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# **Communication in Clothing: Alcott's, Armstrong's & Gerwig's *Little Women***

Communication of class and social environment in clothing

**June 2020**

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
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## **Abstract**

This bachelor thesis is based in adaption studies, with an angle of costuming. The clothing in the 1868 novel *Little Women* will be viewed in relation to the costuming of the Gillian Armstrong adaptation from 1994 and the Greta Gerwig adaptation from 2019. The angle is how class and social environment are communicated through the clothing in *Little Women*? This will be viewed mainly through scenes from chapter nine, “Meg goes to Vanity Fair”, but some other scenes and reoccurring motifs in clothing will also be mentioned.

Denne bacheloroppgaven er basert på adaptasjonsstudier, med en vinkling innenfor kostyme. Klærne i boken *Little Women* fra 1868 blir sett i sammenheng med kostymene i Gillian Armstrongs adaptasjon fra 1994, og Greta Gerwigs adaptasjon fra 2019. Problemstillingen er hvordan klasse og sosialt miljø er kommunisert gjennom klærne i *Little Women*? Dette vil bli belyst hovedsakelig gjennom scener fra kapittel ni, men noen andre scener samt gjennomgående motiver i kostymer vil bli nevnt.

## **Adaptions of *Little Women***

*Little Women* was first published in 1868 by a 37 year old Louisa May Alcott, and brought with it a wide reputation (Bragg, 1978, p.95) Alcott was a woman with a strong will, and she wanted her writing to speak out on injustices placed upon the civilisation and encourage people to terminate the repression (Bender, 2017, p.141). A staple of twentieth-century entertainment has been the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel (Troost, 2007, p.75). *Little Women* is one such novel, and has had various adaptations through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most well-known are the 1933 adaptation by George Cukor, the 1949 adaptation by Mervyn LeRoy, the 1994 adaptation by Gillian Armstrong and recently the 2019 adaptation by Greta Gerwig (Injeian, 2019). The adaptations of 19<sup>th</sup> century novel especially resonate with women, an audience often neglected, in how they foreground relationships and social issues (Troost, 2007, p.75). In *Little Women* various relationships are established and many different social issues are brought up, ones even relevant today. This relevancy in the social issues are clear in both the Armstrong adaptation and the Greta Gerwig adaptation from 2019, which will be the main sources used alongside Alcott's book in this bachelor thesis.

When studying *Mise-en-scène*, the different parts should be looked at systematically. This means tracing one element, such as setting and lighting, through a scene (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p.158). The element that will mainly be traced throughout this bachelor thesis is the use of costumes. Clothing seems to matter a great deal to several characters in *Little Women*, both in the novel and in the adaptations. Out of all of the sisters, Jo has received most critical attention (Sherman, 2013, p.48). The main focus here will be on the character Meg, as she is further described upon the base of clothing related to class and seems with her sister Amy to be preoccupied with it. Both Meg and Amy need to come to terms with consumerism as they go out into the world (Doyle, 2015, p.176). Jo only cares about the way she is dressed for her family's sake, not for her own. When she wears her burnt dress to the Gardiner New Year's party, she hides the back of her dress in order to not embarrass her sister Meg. The main analysis will be built on scenes from chapter nine, where some scenes only contain Meg out of the four sisters, but reflect the class and economic situation of the whole family.

The March family have many different acquaintances, ranging in class and economic situation. When the March family are planning to socialize with people of a higher social class than them, they become more strongly inclined to care about their clothing.



This connection between clothing and class deserves further investigation. Adding to this, the different classes seem to be affected differently by consumer culture, and this is reflected in the meeting between people from different social classes. So, how is class and social environment communicated through the clothing in *Little Women*? There are various scenes which reflect the connection between the different class and clothing, and how consumer culture affects the different social glasses. The scenes that will have the main focus in this bachelor thesis are the scene with Meg right before the party, and the scene at the party in chapter nine, «Meg goes to Vanity Fair». Other scenes and recurrent costume motifs will also be discussed.

### **Costumes as more than an indicator of historical period**

The description of clothing in the book is extremely thorough, which gives clothing an even greater meaning to the story. Alcott dedicates several pages of her book to describe the clothing the girls own and desire. What they wear, how they wear it and why they wear what they wear Alcott makes clear in her novel. The visualisation of these descriptions is portrayed in different ways between the 1994 Armstrong adaption and the 2019 Gerwig adaption. Both make the costumes a central part of the mise-en-scène but have different aspects of costuming as their focus.

Alcott brings a lot of personal experience to this novel, as it is semi-biographical. Alcott managed several cultural transformations in her life and work. She grew up with ideas of modesty, but developed a presence of conspicuous consumption later on (Stoneley, 1999, p.23). The book is influenced by the Alcotts being a family of strong suffragists (Bender, 2017, p.150). Alcott's values and understanding of social injustice shape the book, and this then again shapes the adaptations. In the book, the Marches belong to a class once ruling, now residual, after the father lost his fortune when his business partner. They were once a part of a community of families with similar values, but are now in a transitional society where nouveau riche families like the Moffats rule (Sherman, 2013, p.31). In the novel, Alcott brings forward the role of class, poverty and possibilities of social mobility from her own experience. She herself had issues with gatherings with people of a higher class, as Stoneley mentions her journal from 1860, where Alcott was invited to a John Brown meeting but did not attend, as she did not have any "good gown" (1999, p.26).

This kind of thinking is reflected throughout the book, and already in chapter three you can see how clothes and appearances affect their willingness to participate in social gatherings with people of a higher class. When Jo does not have proper gloves to go to Mrs Gardiner, Meg refuses to go with her if Jo decides to go without gloves. This glove scene is in neither of the adaptations, but in the Armstrong version you can see Beth in the background washing a pair of them. The 2019 adaptation does not employ the correct attire for the historical setting with their lack of gloves. Gloves among other things helped women in the Victorian era create a sense of who they were, and this again had important consequences for how they experienced class (Beaujot, 2012 p. 1). In a setting like this, gloves are elementary. As Meg says to Jo: “Gloves are more important than anything else. I should be mortified if you didn’t have them” (Alcott, 2018, p.44). Feminine dress made strong demands in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and had a commanding social importance (Hollander, 1981 p.30).

In the 2019 adaptation there is an absence of gloves, even when specifically mentioned in the novel. This is probably a result of the angling costume designer Jaqueline Durran took. As mentioned in her Los Angeles Times interview, costume designer Durran wanted to portray the Marches radicalness through their costumes. (Kinosian, 2019). The focus was less on historical accuracy, and more on the family’s feminist values. Costumes in films can do much more than indicate an historical setting or period. It can be used as a tool to provide a schematic framework of personality and development of characters (Gibson & McDonald, 2012, p.310).

In both adaptations, Meg’s shoes which are too small are shown as something pretty Amy envies. They do not fit Meg’s feet, but she still uses them, which results in her spraining her ankle. This can be seen as her not fitting into the social environment, even with her best efforts. Costumes work as an important part of an adaptation, where they work to concretize ideas that are brought forward by the novel but have not been dwelt on at length (Gibson & McDonald, 2012, p.300). The 2019 adaptation does more to emphasise feminist values in their clothing, while the 1994 version is more concerned with the societal expectations in different environments. Even with this in mind, both the 2019 and the 1994 adaptation use this scene at the New Year’s eve party to show how Meg tries to fit in with society dressed as best

as she can, while Jo hides behind curtains in a broken dress, like she does not belong in their company. The spraining of Meg's ankle shows that she too, does not belong with them.

## **Meg goes to Vanity Fair**

Each of the sisters has her own particular temptations she needs to overcome, which Meg finds when she "goes to Vanity Fair" (Marchalonis, 1996, p.10). In chapter nine named "Meg goes to Vanity Fair", Meg is going to her first big party by herself with her erstwhile social environment and friends from her youth. Meg is the first of the sisters to face the challenge of going out into the fashionable world without the others (Sherman, 2013, p.33). When the sisters get Meg ready to go to the Moffats, they pack up the best fineries they have for Meg to bring. When trying on the outfit for the big party with her sisters, the ensemble "seemed nearly perfect in their eyes" (Alcott, 2018, p.136). Meg has the same fineries when she goes to the Moffats, and her thoughts on the clothes change as she sees the reception of it by the other girls: "Meg saw the girls glance at it and then one another, and her cheeks began to burn, for, with all her gentleness, she was very proud." (Alcott, 2018, p.141). In the Armstrong adaptation it is more directly shown through dialogue and the body language of the girls in the frame how they deem Meg's clothes as not suited for the company or occasion. The same is more implicitly stated through language and facial expressions in the Gerwig adaption, but it not dwelt on as much as in the 1994 film.

In the novel we get to know how Megs clothing is not up to part with the rest of the girls, while in the adaptation we clearly see how and why. The dress situation is clearly described in the book, but both adaptations bring an illustration of the situation. In both films she is confident in her own dress, until the unsuitability is pointed out. She seems happy and fitting in in this new dress, but her carrying of the costume changes as Laurie reminds her how this is not her reality. Both films utilize this scene to show how Meg's demeanour changes as she is put in these clothes. She is truly «a doll» to them, and the clothes play a large role here. Both adaptations use the scene with Megs shortfall of a suitable dress to illuminate that Meg does not belong there in terms of class. Her surrounding peers at the Moffats all have the correct attire, while Meg lacks this. This shows how the social environment affects Meg's thoughts about her own clothing.

In the Armstrong adaptation Meg's dress is carefully carried up the stairs by a servant before she puts it on. This gives the viewer an impression of the dress as adequate for the situation. When Meg puts on the dress, it is clear from the other girls' reaction that it is not suited for their party. This dress at first seems perfectly fine for both Meg and the viewer, but this changes with the social environment the other girls provide. This shows the importance of changing social environment on clothes, and vice versa. The dress seems perfectly fine in the hands of the servant and Meg is happy with it too, but the girls' thoughts about it makes it unredeemable. In this version it is clearly pointed out how the dress does not fit the part to be attending a coming out party in. There is a clear distinction between what she wears, and what she should be wearing. In Gerwig's version there is less focus on how this dress she is wearing is unfit for the occasion, it is merely pointed out how she should wear a different dress than the one she wore the night before. It is pointed out how she does not have any dress to send home for, as she only has this, but she is no sooner offered a dress by Belle who has plenty of spares.

Gerwig dedicates shorter time to Meg's dress scene before the party. Gerwig though has a stronger focus than Armstrong on keeping more of the original dialogue in the scene with Meg at the Moffats before the big party. This last scene before the coming out party revolves around what Meg is to wear to this event. In the book these happenings occur over a couple of days, as Meg is at the Moffats for several days. In both adaptations, the focus is on the big party scene, and some on the scene building up to this. Gerwig's scene leading up to the party is a visually stunning scene with all the girls walking up the stairs in their gowns. Meg's dress clearly stands out from the rest, as it is lavender and of a totally different style than the others. In the next scene with Meg, she is blending perfectly in with the rest, after borrowing Belle's dress.

In the Armstrong version almost all the dialogue between the girls before the party is changed. Armstrong is utilizing this scene to build a more extensive storyline on the social position of the Marches, and links it up to Alcott's family herself. She uses the similarities between the Marches and Alcott family to bring forward Alcott's own thoughts around social issues and differences. The class differences and social issues here reflect Alcott's own reflections upon it in that time period. As Peter Stoneley notes in his article on Alcott and social power, the Alcott family had a moralized discourse when it comes to fashion. They did not wear silk as it was exploitative (Stoneley, 1999, p.24). The Alcott family was deeply

concerned and troubled with the social inequity that fashion seems to enforce and celebrate. Systems of production, such as slavery and how factories were run, were also a significant theme in literary works of this era (Stoneley, 199, p.25). These thoughts are reflected in the dialogue between the girls at the Moffats before the party. The screenwriter of the 1994 adaptation, Robin Swicord, used historical sources outside the novel to amplify the politics of the time and what she believes Alcott wanted to further convey, but could not at the time (Hollinger & Winterhalter, 1999, p.173). This seems to be the case with this scene. The 1994 adaptation uses this scene to make a clear connection to Alcott's real life. Sallie mentions that "the Marches haven't bought silk in years, they have views on slavery", which is a direct link to the Alcott family's own beliefs. Alcott's thoughts on social inequity and class have already been depicted through the book but are further represented through this scene. This gives the costumes further meaning for the viewer, as class and reasoning behind the choice of clothing has been further established. This use of Alcott's own ideas builds further on the social and class difference between Meg and the other girls. This brings additional meaning to the costumes, as Meg essentially breaks her own morals in order to fit in with the other guests at the party. Her costume does not represent her inner values, which leads to a gap between costume and self (Sherman, 2013, p.38).

In Gerwig's *Little Women*, there has been a larger focus on colour symbolism. Every main character has their own scheme. Durran as the costume designer wanted to have a palette for each girl (Kinosian, 2019). Meg is usually in something green or lavender, like her own dress at the Moffats. In the book she brought a white tarlatan dress and a blue day dress, but the Gerwig version changes this to a lavender piece. Throughout the movie, Meg has a green and lavender scheme, which is not broken until she is dressed like a doll at the Moffats. She then blends in with the other girls there in their dainty dresses.

The scenery provides the same tonal values as the dress Meg borrows. Meg's dress blends in with the colours in the background filled with pink draperies, and it looks as if she belongs there. The commonly made lavender dress made Meg stand out economically, while the opulent pink dress makes her fit in to the rest of party, both the people and the surroundings. The next scene after Laurie has been tactless in his meeting with her at the party, her pink dress stands out from the yellow toned background. As she sits with her back facing the camera, it is as if she is a draped ornament on the sofa. She seems more of an ornament than a girl. The colours used to portray each of the sisters' personality disappears in Meg's case

when she is placed in this pink dress. It is as if she is consumed by the consumer culture herself. In this dress she is portrayed as a fashionable thing on the sofa, with all her personal traits disappeared. This scene provides the viewer with something visually stunning, where Meg almost looks like a set piece on the sofa. The weaving of Meg's costume into the overall *mise-en-scène* reinforces the mismatch of Meg's class and social environment.

## **Reflection of class in numbers**

Durran mentions in her interview with the Los Angeles Times that she wanted to modernize the costumes and let each actor wear them as they like and director Gerwig wanted them to wear them. She also wanted it to look as if Jo and Laurie switched clothes throughout the film. (Kinosian, 2019). This focus on trying to communicate various things through costume may have somewhat interfered with the costume's task to communicate class and social placement. The switching between characters clothes can be seen in both adaptations. While the Gerwig version focuses on androgynous aspects between Jo and Laurie, Armstrong's clothes exchange portrays the Marches economic situation. In the Armstrong adaptation, the blue dress Meg wears to the Moffats is later used by the younger sister, Amy, which seems like a probable exchange in their economic situation. It seems natural that the youngest one in a family like the Marches would wear hand-me-downs from their older sisters. In the Gerwig version you do not see this, as Amy's clothes often look as if they were newly tailored to her. Through this element of costume it is easier to understand the Marches' social placement in Armstrong's version than the Gerwig's version.

The Armstrong adaption features few outfits for the sisters, which makes it easier for the audience to notice when Amy wears Meg's old dress. The Gerwig adaptation features more outfits for the four sisters, but it seems balanced because they mostly stay to their assigned colours. Amount wise, the costumes in the 1994 film reflect their economic situation. They live in the grand house they had before their economic situation changed, but their clothes are not as grand as their house. They are worn and scarce, which again means there are less costume changes.

## The communicated

Little Women has been adapted many times and will likely be adapted again in the future. There is a clear class distinction in Alcott's book, as well as in Armstrong's and Gerwig's adaptations. This is partly achieved through clothing and the changing social environments. The 1994 adaption seems to focus more on the Marches' economic situation than the 2019 adaption. This could be partly because of the context in which the films came out. Each adaption of *Little Women* reflects the social and cultural situation in the time it is made (McCallum, 2000, p.83). The theme of gender roles is far more relevant in 2019 than in 1994, so an upped focus on this is only seems of the time. The historical setting of the clothing seems to be further emphasized in the 1994 adaptation, than in the 2019 one. Costumes in films can do much more than indicate an historical setting or period (Gibson & McDonald, 2012, p.310). Also, a central role of costumes is to create audience pleasure (Gibson & McDonald, 2012, p.310). The 2019 adaptation is filled with beautiful frames, where the costuming plays a large role. Both Adaptations can be seen as a film of its time, with feminist ideas prominent in both. Each adaptation of *Little Women* that has come out has reshaped Alcott's story according to changing ideological forces that shape women's lives (McCallum, 2000, p.81). The Gerwig adaptation did this as well and took gender roles into special consideration.

The lack of focus on the Marches' economic situation in the Gerwig adaption can come from that their "poverty" may seem trivial when pointed out. As noted earlier, the pleas of poverty by the sisters in *Little Women* can be hard to take, as they are well-fed, well-housed, well-educated and well-enough clothed (Braggs, 1978, p.96). This might have had an effect on the representation of the Marches' class and economic situation in the Gerwig adaptation. Instead, communication of class mainly happened through comparison with others. In both adaptations the comparison is made clear in the scene with Meg's dress, where she seems out of place with her dress. The contrast in social class between Meg and the other girls are perfectly summarized in this extract from the novel: "the sensible resolution to be contented with the simple wardrobe which suited a poor man's daughter was weakened by the unnecessary pity of girls who thought a shabby dress one of the greatest calamities under heaven" (Alcott, 2018, pp.144-145). The difference in dress makes a clear distinction of class.

In reference to class in *Little Women*, Stephanie Foote states that: “A complex balance of social desire and a naturalized belief in taste and personal values, class and status play themselves out locally through a series of difficult negotiations with one’s “real” and one’s desired position next to others” (Foote, 2005, p.66). The March girls must look to others to see their own social positioning. This is also what the viewer needs to do to see the same thing. Especially in the Gerwig adaptation the contrast between the others in society is important to highlight their class. This is important in the Armstrong adaptation as well, but their class is also further showed through their clothing independently from the comparison with others.

In *Little Women*, class and social environment affects the clothes, and the clothes affect class and social environment back. These reflections which seems to be Alcott’s own around class and social environment, is also portrayed in both the 1994 and the 2019 adaptation, just in different fashions. Both communicate class and social environment, just in different visual languages.



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