

"Romanticism will not provide us with the necessary tools to construct a women's cinema: our objectification cannot be overcome simply by examining it artistically. [...] Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected. In this respect, it is instructive to look at films made by women within the Hollywood system which attempted by formal means to bring about a dislocation between sexist ideology and the text of the film."

Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema'

Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema,' in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 37.

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Little Women (Greta Gerwig, USA, 2019) engages with the many ways in which patriarchal and sexist ideology has historically and, to this day, continues to impact upon women's ability to express their creativity, to have their art recognised as valuable and the exclusionary idea of the 'genius'.



When read in tandem with Claire Johnston's landmark work '**Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema**', it is clear that the cinematic language of *Little Women* does far more than simply discuss the oppression of women and their creativity. Rather, the film offers examples of "a dislocation between sexist ideology and the text of the film" through a reflective narrative framing device, complex character arcs dedicated to unravelling auteurism and artistic pursuits being given the same, if not more, attention than romantic plotlines.

[IMAGE: The March's
Club for Gentlemen] P.3



Creative Careers & Romance

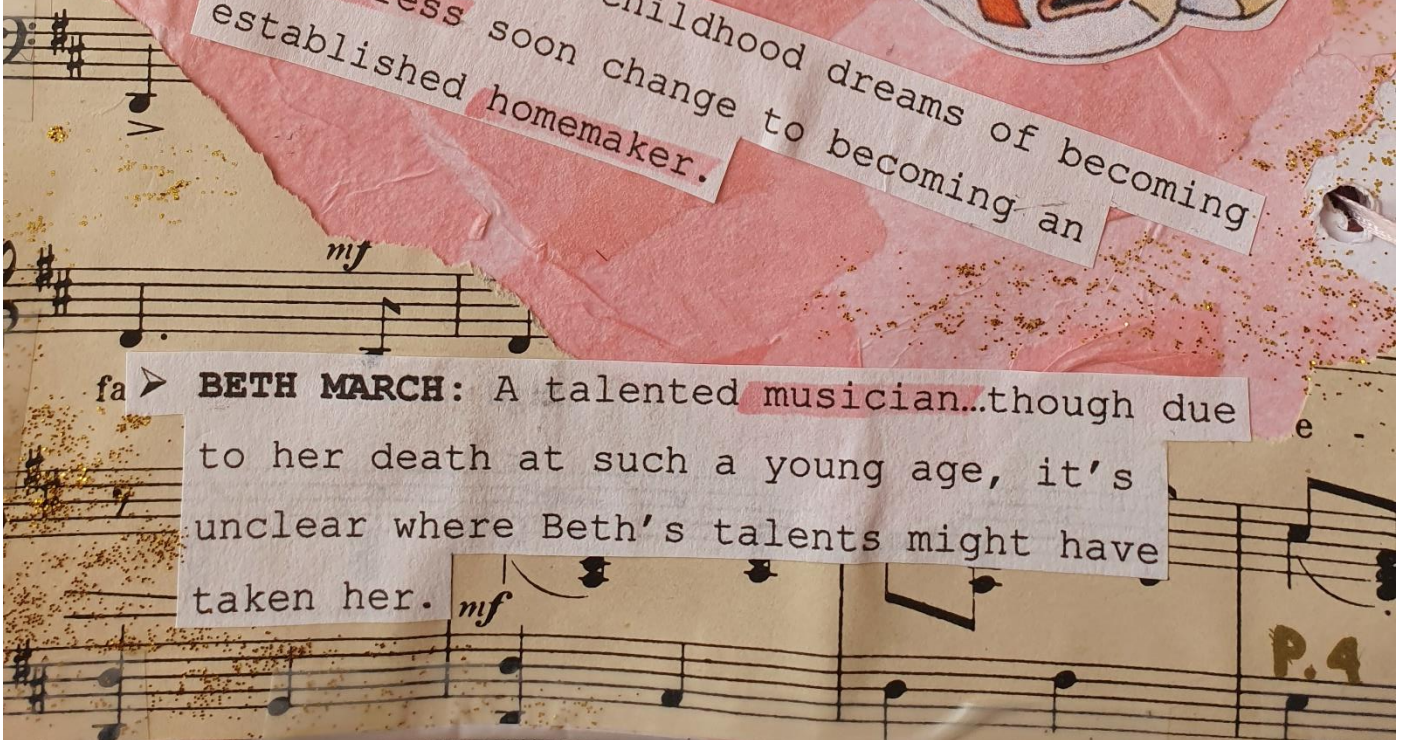
Little Women places a great deal of emphasis on the creative aspirations of each of the March sisters.

➤ **JO MARCH:** Wishes to become a famous writer.

➤ **AMY MARCH:** An adored painter, considered a genius above all others!

➤ **MEG MARCH:** Her childhood dreams of becoming an actress soon change to becoming an established homemaker.

fa ➤ **BETH MARCH:** A talented musician...though due to her death at such a young age, it's unclear where Beth's talents might have taken her.



Upon publishing the first volume of 'Little Women', set in the March's childhoods, L.M. Alcott found that a great many fans wrote to her asking all sorts of questions about who her characters might marry. Alcott desired that readers see beyond the March sister's youthful entanglements - her stories were all about women's creativity and aspirations, complex relationships and families, not just romance!

In altering the order that the story is told - beginning at the end of the first volume with the March's as young women, reflecting on their childhoods in golden tinted flashbacks - Gerwig is able to remove the distraction of asking who the characters might marry.

JO +
LAURIE
4 EVER?

Creative Careers & Romance



The audience is told from the very beginning of the story that Jo March (Saoirse Ronan) refused Theodore 'Laurie' Laurence's proposal (Timothée Chalamet), that Meg (Emma Watson) is already married, and there is a clear connection between Amy (Florence Pugh) and Laurie.



With questions of romance consciously set aside, a 'dislocation' from the original text, Gerwig puts renewed focus on the novel's themes - family, creative aspirations and complex female relationships.



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The Club of Geniuses

The film directly addresses troubling ideas surrounding 'the genius' and how the exclusionary practise of declaring 'genius' has negatively impacted upon women's creativity.

Throughout the narrative, Amy March has constantly been made to feel second best to her sister Jo in Laurie's affections and in her pursuit of her dreams of becoming a great artist.

In travelling through Europe with wealthy Aunt March, taking art classes when not searching for a rich husband to help keep her family from poverty, Amy has begun to doubt herself. She is told again and again that she is not in Europe to pursue her dreams - but to marry well.



After she begins to neglect
her art, Laurie confronts Amy
in the painting studio.

AMY

Rome took all the vanity out of me.
And Paris made me realize I'd never
be a genius. I'm giving up all my
foolish artistic hopes.

↑ Amy has been
dismissed by
male artists.

LAURIE

What women are allowed into the
club of geniuses anyway?

AMY

The Brontes?

LAURIE

That's it?

AMY

I think so.

SCENE ;
Inspired by Gerwig's
conversation with
Meryl Streep
about feminism
& industry.

LAURIE

And who always declares genius?

AMY

Well, men, I suppose.

LAURIE

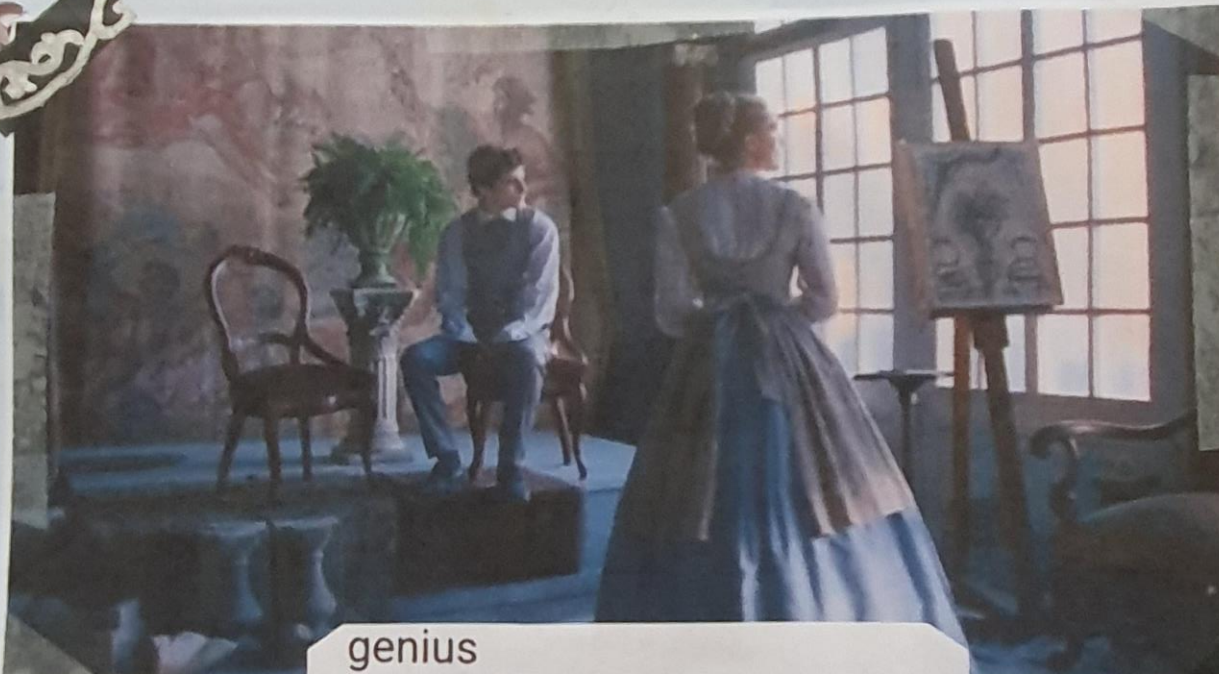
They're cutting down the
competition.

e.g.
Auteurs


AMY

That's a very complicated argument
to make me feel better.

This moment of 'dislocation' in *Little Women* - a scene added for the film, made more poignant by the setting of an art studio filled with Amy's many works of art that she cannot bare to look at - serves as a reminder of the ways in which women in creative fields have been historically refused the label of 'genius' or 'auteur'. Equally talented women have been, and often still are, made to feel second-rate in comparison to male creatives, their dreams shattered by dissolution.



genius

/ˈdʒiːniəs/ 

noun

1. exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability.

'she was a teacher of genius'

Through the narrative of Amy March, Gerwig makes clear that the ideology behind 'the genius' and 'the auteur' is rife with sexism, and deeply exclusionary.

poor and plain and prim, for the only chivalry worth having is that which is the readiest to pay deference to them regardless of rank, age, or color. They have helped you out of, the "tips" they have given you from their store, the stitch old feet have taken. Throughout *Little Women*, it gradually becomes apparent that the film is influenced by Jo March's telling of their story in her book. At the end of the film the truth of the narrative and Jo's fictional account begin to separate - and there are two distinct stories.

A Fractured Ending

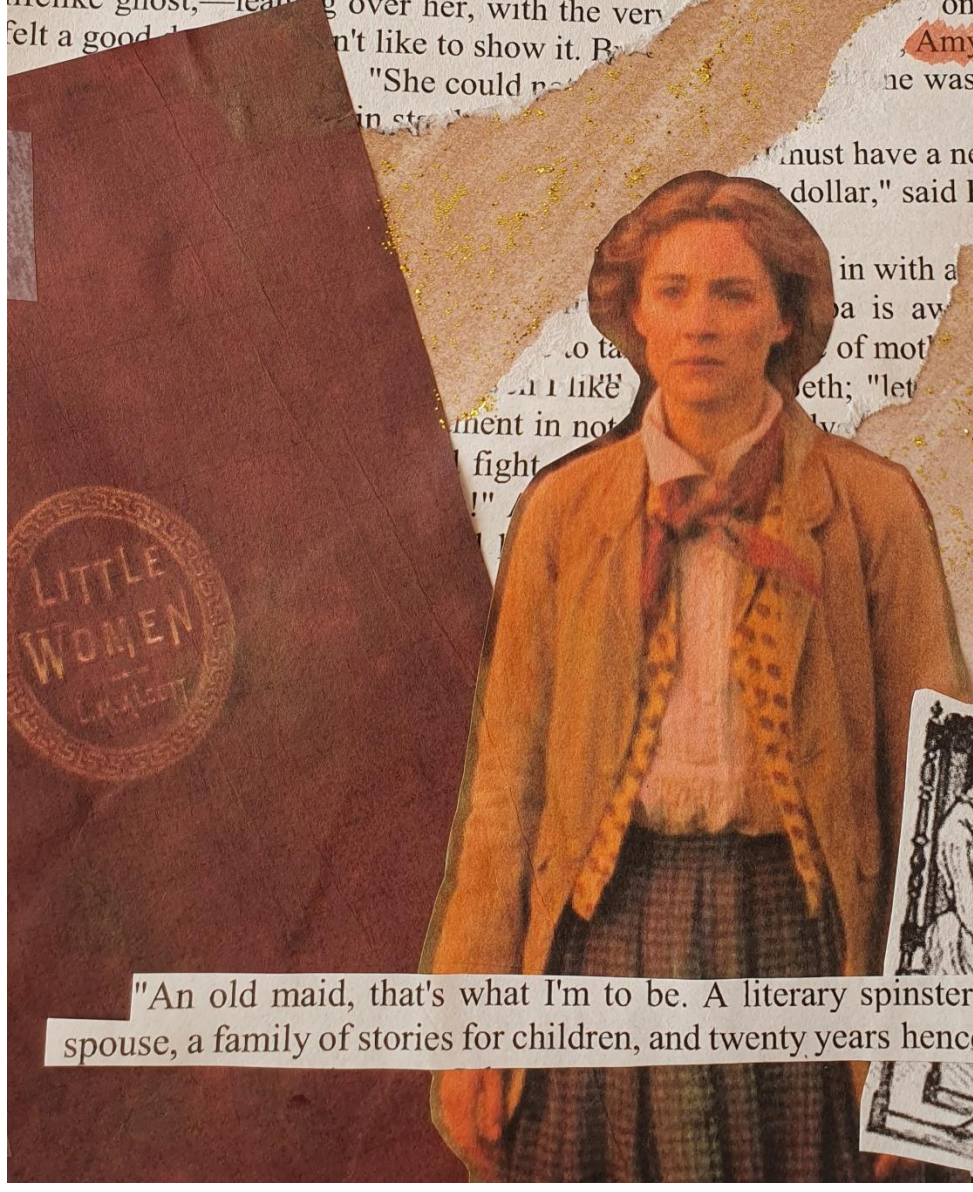
Jo must have fallen asleep (as I dare say my homily), for suddenly Laurie's ghost seemed to sit lifelike ghost,—leaning over her, with the very felt a good deal. "She could not like to show it. Beth put a pair of old shoes had a good effect. One brightened to welcome Amy got out of the easy-chair. He was as she sat up to hold the

"She could not like to show it. Beth put a pair of old shoes had a good effect. One brightened to welcome Amy got out of the easy-chair. He was as she sat up to hold the must have a new pair." "dollar," said Beth. in with a a is aw of mot Beth; "let ment in not fight

the bundles. Do vered Jo. to sit in the big chair w give the presents, wit l to have you sit toasting her face and

lives, and then surpr ther much to own, with old for s sing

"An old maid, that's what I'm to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame,





In one account of the events of the March Sisters, a rose-tinted reality, Jo March is reunited with the professor she met in New York City. They marry, and open a school together.

The other version of events, maintaining the blue-soaked hue that has followed the March sisters in their adult lives, shows us that Jo ~~never~~ marries, just as she swore. Instead, she has a fulfilling career as a published author, telling stories based on her life with her sisters.



Rose tinted scenes fade into the cover of Jo's novel, as she watches it assembled, and it becomes clear that this reality - Jo as an author - is the film's chosen ending.

The reason for this fractured ending is meta-textual, blurring the lines between Alcott and her protagonist.

Author L. M. Alcott, who's novels about the March sisters are inspired by her own family, was told that in order for her books to be published in the late 19th century she would have to make the stories fit the times' patriarchal ideology. Just as Jo is told by her publisher that her female characters must be "married or dead by the end", so was Alcott.

The film therefore splinters from the original ending to 'Little Women', contrasting the influenced version of events in which Jo becomes a "spinster" with the traditional version, in which Alcott was forced to make her marry.



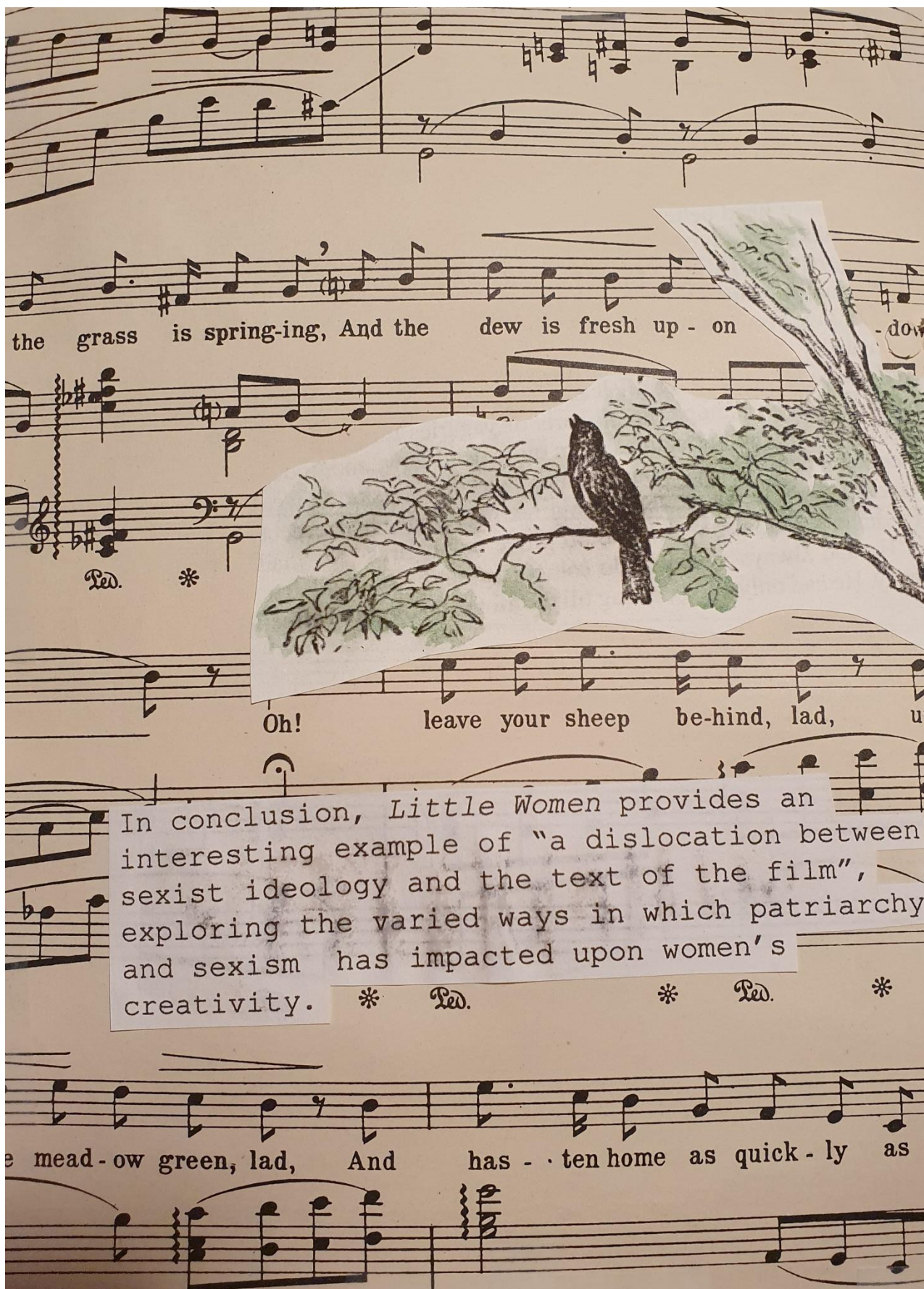
"Part of what I wanted to do was 150 years later give [Louisa May Alcott] an ending she might have liked. I thought if we can't do this now then we've really made no progress and we should all hang our heads."

Greta Gerwig



had a flashback of something that never existed

Gerwig's use of the framing device of Jo's novel highlights that Alcott's own story, her creative pursuits, were warped by the patriarchal ideology of the late Victorian era. The 2019 film's splintered and 'dislocated' ending remains true to Jo March in her desire never to marry, and faithful to Alcott's own wishes.



In conclusion, *Little Women* provides an interesting example of "a dislocation between sexist ideology and the text of the film", exploring the varied ways in which patriarchy and sexism has impacted upon women's creativity.

Filmography

Little Women. DVD. Directed by Greta Gerwig. 2019. Sony Pictures. 2020.



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Injeian, Emily. 'Little Women 2019 Ending Explained: Why the Big Change is Awesome'. *ScreenRant*, December 30 2019. <https://screenrant.com/little-women-movie-2019-ending-explained/>

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