PERAET 2021
International Scientific Conference «PERISHABLE AND ETERNAL: Mythologies and Social Technologies of Digital Civilization-2021»

THE HEROINE MYTH: THE LITTLE WOMAN'S TRANSFORMATION FROM LITERATURE TO CINEMA

Larisa V. Peigina (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) National Research Tomsk State University, Tomsk, Russian Federation, larisa.mareeva@gmail.com

Abstract

Little Women (Louisa May Alcott's literary source and numerous film adaptations) have won the love of mass audiences and the interest of feminist critics as they represent the "American female myth" and provide ample room for interpretation. The novel itself simultaneously asserts and undermines Victorian gender norms, and each subsequent film adaptation redefines these norms from the standpoint of its time. An analysis of Greta Gerwig's latest film adaptation of 2019 traces how contemporary cinema remythologizes Victorian gender norms to construct contemporary normative models of gender identity. This study, using the "heroine myth" model, presents Little Women as a female developmental narrative that includes the successive passage of three stages: Wonderful Child - Beautiful Virgin - Wise Mother. The adaptation of Greta Gerwig offers two options for the development of the heroine - the first corresponds to the book, and the second demonstrates the following sequence: Wonderful Child - Beautiful Virgin - Wonderful Virgin. These changes allow the heroine to maintain her transformative nature, which she is forced to sacrifice in the traditional scenario. At the same time, the preservation of the duality of the ending can be interpreted as an assertion of the variability of women's life or as a concession to romantic conventions while formally defending feminist values.

Keywords: Feminism, gender, heroine, identity

1. Introduction

For a modern person, works of mass culture serve as the most important source of ideas about sociocultural norms and models of behavior, supplying us with the material from which we "actively create our worlds, our identities" (Kimmel, 2006, p. 35), including gender identity.

Analyzing contemporary film adaptations of popular Victorian literature, it is possible to trace how mainstream cinema is transforming Victorian perceptions of gender norms and roles in accordance with changing sociocultural contexts, while demonstrating that concerns about women's status and talk about women's choice are "not yet old news" (Daly-Galeano, 2019, p. 405). Thus, the study of neo-Victorian texts, in particular, film adaptations (the current state of the discussion regarding the boundaries of the term "neo-Victorian" is illuminated (e.g. Cox, 2017; Han, 2018) in their connection with the original source allows us to explore the relationship between the gender "past" and "present", and even view neo-Victorian text as a meta-commentary on feminist thinking about the Victorian era. For example, Han (2018) compares two film adaptations of Anne Brontë's "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall" to capture the legacy of first wave feminism in different periods of the twentieth century.

Having chosen the latest film adaptation of the novel "Little Women"[1] as the object of analysis, our study, following the feminist studies of L. M. Alcott, views "Little Women" as an "American female myth, its subject the primordial one of the passage from childhood, from girl to woman" (cited in Grasso, 1998, p. 190). West (2019) in her article on the transformation of the character of Jo March in various adaptations (including fans) notes: "Jo is never Jo. She is the author, she is the reader, she is feminist icon or disappointment; she is the times as they change, she is society itself" (p. 419). And one of the key aspects of our analysis is the question of how the latest film adaptation of "Little Women" by G. Gerwig in 2019 transforms Victorian gender norms for the modern cinema screen, as well as how the feminist reflection of the novel influences this process, since each subsequent film adaptation does not only inevitably re-constructs the novel in terms of the gender and social norms of its time (see, e.g., McCallum, 2000), but it also turns out to be inscribed in the context of earlier adaptations and theoretical studies (see Grasso, 1998).

2. Problem Statement

Alcott's rich tradition of feminist thinking revolves around a fundamental dilemma, the extreme poles of which Hooper (2019) formulates as follows: "It can be tempting to highlight Little Women's progressive impulses and view Alcott as a trailblazing feminist. (…) On the other hand, the novel might be seen as a nineteenth-century instruction manual advocating that young women suppress their own ambitions and desires in order to become dutiful Victorian-era wives and mothers" (p. 421). Probably, it is precisely its ambivalence that the novel continues to attract more and more generations of readers and critics, giving rise to a wide field for interpretation and making visible, in particular, the contradictions of social demands for women. This article attempts to comprehend these contradictions through the model of

---

[1] The first two novels of L. M. Alcott of the March family, Little Women (1868) and Good Wives (1869), are often viewed as two volumes of the same book. G. Gerwig's film adaptation includes the events of two novels, and hereinafter, "Little Women" means this dilogy.

the "heroine myth", which allows presenting "Little Women" as a narrative about female development, which includes the successive overcoming of three stages: Wonderful Child, Beautiful Virgin, Wise Mother. Also, this model allows identifying the differences between the "female" and "male" versions of the myth. In addition, in this article we look at how Greta Gerwig's newest 2019 adaptation of "Little Women" seeks (at least in part) to expose the novel's contradictions. This intention of the film is also made evident using the "heroine myth" model.

3. Research Questions

1) How does the tradition of feminist thinking about the novel affect its adaptation?

2) How are key aspects of the "heroine myth" model transformed from a literary source to a modern adaptation?

3) What is the difference between the male model of the "hero myth" and the female model of the "heroine myth"?

4) How are traditional gender roles reflected and reinforced in key aspects of the heroine myth model?

5) How is contemporary cinema remythologizing Victorian gender norms to construct contemporary normative models of gender identity?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to use the "heroine myth" model to trace the transformation of the "Little Women" plot from the original literary text to its on-screen embodiment (using the example of Greta Gerwig's 2019 film), fixing the changes and examining them in the context of feminist reflection.

5. Research Methods

In this study, the author follows the principles of the structural-semiotic approach, within which the narrative of "Little Women" is analyzed using the "heroine myth" model, created as an alternative to the "male" version of the "hero myth". Unlike the expanded version of the "male" monomyth proposed by Campbell (1997), and its alternative "female" version, proposed by Murdock (2018), the author of this study presents a "male" version of the "hero myth" as the passage of three main age and psychological stages: "Wonderful Child - Wise Man - God-Man". At the same time, the transition to the last stage is based on initiation associated with death and resurrection, and the Christological myth is the ideal model of the "male" version. In the "female" version offered by "Little Women" (and - more broadly - most of the stories about female development, which are based on Victorian gender norms), the author also distinguishes three stages: "Wonderful Child - Beautiful Virgin - Wise Mother". The model is based on the approach of Efimkina (2003), who studies the socio-psychological matrices of the female age crisis and uses a modified version of the structural-functional method of V. Ya. Propp for the analysis of the plots of "women's" fairy tales, in which the structure of initiation is fixed as a component of the socialization of the personality. This approach assumes that the basis of the basic matrices of the passage of age crises is an identity crisis, and the plots of fairy tales offer normative models for its passage and

resolution. In his research, Efimkina (2003) singles out "three basic identity crises and three basic socio-psychological initiations" as "ways of resolving a woman's age crises": the transition from childhood to youth; transition from youth to middle adulthood; transition from middle adulthood to old age (p. 13). In our study analyzing the plot of "Little Women" as an example of a Victorian narrative about female maturation, the stages we have identified correspond to the first two initiatory transitions, the last transition is not described.

In addition, a gender-sensitive approach allows analyzing the specifics of the "heroine myth" model and its differences from the "hero myth" on a specific material. And the constructivist approach to identity implies that works of mass culture not only express the gender norms of their time, but also directly participate in the construction of the audience's identity.

6. Findings

The analysis of the plot of "Little Women" made it possible to present the novel as a narrative about female maturation, which includes successive overcoming of three stages: Wonderful Child - Beautiful Virgin - Wise Mother. The indicated stages correspond to three stages of development in the "male" model: the Wonderful Child - the Wise Man - the God-Man.

Although the novel introduces the four March sisters as different female types that "have provided a kind of Myers-Briggs-like personality test for readers" (Hooper, 2019, p. 422), this study focuses on Jo March as the main heroines of the novel.

6.1. Jo March: Wonderful Child - Beautiful Virgin - Wise Mother

From the very beginning, we learn that Jo March is disappointed with her female status, she likes everything male, she tends to imitate male behavior. This expresses her disappointment with the restrictions that society imposes on a woman, and at the same time corresponds to the ideas of Murdock (2018), according to which the heroine goes through an obligatory stage of male self-identification. Jo is ugly, does not know how to behave "like a lady" and constantly gets into ridiculous situations.

While the novel refers directly to John Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress", it also mentions the gospel as "a true guidebook for any pilgrim going on a long journey" (Alcott, 2021, p. 25), and much of Jo March's childhood refers to the gospel myth: the heroine "preaches the gospel to the poor" and works "miracles": together with her sisters, she feeds the poor Hummels, donating her breakfast to them, "tames" Mr. Laurence; but most importantly, she transforms reality with the help of her literary and acting gift.

Thus, in our model, the first stage in the formation of the heroine and the hero coincides: as a Wonderful Child, the heroine, although she faces some role-playing restrictions, is still quite capable of performing the same functions as the hero. Wadsworth (2019) calls this period "the privileged space of adolescence", allowing for the manifestation of "gender-nonconformity" (p. 379).

Growing up, Jo March does not become a beauty, but neither does she become one of the "odd women" in literature, "not only disrupts but transforms social norms" (Clay, 2018, p. 111). On the contrary, she receives two marriage proposals, the first of which - from the romantic hero and childhood

friend Laurie Laurence - she rejects, opting for the elderly professor Friedrich Bhaer. In other words, the heroine achieves sudden success in the traditional "girlish" field, to which she was initially not adapted to the maximum. And the application of those abilities that distinguished her from others and constituted her essence in childhood, on the contrary, constantly meets with resistance, forcing the conclusion that the transition of the heroine from a "sexless" child to a girl, suggesting the need to master normative gender roles, is also associated with the emergence severe restrictions imposed on the previously free field of creativity and imagination.

After leaving home for New York, Jo devotes herself completely to writing sensational stories for the sake of money, and in the end receives a harsh sermon from Professor Bhaer about the immorality of such literature. Feminist critics of "Little Women" often point out that Jo explores the realms of the sensual, the aggressive, and the sexual in this part of the novel (see Grasso, 1998). In the book, these attempts are severely branded as "a morbid amusement in which healthy young minds do not voluntarily indulge" (Alcott, 2021, p. 440), and Jo's work is shown not from the point of view of exploring the hidden and dark sides of her own personality, but from the point of view of the evil influence that indulges the low tastes of the public and adherence to romantic and Gothic literary canons on an initially pure soul. It is characteristic that the heroine achieves some success when her literary manner departs from these canons - and approaches the depiction of the "truth of life". Jo's stories - after she returns home from New York - are beginning to be successful. We don't know what they are about, but Jo's father, after reading one of them, sums it up: "There is truth in it, Jo, that's the secret" (Alcott, 2021, p. 541). In addition, the poem "In the Garret", which encouraged Professor Bhaer to come and explain himself with Jo, is based on her sincere feelings and autobiographical material.

So, when she was the Beautiful Virgin the heroine develops in the direction from romanticism to realism, both in life and in work: freeing herself from girlish illusions, she chooses a more prosaic admirer and a more prosaic style. It can also be said that this stage - corresponding to the stage of the Wise Man in the "male" version of the myth - is characterized by the "persecution" that the heroine undergoes. Like the male hero, she meets with distrust and contempt (the limitations of the "human" nature of the hero), but, unlike him, comes to the need to sacrifice her "miraculous" abilities to preserve the "human" part, then the male hero on the contrary, he dies as a "human" to be resurrected in his "divine" incarnation.

Then the heroine, having married, becomes a Wise Mother, finally losing an important part of her wonderful abilities. So, becoming an adult, Jo abandons literary activity for a long time. Only in the fourth book of the series, "Jo's boys", when things start to go badly in Plumfield, she takes up the pen again, and the novel emphasizes that Jo's priority is not creative expression but caring for her family. She is a wise, edifying and at the same time somewhat eccentric educator for her students, who are often "difficult" and dysfunctional. It can be concluded that Jo's transformative abilities as a Wonderful Child are embodied in the end in a rather mundane daily work, as well as in her motherhood.

6.2. Comparative analysis of the "male" and "female" versions of the myth

Our analysis shows that the heroine and the hero start out the same way, like the Wonderful Children, but then their paths diverge: the heroine cannot sacrifice herself and be resurrected in the way

the hero can. However, she can make a different kind of sacrifice. Folklorists have long noted the parallels between funeral and marriage rites, and it is a happy marriage that is a symbolic death for the heroine, since she loses her original transforming nature - or, more precisely, now she can embody it exclusively in childbirth. Despite the fact that the structure of the monomyth, proposed by Campbell and showing the stages of the individuation process, contains the meeting and ritual marriage of the hero with the Goddess (Anima), we argue that a man, guided by the logic of the hero's journey, must leave the Goddess and continue on the journey in order to eventually die and resurrect in the new status of the God-Man. Thus, marriage is not only not the ultimate goal of the hero but can serve as an obstacle to its achievement if the hero decides to stay with the Goddess and refuses to continue his lonely journey.

For the heroine, on the other hand, marriage is a necessary condition for the passage of the second initiation and becomes, in essence, her Sacrifice since it brings death to her original nature. She remains a person devoid of "wonderful" abilities, and the resurrection of the transforming part for her is possible only in the children born to her. Thus, the woman in the model of the "heroine myth" combines the features of the Christ figure and the Virgin Mary.

6.3. Transformation of the "heroin myth" model in the film adaptation of G. Gerwig in 2019

There is a contradiction in the image of the Victorian heroine, due not only to the artistic laws of the plot development, but also to the real socio-cultural situation in which the work is created. It is not for nothing that the feminist assessments of "Little Women" are so contradictory: on the one hand, the focus of the narrative on the heroine's growing up makes the woman visible and gives her the right to vote; on the other hand, her transformation from the Wonderful Child into the Beautiful Virgin and Wise Mother, that is, turning to traditionally female roles, seems to be a step backwards.

Greta Gerwig, in her adaptation of "Little Women", is clearly trying to resolve this contradiction. At the end of the film, the plot "forks": one of the versions deals with the plot of the book that Jo March writes about herself and her sisters - and this version ends "like a book", that is, a marriage with Professor Bhaer and life in Plumfield; another version tells the story of Jo, who writes this very book - and, herself remaining unmarried in reality, is forced in her novel to retreat from the truth of life for the sake of a "happy ending". In an interview with Elle magazine, Gerwig (2021) comments on this: "What if you were looking not just at the love story of a man and a woman for two hours, but at the romance of a dreamy girl with her book? And such a storyline is worth not less attention!".

Using the model of the "heroine myth", we can conceptualize the changes made by the film to this model as follows: if in the novel Jo undergoes a series of archetypal transformations, successively transforming from the Wonderful Child into the Beautiful Virgin and the Wise Mother, then the film adaptation offers two options for her fate - the first corresponds to the book, and the second demonstrates the following sequence: Wonderful Child - Beautiful Virgin - Wonderful Virgin. Thus, the adaptation transforms only the last third of the heroine's journey. In addition, it should be noted that even the image of the Wonderful Virgin contains symbolic maternal connotations: although Greta Gerwig speaks in interviews of "having an affair with her own book", the visuals of the film (Jo's observation of the typographical process) refer more to the process of childbirth. Thus, the Wonderful Virgin becomes a symbolic mother, which, on the one hand, brings this image closer to the image of the Virgin Mary

(whose path in our model is opposed to the "male" version of the path of Christ), and on the other hand, it offers an alternative path of female self-realization.

In this new model proposed by the film, the "female" myth is still different from the "male": the heroine no longer must sacrifice her "wonderful" nature, but her rejection of romantic love is also not labeled as a sacrifice - without losing anything, she acquires the opportunity to realize her creative gift. At the same time, the possibility of the traditional myth is not rejected, and this "bifurcation" of the heroine's path can be seen either as a subversive reflection of the traditional women's dilemma "marriage or career", or as a statement of this dilemma in practice. In addition, the "duality" of the heroine's fate refers to the idea of "split personality", important for Victorian literature. We can say that in "Little Women" by G. Gerwig, as in "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" by R. L. Stevenson, the inability to comply with all rigid (and contradictory) ethical and gender norms imposed on a woman leads to a split of her personality into two subpersonalities, each of which, living its own life within one of the alternative endings, fulfills only part of the regulatory requirements. This observation confirms the need to view any neo-Victorian text as a "constellations of texts and other cultural productions" in "the contemporary digital, multi-platform environment", where "the line between text, context, and intertext seems ever more blurred" (Louttit & Louttit, 2018, p. 5).

Thus, Greta Gerwig's film focuses on the contradictions of "Little Women", which the changed sociocultural situation, the previous feminist reflection, and the achievements of the neo-Victorian novel help to highlight more clearly than the literary source itself risks doing. However, the resolution of these contradictions offered by the film is in itself contradictory: on the one hand, suggesting that Alcott was innovative in her orientation towards egalitarian marriages (Shealy, 2019), on the other, it involuntarily makes one think about the "traps of postfeminist womanhood" (Pietrzak-Franger, 2015), the "lures of critical presentism" (Kohlke, 2018, p. 11), and neo-conservative tendencies that may be latent in neo-Victorian text under the guise of subversive notions of women's agency (see van Dam, 2019).

7.   Conclusion

The newest film adaptation of G. Gerwig has to go beyond the original story to convey all the potential subversivity of "Little Women" in a form accessible to the modern (supposedly emancipated) viewer, For this, the film chooses a strategy of a double ending, which, depending on the position of the critic, can be interpreted both as a breakthrough find glorifying the freedom of choice and variability of women's life, and as a cowardly concession to romantic conventions to please everyone at once. This ambiguity, however, is consistent with the fundamental dilemma characteristic of the feminist interpretation of the novel and reflects the continuing relevance of the gender canons of Victorian literature: Jo March in the film, like L. M. Alcott at one time, under pressure from the editor, was forced to "marry" her heroine.

The model of the "myth of the heroine", as well as the involvement of the context of the previous feminist reflection and research of neo-Victorianism, allow us to consider the contradictions of both the novel and the film not only from within the artistic world, but also from the outside - as revealing the contradictions of socio-cultural requirements for women, embodied in contradictory cultural models that they (and by them) are offered.

Acknowledgments

References

Alcott, L. M. (2021). *Malen'kiye zhenshchiny. Khoroshiye zheny* [Little Women. Good Wives]. Eksmo.

Campbell, J. (1997). *Tysyachelikiy geroy* [The Hero with a Thousand Faces].Vakler, Refl-buk, AST.

Clay, C. (2018). Review of the book *Odd Women? Spinsters, Lesbians and Widows in British Women's Fiction, 1850s–1930s*, by E. Liggins. *Women's Writing, 25*(1), 110-112, https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2017.1371452

Cox, J. (2017). Canonization, Colonization, and the Rise of Neo-Victorianism. *English, 66*(253), 102-123. https://doi.org/10.1093/english/efw058

Daly-Galeano, M. (2019). "Oh Dear, Yes!": Mashing up Little Women, Vampires, and Werewolves. *Women's Studies, 48*(4), 393-406. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1614871

Efimkina, R. P. (2003). *Sotsial'no-psikhologicheskoye soderzhaniye vozrastnykh krizisov zhenshchiny v initsiaticheskikh syuzhetakh volshebnykh skazok* [Socio-psychological content of age-related crises of women in the initiatory plots of fairy tales]. [Abstract of the PhD thesis]. P. G. Demidov Yaroslavl State University. Automated Library System IRBIS. http://irbis.gnpbu.ru/Aref_2003/Efimkina_R_P_2003.pdf

Gerwig, L. (2021, March 7). Rezhisser Greta Gervig – o klassicheskikh syuzhetakh, sil'nykh zhenshchinakh i feminizme [Director Greta Gerwig about classic stories, strong women, and feminism]. *Elle.* https://www.elle.ru/stil-zhizni/cinema/rezhisser-greta-gervig-o-klassicheskih-syuzhetah-silnyh-zhenshinah-i-feminizme-id6854682

Grasso, L. (1998). Louisa May Alcott's "Magic Inkstand": Little Women, Feminism, and the Myth of Regeneration. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, 19*(1), 177-192. https://doi.org/10.2307/3347148

Han, C. P. (2018). The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's (1848) Residence at the BBC: Neo-Victorian Adaptations in the 1960s and 1990s. *Neo-Victorian Studies, 10*(2), 32-67. http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/past_issues/10-2-2018/NVS%2010-2-2%20C-Han.pdf

Hooper, E. (2019). Girl Power: A Look at Recent Little Women Adaptations. *Women's Studies, 48*(4), 421-432. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1614873

Kimmel, M. (2006). Maskulinnost' kak gomofobiya: strakh, styd i molchaniye v konstruirovanii gendernoy identichnosti [Masculinity as homophobia: fear, shame, and silence in the construction of gender identity]. *Gender Studies, 14*, 34-52. http://kcgs.net.ua/gurnal/gurnal-14-02.pdf

Kohlke, M.-L. (2018). The lures of neo-Victorianism presentism (with a feminist case study of Penny Dreadful). *Literature Compass, 15*(7), e12463. https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12463

Louttit, C., & Louttit, E. (2018). Introduction: Screening the Victorians in the Twenty-First Century. *Neo-Victorian Studies, 11*(1), 1-14. https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/198783/198783.pdf?sequence=1

McCallum, R. (2000). The Present Reshaping the Past Reshaping the Present: Film Versions of Little Women. *The Lion and the Unicorn, 24*(1), 81–96. https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2000.0007

Murdock, M. (2018). *Puteshestviye geroini* [The Heroine's Journey]. Klub Kastaliya.

Pietrzak-Franger, M. (2015). Restrained Glamour: Joe Wright's Anna Karenina (2012), Postfeminism and Transmedia Biopolitics. In Hrsg. von Dan Hassler-Forest & P. Nicklas (Eds.), *The Politics of Adaptation* (pp. 243-256). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854_18

Shealy, D. (2019). "Wedding Marches": Louisa May Alcott, Marriage, and the Newness of Little Women. *Women's Studies, 48*(4), 366-378. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1614869

van Dam, D. (2019). Review of the book *Neo-Victorianism on Screen: Postfeminism and Contemporary Adaptations of Victorian,* by A. Primorac. *Victoriographies: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Writing, 9*(2), 206–209. https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/pdfplus/10.3366/vic.2019.0345

Wadsworth, S. (2019). "New Friendship Flourished like Grass in Spring": Cross-Gender Friendship in Moods and Little Women. *Women's Studies, 48*(4), 379-392. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1614870

West, K. (2019). Who Owns Little Women? Adapting Alcott in the Twenty-First Century. *Women's Studies, 48*(4), 407-420. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1614871