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**Cukor's *Little Women* and the Great Depression:
Sacrifice, Morality, and Familial Bliss**

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In his Inaugural Address to the nation on March 4, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said: "We face the arduous days that lie before us in the warm courage of the national unity; with the clear consciousness of seeking old and precious moral values; with the clean satisfaction that comes from the stern performance of duty by old and young alike. We aim at the assurance of a rounded and permanent national life." Speaking to a nation in crisis, Roosevelt urged social mobilization, both at the national and at the individual levels, and a steadfast grip on morality and principle. Interestingly, George Cukor's enormously popular and successful film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, released in this same year, evokes a clear, if subtle, consciousness of this national emergency. Although set during the American Civil War, the

film has profound resonance of the overbearing reality of the time: the Great Depression. The film invokes an emphasis on food, frugality, and conservation, embodies a spirit of activism and social reform, and imbues a nostalgic longing for hearth, home, and familial responsibility and morality. As a result, Cukor's *Little Women* becomes a kind of allegory for the ideal set forth in the nineteen thirties to allay the prevailing fear and poverty: an activist spirit grounded in unbreakable ties to family and community.

The movie opens with a drop shot of the exterior of the March house, but quickly cuts to a scene of a bustling town: horses and carriages, people with baskets, and a shot of a sign above a building reading "U.S. Christian Commission," presumably where Mrs. March, or Marmee (Spring Byington), devotes her time during the day. The U.S. Christian Commission, founded in 1861, "was the nation's first large-scale civilian volunteer service corps" ("YMCA History"). The organization was comprised of over 5,000 volunteers who served as surgeons, nurses, and chaplains, who distributed supplies and educated soldiers. In the film, the building is swarming with women and soldiers, including a soldier with an amputated leg. We see Marmee, who is clearly in a position of authority as she is asked for her signature, generously give money and clothing to a decrepit, patriotic old man who has lost his sons to the war. She says: "When I see things like that poor old man, it

makes me ashamed to think of how little I do," immediately invoking a sense of charity and duty.¹ This scene is entirely an invention and does not occur in Alcott's book, which begins with the four girls in the house discussing the dismal prospects of Christmas. The addition of this scene in Cukor's film functions in an interesting way to bridge the March home with the outside world: it serves to make a connection between the events and aspirations of the girls' lives with a sense of a larger, more charitable, and nobler purpose.²

Patriotic elements, in fact, weave their way through many facets of the 1933 version of *Little Women*. After Marmee reads to her daughters a letter from her husband, who is fighting for the Union troops, there is a close-up on each of the girl's faces, revealing and intensifying their guilt of "not doing enough" at home for their country. Although in both of the other two versions of *Little Women* (1949 and 1994) Jo (June Allyson and Wynona Ryder respectively) has the tomboyish impulse to want to fight with her father, the pervading sense of guilt and duty is most intense in Cukor's film. Here, Jo (Katharine Hepburn) says she wishes to rid herself of her "tomboyish qualities" and become more like the little woman her father describes. There is also an interesting distinction between Mervyn LeRoy's 1949 version and Cukor's version in the scene when Aunt March gives the girls each a dollar to spend on themselves for Christmas. In the former, the girls gleefully

rush out and buy themselves little trinkets (a new hat, some perfume, etc.), reflecting the post World War II consumer confidence, while in the latter, they agonizingly debate as to whether it would be right to spend the money on themselves. Beth (Jean Parker) softly says as she is handed her money from Jo, "Marmee said we shouldn't spend money for pleasure when our men are fighting in the war." In the end, they buy surprise gifts for their mother instead of themselves, reflecting the emphasis on self-sacrifice in the Depression era.

A sense of thrift and a heightened appreciation for food and material things is noticeable in many aspects of the film. For example, in all three versions, the girls are excited to see the bountiful Christmas breakfast when they arrive at the table that morning; however, in Cukor's film, they *shriek* with delight. Ecstatic, shrill reactions are seen at the sight of other material things, such as when Beth receives the piano from Mr. Laurence (Henry Stephenson). Whereas in Gillian Armstrong's 1994 version, for instance, the reaction about the piano is much more subdued, and Beth (Claire Danes) and her family tenderly weep with joy, the March sisters in the 1933 film seem to go ecstatically wild over food, clothing, and other material goods. As Cukor comments, "Walter Plunkett designed the clothes with a great sense of the family—the girls were poor but high-minded, and it was arranged that one of them would wear a certain dress at a certain time, and then another would borrow a skirt and jacket, and so on.

The frugality was very real” (Lambert 76). The emphasis on clothing can be seen most poignantly in the party scene, when the four girls go to a dance with Laurie (Douglas Montgomery). In Alcott’s novel, Meg sprains her ankle and Laurie generously offers to take her and Jo home in his carriage, a proposition that Jo reluctantly accepts. In Cukor’s film, Meg (Frances Dee) does not hurt herself and the focus is shifted to Jo: after she spills food all over herself on the stairs, all the girls are whisked away from the party. Therefore, an “emergency” of a sprained ankle is transformed into an “emergency” of spoiled clothes and wasted food, reflecting a cultural obsession with the preservation of material things.

At the time of the movie’s release, the nation was undergoing a tide of revolutionary social changes. The New Deal, a concept born in Roosevelt’s 1932 campaign for the presidency and put into action early in 1933, brought many changes and reforms into American life, such as the governmental regulation of banks with the Glass-Steagall act of June, 1933, and the creation of the Federal Deposits Insurance Committee (Schlesinger 66). During the following years, Americans saw the advent of the Works Progress Administration, which provided job relief to thousands of the unemployed, and the Social Security Act, which promised long-term financial security after retirement. “What was the New Deal? It was of a piece with the oldest aspirations of the Republic, beginning with ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness,' an experiment in promoting the greatest good of the greatest number" (Schlesinger 57). Although it did have its strong dissenters, the general public, who received regular reassurance from Roosevelt's fireside chats, supported the New Deal and its socialist policies. And despite Americans' tenacious belief in individualism,

this worldwide drift toward socialization had not failed to register its effect upon American life. In January, 1929, for example, the Commission on the Social Studies on the American Historical Association, representing various points of view, set to work upon a sweeping inquiry under the conviction that trends of deep import were stirring in the nation's social and educational system, the majority holding that the American people were moving toward greater democracy and collectivism. (58)

Cukor's film strongly exemplifies the nation's attitudes and the general esprit of social reform of the early 1930s. For instance, when Marmee walks into the house on Christmas morning, she tells her daughters of a starving family in the community. Albeit reluctant at first, the girls willingly decide to give up their breakfast over which a few moments before they had squealed with delight. The film shows them administering their generosity at the rundown

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home of this family, including a prolonged shot of Beth cradling one of the infants, signifying the profound effect that the March family's act of "mothering" is having on the community at large.

Their act of benevolence is reciprocated, as later in the day they find themselves presented with even more delicious food than they had given out that morning, given to them by the Laurence family who heard of their kind act. And interestingly, Cukor's film is the only version of the three that shows the actual performance (and not just the bantering rehearsal) of Jo's play to the little girls of their town, again emphasizing the importance of community service and neighborliness. In an age when the "family as an institution took a fearful beating" and desertions, alcoholism, and fruitless migration were on the rise (Bernstein 20), *Little Women* gave a hopeful picture of family bonds and communal creative energy that lead to stability.

Despite the film's progressive qualities and its continual embodiment of social outreach, it has the perpetual tendency to bring inward everything that is done and to center all of the important action around the hearth and home. Cukor, who read the novel only shortly before he began working on the film, said:

When I came to read it, I was startled. It's not sentimental or saccharine, but very

strong-minded, full of character and a wonderful picture of New England family life. It's full of that admirable New England sternness, about sacrifice and austerity.

(Lambert 75)

In this statement, Cukor reveals that his interpretation of the novel rests on the juxtaposition of "sacrifice" and "family life," that the two are somehow inextricably intertwined and dependent on each other. Images of the tightly-knit family are abundant in the film: the huddling together as one mass when Marmee reads her husband's letter; the sewing circle in which the March women reminisce about the olden days when they used to play *Pilgrim's Progress*; the framing of the girls in an unbroken row as they walk the wintry streets of Concord. As Pat Kirkham and Sarah Warren notice, "[t]he emphasis on a happy Christmas in 1933, even a Christmas with less abundance than usual, works as a nostalgic device and offers a respite from the hardships of contemporary life. Family solidarity also can be interpreted as representing a desirable bulwark against the tough times of the 1930s" (84). The emphasis in Cukor's film is not only on personal sacrifice but also on sacrifice to preserve family unity.

The film (which is shot almost entirely in natural daylight or under the warm glow of the lamp, candle, or flickering fire, relaying its almost incandescent optimism) unsurprisingly downplays family conflict present in Alcott's

novel and in the 1994 film version. Cukor's film omits, for instance, Amy's burning of Jo's book and minimizes the two sisters' frequent clashes in the novel to a couple of instances of absurd bickering toward the beginning of the movie. There is no hint in the film of the March family's capacity for betrayal or of Jo's capacity for passionate anger as when she icily vociferates in the novel, "I shall never forgive you" (Alcott 69). In Armstrong's version, we watch Amy's pain from being intentionally excluded by her sisters from the ball; we then watch in horror Jo's beloved story, which Amy has thrown into the fire, burn to ashes. This action is a powerful symbol of destruction and vengeance, and is followed by a scene of intense anger as Jo violently shakes Amy in her bed. Cukor's film omits this conflict altogether and, instead, chooses to focus on the family's deep and unbreakable bonds, always framing sisters within close proximity of each other, usually in one grouping or in a tight circle.

Interestingly, Jo, with her independent-mindedness and "hoydenish" qualities, as one critic put it (Dickens 51), seems to stretch and bend the tight fabric of the March family unit, particularly in the early part of the film. She is frequently framed at the top of the screen, as in the letter reading scene (it is interesting that in the 1994 version, her dominance is not so central, as Jo is placed towards the bottom of this arrangement). Stairs are used repeatedly throughout the film, and Jo is almost without fail in the dominant position, such as in the

repartee between Jo and Aunt March, when she is trying to escape doing more housework. And in a scene when the March women huddle around the piano, singing a Christian hymn, Jo stands at the right of the screen, markedly apart from the rest of her family. Of the four sisters, Jo is the only one who leaves the home to pursue a career: Amy (Joan Bennett), although she goes to Europe, travels with Aunt March (Edna Mae Oliver) with the unsaid mission to find a rich husband; Meg marries John (John Davis Lodge) and moves no more than a mile or two from her house; and Beth, on her deathbed, likens herself to a “cricket, chirping contentedly on the hearth, never able to bear the thought of leaving home.” And Beth, of course, never leaves the home.

Yet, that said, there is a swooping return to the home at the end of the film. Amy comes back from Europe with a rich husband, Laurie (Douglas Montgomery), Meg gives birth to twins, and Jo, when she learns of Beth’s illness, immediately departs from New York and tends to her dying sister. The scene of Beth’s death marks a significant shift for Jo’s character: kneeling beside Beth at her bed, nestled in her breast, Jo is framed pronouncedly lower than her sister, perhaps suggesting a grounding of her lofty ideals and individual ambitions back to her home and family. Although Beth says of Jo, “You’ve always reminded me of a seagull—strong and wild, and fond of the wind and storm, dreaming of flying far out to sea,” after this

point in the film, there is no more taking flight for Jo. When Laurie returns a married man and finds Jo sleeping in the attic, they are clearly made to appear adult-like and tamed, Laurie with his debonair moustache and Jo with her hair primly turned up. Jo says:

We can never be boy and girl again, Laurie. Those happy old times can't come back. And we shouldn't expect them to. We are man and woman now. We can't be playmates any longer. But we can be brother and sister—to love and help one another all the rest of our lives, can't we now.

Jo, as Beth suggests has flown away, but has perched back on the March home. She solemnly dedicates herself to her family, new members and old, in this scene. And in the last scene of the movie, when Professor Bhaer returns and shyly proposes to Jo, Cukor clearly demonstrates the end of her independence and the restoration of family unity. Huddled under an umbrella, standing on the doorstep of the March home, Jo fills what Bhaer calls his “empty hands” (a dialogue and gesture not in Alcott’s novel, but a powerful one that is imitated almost exactly in both the 1949 and 1994 versions). Marmee then opens the door, warm light and soft chatter radiating from the inside where the entire March family is present, including Jo’s father, and welcomes the couple.³

Many critics have argued that the vast majority of

films produced during the Depression were of an “escapist” nature; that is, they denied that the overbearing hardships of the times even existed. Charles R. Hearn, for example, notes:

It is worth adding in passing that the desire for escape. . . is nowhere better illustrated than in the typical movies of the decade. Frederick Lewis Allen has said that “the America which the movies portrayed—like the America of popular magazine fiction and especially of the magazine advertisement—was devoid of real poverty or discontent, of any real conflict between owners and workers, of any real ferment of ideas. . .” Others who have commented on the movies of the thirties have found few exceptions to Allen’s generalization that most films so successfully dodged the unpleasant realities of the day that they would not convey to later viewers the faintest indication that the nation experienced a crisis in the thirties. (78)

In the case of Cukor’s *Little Women*, at least, Allen’s statement would seem incorrect. It is true that initially, elements of the 1933 *Little Women* seem to contradict each other. As many scholars have noticed, although the Marches claim to live in poverty, they seem to live in splendor—a large house that is gorgeously furnished inside with

crystal vases, spacious rooms, fine china, paintings, and plush sofas. Shirley Marchalonis notes that “the March family’s unity and homemade pleasures do indeed contrast favorably with the harsh modern horrors of grim bread lines and Hoovervilles” (260). Also, although Cukor makes a point to shuffle the girls’ clothes between each other, Kirkham and Warren observe that “Walter Plunkett’s costumes serve to prettify both the wearers and the poverty they were supposed to be enduring...there is little sense from the dress, particularly that of Amy and Meg, that being poor is even irksome to the process of looking attractive” (85). And although the March family is seen giving to the poor, as on Christmas morning, they frequently have access to the pleasures of high society: the girls attend a glamorous ball, Amy travels to Europe, and Jo enjoys an elegant trip to the opera in New York.

At times, Cukor even gives us images of a pastoral life of leisure. For instance, before Marmee receives the telegram with the news of her husband’s injury, the March family lounges outside on the lawn, drinking tea and laughing. The scene opens with a shot of Amy’s painting and then cuts to the March family, suggesting that they are somehow living in a dream world. Yet, all that said, the audience, even a contemporary one, is starkly aware of the “unpleasant realities of the day,” even though Hearn asserts that the movies “would not convey to later viewers the faintest indication that

the nation experienced a crisis" (78). Kirkham and Warren hint at this incredible dynamic of Cukor's *Little Women*, explaining:

Despite the "realism," little of the biting poverty of the 1860s or the 1930s is depicted. The ways the film deals with poverty and longing for better times suggest there is no simple relationship between the film and the Depression; the relationship between the two also needs to be understood in terms of the 'escapism' of romance, humour, and visual pleasures offered by this costume drama. . . (84)

However, although Kirkham and Warren term the film's general ambiance "escapism," it seems more appropriate to label these elements of the film "nostalgic." Rather than being an unresolvable contradiction, the oscillation between poverty and luxury represents a key dialectical pull in the 1930s. *Little Women* is not, as Allen generalizes, "devoid of any real poverty or discontent." The movie is not a fanciful retreat into the sugary desires of a bereft American public but a representation of both the very real hardships that arose from the Depression and the power that people perceived could come out of the "unity," the "old and precious moral values," and the "stern performance of duty" that Roosevelt so persuasively called for at the advent of his social programs. Cukor's *Little Women* arises not out of a wish to escape the pressing

realities of the day but out of the tenacious belief that, with unity and family, America could become again what it once was: secure and plentiful.

This is the paradox of Cukor's film. It not only displays the economic sufferings of the people of the thirties but also embodies the unflinching desire for social change and action as well. The synthesis of these two themes—hardship and relief—coupled with an unfailing adherence to family ties, results in a picture (however nostalgic or sentimental) of supreme happiness, human betterment, and social progression. Aunt March, as she naggingly criticizes Jo's father, says: "It isn't preachers that are going to win this war; it's fighters." The March family continually imbues this spirit of action rather than passivity; by fighting to preserve what they deem most sacred—family, community, and unity—the characters of Cukor's *Little Women* come alive as representatives of the hope and determination of the era in which the film was produced.

Notes

- 1 This observation, as with several of my subsequent observations, parallels much of the thinking of Pat Kirkham and Sarah Warren in "Four *Little Women*: Three films and a novel" (see Works Cited page for full bibliographical reference). Unfortunately, I discovered the essay late in my research and so could not incorporate it into the analysis of the first part of my paper.
- 2 All film quotations are taken from Cukor's 1933 version of *Little Women*.
- 3 The domestication of Jo at the end of the movie has many more far-reaching feministic implications than the nature of this paper can allow me to discuss at length. Jo, for instance, who toward the beginning of the film downplays the importance of gloves, insisting to Meg that wearing crumpled, lemonade-stained ones to Laurie's party is perfectly fine, is seen later in the movie at the opera, sporting two crisp, white gloves on hands that now so delicately embrace opera glasses. Also, while at the onset Jo is staunchly enthusiastic about adventure and action stories, she absolutely melts at the sound of Prof. Bhaer's melancholy, sentimental voice as he sings in German at the piano. In addition, when she returns from New York to tend to Beth, she is framed behind an ironing board, wearing a white

apron and cap, and busily engaged in her work. She is domesticated and tamed here, and clearly happy to be so. All these matters, however compelling, demand a separate or longer paper to do them justice.

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