

PORTRAYAL OF JO MARCH'S AUTHORSHIP IN THE 1933 AND THE 2019 *LITTLE WOMEN* FILMS

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Abstract

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1868) is a widely celebrated American novel whose enduring themes of sisterhood and family have inspired numerous film adaptations. One central theme that remains relevant today is creative ambition, particularly Jo March's authorship. Although Jo's pursuit of authorship resonates with contemporary women who still face obstacles in fulfilling creative aspirations, this aspect is not consistently emphasized across adaptations. This article analyzes the portrayal of Jo's authorship in two *Little Women* films—1933 and 2019—to examine how cultural contexts shape its representation. The study aims to (1) describe the differences in how the two films depict Jo's authorship and (2) explain the cultural backgrounds that motivate these differences. Employing a cultural studies approach supported by feminist perspectives and authorship theory, the analysis reveals that Jo's authorship is significantly diminished in the 1933 adaptation due to the sociocultural pressures of the Great Depression, limited feminist discourse, and Hollywood's preference for romance-driven happy endings. Conversely, the 2019 adaptation offers a more comprehensive depiction of Jo's creative agency, influenced by contemporary movements advocating women's empowerment and increased attention to women's artistic ownership. These conditions enable filmmakers to foreground Jo's authorship as a central feminist theme.

1. Introduction

Little Women, a celebrated novel by Louisa May Alcott, was first published in 1868 and quickly became a literary phenomenon, with its initial two thousand copies selling out rapidly and establishing Alcott as the season's most successful author (Madison, 1974). The narrative follows the coming-of-age experiences of the March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—whose interpersonal dynamics, struggles, and emotional growth continue to resonate with readers across generations. Themes of sisterhood, family, ambition, and societal expectations make the story enduringly relevant, which is reflected in its vast range of adaptations: six feature films, numerous television productions, theatrical versions, a Broadway musical, an opera, multiple anime adaptations, and countless fan revisions (Hooper, 2019; Thomas Flight, 2020). Among these, film adaptations have consistently reached the widest audiences. Beginning with a 1917 silent version, the story has been adapted to film in 1918, 1933, 1949, 1994, and 2019, prompting questions about why each generation continues to reinterpret the narrative. Scholars argue that the novel's portrayal of women's lived realities and the universality of its themes allow it to remain culturally relevant, with Matteson (2019) even comparing the March sisters to contemporary heroines such as Hermione Granger and Katniss Everdeen.

A central tension in the novel lies in Jo March's creative ambition, particularly her pursuit of authorship. While Beth, Amy, and Meg explore their own creative passions, Jo's writing journey is the most extensively developed and yields tangible accomplishments through her published works. Her determination to become a writer and her rejection of traditional nineteenth-century gender expectations construct her as a symbol of women's creative struggle across time.

Yet constraints on women's artistic and intellectual labor persist today. For instance, research by Rakhmani, Eliyanah, and Sakhiyya (2021) found a significant decline in the academic output of women scholars during the Covid-19 pandemic due to disproportionate domestic burdens. Their findings echo the broader reality that women's creative autonomy continues to be influenced by structural and cultural expectations. This continuity underscores why examining Jo's authorship in film adaptations remains meaningful.

Although Jo's literary ambition is central in the novel, its depiction varies considerably across film versions. Some foreground her creative agency, while others minimize or shift its narrative prominence according to the social climate of their period. This study examines two highly acclaimed adaptations—*Little Women* (1933), directed by George Cukor, and *Little Women* (2019), directed by Greta Gerwig—chosen both for their critical recognition and for the significant historical gap between them. The 1933 film won Best Adaptation at the 6th Academy Awards and received several international nominations, while the 2019 version earned six Academy Award nominations and was listed among the American Film Institute's top films of the year. The 86-year interval between them provides a valuable lens for examining changing cultural ideologies that shape representations of women's creativity.

Previous scholarship on *Little Women* and its adaptations ranges from studies on character identity to film structure, authorship, gender, and cultural translation. Wang (2021) investigates four Hollywood adaptations to explore how female subjectivity is constructed through plot, characterization, and depictions of authorship, yet does not focus specifically on comparing the 1933 and 2019 films. Keogh (2025) analyses gender, autonomy, and feminist perspectives in *Little Women*, placing emphasis on broader ideological developments rather than on authorship as a specific narrative theme. Bruti and Vignozzi (2021) examine the representation of spoken discourse across original and dubbed adaptations, offering linguistic insights but not addressing creative ambition. Meanwhile, Chang (2025) discusses the translation, adaptation, and reception of *Little Women* in China, highlighting its transformative role for girlhood narratives in a different cultural context. Although these studies collectively expand the scholarly understanding of *Little Women*, none provide a focused comparative analysis of Jo March's authorship in the 1933 and 2019 films, nor do they explore how cultural contexts shape the shifting emphasis on women's creative agency.

To address this gap, the present study investigates (1) the differences in how Jo's authorship is portrayed in the 1933 and 2019 films and (2) the cultural backgrounds that motivate these portrayals. It argues that Jo's authorship is diminished in the 1933 film due to the socio-political climate of the Great Depression, the absence of progressive feminist discourse, and Hollywood's prioritization of romance-driven endings. By contrast, the 2019 adaptation foregrounds Jo's creative autonomy against the backdrop of contemporary feminist movements and rising advocacy for women's creative ownership. Through this focus, the article contributes a distinct perspective to *Little Women* scholarship by demonstrating how cultural ideology shapes the cinematic representation of women's authorship across time.

2. Method

The discussion was conducted in two major stages. First, the study identified and described all events related to Jo's authorship in both *Little Women* films (1933 and 2019). Narrative events that served similar functions in each film were then compared side by side using feminist perspectives and authorship theory. The primary theoretical framework applied in this stage was Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) *anxiety of authorship*, which explains the cultural and psychological pressures shaping women's creative expression.

Through this comparative process, several significant differences emerged in how each film represents Jo's struggle as a female author. The second stage involved analyzing these differences through a cultural study approach to uncover the cultural backgrounds and historical contexts that inform each film's portrayal. This approach treats film not merely as an artistic text but as a cultural product shaped by social norms, ideological values, and gender discourses of its time.

2.1. Anxiety of Authorship

In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Gilbert and Gubar (2000) introduce the concept of *anxiety of authorship*, a form of creative anxiety experienced by many women writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This idea builds upon Harold Bloom's (1979) *anxiety of influence*, which argues that male writers struggle psychologically with the awareness that their work is shaped by literary "forefathers" rather than purely original ideas.

However, Bloom does not address female writers, whose numbers and recognition were extremely limited at the time. Within a literary tradition dominated by men, women lacked creative foremothers who could serve as models. As a result, women writers inherited not only the fear of lacking originality but also the burden of confronting an entire patriarchal literary tradition that excluded them. This absence of lineage created the unique condition Gilbert and Gubar call *anxiety of authorship*—a dual anxiety in which the woman writer fears both creative inadequacy and social condemnation.

Gilbert and Gubar further argue that patriarchal literary tradition constructs two extreme images of women: *the angel in the house*, representing the ideal passive woman, and *the madwoman*, symbolizing deviance and disorder. A woman who writes risks being associated with the latter, as literary authorship was historically coded as masculine. Consequently, many women felt compelled to diminish their creative ambition, express humility about their work, or even publish under male pseudonyms.

This theoretical framework informs the analysis of Jo March's portrayal in both films, highlighting how each adaptation addresses or diminishes Jo's struggle against gendered expectations that limit women's creative agency.

2.2. Summary of Method and Theoretical Framework

Table 1. Summary of Research Method and Theoretical Concepts

Aspect	Description
Method Stage 1	Identification and description of all narrative events related to Jo's authorship in both the 1933 and 2019 films.
Method Stage 2	Comparative analysis of equivalent events using feminist theory and authorship theory.
Method Stage 3	Cultural study analysis to reveal the historical and cultural contexts influencing each film's portrayal.
Primary Theory	Anxiety of authorship (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000).
Theoretical Foundation	Based on Bloom's (1979) concept of anxiety of influence.
Core Concept	Women writers suffer from a unique creative anxiety caused by the absence of female predecessors and patriarchal literary structures.
Forms of Pressure on Women Authors	Feelings of inadequacy, fear of social judgment, the need to appear modest, and use of male pseudonyms; stereotypes of "the angel" vs. "the madwoman."
Relevance to Jo March	Provides a lens to interpret how each film represents Jo's struggle against gender norms that limit female creative agency.

3. Results and Findings

Little Women is widely recognized as a semi-biographical novel by Alcott, who based the March sisters on herself and her siblings. Jo, in particular, serves as Alcott’s literary counterpart. Like Alcott, Jo is a writer, and her desire to write forms a central part of her personality. Thus, analyzing her as a “model of literary achievement” (Laire, 2009) is fitting. For clarity, throughout this article, I refer to the 1933 adaptation as Cukor’s and the 2019 version as Gerwig’s. The following sections examine Jo’s authorship in both films.



Figure 1. *Little Women* (1933 & 2019) Film Poster (Source: <https://www.filmsite.org/littw.html>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Little_Women_\(2019_film\).jpeg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Little_Women_(2019_film).jpeg))

3.1. Portrayal of Jo’s Authorship

3.1.1. Frequency of Scenes Showing Jo as a Writer

As in the novel, both the 1933 and 2019 films portray Jo as passionate about reading and writing. In the 1933 version, this passion appears early—eleven minutes into the film—when the sisters discuss what they will buy with one dollar each. Jo alone chooses books (“*Undine*” and “*Sintram*”), while Meg prefers gloves, Beth new sheet music, and Amy coloring pencils. This establishes Jo as the family bookworm. Both versions also show Jo writing plays and staging them with her sisters for neighborhood children.

However, although 1933’s Jo declares her commitment to writing, the film includes few scenes of her actually doing so. The single clear scene of Jo writing appears forty minutes into the film, and even then, it is brief—she is simply finishing a manuscript before selling it to the *Spread Eagle* newspaper. Another scene shows only a close-up of her scribbling on paper, without Jo herself. Otherwise, evidence of her authorship is indirect: characters read her published stories “The Phantom Hand” and “The Place of the Coventrys.”

Gerwig’s film, by contrast, highlights Jo’s writing continually. Scenes of her hunched over pages recur throughout, her fingers often stained with ink. In fact, Jo as a writer is the first thing the audience sees: she brings her story to the *Volcano Weekly*. A second writing scene follows shortly after at minute 17. The climactic writing sequence—Jo drafting her novel in the attic—

unfolds over nearly four minutes as she writes obsessively from day to night, surrounded by pages drying on the floor. She refuses even breakfast until Marmee brings it upstairs.

Thus, writing occupies only a marginal place in Cukor's film, making its final sidelining of Jo's literary ambition feel consistent. Gerwig's adaptation, however, foregrounds Jo's writing as a defining force in her life.

3.1.2. Use of Pseudonyms

In Cukor's film, Jo publishes her stories under her real name, *Miss Josephine March*. This is revealed when Amy discovers Jo's byline in the newspaper:

M: It's so exciting and so sad. Who wrote it?

L : Your sister.

A: Really? Jo? Oh, no! You did? Let me see.

L : And I knew it all the time.

M: Isn't that wonderful.

A: Here it is. "By Miss Josephine March." Oh, Jo! I can't believe it. Beth! Beth! Jo wrote a story.

It's in the papers. Isn't that marvelous? Look.

(M: Meg, L: Laurie, A: Amy)

In Gerwig's version, Jo refuses to use her real name, opting instead for anonymity when asked by Mr. Dashwood:

MD: What name would she like put to the story?

J : Oh, yes - none at all if you please.

MD: Just as she likes, of course.

(D: Mr. Dashwood, J: Jo)

Publishing anonymously—or under a male pseudonym—was common for women writers seeking to avoid gendered judgment (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000). Jo's anonymity allows her to write freely, especially given her sensational plots involving duels and killings. Because she pretends the story belongs to "a friend," Mr. Dashwood even refers to the author in the third person. This aligns with Gilbert and Gubar's concept of the female writer's anxiety of authorship (2002), in which women adopt other identities to secure male approval.

3.1.3. Involvement of Professor Bhaer in Jo's Writing Career

In both adaptations, Jo meets Professor Bhaer in her New York boarding house, but his role differs significantly.

In the 1933 film, Prof. Bhaer acts as Jo's literary mentor. At her request, he bluntly critiques her sensational stories as "disappointing" and filled with artificial characters. His disappointment implies an authority he has not earned. He advises her to abandon sensationalism and write from the heart:

PB : Say to yourself, "I will never write one single line which I have not heard in my own heart." Say to yourself, "While I am young, I will write these simple beautiful things that I understand now, and, and maybe later, when I'm a little bit older, and I have, have felt life more, then I will write about these poor wretches, but I will make them live and, and breathe like my Shakespeare did." Will you do that, my little friend?

J : Oh, yes. I'll try, but I don't think I'll ever be a Shakespeare. Do you?

PB : But you can be a Josephine March. And I assure you that is plenty.

(J: Jo; PB: Prof. Bhaer)

Afterward, 1933's Jo increasingly seeks Bhaer's approval, losing her independence as a writer (By the Book, 2020). The much older actor emphasizes the power imbalance and his embodiment of patriarchal authority (Wang, 2021). He even introduces Jo to the opera and ultimately secures the publication of her book through his connections—reinforcing the notion that women needed male endorsement to be taken seriously.

Jo's response—prioritizing his opinion over the publisher's praise—shows her dwindling ambition:

PB: My little friend. I- I was just here to leave you a book. I wanted to tell you my friend published it, and, and he has great hope. He thinks it-
J : Oh, never mind what he thinks. Did you like it?
(J: Jo; PB: Prof. Bhaer)

This reinforces the stereotype of women abandoning creative ambition for domestic roles.

Gerwig's film diverges sharply. Her Jo writes, revises, and publishes independently. Although she asks Bhaer's opinion, she does not defer to him. When he questions her sensational plots, she defends them as necessary income for her family. Unlike the 1933 Jo, she chooses her path deliberately, demonstrating agency.

Because women's creative ambitions were historically dismissed as trivial or temporary, Jo's independence in the 2019 film marks her as a feminist heroine.

3.2. Cultural Backgrounds of Jo's Authorship Portrayal

3.2.1. The 1933 Version

The diminished attention to Jo's authorship in Cukor's film is tied to the cultural context of the Great Depression (1929–1939). With unemployment peaking at 25% in 1933 (History.com, 2009), American families faced economic and emotional strain, including increased abandonment by husbands (Konkel, 2018). During such hardship, audiences sought uplifting stories centered on family unity.

Cukor himself stated that he saw the novel as about "family and sacrifice" (as cited in Kellett, 2002). Thus, the film emphasizes comforting domestic scenes rather than feminist themes. Similar tendencies appear in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), whose film version shifts its novel's class struggle focus toward family values (Yilmazok, 2014).

Additionally, feminism in the 1930s was stagnant—Moran (1989) calls it "a decade of feminist void." A 1933 Jo independently presenting her manuscript to a publisher, as Gerwig's Jo does, would have been culturally implausible. Hollywood also adhered to strict romance conventions in which female protagonists "must have a man" for a satisfying ending (Cartmell & Simons, 2007). Therefore, Cukor ends with Jo's engagement rather than her literary success.

3.2.2. The 2019 Version

Gerwig's adaptation reflects the cultural conditions of the 2010s—a period the UNFPA (2019) calls "a decade of voices and choices." Technology amplified global conversations about gender inequity, and feminism surged in popular culture. Hollywood increasingly allowed female protagonists to exist without romantic conclusions, as seen in *Frozen*, *Moana*, and *Mulan*. Gerwig applies this shift by refusing to make Jo's marriage the culmination of her story; instead, she ends with Jo proudly overseeing the printing of her novel.

The 2010s also saw heightened awareness of women’s struggles for creative ownership. In the film’s negotiation scene, Jo rejects selling her copyright:

“I want to own my own book.”

This mirrors contemporary issues such as women’s underrepresentation in patents (only 16.5% of inventors; World Intellectual Property Organization, n.d.) and the highly publicized case of Taylor Swift fighting for ownership of her master recordings (Clark, 2019). Such contexts help explain Gerwig’s deeper exploration of Jo’s authorship.

3.3. Comparative Analysis of Jo March’s Authorship in the 1933 and 2019 Films

The analysis of Jo March’s authorship in both films reveals substantial differences shaped by distinct historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. While the 1933 version presents Jo’s creative identity in a restrained and domesticated manner, the 2019 version deliberately foregrounds her writing process, professional struggles, and assertion of authorial rights. These differences illustrate how cultural climates—particularly economic pressures, dominant gender ideologies, and the evolution of feminist discourse—significantly influence the representation of female creativity on screen.

To clarify these contrasts, the following table outlines the key distinctions in authorship portrayal across the two adaptations.

Table 2. Comparison of Jo March’s Authorship in the 1933 and 2019 *Little Women* Films

Aspect	1933 Version (Cukor)	2019 Version (Gerwig)
Visibility of Jo’s Writing	Limited; few scenes show Jo actively writing. Narrative prioritizes domestic and family-centered moments.	Extensive; Jo is consistently shown writing, editing, and revising, placing authorship at the forefront.
Portrayal of Women’s Struggles as Authors	Rarely depicted; systemic barriers for women are largely minimized.	Explicit; gendered constraints, pay inequality, and editorial control are central themes.
Use of Pseudonym or Anonymity	Publishes under her real name, simplifying historical complexities of female authorship.	Initially publishes anonymously, reflecting anxiety of authorship and patriarchal publishing norms.
Relationship with Professor Bhaer	Bhaer occupies a guiding, authoritative role; Jo’s creative path becomes dependent on his validation.	Supportive but not directive; Jo maintains professional independence regardless of romance.
Jo’s Authorial Agency	Reduced; Jo relinquishes independence and is shaped by male mentorship.	Strong; Jo negotiates royalties, asserts copyright, and directs her own literary trajectory.
Narrative Priorities	Emphasis on domesticity and romance, consistent with classical Hollywood expectations.	Emphasis on selfhood, ambition, and women’s creative ownership aligned with contemporary feminist values.
Cultural Influences	Great Depression anxieties, conservative gender norms, and the dominance of Hollywood romance conventions.	Fourth-wave feminism, empowerment discourses, and heightened attention to women’s intellectual property.
Overall Portrayal of Jo	Intelligent yet ultimately guided by patriarchal authority figures.	Assertive, independent, and conscious of her rights as an author and creative agent.

3.4. Narrative Discussion

The comparison demonstrates a consistent pattern: the 1933 version diminishes Jo's authorship, while the 2019 version amplifies it. These differences stem from contrasting socio-cultural pressures informing each film.

In the 1933 adaptation, produced during the Great Depression, the film industry favored narratives that reinforced stability, family cohesion, and traditional gender roles. Jo's authorship is secondary, with minimal screen time dedicated to her writing process. Her creative autonomy diminishes further after meeting Professor Bhaer, whose approval becomes central to her literary confidence. This portrayal aligns with early twentieth-century gender ideologies in which women's ambitions were often validated through male authority. As a result, authorship becomes a symbolic extension of domestic harmony rather than an independent pursuit.

In contrast, the 2019 adaptation emerges from a cultural moment defined by renewed feminist activism, heightened awareness of gender inequality, and global conversations about women's creative labor. Gerwig's film situates Jo's authorship as the narrative's core, showing her writing at various emotional and temporal junctures. Her negotiation for copyright and royalties near the end of the film directly addresses women's historical struggle for recognition within creative industries. Here, Jo is depicted not merely as a fictional author but as a representative of broader feminist claims to creative ownership, economic justice, and artistic autonomy.

These findings underscore the extent to which film adaptations reinterpret literary characters in response to shifting cultural ideologies. The 1933 and 2019 versions do not merely retell *Little Women*; they reconstruct Jo March to reflect—and critique—the gender politics of their respective eras.

3.5. Research Limitations

Although this study provides a comparative analysis of Jo March's authorship in the 1933 and 2019 *Little Women* films, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis is restricted to only two film adaptations out of numerous existing versions. Including additional adaptations—such as those from 1949, 1994, or international reinterpretations—might yield more nuanced insights into how Jo's authorship has been shaped across different eras and cultural contexts. Second, the study relies primarily on textual and visual analysis without incorporating audience reception data. Viewers' interpretations, especially across generations, could further illuminate how changing cultural values influence the perception of Jo as an author. Third, this research focuses exclusively on feminist theory and the anxiety of authorship framework; integrating other perspectives—such as adaptation theory, star studies, or industry studies—could deepen the analysis of how production contexts shape narrative emphasis. Finally, as with most qualitative film analyses, interpretations are influenced by subjective reading. Despite these limitations, the findings offer a meaningful understanding of how cultural conditions inform the evolving cinematic portrayal of Jo March's authorship.

4. Conclusion

This article set out to describe the differences between the 1933 and 2019 film versions of *Little Women* in their portrayal of Jo March's authorship and to identify the cultural backgrounds that motivate these differences. The analysis reveals three major contrasts. In the 1933 film, Jo's identity as a writer is only minimally shown, the historical struggle of women writers is largely absent, and Jo gradually loses her independence in authorship after meeting Professor Bhaer.

Conversely, the 2019 adaptation devotes substantial screen time to depicting Jo writing, explicitly portrays the challenges faced by women authors of the nineteenth century, and shows Jo actively pursuing her literary career without relying heavily on Bhaer's guidance.

These differences can be traced to the cultural climates of their respective periods. The diminished portrayal of authorship in the 1933 film reflects the context of the Great Depression, the stagnation of feminist progress during the era, and Hollywood's prevailing preference for romance-centered happy endings. In contrast, the 2019 film's emphasis on Jo's creative agency aligns with contemporary feminist movements and growing awareness of women's struggles for creative ownership.

In terms of characterization, the 1933 Jo reflects cultural assumptions that intelligent women still require male authority, guidance, and validation. Meanwhile, the 2019 Jo is depicted as an autonomous, self-determined figure who understands her capabilities and asserts her right to control her creative work. Collectively, these findings underscore how film adaptations do not merely retell Alcott's narrative but refract Jo March's authorship through the values, anxieties, and priorities of their cultural moments.

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