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## Hollywood and Little Women

When writing a novel, such as Louisa Mae Alcott's *Little Women*, based on life and society in 1860s, with the content of time and place, along with the morality and expectations of this society, the writer will undoubtedly create their own unique voice using these themes as backdrop and motivation for their characters. This is expected as it is all that the writer knows at that particular time in history. When later Hollywood scriptwriters take that novel and adapt its content to film, it is also known that the Hollywood writer will also remake the script in their own voice adding, subtracting or embellishing scenes they believe will be more appealing to the audience. In addition, Hollywood directors will always attempt to rework the novel using their own perceived creativity to "stand out" from the crowd of directors in order to make their film *the* film of the year. Add into this mix, the actor. The actor will undoubtedly tell the public how wonderful the novel and author is, how much they relate to their character and the joy it is to bring characters to life. What they actually are giving you on film is their own interpretation of what they believe a character *should* be as opposed to what the author writes. It is also inevitable that if the scriptwriter, director and actors deviate from the author's work, current social mores will creep into the script and film. With all this in mind it is interesting to delve into films adapted from *Little Women* and to determine how much is Alcott's original work incorporated.

The 1933 film *Little Women* was directed by George Cukor, adapted for screenplay by Sarah Mason and Victor Heerman and starring Katherine Hepburn. Of all films adapted from Alcott's novel, the 1933 version is the most honest in interpretation of *Little Women* by staying true to the storyline of character and action. The film begins at Christmas time, just as in the novel, and does a very fine job in portraying the closeness and camaraderie of the March sisters with touching scenes of their respect, love and admiration of Marmee. Given the era of the film within the despair of the Great Depression, Cukor gave an excellent direction of the pathos of poverty, hunger, social contrasts and death as written by Alcott, along with the declining fortunes of the March family mirroring the standards of the times. Although the film character of Marmee appeared as a more peripheral character in the film than in the novel, that was actually welcome as Spring Byington's interpretation of Marmee was cloying in sentimentality. Of course it is unknown if this was Cukor's intent, but it is possible it was intentional given that most drama's of the 1930s exuded sentimentality to garner the attention of depression era audiences. But, it detracted from Alcott's novel and her description of Marmee as a "tall, stately lady." Alcott's Marmee was integral to the development of her daughters in the novel, but Mason and Heerman included her in the action almost as an afterthought. Instead, Byington's Marmee became ineffectual in reigning in her daughter's excesses.

Katherine Hepburn's interpretation of Jo March is successful in capturing the true spirit of Alcott's character with some minor flaws explored later. Hepburn stayed fairly true in portraying Jo's personality, including often Jo's identifiable epithet, "Christopher Columbus". Although that may seem trivial, it speaks to the essence of Jo's boyishness in that 1860s refined women uttered no epithets of any kind. Hepburn's characterization of independence also remained true to Alcott's novel.

Although Cukor followed the novel religiously there were some key scenes from the novel, more specifically those that involved Amy, that were missing from the film, such as the incident with Amy and the limes, or Amy using a clothespin in an attempt to reshape her nose. Also missing in the film, which appeared as an important revelation of sisterly interaction in the novel, was the fight between Jo and Amy when Amy burned Jo's manuscript and then Jo's subsequent terror and self flagellation when Amy fell through the ice. These were important scenes in the novel in establishing the relationships and internal conflicts of Alcott's characters that were shamefully overlooked by the film's writers that could have replaced some fairly innocuous scenes; especially the role playing that was on film much too long. Also missing from the film was Amy's journey to Europe and the budding romance and subsequent marriage with Laurie. By underplaying this part of the novel the marriage of Amy and Laurie almost appeared spontaneously.

The actresses playing Meg, Amy and Beth also were able to garner most of the essence of their characters as written by Alcott. But, although Alcott's novel was rife with underlying sentimentality, the film overplayed this sentimentality, specifically with the character of Beth. It was as though the actress, Jean Parker in playing Beth, felt it necessary to exhibit the air of tragedy in every nuance of her voice and action, most felt in her relationship with Old Mr. Laurence. Overall, Cukor did a masterful job of direction in bringing *Little Women* to life and although the film and acting have many flaws, of which will be explored later, this 1933 adaptation remains the most true to Alcott's work.

The 1994 adaptation of *Little Women* is a beautifully rendered film of Alcott's work. Directed by Gillian Armstrong and adapted by Robin Swicord, this film version brings to life the sentimentality that pervades the pages of *Little Women*, but more understated and with the feminine perspective so important to the novel. Although the language in this film has a more modern tone, such as we never hear Winona Ryder as Jo March, exclaim "Christopher Columbus", many of the most important elements of Alcott's novel can be found in one form or another in Armstrong's interpretation. Especially appealing is little Amy peering out the window with a clothespin on her nose, or the limes in her desk that caused so much grief with the schoolteacher. Armstrong included Amy and Laurie's sojourn in Europe thereby giving the essence of their relationship, well written in the novel, more understanding as to their growth and eventual marriage.

Unfortunately, there is also a great deal of Alcott's work missing from this film. One very important theme inherent in *Little Women* is that of sacrifice. The most important action of the novel in relationship to sacrifice that sets the tone of Alcott's characterizations is that of the March family giving their Christmas breakfast to the destitute and hungry Hummel family. Reading of the girl's reluctance to part with this feast, but coming to an understanding that sacrifice is a noble pursuit; the reader has a better understanding of the internal and external conflicts that motivate each character throughout the novel. However, Armstrong glosses over this important theme by simply showing Amy reluctantly replacing an orange back into its bowl. The only explanation to consider on this oversight is that Armstrong was attempting to minimize the sentimentality of unquestioning sacrifice that would not resonate with a jaded modern society.

Notably lacking in this particular film version is the importance of Father, Mr. March. Although he makes a cursory appearance, his influence on his daughters is clearly missing. In the novel, Mr. March is as present in the March household as if he were actually there in person, giving his daughters advice and admonishing them on their behavior. In Armstrong's film, he is merely a ghostly presence overshadowed by the force of Marmee's personality. Similarly missing in this film is the crucial interaction of Beth and Old Mr. Laurence. The significance of this relationship in the novel is development into the character of Beth, who is very shy, but the gruff old man is her champion for music and the one bit of indulgence that brings humanity toward Beth. One can only guess why Armstrong left this relationship out of the film, but a possibility is that this relationship is not a romantic one, so not as interesting from a strong feminine perspective and is a contrast from the mostly female audience this film would undoubtedly attract, which is the direction the film appeared to be heading. Overall, there was no significant detraction from the novel and the essence of Alcott's characterization, time and place and movement of action were superbly created.

George Cukor and Gillian Armstrong each directed interesting and honored adaptations of Louisa Mae Alcott's *Little Women* using different perspectives. While both remained true to Alcott's work in their own way, the main similarity between the two lies in the time period of history in which they were filmed. The world in 1933 was deep in depression, so Hollywood filmmakers ultimate goal was to make films designed to provide audiences with that little period of time in which their fears and troubles could be held at bay and that is just what Cukor accomplished. In 1994, the United States was in relative economic prosperity, so Armstrong had no messages to send the public except to give the audience a beautifully rendered film of romance and the complexity of familial relationships and that she also accomplished.

Disparity between these two films, however, is many. Cukor's direction of *Little Women*, while remaining the most true to events and characters in the novel, generated

a tone completely different from Armstrong. The most glaring disparity is in the actors. Katherine Hepburn is undoubtedly one of the finest and most talented actresses on film, but her rendition of Jo was overacted. Alcott's writing gave us a sense of Jo as a tomboy, independent thinker and leader rather than follower, but still very much a woman. Hepburn brought a more masculine tone to Jo in action and in voice, so her ultimate capitulation in loving and marrying Mr. Bhaer just didn't have a sense of romance and her declaration of love seemed forced and spur of the moment. Winona Ryder's interpretation of Jo was more tomboyish, rather than masculine, although Ryder may have been too feminine and beautiful to pull this off as well, but her relationship with Frederick Bhaer progressed more slowly, so had more depth and understanding on their ultimate union. Another glaring difference in these two films is in the actresses chosen to play Meg, Jo, Amy and Beth. The actresses in the 1933 version were much too old for their parts, especially Amy with her plucked eyebrows and overly made up face, so that their young antics were painful to watch and at times bordered on slapstick comedy. The actresses of 1994, with the exception of Winona Ryder, were matched perfectly with their parts and using two different actresses as Amy, Kirsten Dunst and Samantha Mathis, close enough in looks to indicate progression of time, were brilliant and invoked the sense of togetherness and conflict prevalent in the novel.

There was also a notable difference in Spring Byington's 1933 and Susan Sarandon's 1994 role as Marmee. Byington brought a sense of calm passivity toward Marmee that didn't resonate with her role as matriarch in the March household, while Sarandon truly became the glue holding the family together while Father was away. However, Sarandon may have been too forceful a presence with modern characteristics of independent thought and civil rights activism to garner the real essence of Alcott's Marmee.

The role of Beth is arguably the most difficult to bring to film. Her tragic presence in the novel is one of a quietly shy musician, never generating the drama of sacrifice, wants and needs as her sisters, but still presented with womanly sensibilities and an integral component of this circle of women. In 1933, Jean Parker's portrayal of Beth took these characteristics to the extreme elevating Beth to near sainthood status, consequently giving her role little emotion or personality, so that her eventual death did not leave as big of a hole in the circle of women as it did in the novel. In contrast, Claire Danes in the 1994 role of Beth captured the novel's characteristics with a quiet and contemplative personality, but also with more humanity and less saint in the making, so that her death was at the forefront of the break in the family circle and their loss more palpable.

The only similarity of character portrayal in both films was in the actress' portrayal of Meg as the eldest and wisest of the sisters. Quite possibly there just was not enough depth to the character to deviate from Alcott's descriptions.

The men in Alcott's novel also played a major role in these women's lives moving in and out of their circle. In Cukor's version their presence was more viable, such as more presence of Father sorely missing in Armstrong's version, however, Douglass Montgomery's Laurie was overplayed, not only in his over eager boyishness, but also in his overly made up face, rendering an interpretation of Laurie as caricature, rather than true character. Christian Bale, however, was truly worth watching in his 1994 interpretation of Laurie, giving a quietly understated performance with his interactions between Jo and Amy. Especially well acted and enjoyable is Armstrong's inclusion of Laurie and Amy in Europe, giving closure to their budding relationship, unfortunately missing from Cukor's film. The role of Frederick Bhaer in 1933 was played by Paul Lukas as a portly, unassuming and non-threatening mentor. It was difficult to view his characterization as a man capable of winning the love and respect of an independent and ambitious Jo and the differences in the ages of Hepburn and Lukas was not as readily apparent. Gabriel Byrne, however, brought so much more to the personality of Bhaer in 1994. Byrne's portrayal was more forthright in his role as mentor to Jo and the slow play of their relationship more poignant and believable. Although Byrne is a very attractive man, the differences in his and Ryder's age more glaring and invoked Alcott's writing regarding their relationship.

Both the 1933 and 1994 film versions of *Little Women* had their strengths and their weaknesses, but well worth viewing for their individual contributions to Alcott's novel. One such common strength of both films was their art direction, cinematography and costuming. Filmed in black and white, the 1933 film brought a clear sense of time and place allowing the audience to be transported into the world of 1860s New England. Filming in black and white also created more of an atmosphere of destitution, plunging fortunes and anxiety and loss during the Civil War. The costuming in this film was also authentic enough to display the period vividly and in black and white giving the sense of age to the girls' dresses. Armstrong's 1994 *Little Women* was visually stunning using a replica of Alcott's own home as the exterior of Orchard House. The set direction for this version gave a real sense of 1860s New York, Europe and New England and the cinematography superb in lighting and color, so that often the visual overwhelmed the action. Both films were artistically superior in the hands of Cukor and Armstrong and both will undoubtedly be enjoyed for many more years regardless of their differences, or possibly because of those differences.