

Layers of Love and Tension : Exploring the complexities of mother-daughter relationships within Greta Gerwig scripts

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Declaration of Originality

This thesis is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sadushi Vella', written over a horizontal line.

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This thesis will investigate three of Greta Gerwig's scripts focusing on the mother daughter relationships present in each.

Chapter one will focus on the relationship between Lady Bird and Marion in *Lady Bird*. The main focus of this chapter is the daughters realisation that her mother was once a daughter. It will use the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone to further understand their relationship.

Chapter two will focus on the individual relationships of each March sister to their mother and each other in *Little Women*. It will investigate how in allowing each little woman to own their stories Gerwig was able to encourage modern day women to also own their stories.

Chapter three will focus on the relationship between Sasha and Gloria in *Barbie* along with Gloria's relationship with Barbie. It will interrogate how the daughter encouraged and pushed her mother to rediscover her own purpose.

Introduction

Greta Gerwig is a director, actor and screenwriter,¹ who is known for her intricate and nuanced way of portraying real relationships. She is currently the only woman in the Billion-dollar club who has the sole credit for directing². She obtained this status with her pink fantasy 2023 film 'Barbie'.³

The complexities of the mother-daughter relationship have been explored for centuries through art, literature and cinema. These bonds are often portrayed as emotionally charged, volatile and cyclical.

This thesis will focus on three of Gerwig's films *Lady Bird* (2017)⁴, *Little Women* (2019)⁵ and *Barbie* (2023)⁶. These films offer nuanced portrayals of the mother-daughter relationship, addressing themes of independence, intergenerational conflict, and the inevitable pull of maternal love. At the core of these films is a subtle yet profound exploration of the realisation that daughters come to understand that their mothers were once daughters themselves, and that mothers must come to terms with the fact that their daughters will, in time, no longer need their mothers.

This thesis will refer to other forms of literature to further explore these themes along. Such as the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone⁷, as well as the poem by Eavan Boland "The Pomegranate". The myth's central emotional core is the separation and cyclical return of mother and daughter. There is a persistent tension between autonomy and maternal attachment which is also a consistent theme throughout Gerwig films particularly *Lady Bird*.

In *Lady Bird*, Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson's (Saoirse Ronan) relationship with her mother Marion (Laurie Metcalf) is defined by conflict, longing for independence, and the tension between control and freedom. Lady Bird, in her adolescent rebellion, struggles to accept the fact that her mother's critical, controlling nature stems from her own deep, often unspoken love and concern.

This thesis will refer to psychological studies to further analyse the mother-daughter relationships. Issues such as attachment difficulties in *Lady Bird* (John Bowlby; Attachment Theory) and the turbulence of adolescence present between Gloria and Sasha in *Barbie* (G. Stanley Hall; Storm and Stress Theory.)

This thesis will also investigate Gerwig's specific writing techniques, focusing on how her approach to dialogue, use of italics and narrative structure impacts the readability and emotional resonance of her scripts. It will explore how these techniques impact the accessibility and flow of her screenplays along with how these techniques have impacted the overall success and lasting cultural impact.

¹ (Lily S.) Lily S. Pedro Borges, 'Greta Gerwig Biography' - IMDb

² (Ulaby) Neda Ulaby, Article - NPR

³ (Gerwig, Barbie) Greta Gerwig, Screenplay

⁴ (Gerwig, Lady Bird)

⁵ (Gerwig)

⁶ (Gerwig, Barbie)

⁷ (Spitz)

Chapter 1 – Lady Bird and the Pomegranate

The realisation that Mother was once Daughter

The Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone is a simple tale of a mother losing her child to adulthood and independence. Demeter is the goddess of agriculture and the mother of Persephone. Demeter loves Persephone more than anything. Persephone is the Goddess of spring which resulted in incredibly beauty. As mother and daughter, they naturally had a close bond. Demeter saw herself in Persephone. However, nothing lasts forever. Persephone was kidnapped by Hades (the god of the underworld) and forced to become his bride. Demeter travelled land and sea in attempt to retrieve her daughter. In her futile attempt to rescue her daughter she discovered that Zeus (the God of the Gods) had helped Hades kidnap her daughter. She was distraught and in protest left the God's, in turn wreaking havoc on earth. As a result, Zeus reluctantly retrieved Persephone. However, before he could get Persephone, Hades gave her six pomegranate seeds to eat. According to Greek mythology if prisoner eats food given by a captor they will always return. When Persephone was 'rescued' they were surprised to find a radiant queen enjoying her time in the underworld. When she was given the option to return to her mother or stay with her husband she chose to stay with her husband. This enraged her mother even further. Zeus decided that Persephone would spend six months with Hades and six months with Demeter.⁸

This myth accurately displays the tumultuous nature of a mother's relationship with her daughter. The daughter wishes to go out on her own and explore the world for herself and gain her own experiences. The mother wants to protect her daughter from the world as she herself knows the dangers from her own experiences and is reluctant to allow her child to form her own experiences due to fear. This cycle of separation and return along with rebellion against maternal nurture in an attempt to acquire independence has been replicated throughout literature such as Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*.

Lady Bird (2017) was Gerwig's solo directorial debut making \$79 million in the box office⁹. *Lady Bird* stars Saoirse Ronan as Christine "LadyBird" McPherson and Laurie Metcalf as Marion McPherson. As this is a semi-autobiographical script Gerwig is able to inject her own personal experiences with her own mother to enhance and increase the believability of the relationship. Gerwig's style of writing is rare in the sense that it doesn't place blame on either character despite their many 'flaws'¹⁰.

Gerwig instantly immerses her audience in this mother-daughter relationship from the opening scene both in the film and screenplay. Marion (mother) and Ladybird (daughter) share a raw moment crying together as they finish an audiobook of 'The Grapes of Wrath'. Gerwig writes "They laugh and then wipe their tears. It's a nice moment- they shared the same emotion." From this line Gerwig herself can be felt as she puts her feelings into the action, showing how she wants the scene to be felt. By stating that 'they shared the same emotion' she reminds her audience that both mother

⁸ (Madeline)

⁹ (Lansky)

¹⁰ (Constantine)

and daughter have emotions and contain the capacity to experience the same emotion despite their differences of age and power.

Mere seconds later a fight breaks out as Lady Bird “immediately starts looking for a good song on the radio.” Marion is unhappy that Lady Bird can’t “sit with what we heard”. Gerwig’s use of natural dialogue drawn from her own life allows her to create characters with depth. Through using her own experiences, she can accurately capture a typical fight common between most mothers and daughters.

MARION¹¹

We don’t need to constantly be entertaining ourselves, do we?

Lady Bird stares out the window, now sullen. Then:

LADY BIRD

I wish I could live through something.

MARION

Aren’t you?

This moment mirrors Persephone and Demeter in the sense that Lady Bird is yearning to have her own experience, while Marion is disregarding her daughter’s desires in attempt to hold on to her for longer. In this moment of tension Lady Bird fails to see that her mother’s control stems from love similar to the Greek legend.

LADY BIRD

Nope. The only exciting thing about 2002 is that it’s a palindrome.

MARION

Ok fine, yours is the worst life of all, you win.

LADY BIRD

Oh so now you’re mad? Because I wanted to listen to music?

MARION

It’s just that you’re being ridiculous, you have a *great* life.

LADY BIRD

I’m sorry I’m not *perfect*.

MARION

¹¹ (Gerwig, Lady Bird)

Nobody is asking you to be perfect! Just *considerate* would do.

Gerwig highlights the subtle jabs and gaslighting by putting them in italics. This highlights the miscommunication and difference in perspectives that exist between mother and daughter. Even though the mother gave birth to her daughter, the daughter becomes an autonomous individual and not an extension of her mother which mothers tend to forget.

This fight results in Lady Bird launching herself out of the moving car after Marion stated she was ‘not even worth state tuition’. Albeit dramatic this reaction evokes a familiar feeling within many daughters of escapism in these tumultuous moments.

Attachment theory is a psychology theory that has been in development since the 1930s by a child psychiatrist of the name John Bowlby¹². He developed an understanding of the importance of connection between early separations from the mother and subsequent maladjustment, leading him to develop his attachment theory.

Bowlby stated ‘ that the drive for proximity arises from an interconnected set of behavioural systems that collectively shape behaviour. These include the attachment, caregiving, and exploratory behavioural systems.’

In his 1988 book ‘*A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*.’¹³

he explores these ideas and articulates them fully. He decided that there are three key attachment styles;

1. Secure Attachment;

The pattern of secure attachment with healthy development in which the individual is confident that their parent will be present and responsive. This results in the individual feeling confident and comfortable in their exploration of the world. This pattern is promoted by loving parents and consistency.

2. Anxious Resistant Attachment;

The pattern in which an individual is uncertain whether their parent will be present or responsive. This results in separation anxiety and tendency to be clingy and an anxious approach to exploring the world. This pattern is promoted by a parent being present and helpful on some occasions but not on others.

3. Anxious Avoidant Attachment;

The pattern in which the individual has no confidence that their parent will be present or responsive instead they expect to be criticised. This results in the

¹² (PhD)

¹³ (Bowlby)

individual attempting to live their life without love or support from others. This treatment can occasionally lead to personality disorders from compulsive self-sufficiency to persistent delinquency.

He states once an attachment style has been established it tends to persist throughout life. These attachment styles are formed due to external and internal forces placed on parent and child during early childhood (before 12 months old).

Dr Miriam Steele is a therapist and professor who did an interview with The Cut¹⁴ in which she dissects the attachment styles present between Marion and Lady Bird.

Lady Bird has the capacity to reflect on her own experiences which is something Marion struggles with. Marion has significant difficulty opening up with her daughter. She strives to give her daughter the best and even though she cares tremendously about Lady Bird it doesn't translate on the surface. When the two are fighting Marion is often unable to articulate herself accurately in these moments she doesn't know how to let Lady Bird know that she is there for her.

Dr Steele states that Marion and Lady Bird's mother daughter dynamic is an anxious resistant attachment style. This means that Marion is often intrusive and Lady Bird is angry which results in a messy relationship in which the two constantly misunderstand each other.

Demeter and Persephone could also be described as having an anxious resistant relationship. As they fight on Mount Olympus Persephone tries to articulate her new found experiences. Demeter blatantly refuses to listen to Persephone's new self-realisation due to her own perceptions of who her daughter is.

Marion and Lady Bird are fundamentally different in the way they process their emotions and in the way they communicate. One of the pivotal moments in the film that truly displays their differences in communication occurs after Lady Bird has been suspended.

MARION

EVERYTHING we do is for you. EVERYTHING. You think I like driving that car around. Do you? You think I like working double shifts at the psych hospital? You needed to go to the Catholic school because your brother saw someone knifed in front of him at the public school, is that what you want?

LADY-BIRD

No.

No.

¹⁴ (Steele)

No. No....

Marion pours out all her anger and frustration, everything that she was previously trying to hide from Lady Bird. Lady Bird tries to apologise, but Marion refuses to listen. Gerwig's understanding of the psychology between mothers and daughters allows her to beautifully depict the imbalance of power between autonomy and maternal attachment. Lady Bird tries to assert her independence similarly to Persephone, but both daughters are met with aggressive responses from their mothers. Their mothers are unsure how to handle their daughters trying to flee the nest so, they are afraid of losing power and ownership over their daughters, so they fight with them in a futile attempt to keep their daughters. Unfortunately, in both cases this has the opposite effect and instead pushes them further away.

Eavan Boland is an Irish poet¹⁵. She is also a mother. She heard the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone and wrote the poem 'The Pomegranate'¹⁶ in response. 'The Pomegranate' is a contemplative poem that uses the myth to analyse Boland's own life and relationship with her daughter. In response to this myth Boland wrote in her poem;

'I read it first and at first I was an exiled child in the crackling dust of the underworld, the stars blighted. Later I walked out in a summer twilight searching for my daughter at bed-time'

She states that when she first heard the myth she related to Persephone as she was not yet a mother. Years later when she stumbled across it again, she realised she now related more to Demeter as she had become the mother. This is an interesting concept, as daughters like Persephone and Lady Bird in their adolescent rebellion tend to forget that mothers were once daughters too. During a fight between Marion and Lady Bird over a messy bedroom, Gerwig hints that Lady Bird (and by proxy all daughters) will eventually understand that their mother was a daughter at one point.

LADY BIRD

(quietly)

Didn't you ever go to sleep without putting all your clothes away perfectly?

Like even once? And don't you wish your Mom hadn't gotten angry?

MARION

My mother was an abusive alcoholic.

¹⁵ (Ireland)

¹⁶ (Boland)

In this moment Lady Bird begins to realise that her mother's persistent antagonising stems from how she was raised and is an attempt to be present in her daughter's life in a way that her own mother never was. Marion and Lady Bird undoubtedly have love for each other (albeit often unspoken) however they're constant crossing of each other's boundaries causes an abundance of fights. In the Pomegranate Boland describes the struggle of navigating boundaries between a parent and a child from the mother's perspective which sheds light on Marion and Lady Bird's relationship.

Boland simultaneously articulates the torment of realising the seasons of life have moved through her with time and it is now her daughters turn. Lady Bird comes to this same realisation at the end of the film, as she stands outside of a church in New York, a long way from where she started the film. She calls her mother to tell her;

CHRISTINE (LADY BIRD)

Hi Mom and Dad, it's me. Christine.

It's the name you gave me. It's a good one. Dad, this is more for Mom - Hey Mom: did you feel emotional the first time that you drove in Sacramento? I did and I wanted to tell you, but we weren't really talking when it happened. All those bends I've known my whole life, and stores, and the whole thing. But I wanted to tell you. I love you. Thank you, I'm... thank you.

Gerwig intercuts Marion driving home from work at the start of the script with Lady Bird driving on her own for the first time. This technique along with the dialogue juxtaposes the two women and their opposing views on life. It's a beautiful moment that shows that Christine has grown and can recognise the similarities in herself and her mother.

When she decides to use the name her mother gave her, Christine, the cycle of separation and return is ending. Through this name change Gerwig emphasises the growth that teenage girls experience as they exit their rebellious adolescence. The script starts with a fight over her name and ends with her coming back to it. She shows Christine's realisation that her mother is also just a woman and at one point she was just a daughter in the same position as her.

Chapter 2 – Little Women

The varied perspectives of sisters raised by the same mother

“[t]o engage with *Little Women* is to engage with the feminist imagination”¹⁷

The tagline for Greta Gerwig’s 2019 adaptation of *Little Women* was “Own your story”. This chapter will investigate how Gerwig allowed the little women to own their stories and simultaneously encourage modern day women to also own their stories.¹⁸

Gerwig’s adaptation of *Little Women* tells the story of the four March sisters and their mother “Marmee” (Laura Dern). Meg March (Emma Watson) is the oldest she is vain but sweet. Jo March (Saoirse Ronan) is a feminist tomboy who refuses to be supported by a man. Beth March (Eliza Scanlen) is a sick musician and Amy March (Florence Pugh) is a snobby artist who views marriage as an economic proposition.

Gerwig’s decision to stray from the book and jump between adolescence and adulthood allows the audience to gain a fuller perspective on the women’s lives and how they grew into the different perspectives they have, despite coming from the same place. Gerwig was careful to ensure that not only her voice, came through the piece but ensured that Louisa May Alcott’s did too. Instead of simply writing her own version she studied Alcott’s original story and analysed every line to fully understand each character. Through this she was able to flesh out the women, give them and their relationships more complexity and inject more modern feminist ideology into this period piece.¹⁹

Marmee March – The Mother

Marmee is often excluded from essays and discussions on *Little Women*, despite her being the woman who created the little women. She has been written out of these conversations even though she too is a woman who went through girlhood. *Little Women* is seen as a story about four sisters trying to make the leap from girlhood to womanhood. For Marmee’s four daughters the idea of becoming a “Marmee” simultaneously poses as an aspiration and a threat.²⁰

A Marmee is a someone who devotes their life to caring for the next generation. She is someone who disregards her own needs for their sake. She supresses her emotions for them. She makes sacrifices over and over for them.

One of the few times Marmee expresses her emotions she says to Jo “I’m angry nearly every day of my life”. Through this simple line of dialogue Gerwig is speaking volumes. She is reminding the audience how hard it is to not only be a women but a mother. How hard it is to meet society’s unreachable standards and despite knowing

¹⁷ (Howe)

¹⁸ (Blackwood, "Little Women" And The Marmee Problem)

¹⁹ (I. Murray)

²⁰ (Blackwood, "Little Women" and the Marmee Problem)

they are impossible standards women still spend their life trying to reach them. This is a genuine moment where Marmee is telling her daughter she understands how hard her life is because she too is a woman in their society despite how often her daughters forget.

Marmee is first introduced in the film at the moment her daughter Beth dies. This is a mother's worst nightmare that any of their children would pass before them. However as a mother to four Marmee has to navigate how to care for her other three daughters and she doesn't give herself the space or time to grieve.

She introduces herself to Laurie and the audience by saying "You can call me mother or Marmee everyone calls me Marmee." Everyone calls her Marmee because as a mother in that period she couldn't have an identity outside of being a mother.

Gerwig's style of writing involves a lot of description that can't be seen on screen. This is typically advised against, however in Gerwig's case her descriptions add depth to her characters and these descriptions can be felt through the screen even if they are not seen. For example when introducing Marmee she writes "She's a hippie before they existed." Because she wrote this on the page Laura Dern was able to bring this subtext to her Marmee which comes across on screen. Through doing this Gerwig is not only giving context for Marmee but she is also reminding us that all mothers are people before they are mothers.

In the original story by Louisa May Alcott, Marmee seemed significantly more insignificant in comparison to Gerwig's story. Gerwig has created a version of Marmee which is the mother she herself would like to see more of in the world. A mother who can support and care for all of her daughters individual needs while still keeping the complexity and individuality of who she herself is. Gerwig has depicted a mother who is also a person detached from her motherhood.²¹

Jo March

Jo is a powerful independent woman who steps away from the stereotype of the women at the time. She was raised in a household of women and was seen as the "tomboy" when in reality she was the only one who existed without the desire to be with a man. This is a more modern concept than was allowed during the period the film is set. Gerwig is showing that in today's society many young women grow up without desiring men. She is also showing that love can come in many forms, even though we have been conditioned to think that only romantic love can give us intimacy. Gerwig reminds her audience that they can also find it in friendships.

Despite this profound desire for independence and career there is a moment in the film where Jo opens up to her mother saying that she regrets not marrying Laurie.

MARMEE²²

²¹ (Shattuck)

²² (Gerwig, *Little Women*)

But do you love him?

JO

(tearing up)

I know that I care more to be

loved. I want to be loved.

MARMEE

That is not the same as loving.

JO

(crying, trying to explain

herself to herself)

Women have minds and souls as well

as hearts, ambition and talent as

well as beauty and I'm sick of

being told that love is all a woman

is fit for. But... I am so lonely.

This is a poignant moment where Gerwig is showing her audience that even the most independent people crave love and the feeling of being lovable. Gerwig took the majority of this dialogue from Alcott's book but added in the line "but.. I am so lonely". This is one of the most powerful lines in the script and adds a new layer to Jo showing that she too wishes to experience the love her sisters have without realising that she has love just not the romantic kind she has sisterly love which is arguably more important²³.

Meg March

Meg March, the oldest of the March sisters fall into the most classic ideology of the female roles in the society of the time. Her dream is to settle down and start a family like any stereotypical woman should. She aims to become her mother. She is often criticised because of this by Jo as their lifestyle choices are completely opposing. She

²³ (S.)

is also subtly criticised by Amy for choosing to love over security. Meg is the only sister who follows in Marmee's footsteps²⁴.

The first time we meet Meg is in a fabric store where she feels selfish for buying expensive silk instead of spending her money on her kids. Gerwig's use of dialogue shows how casually mothers make these everyday sacrifices for the sake of their children without recognition.

MEG

(ashamed)

Fifty dollars, what was I thinking?

She sees her two 3-year-olds, a boy and a girl, DAISY and DEMI, playing in the yard. She sits down to watch them, feeling both grateful and trapped. They run up to her.

DAISY AND DEMI

Mommy -- mommy!

They fall into her arms, she accepts them and then sends them off to play again.

Gerwig's descriptions of feeling '*grateful and trapped*' as a mother offer a fresh modern perspective on motherhood that wasn't spoken about during the period the film was set. At the time there was a notion that mothers were one dimensional beings who only exist to serve their children and husbands. Through saying that a mother can be simultaneously grateful for her children while feeling trapped by her living circumstances, Gerwig is showing the complexity and three dimensionality of all mothers not just Meg.

Gerwig interestingly juxtaposes Beth's funeral with Meg's wedding day stating that from her perspective marriage is another kind of death as the woman is leaving behind the freedom and independence that she had before becoming a man's property.

Jo and Meg have completely opposing views on motherhood. This is a strange concept that two sisters raised by the same mother could have such opposing views on settling down and becoming a mother. It is even more interesting that the reason for these opposing views stems from the same thing. The fact that Marmee was such a caring and invested mother caused Meg to crave the same kind of appreciation whereas for Jo it caused desire for a career and independence detached from motherhood.

JO

²⁴ (Tomis, Sartorial Geek)

(angry)

You will be bored of him in two years and we will be interesting forever.

MEG

Just because my dreams are not the
same as yours doesn't mean they're unimportant.

Amy March

The March family comes from a poor household. Marmee March has given birth to four daughters due to the time period for any of the daughters to gain wealth it would have to be through marriage. Meg marries for love, Jo doesn't marry, and Beth passes away young. Due to this the family's wealth falls on to the youngest Amy March. Amy is often viewed as materialistic, superficial, and shallow however this is only a surface level opinion of Amy.

Amy March would rather become an 'ornament to society' if it meant her mother and family would be financially stable. Gerwig has changed Amy's narrative from this boy obsessed shallow young girl to a mature realist woman. Amy has seen how Marmee struggled raising four daughters with practically no husband and how Meg struggles despite both women marrying for love.²⁵

Amy receives backlash for this decision to marry for money despite being raised in a loving home by Marmee who has such opposing views on marriage. Laurie (Timothée Chalamet) one of her love interests even states that he finds it "odd coming from one of your mother's girls." Implying that she is acting out of character compared to her sisters and her mother's views.

LAURIE

There is nothing to be ashamed of, as long as you love him.

AMY

Well, I believe we have some power over who we love, it isn't something that just happens to a person.

LAURIE

I think the poets might disagree.

²⁵ (Curley-Holmes)

AMY

Well. I'm not a poet, I'm just a woman. And as a woman I have no way to make money, not enough to earn a living and support my family. Even if I had my own money, which I don't, it would belong to my husband the minute we were married. If we had children they would belong to him not me. They would be his property. So don't sit there and tell me that marriage isn't an economic proposition, because it is.

It may not be for you but it most certainly is for me.

Gerwig has taken a very modern perspective on Amy and even though many people may view her as gold digger on a more in depth view she is a realist doing the best that she can create a better life for herself and her family despite the cards she was dealt. Gerwig uses Amy as a fresh juxtaposition of the other sisters and Marmee's view on a woman's place in the home. Amy is noble in the sense that she would rather sacrifice love than her family's stability.

Beth March

Gerwig interestingly decides to introduce us to Beth at the moment of her death before going on to tell us the story of her life.

EXT. / INT. MARCH HOUSE. 1868.

... the music grows louder as we see empty rooms of the childhood home -- the attic, the dining room, the stairs. Finally we find **BETH MARCH**, alone at the piano. She stops playing suddenly, as if in pain. Then she takes a deep breath, feels the sunlight on her hand, and stretches it out.

MARMEE (O.S.)

Beth! Beth?

She doesn't respond.

This is a clever story tool as it allows us to be more appreciative of Beth and how she interacted with the world and her family. Beth has absorbed all of the gentle characteristics of her mother and is the peace maker between her sisters. She is selfless. She tends to sickly neighbours as Marmee raised her to be caring to all. She has an unwavering gratitude for life and an open acceptance to life. Gerwig uses this character to remind the audience that life is temporary and it is important to enjoy it while we have it.²⁶

"[t]o engage with *Little Women* is to engage with the feminist imagination"

²⁶ (Tomis, Appreciating All of the March Sisters in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*: And the Lessons They Have To Teach Us)

Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* pushes the collective imagination past society's preconceived expectations and restrictions on women. She shows that women can be whatever kind of little woman they would like to be. More importantly she shows that your living circumstances in which you grew up do not define the rest of your life and just because your siblings gained one perspective from your parent does not mean you must follow un the same path.

Chapter 3 – Barbie and the Mother’s Reawakening

A Daughter’s Role in Rediscovering Her Mother’s Own Purpose

“We mother’s stand still so that our daughters can look back and see how far they’ve come”

In 2023 Greta Gerwig became the first solo female director in history to surpass one billion dollars in the global box office.²⁷ She did this with her bubble-gum feminist film *Barbie* (2023).²⁸

The film is about ‘Stereotypical Barbie’ (Margot Robbie) discovering the reality of the patriarchy in the real world. After experiencing existential turmoil in her own matriarchal pink world. Barbie discovers the complexity of girlhood and womanhood by helping a real woman, Gloria (America Ferrera) and her daughter Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt). Although this is a story of the simultaneous turmoil and beauty of being a woman, the real story is about girlhood and motherhood.

Gerwig opened *Barbie* with a homage to “The Dawn of Man” from Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: Space Odyssey ²⁹.

EXT. A DESERT-LIKE-LANDSCAPE. DAY

Like Kubrick’s 2001, but with little girls, not apes. And with baby dolls, not sticks and stuff.

HELEN MIRREN (V.O.)

Since the beginning of time, since the first little girl ever existed, there have been dolls.

These little girls rock their baby dolls, they burp them, they cuddle them: They pretend to be Moms.

HELEN MIRREN (V.O.)

But the dolls were always and forever *baby dolls*. The girls who played with them could only ever play at being MOTHERS. Which can be fun, at least for a while anyway... Ask your mother. (pause)

Gerwig uses italics and underling to emphasise how girlhood was a preparation for motherhood and their toys were tools for this. Barbie was revolutionary for girlhood

²⁷ (Rubin)

²⁸ (Gerwig, *Barbie*)

²⁹ (Kubrick)

as she was the first toy that allowed young girls to imagine whatever they wanted. Barbie was everything from a doctor to an astronaut. Barbie was never marketed as a mother meaning girls didn't have to exclusively pretend to be mothers while playing.

It is also important to note that just because Barbie hasn't been branded as a mother it doesn't make motherhood a negative thing Barbie simply showed girls that there was alternatives. This is what Gerwig explores in this film, she shows the many career paths a woman can have while simultaneously showing how important motherhood is and how both of these things can go hand in hand.³⁰

Barbie experiences "flat feet" and "irrepressible thoughts of death" after discovering that these anomalies are due to the emotions of the person playing with her in the human world she goes on a mission to the real world to help them. She assumes that the person playing

with her is the daughter, Sasha. However it turns out that the mother Gloria is the one having these thoughts and playing with her.

GLORIA

So, I've been a little lonely lately and I found the Barbies we used play with --

SASHA

I thought we gave those away!

GLORIA

And I started playing and making drawings like we used to do together because I thought it would be fun and joyful--

This is Gerwig's way of showing Barbie through the eyes of a mother who has faced the complexities of life and is reminiscing on her daughters childhood along with her own. Inner girlhood. This is a reminder that mothers were once daughters and they too are experiencing life for the first time too. This shows how every women needs to reconnect with their inner child.³¹

SASHA

I don't even know where to start with this wishing a Barbie to life crap.

GLORIA

Listen, I'm just a boring Mom with a boring job and a daughter who hates me. Can you blame me for wanting a little fun?

Sasha is in her angsty teen years. Gerwig uses dialogue to show how a child distancing from their mother can be stressful and hurtful 'a daughter who hates me'. this is a very common occurrence between every teenager and their parents. This phenomenon of teens fighting against their parents is known as "Storm and Stress".

³⁰ (Mooney)

³¹ (Oquiza, 'Barbie' REVIEW: The Beautiful Gaps in Barbie's Mother- Daughter Subplot)

An American psychologist by the name of G. Stanley Hall came up with this theory. This is the period of tension between a teen's rapid desire for independence, and a parent's need to protect their child from harm. The teen is yearning to have adult experiences that they are not developmentally ready for and the parent is trying to keep them as a child for as long as they can. This is the central element of Hall's explanation of teen stress.³² This shows the psychological reason for the fights between Sasha and Gloria

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Gloria's speech in the final act of the film is a tool for Gerwig to show her views on women's roles in society. This speech discusses the unrealistic unachievable expectations placed on women in the real world. Gloria is trying to comfort Stereotypical Barbie after her realisation that being a 'real woman' is impossible. This speech has been called an 'overt feminist message and desire to put Barbie in a broader sociological context' by CNN³⁴. The Washington Post said in contrary 'Gloria's speech suits this world perfectly: Like a fight scene without pain or a human without genitalia, it is a feminist complaint without teeth.

But for our world? The real real one? It's not enough.'³⁵

This film was marketed as a feminist masterpiece however the climax of the feminism is often criticised as underwhelming. There is no discussion of politics or any real-world problems. The message from this speech comes across that all female problems are caused by men and as long as men are in power women can never be happy. Through this speech Gerwig is suggesting that women are stuck in their current 'low level' in society and without the help from a men or a complete revolution they will be stuck there, which is a similar message that she gave in 'Little Women.' However aside from the contradictory feminism elements of the speech hold power and beauty.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

It's too hard, it's too
contradictory and no one says
thank you or gives you a medal, and in

³² (Nicolai)

³³ (Justice)

³⁴ (C. Murray)

³⁵ (Cohen)

fact, it turns out, somehow, that not
only are you doing it all wrong
but that everything is also YOUR
fault. I'm just so damn tired of
watching myself and every single
other women tie ourselves in knots
so that people will like us. And if
all that is also true for a doll
just representing a woman then I
don't even know!

Gerwig uses juxtaposition and fused sentences to emphasises the emotion and passion Gloria has for women supporting women. This story is not abundantly powerful in terms of feminism the things that are being said are not new and have been discussed for years however the subtextual theme of motherhood and girlhood is explored in a beautiful thought-provoking manner.

Gerwig had been exploring mother and daughter relationships for several years by the time she made *Barbie*, (in *Lady Bird* and *Little Women*). When she wrote *Barbie*, she had an innate understanding of the broad complexity of mothers and daughters, not only because of her personal relationships but also as she submerged herself into several stories to explore different dynamics of mothers and daughters. After *Lady Bird* was released Gerwig said in an interview to NPR “I don’t know any woman who has a simple relationship with their mother or with their daughter.” This not only applies to *Lady Bird* but to all of her films particularly *Barbie*.³⁶

The dynamic of *Barbie* starts as a mother fighting for her angsty teens love and attention but ends with said angsty teen fighting for her mother's girlhood. There is nothing simple about loving teenage girls who have no time for their “embarrassing” parents;

SASHA
(so embarrassed)
God I hope nobody from school saw us

There is nothing simple about following your mother to Barbie land and there certainly is nothing simple about tackling the patriarchy to help your mother protect her own her inner child. Gerwig shows us that this is the beauty of mother daughter relationships it is not that they come easily it is the fact that they *are* difficult and complex and despite the differences we spend our lives fighting for that love. At the end of *Barbie* there is a beautiful full circle moment where Sasha takes on the role of the mother and pushes Gloria to advocate for herself and share the ideas, she has with Mattel for new barbies.

Sasha pokes at Gloria, prompting her.

GLORIA
(role reversal to her
daughter)

³⁶ (Gerwig, Greta Gerwig Takes On Mother-Daughter Love (And Angst) In 'Lady Bird')

Okay, stop! I'll do it! STOP!
(to the group, brave voice)
I've got an idea.

Sasha and Gloria have conflicting views on what Barbie represents. It is a beautiful paradox in the sense that Sasha has grown out of her Barbie playing years and Gloria finds comfort and solace in the memories of Barbie. Sasha is of the belief that Barbie is a harmful beauty standard and perpetuates unrealistic ideologies and expectations for young girls to reach. This is because Sasha has grown up in a world where there are significantly more empowering female role models to look up to than Barbie. However, Gloria views Barbie as an empowering reminder that women can be whatever they want, and she remembers the comfort that she felt playing with the dolls. This is Gerwig's way of giving one small example of the generational gap that is prevalent in every mother daughter relationship. It is difficult to see eye to eye on everything as both mother and daughter have grown up in two different worlds. However, there is a lot to be learnt from both mother and daughter.³⁷

One of the pinnacle moments in the film is at a bus stop in the real world. Stereotypical Barbie is acknowledging the simultaneous mundanity and beauty of the real world when she notices an older woman. Gerwig writes that this is new for Barbie as Barbies do not grow old. As Barbie is not from the real world, she has not been conditioned into believing that ageing is ugly she sees it as a sign of beauty and knowledge. The most powerful moment is when the older woman is aware of her own beauty and unafraid to acknowledge it despite the societal expectations to act oblivious and hide self-acceptance.

Next to her an Older Woman sits on a bench, reading. Barbie studies her for a moment.

Barbies don't get old, so this is something she doesn't have experience with. The woman, as if she can feel Barbie's gaze on her, looks up. They meet eyes. The Older Woman nods in greeting.

BARBIE MARGOT
You're so beautiful.

OLDER WOMAN
(cheeky)
I know it.

They laugh, it's lovely.

When speaking with Rolling Stone magazine, Gerwig discussed how she felt that this was the 'heart of the movie.'³⁸ She said that despite it being 'a cul-de-sac moment' in the sense that it doesn't lead anywhere she was adamant to keep it in the film as for her this story is about women and how they not only care for each other but how as the older they get the less they care about societal beauty standards, particularly those that a plastic doll stands for. She said to The New York Times; 'The idea of a loving

³⁷ (Oquiza, The Beautiful Gaps in Barbie's Mother- Daughter Subplot)

³⁸ (Peach, The Scene Greta Gerwig Fought Studio Execs To Keep In The Barbie Movie)

God who's a mother, a grandmother – who looks at you and says, "Honey, you're doing OK" – is something I feel like I need and I wanted to give to other people.' This sums up what the film is about and Gerwig's intention in writing this story.

This story is inherently about how mother daughter relationship's function. It is about the complexities of daughters thinking they know everything and mothers realising they know less and undermine their abilities. Gerwig beautifully captures this complex tumultuous relationship and has many moments in the script that force the audience to reflect on their own relationships with their mothers and daughters. One of these moments is when Sasha is unimpressed with her mother's notion of harbouring a real life, Barbie. Gloria retaliates with;

GLORIA

Listen, I'm just a boring Mom with
a boring job and a daughter who hates me.
Can you blame me for wanting a little fun

This is a reminder that mothers are also humans with a compelling inner world. They were once daughters too, which is an idea that many daughters particularly in their teens (like Sasha) tend to forget. Gloria mirrors Demeter in the sense that she doesn't want her daughter to leave her and is trying to savour the relationship while they are still together. Whereas Sasha is similar to Persephone in her attempts to grow up and leave home. The reason that *Barbie* relates differently to this myth than *Lady Bird* is that Gloria is reconnecting with her inner Persephone and Sasha is taking on the role of Ceres to allow her mother to find her inner girlhood again.³⁹

This idea that "We mother's stand still so that our daughters can look back and see how far they've come"⁴⁰ is a lovely comfort for daughters however it perpetuates the notion that once a woman becomes a mother, she loses the rest of her self-identity. Sasha forces Gloria to combat this by encouraging her to find her inner self and advocate for it proving to women that they can simultaneously be a mother and a fully-fledged woman with a rich inner life.

As Gerwig has said motherhood and mothers and daughters were the "heart of the movie" and if it were not for mothers, we would not have beautiful complex stories to tell.

³⁹ (Brown)

⁴⁰ (Conversation)

Conclusion

Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*, *Little Women* and *Barbie* investigate the insightful explorations of mother-daughter relationships. Through her skilful writing techniques Gerwig is able to navigate the tension between love, independence, and personal growth, hence accurately capturing the emotional complexity of mother-daughter bonds. Across all three films, her portrayal of mothers and daughters reflects the cyclical, transformative nature of these relationships, echoing the ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone.

In *Lady Bird*, Gerwig's sharp, fast-paced dialogue and structured narrative mirror the tension between Marion and her daughter, Lady Bird. Their relationship is defined by moments of separation and return, much like Persephone's cyclical journey between the underworld and her mother. Lady Bird's emotional growth mirrors Persephone's seasonal transformation, as she learns to reconcile with her mother and embrace her roots.

Little Women employs a nonlinear narrative, shifting between past and present, which allows Gerwig to explore the generational tension between Marmee and her daughters. This structure mirrors the myth's cycle of separation and reunion, as the March sisters, like Persephone, move away from their mother but eventually return to her influence with newfound understanding and respect. The film highlights the emotional labour of Marmee, whose sacrifices reflect the nurturing role Demeter plays in the myth, while her daughters seek their own identities outside of her care.

In *Barbie*, Gerwig uses satire and fantasy to explore the pressures women face to conform to societal ideals, particularly the way societal "mothers" shape female identity. Barbie's journey toward self-realization reflects Persephone's journey of both imprisonment and liberation, as she, like Persephone, undergoes a transformation that leads her to return to her true self.

All three films are connected by Gerwig's use of layered dialogue, subtext, and emotional depth to depict the universal yet complex nature of mother-daughter relationships. Drawing from the Demeter-Persephone myth, Gerwig highlights how separation and return, sacrifice, and growth define the emotional cycles within these relationships.

Ultimately, these scripts and films show that while the journey of self-discovery may require distance from the mother, in the end it is the enduring bond between mothers and daughters that provides the foundation for their daughters transformation and inevitable reconciliation.

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