

# The Role of Visual Narratives in Representing Female Identity and Emotions in *Little Women* (2019)

E. C. Monteverdi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Urbino, Italy

Correspondence: E. C. Monteverdi, University of Urbino, Italy.

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of visual narratives in representing female identity and emotions in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019). Through an analysis of key cinematic techniques, including nonlinear storytelling, costume design, spatial dynamics, cinematography, and visual metaphors, the study examines how these elements enrich the portrayal of the March sisters' individuality and collective experiences. The nonlinear structure, marked by contrasting color palettes, juxtaposes the innocence of youth with the challenges of adulthood, reflecting the emotional and psychological evolution of the protagonists. Costume design highlights the distinct personalities and aspirations of Jo, Amy, Meg, and Beth, while spatial dynamics underscore the tension between freedom and societal constraints. Cinematographic techniques, such as close-ups and framing, capture moments of intimacy and creativity, deepening emotional resonance. Finally, visual metaphors—ranging from Jo's manuscripts to Beth's piano—symbolize empowerment and the sisters' pursuit of self-determination. This paper argues that Gerwig's adaptation transforms a literary classic into a profound visual narrative, celebrating the complexities of female identity and emotional resilience while maintaining timeless relevance.

**Keywords:** *Little Women*, visual narratives, female identity

## 1. Introduction

Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is a masterclass in visual storytelling, utilizing cinematic techniques to capture the intricacies of female identity, emotions, and resilience. Unlike many period dramas, this adaptation emphasizes the internal lives of its protagonists through a dynamic interplay of imagery, composition, and narrative structure. Gerwig's nonlinear storytelling reconfigures time, weaving moments of youthful joy with the sobering realities of adulthood. This innovative approach allows viewers to witness the sisters' growth and identity formation in parallel, rather than as a linear progression, intensifying the emotional depth of their experiences. The film's visual language extends to costume design, spatial dynamics, and cinematography, each carefully constructed to reflect the personalities, aspirations, and struggles of the March sisters. Jo's tomboyish wardrobe, Beth's simple attire, Amy's sophisticated ensembles, and Meg's traditional dresses each speak volumes about their individuality and their relationships with societal norms. The spaces they inhabit—whether the warm, intimate March household or the grand but restrictive Laurence estate—become extensions of their emotional landscapes. Through this rich visual tapestry, Gerwig not only revitalizes a beloved classic but also underscores timeless themes of ambition, sacrifice, and self-determination. These visual narratives elevate the film into a profound exploration of womanhood, individuality, and emotional complexity.

## 2. Nonlinear Storytelling Through Color and Tone

In *Little Women* (2019), Greta Gerwig employs a nonlinear narrative structure to weave together the past and present, using color and tone as visual markers to guide the audience and deepen emotional resonance.

Childhood is rendered in warm, golden hues, symbolizing the innocence, creativity, and intimacy of the March sisters' youth. These scenes glow with a sunlit vibrancy, evoking nostalgia and a dreamlike quality that underscores the closeness of their familial bonds and the limitless potential of their early lives. In contrast, adulthood is characterized by cooler, muted tones, reflecting the hardships and losses that accompany maturity. This dichotomy between light and shadow mirrors the film's central theme: the passage from youthful idealism to the often harsh realities of adulthood.

The transition between timelines is seamless yet emotionally potent, as the visual language bridges the past and present. For example, a scene from childhood in the warmth of the family home may cut to a somber, blue-tinged moment of Jo mourning Beth's death, emphasizing the poignancy of loss. These visual juxtapositions remind viewers that the sisters' adult experiences are irrevocably shaped by their pasts. The golden glow of their younger years is not merely a nostalgic device but a representation of hope and the rawness of potential, in stark contrast to the steely, shadowed palettes of adulthood, which reflect compromise, loss, and the challenges of self-realization.



Picture 1.

Gerwig also uses color as an emotional shorthand for the characters' internal states. The brightness of youth reflects Jo's spirited rebellion, Amy's passionate ambition, Meg's romantic dreams, and Beth's quiet contentment. Conversely, the cooler tones of adulthood emphasize Jo's loneliness, Amy's pragmatism, Meg's sacrifices, and the void left by Beth's absence. This interplay of color and tone creates a narrative that is as visually evocative as it is emotionally rich, reinforcing the complex transitions of identity and emotion that define the sisters' journeys.

### 3. Costuming as a Reflection of Identity

In *Little Women* (2019), costume design serves as a powerful visual tool to distinguish the individual identities, aspirations, and emotional arcs of the March sisters. Greta Gerwig, in collaboration with costume designer Jacqueline Durran, uses clothing not only as a means to ground the story in its 19th-century setting but also as a medium to explore the nuanced personalities of the four sisters and their evolving relationship with societal norms and personal ambitions.



Picture 2.

Jo March's tomboyish attire is emblematic of her defiance of traditional femininity and her desire for independence. Frequently seen in loose-fitting shirts, vests, and earthy tones, Jo's clothing reflects her practical, no-nonsense personality and her rejection of the constraints imposed on women of her time. Her androgynous aesthetic visually communicates her struggle to break free from gender norms, underscoring her aspirations to carve out a space for herself in the male-dominated literary world. Her wardrobe evolves subtly as she matures; while still practical, her later outfits incorporate softer elements, symbolizing her growing acceptance of emotional vulnerability without compromising her individuality.

Amy March, by contrast, uses fashion as a tool for social ascension and self-expression. As the most outwardly ambitious of the sisters, Amy's costumes are vibrant, elegant, and meticulously detailed, signaling her desire to thrive within societal expectations. Her sophisticated wardrobe, with rich fabrics and bold colors, mirrors her transformation from a spirited, self-centered girl into a poised woman who negotiates her identity within the confines of societal propriety. In later scenes, her clothing reflects her increased maturity, as she balances her artistic aspirations with her pragmatic acceptance of social realities.

Meg March's traditional, modest dresses capture her adherence to societal norms and her longing for domestic fulfillment. Her clothing, often characterized by soft, feminine silhouettes and gentle colors, underscores her role as the most conventional sister. Even as she dreams of wealth and luxury, Meg ultimately chooses a life grounded in love and simplicity, a decision reflected in her unadorned but elegant wardrobe.

Beth March's wardrobe is the simplest and most understated, mirroring her shy, self-effacing nature. Dressed in soft, muted fabrics, Beth's attire reflects her humility, innocence, and deep connection to home. Her clothing remains consistent throughout the film, symbolizing her constancy and her role as the emotional anchor of the family.

Together, the costumes not only differentiate the sisters but also chart their individual growth. Each outfit becomes a visual representation of the characters' inner worlds, capturing their personalities, desires, and evolving relationships with societal expectations and their own identities.

#### 4. Spatial Dynamics and Emotional Context

Spatial dynamics play a crucial role in *Little Women* (2019), with Greta Gerwig using physical spaces to mirror the emotional landscapes of the characters and highlight the broader societal forces shaping their lives. The March family home, with its warm and cluttered interiors, serves as a symbolic hearth, a place where creativity, love, and sisterly bonds thrive. The intimate proximity of the sisters within this space reinforces their deep emotional connection and the sense of collective identity that defines their early lives. Scenes of shared activities—writing, painting, performing plays—show how the physical closeness of the home fosters both emotional vulnerability and artistic expression.





Picture 3.

In stark contrast, Aunt March's grand yet austere home symbolizes the constraints of societal expectations. The vast, imposing spaces within her house reflect the emotional distance and rigidity of the social structures that she upholds. Amy's time in Aunt March's home underscores her awareness of the trade-offs required to secure her place in a restrictive society. Her composed and deliberate movements within this space suggest a calculated acceptance of these constraints, highlighting her pragmatic approach to navigating societal norms.

The Laurence estate provides yet another layer of contrast. While its opulence reflects wealth and privilege, it also represents emotional isolation. Laurie, despite his affluence, is drawn to the warmth of the March household, suggesting the sterility of his own environment. For Beth, the Laurence home becomes a place of bittersweet solace, as her bond with Mr. Laurence and his piano symbolizes both comfort and her quiet resignation to life's limitations.

Gerwig uses these spatial contrasts to emphasize the sisters' varied emotional journeys and relationships with societal pressures. Jo's restless pacing in the March home and later in the boarding house reflects her yearning for freedom and creative autonomy. Amy's composed demeanor in Europe's expansive landscapes underscores her ambition and adaptability. These spaces are not mere backdrops but active participants in the storytelling, reinforcing the characters' struggles between individual desires and the confines of their environments. Through spatial dynamics, the film vividly portrays the tension between the warmth of familial bonds and the cold realities of societal expectations.

### **5. Cinematography and Emotional Intimacy**

Cinematography in *Little Women* (2019) is integral to conveying the emotional depth and personal connections of the March sisters, emphasizing tactile and intimate moments that anchor the narrative in visual storytelling. Greta Gerwig employs a delicate yet purposeful approach, using close-ups, framing, and recurring motifs to create a rich tapestry of emotional intimacy and individual identity.



Picture 4.

One of the most striking aspects of the cinematography is its focus on hands—a recurring visual motif that captures the sisters' creativity, labor, and love. Close-up shots of hands writing, painting, sewing, and playing the piano underscore the importance of their individual pursuits and passions. Jo's hands, often ink-stained as she furiously writes, reflect her relentless ambition and defiance of societal norms. Similarly, Amy's meticulous brushstrokes as she paints highlight her artistic aspirations and her determination to leave her mark on the world. These close-ups also depict moments of tenderness, such as Beth holding Jo's hand during her illness, emphasizing the physicality of their bond and the raw emotion of these fleeting connections.

Hair serves as another visual motif, symbolizing transformation, sacrifice, and agency. Jo's dramatic haircut, captured in poignant detail, is both a literal and figurative shedding of traditional femininity and a declaration of

independence. The scene's framing focuses on the emotional aftermath, showing Jo's vulnerability as she mourns the loss of her hair while asserting her agency in a patriarchal world. In contrast, Amy's elaborate hairstyles reflect her evolving maturity and growing comfort within societal expectations, presenting her as a woman who navigates societal constraints with grace and ambition.

The use of light and shadow further enhances emotional intimacy. Natural lighting during childhood scenes imbues the film with warmth and nostalgia, while harsher, shadowed lighting in adulthood reflects the sisters' emotional struggles and the complexities of their lives. Framing also plays a key role; tight, intimate compositions capture moments of sisterly closeness, while solitary frames isolate characters during their moments of introspection or conflict.

Through these visual techniques, Gerwig's cinematography not only heightens the emotional resonance of the story but also provides a nuanced exploration of identity, connection, and the small yet profound details that define a life.

### 6. Visual Metaphors of Empowerment

Visual metaphors in *Little Women* (2019) serve as a potent narrative device, illustrating the sisters' struggles for self-determination and their resistance to societal constraints. Greta Gerwig skillfully uses objects and actions as symbols of the sisters' inner lives and their journeys toward personal empowerment, embedding deeper meaning into everyday moments.



Picture 5.

Jo's manuscripts are the most prominent metaphor of agency and ambition. The physical act of writing, depicted in numerous scenes with close-ups of ink-stained hands and furrowed concentration, represents Jo's relentless

pursuit of creative freedom and independence. Her manuscripts are not just papers; they symbolize her refusal to conform to the traditional roles assigned to women of her era. This culminates in the climactic scene where Jo negotiates the publication of her book, a moment meticulously framed to emphasize her authority. Stark lighting and sharp focus isolate her against the backdrop of the male publisher's office, underscoring her triumph in asserting control over her narrative—both literally and figuratively.

Beth's piano acts as a symbol of solace and creative expression, encapsulating her quiet yet profound impact on those around her. The instrument, gifted by Mr. Laurence, becomes an extension of her gentle, nurturing presence. Scenes of Beth playing the piano often bathe her in warm, diffused light, creating an aura of tranquility and emphasizing her role as the emotional anchor of the family. Her music, though soft and understated, carries immense emotional weight, symbolizing the power of quiet resilience and unspoken strength.

Amy's paintings reflect her ambition and adaptability. Throughout the film, Amy is seen sketching and painting, her artistic pursuits mirroring her desire to achieve greatness while navigating societal expectations. Her work represents both her creative aspirations and her strategic understanding of her place in the world, embodying a pragmatic yet determined approach to self-empowerment.

For Meg, the metaphor of domestic comforts—her dresses, home, and family life—becomes a symbol of agency through choice. Unlike Jo and Amy, Meg embraces traditional roles not out of submission but out of her own volition. Scenes of her creating a life of love and simplicity illustrate that empowerment can also lie in the freedom to choose one's path, even within conventional frameworks.

These visual metaphors—Jo's manuscripts, Beth's piano, Amy's paintings, and Meg's domestic spaces—enrich the film's exploration of empowerment. They highlight the diverse ways the sisters assert their agency and individuality, offering a multifaceted portrayal of womanhood and resilience.

## 7. Conclusion

In *Little Women* (2019), Greta Gerwig reimagines Louisa May Alcott's timeless novel through a sophisticated and emotionally evocative visual language, transforming the classic story into a rich exploration of female identity, relationships, and agency. By masterfully weaving together color palettes, costume design, spatial dynamics, cinematography, and visual metaphors, the film transcends the boundaries of period drama, delivering a narrative that resonates with contemporary audiences while remaining true to its historical context. Gerwig's innovative use of nonlinear storytelling, marked by the interplay of warm, nostalgic childhood scenes and the cooler tones of adulthood, invites viewers to reflect on the complexities of growth and identity formation. Costumes become a narrative in themselves, communicating the individuality of the March sisters and their varied approaches to femininity and societal expectations. The film's spatial dynamics, from the warmth of the March home to the grandeur of Aunt March's estate, serve as emotional landscapes that encapsulate both freedom and constraint. Through its cinematography and visual metaphors, the film underscores the diverse ways women assert agency in the face of societal limitations, celebrating ambition, creativity, and the power of choice. *Little Women* is not only a love letter to its source material but also a testament to the enduring relevance of stories that champion the resilience, complexity, and empowerment of women.

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