's mentioned, briefly, but it's a noticeable change from the novel and 1933 film, which both emphasize how the March women work to support the family in their father's absence. Similar to how women were required to enter the workforce during WW2 to replace the men fighting overseas. However, in a postwar world, women's work is deferred. When the men came back from war, whether or not they wanted it, the women were forced out of work and back into domestic roles.

## **What about the other little women?**

In the first two film adaptations, 1933 and 1949, Jo March is decidedly the main character. Her sisters, parents, and Laurie are all relegated to supporting characters in what is truly Jo's story. So there isn't as much to say about these characters in the films as there was in the novel, and what there is to discuss usually centers on their role in Jo's story arc. We'll start here since there isn't much to say.

### **1933 & 1949**

Jo's sisters in the 1933 film are more like plot devices for Jo than anything else. Meg's marriage to Brooke is framed as an emotional conflict for Jo, who struggles to accept that her and her sisters will all eventually grow up and leave. Beth is sweet and innocent, and her sickness and death becomes motivation for Jo to accept adulthood and also to write her book. And Amy, poor Amy. She's really treated the worst on-screen in both this version and 1949. She's honestly played as a joke most of the time. She's the youngest sister, the most concerned with high society, and despite being grounded in reality in the novel, is shown to be kind of shallow and ditsy in the film. Many of the other sisters' important storylines, Meg at Vanity Fair, Amy being an artist, Beth and her piano, are sidelined in favor of Jo. Amy doesn't burn Jo's manuscript and we get no time to see Amy develop a relationship with Laurie, so their marriage feels really out of nowhere.

All of this is true for the 1949 version as well. Meg's storyline is only a lead up to her marriage to Brooke, and this is framed as an emotional conflict for Jo. Beth, who is the youngest sister in this one, is still sweet and perfect, but her death is notably more tragic because she's so much younger in this film. It also makes her death feel more symbolic, showing how the sisters' childhoods have truly ended and it is time they grow up. And once again, Amy is consistently played as a joke and not much else, her over the top girliness and concern with how others see her is played for humor.

## **The Laurence Boy**

### **1933**

Like the other March sisters, Laurie becomes a sidekick to Jo and little else. He's sweet and playful, like in the novel, and is shown to genuinely enjoy the company of Jo and the March

family. In this film, him and Jo are shown to have a boyish affiliation for one another. They act like best buds the minute they meet, with Laurie forgetting that Jo is a girl for a moment. In the novel, there are so many moments that show how Laurie is incredibly caring and attentive to the March sisters and how he can be there for them. And he gets a few of these moments in the film.

*Laurie offers to visit Amy every day at Aunt March's (1:00:10)*

*Laurie comforts Jo after Beth gets sick (1:02:33)*

In the novel, Laurie's caring attitude and devotion to the March sisters is frequently described as maternal, like he looks out for them the way a mother would. In the film, it's framed more like a brotherly affection or a way to show Jo how much he cares for her.

## **1949**

As I mentioned before, the 1949 film adds the prevalent theme of military service, particularly through Laurie. Jo learns about Laurie before she meets him, and learns that he ran away from school to join the army and was found wounded. This immediately endears Jo to him, and she makes an effort to get to know him.

*"I'd like to get to know a boy...who said anything about romance?" (9:20-9:45)*

Throughout their relationship, we see multiple instances of Jo praising Laurie's military service and expressing how she is jealous of him for being able to do that. In fact, in this version, Laurie kind of represents a life Jo longs for. She admires his wealth and is jealous of the fact that, not only was he able to attend school, but was able to run away and become a soldier.

Even though Laurie gets a little more attention here than in 1949, his relationship to Jo doesn't feel any deeper and his character still ultimately falls short. When Jo meets Laurie, it starts in the same way as the 1933 version with them rough-housing and joking around, but this time, Jo's skirt catches on fire here and she flails around and struggles for a minute before - well, why don't you just watch ...

*Jo's skirt catches fire and Laurie has to spank it out.*

Putting Jo in a position where Laurie has to spank out the fire on her dress..That doesn't feel like something that would ever occur in their relationship as it is in the novel. Not to say that adaptations need to be true to everything in the original text, but this just felt ridiculous. And overall, it is unclear exactly what Laurie and Jo's relationship is in this movie. Whereas in 1933 it was clear that they had a boyish affiliation for one another, at the very least, it's less obvious here what Laurie and Jo mean to each other. In one moment, Laurie says

*"You're the oddest fellow I ever saw" (56:00)*

And *literally* seconds later

*"That's a girl for you" (56:08)*

At times, Laurie is portrayed as downright rude and unsupportive of Jo's writing, which perhaps was done to contrast him with the professor and make Jo's eventual love interest more easily accepted by the audience.

*\$! for jo's story is "measly" - he doesn't understand Jo they are incompatible (57:00)*

The only moment when we see Laurie caring for any of the March sisters is when he comforts Jo when Beth is sick, but again, this feels more like a way to prove his love for Jo than any kind of familial protectiveness.

*"Hold onto me, Jo" Laurie comforts Jo when Beth is sick (1:12:20)*

In both the 1933 and 1949 films, Laurie's proposal to Jo plays out almost the exact same way. Jo's rejection of Laurie is framed as incompatibility. She's tried to love him as he wants her to, but she simply doesn't have those feelings for him. It's less about her professional ambitions or concerns about the constraints of being a wife and mother than it is simply about her feelings. This is confirmed by Jo's reaction to Laurie and Amy's marriage. In both films, Jo states that this is how things were always meant to work out and is happily accepting of the union.

### **Jo's Masculinity On-Screen**

So when I talked about the novel, a major portion of my analysis was basically explaining that most people interpret Jo as a tomboy who feels constrained by femininity and womanhood, so she acts boyish to escape that confinement. And as I stated in my analysis of the novel, this is a fair interpretation, like I get where everyone is coming from. But I don't think it's an adequate interpretation of Jo. "Tomboyism" is not adequate for fully understanding Jo because it's defined through the adoption of masculine behaviors and activities, whereas *Little Women* exhibits evidence that Jo identifies as male, or that Jo's expressions of masculinity are not entirely motivated by a desire to be free of feminine constraints. While she certainly exhibits tomboy behaviors, she also demonstrates a conflict between how others perceive her gender and her gender identity. She's masculine. Jo's relationship to femininity and masculinity is not a "one versus the other situation," and her gender identity is not simply a rejection of womanhood. At least that's my argument. But how is Jo's masculinity portrayed on-screen? How did these

filmmakers interpret her? Take a wild guess. I think it's safe to say that the popular "tomboy" interpretation of Jo is predominantly the one we see in the films. So we'll start there, and explore how the film's portray Jo's tomboyishness.

## **Tomboy Jo**

### **1933**

So let's start with 1933 and Katherine Hepburn's Jo. Casting Katharine Hepburn as Jo was so deliberate and probably had the biggest impact on the story and the character, simply because Hepburn and Jo share so many similarities. Katharine Hepburn was born on May 12, 1907 to progressive parents in Hartford, Connecticut. Her childhood was actually a lot like that of the March sisters, growing up in a progressive, close-knit family in a big house with land around it. As a child, Hepburn trailed her parents to suffrage rallies. As a rising star in Hollywood, she was an icon of independence. Hepburn was part of that post-suffrage generation of women I was talking about, and her screen persona resonated with that generation's modern spirit of independence. Despite RKO's determination to brand her otherwise, Hepburn succeeded in inventing herself. She signed with RKO and went to Hollywood in the early 1930s when the industry was fixated on platinum blondes draped in sequins and feathers. So, and I hate to say it like this, Hepburn "was not like other girls." (*BOOO*). Her highly-stylized personality and lanky physique signaled a radical departure from typical feminine starlets. Also, Hepburn had elements of queerness to her persona as well. As a student at a women's-only college, she often took it upon herself to play the male parts in theatrical productions. She was incredibly athletic and often wore men's clothing as a regular part of her apparel.

*Interview between Katharine Hepburn and Katie Couric (1991)]*

[C: "Would you consider yourself a feminist?"

H: "Yes, I'm an absolute feminist."

C: "You were quite a tomboy as a young girl, weren't you? You were called 'Jimmy'?"

H: "I was called Jimmy. I hated being a girl. I really hated it. I just shaved my head and thought 'I'm a boy.'"

C: "What did your parents think of this?"

H: "They thought it was great. They didn't have to brush my hair or wash it."



So, yeah, she's a lot like Jo and was honestly the perfect choice to play her in this film. And audiences loved Hepburn as Jo. She was the probably the biggest reason for the film's success and most critics highlighted her performance above all else as the film's crowning achievement.

Hepburn's Jo truly embodied tomboyish independence. She is incredibly active and athletic, and some behaviors she exhibits in the film are new additions and would have been considered improper even by Alcott.

*Jo sword fighting with Laurie (34:59) - boyish affiliation for each other.*

*Jo climbs down the side of the house (45:20)*

*Jo running and racing Laurie (48:50)*

It seems like, in the film, Jo's greater physical freedom becomes a metaphor for freedom for women. As a visual medium, compared to a novel, the film created more visual evocations of independence - jumping the fences, swinging from tree branches, fencing with Laurie, and more. These visual actions served to amplify themes and characterization, and the film underscored Jo's tomboyishness by having her do things like slide down bannisters and scale the side of her house.

In addition to her athleticism and physical freedom, Hepburn's Jo is outspoken and boisterous, often shouting to Laurie through windows and generally being charmingly obnoxious throughout the film.

*"Christopher Columbus!" This was basically a swear word at the time and I find that funny, just further shows Jo being improper and outspoken.*

*"HA!" (31:30)*

Jo is also shown to be ambitious and passionate about writing, although we don't actually see her writing very often. She writes the plays her sisters perform, sells stories to newspapers, and sees her trip to NY as an opportunity to focus on her writing.

*"When I'm a famous author" (14:15)*

Work itself is prominent and meaningful in this film. After the Christmas card opening shots of New England, the film does not jump to the "Christmas won't be Christmas without presents," but rather, showcases the employment of each March woman: Marmee working at a war-relief center, Meg as a governess, Jo reading to Aunt March, Amy at school and Beth at home.

The film does portray moments where Jo is decidedly masculine, many of which come from the novel. Like in the original novel, there are moments where Jo outright denies that she is a girl and openly expresses that she feels like a boy, or would prefer to be a boy.

*Jo whistled to Amy. "I do it because it's boyish" (13:00)*

*"I am not a young lady...I'll wear my hair down until I'm 100" (13:40)*

*Beth calls Jo a tomboy (13:55)*

Jo demonstrates her androgynous quality and stretchable personality in a performance of *The Witch's Curse*, a play she had written. She switches smoothly from playing the mustached villain to the handsome hero. This shows how Jo embraces moments where she can pretend to be a boy, in her plays or even when interacting with Laurie, meanwhile despising the moments when she must conform to feminine expectations.

*Jo plays each male role in her christmas play, she is often staged and dressed to stand out against her sisters (26-28:00)*

*"I forgot you were a girl" Laurie says this to Jo when they are sword fighting each other. (34:39-35:00)*

*"I am perfectly miserable" Jo when she has to dress up for Laurie's party (37:20) - she is also staged outside of the main dance in the hall, framed as different; an outsider*

There are also a lot of subtle, visual cues in the 1933 film that tell the audience Jo is different, with plenty of moments where Jo is staged or dressed in a way that sets her apart from the rest of her sisters.

*Shot where Jo is staged a part from her family as they sing with Beth around the piano (19:58)*

*When Marmee reads the letter from their father, who boasts about his "little women," the shot is staged so everyone's face is visible except Jo's, who is turned away. "Fonder and prouder than ever of my little women" (16:55)*

Jo is frequently dressed in darker clothing than her sisters or other women around her, and is sometimes seen wearing masculine attire

*Laurie's party - Jo is staged on the outskirts of the party, in a darker dress (37:19)*

*Jo wears a very dark, manly dress when they visit the Hummels (29:09)*

*Jo is dressed in masculine attire and hat at the boarding school (1:22:01)*

So, Jo's tomboyishness from the novel is alive and well in the 1933 version, and we can see that the filmmakers made efforts to show her masculinity and free spirit on screen. Hepburn's Jo lacks femininity but is incredibly sincere. She is stubborn and at the same time enormously sensitive and vulnerable. For instance, she pretends can't be bothered with her physical appearance, but after cutting her long and beautiful hair, cries for the loss later that night.

## **1949**

Of June Allyson's performance as Jo March in the 1949 Little Women film, Bosley Crowther of The New York Times wrote "Comparisons of course, are odious, but if memory serves us well, she can't hold a bayberry candle to the Jo of Katharine Hepburn of fifteen years ago." It was impossible that Allyson's Jo would not be compared to Hepburn's. Not only were the films released relatively close to one another in time, but the 1949 one literally used the same script, settings and music of the 1933 film. So, it's impossible to talk about this film without talking about the 1933 one. The characterization of Jo was relatively the same as in 1933, so a lot of the differences we'll talk about do come down to performance or how this characterization is treated in the film.

Allyson's Jo still had the element of tomboyish athleticism, and just as with the Hepburn version, an early moment in the film features Jo leaping the fence to her house. However, in this version, as opposed to the confident and swift movement of Hepburn's Jo, Allyson's Jo falls on her first attempt, is laughed at by her sisters, and stubbornly redoes the leap to prove herself. This may be a small change but I think it showcases a larger trend in this film to make Jo's tomboyism a joke, just more surface level and less like a deep reflection of the character, like it felt with Hepburn. But, we do see other moments in the film when Allyson's Jo is successfully athletic and physically active, such as when she beats Laurie in a race.

*Jo falls while jumping the fence (2:15)*

*Amy and Meg tell Jo to act proper - she leaps the fence "Oh so boyish!" - Amy (41:30-41:50)*

*Laurie and Jo race, Laurie trips and Jo wins (58:40)*

Allyson's Jo is also very boisterous and outspoken, and I think she actually comes across as more talkative than Hepburn's Jo did.

*Jo is so talkative and obnoxious, not in a charming way like Hepburn's Jo - scene where she visits / meets Laurie at his house (30-33:00)*

1949's Jo still dreams of being a famous writer, but once again, we rarely see her actually writing or negotiating with publishers.

*"Because I plan to be a famous writer one day" (7:00)*

*Jo cries while she works on her story (52:30-53:30)*

Since this film was released in the booming post-war economy, when Jo speaks about her future successes, she focuses on the material items she will get for her sisters. She still writes the plays for her sisters and her, sells her thrilling stories to newspapers and eventually goes to NY to better her writing.

*Jo wants to work - wants to make money and liked the nervous feeling of being out in the world (~1:10:00)*

*Focus on the material items Jo will get for her sisters when she is successful (5:30)*

*After rejecting Laurie, Jo decides to go to NY to focus on her writing.*

However, work is not a prominent theme in this film like it was in 1933. Rather, Jo's tomboyishness is further emphasized by the enhanced theme of military service and Jo's desire to be able to fight as a soldier in the war.

*Jo wants to join the military "He must be a fine one (Laurie)" Laurie ran away from school to join the army and turned up wounded "I'd like to do the same" (8:15-9:00)*

*Army is using carpets as blankets "I wouldn't mind if they'd only let me do something" (12:15-12:35)*

*"I would've done the same as you" (27:30)*

Most of this film's moments that show Jo as masculine or where she rejects her womanhood are the same ones as the 1933 version.

*"Don't use slang" "Don't whistle it's boyish" "That's why I do it!" (4:15)*

*"I'm not a young lady" "Can't get over not being a boy" (4:40-5:40)*

*"I'm the man of the family" (20:50-22:00)*

Like Hepburn's Jo, Allyson's Jo plays the male roles in her play, but the cross dressing is noticeably toned down, a lot.

*Jo's cross-dressing as the male characters in her play is really toned down compared to Hepburn's Jo (10:20)*

There are also fewer moments in this film where Jo is staged apart from her sisters or dressed in contrast to them, but there are still a few. She's often dressed in natural tones, browns

and tans. And she is once again staged outside of Laurie's party, showing her as an outsider in contrast to everyone else.

*Jo is often dressed in natural or toned down colors compared to her sisters, lots of browns and tans.*

*Jo "feels dreadful" dressed up for Laurie's party (40:30) - wearing brown as opposed to the pinks, purples and blues of her sisters.*

*Jo is staged outside in the hall at the dance - she's different from everyone else, an outsider (42:30-42:50)*

However, as I mentioned before, this film treats Jo differently from the 1933 version. Hepburn's Jo and her masculinity felt genuine, and it didn't mean she lacked sensitivity or maturity, but Allyson's Jo and her masculinity is often reduced to jokes and discouraged by those around her, and it comes off as childish.

*"Time you changed, Jo" (1:01:00)*

*Jo's haircut "Your beautiful hair" - Beth/Marmee; "What've you done, you look like a porcupine" -Laurie (1:08:00-1:09:30)*

Overall, I'd say that the Jo March of the 1933 and 1949 films is a tomboy. And she's a tomboy in the novel too, but there's more going on than that. Many scholars who support "the tomboy argument" view Jo's tomboyism as an attempt to escape the oppressive life of a woman and gain male privileges in a patriarchal world. Femininity is associated with confinement, submission and restraint, while masculinity is associated with freedom, independence and adventure. Jo behaves masculinely to distance herself from the disempowered status of women. In these interpretations, Jo's masculine behavior and professional ambition is viewed as feminism: she's a girl behaving masculinely in order to seek freedom from women's oppression. It is certainly true that, in 1868, women's opportunities for an independent life were few and far between. Women had stricter standards of behavior and were often expected to abandon professional ambitions in favor of domestic lives as wives and mothers. Given this view of tomboyism, Jo has been understood as someone who wants to escape the constraints of womanhood... but she ultimately fails to do so because she becomes a wife and mother. In 1868, tomboyism was only acceptable in childhood, and it was expected that tomboy girls would abandon this behavior once they grew up.

## Tomboy Taming

Jo's story in *Little Women* seemingly fits the narrative of maturation into womanhood that is often labeled "tomboy taming." While in my video on the novel, I explain why this is not the case, it may very well play out that way in the films. In these films, is Jo's tomboyism an attempted escape from the confinements of womanhood? And is Jo tamed in the end?

One moment from both films we can look at for a possible answer is how Jo reacts to Meg becoming engaged to Brooke. In 1933, we see Jo's anxiety and sadness upon watching Meg be courted by Brooke. Jo truly seems devastated at Meg's entrance into the traditional adult feminine roles of wife and mother, however, rather than implying that Jo takes issues because of the limits placed on women, the film opts to show that Jo is sad at the prospect of growing up, in general. She asks Meg why they can't just stay young forever, but it doesn't feel like she's asking that because she wants to avoid being a wife and mother, rather because she is scared to grow up.

*Jo freaks out when she finds out Brooke has feelings for Meg (48:10)*

*"I'd like to see anybody try it" (fall in love with her) (48:45)*

*Jo is sad about Meg and Brooke (50:10)*

*"Why can't we stay as we are?" Jo doesn't want to lose Meg and her childhood (1:09:35)*

I think the same is true of the 1949 film. Jo is resistant to Meg's marriage and is very cold to Brooke, more than in 1933, but this isn't framed as a critique of marriage as an oppressive institution, but because she doesn't want her sister to grow up and get married, she doesn't want to lose her childhood.

*Jo is super cold to Brooke when she notices he likes Meg (59:00-1:00:00)*

*Jo confronts Meg about Brooke "You see Meg, I'm a writer...you're not in love" (1:17:00)*

Another moment we can look at to see if Jo's tomboyishness is portrayed as a critique of the constraints of femininity is the proposal scene. In both the 1933 and 1949 films, Jo rejects Laurie because she just doesn't love him the way he loves her. She doesn't have romantic feelings for him, even if she tries to. She doesn't reject him because she opposes marriage or being a wife.

*(1933)Proposal scene (1:15:00-1:19:00) "He's got a foolish romantic notion" (1:20:35)*

*(1949)Laurie follows Jo away from Meg's wedding and proposes to her (1:23:00-1:26:15)*

*"I don't know why I can't love you the way you want me to...I've tried. It would be wrong to say I do when I don't."*

Contrast that with the 1994 and 2019 films

*"I just can't go be a wife" (1994) "I love my independence too much" (2019)*

There are some moments in each film when Jo's boyish behavior is criticized, either by her or others. Jo reflects on her behavior after hearing the letter from father, stating she will work harder to be a good "little woman," and later in the story, Jo loses the Europe trip to Amy. In both 1933 and 1949, this moment is framed as almost a punishment for Jo, since she never acted properly the way Aunt March expected her to.

*"I'll be a little woman for father" (17:20)*

*Jo loses the Europe trip (1:30:53)*

There's also an interesting moment in the 1949 that doesn't happen in the 1933 film, where Beth overhears a rumor at Laurie's party that Marmee has made marriage plans for her daughters. This upsets the sisters, particularly Beth and Jo. When Jo asks Marmee about this, she gives a speech about what she wants for her daughters, saying all she wants is for them to be beautifully accomplished, good, loved, admired, respected, and useful.

*Speech from Marmee about plans for her daughters - she says that all she wants is for them to be beautifully accomplished, good, loved, admired, respected, and useful.*

Jo replies that she is never getting married. And that could imply that she is possibly fearful of marriage and what it means for women, or it could just be, again, that she's scared to grow up and falling in love and getting married represent adulthood.

*"I'm never getting married" (50:40-52:20)*

In fact, in both films, Jo baulks at the notion of falling in love or of someone falling in love with her.

*"I'd like to see anyone try it" (fall in love with me) (58:40)*

By the end of both films, Jo seems to have accepted womanhood. She approves of Laurie and Amy's wedding, and when talking to Laurie, states out loud her acceptance of adulthood.

*(1933)Jo's reaction to Laurie and Amy's marriage "We're man and woman now"*

*(1:50:20)*

*(1949)"We're man and woman now" (1:57:20)*

**The Professor**

Jo's evolution into a grown woman is possibly solidified in the film by her union with Professor Bhaer. 1933, 1949, and 1994 for that matter, all end with Jo running after the Professor in the rain, they confess their feelings, she tells him his hands aren't empty..they kiss, maybe sometimes? Happily ever after the end.

It's hard to determine if Jo's engagement in the films mark the completion of the tomboy taming process. Each film ends at the moment when Jo becomes engaged. The book goes further than that and actually shows Jo and her sisters' lives as adults, wives, and mothers. And I looked at those moments to determine if this narrative of taming played out in the book (it didn't). But it's hard to say if the marriage "tames" her in the films because we don't see any of it. And in each of the films, Professor Bhaer, however weird of a match he is, is depicted as pretty sweet and supportive of her career, helping her get her book published and never really asking her to change who she is.

### **1933**

The 1933 film stays very close to the novel when it comes to the characterization of Professor Bhaer. He's a much older German man who is sweet and framed more like an intellectual match for Jo. They bond while Jo is working at the boarding school: he introduces her to the opera and helps with her writing, but there's still a somewhat awkward parental vibe, which is even in the novel.

*Professor is introduced (1:23:05)*

For instance, the professor critiques Jo's more scandalous writing, like he does in the novel, calling them artificial and asking why she writes "such plot, such villains, and such WoMEEn?!"

*Professor criticizes Jo's writing (1:32:30)*

This movie starts a tradition for the films which is that they change the plot so Professor Bhaer not only approves of Jo's writing career, but is actually the one to get her novel published.

*"You have talent!" (1:35:20)*

*Professor Bhaer drops off her published book (1:52:00)*

*"My friend published your book" (1:53:20)*

I don't like this change, personally, because I think it takes away some of Jo's agency that we see in the novel, where she's the one to get her story published. But here's the thing: if you watch my video on the novel, you know that Alcott never wanted the character of Jo to get married. She was forced by publishers to have Jo get married because, in 1868, heroines of novels only had



two options for an ending: marriage or death. So the romance between Jo and the professor is noticeable awkward in the novel, as well, because Alcott meant it to be.

When trying to adapt the novel for a film, I can imagine the filmmakers struggling to make the romance with Professor Bhaer “work” because it’s awkward and most fans of the novel don’t like it. One way to make the romance more believable is to give the Professor a bigger role in Jo’s storyline and show him to be an intellectual match who supports her writing career.

### **1949**

The 1949 film has another, additional approach for making the romance between Jo and the Professor more believable and dare I say enjoyable for audiences: make the professor hot. In this version, Professor Bhaer is played by the much younger, suave Italian actor Ransome Phillips.

*Professor Sexy Italian Man is introduced (1:29:50)*

As in 1933, we see Jo bond with the professor while she is working at the boarding school in New York, he takes her to the opera, he helps with her writing, and they even share some emotional moments over the professor’s piano playing.

*Jo cries upon hearing the English translation of the Professor’s song (1:34:00)*

*Professor tears apart Jo’s stories (1:44:00)*

Once again the professor is framed as an intellectual match for Jo, but this film does a better job at avoiding the paternal vibes of the novel and 1933 film, both because the professor is aged down significantly, but also because he seems to pine for her and they have more romantic chemistry than before.

Overall, it’s hard to say whether these films play out as tomboy taming narratives. Jo is certainly characterized as a tomboy in each film. The romance with the professor is given a lot more attention and attempts are made to make it more believable, but ultimately, I think since we only see Jo’s life up to the point of her engagement to the professor, we don’t get a clear answer on whether she’s tamed through her marriage. But there is other evidence that points to the tomboy taming narrative in these films. For instance, in 1933, Katherine Hepburn’s Jo eventually takes on a softer, dreamier persona than she had at the beginning of the film, even adopting more light colored, feminine clothing, especially when interacting with the Professor or fulfilling domestic roles.

*White dress worn at the opera (1:39:00)*

In a scene where Meg visits Jo at home after Beth has died, Jo is seen wearing very light colored, feminine clothing while doing the housework. Almost showing Jo as having taken Beth's place as a caretaker of the house.

*Wearing light colors, doing housework (1:46:00)*

By the end of each film, Jo seems to have accepted womanhood, as she tells Laurie they can't go back to the way things were because they are man and woman now.

*"We're man and woman now" (1:50:20)*

Jo's "taming" or just her acceptance of growing up into a woman could be symbolically solidified by her acceptance of Professor Bhaer's proposal.

*1933 umbrella scene*

*1949 umbrella scene*

I like to call this moment the umbrella scene, because the 1933, 1949, and 1994 films all end the same way with Jo accepting the Professor's proposal under the umbrella.

## **Conclusion**

My goal for looking at these film adaptations was to discover how these movies addressed the novel's views on gender and how Jo March's masculinity was treated on-screen. And I think what I concluded is that the queerest version of Little Women is the original. Both of these film adaptations favor the tomboy interpretation of Jo March, and while I can't definitely say if she's tamed in these films, there is evidence that points to that. That's not to say I didn't enjoy these movies, I really did, especially the 1933 version. But I do believe that some of the original novel's queerness and defiance of binary expectations has been lost in translation from text to screen.

Since these films, there have been two more adaptations of Little Women, the 1994 version starring Wynona Ryder and the 2019 version directed by Greta Gerwig. Both of these films stand apart from the 1933 and 1949 films, choosing to emphasize and ignore different parts of the novel in order to tell their own version of the story. All of this goes to show that Little Women is an enduring story with lots of mileage. As long as audiences continue to connect with the story of the Marches, we will continue to see new interpretations and adaptations of this beloved classic.

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