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# Undergraduate Dissertation

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

**"It's Not Important To Be Right. It's Only Important To Be True": *Lady Bird* (2017) as a Subversive Coming-of-age Film**

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## Abstract

This undergraduate dissertation examines the role gender plays in the subversion of stereotypes in coming-of-age movies. In particular, it analyzes how Greta Gerwig's personal vision in the film *Lady Bird* (2017) contributes to creating a coming-of-age story that deploys some of the conventions of the genre but manages to reverse many others. To carry out this study, the essay takes a look at the characteristics of coming-of-age films and at the effects that the male and the female gaze have had in this genre. The objective of this dissertation is to prove that *Lady Bird* is a subversive coming-of-age film due to the distinctive vision of its writer-director, who presents spaces, love, and female bonds as paramount for the personal development of its teenage protagonist.

## Resumen

Este trabajo de fin de grado examina el papel que juega el género en la subversión de los estereotipos en las películas coming-of-age. En concreto, analiza cómo la visión personal de Greta Gerwig en la película *Lady Bird* (2017) es clave en la creación de un coming-of-age que utiliza algunas de las convenciones del género pero también le da la vuelta a muchas otras. Para llevar a cabo este estudio, el ensayo revisa las características de las películas de este género y el efecto que han tenido la mirada femenina y la masculina sobre él. El objetivo de este trabajo es demostrar que *Lady Bird* es un coming-of-age subversivo debido a la visión característica de su directora y guionista, la cual presenta el espacio, el amor y los lazos entre mujeres como aspectos fundamentales para el desarrollo personal de su protagonista adolescente.

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# 1. Introduction

From their very inception, coming-of-age films have been featuring unrealistic and stereotypical teenage main characters. While it is common for male protagonists to embark on and look for adventures, their female counterparts' interest lies in becoming highly popular and finding love. The existence of this contrast is closely related to the role that female and male gaze play in transmitting a certain perspective and in the process of character creation. This vision determines how protagonists are depicted according to gender roles. The object of analysis of this work is *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017), a coming-of-age film which is both written and directed by a woman whose point of view reflects her intention to subvert clichés. To carry out this task, she creates a female protagonist that defies stereotypes and expectations, who does not display the pattern of behaviour that is frequent among teenage girl main characters in films belonging to the subgenre. Rather than focusing on romantic love, the writer-director chooses to tell a story about the ups and downs of the mother-daughter relationship. In addition, she fully addresses the topic of true friendship and presents it as key for the development of the protagonist, whereas her romantic relationships show nuances and contribute to dismantling the idea of idyllic first love experiences. Together with fully developed and nuanced characters, Greta Gerwig uses the setting of Sacramento to express the evolution of Lady Bird. Therefore, even though the movie deals with topics appearing in the coming-of-age subgenre such as the family melodrama and the romance, it manages to deploy its conventions by offering a different, unusual treatment of them. The first part of this undergraduate dissertation introduces the types of coming-of-age movies and the role that gender plays in them and is followed by an analysis of *Lady Bird* as a subversive coming-of-age film, a direct result of Greta Gerwig's personal vision.

## 2. The coming-of-age movie

### 2.1. Types of movies and conventions

The concepts of ‘teen films’ and ‘coming-of-age stories’ have been frequently used to refer to the same genre of movies. In spite of sharing some topics, the latter is classified as a subgenre of teen films. According to Fox, “coming-of-age films have their forerunner in literature in the *Bildungsroman*, which was created in the second half of the eighteenth century in response to the educational ideas of the German Enlightenment” (5). Both *Bildungsroman* and coming-of-age films involve the main character in the process of growing up, of maturation. However, coming-of-age films did not appear until the mid-1950s, when teenagers’ stories started to be depicted onscreen. The reason behind this change was that the American film industry began producing dramas that dealt with the process of reaching adulthood in American society after noticing their positive box office revenue figures. *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) has been considered by many film theorists as one of the first coming-of-age movies, and after its success, studios began producing other films that featured adolescents as main characters, such as *Take a Giant Step* (Philip Leacock, 1959), *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1961), *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), or *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973). The coming-of-age genre was born.

As was previously mentioned, teen and coming-of-age films do not fall under the same category of movies. The main difference between them is “the level of emotion and response from audiences”, and coming-of-age films prioritise “the emotion over comedy” (Butt). Therefore, the protagonists of this subgenre undergo significant physical, psychological and emotional changes that will be paramount for their personal development.

In addition, it is crucial to acknowledge that there are three categories of coming-of-age films depending on the stage of life in which the protagonists find themselves. In the pre-teen division, movies are led by a 12-year-old or younger main character. Some instances of these works are *Stand by Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986), *Boy* (Taika Waititi, 2010), *Tomboy* (Céline Sciamma, 2011), *The Fits* (Anna Rose Holmer, 2015), or *The Florida Project* (Sean Baker, 2017). In the teen category, there is a protagonist who is between thirteen and nineteen years old. Therefore, films such as *Sing Street* (John Carney, 2016), *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017), *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018), *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019), or *The Half of It* (Alice Wu, 2020) belong to this group. The third and last division is known as post-adolescence, with the main character being twenty years old or at the onset of adulthood. *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (Lasse Hallström, 1993), *Good Will Hunting* (Gus Van Sant, 1997), *The Motorcycle Diaries* (Walter Salles, 2004), or *Brooklyn* (John Crowley, 2015) are instances of films that belong to this category.

Together with age, gender plays a crucial role in coming-of-age films. Many of these movies are riddled with sexist clichés that depict young women's behaviour as stereotypical. While coming-of-age films revolving around male protagonists usually examine the adventures they embark on, and the topic of love is relegated to the background, female main characters' interest is aroused by achieving popularity and getting together with their male love interests from high school. Some instances of films that employ the former plot line are *The Kings of Summer* (Jordan Vogt-Roberts, 2013) and *Dope* (Rick Famuyiwa, 2015), whereas *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2008) and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (Susan Johnson, 2018) are examples of movies that deal with the latter. Although these, like many other coming-of-age films, perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes, others contribute to the challenging of these conventions. In recent years, there has been a tendency to include LGTB+ characters in block-

buster films belonging to this subgenre, which acknowledges the fact that teenagers as individuals have different sexual orientations and gender identities. *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) and *Love, Simon* (Greg Berlanti, 2018), among many others, are examples of films that are the consequence of this change.

Coming-of-age films combine coming-of-age worries and themes with components of other movie genres (Fox 6). Therefore, a common element appearing in coming-of-age stories is the family melodrama. Taking into account the age of the protagonists of these films and the fact that many of them live with their parents, their relationship with their families plays a significant role in their daily lives. Parents are frequently depicted as authoritative figures that oppress their children, tear them down, and do not encourage them to be free. They are seen as overprotective, punctilious, narrow-minded and controlling. They do not understand their kids, and they do not strive to do so. However, this is also the outcome of having just one side of the story being told from the subjective perspective of a teenage character. Coming-of-age stories also use elements of the romantic drama since love is one of the main ingredients of this subgenre. The protagonists of these films discover and explore their sexuality, live their first love relationship, break up with their partners, are heartbroken, experience unrequited love, get married, etc. These factors shape their personalities and can have a strong influence on them.

The aforementioned elements are relevant for the analysis of the main topic of this work since *Lady Bird* is a coming-of-age story that features many of these traits but also subverts them. It falls into the teen category because its main character is a seventeen-year-old girl, and even though love is one of the topics appearing in this film, the movie primarily deploys the conventions of family melodrama. She has a complex relationship with her mother,

which is reflected throughout the film. On the other hand, rather than aiming at becoming popular, the protagonist's goal is to leave her hometown and study in college.

## **2.2. Gender in coming-of-age films**

This section will discuss the issue of gender in coming-of-age films and its influence on the subgenre. It will explore specific examples of gender representation, the impact of feminism and the development of the relationships among women in coming-of-age movies. As has been mentioned previously, the creation of certain stereotypes and clichés ultimately depends on the gender of the protagonist. Not only that, but the gender of the members of the film crew can also be the cornerstone when it comes to depicting the life experiences of female and male characters. Therefore, the issue of gender must be taken into account when analyzing coming-of-age films because it reflects the impact of social norms and power structures on individuals and, more specifically, on women.

Throughout the years, the film industry has undergone major changes in terms of female presence. Therefore, several tests were created to measure movies for gender equality and representation. One of the most well-known is the Bechdel Test, which was created as a tool to measure the degree of women representation in films. To pass this test, movies need to (1) feature at least two female characters (2) interacting with each other and (3) holding conversations about different topics unrelated to men (*Bechdel Test Movie List*). However, other options investigate this matter further, such as the Waitle Test, which focuses on the representation of black women, or the Peirce Test, which checks whether there is “a female character (protagonist or antagonist) with her own story, who has dimension and exists in an authentic way, showcasing her needs and desires which she ultimately pursues” (Waters). The

time when films are released plays an important role when it comes to passing these tests. As the following graphics show, movies made from the 50s to the 70s did not generally fulfil the three requirements of the Bechdel Test (Figure 1), while the ones released two decades ago involve a more diverse gender representation (Figure 2). Red represents the complete non-fulfilment of these rules, orange the presence of one condition, yellow stands for the fulfilment of two rules and green represents the film abides by the three of them.

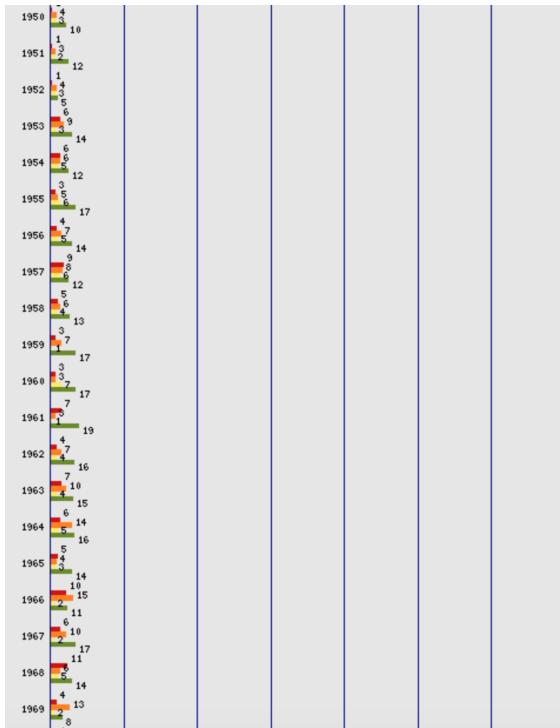


Figure 1

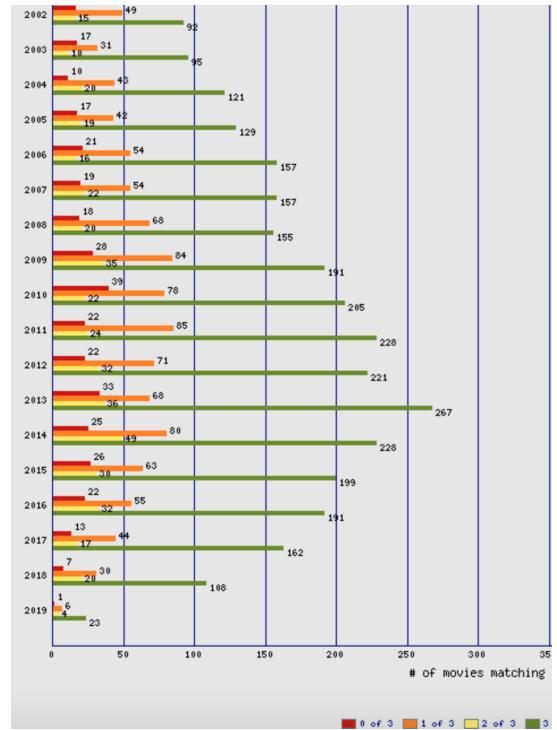


Figure 2

The results show that movies released in the 21st century are more likely to include female characters that comply with the requirements of the Bechdel test. Still, when applied to coming-of-age films, many movies belonging to this subgenre cannot pass it. As an example of that, from the 25 aforementioned films, only 12 do not fail the test even though the vast majority of them were made in the last 21 years. However, *Lady Bird*, the object of analysis of this work, is among those that pass it. It is crucial to note that it was released in 2017 be-

cause it is the year in which the #MeToo movement became viral. Although the concept was first coined by US activist Tarana Burke in 2006, its popularity skyrocketed with the tweet “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (Milano). Therefore, it shared the original aim of its creator, which was to connect and unite women who had endured sexual violence. Women all around the world started sharing their stories, and the movement soon had a tremendous impact on various spheres, one of them being the film industry. This was so because many women working there began accusing Hollywood mogul and film producer Harvey Weinstein of having carried out sexual assault. Three years later, he was found guilty of the charges and sentenced to 23 years in prison. His company, The Weinstein Company, has produced 145 films, and he also produced many films while working at Miramax, the company he founded with his brother Bob. Therefore, he used to be a very powerful figure that decided what movies to finance and took advantage of this. His imprisonment meant the acknowledgement of the power of feminism since it was only due to unity among women that the dark truth behind the producer came to light, and he stopped controlling what his alleged victims could do or say.

Even though the number of female executive producers has experienced a rise, going from an average of 4.6% during the 1950s and 1960s to a 26.4% in 2018 (Stephen Follows), the number is still low when compared to the number of male producers. In addition, women are more likely to produce family and romance films, which, as has been previously mentioned, are characteristic of coming-of-age films. This way, *Lady Bird* was produced by Scott Rudin, Eli Bush, and Evelyn O’Neill, being the latter a woman. This affects the female gaze since it is present in the film in different ways. As a director, Greta Gerwig is aware of the importance of this fact. When asked about Weinstein, she said: “it made me feel so much more fervently that we need women in positions of power – as directors, producers, executi-

ves, studio presidents and everywhere else" (Gerwig). The lack of women in these positions obstructs the presence of women in films, so gender representation is dependent on their ubiquity. This can be seen in the following graphic, which shows failing or passing the Bechdel test is closely linked to the predominant gender of the film crew. It demonstrates the more female executive producers, writers and directors a film has, the more likely it is for it to pass the test.

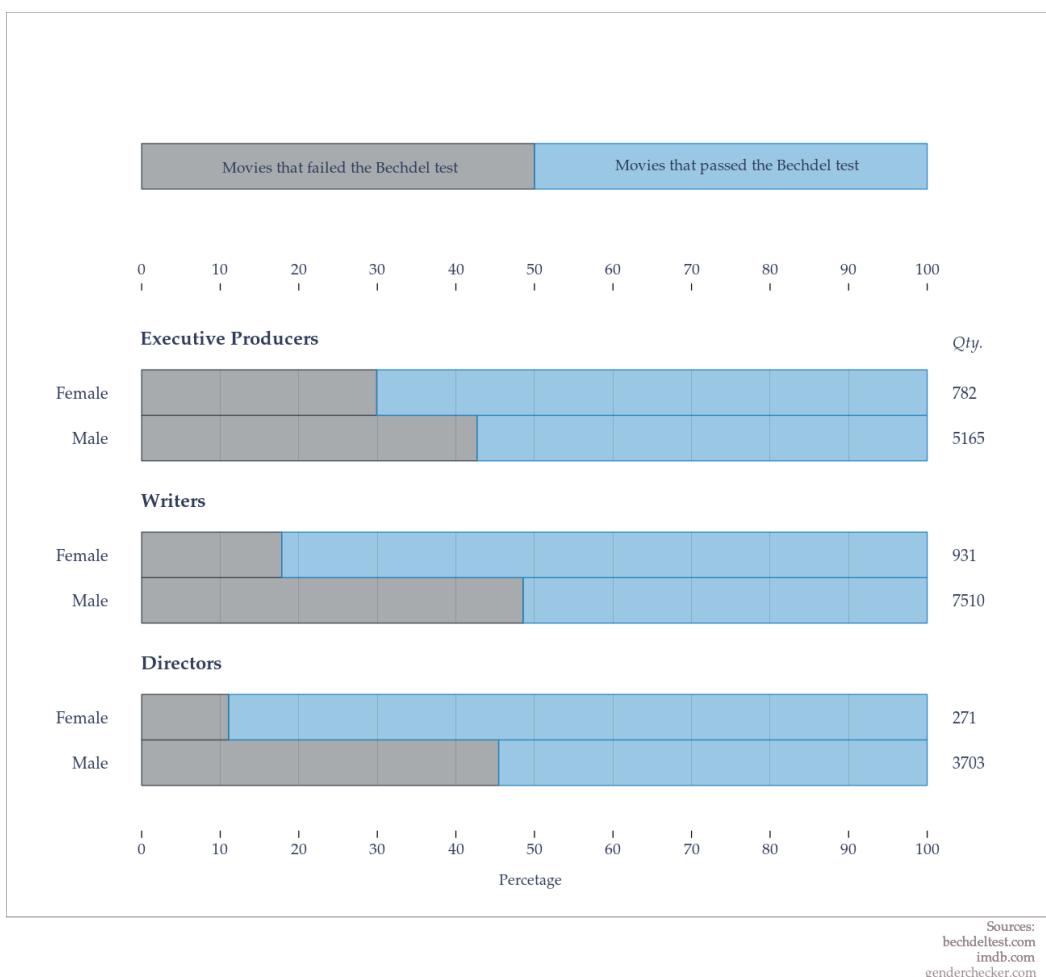


Figure 3

When addressing the concept of the "female gaze", it is particularly important to examine it taking Laura Mulvey's theoretical framework into account because this feminist film theorist acknowledges the significance of the camera when transmitting a certain pers-

pective. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, she argues that gender is in the eye of the beholder. Therefore, when female characters are seen from the viewpoint of men, they are depicted as passive sexual objects. This argument works when applied to films belonging to any genre, including the coming-of-age. For instance, *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2013) is both directed and written by a man, and its four main characters are teenage girls going through the process of maturation whose bodies are sexualized and objectified. Moreover, Alien (James Franco), the male protagonist of the film, is placed in a powerful position. On the other hand, *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2010) is written and directed by a woman, and the camera shows the perspective of the teenage girl protagonist, so the depiction of the female body in this film differs very much from the one found in *Spring Breakers*. Even though these films seem to demonstrate Laura Mulvey’s theory, her approach cannot be taken as a general rule since, at the time of writing this essay, there are controversial coming-of-age movies directed by women like *Cuties* (Maïmouna Doucouré, 2020), which was considered “child pornography” by many spectators. To conclude, although Mulvey is right in her idea that the gender of the members of the film crew is a key factor to consider when analyzing how the “female gaze” works, the gender of the spectator also plays an important role when it comes to seeing women as passive sexual objects.

As has been stated, *Lady Bird* was directed and written by Greta Gerwig, and, as happened with *Fish Tank*, the protagonist is a teenage girl whose perspective is subjectively transmitted by the camera on several occasions. Although the topic of sexuality is present throughout the film, it is seen as an intrinsic feature of Lady Bird’s journey towards maturation, not as a way of presenting her as an object of desire. Therefore, it focuses more on the inner self, on the characteristic journey of self-discovery that takes place during adolescence rather than on outer appearances. This is so because the “female gaze” does not only affect the phy-

sique of the characters, but also the portrayal of their behaviour. In this film, outward appearances can be both accurate and deceiving, a way of presenting characters that will be further analyzed in the next section.

Outward appearances also affect how characters see each other. Coming-of-age films have often depicted women as enemies, as repelling and hating each other. This is a tendency that is followed in many mainstream movies belonging to the subgenre, which is frequently based on the widely-held belief that people can be classified according to their looks. This is the case of *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) or *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), whose female protagonists judge other girls by the way they dress or look. However, coming-of-age films are starting to focus on the role of feminism, on the implications of women supporting and helping one another and fighting against established stereotypes. Therefore, films like *Moxie* (Amy Poehler, 2021) exemplify the meaning of sorority and highlight its importance in contemporary society. The behaviour of the teenage girls appearing in this movie is no longer in tune with the idea of denigrating other women, a trend that is very likely to keep on developing in the future and could be seen a consequence of the empathy and solidarity among women which arose from the #MeToo movement.

### 3. *Lady Bird*: a subversive coming-of-age film

#### 3. 1. *Lady Bird* as an expression of Greta Gerwig's vision

*Lady Bird* was both written and directed by Greta Gerwig. Even though this coming-of-age movie was her directorial debut and first solo writing project, it earned five Academy Awards nominations, among which was the best director nod. This way, she became the fifth woman ever nominated for that category. Before *Lady Bird*, Gerwig had co-written *Frances Ha* (2013) and *Mistress America* (2015) with director Noah Baumbach who is also her partner. In addition, she co-wrote *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007) and co-directed *Nights and Weekends* (2008) with Joe Swanberg. Although Gerwig could not pursue a film degree, she played a role in all of these films, and that, together with her work as an actress in movies belonging mainly to the *mumblecore* subgenre, was the way she learnt about the dynamics of the film industry and about screenwriting and directing. Knowing the background of *Lady Bird*'s director and screenwriter is key to understanding her grounds to create a coming-of-age film that subverts the stereotypes of this subgenre. In *Lady Bird*, Greta Gerwig paid special attention to character development and created Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson (Saoirse Ronan), a protagonist that exemplifies the director's intention to overturn clichés. This section will analyze the aspects of the coming-of-age subgenre Greta Gerwig has subverted with her particular vision and the means she has used to do so to create a film that looks more realistic than ideal.

What many mainstream coming-of-age films have in common is their predictability. Their plots usually feature an ending that the audience can foresee because of having watched other similar movies. As has been previously discussed, when the protagonist is a teenage girl

attending high school (that is, a coming-of-age belonging to the teen category), her interests very usually revolve around longing after the popular boy and achieving popularity. However, *Lady Bird*'s main character defies these expectations. This is connected to its director's aim. Greta Gerwig's main concern when she started writing this film was not whether the protagonist would find love or not, but building a complex character, the kind of teenage girl the audience was not used to seeing onscreen. The writer-director was aware of the importance of outward appearances, and Christine McPherson becomes Lady Bird partly because of her rebellious looks. For instance, Gerwig suggested dyeing Saoirse Ronan's hair red while still showing her dark roots, which makes it look as if she had applied this reddish colour to her hair at home rather than at the hairdresser. Moreover, Saoirse's visible acne was left uncovered by the makeup artist, which contrasts with the flawless skin of the teenage protagonists of other coming-of-age films. In that sense, her appearance is much more realistic and in line with the character's age. Her rock style clothes serve as a means of expression, and all these traits help in the creation of the character's personality. Gerwig wanted Lady Bird to wear clothes that reminded of Alanis Morissette's style and a hair dye that would emulate Tai's hair in *Clueless*, so she played with her influences to create this protagonist.



Figures 4 & 5: Lady Bird's fashion style and skin appearance make her look like a genuine teenage girl

Even though some of the features that define Lady Bird's aesthetic are inspired by those that characterize other coming-of-age films' teenage girl protagonists, her personality differs very much from the one they have. Lady Bird is frequently assumed to be based on Greta Gerwig, and her life experience, to be representative of the writer-director's autobiographical story, but she has openly declared that was not the approach she adopted. This pro-

tagonist exemplifies Gerwig's flawed and admired heroine, the kind of teenager she always wanted to be but never was. Under the alter ego name of Lady Bird, Christine McPherson is not afraid of being herself recklessly, of rebelling against imposed rules, of deviating from the path of life her parents want her to follow. Greta Gerwig spent years writing the original script of the film —which was 350 pages long— because she wanted to build the kind of female character that she had always longed to see in coming-of-age movies. She did not want her protagonist to seek a boy's validation, her prime focus was on her ambitions and fears, on depicting Lady Bird as a three-dimensional character. Therefore, the aforementioned characteristic predictability of films belonging to the coming-of-age subgenre is challenged in *Lady Bird* since spectators do not know how this new kind of protagonist will behave. Gerwig does not use the common characters appearing in this category of movies but rather creates a protagonist whose pattern of behaviour cannot be foreseen and characters surrounding her have a very strong impact on her life.

However, there are aspects of Lady Bird's life that Greta Gerwig shares, one of the most relevant and conspicuous being their Sacramento upbringing. This city is not just the place where the protagonist lives, it is also a character within the film. The writer-director was extremely familiar with the capital of the state of California and that shows in *Lady Bird*. In most coming-of-age films, the plot takes place in a high school, so the city where it is located is a matter relegated to the background. Nevertheless, Sacramento is yet another character in this movie that is portrayed by means of the filtered vision of the protagonist of the story. Lady Bird's conflict is that she does not want to live in Sacramento, she wants to leave the city as quickly as possible and study somewhere else. There are many instances of her disliking the place, such as the name by which she refers to her neighbourhood: 'the wrong side of the tracks'. However, since Lady Bird is a complex character, she is full of contradictions.

An example of this is the appealing, loving manner in which she describes Sacramento in her essay for Sister Sarah Joan. This contrasts with the hostile attitude she had previously adopted to talk about her hometown. This shows that, deep down, Lady Bird loves Sacramento — a feeling that is fully explored and developed at the end of the film—, but she has the sort of attitude that is characteristic of a difficult, rebellious teenager who wants to live her own life away from her roots.

There are several scenes in *Lady Bird* that reinforce the role that Sacramento plays in the personal growth of its main character. For instance, there is a scene in which Lady Bird and her best friend Julie (Beanie Feldstein) are walking through the fancy and wealthy neighbourhood of Sacramento, which contrasts very much with the place where these two characters live. Their stroll is filmed through long shots which show these two friends and the buildings. By not using a point of view shot in this scene, spectators can observe how little Lady Bird and Julie look compared to the big houses surrounding them, which is also how they feel. Moreover, they are wearing their school uniforms, an element that highlights their age and class since they are not dressed like the wealthy owners of the houses. These two friends stop just right in front of a blue house and start daydreaming about it. They wonder how their lives would be if they owned the property. The protagonists of coming-of-age films such as *Boyhood* (Richard Linklater, 2014) often live or move into grand, luxurious houses, or have a best friend who does (like Regina George's mansion in *Mean Girls*). In *Lady Bird*, the protagonist's mother has to work double shifts to keep her family financially afloat and Julie lives in a small apartment with her mother. The wealthy neighbourhood represents their dreamed life, one they can only aspire to.



Figures 6 & 7: the contrast between Lady Bird's home and her dreamed house

As has been discussed, *Lady Bird* presents Sacramento as yet another character in this film that is even more essential than the high school setting. Nevertheless, high schools are usually the centre of the world of coming-of-age movie characters, and Immaculate Heart still plays an important role in *Lady Bird*. High schools can be presented as staunch allies or fierce rivals depending on the life experience of the protagonists of the films. Since Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson is a complex character, her attitude towards the Catholic school she attends cannot be classified as either the former or the latter. It is a love-hate relationship like

the one Gerwig had with St. Francis Catholic school, the place she attended. Immaculate Heart is an all-girls school, which prevents its students from falling in love with the most popular boys, thus eradicating this common cliché of coming-of-age movies. When Greta wrote the opening credit sequence, she came up with the idea of showing Lady Bird sitting in mass, asking herself what was her place in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit structure. However, she ended up deciding that would be an opportune moment to present this character as dreamy, as someone who considers mass a good time to think about her concerns while her classmates are busy praying. Both this behaviour and the fact that she decides to change her name from Christine —which has religious connotations since it derives from the word ‘Christ’ and means ‘a female Christian’— to Lady Bird illustrate her hostile attitude towards religion.



Figure 8: Lady Bird is not interested in Christian beliefs and values

As has been argued, *Lady Bird* is a subversive coming-of-age film because of its reversal of clichés found in movies belonging to this subgenre. Its protagonist’s appearance, lifestyle, aspirations and beliefs differ considerably from those of the main characters of coming-of-age films. Even though Lady Bird shows the kind of rebellious behaviour and attitu-

des that is common among teenagers, Greta Gerwig builds a character that is also an alter ego, someone who is strong enough to fight for what she wants. This, together with the film being a “love letter to Sacramento” according to Gerwig, contributes to dismantling the stereotype of the high school as the only relevant place in the life of teenagers.

### **3.2. Love in *Lady Bird***

As has been discussed in the previous section, *Lady Bird* does not stand for the typical teenage girl appearing in coming-of-age stories. It is undeniable that rebelling against her catholic education and what she considers an oppressive hometown are distinctive traits of her personality, but *Lady Bird*’s story is not about that. When addressing the stereotypical plot of coming-of-age stories, it was argued that their female protagonists’ main goal is usually a romantic one: to get with the most popular, intriguing boy in high school. Although *Lady Bird* feels strongly attracted first to Danny (Lucas Hedges) and then to Kyle (Timothée Chalamet), they are just a part of her experience as a teenager. Her relationship with them will be briefly analyzed in this section because it encourages the personal growth of the protagonist by teaching her some lessons, but it will not be its cornerstone since that is not the most important love story of the film. True friendship is portrayed as more important than romantic interest or the achievement of popularity, even though it takes *Lady Bird* some time to learn that. This aspect will be tackled in this part of the essay too. However, the greatest love story appearing in this movie is not that of *Lady Bird* and the boys she dates nor her strong friendship bond with Julie, but the one existing between her and her mother. Therefore, this section will provide a detailed analysis of the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship in *Lady Bird*.

In an interview with the BBC, Greta Gerwig stated: “we’re so programmed to think that falling in love is what is going to happen to a woman because it almost seems like that is all women do in movies. I feel like that is such a narrow view of the world but is also what people expect” (Gerwig). With this statement, she made it clear that she was aware of the existence of these assumptions, but also that she did not see them in a very positive light. Therefore, Gerwig created a female character whose life did not revolve around falling in love, thus defying the clichés of the coming-of-age genre. The opening scene of the film serves to illustrate the main theme of the story: the meaningful, stormy and complex mother-daughter relationship. It begins with a close-up shot of Marion (Laurie Metcalf) and her daughter, who are peacefully sleeping in a hotel bed, facing each other. This is the very first time the protagonist and her mother appear onscreen, so it is the initial impression spectators get of the characters. Since there is no music, dialogue, nor props other than the bed, the attention is placed on Lady Bird and Marion. There is little physical distance between them, and they are calm and quiet in each other’s company. Therefore, the audience can feel the existence of a bond between the two. This unconditional love between mother and daughter will be essential for understanding the dynamics of their relationship.



Figure 9: Lady Bird and Marion's bond is noticeable in the opening scene

This peaceful situation contrasts very much with what is depicted in the following scene, which is the car journey home. In the beginning, mother and daughter cry together while listening to *The Grapes of Wrath* audiobook. However, this highly emotional moment disappears when they start quarrelling about Lady Bird's college choice. The argument gets increasingly heated and ends up with Lady Bird throwing herself out of the moving car after Marion refuses to call her by the name she has given to herself. To her daughter, "Lady Bird" is more than a name, it is her alter ego, representing the person she believes she really is. Therefore, for this character, her mother's insistence on calling her Christine symbolizes a lack of understanding and a rejection of her true self. Even though this scene has a dramatic ending, it is crucial to keep in mind there was a clearly perceptible baseline of love both in the opening shot and at the beginning of the car journey since its existence is key to grasping this mother-daughter relationship. Lady Bird and Marion keep on arguing throughout the whole film —being the protagonist's college choice a recurring topic of discussion—, but this

underlying love is what causes them to keep on trying to make the other see things from their personal point of view. It is the reason why, in spite of their differences, they do not give up on each other.



Figures 10 & 11: A highly emotional mother-daughter moment quickly turns into a quarrel with a dramatic ending

These ups and downs in the mother-daughter relationship keep on happening throughout the whole film. The scene in which they go to a thrift shop to find a dress that Lady Bird

can wear to Danny's grandmother's Thanksgiving party is yet another instance of the intensity of their relationship. Marion lets her daughter know that she does not like the idea of not spending the celebration together, and complains about the way in which Lady Bird is walking since she keeps on dragging her feet. When a saleswoman greets her, her voice tone changes from a recriminatory to a warm, friendly one. This shows the attitude she has towards Lady Bird, the mood in which they are when they talk to each other. However, the situation changes after Marion finds a dress that Lady Bird loves, and they momentarily forget about their argument. Right after this scene, there is a cut to Lady Bird's living room at night, where her mother has spent the day tailoring the dress they bought at the store while still wearing her nurse uniform. This is a demonstration of how much she really cares about her daughter. *Lady Bird* presents mother-daughter verbal communication as complex, but Marion's actions are very telling and present her as a caring mother in spite of Lady Bird's opinion on the matter.





Figures 12 & 13: Marion's behaviour shows both she knows her daughter well and that she truly cares about her

As has been explained in the introduction of this section, there are other secondary relationships in *Lady Bird*'s life, and her connections with women take more space than those with men. One of these crucial relationships is her friendship with Julie. It is not unusual for coming-of-age films whose protagonist is a teenage girl to deal with the topic of friendship, but it is usually done superficially. As it was shown in the theoretical framework, many of these movies do not pass the Bechdel test since their female characters do not interact with each other to talk about anything other than their love interests. Moreover, the girlfriends of the protagonist are not very complex characters and their role is to give their best friend helpful relationship advice. However, in *Lady Bird*, the spectator gets to know Julie, and her dreams and desires are straightforwardly presented. In an interview with Refinery29, Beanie Feldstein stated: "that is what is so brilliant about Greta's script. You could make a whole film about Julie, about Danny, about Kyle, about Father Leviathan. Every person that orbits around Lady Bird is so full feeling." Unlike other coming-of-age films in which the focus is on the protagonist's perspective and the rest of the characters seem to be just a backdrop that

has little or no relevance, in *Lady Bird* these two best friends encapsulate the meaning of sorority by admiring and helping each other, which makes their friendship look more authentic.

Lady Bird and Julie hold all kinds of conversations, not just the established chat on their love interests, and it seems like there is not a taboo topic they cannot discuss. This connection reaches its peak when Lady Bird asks Julie to go to prom with her. This event has very strong connotations since in coming-of-age films belonging to the teen category, attending prom is portrayed as the ultimate symbol of a successful relationship between the protagonist and the boy she has a crush on. *Never Been Kissed* (Raja Gosnell, 1999) or *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999) are some instances of typical prom treatment in coming-of-age films. Nevertheless, in this movie, Lady Bird and Julie choose each other as dance partners, thus turning the situation into an opportunity to have fun together and to challenge traditional stereotypes. In this event, there are different shots over the course of the dance that show the contrast between them and all the couples that have attended the celebration. They slow dance and take photos together, and their bond is presented as genuine and able to resist their confrontations.



Figure 14: Lady Bird and Julie slow dance together, theirs is a genuine friendship

Even though Lady Bird's relationships with boys do not take up as much onscreen space as the one she has with her mother and her best friend, she learns some lessons from them, and that helps her personal growth. The first boy she falls in love with is Danny, who is based on Connor Mickiewicz, a long-standing friend from Greta Gerwig. Danny is Lady Bird's first boyfriend and, because of that, there are many moments in which they look innocent while learning how a romantic relationship works. Danny appears to be the perfect boyfriend: he respects her, listens to what she says and his grandmother lives in Lady Bird's dream house, but, like the rest of the teenagers appearing in this film, Danny has his own concerns, the main of them being his real sexual orientation. After finding out her boyfriend is homosexual, Lady Bird experiences the first heartbreak of her life, a common event found in coming-of-age films.

If Danny encapsulates the idea of the perfect boyfriend, Lady Bird's second boyfriend is the very opposite. Her relationship with Kyle is relevant because she has her first sexual encounter with him and that contributes to dismantling the traditional concept of virginity loss. Lady Bird expected this moment to be a massive step towards her achievement of maturity, but it is a rather disappointing experience for her. The short duration of the sexual encounter contrasts sharply with the length of the scene since it is the longest of the movie. The mystification of the "first time" has created a very concrete idea in Lady Bird's mind of its meaning and consequences and the standards it must meet. However, nothing goes according to expectations: her nose starts bleeding all of a sudden, she finds out Kyle has lied about not having had sex before, he shows no empathy towards her and she ends up being really upset. The idea of the loss of virginity that Lady Bird had in mind was the one that is presented in

coming-of-age films, that serves as a way of strengthening the relationship between the members of the couple, but here there is a reversal since Lady Bird and Kyle break up shortly after their sexual encounter.

It is highly telling that the two most romantic gestures in *Lady Bird* happen between the protagonist and her mother and the protagonist and her best friend, and do not involve Danny nor Kyle. This is so because they also contribute to dismantling the stereotypical acts of love appearing in coming-of-age films. On the one hand, Lady Bird shows up at Julie's house and asks her to go to prom with her, a moment that has been previously discussed. On the other hand, Marion does a U-turn to go back to the airport and say goodbye to her daughter before she leaves, which is a trope that appears at the end of many romantic films. However, this time it is a mother and not a boy, the one who comes back. It is a deeply emotional scene since Marion regrets her decision of not talking to her daughter even though she is hurt because Lady Bird has decided to apply for universities behind her back. Her need to leave their mother-daughter problems aside for a moment and hug her child one last time shows the pure and unconditional love she feels for her daughter. However, as it happened with her tailoring of Lady Bird's dress, this act of love is only noticeable for the audience and her husband (Tracy Letts) since Lady Bird has already passed the airport security checkpoint.



Figure 15: Moment in which Marion makes a U-Turn to say goodbye to Lady Bird

## 4. Conclusion

After analyzing the aspects that make *Lady Bird* a subversive coming-of-age film, it becomes clearer that Greta Gerwig's vision is key for overturning clichés and stereotypes. Even though the film is not entirely based on the writer-director's personal experiences, there are some similarities between aspects of her life and situations that take place in *Lady Bird* that contribute to creating an atmosphere of authenticity. The protagonist of the film experiences a series of changes that are key for her development, and Gerwig focuses on how they help to shape Lady Bird. Since every character appearing in this movie is, in the words of Beanie Feldstein, very "full feeling", they are all paramount in Lady Bird's process of maturation. Teenage relationships are explored and presented as complex and full of nuances, which contrasts with the approach that is taken in many other coming-of-age movies that have been mentioned throughout this undergraduate dissertation. The fact that the two most romantic gestures happen between the protagonist and her mother and the protagonist and her best friend highlights the director's opinion on the role of female bonds. *Lady Bird* is a love letter to Sacramento, and this city, with which the protagonist has a love-hate relationship, acts as yet another character in the film. It has a very strong influence on Lady Bird, even though it takes her a long time to stop being ashamed of this place and starting to value it. Therefore, *Lady Bird* is a milestone in Greta Gerwig's movie career since, in her directorial debut and first solo writing project film, she addresses two topics that will be key in her filmmaking style. On the one hand, the struggles of a female protagonist, who is growing up, and on the other hand, the profound influence of the mother-daughter relationship on the personal development of female characters. In conclusion, *Lady Bird* exemplifies the beginning of Greta

Gerwig's signature directorial style and her intention to create realistic characters with whom spectators can identify that defy the conventions of the coming-of-age subgenre.

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