

Margaret

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 1, 2011](#) issue

Depending on your tolerance or affection for epic morality plays, Kenneth Lonergan's *Margaret* may either feel too long and subplot-laden, with one too many plot twists, or a bit thin and sketchy (despite a running time of two and a half hours). This mixed response may stem from the fact that the film was shot in 2005 and is just now being released, following some byzantine battles in the editing room. Whichever side you come down on, *Margaret* is nothing if not spiritually ambitious.

The story revolves around 17-year-old Lisa Cohen (Anna Paquin), a smart if slightly annoying girl who lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with her younger brother and actress mother, Joan (J. Smith-Cameron). She attends a private school on partial scholarship and seems to be going through many teen rites of passage—challenging authority, bonding with sensitive teachers, exercising her sexual allure and generally being as difficult as possible.

One day, while shopping for a cowboy hat, she spots a bus driver (Mark Ruffalo) wearing one and tries to get his attention. He notices her waving at him and laughingly responds, which leads to a gruesome accident in which a woman crossing the street is run over by the bus. Lisa cradles the woman's head in her arms as the woman dies.

The film becomes an extended study of Lisa's response to the accident. It surveys the advice she receives from various adults, the decisions she makes (and sometimes sticks with) and how her buried grief and sense of injustice eat away at her and spill into the lives of those around her.

The cast of characters include police officers, representatives of the bus company, her classmates, a boy who has a crush on her, a boy she agrees to have sex with, her teachers (Matt Damon, Matthew Broderick), her mother, her estranged father, the dead woman's best friend, the bus driver and his family, the dead woman's distant cousin, her mother's new South American boyfriend, a few lawyers and a few

members of the Metropolitan Opera of New York. Ergo, the lengthy running time.

The best way to understand what writer-director Lonergan (*You Can Count on Me*) is up to may be to examine the film's title. The film has no character named Margaret, and the only time the name shows up is during one of Lisa's English literature classes in reference to the poem "Spring and Fall," by the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. The poem is about a young girl who is distraught over the dying of the leaves; it ends with the lovely couplet, "It is the blight man was born for / It is Margaret you mourn for."

The film seems to be suggesting that Lisa, the movie's "Margaret," is both naive and admirable in how she tries to process the woman's death. Though it would be easy to pass the buck to the bus driver, or fate, or life in the big city, that option doesn't satisfy her. Though she is told repeatedly that the adults in her life know best when it comes to issues of the law and personal responsibility, the death gnaws away at her core. She has a gut feeling that whatever is being done in response isn't enough.

It's not that people don't want to do the right thing, it's that the existence of right or wrong or good or bad is not nearly as clear as Lisa needs it to be. This ambiguity gets finessed even further in other classroom scenes that include a heated debate about Shakespeare's intent in one of his plays and another debate about America's political role in the Middle East.

Margaret is not an easy film to digest. It is a smorgasbord of stories and ideas, with the links between them oftentimes cloudy. Watching it is like participating in a heated discussion about whether the universe makes sense and whether the question is even worth pursuing. Lonergan seems to be suggesting that it is up to the young among us to question the nature of right and wrong. Their inquiries may seem naive to their more experienced elders, but if the young don't ask such questions, who will?