

Jo March's Characterization as a Reflection of Liberal Feminism in Little Women (2019)

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of women's struggles through a liberal feminist lens in Greta Gerwig's Little Women (2019), with a focus on the main character, Jo March. Using Naomi Wolf's theory of power feminism, the research analyzes Jo March's characterization and the feminist ideals she embodies. The findings reveal that Jo is portrayed as intelligent, creative, ambitious, and principled, and that her journey reflects liberal feminist efforts to claim equal rights in education, economics, law, and social spheres.

Keywords: *characterization, feminism liberal, little women (2019)*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a distinctly human expression, stemming from the enduring need to comprehend, articulate, and share life experience (Pickering & Hoepfer, 1981). It can emerge through various artistic forms, including poetry, novels, music and film—all shaped by the author's imagination. Rather than simply documenting factual events, literature creates its own reality through limitless creativity (Wellek & Warren, 1949). Among modern literary forms, film stands out as especially influential. It serves as both a reflection and, at times, a distortion of societal values, while powerfully capturing emotions that connect deeply with the human condition.

Human experience includes every aspect of an individual's life—emotions, relationships, thoughts, and actions—all shaped by their personal perspective. As society evolves, significant changes have occurred, particularly regarding women's roles and status. Feminism as a social and political movement, plays a crucial role in challenging gender-based inequality and promoting equal rights regardless of gender. Among its various branches—such as radical, Marxist, postmodern, and eco-feminism. This study focuses on liberal feminism, specifically Naomi Wolf's perspective on power feminism. Liberal feminism advocates for women's ability to navigate daily life with strength and to claim equal rights in areas like education, law, and economics. It highlights individual autonomy, self-empowerment, and minimal state interference, aiming to dismantle systems that position women as inferior to men (Ghorfati & Medeni, 2015).

The role of the state, within the framework of liberal feminism, is primarily to safeguard individual rights and freedoms. When women are denied equal rights across various sectors, liberal feminism arises to promote gender equality, personal freedom, and individual autonomy for women. At its core, liberal feminism advocates for women's full agency and individuality (Hanifah et al, 2017), Aiming to ensure equal rights and opportunities. Through this perspective, society is encouraged to eliminate gender-based distinctions in everyday life.

This study focuses on liberal feminism, which emphasizes gender equality, individual rights, and personal freedom in the context of contemporary society. These values are reflected in the character of Jo March, the protagonist of the film *little women* (2019), who struggles to support her family financially in a time when women were paid significantly less than men. Through her daily experiences and strong-willed personality, Jo challenges societal norms and asserts that women deserve equal rights and opportunities, regardless of gender. The film presents numerous liberal

feminist values, making it a relevant subject for analysis through Naomi Wolf's liberal feminist theory, particularly as embodied in Jo March's characterization.

In real life, every individual possesses distinct character traits shaped by personal experiences, contexts, and social interactions. These traits allow individuals to express and define who they are. In literature, character becomes a central element of interest-eliciting curiosity, admiration, or even disapproval (Bennet and Royle, 2004). Character is developed through characterization, a literary technique where the author reveals a character's personality, motivations, and inner qualities. As Reaske explains, characterization includes any narrative action or authorial choice used to depict a character. Various types of characterization can be applied to analyze characters in literary works.

Dialogue plays a significant role in developing characterization, as it reveals a character's personality, motivations, and relationships through both content and delivery. According to Pickering and Hoepfer, a character's speech can directly or indirectly reflect their traits. Elements such as vocabulary choice, speech patterns, tone, and sentence structure provide deeper insights into the character. Reaske also notes that interactions with others can significantly illuminate a character's nature. Through dialogue, both in what is said and how it is expressed—authors offer readers a clearer understanding of the character's identity and emotional depth. Characterization through action reveals a character's traits by illustrating how they behave and respond within the narrative. As Boggs notes, a person's actions often serve as the clearest reflection of their character. Instead of describing qualities directly, authors allow readers to interpret a character's personality through their decisions, behaviors, and reactions to events, encouraging deeper engagement and personal interpretation.

An author can shape a character's identity through the use of distinctive language, which reveals the character's inner life and personality. According to Reaske, a character's personality is often reflected in their language and expressions during interactions with others. Elements such as word choice, tone, and communication style can provide insight into the character's background, values, and relationships, making language a powerful tool in literary characterization. Pickering and Hoepfer explain that authors often use specific word choices to implicitly reveal a character's traits, a technique known as indirect or open characterization. Rather than directly describing a character, the author allows the reader to interpret their personality through meaningful actions, language, or situations that convey underlying messages about the character's nature.

Feminist literary criticism is grounded in feminist theory, which emerged in response to gender-based discrimination that positions women as inferior to men. This bias stems from assumptions that men are inherently different and more dominant in various aspects of life. As Selden et al. state, feminism is a movement that challenges patriarchal culture to achieve gender equality and eliminate gender-based oppression. Feminist literary criticism focuses on analyzing character portrayals in literature to highlight injustices toward women, aiming to promote equality and dismantle patriarchal norms that hinder women's rights. One way to advocate for women's rights is through education—raising awareness among both men and women about the importance of respecting individual rights across all areas of life. Feminism encompasses a variety of movements and ideologies that seek to define, promote, and achieve equality for women in political, economic, cultural, personal, and social domains (Suaidi et al, 2016). It is fundamentally a liberation movement born from the recognition that women have been historically oppressed and marginalized, and therefore must be granted equal rights and opportunities to uphold their dignity and rightful place in society.

Liberal feminism is a key branch of feminist theory that advocates for women's rights through legal and political reform, rooted in the liberalist emphasis on individual freedom, especially in political and economic contexts. Emerging from Western traditions, liberal feminism focuses on ensuring equality of opportunity—where individuals can pursue goals without facing unequal barriers (Tong, 2009). It calls on the state to protect women from violence and uphold their rights, not by equating them with men in every action, but by empowering women to pursue their own choices

freely (Tong, 2009). This perspective recognizes that societal oppression, rather than personal incapacity, often hinders women's independence. While liberal feminists believe that substantial progress has been made, persistent issues such as the gender wage gap and unequal access to education and economic resources continue to obstruct women's full potential. Therefore, liberal feminism continues to advocate for the elimination of legal, political, and social inequalities (Worell, 2001), emphasizing equal representation and individual rights through legislative means.

This study adopts Naomi Wolf's perspective, particularly her "Power Feminism" approach, as part of the liberal feminist framework. While rooted in liberal feminism, Wolf emphasizes the importance of women's empowerment and agency, especially through education and economic independence. She advocates for gender justice by ensuring that women have equal political rights, economic opportunities, and access to education-similar to those enjoyed by men (Tong, 2009). Despite advancements in the 21st century, many women still lack full rights and freedoms in certain social contexts, which highlights the ongoing need to fight for equality and autonomy. According to Hanifah et al., liberal feminism envisions women as individuals with full freedom and independence. In *Fire with Fire*, Wolf argues that gender equality is attainable, but women must overcome internalized fear and reject "victim feminism," which portrays women solely as passive victims. Instead, she urges women to embrace "power feminism," which positions both men and women as equal human beings with intrinsic value. Wolf asserts that patriarchal structures are no longer the primary barrier; rather, it is women's reluctance to claim power and the resistance they face from men unwilling to relinquish it.

Historically, women have been perceived as emotionally driven and physically weaker than men, who are often associated with logic, strength, and leadership. This perception has led to male dominance both in public and domestic spheres, while women have been confined to household roles, suppressing their full potential. A growing awareness of this imbalance has led women to recognize the oppression they face. Naomi Wolf's perspective offers a transformative solution by advocating for power and autonomy. Liberal feminism, as noted by Ansari, focuses on achieving gender equality in public life through legal reforms that ensure equal access to education, fair wages, non-discriminatory employment practices, and improved working conditions. Women increasingly gain access to education, economic participation, and social acceptance in various roles-highlighting progress toward gender equality and reinforcing the core goals of liberal feminism.

Little Women (2019) is an American romantic drama directed by Greta Gerwig, marking the seventh adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel. The film premiered at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City on December 7, 2019, and was distributed by Sony Pictures Releasing. It received widespread critical acclaim and won several Academy Awards. The narrative follows four sisters navigating the challenges of growing up during the 1860s Civil War era in Massachusetts, as they confront societal expectations of womanhood amid financial hardship. The story draws loosely from Alcott's own childhood experiences.

The story begins in 1868 with Jo March pursuing her career as a teacher and novelist in New York. She meets an editor, Mr. Dashwood, who helps her publish a heavily edited story, earning her \$20. Jo resides in a boarding house called "Little Women." Meanwhile, her youngest sister, Amy, is in Paris with Aunt March and attends a party with her childhood friend Laurie. Amy becomes upset with Laurie's drunken behavior and teases him for associating with the wealthy businessman Fred Vaughn. Jo feels hurt and frustrated after receiving critical feedback on her writing from Friedrich, a German professor staying at her boarding house. Upon learning that her sister Beth's health has declined, Jo returns home to Concord, Massachusetts.

Seven years earlier, in 1861 in Concord, Massachusetts, Jo and her older sister Meg attend a party where Jo meets Laurie, the grandson of their neighbor, Mr. Laurence. On Christmas morning, their mother, Marmee, encourages them to share their breakfast with their impoverished neighbor, Mrs. Hummel. Upon returning home, the girls find their table filled with food from Mr. Laurence

and receive a letter from their father, who is serving in the Civil War. Later, Jo visits Aunt March to read to her, and Aunt March promises to take Jo to Europe if she fulfills her responsibilities well.

In 1862, at Mr. Laurence's home, Laurie notices Amy outside after being punished by her teacher and invites her inside before her family arrives. Amy attempts to divert Laurie's attention from Jo to herself, sensing the growing affection between Jo and Laurie when Jo asks Laurie to act in a play she wrote. During a night out with Meg, Jo, Laurie, and John, Amy, feeling jealous, burns Jo's manuscript, which deeply upsets Jo. Amy's apology fails initially, but the following morning she tries to reconcile by chasing Jo to the lake where Jo and Laurie are ice skating. When the ice breaks, Laurie and Jo rescue Amy. That evening, Jo feels remorseful for Amy's accident. Meanwhile, Mr. Laurence invites Beth to play piano at his home, as she reminds him of his deceased daughter.

In 1869, Meg confides her frustration about poverty to her husband John after purchasing fabric they cannot afford, briefly regretting their marriage but ultimately recognizing her happiness with him. Meanwhile, in Paris, Laurie visits Amy to apologize for his behavior at a party and later encourages her to marry Fred Vaughn, whom she ultimately rejects. Amy feels overshadowed by Jo, especially regarding Laurie, who then departs for London. During this time, Beth's health deteriorates, leading to her eventual death. In 1862, at the March family home, Mr. Laurence gifts Beth a piano and discovers she has contracted scarlet fever from the Hummel family. To protect Amy, who has not yet had the illness, she is sent to live with Aunt March. Marmee returns early as Beth's condition worsens, but Beth recovers in time for Christmas, coinciding with their father's homecoming. On Meg's wedding day, Jo urges her to elope, but Meg affirms her happiness in marriage. During the wedding, Aunt March announces her upcoming trip to Europe and chooses to take Amy instead of Jo. Following the wedding, Laurie confesses his love to Jo, but she makes clear she does not reciprocate his feelings.

In 1869, Marmee informs the family that Amy has returned home with her ailing Aunt March. Jo, uncertain if she rejected Laurie prematurely, writes him a letter but ultimately decides against sending it after meeting Laurie, agreeing to remain friends. Jo then begins writing a novel inspired by her and her sisters' lives, submitting early chapters to Mr. Dashwood, who is initially unimpressed. Friedrich visits the March family before departing for California, and the family senses Jo's affection for him, urging her not to let him leave. In New York, Mr. Dashwood's daughters express interest in Jo's story, leading Dashwood to agree to publish it despite concerns about the unmarried heroine. Jo revises the ending to unite the heroine with Friedrich. By 1870, Jo finalizes a publishing deal, and in 1871, she opens a school in Aunt March's house, which has been bequeathed to her. The novel, titled *Little Women*, is finally published.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research method, which involves collecting data qualitatively and presenting the findings descriptively. Qualitative research primarily utilizes text as its main data source. According to Patron and Cochran, the goal of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of various aspects of social life through data generation and analysis (3). In essence, the data is presented in the form of words, phrases, sentences, prologues, dialogues, monologues, quotes, or paraphrases. In summary, this method interprets, analyzes, describes, and summarizes conditions or situations based on data gathered through observations of the research problem. In this study, the primary data source was the movie script, leading the researcher to select Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019) as the object of analysis.

This study utilized two types of data: primary and secondary. The primary data served as the main source, while secondary data provided additional support to strengthen the analysis. Primary data were collected directly from sources related to the research object, specifically from the movie script of *Little Women* (2019) by Greta Gerwig, including dialogues, monologues, and narrations.

Meanwhile, secondary data were gathered from relevant e-books, journals, and articles to complement and support the primary data. The analysis was carried out descriptively, utilizing quotations and supporting references to explore how characterization is portrayed and developed. The research findings are presented in detail in the findings and discussion sections, with additional supporting data provided in the appendix.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the characterization of the main character, Jo March, in the film *Little Women* (2019). The following data illustrate the relationships portrayed in the film through dialogue.

Characterization through dialogue

Characterization through dialogue is a literary technique where the author reveals a character's traits, personality, and background through their speech. As Pickering and Hoepfer explain, characters may express their own traits directly, or their words may offer insights about their character to others in the story (28). Jo March's character is clearly illustrated in the following dialogue.

MARMEE: You are not to attend that school anymore.

JO: Good, that man has always been an idiot.

MARMEE: Jo will teach you.

JO: Me?! I already teach Beth.

MEG: **You're a good teacher.**

The conversation reveals Jo March's intelligence. In the dialogue, Marmee asks Jo to tutor her sister Amy, as Marmee has prohibited Amy from returning to her previous school following an incident. Jo, however, informs her mother that she has already been tutoring their sister Beth. Meanwhile, their older sister Meg supports Marmee's trust in Jo's capability to tutor Amy. This exchange clearly shows that Jo is trusted by her family because of her intelligence. As Reaske notes, "Speaking to others also sheds a great deal of light on a character's personality". In other words, readers gain deeper insight into characters through their speech, manner of speaking, and the responses of others. Beyond her intelligence, Jo also displays a caring and responsible attitude toward her family. She demonstrates empathy and a strong sense of connection with those around her, often prioritizing their needs above her own. This trait is evident in the following dialogue.

JO: Beth? Where is Beth?

Jo turns to Marmee, who shows the truth in her eyes.

MARMEE: She's upstairs. Oh, my Jo. We all thought she was better but the fever had weekend her heart.

Jo produces an envelope full of money.

JO: **Take this and find her the best doctor you can.**

MARMEE: No, you need this money to live in New York.

JO: I'm not going back. I'm using the rest to take her to the sea and get her strong.

She hugs all the women again.

This conversation highlights Jo March's deep concern and sense of responsibility for her family. In the dialogue, Jo gives money to her mother to ensure that her sister Beth can receive the best medical care. Additionally, Jo chooses not to return to New York because she wants to support Beth's recovery and help strengthen her. Jo consistently takes the lead whenever her family faces difficulties, protecting and prioritizing her siblings. She is also willing to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her family, demonstrating her unwavering commitment to them.

Characterization through action

Besides dialogue, a person's character can also be revealed through their actions. As Boggs states, "the best reflection of character can be found in a person's actions" (44). Characterization through action makes characters feel more real and dynamic, as readers observe how they interact with their environment. Jo March's personality is shown through her behaviors and decisions, which become clear in the following dialogue.

Meg, Beth, Jo and Amy are all dressed as men, with hats and spectacles and pipes. Meg reading from the homemade newspaper in her lovely sonorous voice.

MEG: **A new play, written by Miss Jo March**, will appear at the Barnville Theater, in the course of the next few weeks, which will surpass anything ever seen before on the American stage.

JO: Starting the greatest actress from here to the Mississippi River, Miss Meg March.

MEG: Weekly report Meg – Good. Jo – Bad. Beth – Very Good. Amy – Middling.

BETH: Excellent.

AMY: Well done, sirs.

This dialogue reveals Jo March's character through her actions, particularly in relation to her sister. It shows Jo as a creative individual who uses her writing skills to craft a play for them to perform in the coming weeks. Jo possesses a natural talent for writing and dreams of becoming a renowned author. She dedicates many hours to writing stories and plays, using the written word to express her ideas and ambitions.

Characterization through language

Characterization is the process of describing or portraying the nature, personality, or traits of a character in a literary work or oral communication through the use of language. This involves the careful selection of words, style, and speech acts to create a vivid and clear image of the character. It refers to how an author reveals a character's inner life and develops their personality through dialogue and expression. As Reaske states, "A character's personality is described through the use of language and expressions when he speaks to other characters" (48). Jo March's character is revealed through the specific language she uses in her conversations with others, as demonstrated in the following dialogue.

JO: Thank you, Aunt March, for your employment and many kindnesses, **but I intend to make my own way in the world.**

AUNT MARCH: No one makes their own way, not really, least of all a woman. You'll need to marry well.

JO: You are not married Aunt March.

AUNT MARCH: Because I was rich and made sure to keep my money.

JO: So the only way to be an unmarried woman is to be rich.

AUNT MARCH: Yes.

JO: **But there are precious few ways for women to make money.**

Jo March's personality is clearly reflected through her manner of speaking. Her speech reveals that she is principled and self-confident, as she openly disagrees with Aunt March's views. Jo believes that she can carve her own path to success and that women have honorable ways to earn money beyond marrying a wealthy man. This shows that Jo is not easily swayed by others' opinions and possesses a strong sense of self-assurance, enabling her to make decisions that align with her values and principles.

Characterization by authors

A literary technique used to reveal a character's traits is through direct or indirect characterization. "The author describes his character implicitly by using certain words that clearly indicate personal traits" (Pickering and Hoeper, 1981). This can involve explicitly stating the character's nature or offering subtle clues that hint at their personality. In the film *Little Women*, Jo March is portrayed as ambitious, particularly in her pursuit of becoming a writer. This ambition is evident in the following monologue.

Jo makes her way up to the attic, and sits in her old writing chair, looking at the story. She takes a fresh sheet of paper and starts writing.

She writes all night, and into the next day, pilling up page after page. She spreads them out in the attic, like a quilt, building outwards. Candles are lit and re-lit, the sun rises and sets.

Marmee brings her some food and then leaves her alone.

Jo nods off for a second then keeps writing. She revises, she scratches out, she changes orders. She falls asleep on her blanket of papers.

She's re-connected with her childhood, and out of the depths of despair has found hope and inspiration.

Jo finishes and carefully ties up the first few chapters of this experiment and writes a letter to Mr. Dashwood.

In the monologue, Jo March's ambition is clearly demonstrated through her relentless effort to complete a writing project. She spends the entire night and following day revising, editing, and rewriting—an exhausting process that leaves her frustrated yet determined to produce quality work. Her strong ambition eventually leads her to find hope and inspiration, enabling her to carefully draft several chapters and send them, along with a letter, to Mr. Dashwood for publication. Through both dialogue and monologue, the author reveals Jo March's character as intelligent, creative, caring, responsible, and deeply ambitious in her pursuit of becoming a writer.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the characterization of Jo March, the main character in *Little Women* (2019), and reveals her as an intelligent, caring, responsible, creative, confident, and ambitious individual with strong personal principles. These traits are conveyed through various narrative elements, including dialogue, actions, language use, and authorial description. Jo's speech reflects her self-confidence and firm values, particularly in her decision-making and resistance to societal expectations. Her conversations with family members also demonstrate her intellect and deep sense of responsibility, especially in caring for her younger siblings. Additionally, Jo's creativity and talent as a writer are evident in her initiative to write and stage a drama performance with her siblings, aimed at bringing

joy to children in their community. Through these characteristics, Jo March exemplifies a progressive and empowered female figure within the framework of liberal feminism.

Based on Naomi Wolf's theory of *Power Feminism*, a strand of liberal feminism that emphasizes women's strength, independence, and active agency, this study highlights how women must continue to assert their rights in education, expression, and decision-making. Power Feminism promotes the idea that women should no longer be dependent on men and should have equal opportunities in all aspects of life, including education, law, economics, and the social sphere. Although Jo March, the protagonist of *Little Women* (2019), could not access formal education herself, she used her agency and ambition to establish a school, providing educational opportunities for others, especially girls to gain the same rights as boys. Her strong sense of care for others, combined with her ambition, also allowed her to contribute to her family's economy during a difficult period. At a time when women were rarely paid equally to men, Jo March managed to earn a fair wage through her writing, demonstrating her determination to claim her rights. Her actions and character reflect the core values of Power Feminism, as she not only empowered herself but also contributed to broader societal progress, challenging gender-based discrimination and helping other women secure the rights they deserved.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Data analysis, methods, data collection, writing of the original draft, preparation; **Author 2:** Conceptualization, Visualization, Review The final manuscript has been read and approved by all authors; **Author 3:** Visualization, Investigation; **Author 4:** Software, Validation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Ms. Destary Praptawati for her valuable guidance, constructive feedback, and constant encouragement throughout my learning process. I am also deeply grateful to my friends and family for their unwavering support and understanding, which have been a constant source of strength during this journey.

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