

'LADY BIRD' DECONSTRUCTED: A CRITICAL REBUTTAL

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Section 1: Formal Analysis

The Lady Behind *Lady Bird*

Lady Bird, a film by Greta Gerwig which was released in November 2017, is not just a traditional American teen coming-of-age film. Greta Gerwig gets adolescents to bond deeply with Lady Bird, the protagonist, whose legal name is Christine but who has decided to rename herself. Gerwig has an ability to show what it truly feels like to be a young person and covers topics that are rarely covered in American films these days because they are seen as too controversial or unnecessary in the idealized world of film. In *Lady Bird*, Gerwig circumvents the usual difficulties related to low-budget films by focusing on the complicated relationships of the characters, the framing and set up of each shot, and how the origin of Lady Bird's name defines who she is as an individual.

Lady Bird's character is snotty and an artsy try-hard at times, acting in ways which can seem outrageous and rude to older audiences. However, Gerwig evokes precisely what it feels like to ditch your loyal best friend to hang out with the cool kids, and why you would do that.¹ Nothing is shown in the film without a clear connection to the thought process of Lady Bird and the twisted logic that most teenagers turn to to justify how they feel. The depiction of the relationship between Lady Bird and her mother, Marion, also elevates the film. Normally, in movies, parents are seen as obstacles or side characters who are clueless to the actions of their children.² However, we get to learn as much about Marion's life as we do Lady Bird's. The film allows us to connect with both characters even when they are pitted against each other, a

¹ Hans, Simran. "Lady Bird Review – a Magical Portrait of Adolescence." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, February 18, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/feb/18/lady-bird-review-greta-gerwig-saoirse-ronan-laurie-metcalf-observer>

² Hans, "Lady Bird Review."

considerable feat that most directors struggle with.³ Gerwig gets us to understand the characters' conflicting views and choose to support both despite their animosity in particular scenes. The movie has genuine sympathy for Marion and the work she has put in to give Lady Bird a good life without sacrificing support for her.⁴ In addition, director Gerwig is able to include subtle humor within her film without it taking over and distracting from the story.⁵

The title of the film is "Lady Bird" and it illuminates the meaning of the work. Although it is simply the name of the protagonist, it also reveals the kind of film that the film is: eccentric and unafraid to be itself, just like Lady Bird herself. Since Christine gave herself the name Lady Bird, the title shows us its rhetorical meaning in that it is a title given to itself by the film itself, not by the director or producer even though in reality the title was curated by Gerwig. However, Gerwig wants us to think more deeply about the film than the meaning of the title and how that relates or fits the film altogether.

The audience reminisces about adolescence vicariously through watching the film. Director Gerwig didn't try too hard with elaborate sets or long lists of props and extras unlike other directors, even ones of small scale films. Not that preparation and being attentive to detail isn't a positive quality for strong films but Gerwig's choice to shoot the shopping for a dress scene in a real thrift store in Sacramento, the hometown of Lady Bird, shows that a film can still be powerful without all of the staged items.⁶ In the dress thrift shopping scene in *Lady Bird*⁷ (see fig. 1), Gerwig's team didn't have to add too many props to the scene because they choose a

³ Hans, "Lady Bird Review."

⁴ Hans, "Lady Bird Review."

⁵ Hans, "Lady Bird Review."

⁶ The New York Times. "Scene From 'Lady Bird' | Anatomy of a Scene." November 9, 2017. YouTube video, 1:01. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_oW_egQBN4.

⁷ Gerwig, Greta, dir. *Lady Bird*. United States: IAC Films, 2017. DVD, 94 min.

location that precisely fit the look they were going for. The thrift store already had a plethora of different colors, mixed in with the shiny, silver hangers, and the fluorescent lights above Lady Bird and her mother, Marion. The big windows and white fluorescent lights ensured that the subjects were well lit without it seeming unnatural since not as much artificial lighting was used, and if it was used it was practical lighting.⁸ By not working excessively with an overload of props, Gerwig was able to create a more honest and real feel to the scene. She and her cinematographer, San Levy, included a lot of headroom to get the fluorescent lights in and to fully capture the depth of the rows and rows of clothes in the store, which was inspired by a photograph of a grocery store by William Eggleston (see fig. 2).⁹ The thrift shop scene between Lady Bird and Marion precisely encapsulates the relationship that a mother and daughter have: mothers and daughters fight but they also love each other and those polar ends of the relationship can switch in an instant.¹⁰

Unlike many films, which are unrealistic and written with the most predictable lines, creating a story that is not one of the major few baseline stories that all movies get based off of is important in order to give the audience something new to take away from the film's experience. *Lady Bird* is an inspiration to focus more on the intricacies of the relationships of characters, specifically adolescents, which can be harder to display effectively on screen unless with the right actors and screenplay. In *Lady Bird*, Greta Gerwig delivers the message of growing up and the path to discovering who we are while inviting us in on the main actress's journey through effective cinematography, camera techniques, and solid relationship and character arcs.

⁸ The New York Times. "Scene From 'Lady Bird'."

⁹ The New York Times. "Scene From 'Lady Bird'."

¹⁰ Iacucci, Carolina. "Why Does Everyone Love Lady Bird?" Medium. Medium, January 13, 2018. <https://medium.com/@carolinaiacucci/why-does-everyone-love-lady-bird-eccc36c4b13>.

Section 2: Research Essay

Bright pink hair, jumping out of a moving car, and abortion lectures may be some of the first things to come to mind when thinking of an indie film. However, what sets the film *Lady Bird* apart is that it isn't just another independent feature produced outside of a major entertainment company; the film captures the learning process of finding one's self identity and the ways in which we can unapologetically make mistakes to get there. Greta Gerwig, the director and writer of *Lady Bird*, was inspired to create the film after reflecting on her adolescence growing up in Sacramento, where the film is also set.¹¹ Despite receiving a perfect run on Rotten Tomatoes after its initial release, the indie film has garnered backlash claiming that it is overrated and too stereotyped.¹² Many feel that viewers are giving *Lady Bird* too much credit even though it's like every other indie film with a teen main character who is struggling to find herself. Critics claim that the story and characters are too bland because nothing eventful or out of the ordinary pushes the story forward. In *Lady Bird*, Gerwig artfully uses cinematography and a strong storyline that revolves around the lives of the characters instead of solely fixating on the title character, which were missed or ignored by film critics, to prompt reflection on the long and occasionally inconclusive process of becoming an adult.

Lady Bird is an unreliable narrator and a less than benevolent hero, which, according to film analyst Cole Smithey, is why any chance of creating empathy or sympathy with her is destroyed.¹³ At first watch, this is overlooked because of how audiences are used to automatically rooting for the main character. Smithey, however, states that the way Gerwig

¹¹ Rosenberger, Tim. "Glorious Girlhood: *Lady Bird* (2017): 25YL: Film Analysis." 25YL, July 3, 2019. <https://25yearslatersite.com/2019/07/02/lady-bird-2017/>.

¹² Iacucci, "Why Does Everyone Love *Lady Bird*?"

¹³ Smithey, Cole. "Lady Bird Revisited: Now You Know Why It Sucks So Bad." aNewDomain, February 28, 2018. <http://anewdomain.net/lady-bird-sucks-all-reasons-why/>.

wrote in and presented her character was what made *Lady Bird* unlikeable.¹⁴ Although he felt that the characters that *Lady Bird* interacted with and the environment that she was put in were also uninteresting, they were still more interesting than “anything or anyone else in this film.”¹⁵ Smithey “suffered” through the movie because it wasn’t exciting enough.¹⁶ Similarly, film critic Aditi Natasha Kini explained how she thought that the movie was filled with complex characters but that *Lady Bird* just wasn’t one of them. Kini would rather learn more about *Lady Bird*’s friends, parents and even her adopted brother whose girlfriend is living with their family. The writing for the film created and threw in these characters but was “not attentive enough to spend time on any of them.”¹⁷ On the contrary, Gerwig did reveal numerous details about each of the distinctive characters that surround *Lady Bird*, however, they were shown and not directly told, which for some viewers, can be easily missed. Gerwig also slips in key attributes in the background of shots or in cutaway shots that aid in setting the scene and subtly give more information about the film so it doesn’t need to be awkwardly put in the script. For example, in the opening scene of *Lady Bird* at her Catholic school, a bulletin display is posted with the words “9/11 Never Forget” which can lead the audience to infer that the September 11 attacks had recently taken place.¹⁸ Additionally, the minimal use of technology, especially touchscreen cell phones, shows that the film takes place in the early 2000s when everyone didn’t have their own phone or computer. Although this technique of not explicitly stating everything that is going on in each scene saves a lot of time and allows for more of the viewer’s interpretation, the hints in

¹⁴ Smithey, “*Lady Bird* Revisited.”

¹⁵ Smithey, “*Lady Bird* Revisited.”

¹⁶ Smithey, “*Lady Bird* Revisited.”

¹⁷ Kini, Aditi Natasha. “*Lady Bird*’s Glaring White Mediocrity.” Image. The Week, December 7, 2017. <https://theweek.com/articles/741399/lady-birds-glaring-white-mediocrity>.

¹⁸ Gerwig, Greta, dir. *Lady Bird*. United States: IAC Films, 2017. DVD, 94 min.

Lady Bird may have been too subtle. The details Gerwig included in the film most likely were too difficult to spot for some viewers and therefore didn't have an impact, which would have left the audience confused and unfulfilled.

A major complaint from those who critiqued the film was that nothing ever happened. The film was seen as lacking an interesting storyline or any exciting events that sparked change and propelled the movie forward. Kini, New York writer and critic, noticed that *Lady Bird* was neither exceptionally gifted nor exceptionally awful.¹⁹ In Kini's opinion, since the film's "relatability hinges on its lack of specificity and the stasis of its character study," the protagonist finds herself in the same place at the end of the movie as she was at the beginning. In our modern age of Marvel and Star Wars, inciting incidents are typically thought of as a call to action that involves something to the extent of the end of the world or at least stopping the downfall of a significant person. This is why many audiences don't find films about real life, excluding reality tv plots, interesting anymore. Even though there are no epic fighting scenes in *Lady Bird*, there are events always happening that allow us to uncover more and more about Lady Bird's life. The biggest troubles in Lady Bird's world are her family's financial struggles and the attitude that she has convinced herself to believe that she hates her Sacramento hometown.²⁰ Throughout the film, Lady Bird goes through losing her best friend, discovering that her boyfriend is gay, and comforting her father after he loses his job. These may seem like boring events to some viewers, but they are still events that have a big impact on Lady Bird.²¹ Laurie Metcalf, the actress for Marion, commented that the movie is "so delicate" because you can't lay

¹⁹ Kini, "Lady Bird's Glaring White Mediocrity."

²⁰ Wilkinson, Alissa. "Lady Bird Is Not Just One of 2017's Best Films. It's a Beautiful, Hilarious Act of Love." Vox. Vox, November 24, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/2017/11/2/16552860/lady-bird-review-saoirse-ronan-greta-gerwig>.

²¹ Wilkinson, "Lady Bird Is a Beautiful, Hilarious Act of Love."

into the lines as actors but Greta Gerwig “sets the tone perfectly.”²² In each scene, “you have moment after moment to recognize both sides of each character” and “every character is totally three dimensional.”²³

The most important part of a film’s ending is how the protagonist has changed. According to Aditi Natasha Kini, *Lady Bird* flits from relatable problem to relatable problem unchanged.²⁴ Being the stereotypical white and privileged girl that she is, *Lady Bird* starts out entitled and not appreciative of the hard work that her parents have put into providing for the life that she has. For most of the film, she is seen constantly arguing with her mother and specifically in the thrift store dressing room scene (see fig. 3), Gerwig shows *Lady Bird* and Marion clashing on screen not only through dialogue but also through their clothing.²⁵ Marion is dressed in her blue nurse scrubs and carries a blue dress while *Lady Bird*, with her eccentric pink hair, dons a flowery pink dress. In this scene, it is revealed that Marion is so strict with *Lady Bird* because she just wants her to be the best version of herself, to which *Lady Bird* responds with “What if this is the best version?”²⁶ At that point, the audience learns that *Lady Bird* understands the sacrifices her parents have made for her, but that she’s scared she will never be good enough or able to live up to their expectations. *Lady Bird* knows that Marion loves her because she is her daughter, but that she wants her mother to like her. The ending scene is of *Lady Bird* at college, calling home to reminisce about her childhood in Sacramento and how

²² The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. “Laurie Metcalf’s ‘Lady Bird’ Performance Made Audiences Call Their Moms.” January 13, 2018. YouTube video, 9:17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo3R-xdA4g0&list=TLPQMTEXMjIwMTnTXJjanrp5qg&index=15>.

²³ The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, “Laurie Metcalf’s ‘Lady Bird’ Performance.”

²⁴ Kini, “Lady Bird’s Glaring White Mediocrity.”

²⁵ Bradshaw, Peter. “Lady Bird Review – a Hilarious Love Letter to Teenagers and Their Mothers.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, February 15, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/feb/15/lady-bird-review-greta-gerwig-saoirse-ronan-laurie-metcalf>.

²⁶ Bradshaw, “Lady Bird Review.”

much she truly loves her mother and her hometown. Clearly, there is a change in Lady Bird, even if it did take all the way until the very last shot to display explicitly.

In *Lady Bird*, Gerwig gives us a genuine look at all aspects of Lady Bird's final high school days, including and emphasizing her bad times where more negative views of her may be formed. *Lady Bird* garnered criticism because many people didn't relate to it and the prominent qualities that made the film special were too small to be noticed and therefore were insignificant. On second watch and when paying closer attention, many of these details come to light. The difference between *Lady Bird* and other indie films is Gerwig's use of story and cinematography which, through the scattering of artistic details throughout the film and the development of Lady Bird's character, reminds the audience to reflect on their own adolescence and contribute to what makes the film strong and moving.



Figure 1: Greta Gerwig, *Lady Bird*, 2017, film



Figure 2: William Eggleston, *Untitled*, 1965-68, dye-transfer print



Figure 3: Greta Gerwig, *Lady Bird*, 2017, film

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Touchstone Artist Paper Rubric:

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Section 1: Formal Analysis Essay	<p>Introduction does not resemble the opening paragraph of a Formal Analysis.</p> <p>Body of the essay is obviously underdeveloped. Body paragraphs, if they exist, are severely unfocused and lack any sense of logical transition from one to the next.</p> <p>Writer largely neglects the professional language of the medium</p> <p>Essay lacks an inductive essay organizational pattern.</p> <p>Essay lacks inductive essay organizational pattern and/or is missing a thesis.</p>	<p>Introduction is missing one or more of the following: artwork, artist, year, medium.</p> <p>Summary of appearance is unclear.</p> <p>Body paragraphs are significantly lacking in focus and do not logically transition from one to the next.</p> <p>Writer uses the professional language of the medium in a limited fashion, offering some reasonable description and analysis of compositional elements of the work, but their observations are vague and/or limited.</p> <p>Writer uses an inductive essay organizational pattern, although the thesis is flawed.</p>	<p>Introduction establishes the artwork, artist, year, and medium, although it could be more efficient / specific in its summary of its appearance.</p> <p>Body paragraphs are fairly focused but could more logically transition from one to the next.</p> <p>Writer uses the professional language of the medium to describe and analyze various compositional elements of the work, although their observations could be more astute or thorough.</p> <p>Writer uses an inductive essay organizational pattern, leading to a plausible thesis in the concluding paragraph which connects form and meaning.</p>	<p>Introduction efficiently and accurately establishes the artwork, artist, year, and medium and summarizes its appearance.</p> <p>Body paragraphs are very focused and transition logically from one to the next.</p> <p>Writer uses the professional language of the medium to describe accurately and analyze convincingly various compositional elements of the work, providing astute and thorough observations.</p> <p>Writer uses an inductive essay organizational pattern to reveal compelling insights into the form and meaning of the work, leading to the thesis in the concluding paragraph.</p>

<p>Section 2: Research Essay</p>	<p>Introduction compounds the weaknesses described in Level 2, neglecting a recognizable hook, research context, and/or thesis.</p> <p>Body paragraphs fail to advance an argument, neglecting the required pattern of topic sentence, research support, and analysis. Sentence and paragraph transitions are missing, making the paper feel like a very disjointed early draft.</p> <p>Conclusion does not make any recognizable attempt to bring closure to the essay or leave the reader with a memorable impression of the artwork's significance.</p>	<p>Introduction suffers from a weak hook or thin/unclear research context. There's little sense of a conversation about the significance of the artwork. Thesis may be vague in its current form.</p> <p>Organization of body paragraphs suffers from missing or weak topic sentences (which may not be argumentative enough). Research support has obvious weaknesses and/or analysis is underdeveloped, doing little to advance the argument. Sentence and paragraph transitions are weak or largely missing.</p> <p>Conclusion does not bring closure to the essay, and/or the significance of the artwork is not articulated clearly or memorably.</p>	<p>The hook or research context could be reconsidered in order to strengthen the introduction. Thesis may be clear, but could be more compelling.</p> <p>Body paragraphs follow deductive organization, leading with topic sentence arguments, but they need to be more specific. Research support and analysis could be bolstered in order to more effectively advance the argument. Sentence and paragraph transitions work in some places, but could be improved in others.</p> <p>Conclusion brings closure to the research-based discussion, but could leave the reader with a more memorable lasting impression about the enduring significance of the artwork.</p>	<p>Introduction hooks the reader, setting up a clear and compelling thesis in the context of a focused, research-based conversation about the significance of the artwork.</p> <p>Body paragraphs follow deductive organization, leading with specific topic sentence arguments, supported by apt research support and convincing analysis, advancing the central argument. Sentences and paragraphs transition smoothly.</p> <p>Conclusion brings closure to the research-based discussion, leaving the reader with a memorable lasting impression about the enduring significance of the artwork.</p>
<p>Chicago-style Format and Citation</p>	<p>Cover page is missing or severely flawed.</p> <p>In-text citation: Chicago-style</p>	<p>Cover page format is somewhat similar to the Chicago-style model, but is</p>	<p>Cover page format is mostly consistent with Chicago-style model. Title is present, but could</p>	<p>Cover page format reflects Chicago-style model exactly. Creative title is superb,</p>

	<p>footnotes are not used.</p> <p>Bibliography page is missing or severely flawed according to Chicago standards.</p>	<p>missing a creative (or an appropriate) title or other formatting elements.</p> <p>In-text citation: Chicago-style footnotes suffer from multiple errors.</p> <p>Bibliography page includes only a few sources and/or has multiple errors according to Chicago standards..</p>	<p>be a more creative representation of the thesis.</p> <p>In-text citation: Chicago-style footnotes are nearly perfect.</p> <p>Bibliography page includes all required sources and is nearly perfect by Chicago standards, with only a couple errors.</p>	<p>thoughtfully reflecting the thesis.</p> <p>In-text citation: Chicago-style footnotes are perfect.</p> <p>Bibliography page includes all required sources and is perfect by Chicago standards.</p>
Mechanics	<p>Writing is seriously obscured by spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.</p>	<p>Writing contains many errors. Errors affect reader's understanding.</p>	<p>Writing contains some errors, but not at the expense of understanding.</p>	<p>Writing is polished, free of spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.</p>

Grade: A-