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From Classic Novel to Broadway Musical Production:
An Examination of *Little Women* as an Adaptation
Meghan Skiles
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“Louisa May Alcott’s autobiographical story of growing up during and after the Civil war in a house dominated by women was ripe for a musical makeover, its themes of sisterhood and female empowerment providing an automatic connect for women of all ages” (Rooney 58). So writes David Rooney in his review of Allan Knee’s 2005 musical adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. The rest of his review, however, expresses a rather negative opinion of the show. While he praises the performances of actors such as Sutton Foster and Maureen McGovern, he writes that Knee’s book has a number of “deficiencies” and weaknesses that are unforgivable. He calls the score bland, and says that while the production is “amiable and tasteful enough, it’s a little wan and not entirely absorbing” (Rooney 58). Another review compares watching the musical to “being married to a schizophrenic: You’re with a person you’ve known for years to be sweet, intelligent, vivacious, honest, and tenderly empathetic; then suddenly, out of nowhere, that person begins running around and screaming at you in dementia” (Feingold 67). Zachary Pincus-Roth, however, writes that the show has been compared “to other recent musicals popular with young girls,” praises its poignant themes, songs and relevance, and refers to it as “a mother-and-daughter must-see,” (Pincus-Roth 64). Such mixed reviews of the Broadway musical seem odd. Alcott’s original *Little Women*, on the other hand, is constantly referred to as a “beloved novel,” and a classic work of literature. It is read by young women, passed along to their daughters, and has survived with surprising popularity since its initial publication in the mid-nineteenth century. How then, can such a beloved classic receive such varying reactions when taken to the stage as a musical? The field of adaptation studies can provide an interesting lens through which to view this dilemma. By examining critical works on the adaptation of novels and classic literature to visual mediums such as film and theatre, one can achieve a firmer grasp on the factors that make an adaptation, and particularly a musical adaptation, successful or unsuccessful. In the case of *Little*

Women, the musical, upon first glance, does not appear to be a successful adaptation. Examination of Knee's *Little Women* through the lens of adaptation studies would support this, for the musical adaptation leaves out many important plot points, thematic messages, and character development details that are central to Alcott's original work. The value of the musical is evident when one moves past these alterations and focuses instead on the context of musical in the modern world and the importance of continuing the novel's legacy into the modern day.

Little Women, by Louisa May Alcott, has been the basis for countless adaptations that have made their way into popular culture. Adaptations of this classic novel range from films to stage shows to operas, because of its timeless nature. "Alcott's work thrived in popular culture," writes Nancy McCabe, "inspiring movies and TV adaptations, musicals, operas, and anime. It's been translated into more than fifty languages and spawned the usual catalogues of merchandise—t-shirts, magnets, puzzles, notecards, dolls, diaries. 'For a century,' writes Ann Douglas, 'American middle-class girls read all of Louisa May Alcott's books for children simply as a part of being young, and of growing up'" (McCabe 207). Barbara Lupack theorizes on this, saying that "although in today's market blockbusters like *Titanic* or *Jurassic Park* have become the cinematic norm, there continues to be an interest in adaptations based on the works of writers of an earlier age, especially the novels of nineteenth-century women" (Lupack 7). She believes that this is because, "numbed by brutal action movies aimed at teen-age boys, audiences are hungry for the classics. An aging, educated population wants to escape into the more universal themes of love and family, ambition and power," which Alcott's *Little Women* exemplifies (7). In other words, people are drawn toward classic women's fiction in movies and popular culture because, with all of the action and war movies that are so popular in today's media, people want to escape to more comforting and personal themes. Because they often present well-developed characters, strong

women, and timeless plots, classic novels by female writers present the type of escape people are looking for.

Unique adaptations of Alcott's *Little Women* include publications such as *The Louisa May Alcott Cookbook*, published in 1985, containing a number of recipes based off dishes that appear in the novel; *A Louisa May Alcott Diary*, published in 1987, containing miscellaneous quotes, dates, and activities pertaining to *Little Women*; and *Louisa May Alcott's Little Women Paper Dolls*, printed in 1981, with dolls that looked like loose interpretations of the characters from the story (Delamar 171-2). These examples represent frivolous marketing schemes rather than any type of respectable literary adaptation, but they play significant roles as modes of sustaining the popularity of a canonical text and its presence in modern popular culture. On the more literary side, Alcott's *Little Women* has also been adapted into a variety of play scripts, dating back to the 1870's, mere years after the novel was originally published (173). The fact that Alcott's *Little Women* was so quickly adapted into play scripts is evidence of how immediately beloved and successful the novel was following its publication. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, play adaptations were very common and, although Louisa May Alcott never wrote any herself, she was aware that such performances were taking place (173). The first Broadway production of the novel, titled "*Little Women: A Comedy in Four Acts*," premiered in 1912 (174). Critics called it a wonderful, "long-deferred tribute to the dramatic element in her gifted nature" (174). In addition to stage play scripts, adaptations in the form of radio scripts and recordings were also created in the mid-twentieth century, with mildly enthusiastic reception from the public.

Delamar writes that "radio, and even Broadway productions, reached some people, but the real focus of adaptations that delighted young and old with the exploits of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy were on film" (178). This is to say that, although all of the various existing adaptations of the novel

achieved a certain level of success, film adaptations contained something special that sparked the interest of the public in a way that previous adaptations never achieved. By moving the classic story of the March family to the big screen, the characters were embodied for a large public audience in a way that captured the girls in action and made them much more tangible and realistic. The first significant film adaptation of *Little Women* was released in 1933 by RKO Studios, with Katharine Hepburn starring as Jo. As Delamar says, it was “almost immediately called a ‘screen classic,’” and it received many awards (178). Although it has its flaws, such as some serious casting issues including a pregnant, 20-year-old Joan Bennet playing 12-year-old Amy, the public seemed to love it, likely due to its themes of “unity and homemade pleasures” in stark contrast to the realities of the depression (Marchalonis 260). The next major film adaptation was released in 1949 by Metro Pictures, and “was essentially a remake of Cukor’s film” from 1933 (260). Marchalonis explains that this version used the same musical score and “Christmas-card settings,” making the film remarkably similar to the previous film. She also explains that, “the film tried to be faithful to such an extent to Alcott’s text that critics complained ‘The sentiment is too meticulously preserved in the picture, a bit out of joint for our times’ (Variety 23 Feb. 1949)” (260). In other words, the adaptation remained so faithful to the original that it became foreign in the modern world. Along those lines, Marchalonis believes that the film adaptation most faithful to the text is the 1970 BBC version of *Little Women*, which is “much longer than the earlier Hollywood versions; it includes all the events of the plot, somewhat rearranged” (261). The most recent film adaptation is Columbia Pictures’ 1994 production, starring a number of big names such as Winona Ryder, Claire Danes, Kirsten Dunst, and Christian Bale (261). Undeniably the most popular of the *Little Women* adaptations, critics have said that this version has an “at-times

jarringly modern feminist slant,” and tends to try too hard to modernize the story, but is pleasantly unique in many other ways (261).

Marchalonis sums up the overarching reactions to all of the film adaptations in the following quote:

The films... combine both parts of Alcott’s best-known work [*Little Women* and *Good Wives*], although—given the necessity of compression and rearrangement when a novel is adapted—they tend to pick and choose from the second. The early Hollywood versions, for instance, are as true to the details of the narrative as the films’ length permits, but generally they omit a great deal from the second part, *Good Wives*, focusing there on moments that make drama, such as Beth’s death and Jo’s experiences in New York. (258)

In other words, Marchalonis is saying that the limitations created by the acceptable length of a film, force film artists to choose which elements of the novel they want to focus on for the movie adaptation. With only a short window of time to work with, they generally stay as faithful to the text as they can, while focusing on the elements that create drama, or keep an audience’s attention, and cutting out less significant, more mundane aspects of the plot. Although this creates prominent plot holes and causes writers to cut important small details out of the story, it is a necessary sacrifice due to the essential compression that comes with a movie adaptation.

The regular reoccurrence of adaptations of Alcott’s *Little Women* prove its significance and its relevance in the modern world. “The extant versions of *Little Women* demonstrate not only how Louisa May Alcott’s classic story of American girlhood has endured but also how the period piece has been reshaped to reflect contemporary tastes and concerns,” writes Barbara Tapa Lupack in the introduction to her anthology of essays on film adaptation (Lupack 10). This is to say that,

although Louisa May Alcott wrote *Little Women* in the 1860s, a time drastically different from the modern day, the continuous return to Alcott's heartwarming story shows that the themes and concepts expressed through the story of the March sisters remains relevant to this day. People relate to the girls' experiences and relationships, take those elements of the story, and apply them to their own lives, remolding and reshaping the stories and the experiences to more intimately relate them to their own lives. Beverly Clark Lyon points out the elusive qualities that make Alcott's *Little Women* so timeless when she says,

... it says something when the one item a child saves while fleeing the Chicago fire in 1871 is a copy of *Little Women*. Or when a producer labors for eight years to obtain permission to mount a stage production of *Little Women*, a century ago, and then labors to find a theater manager willing to host it— and the result is a hit Broadway show. Or when a producer similarly labors to persuade film executives, two decades ago, until she becomes one herself and produces a successful film version. (6)

Alcott's novel is significant because of the sentimental value that people attach to the story. It is by no means the most exciting or thrilling tale of all time; in fact, a major part of the charm of Alcott's *Little Women* is that it is so mundane and so realistic. Despite the surface mediocrity of the story, and indeed because of this, people tend to develop an intense personal attachment to the story and the characters in it.

Because of the sentimental attachment so many people have to Alcott's *Little Women*, and its relevance in the modern world, it is no surprise that the story has been adapted over the years into not only film adaptations and theatrical adaptations, but musical adaptations as well. In her book on the afterlife of *Little Women* and its modern significance, Beverly Clark Lyon writes that

she has found evidence of at least 12 musical adaptations of *Little Women*, not including an opera based off Alcott's life and a musical version of one of her sensational stories such as her operatic tragedies from the novel (Lyon 152). In addition to many earlier, lesser-known musical adaptation productions, *Little Women* made its way to the New York stage in the early 2000s as a Broadway musical. With a book by Allan Knee, lyrics by Mindi Dickstein, and music by Jason Howland, this modern musical opened at the Virginia Theatre on Broadway on January 25, 2005. This brand new musical starred Sutton Foster, a rising star on Broadway who broke through as Millie in "Thoroughly Modern Millie" a few years prior, along with singer Maureen McGovern and a cast of eight other talented Broadway actors and actresses. While the production did not run for a very long time, audience reception of the Broadway adaptation was overall very positive. With *Little Women's* long history of adaptations, the work of adaptation theorists and critics becomes a useful tool with which to evaluate such modern reproductions of a work from over a century ago.

Adaptation, or the act of changing a work (a movie, book, play, etc.) so that it can be presented in a different form, is a difficult and complex process. When adapting a work of art from one medium to another, the adaptor runs into many difficult tasks. By looking at the process of adapting literature into movies and films, it becomes easier to then look at the difficulties that come with adapting literature into theatrical presentation. The problem with adaptation is that it is difficult to agree on what makes an adaptation successful. Is it the audience's reception to the adaptation? Is it a strict faithfulness to the original work? How much liberty does an adaptor have to change the story and alter important elements of the original writer's work? "Changes are *inevitable* from the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium," writes George Bluestone, a forerunner in adaptation theory, but to what extent these changes are acceptable remains a question (Bluestone 5). Time constraints, tense, discourse, and fidelity are some of the

primary aspects of literature that are tested in the adaptation process. Each of these areas creates a need for changes such as the ones to which Bluestone is referring. They present complications that the adaptor is forced to grapple with throughout the entire adaptation process, because these changes help determine the validity of a work of adaptation.

When adapting a novel into a visual medium, one of the first issues the adaptor faces is the issue of length. Novels can have hundreds of pages, and the reader has the opportunity to finish the book on their own time. As George Bluestone writes, “a fifty-hour novel has the advantage of being able to achieve a certain density... simply because the reader has lived with it longer” (Bluestone 50). By this, he means that the reader has the opportunity to get familiar with the book. The reader can develop personal connections and become familiar with the characters and the world in which they live. Since it “allows stops and starts, thumbing back, skipping, flipping ahead, and so lets the reader set his own pace, a novel can afford diffuseness where the film [or other visual medium] must economize” (50). In other words, the writer has the freedom to take his time and spread out his information and details throughout the course of the entire novel, however long that may be. The visual medium, on the other hand, must attempt to fit a similar amount of information into a much shorter amount of time. “Audiences do not like to sit for more than four hours,” so the filmmaker or playwright must condense, picking and choosing what to take from the novel and what to leave behind in translation (Griffith 67).

Tense also poses a problem, because, as Bluestone says, “The novel has three tenses; the film has only one” (Bluestone 48). He goes on to explain that the three tenses are: the chronological duration of the reading, or the time it takes the reader to finish the book, the chronological duration of the narrator’s time, or the period of time in which the narrator tells the story, and the chronological span of the narrative events, or the time period over which the story takes place (49).

When reading a novel, readers accept the fact that they are in a fictional world, and suspend disbelief in order to accept authority of convention so that the three chronologies may harmonize (49). Films and other visual mediums are much less likely to have such an advantage, because there is generally no tense. “Pictures have no tenses,” writes James Griffith. “They show only the present—they cannot express either a past or future tense. The novel renders the illusion of space by going from point to point in time; the film renders time by going from point to point in space” (Griffith 22). In other words, because the visual medium uses sight and picture to convey itself, there is only the present. This becomes an issue when adapting a novel that utilizes all three of the tenses presented by Bluestone, because it can be difficult if not impossible to translate those elements of the novel into a visual form.

Discourse is yet another difficulty that comes with the task of adaptation. One of the most identifying qualities of a novel is its capability and tendency to use discursive methods. The author or narrating voice has the option to write a side commentary on the happenings of the book. The book may provide insight into the characters’ internal thoughts, emotions, or opinions. Because of its nature, the novel has the ability to utilize such methods, providing a much rounder understanding of the story, the characters, and the authors. “But the film, being a presentational medium (except for its use of dialogue),” writes Bluestone, “cannot have direct access to the power of discursive forms. Where the novel discourses, the film must picture” (Bluestone 47). The film, or other visual medium, must use images instead of words, which can create difficulties. It is difficult to *show* an important section of discourse when it was intended to be read. Similarly, it is difficult to show the internality of a character without being able to use the words of the author who created the character in the first place and who knows the character better than anyone else

does. Bluestone explains this, saying, “The film, then, cannot render the attributes of thought (metaphor, dream, memory)” (Bluestone 50).

Possibly the most contested issue within adaptation studies is the issue of fidelity, or faithfulness to the original work. Because of the nature of the different mediums, there are bound to be changes and discrepancies between the original work and the adaptation. Scenes may be cut, characters altered, important events glossed over, timelines changed; in other words, any number of changes might occur. This becomes an issue particularly when the work being adapted to a new medium is a highly respected work of literature such as *Little Women*. Audiences have specific ideas and expectations of how the work should be adapted and what should or should not be included in the adaptation. How, then, does an artist create a successful adaptation? To what extent must the adaptation remain true to the original, and what are the effects of the changes that the adaptor chooses to make? Can an adaptation between mediums be successful at all? James Griffith explains the old ideology, saying, “If one assumes that art involves an inseparable relationship of form and content, and if one proceeds from such an assumption to define an art according to its medium, then the issue of film adaptations of novels becomes a very simple matter: the adaptation cannot be the same thing” (Griffith 30). In other words, some critical views suggest that the form of a work, such as the literary nature of a novel, must be inextricably linked to the content to constitute as art. If this is true, then there is no such thing as a successful adaptation. Griffith, however, does not agree with this sentiment. Rather, he submits to the George Bluestone’s argument that,

What happens, therefore, when the filmist undertakes the adaptation of a novel, given the inevitable mutation, is that he does not convert the novel at all. What he adapts is a kind of paraphrase of the novel—the novel viewed as raw

material. He looks not to the organic novel, whose language is inseparable from its theme, but to characters and incidents which have somehow detached themselves from language and, like the heroes of folk legends, have achieved a mythic life of their own.” (Griffith 22)

Since one cannot capture the original novel in its exactitude, one must separate the novel as an art form from its original medium as a literary text. The writing is the most essential part of what makes a novel a novel. Rather than trying to preserve the novel entirely, the adaptor must find the essence of the novel, the organic material hiding under the linguistic element of the novel, and work to convey that. Doing this, Griffith believes, does not necessarily compromise the integrity of the novel. “Clearly,” writes Griffith, “fidelity entails fidelity to effects rather than details. The filmmaker can omit or alter some details... and still maintain the final effect of the novel” (Griffith 73). In other words, the novel can be adequately and successfully conveyed through a film or visual medium, even with the changes that are inevitably made in the adaptation process. Changes are acceptable and indeed expected, but as long as the adaptor maintains the effect, or the essence of the novel, some alterations and omissions are acceptable and expected.

Bluestone would support Griffith’s argument about the acceptability of changes to an adaptation, for he believes that, regardless of the criticism they may receive, the filmmaker or adaptor has every right to make slight alterations. “Taking liberties does not necessarily impair the quality of the film,” writes Bluestone, “whatever one may think of the novel” (Bluestone 5). Griffith goes further, drawing on the authority of Coleridge to argue that “a certain quantum of difference is essential,” for to have an identical copy would be defective.

That is, an imitation tries to capture some qualities of the object without perversely trying to capture them all. For instance, a still-life painting or a poem

may pleasantly suggest the color and ripeness of an apple, but without tempting us to bite into the canvas or page; on the other hand, a copy such as a piece of wax fruit may tempt us to taste it, but if fooled, we are put off by the wax taste and disgusted with the apple as, perhaps, kitsch decoration. In the case of adaptations, the deductively abstract critics who emphasize the medium agree with Coleridge that the written work need not taste like an apple, but they insist that the film adaptation taste like ink. An inductive method encourages a more consistent critical attitude: an imitation, even if it adapts a prior imitation, should be judged by the choices it embodies and not forced to copy the prior choices. (Griffith 40)

If an artist tries to re-render another artist's work too exactly, he ends up creating a mere copy of the original, which is not only unimpressive but also somewhat perverse, or corrupt. The goal is not to trick the audience into believing that the adaptation *is* the original, but rather to convey they general essence of the original in a new way. Griffith is reproaching the critics who believe that a visual adaptation should try to capture the literary element of a novel, because a visual medium is simply intrinsically different from a written medium. The adaptation, he believes, should be judged for its artistic decisions and its ability to embody the raw material of the work from which it stems.

Although there are many difficulties that come with adapting a novel to a visual medium, there are also advantages. When it comes to visual mediums, there are many more studies pertaining to film adaptation than there are studies pertaining to theatrical adaptations. Theatrical adaptations are live performances while film is heavily reworked and edited, and in many cases, this makes filmmakers' tasks seem a lot easier. They can film a scene multiple times, pick the best take, and go back to use editing technologies to perfect the shot. Theatrical adaptations do not have

these same advantages. They can, however, allow viewers to connect personally with the story. “A theme, character, storyline, or place may so capture us that we want to share the discovery with others,” explains Vincent Murphy (Murphy 5). It “allows us to share a discovered story in the unique way that only live performance can, bringing the story-tellers and audience together for the experience” (5). This is an advantage because the playwright, when adapting the story, can play into the emotions of the audience and count on some level of connection there. Because live theatre brings the storytellers, or the performers, and the audience together in the same room, the theatrical production has an element of connection that a movie or film production cannot capture. Laera elaborates this a little, saying that “A writer takes a thought and compresses it into an image that’s then compressed further by the director and then further by the actors and designer, and then that expands out into the audience again” (Laera 266). This is to say that, although the playwright experiences the same difficulties of trying to compress and shorten the novel, he has the connection with the audience who is able to expand the compressions back into full ideas while connecting with human beings on the stage.

Theatre also allows some advantages when it comes to being able to work through some of the difficulties a filmmaker experiences when trying to present the important discursive elements of a novel in a visual medium. For example, novels generally include “internal conflicts, many of which are reflected through consciousness and depicted in internal monologues” (McDougal 46). Writers of novels have the ability to take extended periods to go into detail about character’s inner thoughts and monologues. As Bluestone says, the film has more difficulty rendering attributes of thought such as metaphor, dream, and memory (Bluestone 50). Musical theatre presents an interesting advantage here, by often utilizing song to present such discourses. A key element of musical theatre is that the musical utilizes song and dance to advance the plot,

but another purpose that the musical numbers serve is to express the characters' thoughts and emotions in ways that are not as possible through dialogue. A song can convey a mood without even using words, and the addition of lyrics provides a completely new dimension to a show or scene. "What's really, really central," writes Laera, "is that all theatre is adaptation. Every time one makes a process of theatre – you're adapting something, and every time you write a play – you're translating something" (266). With this in mind, Allan Knee's Broadway musical adaptation of Alcott's *Little Women* becomes more than just a fun show to watch. By examining it through the lens of adaptation theory, some key issues present themselves. Some of the more superficial issues are those regarding the time constraints that are prevalent in any visual adaptation. More important are thematic issues such as Alcott's messages in the book and her characters' identifiable traits. All of this presents an opportunity for discussion on the relevance not only of musical adaptations, but specifically of Alcott's story in modern times through the adaptation created by Knee.

From the time of its original publication, Alcott's *Little Women* achieved a level of popularity that was impressive for its time. In fact, "Alcott's books were so popular in her time that, according to Harriet Reisen, readers eagerly awaited their release 'with a fervor not seen again until the Harry Potter series of J. K. Rowling'" (McCabe 207). Although it was written in the late 19th century, this novel is still read by a surprising number of people. "Librarians continue to verify that *Little Women* is checked out on a constant enough basis to be considered popular," writes Gloria Delamar in her book about the history and relevance of the novel (Delamar 164). She also writes that "publishers, with their numerous editions of *Little Women* in print, continue to sell them, thus validating its popularity in a substantial way," explaining that it has never been out of print since its original publication in 1868 (164). This is a rather astonishing feat for a novel,

particularly one geared towards children. Because it is a classic tale of love, family, and personal growth, women who have grown up with the novel continue to read it to their daughters and to enjoy the warm familiarity of the March family. Originally, Alcott's story was released as two different books: *Little Women*, in 1968, and its sequel, *Good Wives*, in 1869. Publishers later combined the two volumes to form the full-length novel now recognized simply as *Little Women*.

Based closely on Alcott's life, *Little Women* is the story of the March family and their lives throughout the 1860s. In it, readers journey with the March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, through the period of change and growth which all girls experience as they travel from childhood to adulthood. The novel starts on one bleak Christmas Eve in 1862, when the girls reflect upon how different Christmas will be with their father away serving as a chaplain in the Civil War. They resolve to be model children until their father gets home so that he may be proud of them. Throughout the story, the girls mature and take time to reflect upon themselves and their situations. Everyday occurrences become valuable life lessons as each of the four sisters experience different things such as Meg and Jo's first ball, Meg and Amy's first time abroad, and the regular humdrum aspects of daily life, such as jobs, school, and friendships. By the end of the novel, Meg, the eldest, is married with twin toddlers, having learned many lessons about what it means to be a good wife and mother. Beth, the fragile third sister, dies before she makes it to adulthood, but leaves behind a legacy of selflessness and love that the rest of the family vows to carry on forever. Amy, the youngest, spends time abroad in France with the girls' Aunt Carrol and comes home married to Laurie, the girls' childhood neighbor and best friend. Jo, the heroine of the book, travels to New York, becomes a successful writer, comes home to be with her family while Beth's health is fleeting, and ends up marrying a professor she befriended while in New York. The two of them have two boys, and open a school for boys at the family estate left to Jo by Aunt March. Throughout

the novel, the girls' loving mother, Marmee, and their quiet and contemplative father serve as role models for what domestic democracy should look like. They run a loving but firm household, and they never miss an opportunity to teach the girls a lesson based on the troubles that they get themselves into. Though the story has a level plot, without many vicissitudes, readers see the family grow and evolve with one another, experiencing love, loss, and heartbreak, and never forgetting that family is a precious gift.

The many differences between Alcott's *Little Women* and Knee's Broadway production of *Little Women* prove that adaptation requires a certain amount of change, alteration, and movement away from the original work. Many of these differences are surface level. One major factor that leads to such differences is the previously mentioned issue of time. When individuals go to the theatre, they have certain expectations, one of which is the amount of time they will spend there. Audiences expect a standard full-length musical to run for about 2-2.5 hours, with a brief intermission about halfway through the show. Because of this, playwrights face the difficult task, addressed by George Bluestone in his writing about adaptation theory, of fitting an entire novel into such a short amount of time. As Bluestone says, visual mediums must economize, or condense the material taken from a written medium because of the differences in art form. The changes made to the story in Knee's adaptation create some interesting differences between the plots of the novel and the musical.

One prominent difference that is evident in the musical version of this novel, likely due to the difficulty of time constraints, is the absence of Mr. March. Mr. March never appears on stage in the musical. Although he is not physically present for most of the story, Mr. March is a very important character in Alcott's *Little Women*. The novel opens with the sisters talking about how different Christmas will be without their father around, since he is off serving in the Union army.

Although he is away for a very long time, the March father is always a presence in the household. He writes letters to the family, instructing them to be good girls and to patiently await his return, and, even in his absence, the girls work to make him proud. The musical and the book correlate on this aspect. Beyond this however, they slightly differ. In the book, Mr. March comes down with an illness while at war, and Marmee travels to Washington D.C. to care for him. When Beth contracts Scarlet fever, Marmee returns home in November, and Mr. March follows on Christmas exactly one year after the beginning of the novel and takes his place as a quiet but loving father. In the musical, the timeline is very different. Mr. March does not return home at all during the duration of the play. His absence is especially noticeable when he is not around for Beth's death. In the novel, the family has the support of their father figure while dealing with the death of their beloved daughter and sister, but in the show they are forced to deal with the tragedy entirely on their own, which creates an interesting dynamic. It almost seems like Mr. March is not a member of the family at all. Although he is not always an example of the most emotionally present parent in the book, he is always there when the family needs him. In the final scene of the musical, Meg mentions the fact that their father's train is getting in that day, but the show ends before he returns. This change, though recognizable, makes a certain amount of sense for the adaptation. For Mr. March to make an appearance on stage would require an entirely new character to be written into the play. Writers would need to add a scene for his return, and would need to further develop his character throughout the rest of the show. With the show already running about two hours long, there is simply not time for this. Because the writers do set up the importance of the March girls' father and his absence, however, his spirit is still present throughout the entire show. In the first act, Marmee sings a song entitled "Here Alone," in which she sings about the difficulties of staying home while her husband is at war and raising "little women" on her own. The spirit of this song

resonates throughout the rest of the show, and because of this Mr. March is present, albeit not physically.

Another noticeable difference caused by time constraints is Meg's trip to Europe. In the novel, Meg, the eldest March sister, spends two weeks in Europe with Annie Moffat, a friend whose family is much wealthier than the March family. Before she leaves, her sisters dote on her and express how much they wish they could go to Europe with her. While in Europe, Meg attends fancy parties, wears beautiful gowns, and dances with eligible young men. She meets up with Laurie, the girls' neighbor and best friend, who reprimands her about trying to be something she is not. Meg lets Annie Moffat's sisters dress her up like a doll and soon learns a variety of lessons about vanity, jealousy, and materialism that she carries with her throughout the following months and years. Although these events constitute an entire chapter of Alcott's *Little Women*, there is no mention of any such events in the musical version. The closest reference to any type of related event is Meg and Jo's invitation to Annie Moffat's St. Valentine's Day ball, which they attend in the musical, but which does not exist in the novel. The absence of these events in the musical is likely largely due to the time constraints that are present in any adaptation. To add in stories or scenes involving Meg's time in Europe would surely add too much time to the show, which would then cause difficulty when it came time for the more major plot points, such as the burning of Jo's manuscript and Beth's death.

The main tragedy in Alcott's *Little Women* is the death of the meek and mild-mannered third sister, Beth. Beth is the angel of the family, the one who is always ready with a kind word or a helping hand. The relationship between Jo and Beth is a very special one; they are inseparable and have quite a unique bond. In the novel, Beth is sick for a very long time. Towards the beginning of the novel, Beth contracts scarlet fever after spending time caring for a baby at the house of the

Hummels, a poor family who lives down the street from the Marches. Although she gets gravely ill, Beth recovers, and lives a good few more years. She is often weak and frail, but she lives until after Jo has gone to New York, made a living on stories, and come home to live with her family again. This all spans over a period of about three years. In the musical, however, Beth gets sick with scarlet fever while Jo is in New York, causing Jo to rush home to care for her. Beth then dies shortly after Jo returns from New York. This all happens in just over a year. While these events are all slightly skewed, taken out of order, and rearranged to change the narrative, it is important to recognize how much more time it would have taken for the authors to write in not one, but two instances of Beth being unwell. The important element that they tried to capture was the tragedy that came with her death, not the way that happened. Because of their time restrictions, such changes become necessary.

There are also a few seemingly insignificant details about Amy and her character that are likely due to time constraints. For example, in the novel, Amy gets upset and burns Jo's manuscript because she does not receive an invitation to the theatre with Meg, Jo, and Laurie. In the musical, she gets upset and burns the manuscript after Jo and Marmee tell her that she cannot go to Annie Moffat's St. Valentine's Day ball, which Jo and Meg are attending. As with Meg and her trip to Europe, trying to add in another scene involving so many characters and requiring the creation of an entirely new event would take up much more time and not allow for as much of a focus on the more significant events. The alteration of small details here allows the writers to focus more on the importance of Amy burning Jo's manuscript and the aftermath of that action, rather than having to provide only surface level attention to the much more momentous event that fuels the passion in Jo that leads to the rest of the events in the show.

Another small group of discrepancies that are likely due to the element of time is the number of differences between Amy's experiences in Europe. In the novel, Amy goes to Europe and spends a few years there with her Aunt Carrol, her husband, and their daughter Flo. While there, she meets up with Laurie, and the two of them fall into a comfortable loving relationship. Amy helps Laurie overcome his laziness and self-pity, and Laurie helps Amy cope with the loss of her sister Beth. The two fall in love and get married while in Europe, and come home to their families with the big news. All of these events take place over the course of several chapters, and the reader becomes very invested in Amy's trials and tribulations. In this section of the novel, the reader sees Amy grow and mature into a young woman rather than the little girl from the beginning of the novel. In the musical, Amy travels to Europe with her Aunt March. The audience does not learn much about her time in Europe, except for the fact that she bought many fancy things and the fact that Aunt March scolded her for mourning for too long over the loss of Beth. Moments later, Laurie comes into the scene and the audience finds out that Amy and Laurie have been engaged while in Europe and are to be married within the year. In the musical, this all takes place over a span of about a year or two, while in the novel the events are much more spread out. These alterations create some interesting questions in the musical. For example, the changes in the timeline cause Amy to be only about fourteen or fifteen when she gets married to a twenty-year-old Laurie, as opposed to the novel version of Amy who is about nineteen when she gets married. Additionally, it creates the question of why, although Alcott had the two characters get married in Europe, the writers of the musical chose to move this life event to the United States after their return from abroad. In the grand scheme of things, these are relatively insignificant changes, which seem to be simple changes made to save time and to focus on the more significant events of the novel, but some of the changes seem questionable.

The relationship between Jo and Professor Bhaer is also altered in the musical because of time constraints presented with a visual medium. In the novel, Jo meets Professor Fritz Bhaer while she is in New York, living at Mrs. Kirk's boarding house where the professor also resides. They develop a friendship before Jo decides to leave New York to go home to Concord. Years later, after Beth has died and Amy has returned from Europe, Professor Bhaer shows up in Concord, claiming he is there on business. He stays in the area for quite some time, during which Jo starts developing romantic interest in him – a feeling she has never experienced before. While he is there, the professor meets the March family, develops an intellectual relationship with Mr. March, who is a self-proclaimed philosopher, and begins subtly courting Jo. Bhaer informs Jo that he intends to head west for business, but that he loves her and hopes to marry her. The two maintain a long-distance relationship, writing letters back and forth to one another and waiting until their fortunes change enough for them to be together. When Aunt March dies and leaves her house to Jo, the pair start a school for boys, eventually having two sons of their own, and the novel ends on a happy note, with the entire family gathered together in the Orchard at Jo and Bhaer's new home. Kneebly abbreviates all of these events in the musical. With the change in the timeline regarding Amy's wedding, Bhaer shows up on the day of the marriage and expresses his feelings for Jo, asking her if someday she will marry him. She accepts, sings a little song, and then the pair proceed into the wedding to meet the rest of the family. With that, the show ends. No mention is made of the courting, Bhaer's plans to move west, or the possibility of the couple having children. As Beverly Clark-Lyon says, "although we're told that [Professor Bhaer] and Jo spend time together, she seems, onstage, to have relatively little interest in him as a person. If the goal of showing him early is to motivate their eventual romantic union, it's no more convincing than the hurried coupling of Amy and Laurie" (Clark-Lyon 155). While it would have been nearly impossible to fit into the

musical all of the details on the relationship between Jo and Bhaer, these changes cause important details to be left out of the story.

Although the differences caused primarily by the length constraints of a theatrical importance are many, when looking at the musical as a whole it seems that they do not have that significant of an effect on the plot and overarching core of the show. As Griffith writes, the most important job of an artist when adapting a novel to a visual medium is for him to adapt a “paraphrase of the novel—the novel viewed as raw material. He looks not to the organic novel, whose language is inseparable from its theme, but to characters and incidents which have somehow detached themselves from language and, like the heroes of folk legends, have achieved a mythic life of their own” (Griffith 22). Knee’s musical version of *Little Women* does seem accomplish this task of capturing much of the important essence of the novel. It captures Jo’s independence and her writing career – two of her most defining character traits from the novel. It, for the most part, captures the major events of the novel and the effects they have on the characters. The music and lyrics of the musical convey the difficulties that come with Mr. March being away at war, the excitement and anxiety caused by Meg and Jo’s attendance of their first ball, the sorrow and mourning over the death of the beloved Beth, and the difficult task of moving past such loss into a place of peace and acceptance. The characters and their behaviors display the importance of family, the sense of empowerment displayed by Jo, and the importance of everyday happenings. Meanwhile, Knee has altered the story to make it more appropriate for today’s world. For example, writers chose to focus more on feminist, female empowerment aspect of the show. Jo outspokenly defies men and embodies 1990s girl power. Her sense of independence, disregard for society’s expectations, and demand for treatment equal to that of men is applicable to modern young women.

Although it takes place in the Civil War era, the family and the characters act very much like a modern-day family.

Although these arguments are valid, it is important to recognize a few key elements of the novel that are lost in the musical adaptation, such as Alcott's *Little Women's* teaching element. This was by no means uncommon of literature in Alcott's time, particularly literature such as *Little Women* that specifically targeted children. Marchalonis explains this phenomenon.

Nineteenth-century readers expected a 'moral' from both prose and poetry and often judged a work by its ability to interweave lesson and plot: the Horatian precept that the way to get a message across was to enclose it in a good story. Alcott put her message in Marmee's words; the action carried out the ideas. (268)

In Alcott's time, audiences often only considered literature and poetry decent and valuable if they successfully worked a moral lesson into the story without making it seem like the author is preaching to the audience. By weaving the lessons into the narrative, the author can accomplish two things at once. He or she can tell a meaningful story while both entertaining readers and teaching them a thing or two. In Alcott's work, Marmee serves as the loving mother who constantly provides a wise word or lesson when the girls get themselves into predicaments. One excellent example is when Jo finds herself having difficulty controlling her temper after Amy burns her manuscript, and Marmee explains to her how she struggles with the same battle, giving Jo the following lecture. "I hope you will be a great deal better, dear; but you must keep watch over your 'bosom enemy,' as father calls it, or it may sadden, if not spoil your life. You have had a warning; remember it, and try with heart and soul to master this quick temper, before it brings you greater sorrow and regret than you have known today" (Alcott 81). Because the kind words come from such a loving and understanding mother, Jo readily accepts her advice, and the reader sees the pair

form a special bond while Jo learns a valuable lesson and vows to do better in the future. Such lessons and instances are not uncommon throughout the entire novel. Towards the beginning of the story, in fact, Jo comes right out and says, “Tell another story, mother, one with a moral to it, like this. I like to think about them afterwards, if they are real, and not too preachy” (Alcott 44). The type of story Jo is asking to hear here is the same type of the story Alcott is writing within *Little Women* itself; it is a story that teaches a lesson without sounding “too preachy,” or overly didactic.

With the help of Marmee, the girls remain always mindful of their moral obligations. In addition to the moral lessons the novel teaches, it also provides regular references to religious obligations and tries to teach readers spiritual lessons as well. “Nearly all nineteenth-century fiction, and especially that written by women,” writes Marchalonis, “was, at some level, ‘about’ religious belief, or perhaps it is better to say it took place in a world where religious belief was understood, shared, and perfectly acceptable” (Marchalonis 268). In other words, the culture of the time dictated that literature needed to be, in some way, related to religious belief. The world in which Alcott and the semi-fictional March family existed held far more religious undertones than the modern world does. Because of this, everything anyone said, did, or wrote was, on some level, peppered with religious meaning. In the novel *Little Women*, Alcott does not gloss over this element of nineteenth-century fiction. Her story abounds with religious lessons. Many of these, as with the moral lessons of the book, come from Marmee. One such example occurs in the same scene where Marmee tries to help Jo learn to control her temper. In it, she says the following:

My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning, and may be many; but you can overcome and outlive them all, if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father as you do that of your earthly one. The more

you love and trust Him, the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will depend on human power and wisdom. His love and care never tire or change, can never be taken from you, but may become the source of life-long peace, happiness, and strength. Believe this heartily, and go to God with all your little cares, and hopes, and sins, and sorrows, as freely and confidingly as you come to your mother. (Alcott 83)

This passage is exemplary of many others in the novel. Marmee helps the children grow both morally and religiously.

Most of the religious and moral overtones of the novel are lost in its adaptation to the stage. Marchalonis writes, of the 1994 film adaptation of *Little Women*, that it “fails to establish what Alcott, through her character [Marmee], insists on: the sometimes painful lessons of self-sacrifice, self-discipline, and moral strength that the daughters must be taught” (Marchalonis 263). The same can be said of the musical. There is very little of the moral element that transfers to the musical version of the story. Although Marmee is a loving and caring mother to the girls, she provides very little in the way of moral guidance. There are very few times where she even touches on the types of issues she addresses in her speeches present in the novel. One such example is in the second scene of the musical where she tells Jo that she “must learn to think before acting on every whim” after Jo cuts down a tree belonging to the March’s neighbor, Mr. Laurence (Knee 16). The only other scene where Marmee guides the girls in any moral way is after Amy burns Jo’s manuscript. In this scene, Marmee reprimands Amy for destroying something so important to Jo, and then tells Jo that she ought to forgive Amy, for she is just a child and failing to forgive her might end up hurting Jo herself (Knee 41-42). The rest of the musical provides no moral guidance from Marmee.

Although she does remain a supportive and loving mother as she does in the book, she does not lecture the girls on self-discipline, self-sacrifice, or moral strength.

The musical also loses the outward display of growth that each of the characters shows throughout the novel. Marchalonis writes, again about the 1994 film, “its great weakness is its failure to portray the sometimes difficult process of growth, a process that involves frequent and significant interactions among the characters” (Marchalonis 261-263). In other words, the film lacks the insight into the personal growth of each of the characters. In the novel, each of the sisters, along with Laurie and even some of the adult characters, experience great levels of personal growth. Again, the musical has similar flaws. Because of the need to cut out great portions of the story to save time, the audience does not get to see any of the characters grow, learn from their mistakes, or exhibit self-improvement. A good example of how *Knee* cuts teaching element out of the musical is the absence of the Hummels, a poor family who lives down the street from the Marches. In the novel, a very important and memorable scene occurs on Christmas morning when Marmee comes into the house and asks the girls to give up their delicious Christmas breakfast for the family down the street who have no food and no warmth. The girls reluctantly agree, and later realize what a wonderful thing they have done, vowing that they shall continue to love their neighbors better than themselves (Alcott 15). Through this act, they experience self-sacrifice, and learn how fulfilling and important it is to put others before themselves. In the musical, there is hardly any mention of the Hummels. The family receives mention one time, in the beginning of the show, after Jo chops down the Christmas tree from Mr. Laurence’s property – an event that did not exist in the original novel and was created solely for the musical. In this scene, Marmee reprimands Jo for destroying someone else’s property, and tells her to take the tree back immediately, after which mild-mannered Beth suggests that they give the tree to the Hummels, for

they have so little (Knee 13-14). If one is not already familiar with the novel, this fleeting mention of the Hummels in the musical will hold no significance to the viewer. Not only does this take away an incredibly significant plot point (for it is Beth's interaction with the Hummels later in the story that leads to her contraction of scarlet fever), but it also takes away an important illustration of the growth and the lesson in self-sacrifice which is so central to the original essence of the book. In fact, it almost negates the importance of the Hummels from the original story, because it drops them in as an afterthought. The idea of bringing the tree to the Hummels only arises after all other options of keeping it have been exhausted. Additionally, because it is just a tree, the element of self-sacrifice that the girls display is minimal. Unlike in the novel, the girls are not giving up their breakfast, causing them to feel a certain amount of hunger all day. By giving up a tree that was not theirs to begin with, they come out of the situation no worse off than they were before.

Jo's moral growth evident through her writing pursuits while in New York is also absent from the musical. While trying to be published in New York, Jo's first submits a story to Mr. Dashwood at the "Weekly Volcano," a magazine that publishes sensation stories (Alcott 351). In her first attempt, she adds moral reflections, for she believes that "every story should have some sort of a moral," in hopes that readers see their sins and repent (352). Dashwood shoots this idea down, and Jo begins writing true sensational stories, full of crimes and elements of "bad society." In order to make her stories more believable, Jo begins spending time investigating and spending time with bad society, finding herself remarkably interested in this lifestyle. She does not tell anyone about these writing assignments, for she feels rather embarrassed and ashamed of them, particularly when Professor Bhaer mentions in passing how trashy he thinks such writings are (361). After this, Jo decides to quit writing sensational stories altogether. In the musical, there is a much different chain of events regarding Jo's writing pursuits. The show opens with Jo explaining

to Professor Bhaer that she truly loves writing “blood-and-guts stuff,” for she thinks it is amusing and it is what society wants. When Bhaer expresses his disgust, saying that he thinks she can do better, Jo gets offended and insults Bhaer to his face, calling him arrogant and aloof (Knee 5). The scene then flashes back to two years earlier, in the attic of the March family home, where the audience learns that Jo has always been fond of writing “blood-and-guts stuff.” This theme is evident throughout the whole show. While the Jo of the novel is far more conscious of the importance of a sense of morality in her writing, the Jo of the musical focuses on writing passionate, thrilling tales of romance and seduction.

The differences between Jo’s writing in the novel and in the musical comprise a major alteration. The Jo of the musical is not in any way concerned about how an individual, particularly a lady, should act in society. From the beginning, she lacks the type of moral compass that is present in the Jo of the novel. She thrives on passion, daring, and thrills, which are all elements that would have been highly looked down upon in the actual time of Louisa May Alcott and her family off whom the Marches are based. She is proud of her sensation stories, and proclaims to the world that she will be famous because of them. The Jo in the novel, on the other hand, turns to sensation stories as a last resort, after Dashwood turns down her morally admirable stories. Although she becomes fascinated with the dregs of society while she writes sensation stories, she is ashamed and keeps her writings secret, publishing her work anonymously, and intentionally not telling her family for she knows they would be disappointed in her. These transformations of Jo’s character show the lack of a moral agenda in the musical. While the novel works to impart wisdom and moral lessons on the reader, the musical attempts no such thing. The Jo from the musical is not meant to set an example for viewers on how to behave in society, or on how to be a morally

upright citizen. Because of her fascination with such subject material from the beginning of the show, the audience does not experience any kind of personal moral growth in Jo's character.

In the novel, another instance where a character experiences vast moral development occurs when Amy travels to Europe and spends time with Laurie. During this time, both Laurie and Amy face opportunities for growth, and the segments involving them are riddled with moral lessons and messages for the audience. For example, while in Europe, Amy faces the opportunity to marry a particularly wealthy suitor named Fred Vaughn. Laurie and Amy have the following conversation where Laurie scolds her, shaming her for valuing material goods over true fondness.

“Then you are fond of old Fred?” Laurie says. “I could be if I tried.” “But you don't intend to try till the proper moment? Bless my soul, what unearthly prudence!...”

“He is rich a gentleman, and has delightful manners,” began Amy, trying to be quite cool and dignified, but feeling a little ashamed of herself.” “I understand—queens of society can't get on without money, so you mean to make a good match and start in that way? Quite right and proper as the world goes, but it sounds odd from the lips of one of your mother's girls.” (Alcott 411)

Here, the reader sees Laurie stepping in in place of the girls' mother, and the reader sees Amy recognizing the error of her actions in ways she never did when she was a young girl, proving that she has developed more of a moral compass. The passage exposes the backward nature of materialism and the dangers that come with acting out of a want for money. Additionally, although Amy expresses this materialistic and vain attitude, later in the novel when Fred Vaughn proposes, Amy politely declines. She realizes that there are more important things than simply having money enough to hold a place at the top of society and catch the attention of others. This revelation shows a certain level of moral growth and strength, for Amy has grown out of her childish, immature

ways of materialism and egotism. Through this display of growth in Amy's character, Alcott passes along a lesson about how love, sincerity, and humility are more important than worldly pleasures – a moral theme that is evident throughout the entirety of the novel *Little Women*.

Within the same scene, Laurie receives an even harsher lecture from Amy. After having his romantic gestures towards Jo rejected, Laurie runs away to Europe and lives a life of leisure, paying no mind to his responsibilities as a young man, and Amy scolds him for it, saying,

I said when we first met, that you had improved; now I take it all back, for I don't think you half so nice as when I left you at home. You have grown abominably lazy, you like gossip, and waste time on frivolous things: you are contented to be petted and admired by silly people, instead of being loved and respected by wise ones. With money, talent, position, health, and beauty,—ah, you like that, old vanity! but it's the truth, so I can't help saying it,—with all these splendid things to use and enjoy, you can find nothing to do but dawdle, instead of being the man you might and ought to be. (Alcott 413)

In this passage, Amy lectures Laurie for a wide array of worldly sins such as laziness, vanity, and wastefulness, among others. The lecture is a straightforward expression of the dangers that come when one lets down their guard and gives into temptation. This is an excellent example of the “painful lessons” of discipline and moral strength to which Marchalonis is referring. Through Amy, Alcott passes along her message of how important it is to remain morally strong and to grow in oneself. Although the two eventually fall in love, Alcott makes it abundantly clear that Amy cannot love Laurie until he has overcome some of his evils, and vice versa. The characters cannot be happy and fulfilled until they have learned a moral lesson.

In the musical, it is clear that none of the instances that prove so educational about moral lessons exist. Because the audience does not see Amy and Laurie in Europe at all, the audience

does not get the chance to see how the characters have developed stronger moral characters even when away from the guiding presence of Marmee and their supportive family. Instead, the focus is placed on other elements of the story, which “displaces both plot and values, resulting in a superficial portrayal that provides no sense of growth; characters are robbed of credit for the moral strength that enables them to make right choices” (Marchalonis 263). In other words, Knee’s disregard for the teaching element so present in Alcott’s original work allows the modern stage depiction of the story to achieve only a surface-level representation of the original story. Rather than seeing Amy and Laurie grow and develop moral compasses that allow them to make choices lining up with upstanding values and beliefs, both in the presence of their elders while they are children and on their own as young adults, the audience only gets to see the flat depiction of them and their actions and decisions. Such omissions prove that the important moral element that permeates throughout Louisa May Alcott’s entire novel is lost in translation to Allan Knee’s musical version of the classic text.

Knee’s book, as Beverly Clark-Lyon explains, tries to capture so many of the memorable plot-points of the show, but in doing so, it tends to negate the importance behind those events. Clark-Lyon sums this up in the following passage.

He incorporates the best-remembered incidents, including Jo’s cut hair, Beth’s dying (offstage), Jo and the Professor reconnoitering under an umbrella. But to show Jo’s impulsiveness, Knee adds an incident in which she rushes outside to cut down one of the Laurences’ trees for a Christmas tree. So an angry Mr. Laurence comes to the March household: that’s how the Marches meet the Laurences. Jo’s vandalism and theft are not judged particularly reprehensible; she just has to do some chores for the Laurences and agree to send the tree to the impecunious

Hummels. Which she does— asking the newly introduced Laurie to do the delivery, not caring enough about the act of contrition and benevolence to do it herself.

(Clark-Lyon 155)

Knee's musical offers a mere snapshot view of Alcott's original novel. It takes the important incidents from the show and puts them into almost a bulleted list, giving the audience an idea of the types of events that happen in the book, but failing to fill them in the entire way. Instead of getting the full picture, including the important events, their meaning, and the lessons and growth exhibited by the characters through such events, the audience gets more of an empty outline of the story. The true meaning does not quite translate, and often seems intentionally ignored such as the entirely made-up scene with the Hummels where Jo cannot even spare the time to swallow up her pride and deliver the tree herself, an act which would exhibit too much of a lesson for the musical.

Because the morality of Alcott's original *Little Women* is so prevalent and emphasized throughout the entirety of the novel, it is important to examine why such an important element is entirely skipped over when it is translated into a modern-day musical. Perhaps one of the most convincing arguments is that such a pedagogical presentation to a modern-day audience simply would not go over well. Although audiences and readers in Alcott's time accepted and even expected such teaching measures in popular fiction and entertainment, the audiences of today do not have those same expectations. In fact, if a modern-day audience went to view a Broadway musical and experienced a series of events and lectures that emphasized morality and the importance of growing and learning better Christian principles, they would likely not enjoy the performance at all. Because the modern-day world has a tendency to elevate the self and put individual interests over traditional values, "the novel's message seems even less appealing to contemporary audiences: the austere virtues, the non-glorification of self, the idea that the self

needs training in restraint and control” (Marchalonis 268-269). This is to say that such messages would likely be lost on a modern audience, because they live in a world that focuses less on virtues and self-control and more focused on success, adventure and thrill.

Beyond the level of moral didacticism lost through adaptation, Knee’s musical fails to accurately present the deep level of character development Alcott provides, which causes the characters not only to neglect moral responsibilities, but also leads to a surface-level understanding of each of the characters as individuals. Rather than experiencing full representations of rounded-out characters, the audience receives a far more superficial representation of the characters. The characters and their development in Alcott’s novel, particularly the four March sisters, are generally recognized as one of the key elements that draws and attracts readers to *Little Women*. Through the book, readers see the characters grow and develop, and they get the opportunity to identify and sympathize with each one of them. Clark-Lyon explains that,

Although most fans don’t specify what they loved about Alcott’s work, many appear to have especially appreciated her characters. One wrote that the novel “is so real, the characters are so real and sweet.” Another, self-identifying as Jo, felt that “Miss Alcott must have seen us four girls before she wrote the story.” A British woman appreciated Alcott’s valuing of the ordinary, her loving attention to the sisters’ “grand aspirations, homely duties, mistakes, troubles, and ‘good times,’” not to mention the detailed attention to clothing, to making do with little, as with Meg’s “many-times-pressed-and-mended white tarlatan. (Clark-Lyon 17)

These sentiments exemplify the comfort and appreciation readers have for the small details of the novel and its characters. Because Alcott takes so much time in her book to expand upon the intricacies of the characters, readers have the chance to get to know them fully. Through her

“valuing of the ordinary,” or her attention to the small details of the everyday lives of the March family, Alcott creates a full, captivating image of their household, their relationships, and their individual character traits, allowing the reader to get a complete image of each of the girls in their own right. Different people identifies with different characters in the novel at different points in their lives, but it seems that most readers can identify with every character at some point.

In the musical, the opposite is true. Knee’s adaptation of *Little Women* is entirely centered around Jo. Although all of the prominent characters from the original work are featured, their presences are entirely overshadowed and somewhat negated by the overwhelming focus on the modern-minded, quirky female writer. As Ben Brantley says in his review of the musical, “although Jo has always been the main attraction in any of the film and stage versions of the novel (especially as Katharine Hepburn played her in George Cukor's enchanting 1933 movie), here her literary ambition eclipses the tale's homier aspects” (Brantley). Brantley is justified in saying this, for throughout the musical the audience’s attention is constantly directed toward Jo, her personal battles, and her literary career. This is especially noticeable when looking at the musical numbers. Of the twenty-six songs in the musical there are only eight in which Jo does not sing. Of those eight, Jo is still on stage for all but three of them (Knee vii). These numbers show the overwhelming presence of Jo’s character from a purely physical standpoint, simply because she is physically present for the large majority of the show. Beyond that, as Brantley points out, her literary ambitions dominate the plot and cause the rest of the events and characters to receive little attention. While Jo’s character is clearly laid out, “the other March sisters seem to pass before your eyes like labeled luggage on a conveyor belt” (Brantley). When comparing each of the four sisters through in the musical and the novel, this lack of development becomes abundantly clear.

In the musical *Little Women*, Meg, the eldest of the March sisters, is probably the sister who, after Jo, gets the most character definition. From her first line upon her entrance in the first scene, the audience gleans that Meg wishes to be a member of society when she says, “Jo, I hate being a governess. I should be meeting eligible young men” (Knee 6). From this line, it is clear that she is unhappy because she has to work while other young women get to experience society. After this, the audience learns that Meg, while excited about her first ball and her chance to be a part of higher society, is also nervous. The song “Delighted” shows her struggle between this excitement and anxiety (25-27). The next bullet point on the list of Meg’s character development in the novel is her marriage to John Brook, Laurie’s tutor, which the audience learns about in the song “More Than I Am” (59-60). In the second act, the only new information the audience receives about Meg is that she has twins and that she is happy in her marriage. While this is more character development than either Beth or Amy receive in the musical, it is clear that it is still a minimal amount.

In *Little Women*, the novel, Meg receives a much more distinctive character development. To begin with, there is much more distinction between Meg, as the eldest, and the rest of the sisters. While in the musical they tend to operate more as a group, the Meg of the novel is more authoritative and tries harder to be something of a little mother to her sisters whenever their mother is away. In the first chapter, Meg reprimands her sisters for arguing, “beginning to lecture in her elder sister fashion,” which sets her apart from the beginning as having a specific rule as the leader of the pack (Alcott 5). Beyond this, the reader gets multiple looks into Meg’s life apart from her sisters. She spends time in Europe with Annie Moffat and the Moffat family, where the reader gets to experience her internal struggle between her desire for elegance and fine things and her loyalty to her family and the lessons they taught her about humility and grace. Later in the novel, the

audience gets to see Meg's feelings for John Brook develop, watching her go from uncertainty in her feelings towards him to growing fondness, which she finally accepts in its entirety after she has been questioned by Aunt March on her and John's motives. In the musical, the entire relationship between Meg and John is entirely summed up through one scene (1.3) where they meet and dance at a ball and one scene (1.5) where they profess their love for one another. The audience gets no chance to see Meg struggle with her feelings or let them develop. Additionally, particularly once Meg is married and has her own family, the novel allows readers plentiful opportunities to see Meg's life away from her family. When she and John move into a little cottage across town, the reader sees her struggle with how to be a good wife and, later, a good mother to her twin son and daughter. She fights an internal battle between wanting to do everything she can to please her husband and wanting to go into town and buy fancy clothes with the money he earns. Overall, the reader sees Meg learn to put her family first and to fight her urges to give into vanity and pride, when she decides to return a fancy dress she bought in order to have money to purchase John a coat he needs (237). Because of the focus on Jo in the musical, all of these events and details about Meg's character are overlooked. She comes across as a lovable, if somewhat vain, girl who gets married off to the first suitor who comes her way, which is a far stretch from the character in the novel.

Beth, the frail, quiet, second youngest sister, is clearly a supporting character in the musical. While her presence is important, because she is a quiet character the audience does not get much of a glimpse into her mind or her motivations. Kneebly does a decent job of stressing the loving nature of Beth, having her always be the one to comfort a sister who is feeling sad or disappointed and to be the peacemaker. In the beginning of the musical, when the sisters are reflecting on how difficult Christmas will be without their father, Beth is the one who comes in

with an optimistic announcement that Jo has a surprise for the girls, brightening the mood of the scene with her peaceful nature (Knee 6). She later comforts Jo after Amy burns Jo's manuscript, and then urges Amy to make peace with Jo by going ice-skating with Jo and Laurie. Beth's primary defining moment is when she and Mr. Laurence, the Marches' elderly neighbor and Laurie's grandfather, sing a nonsense duet while practicing the piano. This song, "Off to Massachusetts," reveals that she loves playing the piano and shows that she has a sweet enough nature to break cranky Mr. Laurence out of his shell (Knee 46-48). The musical provides a brief glimpse into the relationship between Beth and Jo, after Jo cuts her hair and Beth tells Jo that "she can make the clouds disappear," showing that Beth looks up to Jo and that the two are very close (62). Beyond that, the only further development of Beth's character is when the audience learns that she has scarlet fever, which is mainly important because it causes Jo to return home from New York. Throughout the entire musical, Beth speaks only of others, helping to develop the rest of the characters while never focusing on herself. The one line in which Beth references herself is while she and Jo sing a song about letting go just before Beth's death, and Beth tells Jo that she "never made plans about what [she] would do when [she] grew up," and that her only concern is how Jo will go on. This once again puts Jo at the forefront, even in a moment where the audience would expect Beth to be the center of attention. Beth dies offstage, causing even her final exit to be overshadowed.

Alcott's novel characterizes Beth much more. Through internal monologues and glimpses into Beth's daily activities while her sisters are away at work and school, the audience learns that Beth is an incredibly timid, genteel soul, who cannot stand to see any kind of creature hurt. This is perhaps best exhibited by her careful attention to her dolls, particularly to hand-me-down doll of Jo's which is falling apart due to a lack of attention from Jo. Beth pays special attention to this

doll, caring for it as though it is a real child. This shows her sensitive, caring nature. Alcott writes that “everyone felt how sweet and helpful Beth was, and fell into a way of going to her for comfort or advice in their small affairs” (Alcott 277). Another important element of Beth’s character that is left out of the musical is the way she contracts scarlet fever. In the novel, Alcott explains that one day while Marmee is in Washington, Beth goes to care for the Hummels who, in the novel anyway, have a litter of children, no money, no food, and extremely poor living conditions. While there, the Hummel baby dies of scarlet fever while lying in Beth’s arms. Beth comes home from the Hummels and quietly mourns, with no one realizing until late into the night that she has come home (179). Because the musical leaves these details out, it loses a certain poignancy, in that Beth is the only one of the sisters to go care for the poor family down the street and she is the one who suffers for it. In the musical, however, the audience loses the chance to see the effect that the death of the Hummel baby has on Beth, and the way the event shapes her character. Additionally, in the novel Beth’s character recovers, albeit never fully, from her bout with scarlet fever. Afterwards, she is never quite the same, but she continues to live a life of good will and charity. She knits things for the children who walk by on the streets and utilizes all the time she has left to practice kindness and gentility towards others. Even once she and the rest of the family realize she does not have much time left, she never gives up until she can no longer muster the energy to pick up her knitting needles. The character developments that the reader sees in Beth, as well as in the rest of the March sisters, through the course of Beth’s illness are completely lost in the musical version of the story. When Beth dies in the novel, she is about nineteen or twenty years old, while in the musical she is only fourteen or fifteen. The mere fact that she has the chance to grow up more in the novel also allows for further character development, simply because she has more time to learn and grow.

The last of the four sisters, Amy is perhaps the sister whose character development is most overlooked in *Little Women* the musical. When the musical opens, Amy is twelve. The audience sees her complaining about how girls tease her at school, and getting upset because she feels left out as the youngest. "I'm always forgotten! I'm always last! I'm never invited anywhere! I have nothing special!" she complains after not being invited to the ball (Knee 41). The next image the audience gets of Amy is of her burning Jo's manuscript out of childish spite, and then in the following scene she falls in the ice after trying to follow Jo and Laurie while ice-skating. The last time Amy appears on stage in act one, she begs Marmee not to make her go to Aunt March's house because everything is so old and scary. Through all of these actions of Amy's, she comes across on stage as simply the whiny little sister who is rather annoying and burdensome. In the second act, Amy returns home from Europe engaged to Laurie, suddenly the model of a young lady. She, very maturely, gives Jo a book of her drawings from Europe, telling Jo they will always be close, singing a song with Laurie about how it is amazing that they fell in love, and leaving stage until she returns in a wedding dress in the final scene. These two snapshots of Amy provide an incredibly limited depiction of her character. The audience sees her only as a little girl and then suddenly as a young woman, getting no glimpse of the character in between, and allowing them very little chance to identify with her or see her grow.

The novel's Amy is a far more likable character. Though the reader gets a glimpse of Amy as a proud, vain little girl in the beginning, she quickly begins to grow and learn lessons, developing into a character with whom readers can identify. The story tells of her difficulties at school with trying to be a good girl and student but also wanting to have many friends who dote upon her, reminding readers of the little cares and worries they experienced in primary school. As she grows, she, along with all of her sisters, is forced to grow up quickly because of the war and

Beth's illness. When she stays with Aunt March while Beth has scarlet fever, Amy learns important lessons about religion and self-reflection, praying with all her might and writing out a will in which she distributes all of her little possessions among her family (Alcott 196). Through this little act, the reader begins to find Amy endearing, and views her as a little girl who is learning her place in the world rather than simply an annoying little sister. When Amy goes to Europe, the reader begins to even further identify with her. A young woman now, the reader joins Amy as she grapples with vanity, pride, and romance. When Beth dies while Amy is in Europe, the reader mourns with and for Amy over the fact that she cannot go home to be with her family in such a time of sorrow, but she stands out for her optimism, vowing to do better and be better. Because Knee and his writing team put almost no effort into developing Amy's character in the musical, all of these important characteristics and developments are lost. Instead of being a character who shows a remarkable growth from a little girl to a young wife, the Amy of the musical becomes the character no one likes; the character that the audience could do without.

These examinations of the March sisters show how so much of the character development, which is arguably one of the most important aspects of the novel, is lost through its adaptation to the musical. Because the Knee writes the musical from Jo's viewpoint, the rest of the characters lose their charm and relatability. The audience receives a snapshot of each sister, labeled by only the most telling character plot points from the novel, and receives no "shading and detail that make these elements feel true to life in the book" (Brantley). Instead of being fully developed, well-rounded and individual characters, Meg, Beth, and Amy are simply there to be Jo's sisters. Beverly Clark-Lyon writes, "the novel 'has two qualities that suit it to the present theatre even by the severe standards of the Puritan youth. It is rich in character and it is rich in atmosphere.' The characterizations are vivid, the characters' actions "the out-croppings of traits beneath...' evolving

with consistency” (Clark-Lyon 81). In other words, the novel has the potential to be turned into a rich and developed theatrical production, based on its fully developed characters and their constant evolution throughout the novel. In Knee’s musical, however, much of that potential for vivid and vibrant character development is lost in the overwhelming focus on Jo’s character above the rest of the March Family.

Although in the musical most of the March sisters are underdeveloped and “seem to pass before your eyes like labeled luggage on a conveyor belt,” it seems as though their traits are not entirely gone (Brantley). Because of the nature of the narrative, the entire story is told from the point of view of Jo, who seems to, in a way, embody the characteristics of each of the sisters whose characters are not fully developed in the musical. From Meg, Jo gains the matronly teaching trait, evident particularly when Amy falls through the ice and Jo reprimands her, telling her that she needs to work harder to be careful and responsible, and that she must never do such a thing as skate on thin ice because she is too important to the family (Knee 50). From Beth she gains the power of forgiveness and the ability to comfort her sisters, evident in the second act when Amy comes home from Europe and Jo comforts Amy over her being away for Beth’s passing (94). From Amy, Jo gains her sense of optimism and hope. With the way the writers of the musical chose to go about adapting this novel, this is almost necessary. Alcott’s *Little Women* is told from an objective viewpoint. The reader gets to experience each of the girls in their own right, together and apart from the rest of the family. A third person omniscient narrator allows for glimpses into the girls’ minds. By choosing to tell the musical through Jo’s perspective, it flattens the narrative, making it more difficult to relate to the characters. There is no narrator, so the audience only gets to see the sisters through Jo’s lens, which does not allow for the same level of personal connection as does the novel.

George Bluestone says that the individual who takes on the task of an adaptation works to find the raw material of the novel and focus on communicating its essence in his adaptation. Rather than trying to entirely preserve the language and medium of the novel, he looks “to characters and incidents which have somehow detached themselves from language and, like the heroes of folk legends, have achieved a mythic life of their own” (Griffith 22). In this sense, one could argue that Knee’s adaptation does not commit any sort of injustice to Alcott’s novel. Although he is not one hundred percent faithful to Alcott’s original work, entire fidelity would cause the musical to simply be a copy, as Coleridge expressed when he said, “a certain quantum of difference is essential... and an indispensable condition and cause of the pleasure we derive from it; while in a copy it is a defect, contravening its name and purpose” (Griffith 22). Of all of the characters in Alcott’s original version of *Little Women*, although they are all incredibly well developed and well loved, there is no question that Jo is the one most likely to live on “like the heroes of folk legends.” When readers think of *Little Women*, they tend to think of it as the story of Jo March and her sisters, not as the story of the March family. Especially in modern times, Jo is the recognizable character because of her sense of independence and her inherent feminism, which the writers play up in modern adaptations. She is headstrong, defies gender norms, and stands out as a model for young girls.

What modern day audiences fail to realize, however, is that Jo is not a character who openly defies society. In the novel, she expresses her disdain for the expectations placed on women by society, but overall she submits to those expectations and does what society and her family expect of her. She does not walk around in the 1860s in pants, as does the Jo of the musical, for this would have been entirely frowned upon and she would have likely been ostracized. Instead, she wears skirts and acts like a proper “lady” should act. Though she struggles with her duties and has

difficulties controlling her temper and her passion, she manages to overcome these difficulties in order to behave in an appropriate womanly fashion. These details often get overlooked, causing modern readers and audiences to pull out of Jo the characteristics that they think modern women should have, rather than appreciating Alcott's work as a snapshot of the reality of the everyday lives of the family in that time. Because of this modern way of reading the novel, readers and audiences tend to overlook the rest of the sisters, even though they are as integral to the original story as is Jo. In fact, the novel's original title was *Little Women: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*. Through this title, it is clear that each of the sisters is important, but that importance is lost in modern adaptations.

Although many of the important elements slip through the cracks in the modern musical representation, the musical interpretation of *Little Women* does not fail to bring Alcott's story to life. One of its major strengths, and indeed one of the major strengths of musical theatre as a whole, is its ability to use song to advance the story and to add a deeper emotional dimension. As Bluestone says, the visual, "presentational medium (except for its use of dialogue), cannot have direct access to the power of discursive forms. Where the novel discourses, the [visual medium] must picture" (Bluestone 47). In other words, stage productions lose the advantage of discourse, or long written sections, that give the reader more insight into the story. This is particularly important, especially in Alcott's *Little Women*, because so much of the novel is introspective, focusing on internality and explanations that utilize the power of discourse, rather than an excess of physical action. Because of this, it can be difficult to translate to stage. Stage productions are primarily active, using physical bodies to convey actions and events. In stage adaptations of novels, therefore, the focus is generally on actual physical events that take place, for those are the things that can be taken and *shown* in a physical production. Unless the playwright chooses to have the

actors deliver long monologues, the discursive element is all but lost, except in the dialogue spoken by the actors. There is no way to understand the internal monologues and struggles the characters face in the book. The musical solves this by using songs to discourse. Through the songs, the audience gets a glimpse at the internality and inner thoughts and emotions that the novel conveys through discursive methods. The emotions and feelings conveyed through the song allow for a different perspective, more akin to that of the novel.

One character who truly utilizes the song to present material that would traditionally be presented through discourse in a novel is Marmee. In the musical, Marmee performs two songs in which she opens up to the audience, revealing her thoughts and emotions to the audience. In her first song, "Here Alone," she sings about her concerns and difficulties with raising four young women on her own while her husband is away at war (Knee 17-18). If Marmee were to come out and simply state her feelings and concerns in some sort of monologue, it would not create the same effect. The music creates a strong emotional connection with the character, and through music, she can truly express everything she is feeling. The same kind of moment comes later when, in act two, she comforts Jo through the song "Days of Plenty," in which she expresses her grief and her struggle with dealing with the death of her daughter Beth. This song allows again for a type of connection and insight into Marmee's character, which would not likely be possible without the utilization of music that the musical theatre format provides.

The musical adaptation of *Little Women* brings readers back to a traditional text and, even if it makes some alterations, at least it gets people thinking about literature. The musical makes drastic changes to the characters, but doing so is how they ensure that the characters will resonate with modern audiences. Readers and viewers find what they want to find in a novel or a production, and modern readers are more likely to identify with a wildly independent Jo who refuses to submit

to gender norms and who does not care what society thinks. They are less likely to identify with a Jo who changes herself to please society, as Jo does in the novel. The same can be said about the rest of the characters. The modern musical representation focuses on Jo because she is easy to turn into a modern character. The Amy and Meg of the book are too caught up in societal expectations, and they play into and even enjoy the roles that women are expected to take in the nineteenth century. Jo, on the other hand, although she comes around in the end, puts up more of a fight, which makes her easier to relate to modern women.

Although much of the important detail and material is lost, by turning *Little Women* into a musical, it brings the remarkable and revolutionary story to a new modern audience. Clark-Lyon writes that *Little Women* “was perhaps the first American book explicitly directed to girls as an audience, offering four models of girlhood, at a time when children’s literature was only starting to undergo gender segmentation” (Clark-Lyon 11). In other words, it provided young girls with a form of entertainment directed specifically towards them for the first time in history, which is an incredibly impressive task. Because of this, it is important that it live on in American culture, with modern audiences recognizing it for both its historic context and what it meant to audiences of the nineteenth century, as well as for its significance today as a story that embodies the heart of American domestic life.

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