

Little Women (2019) Film Analysis

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“Little Women” (2019), directed by Greta Gerwig, is a film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s novel “Little Women” (1868). The film follows a character narrative as it focuses on the March sisters (Jo, Amy, Meg, and Beth) and their motivations, needs, and goals. The themes of the story are centred around family, self-sacrifice, and women’s struggle with personal growth in a male-dominated working society. This film essay will analyze the style of direction, mise-en-scene, and camera shots used to enhance the plot and send a particular message to the viewer.

Greta Gerwig’s style of direction in this film stands out as it does not follow the common linear narrative. Instead, Gerwig intertwines the past with the present throughout the film, creating a non-linear narrative. This generates a strong contrast between the scenes as the past shows the March sisters’ youthful, hopeful and innocent stages in life in comparison to the harsh realities of adulthood. The contrast is even more emphasized as the scenes from the past have bright, warm lighting to them (figure 1) while the scenes from the present use dark, gloomy lighting (figure 2). This subtle change in lighting can tell the audience that the March family’s present life is not what they hoped it would be. Gerwig also changes the plot of the original novel to better suit the theme of women’s personal growth. For example, in the novel, Jo March marries professor Friedrich Bhaer despite Jo saying that she never wanted to marry (as it did not align with her goals). However, in the movie, she does not get married to him at all and sticks to her word. Despite this controversial change, Gerwig adds a special twist at the end of the story that makes both the characters and the audience content.

The mise-en-scene is also very crucial in this film as it is set in the Victorian era. This means that all the elements of the film need to mimic the aesthetics of this time period. The set design of the film carried vintage elements like wooden furniture, candles, and fireplaces to create an authentic look of the past. Another important element in set design is differentiating how the poor people lived in comparison to how the rich people lived. This set design difference is evident by comparing the March family’s home and Laurie’s home (figure 3). The set of Laurie’s home looks more luxurious as there are books at every corner, portraits, and velvet sofas while the March family’s house looks homier since it is decorated with handcrafted items. The costumes and makeup also showcase this time period. For example, all the women wore

dressess made out of a lot of fabric, however, since the March sisters were poor they would wear more casual fitted dresses unless there was a special occasion (figure 4). On the other hand, Laurie would wear a linen shirt with a collar and a velvet coat since he was wealthy and would be able to afford it (figure 5). The makeup on the characters was very minimal since it was frowned upon to apply heavy makeup in the Victorian era (*Victorian Era Makeup - The Fashion Folks*, 2016) (figure 6). All of these visual elements combined can send a message to the viewer that this story is set in the Victorian era without needing to clearly state it any time during the film.

Furthermore, the composition of the scenes and how they were shot can send signals to the audience about how the characters are feeling. For instance, a good example of this is the scene where Laurie confesses his love to Jo and she rejects him. The long-shot shows the audience Laurie's reaction to her rejection as he is walking away upset while she is trying to reassure him. The medium shot is used to focus on their dialogue and their facial expressions during this scene. The audience can clearly see that both Laurie and Jo are in distress in this situation. Sad non-diegetic music starts playing when Laurie walks away from the scene to emphasize the last time he will see Jo in a while. The extreme long shot at the end of the scene shows Jo alone in the big field which visualizes Jo's loneliness after she had just lost her best friend.

Another scene that uses multiple camera shots to send a message to the audience and help them feel more connected is when Amy spoke to Laurie about marriage. This scene first starts with both of the characters being shown using a medium shot back in forth to deliver their dialogue. The medium shot also allows the audience to see how the characters are reacting to the conversation, for example, Amy puts down the towel she was holding as she gets more serious about the topic they are talking about. Also, the camera follows Amy as she delivers her monologue and stops at a close-up shot to show her facial expressions. Laurie is barely shown when she is delivering her monologue about how marriage is an economic proposition since this issue is only relevant to her as a woman. Moreover, no non-diegetic sounds or music are playing in the back to distract the audience during this serious moment. The dialogue between the two characters does abruptly end when the diegetic sounds of horses appear as it indicates to the

characters and the audience that Amy's soon-to-be fiancé has arrived. A close-up shot is used to emphasize the intimate moment Laurie and Amy are having as he is unbuttoning her apron. Gentle non-diegetic music starts playing for the first time in this scene in combination with the diegetic sounds of the birds tweeting. These sounds are purposely edited in to create a romantic and peaceful atmosphere. These elements, alongside Laurie complimenting her at the end of the scene, tells the audience that Laurie might be falling in love with Amy.

The film's use of specific directing styles, appropriate mise-en-scene, and meaningful camera shots create a story that allows the audience to be integrated into the character's life. These elements all together can send a message to the viewer about the time and place of the story, the motivations of the characters, as well as how the characters are feeling. Without these important techniques, the audience would not be able to understand the story and relate or feel for the characters.

Figures



Figure 1. Warm, Bright Lighting - Little Women (2019)



Figure 2. Cold, Dark Lighting - Little Women (2019)



Figure 3. March Family's House vs Laurie's House - Little Women (2019)



Figure 4. March Sisters' Attire - Little Women (2019)

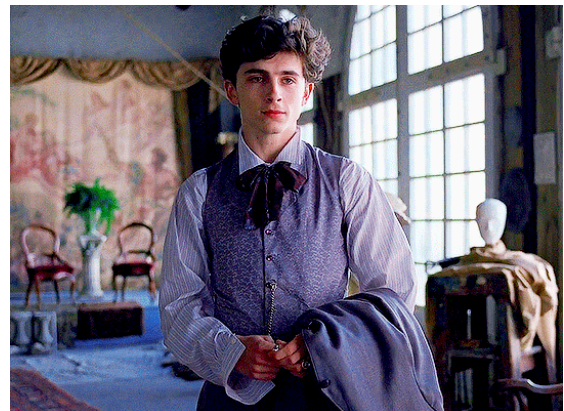


Figure 5. Laurie's Attire - Little Women (2019)



Figure 6. Minimal Makeup - Little Women (2019)

Links To Analyzed Videos:

Laurie confesses his love to Jo (Timestamp: 1:56-3:46) - <https://youtu.be/3cEg2HCl50I?t=117>

Amy speaking to Laurie about marriage (Timestamp: 1:27-3:39) - <https://youtu.be/0D8nRpJsQlk?t=87>

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