Married or Dead: The Girl Next Door, Little Women, and Feminine Irrelevance

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Who is the girl next door? Picture one in your mind. What do you see? Is it a specific character? A generality? Can you imagine anyone at all? The girl next door is a classic character trope found in books, film, and television alike. But unlike other classic tropes such as the femme fatale or the blonde bombshell, the label is applied to real women just as frequently as fictional. From Taylor Swift to myself, women have been sorted into this nebulous category with equally nebulous implications. What does someone mean when they label you the girl next door? And what can that label mean? This paper begins with an exploration of the trope as it is currently understood by unpacking the traits and narrative implications of the character. It then goes on to explore how Louisa May Alcott’s magnum opus, *Little Women*, and its protagonist, Jo, build a blueprint to reconstruct on the narrow, patriarchal label. Finally, it considers how two of the film adaptations of the novel further expand on this reconstruction and consider the full possibility of the girl next door as a figure of empowerment rather than oppression.

1. Who Is the Girl Next Door

There is surprisingly little academic literature on the girl next door. In order to generate a definition for her, I had to take things into my own hands. I ended up conducting a
survey to glean how people actually thought about the girl next door. I wanted to know what space she occupied in the modern mind. My four questions asked respondents to consider what characters they considered to be girls next door, what traits they associated with the trope, what role she typically plays in a story, and how her storyline ends. I also pulled from internet articles and forums to examine what current discourse on the girl next door looked like. Trends quickly began to appear.

In describing the girl next door, certain traits arose over and over again. “Wholesome”, “sweet”, and “kind” were the terms most frequently used in relation to the girl next door in the survey results. She was also often described as attractive, but this attractiveness was often qualified as being non-threatening or benign, the terms “cute” and “pretty” being the most common. It was certainly never a sexualized attractiveness. In fact, sexuality was markedly absent from any description of the girl next door. The Tropedia page on the girl next door writes that she’s “not promiscuous, but might be a foil to one who is.” A survey respondent described that character as “only sexy on accident.” In fact, respondents often described the girl next door as “pure” or “innocent,” making her incapable of being intentionally sexy. Interestingly, respondents continuously described the girl next door as “plain,” “natural,” or “normal.” While only one respondent explicitly mentioned demographics in their response about traits, the characters listed when asked about the trope were overwhelmingly white and middle class.
In her video essay “The Pink Nipple Propaganda,” Tee Noir describes the girl next door as, “the humble nice girl who the male protagonist has always known, but never really paid attention to. Her humility and disinterest in sexual attention is eventually what makes her the perfect love interest and sexual partner” (00:13:24-39). Noir is exploring the trope alongside other classic depictions of white women in media under the male gaze. Alongside other archetypes such as the cool girl or the blonde bombshell, Noir notes the lack of sexual agency any of these types of women have and how their sexuality is determined by the men around them. She says, “it positions this woman’s sexuality as something that needs a chaperone. Something that she stumbles upon once the male interest is ready to engage with her sexually and/or something happens in the world...[it’s] not something born from her own desires.” (Noir 00:13:52-00:14:11). For the girl next door, this lack of agency is determined by a lack of interest or some sense of white patriarchal morality.

After sitting with this definition and the traits that frequently appeared in my survey, I began to notice a tendency for the girl next door to lack any substantive personality or definition. The traits used to describe her leave her relatively unremarkable in any sense. In other words, she is as neutral a figure as a woman or girl could possibly be. She is inherently unnoticeable; she has to blend in with the crowd. This also explains the tendency for the character to be white and middle class. In the American and European settings that the girl next door usually appears in, white and middle class are seen as the societal defaults. If she is white and middle class, it takes less effort to make her seem “normal” or “plain” within those societal contexts. The girl
next door’s tendency toward passivity further contributes to her neutrality. Traits like “sweet,” “innocent,” or “pretty” connote an individual who is acted upon, but very rarely takes action themselves. Without taking action, the girl next door further shies away from attention or remarkability. We can seek this passivity in Noir’s definition as well, where the girl next door is a love interest, but only when the male protagonist decides she is and not before. She never takes initiative and pursues him herself. She is simply waiting to be noticed.

Besides her general defining characteristics, the girl next door often occupies a certain narrative space. Most of the survey respondents, when asked to consider the role the girl next door plays in a typical narrative, the answers overwhelmingly placed her as a romantic interest, often a side character, and only occasionally the protagonist. Notably, she was never characterized as an antagonist. Additionally, when asked how her story ended, the most common response was in some form of a romantic relationship. This makes sense given her tendency to be a romantic interest. Returning to the Tropedia page, we learn that she is also frequently pitted against the sexualized female foil previously mentioned in a love triangle. The man in the love triangle then has to choose between sex and stability as represented by each of the women in a literalization of the Madonna/whore dichotomy. Of course, I would be remiss to not mention the origin of the girl next door’s title: her physical location being quite literally next door to the male protagonist. Being next door makes her easily known, but so familiar that she is overlooked, especially as a potential love interest. This is perhaps
why the name has stuck because even when she is not literally next door, she metaphorically is.

These narrative tendencies align with the traits previously ascribed to the girl next door. Her kind-heartedness and benign attractiveness make her unnoticeable but not unlikeable. It is not that the male protagonist cannot conceive of her being a love interest, but rather that it does not occur to him that she might be. This returns to the idea that she is unremarkable. It is also of note that the girl next door is primarily only viewed in a romantic context, given her tendency to be a romantic interest. Neither the survey nor various internet resources had much to offer about the girl next door outside of said context. She is not defined by any typical hobbies, interests, or ambitions like other typical female tropes, such as the femme fatale, the nerd, or even the popular girl. The entirety of her being, at least within the context of the story, is related back to how she can be of interest to the male protagonist.

This leaves us with characters who are girls next door. This was the question that elicited the most varied answers in my survey. That being said, one name did appear at a much higher frequency than any of the others: Betty Cooper of *The Archie Comics* (and later The CW’s *Riverdale*). Betty Cooper seems nearly synonymous with the girl next door. The *Tropedia* page uses her picture to represent the category and the love triangle mentioned is named after Betty and her friend/rival Veronica, who are both in pursuit of Archie’s affection. While Veronica comes from money and is constantly dressed fashionably with a flair for standing out, Betty dresses more plainly and shares a middle
class background with Archie. In the TV show adaptation, *Riverdale*, Betty actually is Archie’s neighbor—her bedroom window looks into his. In the comics, Archie does express interest in both Betty and Veronica but tends to choose Veronica over Betty when able. In fact, usually Archie only turns to Betty when Veronica has made herself unavailable to him. This can be seen in Fig. 1, where Betty seizes on a chance to capture Archie’s attention after Veronica leaves him for a different man. Seeing the two together makes Veronica realize what she is missing and takes Archie back, to his pleasure and Betty’s chagrin. This pattern is returned to time and time again by the comic book’s creators.

In building a definition for the girl next door, one thing strikes me: she consistently adheres to the patriarchal ideals of womanhood. The girl next door is never a threat to men. She enacts no agency in her sexuality and allows men to define it for her. She is agreeable and wholesome, therefore unlikely to push back against restrictive, or even abusive, aspects of the patriarchy. She is not too attractive and therefore garners no extra power through her looks. This is what makes her the perfect love interest, as Tee Noir points out. She is the
pinnacle of domesticity and safety that men can come home to. She is capable of being neutral because she is what society expects of womanhood, never betraying the basic forms of femininity as defined by the patriarchy.

2. *Little Women* and the Girl Next Door

Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* features not one, but a whole family of girls next door. However, I’m primarily interested in Jo and how her character arc redefines the trope. Jo fits the bill: white, middle-class, pretty, and even lives next door to love interests, not once, but twice. And yet, I dare say anyone would charge her with the banality presented in the girl next door’s definition. Instead, we get a passionate young woman with fierce desires and dreams for her futures. She is not complacent within her life as we often think of the girl next door, but rather an agent of change for both herself and the lives around her. Still, the application of the term applies and rather than wave her off, I would take this as an opportunity to examine how we might expand the girl next door’s definition and how we think of her.

One might argue that Jo March is a rebel or a tomboy rather than a girl next door, and I would accept that as a fair argument. However, I would ask that one consider that Jo’s tom-boyish behavior is kept mostly to her close friends and family. That is to say, if we had a more external view of her, rather than the intimate look Alcott provides into her world and machinations, would we still see her as the rebellious spirit we know and love?
For example, she is still at home in the world of domesticity. At one point it is made mention that she “took especial credit to herself that she could use a needle as well as a pen” (Alcott 287). This suggests that while writing may be her passion, she is still quite capable of fulfilling her domestic duties and takes pride in her skill at them at that.

As previously mentioned, the girl next door is the pinnacle of domesticity. Jo’s investment in domestic activities therefore aligns with the expectations of the character.

In the second half of the novel, Jo’s maturity blossoms into the girl next door role. Perhaps this is most clear in her relationship with her writing. Earlier in the novel, Jo enjoys writing dashing stories with knights and princesses. Entertainment and fun lie at the center of her passion. By the time we see her well and truly interacting with the publishing world, her goals have changed. Despite being able and willing to write the sensational pieces asked of her by Mr. Dashwood for the “Weekly Volcano,” Jo originally intends to write pieces with moral commentary and development. She protests to Dashwood, “’But, sir, I thought every story should have some sort of moral, so I took care to have a few of my sinners repent” (Alcott 347). Her earlier wild passion for writing melds with a more mature passion to do good in the world, to be a good influence. This aligns with the girl next door’s tendency to be wholesome and perhaps even innocent. When she is unable to publish works that live up to her moral standard, she is eventually persuaded to give up her writing altogether by her future husband, Professor Bhaer (355). Even in the brief interlude when she agrees to write sensationalist works, she refuses to attach her name to the pieces for fear of what her family might think (349). Her passion flames out and she chooses to be respectable and
stand a moral ground, rather than chase her dreams at any cost. Even when she chooses to write she hides it away, suggesting, once again, that her rebellious, passionate spirit is only for those closest to her to know.

Jo’s relationship to love and marriage is where her girl next door identity is most complex. The girl next door is a romantic figure and Jo spends most of the novel running away from romance. In most books, we would expect her intimate friendship with Laurie to end in a marriage in good old friends-to-lovers. In fact, most of the characters, including Laurie, expect this ending, and yet Jo is not satisfied by the idea of her life ending in marriage. In her many protestations against his proposal, she tells Laurie, “I don’t believe I shall ever marry; I’m happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man” (Alcott 365). Notably, at this point in the novel she had already met Professor Bhaer, who she will later marry. In fact, Jo is hesitant to give into any romantic persuasions until the penultimate chapter of the novel when she goes after Bhaer.

But here is where I protest that the girl next door is a romantic figure by her own right. The girl next door’s own feelings towards romance are negligible so long as a man is romantically interested in her. Jo draws the romantic attention of not one, but two different men over the course of the novel. Notably these are also men who she quite literally lives next door to. Laurie is her neighbor at home in Concord and Professor Bhaer lives in the same house as her in New York. It is their desire for her that entrenches her as a girl next door because it demonstrates that her external value in the
world of *Little Women* still suggests domestic appeal. While we as readers might recognize that Laurie romanticizes her to fit his vision of marriage and that Bhaer tames her into that vision, it is implied that the complexities that prevent Jo from desiring marriage are not visible in the same way to those around her as they are to those who get to read her inner thoughts. When we reconsider the girl next door’s agency as a romantic figure, we create space for depth and variation in her character.

What interests me most about Jo, however, is her anger. I would argue that much of Jo’s character arc is anchored in her overcoming her zealous temper and outbursts to become a moderated and mature woman by the end of the novel. Towards the beginning of the novel, Jo’s capacity for ire and ability to hold a grudge leads to Amy nearly drowning. After the accident, a remorseful Jo laments to Marmee, “It’s my dreadful temper. I try to cure it; I think I have, and then it breaks out worse than ever” (Alcott 79). Marmee comforts Jo with her own struggles with anger at her age, and her continued struggles. “I’ve been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so” (79). Jo’s desire to overcome her temper and Maumee’s anecdote about her own add depth to the girl next door’s definition, rather than contradict it. Jo and Marmee ultimately end their stories as domestic figures, much as the girl next door does. But because *Little Women* presents us with their internal landscapes and journeys, we are able to see that the sweet, agreeable domesticity characteristic of the girl next door is not necessarily a natural state of being.
3. Evolution in Film

Two film adaptations of *Little Women* have hit theaters since the second-wave feminist movement: Gillian Armstrong’s 1994 adaptation and Greta Gerwig’s 2019 adaptation. Each belongs to its own feminist wave: Armstrong’s to third-wave and Gerwig’s to fourth-wave. As with all cinematic adaptations, these adaptations take artistic liberty with the source material. That being said, both films stay relatively faithful to the original story as far as plot is concerned. Gerwig’s is the most notably different in her decision to follow a non-linear timeline, although the events of the timeline are still, for the most part, the same as they are in the novel. It is in the more subtle differences, however, that we discover a modern take on the girl next door that pushes Alcott’s vision into the twenty-first century.

Armstrong’s version of *Little Women* is quite obviously a product of its time. Gone are any of Alcott’s progressive subtleties in favor of staunch, outspoken feminism. Take for example, Marmee, who at one-point states in response to Mr. Brooke’s passive aggressive note about her daughter’s level of rambunctious activity: “It’s my opinion that young girls are no different than boys in their need for exertion. Feminine weakness and fainting spells are the direct result of our confining young girls to the house bent over their needlework in restrictive corsets” (Armstrong 00:20:06-16). Not only does she directly confront a man about his view on the proper roles of women, but she does so through the condemnation of a garment closely associated with the constraint of patriarchal values—the corset. In the novel, Marmee is never so blatantly quote-on-
quote feminist. One of the great talents in Alcott’s writing is her tender hand for character complexity, which I would argue is sometimes best exemplified in Marmee. Marmee is constantly straddling her desire for her girls to follow their passions, such as Jo’s writing, but is also aware of the dangers in entirely ignoring one’s place in society. This delicate balance can be seen in Marmee’s decision to remove Amy from school after she is violently reprimanded by her male teacher. She tells Amy, “I am not very sorry you lost [the limes], for you broke the rules, and deserved some punishment for disobedience . . . I should not have chosen that way of mending a fault . . . but I’m not sure that it won’t do you more good than a milder method” (Alcott 70). Here, Marmee shows her complexity in desiring her daughters be treated well by the world, but also agreeing that there are parameters to how they are to behave. Armstrong’s adaptation does away with this balance in order to make a staunch moral position about how women should behave in society. In it, Marmee is a feminist through and through and that is the lens through which she raises her daughters.

Jo is equally a victim of the film’s reductionist tendencies. The anger that I pointed out is so crucial to Jo’s complexity is nearly entirely erased in Armstrong’s adaptation. In her paper, “Louisa May Alcott’s ‘Magic Inkstand’: Little Women, Feminism, and the Myth of Regeneration,” Linda Grasso points out that Jo faces almost no internal struggles as a character (181). The scene previously mentioned where Marmee and Jo commiserate over their tempers is nowhere to be found. Professor Bhaer never attempts to censurate Jo and actively works to not condescend to her. Jo never shows explicit interest in the world of domesticity. All of her complexity, the very
complexity that made her such a fascinating example of the girl next door is gone. As Grasso puts it, the adaptation takes liberty with “its heady eradication of all the tensions, conflicts, ambiguities, and paradoxes that feminist literary scholars now recognize as the paradigmatic encapsulation of the white, middle-class, nineteenth-century writing woman’s dilemma” (180). The movie, in what could be argued to be an attempt to ‘fix’ the story, actually works to reduce its characters as the girl next door trope often does, just in a different manner. What makes Little Women so brilliant is Alcott’s ability to embrace the dilemmas women and girls constantly face when choosing between their own desires and societal expectations. While Armstrong’s adaptation might position the women as better feminists, it is still a reduction of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a girl next door.

Greta Gerwig’s adaptation is considerate of the societal advances of feminism, yet still maintains the character complexity that makes Little Women a renowned attestation of what it means to grow up female. This is seen in her development of Amy’s character. Rather than being relinquished as the bratty younger sister as Armstrong’s adaptation leaves her, Amy is shown primarily as an adult, who is carefully balancing her love of painting with her desire to live a comfortable life. In a monologue inspired by Laurie critiquing her decision to marry for money instead of love, she says, “I’m just a woman. And as a woman I have no way to make money, not enough to earn a living and support my family. Even if I had my own money, which I don’t, it would belong to my husband the minute we were married. If we had children, they would belong to him, not me. They would be his property. So don’t sit there and tell me that marriage isn’t an
economic proposition, because it is. It may not be for you, but it most certainly is for me” (Gerwig 01:05:47-01:06:21). This monologue, and indeed this scene, strikes at the heart of Gerwig’s adaptation: women can have an incredible breadth of desires and dreams, but very little recourse to actually achieve them, and because of this, women are forced to make difficult decisions about how they choose to move through the world.

Where Armstrong’s *Little Women* feels like a feminist fairy tale, complete with stock characters and ignorance of reality, Gerwig carries on the weight of *Little Women* that at once made it controversial and massively appealing.

Gerwig’s true success is her take on Jo. Unlike Armstrong who reduced her to a token feminist, Gerwig continues to honor Alcott’s vision of Jo as a passionate woman with little interest in romantic pursuits. She included the exchange between Jo and Marmee about temper that Armstrong left out, but then pushes the envelope even further. Repeatedly throughout the film, Jo expresses sentiments of wishing she, her sisters, and Laurie could all just remain friends forever, without marriage getting in the way. This is felt most poignantly towards the end of the movie when Jo expresses regret in turning down Laurie’s marriage proposal, a scene not found in the book. She laments to Marmee, “Women have minds and souls as well as hearts, ambition and talent as well as beauty and I’m sick of being told that love is all a woman is fit for. But... I am so lonely” (Gerwig 01:42:32-53). This moment highlights both Jo’s internal conflict surrounding marriage but also demonstrates that she still retains her passion. She has still matured certainly, but her maturity does not come at the expense of her capacity to express her frustrations. She is still angry, but she has learned to direct that anger
towards issues that hold her back, rather than lash out at those around her. As a girl next door, Jo establishes that one can desire domesticity and marriage under the right circumstances, but she can also retain her capacity to express herself even when it might be controversial. She maintains a desire to be a person, a full complex human being.

Gerwig honors this best in the ending of the film. As the film reaches its conclusion, Gerwig begins to blend Jo’s character with Alcott’s own publishing story. This honors Alcott’s wishes for her character that she was unable to achieve in the era when she published and the fact that Alcott based Jo’s character on herself. In the *New York Times* article “This Is ‘Little Women’ for a New Era,” Jessica Bennett points out that Alcott wished for Jo not to marry but caved to pressure from fans (para. 14). Notably, Alcott herself never married. Gerwig leaves Jo’s relationship status surprisingly vague. She includes conflicting scenes where Jo is seen opening the school with Bhaer and in another telling Mr. Dashwood that the protagonist marries neither man at the end of her book (with the implication that the protagonist is her). The open-endedness leaves the viewer wondering if Jo gets married like she does in the novel or if she retains her independence like Alcott did. Additionally, Gerwig shows Jo continuing to write and eventually publishing *Little Women* further synthesizing Jo and Alcott’s storylines. Bennett points out that Jo successfully negotiates a contract with Mr. Dashwood that allows her to retain the work's copyright as Alcott did (para. 35). In blending Jo with a diegetic Alcott, Gerwig reaches the final evolution of the girl next door: a real living breathing woman full of complexity, ambition, and desire, not just a stock character for a man to fall back on.
4. Conclusion

At the beginning of Greta Gerwig’s adaptation, Jo March is told by her publisher that “if the main character’s a girl, make sure she’s married by the end. Or dead” (00:03:51-57). This is exemplary of the radical reduction of girlhood perpetuated by the girl next door’s colloquial definition. To consider the girl next door as a means to an end rather than her own category of livelihood is where the original definition of this character begins to fail. It makes her irrelevant to her own story. This is what Alcott and Gerwig so delightfully push back against. They let the girl next door be the main character. They let her have dreams and ambitions. As I previously mentioned, the girl next door as she is currently understood is a patriarchal ideal. Jo’s anger and lack of matrimonial interest threaten that ideal. Women certainly are taught to hide their anger. As Laurie Penny points out in her essay “Most Women You Know Are Angry,” “boys learn to disguise their hurt and vulnerability as anger–girls, all too often, learn the opposite” (680). Women and girls are conditioned not to be angry because it threatens the foundations of patriarchy. As Penny goes on to point out, anger is a response to injustice (681), an experience all too common for women around the world. We learn to stifle that response to make sure men continue to feel “safe and unthreatened” and maintain our “attractiveness” (681). Jo teaches us that we can still be ordinary women or the very embodiment of girlhood while still feeling, and better yet, expressing the full range of our emotions–especially our anger.

If the girl next door is to be the average, everyday understanding of a girl, we must reconsider what that looks like in order to erase the patriarchal undertones from our society. A woman whose life is not centered around marriage is not extraordinary. A
woman who is angry is certainly not extraordinary. As the continued popularity of *Little Women* and Jo March highlight, these are actually quite common female experiences. They are at the epitome of girlhood. They don’t make our stories any less worthy of the space they take up. They don’t make us less complex or less desirable. In actuality, they make us human.

I do want to make space, however, to acknowledge that this paper has by no means finished rewriting the girl next door’s narrative. While it certainly has addressed the patriarchal constraints on the girl next door, it has not addressed the tendency for the girl next door to be white and middle class and therefore holding up racial and socio-economic power structures. This also needs to change. This is especially true when considering aspects of girlhood and femininity related to anger and romance. As Tee Noir points out in her video, that while “black women are in some way challenging notions of purity, [they] are seldom credited for deconstructing it because the idea of purity never included [black women] to begin with” (00:10:13-31). If we are reconsidering how the girl next door relates to modern romance culture, we have to consider how intersectionality challenges the purity culture deeply entrenched in it. Furthermore, as Penny points out that society views white women’s anger very differently than women of color’s. She writes, “white women come across as “fiery” or “feisty,” which doesn’t hold true for women of other races.” An intersectional consideration of the girl next door must consider how we as a society can reconcile divergent views of feminine anger dependent on race. If the girl next door is to represent a default form of girlhood, then all girls need to be able to see themselves as the girl next door.
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