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### What Really is Eating Gilbert Grape?

Lasse Hallström mastered the art of creating films that have characters with depth, that move audiences to tears for reasons that are not necessarily obvious. He somehow manages to select actors who are absolutely perfect for their roles, taking the dysfunction of a family and making it seem endearing, surprising audiences everywhere, as is exemplified in what I believe is Johnny Depp's best performance. A brutally honest film, those viewing *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* can almost certainly relate to the emotions the characters experience throughout the film. The themes throughout the film of trying to escape while also trying to save face and dignity leave the audience with a feeling of hollowness but also with a sense of hope and freedom.

Leonardo DiCaprio, Johnny Depp, and Darlene Cates dominate the film with their genuine, down to earth performances. Throughout the whole movie, we see every side of the characters, flaws and all. Leonardo DiCaprio's character, Arnie Grape, is the mentally handicapped son of Darlene Cates's character, Bonnie Grape. Johnny Depp takes on the lead role of the film as Gilbert Grape, the older son of Bonnie. Gilbert has essentially taken on the role of the father of the house since his father hanged himself in the basement of the family home in Endora, a small Midwestern town. "Describing Endora is like dancing to no music," Gilbert asserts in a voice over at the beginning of the film. It really sets the tone of the film and gives Endora a character as well. Gilbert is

full of lines that resonate with the audience, making each viewer think about what he's just said and why he said it.

There are many points throughout the film where Gilbert indulges the town's children in sneaking a peek at Gilbert's agoraphobic and morbidly obese mother. She's like a circus freak, or a zoo animal, comparable to the Bearded Lady. Everyone wants to catch a glimpse of her. He lifts a little boy up to the window, giving him a knowing smirk as he runs away excitedly to tell his friends all about the experience. "She's a whale," he says to his best friend, who immediately scolds Gilbert for speaking about his mother in such a way. "My mother is kinda attached to the house..." he explains to his love interest, Becky, who is a true free spirit and just the right person Gilbert needs in his life. Also in a long shot, as Becky and Gilbert look at his humble home from afar, he muses, "How small it looks from here considering the girth of what's inside it." It is clear that Gilbert has conflicting feelings about his mother. He's embarrassed by her, yet maintains a sense of protectiveness at times, especially towards the end of the film. He misses the mother he used to know, resents his father's suicide for turning her into the unmoving fixture that she has become. "She used to be so pretty. She used to be so...fun," he reflects to Becky.

After one of Arnie's climbs up the town's water tower, Bonnie must face her fears of leaving the house and entering society to go down to the police station to pick him up. The camera follows the car down the street, showing the car visibly weighed down on one side to highlight the stigma around Bonnie's obesity. When she struggles out of the car in town, people gather to stare, both adults and children, like Bonnie is a zoo animal. The children laugh and a grown man even has the audacity to take a photo of her. It is

clear on Gilbert's, Amy's, and Ellen's faces that they are embarrassed by their mother, but also want to protect her from the humiliation she is experiencing, offering to go inside the station and retrieve Arnie for her. But Bonnie perseveres and pushes through the shame for her son. Despite her bravery, though, the camera shows Bonnie sitting at home that evening, her dinner plate untouched, depression clear on her face. She looks at what her life has become since becoming widowed: all the weight she's gained, to the point where she never leaves the couch and her children carry the dinner table to the couch every evening, and how depressed she has become.

The theme of escaping is hugely prevalent throughout the film. Arnie is always running back to the town's water tower and climbing as high as he can before Gilbert dutifully has to talk him down while a crowd gathers to stare at the spectacle, even though it happens regularly. Arnie also loves to climb the big tree outside the family home and loves to play hide-and-seek with Gilbert and his older sister. Bonnie also climbs to escape. At the end of the film, after Arnie's eighteenth birthday party, Bonnie takes a stand, literally. She slowly walks to the steps in her home and, very laboriously, climbs the stairs, one at a time in a final attempt to escape. This is also the turning point of the film. Bonnie makes it to the bedroom, is tucked in by her children, and dies peacefully. Her last words are to Gilbert: "You're my knight in shimmering armor, you know that?" When Gilbert tries to correct her, she retorts with, "No. Shimmering. You shimmer and you glow." This seems fitting for her character because Gilbert takes so much responsibility and blame throughout the whole film; he's always the one his sisters blame for Arnie's running away and for things not running smoothly. He finally gets some recognition for all the hard work he does.

Perhaps the most moving part of the film is the family's response to Bonnie's death. Hallström includes a montage of the children sitting or standing, mourning, in the bedroom with their mother dead in the bed, implying the passage of time. Ellen, the youngest sister, finally breaks the silence with, "There's gonna be a crowd. I just know there's gonna be a crowd," in between sobs. They know that the only way to remove their mother's body from the house will be with a crane and they cannot stand the thought of humiliating her after her death. A brooding Gilbert stands defiantly and announces, "I'm not gonna let her be a joke," and storms out of the room. The siblings, who seemed unable to come together for anything throughout the film, wordlessly work together to carry all the furniture and personal belongings out of the house. The next scene is a long shot of Gilbert and his siblings silently watching their home, and with that, all their past humiliations, hardships, and life, become engulfed in flames.

It is a very bittersweet ending; the audience cries for the destruction of this family, but also smiles for the hope that this ending brings for a new beginning. Gilbert and Arnie will stay together, leaving with Becky, and the sisters will each go on their own path, finally having the freedom to pursue their dreams. Lasse Hallström perfected this film, with some of the most genuine performances in cinematic history. An incredible cast, Depp, DiCaprio, Cates, and Lewis have the audience engaged from beginning to end, emotionally invested in what happens to the characters. The small town feeling of Endora captivates the audience, leaving it wanting to learn more about the lives of all the characters. Hallström created an instant classic, a go-to film for viewers all over the world because, on some level, we can all relate to the experiences or emotions portrayed by the characters, a feat that is very difficult to accomplish in modern

film. *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* is one of my favorite films, all thanks to the direction and imagination of Lasse Hallström.