

Excesses of New England Transcendentalism in *Dead Poets Society* and *Mona Lisa Smile*

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Introduction

Dead Poets Society (1989), directed by Peter Weir, became one of Hungary's cult films in the 1990s. The movie was released after the change of regime and the end of the socialist period of Hungary. It promotes ideas about life, education, and the self that were not accepted prior to the change of regime, and due to this aspect, the movie had an encouraging effect on people at the beginning of a new period. *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) directed by Mike Newell is built on similar ideology as *Dead Poets Society*, but it introduces reforms focusing on women and feminist issues. Since both movies incorporate Transcendentalist ideas as well, this study aims at discussing the representation educational, feminist and art-related reforms of New England Transcendentalism. Both movies depict the 1950s and include aspects of New England Transcendentalism: *Dead Poets Society* mainly focuses on the educational reforms introduced by the Transcendentalists, and it incorporates the character of Emerson's liberal hero, along with such ideas as individualism and the importance of literature. *Mona Lisa Smile* highlights feminist issues, such as the connection between women and art, education, independence, and professional integrity.

This study proposes three new ideas. First of all, the movies are analysed together, in relation to the Transcendentalist ideas they incorporate. Secondly, this paper discusses the Transcendentalist ideas present in the movies as forms of "excesses." Finally, in connection with the movies and their setting, I will address the question regarding the emergence of a second Transcendentalist Movement in the 1950s.

To explain the excesses that appear in the movies, it is important to define how the term "excess" is interpreted here. In this context, the term refers to three things. First of all, it refers to the question whether the 1950s would have been a fertile ground for a second Transcendentalist Movement. The anxiety deriving from the hardships of the post-war years might have served as a reason for Americans to reconsider their culture and identity; yet, the 1950s and the nineteenth century were fundamentally different periods with dissimilar social and political backgrounds. The movies, nevertheless, apply Transcendentalist ideas as a source of a possible change, and I find this aspect open to question. Even though certain ideas of the Transcendentalist Movement, such as independence, equality, and its social and educational reforms, might seem relevant during this era, the contemporary social and political atmosphere was not ready for these radical ideas. In this context, Transcendentalist ideas seem distorted and

unfaithful compared to the original concepts of the movement. Secondly, the term is related to feminist issues and ideas. In the 1950s, gender norms were renewed, and certain Victorian values regarding the status of women re-emerged. *Mona Lisa Smile* focuses on these issues and seems to reflect on the feminist ideas of the Transcendentalists. The movie also extends those ideas by talking about problems that were not well-received in the nineteenth century and in the 1950s either. Finally, the movies distort and exaggerate certain tenets of Transcendentalism. For example, the disregard of lower classes and women, the suppression of homosexuality, the lack of racial representation, and the over-valuing of self-reliance and non-conformism are all present in the movies. These ideas are not faithful representations of the Transcendentalist beliefs. These excesses will be further analysed in this paper with examples.

In order to analyse the movies, the significance and the most relevant aspects of New England Transcendentalism need to be mentioned. The Transcendentalist Movement left a visible impact on American society. As George Hochfield claims, the movement impacted the “American character” itself and helped defining the so-called “American type” by introducing the image of the self-reliant man (35 – 36). Moreover, the Transcendentalists took part in educational and social reforms, including their fight for equality and for women’s rights.

New England Transcendentalism emerged in the early nineteenth century as a philosophical movement and as a branch of Romanticism. It was the era of the American Renaissance: Americans’ attempt to create their own culture. Transcendentalism with its new and unique ideas became a tool in this process. The movement was radical as opposed to the contemporary beliefs and norms, introducing “rebellious” ideas regarding the world and the self. The leader and spokesperson of the movement was Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the advocates of the movement include a number of well-known authors as well, such as Henry David Thoreau, Dr William Ellery Channing, and Margaret Fuller.

Even though New England Transcendentalism is partly built on European roots, what makes it exclusive is its impact on American literature. While the movement had philosophical aspects, it also became a literary movement. Its advocates such as Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson are significant figures in the history of American literature. They used their literary works to give voice to their Transcendentalist beliefs. Besides literature, other forms of art were also highly appreciated by the Transcendentalists. Since art is a form of self-expression, it held significance for the Transcendentalists. Even Emerson refers to art and its importance several times in his essays. In “Nature” (1836), he says: “A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world” (52), and he also calls art “an expression of nature” (52).

Both as a philosophical and literary movement, Transcendentalism is built on a number of principles. First of all, as a branch of Romanticism, it places a huge emphasis on Nature. The movement took certain ideas from Deism and British Romantics: the advocates of the movement believed in the existence of a strong, direct connection between men and nature. According to Alireza Manzari, they viewed nature as a representation of the Spirit and God himself (2). The whole movement emerged as a sort of religion of nature. These principles were mentioned in Emerson's "Nature". In his essay, Emerson describes Nature as "NOT ME" (2), that is everything separate from man, from the individual. He says that "the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul" (3) and also elaborates on the interrelatedness of Nature, man, and God.

As a philosophical movement, Transcendentalism partly relied on Kantian philosophy. Frederic Ives Carpenter remarks that the main idea taken from Immanuel Kant's philosophy was the distinction between Reason and Understanding (24), introduced in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Kant saw Reason as a higher faculty than Understanding: as the place where unique, original ideas can be found. Carpenter says, in Kant's view, Reason is what gives access to the "truth" (25), while Understanding refers to concepts derived from experience. Emerson borrowed these ideas and set them as significant principles of the Transcendentalist Movement.

Yet, Carpenter believes that Transcendentalism was more of a religious movement than a philosophical one (27). It took certain ideas from the Unitarian church. Similar to Unitarianism, Transcendentalists held an optimistic vision of human nature, maintaining the belief that it is improvable through self-culture. However, they also dismissed some ideas of Unitarianism, such as Christian doctrines, and the authority of God over human reason. They also gave less importance to the Bible and denied its title as the only tool of direct connection to God. As Carpenter points out, Transcendentalism was built upon the optimism of Unitarianism but gave more significance to human intuition and spirituality (27 – 28).

In fact, Transcendentalists preferred a Monistic point of view regarding God, life, and human nature. They believed there was no distinction between God and humans. As Manzari points out, they referred to God as the origin of everything, whose presence, the Divine, dwells in every human being (1). With the help of that divinity, the purpose of man is to achieve their full capacities and re-emerge with the Oversoul, that is God. Manzari also adds that the belief in the soul's divinity led to the propagation of individualism, self-reliance, and non-conformism (4). These principles are significant ideas of the Transcendentalist Movement, encouraging

people to trust their own intuition and dare breaking the norms of society. These ideas were highlighted in one of Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance" (1841). In "Self-Reliance," Emerson encourages the individual to trust themselves and their intuition (141). He says that man gives existence to divine, genius ideas that should not be dismissed (141). He mentions the importance of solitude, independence, and non-conformism, claiming society and imitation have a destructive effect on original ideas (142). These opinions of his are highly emphasised in *Dead Poets Society* as well. In chapter two, I will analyse how these principles are represented in the movie in comparison to Emerson's original ideas.

As for self-reliance and intuition, they were also included in the educational reform introduced by the Transcendentalists. As Hochfield states in his essay, Transcendentalism had a significant effect on the American educational system (46). According to Krystyna Grocholski, the Lyceum movement started in New England in 1826: the aim was to improve the levels of literacy and to find solutions to certain problems of the current educational system (Grocholski). The Transcendentalists joined this movement, trying to follow their own principles regarding education. Some of the advocates of the movement, such as Thoreau, Amos Bronson Alcott, and even Emerson, were teachers themselves. The educational reform of the Transcendentalists will be discussed in chapter one.

The movement also gave room for radical ideas regarding women and is linked with the then evolving feminist movement. As Tiffany K. Wayne explains, a philosophical ideal, called "self-culture" served as the link between the Transcendentalist Movement and feminism (7). It proposed the idea of equal rights to education and vocation for both sexes and rejected gender-based access to schooling. Furthermore, one of the advocates of Transcendentalism, Margaret Fuller was a forerunner to feminism. She wrote a book entitled *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) in which she speaks on behalf of women and their rights. Apart from Fuller's book, a lecture of Emerson, entitled "Woman," was published in 1855, in which Emerson emphasised the importance of free access to education, property, and suffrage for women. However, Emerson's feminist activism has always been debated. Len Gougeon mentions that he even became the object of feminist critics holding the belief that his contributions were not significant enough to give a strong foundation to feminism (583).

Regarding Emerson's proto-feminist activism, the image of his liberal hero might be another obstacle. The character of the Emersonian hero was introduced in his earlier essays and lectures. This "hero" manifests in the character of the Poet or the Scholar. Emerson perceives

them as male individuals, and he even seems to exalt them in his works. The representation of his liberal hero might contradict his activism regarding women's rights.

As mentioned before, the two movies analysed in this study are built on Transcendentalist ideas. Even though only one of them deals with feminist issues, both movies are set at conservative educational institutions in the 1950s. *Dead Poets Society* takes place at an all-boys school, distributing no female representation at all when it comes to the incorporation of Transcendentalist ideas. Yet, *Mona Lisa Smile*, set at a women's college, takes a look at Transcendentalism from a feminist approach.

Dead Poets Society is mainly built around John Keating, a new English teacher at Welton Academy. He represents the Transcendentalist voice, showing new points of view regarding life to his students. He approves of the critical approach to teaching and learning literature and is determined to trigger creativity and self-expression in the classroom. He encourages his students to be more intuitive and to step out of their comfort zone. Yet, from my point of view, he does all of this in a highly romanticised and excessive way, not taking into consideration the validity of his ideas and the consequences they might cause. The misunderstanding and the reception of his ideas in such a conservative environment result in the suicide of one of his students, Neil Perry. I will elaborate on these excesses in chapter two.

Mona Lisa Smile also puts the focus on an art history teacher, Kathrine Ann Watson. Just like Keating does in *Dead Poets Society*, Kathrine Watson tries to change the perspectives of her students. To analyse the movie, it is important to note that the 1950s was a tough period for women in the USA. According to Jennifer Holt, gender roles were extremely strict, and the image of the "ideal woman" was born, labelling women as the typical domestic housewives (1). *Mona Lisa Smile* is set in these years at Wellesley College. Kathrine Watson, a feminist herself, keeps challenging her students and motivates them to pursue their own career and stand up for their rights instead of fulfilling the expectations resulting from the contemporary gender norms. As visible, the movie applies a feminist approach to the idea of individualism, but excesses appear as well, mostly when it comes to the character of Katherine Watson and her stubbornness. The question how much a professor can interfere with their students' lives also emerges. Chapter three will elaborate on these questions.

Although both movies are set in the 1950s, they show a very different perspective of contemporary life and education. The 1950s, in fact, was a crucial period for the American society for a number of reasons. The post-war years had their own atmosphere, and everything was built around the formation of a new American Dream, as well as the pursuit of happiness;

yet, as Daniel P. Kamienski explains, instead of being able to fulfil their individual goals and to follow their inner motivations, people were trapped in a society based on prescribed norms and conventions (5). The movies portray radical Transcendentalist ideas at conservative educational institutions founded on strict values and traditions, where change is evidently not welcome. Considering the social and political atmosphere of the period, the re-emergence of Transcendentalist ideas regarding the self and equality might seem fitting. Nevertheless, it was not possible to achieve fundamental changes. On an individual level it was possible, but since the atmosphere of the 1950s was relatively conservative and resistant to accept radical ideas, systemic changes could not be realized. Conservatism was typical of the nineteenth century, too – but it was a time of revolutions, as Wesley T. Motts says: “a time ripe for healthy change” (195). The 1950s was a period already overwhelmed by the hardships of the previous decades and the changes of the post-war years. The 1960s, however, proved to be a more sufficient time for change and the re-evaluation of Transcendentalist ideas. The literary group of the Beat Generation can serve as evidence for this claim. The Beat Generation dominated the 1960s and incorporated many Transcendentalist ideas in their movement.

This study is divided into five parts: the Introduction is followed by the first chapter, which delineates the reform movements of the Transcendentalists, namely their educational and feminist reforms. Chapter two analyses the movie *Dead Poets Society* in detail and focuses on the Transcendentalist elements that the movie incorporates by examining how excessive or even distorted they are. Finally, chapter three analyses *Mona Lisa Smile*, examining how the movie represents the tenets of Transcendentalism as well as the status of women in the 1950s. This chapter also elaborates on the possibility of a second Transcendentalist movement in the 1950s. The third chapter is followed by the Conclusion, which summarizes the main ideas and results of the present paper.

Chapter 1: Reform Movements: Education and Feminism

As it has been mentioned in the introduction, New England Transcendentalism included educational and social reforms. The social reforms of the Transcendentalists also involved their fight for equality and for women's rights. The movies *Mona Lisa Smile* and *Dead Poets Society* are partly based on these reforms. In order to provide a better understanding of the movies, these reforms must be discussed. This chapter will elaborate on the educational reform introduced by the Transcendentalists, together with their feminist activism as part of their social reforms.

The educational reform of the Transcendentalists introduced innovative methods regarding teaching. The nineteenth century education system was lacking in many aspects, and the advocates of the movement tried to improve its quality. As Richard Miller points out, one of the problems of contemporary education was its aim of fulfilling solely "informative purposes" (8). He adds that the educational system was highly influenced by the Enlightenment, and reason was valued over intuition (8). He also elaborates on how the "standardized" (2) form of education was characteristic of the period, which consisted of arithmetic studies, reciting scripture from memory, and acquiring the Latin language (2). He further notes that the lack of diversity among students served as another problem (10): certain classes and groups, such as working-class students and people of colour, did not have access to proper education (45), which led to inequality. Moreover, according to Wesley T. Mott, while basic education was provided for women as well, they had no access to higher education (88). The Transcendentalists aimed at providing solutions for these problems by radicalizing the contemporary education system.

Amos Bronson Alcott opened his Temple School in Boston in the September of 1834. His assistant was Elizabeth Peabody, who described the innovative methods that Alcott applied as a teacher in her *Record of a School: Exemplifying the General Principles of Spiritual Culture* (1835). According to Miller, many of Alcott's methods were unorthodox in character (1). His methods were remarkably radical in the nineteenth century context, and he became object of criticism; eventually, he had to close his school in 1838. Nevertheless, as Miller says, even though Alcott's approach towards teaching was criticized, he "radicalized the 19th -century pedagogical field" (1). He adds that Alcott's methods included the rejection of rote-learning and the humanization of his students (1). He calls Alcott's teaching method "de-standardized" (2) education, where students are not compared to their classmates, and the teacher can provide

attention for each student and address their needs (2). According to him, what served as the focus point of Alcott's teaching was personal growth for he was deeply concerned with the spirit (2). Mott further adds that in order to improve the self-awareness of his students, Alcott made them write journals (189). Since Alcott considered self-reflection a significant aspect of education, as Miller says, he did not use this method as a way of testing his students' knowledge, but as a way of letting them assess their inner selves while writing about their own feelings and emotions (16). He adds, another core element of Alcott's teaching was improving the interpretive and analytical skills of his students (16). As Miller further elaborates, Alcott's students were also encouraged to learn from one another as well, and he established an environment where the students could reflect on and defend their own ideas as well as each other's ideas (44). Moreover, according to Mott, Alcott did not refrain from bringing up taboos either, such as sexuality or religion, during his lessons (190).

As visible, Alcott's methods were not in compliance with the contemporary forms of education which valued reason over intuition and spirituality, and objectivity over subjectivity. Miller finds that Alcott's teaching had an effect on the inner self of his students (14). He notes, Alcott's – and the other Transcendentalist teachers' – methods served as a tool of reviving the human spirit by reforming the institutions of society (5). As Miller explains, this process started with the individual, hoping that by receiving an education that focused on spirituality, the inner self, and self-reliance, students could make a change in society and reform its institutions (34). In connection to this, the methods used by Alcott and his assistant, Peabody, as Miller says, "liberated" (33) the contemporary education system by establishing a learning environment, where the students could acquire knowledge "without having to conform to a standard set by authoritative powers" (33). He adds that Alcott, in fact, gave the title of the "final authority" (44) to the teacher by stating that the teacher alone obtains the responsibility of creating practices in the classroom (44). Miller remarks that Alcott even calls out parents applying poor parenting practices and says that it is the teacher's responsibility to advance the students' development on all physical, spiritual, mental, and social levels (45-46).

Alcott and Peabody were not the only ones among the Transcendentalists who turned to teaching. Mott points out that many of the movement's advocates engaged in the field of teaching, such as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Ralph Waldo Emerson (188). Through education, they most importantly wanted to prevent their students from having their spirit negatively affected by existence and life. In this sense, as Mott says, spirituality and the idea of innate divinity was of significance for the Transcendentalist teachers (187). Like Alcott,

they also focused on the inner selves of their students. However, even though the Transcendentalists applied innovative approaches in their education, they were demanding teachers. As Mott explains, their aim was not to decrease requirements and student performance, but to make the process of learning more enjoyable to their students (201).

According to Mott, for Emerson, education meant teaching self-trust (185). As he further elaborates, Emerson also focused on spirituality and the inner self, and similar to Alcott, he denied the notion of rote-learning, bringing thinking and more active learning to the fore (196). Self-reliance was of another importance in his teaching: as Wesley T. Mott quotes him, “The end of education should be self-reliance...” (196). As it is visible, in Emerson’s teaching, intuition and the self were of significance. He encouraged the spiritual- and self-development on his students. What he states in his essay “Self-Reliance” is also applicable to his teaching methods. His essay, “The American Scholar” (1837) demonstrates some of his beliefs regarding teaching methods as well. In Mott’s interpretation, Emerson’s essay severely criticises society and contemporary educational system because they stand in the way of the students’ spiritual development (195). His thoughts about library-goers and bookworms also apply to his teaching methods: he denied the effectiveness of reciting knowledge solely from old books and emphasized the importance of thinking instead. Mott says that he treated books as sources of inspiration and as thought-invoking tools, giving priority to the act of selectivity as well, which meant “creatively absorbing what he needed for his own imagination” (195).

Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau also regarded education as a tool to improve not only one’s intellect, but the self as well. According to Mott, Margaret Fuller often made her students write journals too, and she also asked them to define things in order to improve their capacities regarding thinking (192). In the case of Thoreau, what made his education outstanding was his attitude towards authorities: Miller remarks that he was strongly against the government, voicing that it is not the lawmakers who engage with students (39). He was against authorities interfering with the process and practices of teaching. According to Mott, even Emerson was against systematizing education (198). As it is visible, Alcott, Thoreau, and Emerson rejected the idea of institutions having the main responsibility over education, and they give more authority to the teachers themselves.

The Transcendentalists also wanted to make education accessible to all. Mott finds that they believed in equal rights to education regardless of race or gender (201). As it has been mentioned before, the question of diversity in the classroom was a problem in contemporary education, which the Transcendentalists tried to solve. Still, as Miller says, it is likely that

Alcott's classroom was not a particularly diverse environment either (11). As he explains, when Alcott tried to admit an African American girl in his Temple School, the parents of his students interfered with this process, claiming they would withdraw their children from the school, if he were to admit the girl (38). Even though he was trying to make a positive change, he could not affect those parents' attitude towards people of colour. Nevertheless, as Mott points out, the Concord School of Philosophy opened in 1879 as a place that offered equal opportunities for education (200).

The Transcendentalists' fight for equality did not manifest solely in their aim of making education accessible for all. Their social reforms were of significance as well. They took part in the abolitionist movement which aimed at putting an end to slavery; eventually, the abolitionist movement provided the grounds for feminist activism, too. According to Len Gougeon, many women took part in the abolitionist movement through which they could show their strength and abilities (586). He adds that after achieving the abolition of slavery, the Transcendentalists started to focus more on women's rights (587).

The concrete idea of feminism was inexistent in the nineteenth century. Victorian values dominated the expectations regarding middle- and upper-middle-class white women. According to Susan M. Cruea, an image of women was born: the "Cult of True Womanhood" (188) which described the ideal woman as a perfect housewife, a perfect mother, and a true supporter of her husband, invisible in public life. She was pure and chaste, did not concern herself about politics, career or any pursuits outside the home. A perfect woman did not seek education and did not try to support herself financially either, for independent, educated women were seen unfeminine and even unnatural. They had no right to vote either. As Cruea notes, all these factors led women to become completely dependent on their husbands (187 – 189). The Transcendentalists noticed the problems regarding the status of women and attempted to raise public awareness of women's inferior status.

According to Phyllis Cole, it was female Transcendentalists who first succeeded in gaining attention in the matter, mostly through their writings which later gave foundation to their activism (257). Shee explains, in order to acquire authority in church, republic, and the state, they first had to claim "the power of private thought" (257). She also adds that Margaret Fuller was the editor of the *Dial*, a Transcendentalist periodical, in which she published many writings of female authors (262). As she notes, female members of the Transcendentalists also held their own meetings and conventions: the first Women's Rights Convention was held in 1848 (257). As she further elaborates, at this convention, one of the advocates of the movement, called

Caroline Dall, talked about the beginning of their activism, and said that it was one of Margaret Fuller's essay, "The Great Lawsuit" (1843) that started it (257).

It is indeed Margaret Fuller who is mostly associated with the slowly evolving feminist movement of the nineteenth century. Her contributions inspired many other Transcendentalists to speak on behalf of women. She edited the *Dial*, and she herself wrote essays about the status of women, such as her most known book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. According to Jane Duran, she strongly insisted on equality between men and women (66). Yet, she was not the only female Transcendentalist who contributed actively to the women's rights movement. It is important to mention other activists, such as Caroline Dall, for example. Tiffany K. Wayne points out that Dall was one of the Transcendentalists who actively took part in the women's rights movement (3). According to Wayne, she regarded the whole Transcendentalist Movement as a sort of feminist activism (4). According to Cole, Dall also turned to writing and published her book titled *The College, the Market, and the Court* (1867) (258). She says that Elizabeth Peabody also spoke on behalf of women, and she often involved Biblical stories in her writings to challenge "scriptural authority" (262) assigned to men. Cole mentions that Peabody lifted the blame of the Fall from the shoulders of Eve, pointing out that Adam and Eve were equal individuals – even in the act of sinning (260). Cole claims that Fuller's contributions to the women's rights movement laid foundation for "gender-equalizing pedagogy" (260). Lastly, it is also important to mention Lydia Maria Child. As Cole points out, she was the writer of the first Transcendentalist book, *Philothea* (1836), in which she writes about her struggles as a "public woman" (260).

As a result of their contributions, their activism gained more participants. Cole mentions that in 1850, the first national convention on women's rights took place in Worcester, Massachusetts (265). And from that point on, not only women participated in the women's rights movement, but men as well, mostly among the advocates of the Transcendentalist Movement. As Cole recalls, the 'Boston feminist coalition' gladly let men join their circle, such as William H. Channing or Emerson himself (266). As Cole says, Channing even spoke up for the rights to vote and to divorce for women (265), while Thomas Wentworth Higginson, another advocate of the Transcendentalist Movement, called out men who believed women were inferior to them (267). Ralph Waldo Emerson actively took part in the women's rights movement, too, publicly voicing his opinion that women should be granted the right to vote, to property, and to higher education. Gougeon remarks that he even became a vice-president of the New England Woman's Suffrage Association (590). According to Wayne, as men started to

join the women's rights movement and to attend the meetings organised by Transcendentalist women, Caroline Dall regarded this process as women allowing men to enter their circles (Wayne 3).

However, when it comes to Emerson's proto-feminist activism, it is important to mention that he became object of criticism. David Leverenz points out that in his earlier essays, Emerson put significant emphasis on ideas regarding manhood and masculinity (38-39). He introduced the image of his liberal hero, a male individual, who manifests in the characters of the Poet or the Scholar. Descriptions of what he perceives as the "ideal man" appear in his essays such as "The American Scholar", but the work which provides the best insights into the character of his liberal hero is his essay titled "The Poet" (1844). According to Leverenz, by introducing his "hero," Emerson had a specific aim: to create a new class of elite (39). He adds, Emerson wished to change the ideals of contemporary manhood, shifting the source of true masculinity from possessiveness and property to dispossession, intellect and spirituality (40-43). In his essays, Emerson even seems to glorify and exalt the image of his liberal hero. He portrays both the Scholar and the Poet as higher entities among human beings, as superior to others. For example, in "The American Scholar" he calls the Scholar "Man Thinking" (2) and in "The Poet" he refers to the Poet as "liberating god(s)" (13) or the "only teller of news" (4). He describes them as the educated, intellectual men, who see beyond the material world and are ought to lead humanity.

Nevertheless, Emerson's liberal hero was introduced before he would turn to address the situation of women. In 1855, he published his lecture "Woman", in which he emphasises the need for equal rights for women. He held several other speeches in which he spoke on behalf of women. As Wayne says, the Transcendentalists started to promote the idea of equal access to self-culture, and the idea that every individual has the right to pursue their own path (4). She adds that they believed that understanding the world requires getting to know the self as well through the process of education and reflection to which self-culture served as the link (5). She also notes that the advocates of the Transcendentalist Movement, voiced that the soul of an individual is sexless (4), hence, self-culture should be accessible to all.

One of the results of the Transcendentalists' feminist reform became apparent with the launch of the first feminist periodical, *The Una: A Paper Devoted to the Elevation of Woman* in 1853. Moreover, as Cole points out, the activism started by Transcendentalist women continued up until 1900 (270). Nevertheless, she notes that most women still resisted change regarding their status (266). Many of them were still lacking the self-consciousness that would have helped them share their experience and to partake in the movement. The contemporary

norms of society – which did not give place for radical ideas – might have served as another factor in this case.

As it has been demonstrated, the educational and social, namely the feminist, reforms of the Transcendentalists were of significance. By introducing new methods, the Transcendentalists started the radicalization of the educational system. They also took part in the abolitionist movement, and they fought for the rights of women. Their contribution to the contemporary women's rights movement was significant enough to give a basis to the slowly evolving feminist movement.

Chapter 2: Excesses of American Transcendentalism in *Dead Poets Society*

Dead Poets Society is partly built on Transcendentalist ideas but represents them excessively. The movie incorporates elements of the Transcendentalists' educational reforms and certain ideas present in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays. As the previous chapters have mentioned, individualism, non-conformism, and the importance of art and intuition are all included in the movie. Nevertheless, the movie represents some of these ideas in an exaggerated way and distorts the concept of Transcendentalism. This chapter will show examples of such excesses by analysing the movie and how faithfully it presents the Transcendentalist beliefs. As the Introduction mentioned, the term "excess" will refer to three things in this context: how Transcendentalist ideas may or may not be fitting in the 1950s' environment; the representation of women and feminist ideas; and the distortion of Transcendentalist beliefs.

Firstly, I will address the Transcendentalist elements and explore whether the movie remains faithful to or distorts the initiatives of the movement. *Dead Poets Society* takes place at Welton Academy, a highly conservative educational institution established for the admission of boys only. The movie tells the story of a group of students and John Keating, the main character. Keating arrives at the school as the new literature teacher with the aim of creating a more radical and open-minded learning environment. It is revealed at the beginning that he was a student of Welton academy, too (*Dead Poets Society* 04:04-10). This entails that he is already familiar with the institution and its traditions and values; yet this fact does not seem to discourage him from fulfilling his aim. He starts encouraging his students to form the group of "Dead Poets Society" in which he also participated as a student.

Keating is portrayed from the very beginning as an eminent intellectual, as Emerson's "Man Thinking" himself. He seems to be borrowing a great many of practices and methods from the Transcendentalist teachers of the mid-nineteenth century. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Transcendentalist teaching methods were unorthodox in character. Keating also applies methods that are declared unorthodox by the authorities of the school (01:19:09-14). Just like the Transcendentalists did, he focuses on the self-development of his students; but he does so by trying to broaden their minds. At one point, he asks his students to stand on the table, encouraging them to look at things from a different perspective (43:00-44:07). He tells them: "Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way." This act becomes an important motif later on in the movie. Similar to Emerson, he also includes self-reliance as one of the central keys in his education. He claims that he wants his students to be

free thinkers (27:29-31). Keating also encourages his students to dare to be creative and to handle their feelings and thoughts as sources of inspiration. For example, he asks them to write a poem and read it out loud in front of the whole class, which also inspires them to stand up for their thoughts instead of being ashamed of them (53:52-58:00). By requiring his students to define what poetry is, Keating applies Margaret Fuller's method of asking students to define things by themselves as well. He also instructs his students to rip out their book's introduction about the definition of poetry, encouraging them to approach other people's – even professionals' – ideas critically. A quote from him illustrates the point: "...you will learn to think for yourselves again" (21:02-24:59). Keating introduces the idea of non-conformism to his students, too, and tells them they are not obliged to conform to society and its expectations (01:03:38-05:52), which is another idea borrowed from Emerson's "Self-Reliance", in which he says: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (142). Emerson also points out the difficulty of staying self-reliant in the face of society but says that it is what real self-reliance means (144).

However, Keating fails to convey the true meaning of self-reliance to his students. While they recreate the group of the "Dead Poets Society" and sneak out at nights into a cave to read out poems to each other, this initiative is not a true sign of self-reliance: they merely follow Keating's encouragement. Eventually, they misunderstand Keating's words and his novel ideas. They interpret the notion of self-reliance as a revolt against authorities and their parents, but that is not the true meaning of self-reliance. One of the main characters, Charlie Dalton, writes an offensive article in the school's magazine in which he demands the authorities to admit girls to the institution (01:15:23-16:35), but he merely does it because he wants to impress Keating. After he gets punished for his actions, Keating tells him that self-reliance should not result in negative outcomes and that one should not mistake its notion for recklessness. He mentions the importance of recognizing the proper times for daringness and for carefulness.

These misunderstandings later result in another main character, Neil Perry's suicide. The tragic outcomes of Neil's story root from his dream of becoming an actor. In order to fulfil his aim, he has to confront his strict, demanding parents – which he fails to do so. His father strongly opposes the idea of his son pursuing an acting career and resists considering Neil's feelings. Even though Keating advises Neil to talk to his father about the matter, Neil eventually participates in a theatre play as the main character without his parents' acceptance. However, his parents keep interfering with his aim and refuse to let him pursue his dream. As he feels trapped in a life deprived of his free will, he takes his own life, perceiving suicide as the only

escape, as the only self-reliant act he can perform. With this aspect, the movie tries to depict how misunderstanding the notion of self-reliance can make the individual vulnerable. Suicide is not a form of self-reliance. The Transcendentalists, who believed in the divinity of the soul, promoted the endless opportunities life could offer to each individual. They encouraged the individual to seek these endless opportunities. However, since Neil cannot withdraw his attention from the conventions of his environment, he still sees the world according to its patterns, which leads him to misunderstand the notion self-reliance. He thinks, he can choose only from two opportunities: living a life controlled by his parents or taking his own life. It is important to mention that before he would end his life, he puts on the garland he wore during the play. He gets into the character he was playing, Puck of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night Dream*, which may represent his suppressed desires and his failure of fulfilling them. His actions carry the message that those who do not conform to the conventions set by society and the authorities do not have the opportunity of self-realization. He does not dare to confront his father because he has control over Neil's life. Neil cannot comprehend the fact that he is a free human being, independent of anyone but himself, which in the Emersonian sense is the notion of self-reliance.

The opportunity which would let the students practice real self-reliance occurs after Neil's death. His father and the authorities of the institution blame Keating for the happenings, pointing out that he was the one who encouraged Neil to become an actor, and they plan on dismissing him. This requires the students' signature, and they threaten the ones who refuse to sign the paper with expulsion. Everyone signs the paper out of fear, except for Charlie Dalton who eventually gets expelled. He is the only student who seems to rely on himself and his own values, which is justified by his reluctance to put the blame on the teacher he loves. The other students conform to the expectations of the authorities and of their parents. At the very end of the movie, when Keating is shown collecting his belongings in the classroom, the students stand on the table, disregarding the orders of another teacher, and call Keating "Oh, Captain, my Captain" (02:03:17-05:11), a name he assigned to himself earlier. While this closing scene is undoubtedly impressive and might soothe the tragic ending, I would argue that the students' dramatic performance is more likely a form of temporary revolt than reassuring traits of self-reliance. Although the movie is open-ended in this regard, it is implied that the ones who stay at the academy will be obliged to continue their years and respect the rules like they used to before Keating's arrival.

Regarding Neil's suicide, it is also open to question how much a teacher can interfere with their students' lives. As mentioned in chapter one, Alcott held teachers more responsible for the students' development than their parents, but the movie seems to challenge this idea. Right before Neil's suicide, Neil's father asks Keating to stay out of his son's life (01:38:48-39:02), taking this responsibility out of the teacher's hands. In fact, Neil's suicide cannot solely be attributed to Keating's radical teaching methods. On the one hand, he encourages Neil to pursue his goal, but on the other hand he also tells him to seek a solution jointly with his parents. He does not tell him to be reckless and go against his parents' will. It is Neil who has decided to disregard Keating's warning out of fear. As I see it, Neil's parents, mostly his father, are also to blame for the happenings. Were they to consider their son's feelings, they could have avoided this tragic outcome.

However, the environment in which Keating applied his methods was not suitable for their reception, and Keating knew about its conservative atmosphere. In his methods, another aspect of the Transcendentalists' educational reform can be found: starting with the individual. The Transcendentalists aimed at changing society and its institutions by starting with the education of the younger generations. Keating seems to apply this method as well. Nevertheless, having been a student of Welton Academy and being aware of its conservative environment, Keating could have calculated the hazards of his innovative methods. While students need help and encouragement for self-development and to trust their feelings or stand up for themselves, the conservative academy and the political atmosphere of post-war society do not serve as a fitting environment for Keating's radical practices. Even the students end up misunderstanding his words, and motivated by his liberating ideas, they close their eyes upon the harshness of reality and the consequences of their actions. The problem is not with Keating's character and his ideas, but rather with the unfitting environment in which he tries to enforce them, ignoring the odds that are against his actions. The system he tries to change remains undefeated, the authorities and the parents do not approve of his actions. Just as the society of the mid-nineteenth century found Alcott's methods "blasphemous", the 1950s show no tolerance toward these practices either.

Another significant factor to consider is the quality of life regarding America of the 1950s. These years, often referred to as the silent fifties, were a crucial period for the American society. In the post-war era, the "pursuit of happiness," which first appeared in the Declaration of Independence, became a significant goal, and it was highly propagated along with the formation of the new "American Dream" related to it. The media started promoting the new values of this

American Dream. According to Daniel Álvarez Cillero, after the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War, the concept of the American Dream was meant to serve as a new source of happiness and relief (22); yet, due to the strict social conventions and norms, this aim was not fulfilled. Daniel P. Kamienski describes the period as the “Age of Affluence and Anxiety” (2). Cillero further adds that the main values of American society became materialistic (13), and the white, middle-class, suburban family became the normalized image of the 1950s (23). Kamienski points out that happiness meant being married, working hard, and raising children (4). And with that, gender norms were established as well: as Cillero recites, the husband was the breadwinner of a family, while the wife stayed at home with the children, did the housework, and indulged in the act of consumption (23). As Cillero points out, women were “enclosed in the world of the house” (26), oppressed, and suffered social exclusion (26). Kamienski also adds that due to the strict norms, individual dreams and goals were dismissed, and the problem of conformity emerged (5). He further notes that people promoting different lifestyles were considered “abnormal” (3), and that homosexuality was considered a taboo and unnatural (21). According to Cillero, art and literature were pushed into the background, too (29). He adds that the disregard towards one’s own interests and goals and the lack of individual freedom led to “emotional emptiness” (29), loneliness, and mental illnesses such as depression, and the idea of escapism became more and more desirable (29). The American Dream was meant to let people pursue their own happiness; yet it left them trapped in a society regulated by conventions.

Dead Poets Society portrays some of these characteristics of the 1950s. The characters in the movie are to conform to the norms of society and to the expectations of their parents. This aspect is most visible in the case of Neil, since he is forced to dismiss his own dreams and is obliged to live up to his parents’ expectations as the obedient top student. Moreover, there are forms of repressed homosexuality incorporated in the movie as well, on which I will elaborate later in this chapter. Yet, considering the contemporary political state of the 1950s and its social atmosphere, I would argue that Transcendentalist ideas might not be fitting for this period. As I have mentioned in the Introduction, the nineteenth century and the 1950s were fundamentally different from each other. The 1950s was already overwhelmed with the changes of the post-war years and the new lifestyle that characterised the decade. Considering the social and political atmosphere along with the conservative environment of Welton Academy in *Dead Poets Society*, Transcendentalist ideas are unlikely to prevail. The movie tries to encourage the ideas of individualism and self-reliance in a period when social conventions were very strict, and a strong sense of conformity was characteristic of society. According to John Tytell, people

did not dare to speak up against authorities (8) and to address the problems resulting from conformity. They rather stayed silent, as the name of the period also suggests. In such an infertile environment, radical ideas were not well-received.

Apart from distorting the notion of self-reliance and presenting Transcendentalist ideas in an unfitting environment, the movie excludes aspects of the Transcendentalists' social reforms as well. It does not show diversity in terms of social classes and races, and only the white, upper-class society is represented. Even though the Transcendentalists took part in the abolitionist movement and fought for equality, the movie does not include the notion and importance of equality either in the form of class discussions or in the form of representation. The setting is a private academy, and the movie seems to disregard public schools by portraying them as unintellectual places (*Dead Poets Society* 01:09:38-10:40), while the Transcendentalists did not discriminate people based on social class. Women are also disregarded and underrepresented.

Dead Poets Society does not include any aspects of the Transcendentalists' fight for women's rights and engages only in male communities. Women are included only for the entertainment of men. At one point, Charlie takes two girls to one of their "Dead Poets Society" meetings, but the girls are not given much thought or words, and they cannot even make a distinction between Charlie's self-written poems and classic ones (01:10:41-11:31). When he publishes the article about the admission of girls, his only aim is to satisfy his own sexual needs. The only other girl shown in the movie is Chris Noel, one of the boys, Knox Overstreet, is in love with. She has an abusive boyfriend, who she eventually leaves. She attends a public school, but her family maintains their status by making friends with upper-class members. She values the upper-class more than her own social circle, too. Apart from her, no other female character has a voice. According to Eleonora Biondo, the movie also depicts forms of female inferiority, as Neil's mother is reluctant to stand up for her son against her husband (3).

Yet, the movie does not fail to represent Mr. Keating as Emerson's liberal hero. He appears as the self-reliant, intellectual, American man. He highlights the importance of thinking and creativity and reminds his students of the genius dwelling in them. As Gary Snapper explains, he vivifies poetry "through the encouragement of creative expression" (27). He is independent and bravely stands up against the authorities. Still, according to Tania Modleski, what makes him truly represent the Emersonian hero is the resemblance of male authority he carries with himself (138). Modleski says that the fact that he makes his students call him "Oh Captain, My Captain" (*Dead Poets Society* 12:30-13:00) is a reference to Walt Whitman's poem

of the same title, the poem which approves of male authority (138). With these characteristics of his, he is portrayed as superior to the other teachers in sensitivity and intellect. As the movie depicts the beginning of the school term, the standardized teaching methods of the other teachers can be seen: they are strict, already demanding, and are sticking to the curriculum (*Dead Poets Society* 10:25-11:19). The shift to Keating's lesson right afterwards emphasises the uniqueness of his teaching methods, as he quietly escorts his students out of the classroom, and familiarizes them with the idea of "Carpe Diem," that is of "seizing the day." Considering the conservative principles of education and the age of the students, it is not surprising that Keating is of such a significant influence on them. While the other teachers only care about their intellectual development, Keating motivates them to live their lives to the fullest. Yet, they are young high schoolers at an age when they are easily influenced and persuaded, and Keating is not careful enough when he starts introducing his radical ideas: he does not consider the possible negative outcomes they might draw.

Keating also represents the Transcendentalists' love for art. He is a literature teacher and a true Romantic. He talks about the importance of poetry, love, romance, and beauty claiming that these are the things that make life enjoyable: "We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race" (25:36). By the poem-writing assignment, he even encourages his students to write poems themselves and he also motivates them to recreate the group of the "Dead Poets Society". Yet, Snapper calls his teaching methods "dishonest" and "romanticised" (27) remarking that he is an extreme representation of literature teachers (27). He believes that Keating is trying to achieve changes in society through his teaching, but eventually fails: at the end, most of his students continue their lives at the academy, pursuing the path that has been already chosen for them (28).

As earlier pointed out, there are forms of repressed homosexuality present in *Dead Poets Society*. Tania Modleski refers to the movie as a "hysterical text" (137), in which homosexuality is repressed, and even though its notion is excluded from the main narrative, it appears in many different forms (137). The boy who is most likely to be struggling with his sexuality is Todd Anderson, one of the main characters. He, as Modleski points out as well, shows signs of "sexual identity crisis" (138). He is a shy, insecure boy, seemingly an outcast in the boys' friend group of the "Dead Poets Society". At one point, when he fails to prepare his poem-writing assignment, Keating asks him to stand up in front of the classroom, look at the picture of Walt Whitman, and create a poem out of incoherent thoughts on the spot and reveal what is hidden deep inside him (*Dead Poets Society* 55:10-58:00). The fact that Todd is inspired by Walt

Whitman, a keen follower of the Transcendentalists, and who was very likely homosexual, as Modleski points out (138), might imply that they are secret sharers in their sexual orientation. Even though Whitman is referred to throughout the movie, his sexuality is never mentioned. Todd's roommate, Neil Perry might also be struggling with his sexuality. His relationship with Todd raises suspicion in this matter. After Neil's suicide, it is Todd who is most shocked and traumatized by the happenings. Apart from Todd and Neil, Keating's sexuality is questionable as well. He claims to have a fiancée whom he has left in London for teaching. Modleski notes that at one point, he is shown writing a letter to her with her photo placed on his desk; yet, this scene seems staged, and it is never revealed why he has chosen to leave her (139). Finally, Modleski also refers to the fact that at the very last scene of the movie, when the students stand on the desk to pay respect and say goodbye to Keating, the camera zooms in on Todd, but the legs of another student remain on the sides, placing Todd's figure between them, which might be another manifestation of the repressed, latent homosexuality in the movie (139-140).

As this chapter has demonstrated, *Dead Poets Society* is based on Transcendentalist ideas. Their educational reforms and Emerson's "Self-Reliance" served as inspiration for the movie itself, but the representation of Transcendentalist ideas is not entirely faithful to the original notions of the movement. The movie also fails to exhibit the social reforms of the Transcendentalists and includes forms of latent homosexuality. Finally, Transcendentalist ideas are represented in the context of the 1950s, in an environment which is not evidently fitting for their reception.

Chapter 3: Excesses of American Transcendentalism in *Mona Lisa Smile* and the Possibility of a Second Transcendentalist Movement in the 1950s

Mona Lisa Smile applies a feminist approach to Transcendentalism. While the movie incorporates certain tenets of the Transcendentalists' educational reforms, the main focus is on the status of women in the 1950s. Besides, art and women's relation to it is another central element. As earlier argued, excesses appear regarding the Transcendentalist ideas portrayed in the movie, and these excesses are also to be analysed within the frame of the reception of Transcendentalist beliefs in the 1950s, feminist issues and the representation of women, as well as the distortion of Transcendentalist ideas.

The movie is set at Wellesley College, a conservative educational institution for women, in the 1950s. In order to better understand the movie itself, it is important to mention the contemporary lifestyle and status of women. As already discussed, the post-war years had their own atmosphere, which also resulted in the renewal of gender roles. Victorian values regarding white middle- and upper-class women became valid again, and the image of the "ideal woman" was born as well. In terms of career, women had limited opportunities, and the role of the woman was again attached to the home with the responsibility of homemaking and taking care of their family. These aspects of the decade are well-incorporated in the movie, perhaps even a bit exaggerated.

Mona Lisa Smile is set in such an environment, and even Wellesley College promotes the above-mentioned lifestyle for women. The sole aim of education portrayed in the movie is to prepare girls for marriage and for life as a wife. There are classes that focus on becoming a suitable wife (*Mona Lisa Smile* 28:09-29:35), and freshly married students even receive exemption from the necessity of attending classes (01:00:50-01:18). A teacher called Nancy Abbey even tells her students straightforwardly: "A few years from now, your sole responsibility will be taking care of your husband and children" (29:15-21). Katherine Ann Watson, the main character, applies for the position of the new art history professor to bring about change by introducing her radical, "progressive" ideas.

One of the excesses of the movie is that it represents mainly two archetypes of women. Kathrine Watson appears as one of them: she is the emancipated, independent woman. The other female archetype the movie especially focuses on is the conservative, domestic housewife characterised by one of the students, Betty Warren, who is preparing for her marriage. She respects the traditions Wellesley, and her goal in life is to build a family and to become an ideal

wife. She strongly opposes Watson's radical beliefs. The movie puts the main focus on these two archetypes, but represents other female figures as well: Nancy Abbey, the jilted, pitiable, lonely woman; and Giselle Levy in the character of the emancipated, free-spirited, sexually active woman. Joan Brandwyn, another main character, serves as the balance between the two main archetypes: she is the woman who eventually chooses marriage over education out of free will.

As the new art history teacher, Watson represents the Transcendentalist voice in the movie. She applies certain methods that the Transcendentalists favoured as well. For example, she also uses "unorthodox" practices and encourages her students to rely on their own thoughts when analysing a piece of art. On her second lecture, she tells her students: "There's...no textbook telling you what to think" (16:17-26). She also asks her students about what makes art good and who decides whether a certain piece of art is good or not. She encourages them to decide the quality of a piece of art for themselves according to their own taste and standards. Instead of focusing only on the classics, she introduces them to modern art as well, showing them Jackson Pollock's painting, *Number 1*. In this sense, the movie also represents the relationship between women and art, which seems rather unusual, regarding the fact that female artists tend to be less known than male artists. The relationship between art and the individual is usually portrayed through a male perspective, and by applying the female perspective, the movie includes another novel idea. Watson also promotes the notion of nonconformism to her students by telling them they can conform or be themselves and by encouraging them to create their own art. Yet, what makes her education truly characteristic is the fact that she does not refrain from voicing her opinion on marriage and the contemporary status of women. She is openly against the values of Wellesley and of contemporary society. She promotes the notion of self-reliance and nonconformity by motivating her students to recognize their potentials and not to adhere to the expectations of society as mere housewives.

Nevertheless, her actions draw consequences: the authorities of the institution strongly disapprove of her "progressive" practices. She is required to change her methods and stick to the curriculum, or else she needs to leave; eventually, she resigns from her position. Considering the environment of the school, Watson knew what she undertook and what would await her. She was completely aware of the conservative nature of the institution, and the final outcomes are not surprising. The system she tries to challenge seems undefeatable.

Certain excesses appear regarding Katherine Watson's character: she is especially stubborn, living only according to her own principles, ignorant of other forms of life that differ

from her values. It is important to help her students realize their potentials and to enlighten them about the situation of women, yet she tends to disregard some of her students' needs or preferences. She misunderstands the notion of self-reliance: instead of encouraging her students to pursue their own goals and happiness, she keeps voicing her own opinion. She is at first reluctant to acknowledge the fact that there are other values that still can be valid. She is extremely scared of commitment and equals marriage to the complete loss of a woman's freedom and independence. This clearly shows when she rejects the proposal of her partner, Paul (56:27-57:40) and gets into an affair with another professor at Wellesley, called Bill. Later, even Bill points out that it is impossible to be honest with her because she expects too much of others and is quick to judge them. He even adds, he thinks that Watson came to Wellesley so that others can help her find her way, and not conversely (01:40:28-41:13).

Katherine Watson highly encourages one of her students, Joan Brandwyn to receive further education and attend law school. Joan decides to submit her application to Yale University, and Watson helps her with the procedure. However, Joan eventually chooses to get married instead and not to receive further education, so that she can focus only on her future family. Watson is disappointed to receive this news, but Joan confronts her: "You stand in class and tell us to look beyond the image, but you don't", adding that Watson looks down on housewives and perceives them as worthless individuals having no soul (01:31:27-32:28). Watson eventually understands Joan's decision and congratulates her, which entails some character development on her behalf.

Joan, in fact, slowly swaps places with Betty Warren in some aspect. Betty Warren is a conservative girl at first, finding virtue solely in marriage. She resembles her mother, who keeps encouraging her daughter to get married and become an ideal wife. Betty conforms to her mother's expectations and is preparing for her marriage. She even tends to call out her friends, such as Giselle Levy, a true nonconformist with view to the woman's place. However, Betty cannot hide her anxiety and jealousy: her picking at her friends for following a different lifestyle or trying to sabotage another friend, Connie Baker's relationship (01:26:08-27:06) are a result of her suppressed feelings. Yet, she sticks to her values and is ready to attack anyone who does not share her beliefs. She eventually causes the dismissal of Amanda Armstrong, the school nurse, who secretly gives contraceptive devices to the students. The tension between Betty Warren and Katherine Watson keeps getting more visible throughout the movie and achieves its peak when Betty publishes an article about Katherine's "progressive" methods and about her views on regarding marriage. She claims that Watson "decided to declare war on the holy

sacrament of marriage” and that she rejects the roles women were “born to fill” (01:07:50-08:34). After the article is published, Watson holds a lecture about how contemporary society portrays women as mere housewives with no depth, while Betty just sits quietly with teary eyes (01:08:35-11:43). However, she slowly starts to change. She discovers her husband’s affair with another woman, and even her mother takes her husband’s side, telling Betty to gather herself and pretend she does not know about the affair. At one point she is shown looking at a picture of Leonardo da Vinci’s of *Mona Lisa*, while her mother is sitting next to her, assuring her that there is no need to file for divorce. She shows her mother the painting and says: “She’s smiling. Is she happy?” (01:42:03-22), pointing out that she too would only pretend to be happy were she to stay married to her husband. She uses art to express her feelings, and this is the point when the movie refers back to its title. This is also the scene when art and its interpretation interrelate with the act of self-reflection. When Betty looks at the painting, she interprets its meaning in accordance with her own feelings. She perceives Mona Lisa’s smile to be fake and finds sadness hidden behind it. In this sense, she relates to the painting. She eventually files for divorce despite her mother’s disapproval and moves to an apartment with Giselle Levy. From a conservative, marriage-orientated girl, she becomes an independent woman. Her action is a truthful representation of the notion of self-reliance.

Joan Brandwyn, on the other hand, chooses marriage instead. She is a clever girl who has the opportunity to attend law school. However, she only considers this idea due to Katherine Watson’s encouragement. Even though she gets admitted to Yale University, she decides to get married to her fiancé secretly. Yet, her actions are examples of self-reliance as well. She chooses marriage not because it is expected of her or forced on her, but because she realizes that building a family would make her happier than receiving further education. She tells Katherine: “I know what I’m doing, and it doesn’t make me any less smart” (01:31:55-59). Her marriage in fact resembles the type of marriage that feminists were promoting: a relationship in which both parties are satisfied both physically spiritually. Yet, considering Joan’s case, the question of a male mask behind her actions emerges due to the fact that the movie was directed by a man. I would argue, however, that her decision is not necessarily the result of a male perspective. She has become a wife eventually, but the exact opposite has happened to Betty. The movie lets both characters explore their own ways through different forms of self-reliance.

In connection with the question of self-reliance, not only Joan and Betty have acted according to their own will, but eventually Katherine Watson as well. The authorities at Wellesley disapprove of her teaching methods and require her to stick to a pre-admitted

curriculum, or else she cannot return as a professor the following school year. She decides to resign from her position, reluctant to teach according to the requirements set by the authorities. It is visible that Katherine Watson, Joan Brandwyn, and Betty Warren all go through character-development, and even though excesses appear in the movie, the portrayal of self-reliance is more faithful than in *Dead Poets Society*.

Nevertheless, the movie extends Transcendentalist beliefs and ideas regarding feminist issues. One of the main aims of nineteenth century activism for women's rights was to ensure political equality. The activism gave foundation for the first wave of feminism that occurred between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, with a focus on the matter of suffrage. In *Mona Lisa Smile*, set in the 1950s, the right to vote and receive higher education is already granted for women; hence, the movie highlights feminist ideas that were not emphatically voiced by the Transcendentalists, but served as the main goals of the second wave of feminism beginning in the 1960s. As Mohajan Haradhan remarks, in the second wave, the focus was placed on "sexuality and reproductive rights" (11), and redefining gender norms served as another goal (3). These issues appear in *Mona Lisa Smile*. The movie addresses the problems deriving from contemporary gender norms which labelled women as the typical, domestic housewives: through the character of Katherine Watson, it voices the rejection of these norms, highlighting the fact that women are more than mere housewives. It also includes matters regarding sexuality. One of the characters, Amanda Armstrong is openly lesbian; still, this aspect is not especially highlighted in the movie and is regarded as a taboo. Amanda is also the woman who gives contraceptive devices to her students and promotes reproductive rights. Moreover, the movie also introduces the image of the emancipated, independent, careerist woman, which was not characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century yet. The nineteenth-century society was not ready for the reception of these radical ideas regarding women and their sexuality. In fact, they were not particularly well-received in the 1950s either due to the conservative atmosphere. By asserting the above-mentioned issues, the movie extends the Transcendentalists' feminist ideas.

As it has been demonstrated, *Mona Lisa Smile* and *Dead Poets Society* are built on similar grounds, both promoting Transcendentalist ideas regarding the self and education. Yet, *Mona Lisa Smile* expresses the notion of self-reliance more efficiently and incorporates the Transcendentalists' feminist activism as well, what is more, it reaches beyond the core ideas of the movement. Since both movies present Transcendentalist ideas in the 1950s, it is open to question whether those beliefs would stand their grounds in the 1950s America. In the previous

chapters, I have elaborated on the political and social environment of the period: I mentioned how the changes of the post-war years resulted in the establishment of strict social and gender norms, how the white middle-class suburban family became the normalized image of the 1950s, and how the media started propagating the “pursuit of happiness” and the American Dream – but as John Tytell suggests, these notions were highly misinterpreted and distorted (7). It might seem that the problems resulting from the contemporary norms would require the re-emergence of Transcendentalist ideology. Nevertheless, as pointed out earlier, the 1950s were already overwhelmed by the changes of the post-war years; but what serves as a bigger problem is that Transcendentalist ideas would have most likely not been well-received. Tytell notes that people living in the 1950s were reluctant to address the issues regarding the social atmosphere and to question authoritative powers (8). Caitlin Cater also adds that the environment was highly conservative, and people were expected to conform to society’s values (24). She says that people became “indoctrinated” (25) with the beliefs of the homogenized society (25). As Tytell further elaborates, individualism was replaced by conformity, and “tolerance of ideological difference had been subverted to a passion for organization and political similitude” (7). He describes the period as a “time of extraordinary insecurity, of profound powerlessness as far as individual effort was concerned, when personal responsibility was being abdicated in favor of corporate largeness...” (5). These aspects of the 1950s show why Transcendentalist ideas would not have been well-received: the social atmosphere would have not been ready for the reception of such radical ideas even if those promoted a better quality of life. The pressure of the authoritative powers was too strong on the individual and on society as a whole. This entails that the 1950s did not serve as a possible time for a second Transcendentalist Movement. This period mainly just gave the foundation for the movements appearing in the 1960s, such as the second wave of feminism and the civil rights movement, for example. Regarding the overall mentality of society which was visibly more ready for the reception of new ideas, the 1960s served as a more appropriate time for the re-emergence of Transcendentalist ideas. It was also the period when the literary group of the Beat Generation appeared and started the Beat Movement.

According to Tytell, the origins of the Beat Generation root from nineteenth-century Transcendentalism (4). The members of the Beat Generation, such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs, started a literary movement in order to express their discontent with the contemporary status of society. As Tytell recalls, they began publishing their works in the 1950s, but they gained popularity only in the 1960s (3). According to Cater, the Beat Movement eventually became a main force that induced the societal changes of the

'60s. She also adds that similar to the Transcendentalists, the Beats put the self and the individual into focus and promoted self-reliance (16). As she explains, the inner self was of significance for both the Transcendentalists and the Beats, and they also highlighted the importance of self-awareness in prioritizing the needs and desires of the individual against society (16). As she further elaborates, they both addressed the negative effects that society and outward institutions have on the individual (14). She notes that nonconformity was another shared notion of both movements (25). In his best-known poem "Howl" (1956), Allen Ginsberg talks about the negative effects of conformity and about how society drove his friends to madness. Cater adds that the significance and power of inward change were also emphasized by both movements: they held the belief that change on an individual level "radiates outward" (19) and can eventually cause changes in society (19). As visible, both movements shared a number of ideas and characteristics despite the time difference between the periods they dominated. As Cater points out, these similarities "suggest a continuity between two seemingly disparate periods in American culture" (19-20). Moreover, the fact that they share a number of features serves as a proof for why a second Transcendentalist Movement would have been better-received in the 1960s.

Nevertheless, the two movements did not share the exact same foundations and ideologies. The 1950s and the 1960s had different sources of problems than the early nineteenth century. According to Tytell, the Beat Generation reacted to the insecurities that dispirited their generation (12) and as Cater remarks, those insecurities resulted from "the frightening and contradictory realities of modern life" (23). Tytell further notes that they rejected the conservative atmosphere of the period, and while society judged and condemned difference, the Beats regarded even madness to be natural (10-11). As he remarks, they even turned to using mind-altering substances in order escape from reality and to enhance their creative expressions (11).

To conclude this chapter, the 1950s do not serve as an appropriate period for the reception of a second Transcendentalist Movement: the 1960s proved to be more fitting for the re-emergence of Transcendentalist ideas. Yet, *Mona Lisa Smile* represents Transcendentalist ideas in the context of the 1950s, which results in excesses. Excesses also appear in the form of feminist issues and distortion of certain Transcendentalist ideas. However, the movie eventually ends with a rather positive outcome and conveys the notion of self-reliance more truthfully than *Dead Poets Society*.

Conclusion

With view to the movement's initiatives, this study proposed three new ideas. Firstly, it analysed *Dead Poets Society* and *Mona Lisa Smile* in the context of Transcendentalism. Secondly, it discussed the Transcendentalist elements present in the movies "as excesses". Finally, it addressed the question of a second Transcendentalist Movement taking place in America in the 1950s.

In order to fully understand the ideas articulated in the movies, the main principles of New England Transcendentalism have been discussed. The roots of the movement can be found in Europe, and it emerged in America in the nineteenth century. The movement embraced a set of philosophical, religious, and literary trends. It borrowed ideas from the British Romantics, from Immanuel Kant's philosophy, and from the Unitarians as well. The main features of the movement include the love of nature, spirituality, focus on the inner self, intuition, self-reliance, non-conformism, and the Monistic idea that God's divinity dwells in every individual. The Transcendentalists also took part in educational and social reforms, and with their proto-feminist activism, they gave foundation to the feminist movement of the late nineteenth century.

A great number of the mentioned principles appear in the movies. Both of them are built on the Transcendentalists' educational reforms. The main characters are art teachers who try to radicalize the conservative learning environment in which they teach, relying on the Transcendentalist teachers' unorthodox methods. This means that they place the main focus on the students' spiritual- and self-development, while they also encourage them to be self-reliant instead of conforming to the conventions of society. Apart from the educational reforms, *Dead Poets Society* also incorporates the character of Emerson's liberal hero whom he perceives and describes in his essays as the eminent, intellectual man. In the movie, this "hero" is represented by John Keating. *Mona Lisa Smile*, set at a women's college, relies on similar ideology as *Dead Poets Society*, but approaches Transcendentalism from a feminist perspective. It addresses questions such as the validity of contemporary gender norms, women's status in society, and women's relation to art. Both movies are set in the 1950s, but they portray the period from different angles.

Even though the movies are based on Transcendentalist ideas, they represent those initiatives rather excessively. This study has found that in the case of *Dead Poets Society*, distortions mainly appear regarding the interpretation of the notion of self-reliance and the exclusion of the Transcendentalists' social reforms. The students in the movie misinterpret the

notion of self-reliance as revolt against authorities and their parents; however, the true notion of self-reliance does not manifest solely in the form of revolt. It rather means the ability of standing up for ourselves in the face of society. Moreover, only the white upper-class is represented, and the focus is excessively on male communities.

In *Mona Lisa Smile*, excesses can be found regarding the main character, Katherine Ann Watson's personality, and the representation of women. The movie focuses mainly on two female archetypes: the emancipated, independent woman portrayed by Katherine Watson, and the conservative, domestic housewife in the character of Betty Warren. However, by the end of the movie, both characters experience character development. Katherine Watson is at first a very stubborn woman who only perceives the world through her own set of values, considering marriage as the loss of a woman's freedom. She eventually comes to accept the fact that some women might have different preferences than her. Betty Warren, changes as well: she leaves her cheating husband and becomes an independent woman. Since the characters end up choosing their own path according to their own values, the movie does not fail to convey the true notion of self-reliance. However, the movie extends Transcendentalist ideas about feminism by addressing issues not included in the Transcendentalists' activism, such as sexuality, reproductive rights, gender norms, and the image of the emancipated, careerist woman.

Both movies incorporate common features as well apart from the inclusion of Transcendentalist ideas and teaching methods. They portray art as a significant value and put emphasis on the importance of creative expression. However, both movies represent the question of sexuality as a taboo. In *Dead Poets Society*, homosexuality is latent, and while *Mona Lisa Smile* includes a lesbian character, this aspect of the movie is not especially emphasized. The movies also share their setting: both introduce Transcendentalist ideas in the 1950s. However, whether those radical ideas could have found a fertile ground in the post-war era is open to question. Regarding this matter, this study has found that considering the political and social atmosphere, the 1950s would not have served as an appropriate environment for the reception of Transcendentalist ideas. The 1950s were already overwhelmed by the hardships of the previous decades and the change of lifestyle emerging in the post-war years: there was no room for radical ideas, and the period was unfitting for a second Transcendentalist Movement.

However, the 1960s proved to be a more appropriate time for the re-emergence of Transcendentalist beliefs. The Beat Movement serves as proof regarding this question. It was a literary movement started by the Beat Generation in the 1950s, but it only gained popularity in

the 1960s. As John Tytell points out, the movement itself was built on Transcendentalist ideas (4). The two movements shared features such as the promotion of individualism, nonconformism, self-reliance, and the rejection of authorities. Caitlin Cater notes that they both focused on spirituality and the self, and denied the authority of outward institutions, emphasising their negative effects on the individual (14-16). The similarities between the two movements entail how Transcendentalist ideas could eventually prevail in the 1960s.

The final outcomes of this paper are the following: *Dead Poets Society* and *Mona Lisa Smile* incorporate Transcendentalist elements, but they represent some of them excessively. As both articulate Transcendentalist ideas and test their impact in such a barren period, it was open to question whether a second Transcendentalist Movement could have emerged in the 1950s. However, regarding the contemporary social and political atmosphere, this era did not serve as an appropriate time for the reception of Transcendentalist ideas.

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