

Exploring Motivational Message and Literary Themes in Little Women (2019): A Maslovian Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the motivational themes and themes in Greta Gerwig's film, *Little Women* (2019), based on Louisa May Alcott's work, from a Maslowian perspective, focusing on how the adaptation of the novel relates to the interplay between power, desire, and masculinity, using Louisa May Alcott's experiences. Gerwig's adaptation also serves as a general example of using Maslow's hierarchy of needs in feminist novels. According to Maslow's theory, everyone has five needs: physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization. (Maslow, 2017). This provides a basis for analyzing motivation in the novel. The relationships and identities of each main character in "*Little Women*"—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March—are shaped by their relationships and identities with one another. (Bragg, 1978) This research analyzes the journey of human motivation portrayed in the film *Little Women* through the characters in their struggles to fulfil various types of human needs and the narrative. The method chosen to analyze this theory is qualitative, including text analysis, film analysis, character development, and dialogue to identify the actions and relationships of characters according to Maslow's hierarchy. The primary data source is the film *Little Women* (2019), directed by Greta Gerwig. Which has a duration of the film (2 hours 15 minutes) Specific elements analyzed include scenes that show the motivations and decisions of the characters. Dialog that reveals psychological and emotional needs. Symbolism, visual storytelling, and character interactions. Additional data includes academic literature on Maslow's theory and secondary sources that analyze the themes and characters of the film. The research findings indicate that the Maslovian perspective is a unique way to explain character evolution in detail and the importance of understanding the story, which can also be applied in psychology and sociology.

Keyword: *Little Women, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Motivational themes.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Motivational messages are used to encourage individuals or groups to remain motivated, optimistic, and strive to achieve their goals. Motivational messages are usually conveyed with meaningful and supportive words, and often touch the emotions of the recipients. Motivational messages are also frequently used to encourage people to keep striving in matters related to their daily lives,

such as studying, working, self-development, and facing difficult situations. while the theme of literature is the main idea, message, or concept underlying a literary work. The theme conveys a deep meaning or lesson that the author wants to communicate through the story, characters, or events depicted in the work. Often, experiences or values associated with various cultures and eras encompass things like love, sacrifice, the struggle against injustice, loss, recovery, and freedom.

The adaptation of the 2019 film *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig, is a reinterpretation of Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel, explored in a modern way through timeless themes. This study examines motivational messages and literary themes through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which classifies human motivation into five levels: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. (Maslow, 2017). The film *Little Women* is also a complex narrative due to the integration of themes such as family love, gender roles, ambition, sacrifice, and resilience. This research not only enrich the understanding of "*Little Women*" as a literary work

but will also contribute to psychology studies by linking the theory of needs with character analysis. This research explores how human motivations in the film present to understanding of the struggles and universal aspirations of its characters.

The journey of each character in this film is related to the problems they face concerning the fulfilment of needs at a certain level according to Maslow. Then, this research can invite readers to reflect on how the themes discussed in the novel and film are still relevant in modern life. This film tells the story of the lives of the four March sisters: Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy, as they face the limitations of youth, poverty, and societal expectations. In the internal context, this film tells the story of the tension between individual desires and communal obligations, manifested in Jo's struggle between her literary ambitions and her loyalty to her family. Each sister represents a different path to fulfilment, navigating social boundaries and personal ambitions. Jo's relentless pursuit as a writer, Meg's pragmatic approach, Amy's striving for recognition in design, and Beth's realm of love and belonging. With Greta Gerwig's adaptation, these themes are revived, emphasizing feminist autonomy and creative fulfilment. This film reorders the novel's chronology, bringing together the young sisters' dreams with adult realities.

In the film *Little Women* (2019) by Greta Gerwig, viewing themes and motivational messages in literature from a Maslovian perspective offers a new way to understand character evolution and important messages. Integrating Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a fresh perspective. However, many studies have examined the themes and character development in the film. In her efforts to reach her full potential as a writer, Jo March can fulfill the hierarchy of Maslow's needs, from physiological needs to spiritual needs, according to previous research. This is a study that discusses internal and external conflicts regarding social demands and personal desires. The study demonstrates how Gerwig's adaptation highlights the connection between women and art, desire, and independence, echoing the experiences of Louisa May Alcott. The study of *Little Women* (2019) discusses character development, feminist themes, and contemporary personal conflicts. However, there is still little discussion about the application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to understand the motivational messages and literary themes of the film. Moreover, Gerwig's *Little Women* gives us an extraordinary opportunity to use Maslow's framework in a story focused on femininity. Scholars like Bazin (1967) say that adaptation is an interpretation of a text influenced by the cultural context that shapes it rather than merely replicating the text. From the book *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott above, when women behave inappropriately or imitate men, they are considered bad women.

This study analyzes the *motivational messages* and *literary themes* in *Little Women* (2019) using Maslow's hierarchy of needs. By examining how the characters strive to fulfill their physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization needs, the research explores themes of perseverance, independence, and personal growth. It highlights how the film conveys inspiration through its portrayal of ambition, family bonds, and societal challenges. By integrating psychological and literary analysis, this study offers a deeper understanding of how *Little Women* (2019) motivates and resonates with audiences.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is descriptive qualitative. Descriptive approach to explore motivational messages and literary themes in *Little Women* (2019) using Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a theoretical framework. This

methodology involves textual analysis, focusing on the film's narrative, character development, and dialogue to identify how the actions and relationships of the characters align with the five levels of Maslow's hierarchy. The primary data source is the film *Little Women* (2019), directed by Greta Gerwig. Which has a duration of the film (2 hours 15 minutes) Specific elements that are analyzed include: Scenes that show the motivations and decisions of the characters. Dialog that reveals psychological and emotional needs. Symbolism, visual storytelling, and character interactions. Additional data includes academic literature on Maslow's theory and secondary sources that analyze the themes and characters of the film.

The analysis follows a structured approach to examining *Little Women* (2019) through Maslow's hierarchy of needs. First, *scene selection* involves identifying key moments in the film that correspond to different levels of Maslow's framework, such as instances where characters seek security, love, esteem, or self-actualization. Next, *character analysis* traces the motivational journeys of each March sister, mapping their actions, struggles, and personal growth onto Maslow's hierarchy to reveal how their aspirations and challenges align with fundamental human needs. Finally, *thematic synthesis* explores recurring themes of motivation, resilience, and gender dynamics, demonstrating how the film portrays the pursuit of fulfillment despite societal and personal obstacles. By integrating textual analysis with psychological theory, this method highlights how *Little Women* reflects universal human motivations, offering a deeper understanding of its inspirational and emotional impact.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This analysis demonstrates how the thematic framework of the 2019 film *Little Women* aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and how each path of experience provides a perspective within herself to face the challenges of the world, which then contrasts with the family's struggles. (Adzkia et al., 2022). Here, March's struggle against poverty highlights the importance of meeting basic human needs.

3.1. Exploring the journey of human motivation through its characters

Physiological Needs and Safety Needs: Scene (00:08:45-00:10:20) At the

start of the film, Marmee (Laura Dern) emphasizes the importance of sharing even though they have very little money. There is a Christmas breakfast where the sisters share their food to show how the March family prioritizes communal love over individual survival, subtly addressing the difference between physiological needs and higher needs. *In Scene (01:13:20-01:15:40)*, Beth's role focuses on household chores and taking care of her health, showing that she fulfills the family's basic needs. This family faces challenges, where Marmee becomes the center of the family to meet the needs of her four kids, but they are happy with their daily routine, showing the strength of love and family care.

A. Love and Possession: *In the Scene (00:43:10-00:45:20)* Beth plays the piano given to her by Mr. Laurence, this moment shows how love and attention from others give Beth a sense of being loved and possessed even though she feels less confident about her condition. And Laurie expresses his feelings to Jo in the *scene (01:22:50-01:26:30)* with dialogue. At that moment, Laurie declares his love while they are alone together. But Jo rejected his love by saying that Jo chose freedom for her family, herself, and her dreams over a romantic relationship.

B. Self-Esteem and the Need for Self-Actualization

(Asiva Noor Rachmayani, 2015) In the film *Little Women*, the theme of esteem is closely related to the characters' search for recognition, self-esteem, and personal achievement within the constraints of the social and gender roles they play. Self-actualization, which is at the top of Maslow's hierarchy, represents the search for personal meaning and the fulfillment of one's potential. In *Little Women*, each sister embarks on a journey towards self-actualization in different ways, reflecting their unique aspirations and situations. Maslow's concept of esteem includes external validation (respect, status, and recognition) and internal validation (esteem). In a scene in this film, Beth has passed away due to the illness she suffered from. Beth's death is a poignant reminder of the fragility of life and the importance of seeking happiness in simple and meaningful relationships.

Jo March's Journey of Esteem: *In the Scene (00:12:30-00:14:10)*, Jo receives the rejection of her Manuscript. The story is based on Jo's desire to become a writer, which symbolizes her desire to create and respect society. Throughout this film, she struggles against social norms that disregard women's intellectual pursuits. Despite facing several rejections and criticisms, she chose to continue

publishing her writings, demonstrating her resilience in pursuing external recognition. But finally, in *Scene (02:07:10-02:12:30)*, Jo publishes her book titled *Little Woman*. In negotiations with the male publisher, Jo demonstrates her worth by demanding royalties and shows her growing confidence and recognition of her value. This scene shows that Jo has achieved her self-actualization as a writer by proving her dreams and abilities to the world.

Amy March's Self-Esteem: Amy's character here develops through achievements and recognition in honing her artistic abilities and pragmatically accepting her social reality, showing two motivations: seeking acknowledgment for her talent and seeking security for a stable future. Her famous line, "I want to be great or nothing at all," *Scene (01:08:15-01:11:20)* shows her struggle for self-esteem amidst the limited expectations for women in the 19th century.

Meg March's Self-Esteem: In the scene *(00:59:45-01:02:30)* Meg becomes more relaxed, but she remains attractive. She chose to lead a simpler life as a wife and mother rather than pursuing social status and wealth. Her choice reflects various types of appreciation rooted in respect and fulfilment through love and family. Although she reaffirms her love for John Brooke, her moment of vulnerability, where she acknowledges her longing for material comfort, illustrates the conflict within her between social validation and personal satisfaction.

Self-Esteem and Self-Actualization This film conveys a sense of self-esteem and self-actualization by showing how these needs can be accepted through differing personal values and social contexts. (Gilligan, 1982). Jo's creative independence, Amy's blend of ambition and realism, Beth's quiet acceptance, and Meg's commitment to family illustrate the multi-faceted nature of human fulfilment. *Little Women* emphasizes that the path to self-realization is not singular, but rather highly individual.

3.2 Universal Human Needs and Thematic Content

Feminist Perspective of Maslow's Hierarchy The feminist nuance present in *Little Women* offers a critical perspective on Maslow's theory, as it has already drawn criticism for its androcentrism. This film portrays women as complex individuals, seeking ways to challenge their own social limitations against the expectations of self-development. (Bender, 2017; Sutrisno et al., 2023). Jo's bargaining with her male publisher, Amy's pragmatic decision-making, and Meg's choice to prioritize family illustrate the diverse ways women navigate self-

fulfillments within a patriarchal structure. This perspective enriches the understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs by showing how gender influences the prioritization and fulfilment of needs. This interconnectedness aligns with modern critiques of Maslow's hierarchy, which state that people often pursue multiple levels simultaneously, depending on their context and priorities.

Similarly, Greta Gerwig's adaptation emphasizes several motivational messages that resonate across cultural and temporal boundaries:

- (1) **Autonomy in Leadership:** Jo's resolute decision to chart her own course serves as a feminist critique of societal expectations. Jo rejects traditional roles by challenging the audience to reflect on what they're looking for in self-actualization amidst external pressures. (Maslow, 2017)
- (2) **Relational Values:** The strength of the bond among the March sisters illustrates the importance of love and belonging in achieving a fulfilling life. Amid individual challenges, mutual support becomes the foundation for personal growth.
- (3) **Resilience in Adversity:** The family's ability to find happiness and meaning despite facing financial difficulties and personal loss highlights the human capacity for resilience—a recurring theme that aligns with the lower levels of physiological and safety needs according to Maslow.

4. CONCLUSION

In (2019), the application of Maslow's hierarchy to *Little Women* reveals the universality of the March sisters' journey, showing how human needs are interconnected at various levels. Greta Gerwig's adaptation brings many new elements to its source material. It is also a contemporary exploration of motivation, resilience, and self-fulfilment. This film, with its feminist lens and nuanced portrayal of human needs, challenges conventional psychological frameworks and provides a deeper comprehension of the various ways people navigate life's difficulties. (Adzkie et al., 2022; Bragg, 1978; Gergen, 1993)

Little Women (2019) by Greta Gerwig skilfully depicts universal issues of fulfilment and motivation through the lens of *Sisters March*. This thesis explores how each character embodies various levels of the motivational framework, demonstrating the fluid and interconnected nature of human desires and

aspirations, using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Jo's dead end towards creative freedom Various paths to self-actualization are shown through the harmony between Amy's ambition and pragmatism, Beth's quiet satisfaction, and Meg's acceptance of familial love. This film illustrates that human needs are highly individual and non- hierarchical, and that individual values, social constraints, and relationships shape them.

The feminist side of *Little Women* enhances the analysis by challenging the conventional interpretation of Maslow's theory. The March sisters overcome the patriarchal society to achieve

their goal of independence. By doing this, they provide a critical understanding among the methods by which gender prioritizes needs. This perspective highlights the significance of *Little Women* as an endless story that encourages viewers to reflect on their own motivations and principles. In conclusion, *Little Women* (2019) cinematically and literarily demonstrates the complexity of human motivation. By integrating themes of purpose, love, resilience, and self-discovery, as well as what it means to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. This study not only demonstrates that Alcott's story has universal appeal but also affirms that Maslow's framework can be used to analyze literature and cinematography.

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