

New Horizons in English Studies 5/2020

## LITERATURE



Łucja Kalinowska

NICOLAUS COPERNICUS UNIVERSITY IN TORUŃ

LUCJAKALINOWSKA97@GMAIL.COM

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0001-5179-6211](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5179-6211)

---

# Searching for the Self: Transcendentalist Ideas as an Inspiration for American Teenagers in *Little Women* by Gillian Armstrong and *Paper Towns* by John Green

**Abstract.** This paper examines two American works of fiction concerning how teenage characters explore and manifest their identity, looking up to transcendentalist ideas, whether consciously or not. The paper puts forth the most individualistic protagonists and investigate their motivation, ways of escaping the society's expectations and the interaction between them and their environment. The first source analyzed: the film *Little Women* directed by Gillian Armstrong tells the story of the March family living in the 1860s Concord, influenced by the spirit of transcendentalism. The second source discussed: John Green's novel *Paper Towns* employs the notion of a character coming back to transcendentalist values and authors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper shows how the teenagers use the transcendentalist ways, whether they are aware of them, and defy the rules of the society frequently represented by the people in their closest environment.

**Keywords:** transcendentalism, individualism, identity, teenagers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau

## Introduction

Transcendentalism is a notion which seems very attractive to individualistic young people at the verge of adulthood (Andrews 2017, 143). This philosophy supports the view that one's own idea of a good life is valid, and it is an idea that comes from with-

in, thriving in the youngsters' minds as opposed to the older generations (Emerson and Porte 1983, 201). Transcendentalism puts emphasis on being independent, which is what the teens seek the most when they enter the stage of shaping their individuality. Their parents often let them know that the offspring is never the one that should make decisions and act like they know what will bring them prosperity and contentment, while transcendentalist authors claim that the person's inherent judgment of the good and the bad is sufficient to make choices for oneself. In the selected works of American culture, American teenagers resort to transcendentalist ideas to explore and manifest their identity. This occurs in the film *Little Women* (1994) directed by Gillian Armstrong and the novel, *Paper Towns* (2008), written by John Green.

Both stories have been dramatized cinematically; however, the written stories differ from each other significantly in terms of their tone and focus. Admittedly, the story in *Paper Towns* by Green is much simpler than in *Little Women* by Alcott, and although not being any less meaningful, it does not involve many characters and is focused mostly on one task: finding Margo. As distinct from that, the story in the literary version of *Little Women* is much more complex and tells a much longer story, while the film is more concise, focused on Jo, portrayed brilliantly by Winona Ryder. The tone of the film might be very blatant in some scenes; however, I find it to be the most suitable adaptation of the story, highlighting exactly these qualities of Jo which I wanted to point out. Jo's enthusiasm in the film, gathered in a dose of the two hours the picture lasts, is as intense as Margo's determination in the book. The only film adaptation of *Paper Towns*, although it did receive favorable reviews as a standalone picture, did not stress the importance of the analysis of Whitman's work in Quentin's quest to not only physically find Margo, but to understand her (Ross 2015). As a result, the main theme relevant to this paper was omitted in the film, which is why I decided to analyze the original story of *Paper Towns*.

Individualism comes forth as an American concept which has had a significant influence on the spirit of the nation throughout its history (Bellah et al. 1985, 1991). Its contribution to the grandeur of the American freedom is unquestionable: it was the first truly American movement, taking inspiration from the European thought, but adding to it a newfound optimism. Bellah (1985, 143) defines transcendentalist individualism as "ontological" where "the self is the only real thing in the world." Maxwell (2017, 145) points out to the idea of self-reliance, which should be interpreted "not [as] autonomy, but authenticity," entrusting individuals with a distinct capacity of listening to their own inner voices. Moreover, transcendentalists are now well-known for being early propagators for women's rights, education reforms and the abolition of slavery, for they believed that all these problems could be alleviated with the society sharing their will to introduce changes (Wayne 2014, 9).

The Americans do remember what legacy these individualistic transcendentalists left; however, in my opinion, the original transcendentalist form of individualism has been largely lost, especially the spiritual aspects of it, as well as the will to retain the balance between the society and the individual. Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau, tra-

ditionally known as the transcendentalist trinity comprised of the philosopher, the poet and the activist respectively, have remained on a pedestal, but their philosophy has been simplified and adjusted to the needs of the modern worldviews (Sławek 2009). The transcendentalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century put forth the inherent goodness of an individual which can only be regained through self-reliance, and employed the notion of civil disobedience as a way of nonconformity. The fundamental principles of these ideas originated in German romanticism and idealism, largely influenced by the works of Immanuel Kant, who, replying to Locke's skeptical philosophy, argued that the mind does not only acquire experience through the senses, but through "intuitions of the mind itself" (Emerson and Porte 1983, 198). Upon the forming of the Transcendental Club in Cambridge, transcendentalism became associated with a cohesive group of followers of the idea of self-reliance, who emphasized the importance of rife spirituality unassociated with traditional societal structures (Worley 2001, 3). Even at the time of its flourishing, transcendentalism encountered obstacles and opposing attitudes, which made it almost impossible for its followers to fully employ it and wholly live by it, with all the existing innate ties of the individual and the society. Still, the individual was a model of perfection, and the balance of one's individualism and social life was an issue many tried to solve, yet it seems that it remained unsolved (Worley 2001, 11).

This occurs in the film *Little Women* from 1994 directed by Gillian Armstrong.. Based on Louisa May Alcott's novel of the same title, written in 1868, the movie showcases how four teenage sisters of utterly different characters are influenced by the spirit of the epoch and the mode of upbringing adopted by their parents. It is a story of the March family based in Concord, of which the parents are invested in the town's transcendentalist circle. The family meets obstacles as the father goes to Civil War and his wife and four daughters need to support each other and rely on their affluent relatives' financial help. The foundation of transcendentalist ideas imbued by their parents aids the four girls in grounding their purpose and remaining true to themselves.

A modern example of teenagers consciously using the transcendentalist heritage as a model for individualization among the crowds and against the expectations of the society is *Paper Towns*, a novel written by John Green in 2008. It tells the story of Quentin, a regular teenager infatuated with his neighbor, an exceptional girl named Margo, whom he used to be friends with. Unexpectedly, Quentin is taken by her on the last adventure in their hometown, Orlando, the night before she escapes for good, leaving him clues for where she is going in Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*. He not only wants to find her, but also uses the poem to try to understand her motives and finds out more about the real Margo rather than the one whom he imagined.

In these stories, the American teenagers explore and manifest their identity, looking up to transcendentalist ideas, whether consciously or not. The component of transcendentalism, with its ideal of authenticity and a desire of self-fulfillment, sets these young characters apart from the ordinary teenage "rebels without a cause" (cf. films: *The Breakfast Club* (1986), *Heathers* (1989), *Thirteen* (2003), *Spring Breakers* (2013)). The protagonists of *Little Women* and *Paper Towns* approach the trajectories

of their lives as dependent primarily upon them until the society puts them into fixed roles, which is why they feel the need to act before it happens. Determined to remain true to their own originality and never lose touch with their inner voices, each of them uses the heritage of transcendentalism in different ways and with different attitudes. Their stories provide ground for seeing how transcendentalism functions among the youngsters across centuries, which will be demonstrated in this article.

### ***Little Women* (Gillian Armstrong, 1994)**

In the years of the greatest prominence of the transcendentalist movement (1836 – 1860), it was appealing to various age groups, with the older adherents non-intrusively guiding the youth. American colleges were the center of this, as Ralph Waldo Emerson (Emerson and Porte 1983, 59) declares in *The American Scholar* that “they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create” and are supposed to “set the hearts of their youth on flame.” Higher education was of tremendous importance, yet first, and perhaps, more importantly, these were the parents who brought up their children according to transcendentalist values, allowing them to better themselves in every possible way and make their own life choices. This enormous encouragement towards seeking their own genius enabled youngsters to truly become individualists and not to give in to the lure of following the set patterns.

The notion of transcendentalist ideas passed on by the parents to the young generation on the verge of adulthood is very much present in the Oscar-nominated 1994 movie adaptation of the book *Little Women*, written in 1868 by Louisa May Alcott. The film, directed by Gillian Armstrong, strongly addresses the importance of the treatment of individual traits and objectives, telling a story of the rather unwealthy March family, especially focusing on the dreams and struggles of Jo, one of the four sisters in the household. The parents of the March girls are a part of “a rather unusual circle in Concord” (Armstrong 1994), meaning the transcendentalists. Concord holds importance as the beloved hometown of the March family, where, after its members are apart traveling for various reasons, the clan always reunites. The viewer is reminded of this deeper meaning several times throughout the film, even by a potentially trivial activity, like ice-skating, which contributes to the picture of the people being entrenched in the setting by taking place on the frozen Walden Pond, after which Henry David Thoreau named his memoir. Concord town was, indeed, home for one of the most significant communities of transcendentalist philosophers, thus, it becomes vividly apparent how invested the March family is in the philosophy of transcendentalism, additionally helping the next generation to achieve the objectives of the movement as well.

The family is, admittedly, not perpetually elated. As the Civil War breaks out, the father joins the Northern troops, forced to leave his wife and daughters at home until the end of the war. However, through this hardship, the bond between Marmee – their mother – and the four daughters becomes even stronger, as they all learn to keep up the

positive attitude in their daily struggles. Nevertheless, even growing so close together, the girls have their own ideas about the path they should navigate in their lives, while Marmee expects them only to lead meaningful and useful lives (Laire 2008, 24). The youngest one, Amy, is an aspiring painter who wants to marry a rich man. Elisabeth "Beth," is musically talented and plays the piano, however, what she lacks is a properly functioning instrument and excellent health. She dies in her teenage years, leaving her family in mourning. Josephine "Jo" wants to fulfill her dreams of a writing career, once lucrative and reserved rather for men than women. Margaret "Meg" is enraptured by the idea of marrying a kind, humble man who would appreciate her impeccable manners and considerate heart.

Jo, the most prominent character of *Little Women*, "the heroine of the novel" (Laire 2008, 26) sinks in the spirit of transcendental individualism more than any other figure from the family, and this sinking in holds differing results. She challenges others' convictions and exceeds the restraints of refined behavior, thus nettling those who regard it highly, at the same time being adored by them. Perhaps, it is impossible to be indifferent to Josephine, "the much beloved little woman" (Laire 2008, 26), because she is so outspoken and loud. She defies the rules, despises dresses and gloves, talks while eating, sits on a desk as if it was a bench, and sneaks out from lavish parties not to be compelled to dance. When she meets her family's neighbor, Laurie, in an alcove to which she snuck into, they both laugh at the forced manners of the celebrating crowd. As they mock the dancing, she admits that she does not know the ladies' part due to the fact that Meg always takes it when they dance. As Alcott (1868, 6) describes her characters, Jo is "dying to go and fight with Papa" and likes "boy's games and work and manners." It is apparent that she would most certainly prefer to be a man, which is the reason for her immense individualism.

The most crucial feature of Jo, and one that determines her life, is that she is an excellent writer, dreaming about living in New York City and publishing her stories in the most renowned magazines. Her genius is implied to be the only real genius among all the talents that the young characters have: Amy's painting and Laurie's music do not emerge as one of a kind; Beth's love for the piano quickly dies with her. It is Jo who seems to be so engrossed in her potential prospects that no other idea of a future is captivating enough to consider it substantial. She holds a strong faith in her abilities to become who she has always wanted to be without giving in to what her relatives regard as appropriate for a lady. Somewhat radically, in the transcendentalist fashion, Jo chooses to be tuned into her stream of consciousness and independent from the material involvement (Natanson 1962, 45).

Having been brought up among the transcendentalists in Concord, Josephine is imbued with the magnetic ideas of individualism. Therefore, she adopts the manners, longings and objectives which seem the most attractive to her and transpire to shape her views into those of a man. Indubitably, Jo's mother and father still support their daughter, whereas her sisters do not understand where her manners come from. She is the most unruly of them, frequently embarrassing them by her behavior which seems

to transgress their epoch. By living in a world governed by her “attitudes and interpretations” of reality, she makes herself seem strange and uncanny to her sisters (Natan-son 1962, 61).

This unique aura of Jo becomes the reason for Laurie’s infatuation with her. At the beginning of the story, she is only interested in him as an object of her imagery, as she speculates if he is “a captive” of his grandfather, a boy with a “tragic, European secret.” The fact that he was born in Italy, on the Old Continent, and is inextricably linked to Europe arouses Jo’s imagination, as she already perceives Europe as an infinitely inspiring, mythical place. After developing assumptions about Laurie, she learns what he is really like and all the sisters grow close to him, as if adopting him as a brother. Jo, preoccupied with creating stories, does not develop romantic feelings for anyone, not even Laurie. To Amy’s remarks about “the boy,” she responds “He isn’t a boy, he’s Laurie!” At the same time, Laurie develops much stronger feelings for Jo. He selects a rather unsuitable moment to confess his love: right after Meg gets married, bringing Jo to dismay. She definitely does not wish to marry; moreover, she is aware of the fact that having the financial means to live a sumptuous life might lead her to idleness and dissatisfaction. Her immense urge towards individualism prevents her from settling for his proposal. She makes the decision that might break Laurie’s heart; however, she wants to remain true to herself and seek what she has always wanted. Moreover, Laurie does not impress her with how reconciled he is with the loss of his dream of pursuing a career in music: he is repressed by his grandfather who requires him to go to college. While Jo dreams of college education, Laurie does not want it, but he never rebels against it. Josephine wishes that he would fight for his dreams, which is another reason for rejecting his proposal. Her individuality does not inspire him: fearful of the judgment of the society, he chooses reason over desire (Worley 2001, 9).

If Laurie could become individualistic only to convince a girl to accept his proposal, he is utterly the reverse to Jo. Until she lets go of a part of her ardent ideas, she does not feel the need to be cherished, and eventually grows to care to be loved (Alcott 1868, 768). After Meg’s wedding and Laurie’s proposal, she “just knows” she will “never fit in anywhere,” which prompts her to start anew in New York City. Soon after arriving, she develops a bond with professor Friedrich Bhaer, a scholar from Berlin who compares transcendentalists to German romanticists. The rather poor tutor that he has become after arriving in America proves to be indispensable to Jo’s new understanding of the movement. Their conversation on the transcendentalist notion of perfecting oneself in Walt Whitman’s fashion sparks Jo’s interest in Friedrich. She opens up about feeling like she is not good enough, like she is “hopelessly flawed,” to which Friedrich responds “I think we are all hopelessly flawed” and advances to say that perfection might be redundant in transcending oneself. Further, reading Jo’s stories and becoming enchanted by her, he attempts to tell her that those stories do not seem to come from her heart. After parting ways, Josephine grows to understand what “her professor” (Alcott 1868, 824) meant by these words. This close relationship with the wise scholar is a turning point, amplified by Beth’s death. Jo becomes more aware



of her own feelings, allowing herself to mourn the loss of both Friedrich and Beth. She looks deeply into what she has been experiencing and embarks on writing a book of a new kind: about her family, as a therapy for grief. She publishes the book under her own name, not concealing as a man, putting her raw self into the world at last and contributing to the growing number of female authors (Knight 2003, 12). Being on her own in New York and meeting professor Bhaer alters her unruly individualistic self to be more mature than manifesting herself by boyish behavior, even though she still “refuses to obey the silly rules a lady was expected to respect” (Laire 2008, 28).

There are numerous approaches towards individualism that the characters in *Little Women* apply, but what they have in common is that they are all influenced by the transcendentalist spirit of the March family. The parents play a tremendous role in their daughters’ upbringing, yet what comes next depends on the young women’s individual traits and their desires. They do struggle to achieve their objectives, being open to the wild, narrow path or the well-defined road. As the characters mature, they learn not only to live accordingly to themselves, but also in harmony with others, managing to balance their individualism and the love for their family and friends.

### ***Paper Towns* (John Green, 2008)**

Transcendentalism has held importance as a part of the American heritage; however, the sole philosophy did not reform the society as thoroughly as the Transcendental Club’s founders wished, thriving in the newborn American democracy (Walls 2017, 12). This is vividly seen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the majority of people live according to a common blueprint of achieving success and not to their own idea of self-fulfillment, even though the narrow-mindedness of the population is thought to have decreased. Among the youth, there appear fresh ideas that are strikingly similar to those proposed by transcendentalism. When looking for an expression of this trend in the sumptuous abundance of young adult fiction available on the market in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Paper Towns*, written by John Green in 2008, distinguishes itself by the engagement of a character who finds reassurance in the transcendentalist philosophy and literature.

The novel’s action takes place mainly in the suburbs of Orlando, Florida, in a fictional subdivision called Jefferson Park, which consists of a large number of houses looking exactly the same, lined along cul-de-sacs. The city is portrayed as a fragile, artificial formation full of consumerist people “demented with the mania of owning things” (Green 2013, 57). Among these neighborhoods lives Quentin “Q” Jacobsen, an ordinary eighteen-year-old boy who has an immense crush on his neighbor, a much unordinary girl named Margo Roth Spiegelman. She establishes a plan of escaping from home but takes Quentin on one last adventure before she disappears and leaves him clues on where she has gone, thereby taking him on an adventure of a new kind.

The Jacobsen and Spiegelman families are friends who often spend their free time together and seem to live in neighborly peace. In each family, however, the model of

upbringing is utterly different. Quentin's parents are therapists working with troubled youth and are able to put their work experience into raising their son, as a consequence making him rather content with them and not giving him reasons for any sort of teenage rebellion (Green 2013, 80). Quentin trusts them and tends to be more honest with them than other characters are with their parents. This attitude towards his parents translates also onto his frankness towards other adults and reliability on them: he seeks support of his English teacher and is not afraid to tell a detective everything that he knows to help solve the case of Margo's disappearance instead of keeping all the secrets to himself.

Margo is being brought up by parents who gropingly try to have some sort of control over her and her sister. They use methods of dubious efficacy, evoking Jacobsens' concerns about the actual reason for Margo's defiance, which is thought to simply be contrariness; however, it may lie somewhere else. They might not be the main trigger for her disillusionment with the quality of her life in Orlando, but their attitude towards their daughter seems to be the bottom line of her attention craving in the first place (Green 2013, 106). The heroine does not feel loved by her parents: she barely notices them, trying to ignore their ideals of living by a common scheme and not striving for something greater than the mediocre, suburban life. She feels that they only show support to her when she does everything to please them (Green 2013, 297). She does not have any compunction about leaving her family, because they and their values mean nothing to her. When she finally escapes the place that was supposed to always be her home, the Spiegelmans are relieved that they do not have to handle the outcomes of their daughter's ideas any longer. They claim that she was the sickness of the family (Green 2013, 103) and that they do not want to see her back at home, wanting to focus on the upbringing of their younger daughter, Ruthie.

Since she does not find any reassurance in her parents, she seeks it in American literature of bygone epochs, like Sylvia Plath's or Emily Dickinson's poetry, and especially Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. *Song of Myself* becomes her manifesto for leaving Orlando and fleeing the curse of fitting in. She realizes that living in one routine in order to fall into another is not what will make her happy: the regular pattern of going to college from high school, getting a stable job and establishing a family seems unnecessary, or even inhibitive to obtaining happiness from her point of view. She is an advocate of living in the moment, not numbly going with the stream and down the drain.

Even though Quentin is the one telling the story as a first-person narrator, Margo's character is as crucial as the protagonist in the story. She has become a living legend in her school: there are stories about her endeavors which seem entirely invented; however, they always prove to be true. She is often referred to as a "badass," in recent years especially meaning a girl who is tough and contradicts the stereotype of a gender role, that of an obedient woman (Hoby 2015). However, her behavior is not as boyish as Jo March's, the supreme individual of *Little Women*. Margo does not wish to be a boy, because she is able to do everything that she yearns for without dreaming of being someone else. She becomes an individualist through tuning into those desires which



she has the power to fulfill: she executes her secret plans of road trips and elaborate pranks, and finally, decides that she needs to escape one last time.

Her own self is not the only object of her attention, though. She belongs to a popular clique in her school and stops her friends from bullying both the geeks and the younger students. Every time she disappears, it is as though the school is left without its queen and the order is violated. However, on her last escape, Margo commends the responsibility to restore the order to Quentin, which shows that she is not preoccupied only with her own good. She cares about him to a great extent: she wants to convert Q into being more adventurous. She persists to keep to herself an imaginary version of him invented for her stories she wishes to be true, as if she could reshape his personality by imagining him anew. Finding that imaginary version of Quentin highly appealing, she wants to show him how to live, as in transcendentalism: wholly and freely fulfill one's desires (Harma 2016, 13). Even though he is in love with her and wishes to be by her side, he finds comfort in his routine, and, above everything, wants to have a chance to finally grow up (Green 2013, 268). Quentin wants to follow the exact path that Margo despises so much, and, eventually, he realizes that they are headed in different directions, being able to recognize that his dreams are as valid as hers, even though she perceives them as bland and not individualistic in the slightest. They both understand that they do not stand a chance of a mutual future, but he is more sedate in realizing this, finally accepting that the Margo he imagined is not exactly who she is (Green 2013, 282). On top of being more emotional, Margo is in need of good quality company, which is why she regrets so much that the dauntless Quentin she imagined in her stories cannot be real – unlike Jo March, whose idea of Laurie is invented just for the sake of creation. Quentin, on the other hand, finally accepts that the Margo he imagined is not exactly who she is (Green 2013, 282) and knows that it is most sensible to let her go so that both their individual ideas of a life well led can be fulfilled.

Walt Whitman and his *Song of Myself* play a crucial part in Quentin's search for Margo, both literally and metaphorically. The poem becomes a carrier of one of the clues of where Margo is going. Even though she tries to cover up her traces and does not actually want him to go as far as actually finding her, he seeks more clues and reconstructs her way to New York. The more important metaphorical dimension of Quentin's search for Margo involves long hours of reading *Leaves of Grass* in order to try to interpret the book the way Margo does, to feel closer to her, to understand her motives and thought processes which led to her final decision. While focusing on the parts of *Song of Myself* she has highlighted, his most prevailing interpretation is that the poem sounds like a suicide note. He focuses on the lines "To die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (Whitman 1855, 17) and "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles" (Whitman 1855, 56). The inherent optimism and goodness of the nature of an individual undergoes degradation to inherent pessimism or grim realism. This affects Quentin's expectations about finding Margo: there is a feeling lurking in the back of his mind that he is looking for her dead body, not for a living, thriving girl. He

expresses his worries to his English teacher, who hopes that Margo did not misunderstand Whitman's intentions the way Quentin did and that his glum expectations are not true. She is sorry to know that the optimistic poem of a transcendentalist author might have been interpreted as a hopeless cry of a desperate person. At the same time, the teacher praises him for using poetry to try to understand another person and tells him to try reading the poem as a whole, not searching for clues in snippets. He responds that he reads it "to try to understand Margo, not to try to understand Whitman" (Green 2013, 161). Eventually, he does wonder about Whitman's message and comes to his own conclusions about humans being connected to one another by a system of roots. Even though Margo does not succeed in making Quentin entirely like a character from her stories, she does introduce him to the most renowned transcendentalist poetry and inclines him to think deeper about what he would not usually be concerned with.

Margo uses Whitman's poetry as post-escape inheritance for her beloved friend, and she herself resembles the poet by her reputation and wanderlust. Just like Whitman acquired a celebrity status in his time (Reynolds 2000, 38), Margo is loved by the people who admire her endeavors, which gives her the aura of a celebrity icon. Moreover, her ultimate goal as long as the action of the book lasts is to go to New York City, which she considers "the only place in America where a person could actually live a halfway livable life" (Green 2013, 120). This also reminds us of Whitman, who was actively involved in New York City's artistic circles, and his person remains inextricably linked to the city.

Another feature of Margo's undertakings that draws on transcendentalism is her own version of civil disobedience. She does not act solely for the sake of acting, yet she enjoys violating the law to feel the adrenaline rush of breaking into Sea World, an abandoned mini mall, or the SunTrust building, purely for fun or strategic purposes. Breaking into her ex-friends' houses in order to bring them to justice may not be pure civil disobedience; however, it is against the law, and Margo does not consider it an evil deed. It is the notion based on what Henry David Thoreau stated: he argued that society should be left alone by the government to do what they morally desire (Thoreau 1993, 2). Margo never openly rebels against the government because she seems unaffected by it; however, it is as though the rules of the society are impending to govern her, and they are exactly what she defies by her civil disobedience.

All the lure of Margo's character shatters as the novel unfolds its last secrets. Although, to a certain point in time, no one suspects her to be hiding behind a facade of knowing who she is and where she is going, it turns out that this rowdy aura is just a fable of Margo Roth Spiegelman. She admits to Quentin that she used to enjoy being loved by everyone, but in the end she realized that it is not what brings her happiness. Thinking about Florida in terms of being made of paper, she knows that it is her who is made of especially frail material, and that it is herself who has a problem, not everyone else: she has to escape not because she does not fit in among the paper people, but because she is the most foldable person she knows, and wants to learn how not to be so fragile. She goes to a town which first existed as an idea and only then became

real, in hopes that in a place like that a mere image of her will also become true. This resembles the Emersonian confidence that “essence precedes existence” (Harma 2016, 16). Margo wants to become really aligned with who she imagines to be, afraid that staying in Orlando would mean being brought back into the lure of popularity and material things. Instead of being the embodiment of everyone’s wishful concept of individuality, she wants to fulfill her own concept of it and become the real Margo, not just a neighborhood legend for those who adore her facade.

Staying true to oneself is a crucial takeaway of *Paper Towns*. John Green introduces Margo and Quentin as opposing teenage characters who are entirely different and both undergo internal alteration, but they do not meet halfway. Quentin is able to get to know Margo through the transcendentalist poetry of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, and thus, it helps him to broaden his horizons even further than the impact of the sole spirit of Margo. He still does not fully understand her, and she does not comprehend his image of happiness. Margo, however, even being apprehended by the very person claiming to love her, maintains the comfort of knowing that a whole group of renowned 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars, who shaped America at the time, had the same ideas as her. This reassurance is the most important motive of Margo’s love for these ideas. She chooses to believe in them, and even though it seems that living in the comfort of ignorance of greater dimensions of the mind is easier, her well-being is not endangered as long as the transcendentalist inspiration prevails over the degrading simplicity of a mundane reality.

## Conclusion

Every main character in the analyzed film and the book is non-conformist and persistent. Even in their darkest moments, they keep believing that it is worth having their own image of themselves which might not be easy to maintain while living a regular life peacefully. It might seem that being so individualistic makes it even harder for them to achieve peace and comfort in such a single-minded society. However, with the transcendentalist ideas in mind, they know that comfort is not what equals growth. Thereby, they boldly state their objectives, push through obstacles and when they cannot see the light, they still believe that it exists.

Josephine from *Little Women*, contrary to Margo from *Paper Towns*, lives in times when transcendentalism is the domain of her parents. She becomes acquainted with it at an early age, her parents being a positive trigger towards her explorations. They are the reason she knows how to explore her imagination and reach for everything but the low-hanging fruit. In the case of Margo from *Paper Towns*, her parents are a negative trigger towards these ideas: she rebels against their indifference towards her and everything they want. Margo sees Orlando as a place filled with artificiality, while they see the place indisputably as home. Familiar and unchallenging, for them it is the ultimate goal; to her it seems to be a form of imprisonment. Because she does not find any reassurance at home, she finds it in literature and grand ideas of long-gone times.

She often makes it her priority to oppose her parents, mostly when they may hinder her plans. However, she rebels not as much against them as against the bigger picture of society, which is symbolized by them.

While *Paper Towns* ends with Margo being far away from home, still figuring out her next steps and holding onto the hope which her favorite poems provide, *Little Women* gives the viewers the finale they most likely expected, which is a happy ending of a rather romantic character. The lovers are together again; there is a lot of light, despite the pouring rain, they are making plans for a shared future. The book's ending is more bittersweet, closing with Quentin reconciling with the thought of not being by Margo's side, while she seems to have second thoughts, and this makes for a surprising revelation. Quentin comes to accept what he truly wants and that having it will not involve being with Margo. He does not walk away from his plans, but he walks away from the girl he loves, or thinks he does. It is him that fulfills the idea Margo wants to fulfill, while she is alone, just as she wanted, yet unsure, as she might have expected.

The characters' transcendentalist approaches differ from each other in individual features, which shows how greatly they employ and embrace their own ideas. Josephine's individualism is consciously transcendentalist, striving to search for her own way by rebelling against the role of a woman, frequently ostentatiously and with a goal in mind. Margo's individualism is consciously referring to transcendentalism, however, with less optimism and more bitterness than Josephine's. She is more of a misunderstood recluse who is piercingly aware of who she is, and her individualism arises in opposition to other people's consent to the comfort of the shallow, store-bought happiness.

The age of Josephine and Margo is also of great importance in the urgency of their aiming towards individualism. Both girls are entering adulthood, which is a time more suitable for making impactful life choices. Feeling as though it is the last chance to proclaim themselves, they make the crucial decisions on where to navigate to make their own route: it is the time to actually start inventing their own versions of themselves and not just dream about them. Therefore, they come to action, reassured that the ways they want to follow were effective far back in the past. Giving in to the rules of the modern world seems to be a threat for Margo, as the society pressurizes her into the model of ensured success. Josephine fiercely refuses to follow the expectations of the brassbound part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century society, symbolized by her aunt, and opposed by transcendentalists. She is bolstered by the epoch's spirit and her surroundings of the Concord circle to truly search for her own inherent goodness in self-reliance, while Margo is offered an easy, widely accepted solution to fall into a category where there is little space for critical thinking and fulfilling her idea of herself. This is why she employs more drastic ways of escaping her home.

Margo, naturally, holds some advantage of the times she lives in: women have more opportunities for development of their distinctive selves and are less frowned upon than in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they use their inherent human rights. Moreover, Margo owns a car, so she is more mobile and can practically leave anywhere and as many times as she desires to, but what is worth mentioning is the fact that the modern

age may also play at her disadvantage. Her disillusionment with places and people being “paper” is unlikely to stop on Florida – it is not the only place which succumbed into consumerist living, and it might be impossible to escape the lure of it. Her issue is, admittedly, much different than Jo’s issue, specifically from the contemporary point of view: today’s viewer of *Little Women* knows that women’s rights have become more respected, and in these terms, the future is bright. In the case of Margo, merely being a young woman is more characteristic of the book being in the genre of young adult literature than of trying to prove anything along the lines of feminism. Concerning the time, Margo’s problem can be illustrated by uncertainty. Today’s reader of *Paper Towns* does not know the exact future of consumerist society, yet it is likely to be viewed in a more pessimistic way. This is how Margo sees it, too, and that lack of optimism becomes another crucial reason for the urgency of her actions.

The transcendentalist individual, no matter how much he or she wishes to, does not function in absolute abandonment. Naturally, relationships are formed, as there are elements of romance in *Little Women* and *Paper Towns*, every single one of them playing a similar part in the story: it is often the loss of the relationship at a young age or a chance of initiating it that pushes the characters towards more self-discovery. This shows how strong human connections influence even the most individualistic souls, especially because of how deeply sensitive they are due to being so eminently connected to their raw emotions. Be it Josephine’s bond with Laurie, the later fascination with Friedrich or Quentin’s infatuation with Margo, each of those human connections, deep or superficial, brings the characters to making crucial decisions and realizations.

Following the transcendentalist ways of tackling the unfavorable reality is effective in American teenagers’ lives, whether they consciously employ these ways or not. Being so young and under the influence of the adults’ ideas, which seem not to have been effective in their own lives, the teenagers feel the need not to conform. Josephine, Margo and other characters maintain the fight for their hopes and desires of their hearts, each of them in the spirit of transcendentalism. It is still an engaging concept to live by and a way for young people to be assured that their ideas of being their own persons are useful and relevant. Even today, as the majority of transcendentalist writers have been classified as important to the history, but not the current American ideology, the philosophy remains as suitable and necessary as back then, if not much more.

## References

### Primary sources:

- Little Women*. 1994. Directed by Gillian Armstrong. USA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. DVD.
- Green, John. 2013. *Paper Towns*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

**Secondary sources:**

- Alcott, Louisa May. 1868. *Little Women*. Planet PDF. [http://www.planetpublish.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Little\\_Women\\_NT.pdf](http://www.planetpublish.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Little_Women_NT.pdf)
- Andrews, Barry Maxwell. 2017. *Transcendentalism and the Cultivation of the Soul*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1991. *The Good Society*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo, and Joel Porte. 1983. *Essays & Lectures*. The Library of America. New York: Viking Press.
- Harma, Tanguy. 2016. "The Intuitive Self Made Supreme: An Existentialist Reading of Emersonian Transcendentalism through Sartre's Concepts of Nothingness and Engagement." Conference proceedings. London: University of London.
- Hoby, Hermione. 2015. "The Problem with Being 'Badass.'" *The Guardian*, December 7. <https://bit.ly/2GldZvp>.
- Knight, Denise D. 2003. *Writers of the American Renaissance: An A-to-Z Guide*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Laire, Delphine. 2008. "Little Women, a Feminist Study." Master's Thesis. Ghent: Ghent University.
- Natanson, Maurice. 1962. *Literature, Philosophy, and the Social Sciences: Essays in Existentialism and Phenomenology*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Reynolds, David S. 2000. *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ross, Ashley. 2015. "These Are the Biggest Differences Between The 'Paper Towns' Movie and Book." *Time*, July 24. <https://bit.ly/38aPgra>.
- Sławek, Tadeusz. 2009. *Ujmować: Henry David Thoreau i współnota świata*. Katowice: The University of Silesia Press.
- Thoreau, Henry David. 1993. *Civil Disobedience, and Other Essays*. New York: Courier Corporation.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. 2017. *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wayne, Tiffany K. 2014. *Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
- Whitman, Walt. 1855. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Eakins Press. <https://bit.ly/2DmEf8a>.
- Worley, Sam McGuire. 2001. *Emerson, Thoreau, and the Role of the Cultural Critic*. Albany: State University of New York Press.