

Margo's Individuality in John Green's Paper Towns: Exploring the Realms of Unrequited Love and the Frontiers for a Liberated Woman

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Abstract

The article aims to examine how individuality is projected in Paper Towns by John Green. John Green's writings are known for sharp dialogue, unrequited love, and many heart-breaking twists. Green identifies the individualistic spirit through Margo's character, which becomes a focus of this paper. The different facets of the character are explored to reveal the bildungsroman journey undertaken. John Green's Paper Towns is the primary text of analysis in this study. Other secondary sources are also consulted to substantiate the arguments presented in this study, and other sources. The theoretical framework is built on feminism and relevant critical insights and other sources. Liberal feminism theory is employed in the analysis of the primary text to comprehend the woman's problem in the novel. The sociological approach was also used to show the social context in John Green's Paper Towns as it represents Florida's society in the 21st century. It concludes that a woman must fight for her rights as they become her natural rights. For Margo, leaving Florida is only the beginning of pursuing her goal.

Keywords: Individuality; Liberal Feminism; Sociological approach.

From the 19th century, women were exploited physically and mentally by their society. They were not allowed to go outside and were forbidden to converse with men outside their houses (Digby, 1990: 05). Moreover, in the Victorian era, women had to work in factories to fulfill their family needs. But, their salary was half their husband's (Mas'udah, 2022; Nisak & Sugiharti, 2020). They suffer from stress and pain from working long hours, little food, and

crowded factories (Barrett, 2013: 35). Women should behave based on society's traditional norms (Astuti & Harry, 2021). It restricts a woman's freedom to think and do something based on her desires and thoughts (D. P. Wardani & Lestari, 2020). Based on this background, the author chose the novel Paper Towns by John Green, which portrays women's unequal position in the modern era.

The historical exploitation and restriction of women, from the physical and mental oppression of the 19th century to the stringent societal norms of the Victorian era, underscore the persistent struggle for female autonomy. Women's limited roles, unequal wages, and constrained freedoms during these periods highlight a long-standing pattern of gender-based inequality and suppression.

Some research has been conducted about Paper Town. The description of the rebellious character of Margo (Ratnaningtyas: 2016) and transcendentalism in Paper Towns (Kalinowska:2021). However, there is no research on Margo's thought processing and behavior when interacting with the other characters.

The Author applied the liberal feminism theory by Elizabeth Cady Stanton to analyze Margo's struggle as a main character to experience freedom based on her desire. This study aims to fill this gap by applying liberal feminist theory, as articulated by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to analyze Margo's struggle for self-empowerment and freedom. By examining how Margo navigates her desires and societal expectations, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of her character's resistance to traditional norms and her pursuit of autonomy within the context of contemporary gender dynamics. Furthermore, this study explores how Margo's journey reflects broader societal attitudes towards gender and independence, offering insights into the ongoing challenges women face in achieving personal freedom and self-realization. The research not only contributes to the discourse on modern feminist literature but also illuminates the ways in which Green's narrative critiques and engages with current issues of gender equality. By analyzing Margo's interactions with other characters and her internal conflicts, the study aims to shed light on the complexities of female agency in a modern setting, providing a nuanced understanding of how contemporary literature reflects and influences the evolving

conversations around women's rights and individual autonomy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sociological Approach

The sociological approach examines literary work through sociological views such as cultural, economic, political, and religious contexts (Susanti, et al., 2022). It also analyzes the cultural, economic, political, and religious values in which it is written in the literary work or received by the reader implicitly or explicitly. The relation between social values and literary work constructs the social situation, world views toward the era, and the author's thoughts about the cultural system in the literary work. Goffman (1956: 3-7) explained that individuals can be seen as performers, audience members, and outsiders who operate within particular stages or social spaces. This means that the individual is an integral part of the influence of the author's thoughts about his literary work. It creates social establishment toward society, as reflected in the literary work.

Ian Watt (1964: 300-313) wrote that the interrelationship between the author, literary works, and society are connected and affect one another. Furthermore, Watt divides the interrelationship into three sections. First, Watt explains the author's social position in his society. It also involves the readers, who may influence the author and affect his literary work. The relationship between the readers and the author is important because it reflects the essence of his literary works. Therefore, the author's social position is used to measure how much he considers his work to be a profession. The author's professionalism is reflected in the form of his literary works. Second, Watt describes literature as a mirror of society. It means that literary work represents the actual condition of the author's society. However, literary work does not precisely depict the actual condition of a society because the characteristics of the society may have been gone when the literary work has

been published. The other reason is that the author may add his perspectives and thoughts toward his work so that it blurs the actual facts of society. In addition, the problem the author wants to expose in his literary work sometimes does not reflect the entire society's problem. It may only belong to particular people or groups. Therefore, literature only reflects the essence of the society. Third, Watt explains about the social function of literature. It is used to show the values of a literary work. Literature may be considered as a new form of values and norms that will eliminate the old ones in a certain era. On the other hand, literature is only considered entertainment for readers. This means that the purpose of literary work is limited to entertaining the reader. It gives value to the readers by entertaining them. For this reason, the sociology of literature has a specific function of connecting the fictional life of human beings with the author's thoughts and perspectives.

Therefore, I use the sociological approach to show the social context in John Green's Paper Towns as it represents the actual Florida's society in the 21st century. By using the sociological approach, I try to expose the current condition in Florida's society related to the problem of women's unequal position in the novel.

Liberal Feminism Theory by Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Liberal feminism is a belief that aims to equalize women's position among men and stand up for women's freedom to experience individualism, emancipation, and equality of economic, social, law, and political rights. Women's rights cannot be taken away because they constitute the individual. It should be a natural right for women. The current law for women is not equal. So, women should have equal opportunity to think rationally and do something based on a woman's desire and thoughts. (Stanton, 1854: 156).

Women must struggle to achieve happiness (Shinta, 2016; Kasih, 2024). It is also hard in the midst of Victorian society. Mary Wollstonecraft

echoed that women ought to have representatives instead of being arbitrarily governed without any direct share, which allowed them to be included in the deliberations of government (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Mary urged that women must have representatives to voice their thoughts and opinions to the government. Women are free-born citizens who can use their voices in the elective franchise.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton voiced that women fight for equality among men. She believes opportunities and choices must be a personal responsibility for a woman's life. A woman can plan her future (Stanton, 1854). A society dominated by males does not give much reason for a woman to develop into what a woman dreams of. Stanton also stated that a woman's responsibility belongs to her individual life. Men cannot force women to do what they may dislike only because men are considered higher than women. It puts a woman in an unequal position as they do not have control of their own body and mind (Karananeethi, et al, 2024). Mary Wollstonecraft stated that women must be treated as rational creatures by society. She believed that if a woman is treated equally, she becomes a wise and virtuous wife (Wollstonecraft: 1792). Mary also criticizes the education system, which is not only intended for a man but a woman must also be educated. She stated that,

"Contending for the rights of women, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she is not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge." (Wollstonecraft: 1792)

Women need education because it helps them be treated equally by society and have an equal position (Putri, 2022). If not, a woman could suffer from oppression and ill-treatment from men (Sudarso, et al, 2019). It can also be reasoned that women's natural rights are obstructed because of the male-dominant ideologies and the social restriction associated with expressing a woman's experience (Selden et al., 2005; L. D. P. Wardani et al., 2023). Man and

woman must be educated, to a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in (Wollstonecraft:1792). The social restriction created by the society cannot imprison women's freedom to experience individualism, emancipation, economic equality, social, law, and political rights.

METHOD

To analyze the primary text, the authors employed various methods. A textual analysis is carried out with reference to feminism. A close reading of the text was conducted to identify how women are depicted in the novel.

The research employs a qualitative analysis method (Pandin & Yanto, 2022; Pandin & Yanto, 2023) to explore Margo's character in John Green's *Paper Towns*. The analysis begins with a close examination of dialogues to uncover Margo's internal thoughts, ideas, and opinions about her society, focusing on passages where she expresses dissatisfaction and resistance to societal norms. This initial step aims to understand her thought processes and the rationale behind her actions. Following this, the study applies liberal feminist theory to identify and analyze the obstacles Margo faces in her quest for freedom. This involves examining how societal constraints and gender inequalities within the novel reflect broader feminist concerns about female autonomy. Additionally, the research investigates how other characters perceive Margo's struggle, providing insight into the social dynamics and responses to her fight for independence. Finally, a sociological approach is employed to contextualize the novel's depiction of Florida's 21st-century society, comparing it with real-life conditions to highlight issues of gender inequality and societal constraints. This comprehensive method provides a nuanced understanding of Margo's quest for autonomy and the interplay between her personal struggle and the broader social context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Margo Uniqueness

Margo's character can be observed through other supporting characters such as Quentin, Radar, Ben, Lacy, Ruthie, Quentin's parents, and detective Otis Warren. Margo Ruth Spiegelman as she is experiencing an unequal position in her life.

"Listen, that reminds me, I took the liberty of putting some supplies in the back of the van earlier." Margo said. "What, like, before I agreed to all this?" "Well, yes. Technically yes."

(Green, 2008: 08)

Margo represents the spirit of most teenagers in general. However, the difference between Margo and the other teenager is that Margo ignores her appearance. She gives more attention to what she feels. It is normal for Margo to be silly sometimes as she tries to find her true purpose. In addition, she also says that she is infinite. It shows us that Margo is confident enough to do anything, as if there is no limit. Hence, it brings her to her adventure earlier when she and Quentin found a corpse in the middle of the park. Quentin decided to run while Margo stayed there, looking for a reason why the man was lying there dead. Moreover, Margo also says that she is a big believer in random capitalization. In her opinion, capitalisation rules are unfair to words in the middle. It is also how Green tries to create a unique character. He implicitly shows that Margo is not the same as the other character. The true identity of Margo is herself. She wants to be different therefore, she does not follow the general rule of capitalisation. She thinks that words in the middle also deserve to be capitalized. Usually, a proper sentence or noun starts with a capital. She disagrees with that rule.

Margo fears being the object of hatred by her friends and family. By being different from the other girls, she knows that society could marginalize her. Therefore, she lies to herself and becomes the girl that everyone wants. By doing so, she can blend in with society and

prepare herself for the real fear. Fear comes from the judgment and hatred in her society if she tries to be herself. She said she trains herself to face the worst she may ever have. However, at the end of the day, she admits to Quentin that she is unprepared to face it. All the lies she does for almost her entire life are not enough to convince her that she is already part of society. Therefore, it shows that Margo Roth Spiegelman, the main character in *Paper Towns*, is round. A multi-dimensional round character has complex personalities, backgrounds, motivations, and desires (Abrams, 1999; Tabbert & Rudanko, 2021). Margo's earlier motivation was to be accepted in society as she lies to herself and is the girl everyone wants. In the end, she is being honest to herself that being an everyone-girl is not her true self. She realizes her weakness and tries to be the girl that she wants.

Mature Self-Responsibility

Margo Roth Spiegelman is trapped by her parents and society's view that girls should behave like girls. Although she has many ideas about what to do, she cannot do them because of her parents' restrictions. When she is seventeen years old, she escapes from Florida to express her freedom without any interference from her parents and the people around her.

Margo is also jealous of Quentin, who can do everything he wants with his parents supporting him. Sneaking out of her room or paying her little sister to replace her is the only way for Margo to resist her parents. There, I can relate Margo's punishment to Stanton's statement. She said that women should have equal opportunity to think rationally and do something based on a woman's desire and thoughts. A man could not limit the woman's desire and thought as both man and woman are equally created (Stanton, 1854: 5). Man here can refer to Margo's parents as they also limit her freedom. Margo also said, "I think the future deserves our faith" (Green, 2008: 296). She believes her freedom and future depend on what she is doing now. It is also similar to the idea of liberal feminism that Stanton has been struggling with. Stanton clearly emphasizes that

man can neither blind nor lose ties because the prerogative power belongs to God alone (Stanton, 1854: 6). Margo also believes that what she is doing now represents her true self.

"Finally it was starting to feel like they knew me, too" implies that Margo is finally free from being an everyone-girl in her society. Margo is coming up with a decision to leave her hometown. She realizes that her presence will only hurt her and her society, as has already happened in Spiegelman. Her parents never love and get what Margo wants. Margo never gets their idea, too. Eventually, they will lose and hurt one another. However, Margo still tries to be a paper girl by pretending to be friends with everyone. She makes herself seem interesting so that she can fit into so many different situations. Margo also states that she loved being a paper girl. In her opinion, people love the idea of a paper girl. As a result, Margo then loves being an idea that everybody likes. Eventually, she gets tired of it. She realizes that she could never be the idea of herself. She wants to do something based on her desire and thoughts. Margo thinks that her parents are not unfair to her. She confirms herself as a victim of social inequity. Margo never gets equal opportunities to live the life she wants. By imagining that New York is the only place in America where a person could live a halfway-livable life, she misses being herself. Therefore, moving to Agloe is the only way for her to experience individualism. She states that Agloe is a perfect place where paper creation becomes real. Most importantly, Margo finally learns one thing about herself when she has been gone. She finally finds a place to be herself without pretending to be a paper girl again. In Agloe, Margo can do something based on her desire and thoughts. She does not have to worry about what her parents or people will say about her behavior. She could get equal opportunities too to do something she truly wants.

"You were with Margo Roth Spiegelman last night? At THREE A.M.?" I nodded. "Alone?" I nodded. "Oh my God, if you hooked up with her,

you have to tell me every single thing that happened. You have to write me a term paper on the look and feel of Margo Roth Spiegelman's breasts. Thirty pages, minimum!"

(Green, 2008: 53)

In Ben's statement, it can be seen that a woman's position is still considered lower than a man's. Ben, as a representation of a male character, can make fun of a woman's body. Ben even says that Quentin has to write him a term paper on the look and feel of Margo Roth Spiegelman's breasts. Although Ben considers his statement as a joke, it is clear that Margo becomes only an object for him to fantasize about. Ben's statement is disrespectful to Margo as a female character. Ben seems to only care about what Quentin has to do if he wanders with a girl in the middle of the night. There are few things that Margo can be proud of except only be seen from her physical appearance. It was the first time that Margo, as a female character, did what she liked most. She can decide and plan what she is going to do. She deserves more than only being judged by her physical appearance. However, it is not the first time that Ben puts a woman as an object for him.

Ben puts a woman as an object for her to be fantasized. In his opinion, a woman is created only to please his sexual needs. When there are no women in Quentin's house, he does not want to come. Therefore, it becomes a serious issue that a woman is mostly judged by her physical appearance only. When she is not categorized as a sexy or pretty woman, she deserves nothing from society. It places women in an unequal position as they cannot express their thoughts or ideas only because they do not fit into the category created by men. It is unfair for women, especially those who do not have an advantage in their physical traits. They are being mentally bullied by society as they cannot decide what they like or dislike. It can lead to depression as it imprisons a woman's natural right to be what she dreams of. Therefore, the difference between men and women in terms of social position in Margo's society can be seen in the table below:

Man or Male Character	Woman or Female Character
Man gets fewer obstacles to decide what he likes or dislikes.	Women have more obstacles to deciding what she like or dislike.
Man has a higher chance of successfully achieving his passion.	A woman has a decent chance of successfully achieving her passion.
Man gets more opportunities to be a leader in society.	Women get fewer opportunities to be leaders in society.
Man is mostly seen and judged by his intelligence.	A woman is mostly seen and judged by her physical appearance.
Man is considered to have a higher position in the family.	A woman is considered to be in a second position in the family.
Men often blame women.	The woman mostly becomes a victim of man's mistakes.
Men tend to underestimate women.	A woman is considered a weak individual.
Man often makes a woman into an object to be fantasized.	Woman becomes an object for man to fantasize.

Unsupporting Family

Family is a valuable gift that is given to every human. According to the Usapho Foundation (2018: 02-03), a family is the first lesson to build relationships with others. Having a family means to feel secure and have responsibility for each other. The family also represents people who accept you in every condition. There is no hatred or judgment to be accepted in the family. Family is important because it provides love and support to each member. Family members learn from one another and share life's joys and sorrows. The family also gives each member security and value regardless of age. When a family member feels insecure, she will return to her family for help. Spending time with family shows a person the value of love, appreciation, and honest communication.

However, Margo never gets the chance to be supported by her family. Margo is unsupported by her own family. It exactly happens to Margo as her family becomes her problem. Instead of supporting Margo in pursuing her freedom and happiness, they constantly ask Margo to stop and be like any other girl. For Margo, a family is

unimportant as they do not provide love and support to her. When Margo feels insecure, she prefers to solve things her way. Therefore, this chapter exposes the woman's unequal position that happened to Margo because of her unsupported family.

"We're happy to pay for her to go to college, but we can't support this, this silliness. Connie, she's eighteen! And still so self-centered! She needs to see some consequences ... You can imagine how embarrassing this is for us."

Oh, come on Connie. Look, is it sick that it's a blessing to have her out of the house? Of course it's sick. But she was sick in this family! How do you look for someone who announces she won't be found, who always leaves clues that lead nowhere, who runs away constantly? You can't!"

(Green, 2008: 101-103)

Margo's parents hate everything Margo has done and think it only embarrasses them. It reflects their treatment of Margo. They never understand why Margo left home. They consciously force Margo to think that college and career are her destinations. Consequently, Margo never has a chance to experience individualism in her family. Having a family means they learn from one another and share life's joys and sorrows. Margo is also wondering why Quentin could do everything he wants, but she could not do the same thing in her family. It is unfair for her that she chooses to leave and announces she does not want to be found. It is not her fault that she becomes so self-centered.

Margo becomes self-centered because her parents never let her do what she wants. Therefore, she sees herself as the center of everything because no one can truly understand her wants. Margo wants to further her objectives, and sometimes, she may behave selfishly in certain situations. By running away from her parents, she could truly express her desire in her way. She could experience individualism and do something based on her thoughts that has never happened before. Margo's courage is only a way

to identify herself; it becomes the best protection any woman can have (Stanton, 1854: 20).

Green shows us that Margo hates the "normal" life pattern. Margo believes that life is more than going to college or having money. She keeps wondering why her parents want her to be like Quentin and have a "boring" life, like going to college. Moreover, Margo uses the word "boring" to emphasize that she never agrees with her parents' ideas. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, boring is when you are uninterested or excited about a particular thing or idea. Here, Margo is not interested in having a general pattern in her life. She believes that she deserves more than just a college or career. Margo feels she is not given an equal opportunity and chances to have the life she wants. Margo deserves more than just two options. According to Stanton's statement in her book *The Woman Bible* said that life is not only determined by two choices as the world is moving (Stanton, 1895: 35), She believes that she deserves more than just a college or career for her life by ignoring any interference from her society, especially her parents. However, what Margo wants to do is always seen as bad by her parents. They believe that what Margo does is not appropriate for a teenage girl. It is important to note that how Margo's parents treat Margo highly contradicts Stanton's idea of feminism. Stanton stated that a woman's rights should be natural as they constitute the individual itself (Stanton, 1854: 45)

Frustration means feeling annoyed or less confident because you cannot achieve what you want (Saputro et al., 2019). It can also mean an act of preventing something from being achieved. Margo is clearly annoyed because she cannot achieve what she wants. Margo wants to experience freedom in her life. She desires to pursue her dream based on her thoughts and ideas. She wants to know more about herself by traveling and seeing new things. In her statement, Margo admits that she is the most horribly self-centered person in the history of Quentin. On the other hand, Margo's parents

believe that Margo's every action is motivated by her selfishness. They judge Margo, saying that she only thinks for her advantage. Therefore, she is honest with herself and will do everything to accomplish her desire. However, she does not do it without reason. Her parents become an excuse for her to be a self-centered person. Margo expresses her disappointment by saying, "do you think I would have done it if I didn't need to?" (Green, 2008: 293).

Moreover, at the end of her conversation, she says she does not want her relationship with her parents to end badly. However, she cannot escape from the fact that they have already lost and hurt one another. It may not have happened if her parents had supported her in being exactly what she wanted. Margo's parents here are considered a society that limits the natural rights of a woman.

Self-Independent

By being an independent woman, Margo tries not to be controlled or influenced in any possible way by her society's judgment and perspective. She finally decides to leave to experience the freedom of being herself.

"Only now, after all this lost time, I did realize how terribly I had misunderstood both the game and the prize for winning it."

"Also I decided to clean out my locker, because I didn't really want to come back here and again have to feel like my lungs were drowning in this perverse nostalgia."

(Green, 2008: 139)

Margo self-reflects on what she has done for her whole life. She realizes after all her lost time being into someone else, still, she does not know about how the game runs and wins it. The game here refers to her experience of faking her own life while she struggled to understand herself. She is into everyone-girl to please them to be welcomed in her society. Doing that, Margo thinks, will allow her to achieve her dream. However, the word "terribly" means she is wrong the whole time. Pretending to be someone else to please her friends and parents never changes Margo. It limits her freedom of ideas or

thoughts of being a person that reflects her true nature. She cannot express herself as her choices are mostly controlled by other people. She is trapped in her world, which she created. Therefore, Margo tells Quentin that she has decided to leave. Margo feels that she struggles enough to get her freedom. By leaving her hometown, Florida, she assumes that she may get a chance to be a real Margo Roth Spiegelman. She had already planned it before as she said that she had cleaned out her locker so that she would not come back again. She stated that her lungs are drowning in the perverse nostalgia if she returns to her hometown, Florida. It is sad for Margo to leave her hometown, Florida, as she grows up there. On the other hand, it is also a feeling of pleasure for Margo as she may get a chance to experience freedom in a new place she has never been there before. What she dreams of will come true in Agloe, the small town with the lowest population in her country.

"I leave, and the leaving is so exhilarating I know I can never go back. But then what? Do I just keep leaving places, and leaving them, and leaving them, tramping a perpetual journey? Besides, leaving feels good and pure only when you leave something important, something that matters to you."

(Green, 2008: 229)

For Margo, leaving Florida is only the beginning to pursue her goal. It becomes the first solution for Margo to resist the judgment upon her. Margo emphasizes her reason again to Quentin: "This was the first time in my life that so many things would never happen again" (Green, 2008: 228). Margo's freedom as she never gets a chance to be what she wants. They try to stop Margo from becoming her true self and finding her identity as a woman. As an author, Green also puts several choices into his creation, Margo. Green lets Margo battle with her idea as a paper girl or a Margo Roth Spiegelman until she finally realizes that she is wrong. Green gives an alternate solution for a young woman to get her freedom of individualism. Leaving her hometown is the best

solution for Margo to get what she wants. Green tries to make Margo into a unique and independent character. Leaving seems an easy solution to escape from harsh reality. However, it is a beginning for Margo to have something she dreams of.

Through Margo, Green tries to make the reader believe that "paper towns" are a kind of fake geographic place on a map. It is true; Green explains in his blog that "paper towns were created by mapmakers as a plagiarism detection tool so that those who fake the map will get caught" (Green, 2008). However, the idea of paper towns itself is a representation of the way Margo feels inside. When she reflects on a paper town, it is not a town that is wrong and fake based on Margo's earlier perspective. It is Margo herself. She struggles to create the perfect image of herself so that people welcome her. She always tries to be a particular kind of girl in her society. Margo admits that she loves the attention that being a paper girl gets her closer to society for a while. She loves fantasizing about the image of herself for her own sake and the sake of others. She does not realize that it is imprisoned in her mind. Consequently, she feels pressure to be everything to everyone and please everyone. She knows that it is not true for her. By moving to Agloe, however, Margo wants to throw away the idea of her being a paper girl. Now, she wants the freedom to have the life she dreams of. Apparently, this quotation concludes that in Agloe, Margo can simply be Margo Roth Spiegelman.

"I started writing a story in this notebook. It was kind of a detective story and I'm gonna get more in the city, though."

"And,

"I'm leaving today. I'm going to start really traveling." (Green, 2008: 288-289)

In Agloe, she begins to achieve what she dreams of. She has a goal to be herself. Margo is not a paper girl anymore. She is not a girl who pretends to be good to please anyone in her surroundings. In Agloe, Margo can decide what she likes most and gets it. Margo also believes

that a woman's future depends on her own hands. She said her future deserves faith (Green, 2008: 296). She believes that she can create her future. Therefore, she struggles with herself and her society to get her freedom of individualism. Even with the little opportunities in Agloe, Margo is excited that she is going to start traveling. She becomes different and unique now, but she will not change her personality. Margo only wants the freedom to express her thoughts and ideas to plan her future. She is completely independent now in terms of expressing herself. Therefore, the final result is that in the modern era, women can be anything they want to be. It is proven by Margo at the end of the story that she finally can be a true Margo Roth Spiegelman by making her own choices.

Social Context in Paper Towns

The social context of a novel represents a certain society when a novel was written. This research applied the sociological approach as it connects literary work with the reflection of society. Ian Watt also emphasizes that literature is a mirror of society (1964: 300-313), meaning that literary work represents the actual condition of the author's society. It becomes a contextual background for his literary work. Therefore, this sub- chapter discusses the social context of Florida as it becomes the contextual background in John Green's novel *Paper Towns*.

Paper Towns is a novel that portrays the life of a young girl named Margo Roth Spiegelman, who struggles to experience individualism and pursue her dream of being a traveler. She feels trapped and oppressed by society's perspective. Therefore, she escapes to a smaller town with the lowest population to experience the freedom of thinking and individualism. The setting of *Paper Towns* is Florida, the United States of America, in the 21st century. According to Robin N. Harr (2017: 68), in his writing entitled *Women's Rights as Human Rights*, women worldwide have gathered in networks and coalitions to raise awareness about problems of women's discrimination, inequality, and violence since the 1980s. They have managed a human right to

fight for women's rights in the family, social, economic, and political areas (Huda et al., 2024). The woman's rights also include the right to live free from violent slavery, be educated, and own property. A woman also deserves to vote and earn an equal wage. Women nowadays live in an era where a woman, as an individual human being, can pursue her dream and shape her future. In the Victorian era in the 1800s, a woman was not categorized as a second-class citizen (Digby, 1990: 05). Victorians believed that a woman's proper place was to be within the household environment. A woman was expected to marry and have children only. Her job was also limited to keeping a nice household. Those limitations were the only acceptable roles for a woman during that era. However, there is still a view that women are in a second lower position than men. It happened to two women in Florida as they reported being discriminated against and harassed in the workplace. The news entitled Florida Women Fight Gender Discrimination in the Workplace posted in Workplace Discrimination shows that women still have to struggle against discrimination.

Two Florida women are currently pursuing cases against their respective employers due to being discriminated against and harassed in the workplace. One of the women -- a restaurant employee -- claims that because she does not fit typical gender stereotypes, she is often discriminated against in her workplace and has been the subject of disparaging remarks from her employer. This woman does not fit the typical idea of the female gender as she is 6-feet-tall and has a more masculine sounding voice. She also claims she was not paid for overtime hours worked and that she was fired from her position for confronting her employers about the pay and because they were not comfortable with her appearance. (Rumbaugh, 2013: 01-02)

Women still become a victim of being discriminated against in the modern era. One of the women in Florida claimed that she is often discriminated against in her workplace because she simply does not fit with the typical gender

stereotypes as a woman. A gender stereotype is a generalized view of the attributes, characteristics, or even the roles that ought to be possessed by women and men (Jeria, 2018: 02). It limits women and men's capacity to develop their abilities, pursue their professional career, and make choices about their own lives. Therefore, it puts a woman in an unequal position as she does not have any choices to defend herself from her workmates. She explains that she is being discriminated against and harassed because she is 6 feet tall and has a more masculine- sounding voice. In most parts of Europe and the USA, 6 feet tall is considered tall as it is commonly average for a man. According to the average man, the ideal height for a woman is 5 feet 6 inches. Consequently, a man wants a woman no taller than 6 feet (William, 2014: 01-02). It is unfair for a woman as she cannot choose her appearance when she is born. Moreover, she is also a victim of what she is not doing wrong. Because her coworkers were uncomfortable with her appearance, she was not getting paid and fired from her position. She did not get her rights as a worker in her workplace. It was not her fault for having a more masculine voice. However, it becomes a reason for her co-workers to treat her unequally. Unlike Margo, the Florida woman expressed her disagreement by confronting her society. She was accused of being guilty when she expressed her disagreement with her co-workers, as her action was considered crossing the line. It shows that her society limits her freedom, as she cannot make choices about her own life. It also proves that women are still considered to be in the second lowest position in this current era. A view still puts a woman into an object to be blamed for.

Another woman who holds a custodial position in a school claims that her employer has delegated tasks to her which are typically reserved for male custodial workers, such lifting heavy objects. She asserts that her employer gives her these jobs to carry out because she has a more masculine appearance due to her short hair style and no make-up. She also reports that

she has received back injuries from completing her duties but does not want to leave her position and lose her seniority. She is filing a claim for gender discrimination in hopes of receiving fair treatment.

(Rumbaugh, 2013: 01-02)

Several people still consider women as a second lower position than men. Another woman also from Florida claimed that she was discriminated against because of her physical appearance. She was forced to lift heavy objects, which were typically for male workers, because she had a more masculine appearance due to her short hairstyle and no make-up. Again, it proves that a woman is still judged by her physical appearance first. She does not fit the typical gender stereotypes of women, who tend to have long hair and make-up all day. Consequently, she gets back injuries from completing her duties. She has no choice but to deny the order as she needs the job to fulfill her daily needs as a human being. It shows that in this current era, a woman is still put in an unequal position in certain places. Unlike the first woman, this woman chooses to be quiet and adapt to her workplace. She does not want to get in trouble as she prefers to have her position and seniority. It proves that her workplace limits her natural rights as a woman to speak and express her feelings. She is afraid that she might lose her job by expressing her disagreement with her boss. Like Margo, she keeps her problem to herself and tries to adapt to society. However, she finds another way to help her solve her problem. She is filing a claim for gender discrimination in hopes of receiving fair treatment. It shows that there are laws against sex discrimination in the workplace. Florida employment discrimination laws cover millions of Florida workers (Fenton, 2018: 01-02). If a woman has been subjected to any discrimination in her workplace, she needs to know that the Florida government will help her to fight for justice for her.

Therefore, both cases show that literary work represents the actual condition of the author's society. However, it does not precisely depict the

actual condition of society because Margo, as the main character, does not represent an individual in real life. Her problem as a woman represents the actual problem in Florida. *Paper Towns* itself also does not reflect the problems of the entire society. Therefore, Ian Watt (1964: 300-313) says that literary work only reflects the essence of the actual society. It may only belong to particular people or groups in Florida. In addition, John Green wrote this novel in 2008. Hence, it still happened in Florida's current society in 2013. It shows that in the 21st century, a woman still has to struggle for her freedom to be what she wants. It also exposes that there are people who limit a woman's natural right as an individual to have her own choices in life.

CONCLUSION

Paper Towns stands as a critical examination of the constraints imposed on individuality and freedom within contemporary society. John Green's narrative centers on Margo Roth Spiegelman, a young woman whose quest for personal freedom is marred by the very structures meant to support her. Margo's spontaneous and unpredictable nature contrasts sharply with societal expectations, revealing how her attempts to assert her individuality are thwarted by her family. Rather than being a source of support, her family becomes an obstacle, illustrating how familial expectations can suppress rather than nurture personal autonomy. Margo's evolution throughout the novel underscores the tension between her desire for self-expression and the restrictive forces around her, reflecting a broader critique of societal norms that stifle individualism.

The sociological lens applied to *Paper Towns* highlights the enduring issue of gendered limitations on personal freedom. Despite the advancements in women's rights, Margo's struggle reveals how societal pressures continue to confine women's autonomy. Her family's reluctance to support her ambitions exemplifies the broader societal tendency to impose

conformist ideals on women, restricting their freedom to make personal choices. This critique extends to the metaphor of the “paper town,” which, rather than symbolizing external falsehoods, mirrors Margo’s internal struggle. Her efforts to conform to societal expectations, driven by a desire for validation, ultimately entrap her, illustrating how self-imposed and external pressures converge to limit genuine self-expression.

Green’s portrayal of Margo’s journey from a girl constrained by societal expectations to a more liberated individual challenges the notion

that modern society fully embraces women’s freedom. By choosing travel and personal development over traditional educational paths, Margo asserts her individuality in a manner that critiques the very norms that once constrained her. This evolution highlights Green’s argument that while women may attain greater opportunities, true freedom requires breaking free from both internal and external constraints. Ultimately, *Paper Towns* serves as a powerful commentary on the ongoing struggle for women’s autonomy and the need to confront the societal structures that continue to undermine it.

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