

Name

AP Language and Composition

Ms. Hettinger

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On the surface, the protagonist of Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* acts like any other American teenager. (IP,IC) She flirts with boys, fights with her mom, and makes generally bad decisions. It is when her actions are examined under a closer lens that the complexity of her character emerges. She is simultaneously unerringly confident and startlingly insecure. She lacks no shortage of brashness— talking brazenly (adverb) of the best masturbation techniques and stealing her math teacher's gradebook— except when confronted with unfamiliar people and experiences. The most interesting relationship of the film, however, is not the romantic one she shares with a closeted gay man, nor is it the sexual one she indulges in with a faux-philosophical band member.(interrupter) It is the turbulent connection she shares with her mother, one that dominates the entirety of the film. By varying colors, camera angles, and character positioning, Gerwig demonstrates that the source of their conflict stems not just from a difference in opinion, but from forced proximity and a perceived lack of autonomy.

Gerwig's purposeful choices are evident from the first frame of the film, a shot of Lady Bird and her mother asleep in a motel bed. The colors— pastel pink pajamas and pale yellow pillows— are muted; the soft morning light streaming in from a nearby window draws the watcher's eye to the center of the screen. (em dash) The only sound is the distant hum of traffic, perhaps from a neighboring highway. The camera angle (directly above the two characters) and

the narrow nature of the shot eliminate any details that may sidetrack the audience. (parenthesis)

By removing possible distractions, Gerwig intentionally highlights the lack of distance between mother and daughter. The two are unusually close: Lady Bird's nose is only a couple inches away from that of her mother. (IC:IC) This purposeful positioning is the first of many throughout the film; it generally indicates that an argument is soon to follow.

The first argument between Lady Bird and her mother occurs relatively soon, only two minutes into a 94-minute runtime. The two are on their way back home from a college visit, stuck in the same car surrounded by nothing but corn and soy fields. Their fight is sparked by a short comment from Lady Bird, one that seems typical of a white, middle-class teenager: "I want to live through something." From there, the mother-daughter pair bicker (strong verb) through a variety of topics: Lady Bird's private education at the Catholic Immaculate Heart, her desire to attend college on the East Coast, her inability to pass her driver's test. It is important to note the composition of this series of shots. Once again, the colors are muted—the pale faces of the two characters stand out against their dark shirts and the gray upholstery of their car. The shot is small, not wide enough to fit the entirety of the vehicle or the passing scenery, just wide enough to fit a mother and a daughter sitting side by side. These choices have a similar effect to those made in the opening shot: They draw attention to the proximity of the two characters, a proximity that is so displeasing to Lady Bird that she chooses to jump out of a moving vehicle instead of remaining in a stifling environment with a mother who does not understand her. The next shot makes her feelings perfectly clear: "FUCK YOU MOM" stands out in thick, black letters against a bright pink cast.

This argument is not the last of the film although it is the most explosive.(IC,DC) One notable disagreement occurs after a school dance, immediately after Lady Bird receives her first kiss. Her euphoric exclamations stand in marked contrast to her mother's mood, soured after the realization that her husband's loss of a job and their meager savings will make the coming months difficult financially. The stark difference between mother and daughter sets the stage for a confrontation, a fire that Lady Bird stokes by leaving her clothes strewn across her room. Her carelessness is just the ammunition her mother needs: She stalks into the room and begins her lecture. The tension only increases when Lady Bird's mother shuts the door, inadvertently (adverb) forcing them into the same space. It is this proximity, so reminiscent of previous scenes, that fans the flames of the strained relationship between the two characters. The portrayal of this relationship is especially significant when setting it in the context of other coming-of-age movies, which Ester Zuckerman accomplishes in her *Rolling Stone* article, "How Greta Gerwig Turned the Personal 'Lady Bird' Into a Perfect Movie". She underscores the fact that classic films of the genre— *The 400 Blows* and *Boyhood*, for example— focus primarily on the character development of their male protagonists, relegating female characters to supporting roles as the recipient of the title character's romantic or sexual desire. Gerwig's directorial debut subverts this trope by refusing to portray Lady Bird just as a girlfriend, defined by her relationships; rather, the film treats her as a person, defined by the sum of all her parts.(IC;ca,IC with parallelism) The tension between Lady Bird and her mother not only provides much-needed representation but also displays her transition into adulthood.

It is obvious that Lady Bird feels as if this newly-discovered adulthood is constrained by an overbearing parent, one that treats her as a child instead of the adult she feels she is becoming.

She lacks a sense of autonomy, the freedom to make her own decisions, unchecked by the restraining force of her mother's rules. Lady Bird **compensates (strong verb)** for this as any other teenager does: by acting out, by rebelling against her mother's wishes and against her well-meaning advice. This rebellion is evident in the way that Lady Bird loses her virginity. **When she mentions the possibility of a sexual relationship to her mother, the older woman recommends that she waits until she enters college.(DC,IC)** Instead of doing so, Lady Bird initiates sex with Kyle, a pretentious but pretty boy who after failing to last a full minute, assures her he is but the first participant in a series of unspecial experiences. Fed up with his condescending advice and know-it-all attitude, Lady Bird calls her mother for a ride. As soon as she enters the car, she breaks down, crying as her mother holds her close and attempts to calm her down. It is important to note that this moment of emotional intimacy is one of few throughout the film, an observation emphasized by author Molly McGrath in her critical review, titled "The Parent of Virtues". McGrath argues that the tension between mother and daughter arises from an inability to clearly express gratitude, a factor only aggravated by their tight living quarters. Lady Bird's resentment, developed after years of forced proximity, prevents her from indicating her appreciation or relying on her mother for support. Her walls only fall in a moment of intense insecurity and shame. This scene, therefore, is a significant one in the film, as it not only exemplifies McGrath's gratitude theory but also indicates that there is hope for a repaired relationship.

Lady Bird's rebellion is not limited to hasty relationship decisions; it also shapes the way she imagines her future. There is nothing she despises more than her hometown: Her first line of the film is "Do I look like I'm from Sacramento?" Despite a family income barely large enough

to pay in-state tuition and grades that may be better suited for community college, Lady Bird dreams of attending a school on the East Coast, in New York or Connecticut or New Hampshire, where culture flourishes and where “writers live in the woods.” She cannot be dissuaded by the harsh words of her mother or the blunt words of her guidance counselor, who tells her in no uncertain terms that she will never be accepted to Yale. It can be reasonably inferred that Lady Bird doesn’t want to attend an East Coast college because of the superior academics or thriving art scene. She wants distance from her mother and the sense that she is finally an adult, both things that a preppy, high-brow university across the country can provide. By shunning her mother’s sensible ideas, Lady Bird establishes her independence, separate from her mother’s convictions of her character.

Lady Bird’s ultimate rebellion presents itself in the form of her name. She is first introduced to the audience as Christine, a name that slips out of her mother’s mouth as they argue at the beginning of the film. The name given to her at birth simply doesn’t suit her, however, and Lady Bird rebrands herself in the namesake of a famous First Lady. She **righteously (adverb)** corrects classmates, teachers, and parents when they choose to use the name that she has cast aside. The change becomes a point of contention between her and her mother, who reverts to the name she chose during arguments and lectures. **The most telling aspect of this switch, however, is the manner in which Lady Bird explains it, as a name that was “given to [her], by [her]”.**(interrupter) Rejecting her birth name in favor of one that she chose herself is just another way that Lady Bird attempts to wrest control over her life from her mother, whom she feels is too nosy and too insistent.

It is interesting to watch, then, how Lady Bird acts once her wish is granted, once she is at first waitlisted and then miraculously accepted into an unnamed East Coast college, once she leaves the **tedium (vocab)** of Sacramento for the city that never sleeps. At first, her actions are not unexpected, just like those of any teenager in their first year of college. Exhilarated by the absence of a parental figure and drunk on newfound independence, Lady Bird attends a party, chugs alcohol straight from the bottle, and ends up in the hospital. It is this scene that stands out among previous shots. Whereas earlier frames were composed of neutral pastels and darks, this shot rejects a similar muted makeup in favor of harsh, fluorescent lighting. The streaks of Lady Bird's black mascara against her pale skin are almost grotesque. The narrow nature of the shot prevents the audience from looking anywhere else; even the pink of her hair and the white of the pillow are blurred compared to the clarity of her face. Painting this picture in such stark contrast to earlier scenes emphasizes the difference between Sacramento Lady Bird and the newly minted New York Lady Bird, a woman free to **revel (vocab)** in the consequences of her own bad decisions.

Lady Bird's wild escapade seems to make her realize that her newfound freedom isn't all she dreamt it to be. On her wandering way back from the hospital, Lady Bird passes a church. She stops outside it, thinks for a moment, and then walks in. This choice stands in marked contrast to Lady Bird's earlier comments about religion: her disdain for her Catholic high school (nicknamed "Immaculate Fart") and her fervent rejection of even the idea of applying to Catholic colleges. The peaceful hymns of the choir seem to inspire a change in mind. When she exits the building, Lady Bird calls her mother, the source of so much anger and frustration, of so much conflict and tension. She says only two words, her last words of the film: thank you.

With these two words, Lady Bird indicates a willingness to better her relationship with her mother, a trend noted in a study titled “Mother-Daughter Relationships and Transition to College: Physical Distance and Communicative Changes”. By interviewing classmates and quantifying their responses by having them plot points on a graph, undergraduate student Nina Patrikian discovers that women noted an improved relationship with their mother after they moved onto a college campus, a shift they credited to the introduction of distance and autonomy. Lady Bird experiences the same shift, for many of the same reasons. Once Lady Bird suffers through the consequences of her own mistakes— mistakes her mother could not prevent from across the continent— the driving force of their conflict disappears, allowing their relationship to mend.

Gerwig’s final directorial decision— the most memorable of the film— is concluding Lady Bird’s story with the phone call to her mother. The simple expression of gratitude makes it clear that their relationship is on the mend, but Gerwig leaves the logistics of the reconciliation up to the imagination (and perhaps the personal experiences) of the audience. Her careful timing reflects the purposeful choices made throughout the film, ones that, detail by detail, deconstruct and then reconstruct the relationship between Lady Bird and her mother.

Works Cited

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