

## The Volatility of Being a Woman:

Sarah Treem's *When We Were Young and Unafraid* and Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*

The relationship between mother and daughter is historically a volatile one, exacerbated as the daughter grows up. The time categorized as “coming-of-age” (any time between the ages of 14 and 18 in the artistic canon) is especially so, the pair butting heads as daughter learns who she wants to be and mother learns who she is without the reliance of her much-loved child. It's a relationship that's been explored in fiction for decades, picking up pace as misogyny relinquished enough hold on the artistic community to allow more female-identifying writers a voice. That progression has led to some wondrous female coming-of-age stories: Sarah Treem's *When We Were Young and Unafraid* and Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* are but two of the newfound canon. They've already solidified their place as two of the best. Though presented in vastly different mediums (that of conventional theatrical proscenium versus unconventional indie film), the two works share powerful statements on mothers and daughters, the inevitable generation gap, the many shades of feminism, and what it's like to come of age as a woman.

The emphasis on the mother-daughter generational gap is seen immediately in Treem's play. As Ben Brantley notes for *The New York Times*, “The dialogue that opens the play...sounds like a classic generation gap conversation between a clueless mom and her restless daughter” (Brantley). 50-something Agnes and her daughter, 16-year-old Penny, are discussing an event that often appears in coming-of-age tales: that of America's romanticized prom. Agnes is on the affirmative, telling a resistant Penny that she “just [doesn't] want you to miss it, that's all. I missed my own prom. I always regretted it” (Treem 8). Penny has a reply at the ready, stating, “That's because you grew up in a time where women measured their self-worth by their desirability. I am, happily, free of that patriarchal oppression and do not need to attend some sort of bastardized summer solstice ritual, where I am paraded around like a sheep, in order to absolve myself for having a vagina” (Treem 8-9). Immediately, the audience is let in on the rift between mother and daughter. Some of it is simply growing pains and identity and ideology exploration, yes, but Penny's fight is slightly ironic, in the sense that Agnes has fully instilled it in her. Agnes is a

single mother, a strong, opinionated ex-nurse who runs a shelter for battered women disguised as a bed and breakfast; Penny, “having witnessed the results of domestic violence her entire life, has absorbed her share of feminist rhetoric” (THR Staff). In her effort to help women in the sexist society surrounding Second Wave feminism of the 1970s, Agnes has ingrained, within her daughter, a sort of stubborn mistrust that she never intended. It worries the mother and aggravates the daughter, creating a generational gap that seems unbridgeable.

A similar situation occurs in Greta Gerwig’s *Lady Bird*. As Alissa Wilkinson writes for *Vox*, “The movie’s central pairing is...a mother-daughter relationship that’s drawn with rare sensitivity. Marion’s awareness of her family’s money struggles spills over into almost every conversation with her daughter...she’s clearly terrified that *Lady Bird* will look down on her parents. But *Lady Bird* doesn’t care all that much about the money...she’s worried that her mom simply doesn’t like her very much” (Wilkinson). Within this relationship is seen a typical generational struggle: the supporter versus the supported. Marion is engulfed in very real financial strife, working endless doubles to support her family after her husband loses his job, concerned about giving her children a roof over their head. She does not want her daughter to see her as less than in any way. *Lady Bird* is dealing with adolescent insecurities and the usual fears of graduating high school and heading into the big, wide world. She has collegiate aspirations miles away from her hometown of Sacramento; her only monetary concern is how it will affect her plan to escape to New York City. Her mother’s stressed snapping merely exacerbates *Lady Bird*’s insecurities, causing her to lash out, as well. Similar to Treem’s play, the audience is let in on Marion and *Lady Bird*’s dynamic with immediacy. In the opening sequence, upon driving back from a college visit, *Lady Bird* and her mother get into a squabble about what school she will attend. Both women’s insecurities are in full force. *Lady Bird* says, after becoming irritated with her mother, “I don’t even want to go to school in this state anyway, I hate California” (Gerwig 2). Marion protests, bringing up their inability to pay for East Coast schooling, eventually getting mad enough to snap, “The way you *don’t* work, you’re not even *worth* state tuition” (Gerwig 4). They’ve both stabbed into each other’s weak points of insecurity, only moments after crying together through *The Grapes of Wrath*. The pair’s

dynamic is established with only a few lines, a classic generation gap “informed by fear of the unknown and begrudging expressions of affection” (Wloszczyna).

The play and the film continue to parallel each other in their portrayals of mothers and daughters. Agnes and Penny’s relationship is strained by the arrival of another domestic abuse survivor, Mary Anne. Mary Anne provides an entirely new viewing of the world for the latter; Penny, accustomed to seeing the horrors of abuse and hearing ravings against misogynistic men, is not at all prepared for Mary Anne to say, “They’re not all like John” (Treem 30). As noted by the *Hollywood Reporter*, though Penny is “a smart young woman determined to carve out a life beyond the roles traditionally assigned to her gender,” she is “still an impressionable youth” (THR Staff). Mary Anne’s lingering love for her abusive husband and knowledge of flirtation and sex intrigue Penny, who has never had a romantic partner: as she tells Mary Anne, “I just don’t want to risk it” (Treem 30). She quickly changes her tune, though, as Mary Anne eggs her on in the pursuit of her football player crush. Penny transforms from the ambitious young woman the audience first meets—determined to be one of the first classes of women at Yale, which became coeducational in 1968—to becoming wrapped up in a flurry of young lust, lying to her mother, skipping school, and running away to be with her lover in California. Her identity shifts so much, in fact, that she later confesses, “I don’t want to go to college. I’m tired of being smart. It just makes everyone hate you” (Treem 92).

This drastic transformation sends Agnes into a protective fury, as one can imagine. At first, she simply assumes that Penny is involved in a teenage affair, as many are, and is simply envious of Mary Anne’s maternal involvement. However, when Penny reveals she is skipping class to be with her new man, and that she has lost her virginity in a bout of unprotected sex, Agnes’s envy turns to rage. Unable to convince Penny herself of the slippery slope of truancy and unsafe relationships, she turns to Mary Anne with a biting: “Do you want her to end up like you? Tell her what [your husband] did to you” (Treem 103). The ensuing fight results in Penny hitchhiking to San Francisco, horrified by the graphic descriptions she has just heard and unable to find another coping mechanism. Though one could rightfully argue that part of this separation is the result of revealing the true dangers of the world, a good portion of

it is clearly from the mother-daughter dynamic. Agnes is protective of her daughter, determined to make Penny into a victor instead of a victim. Penny wants to experience the world outside of small Whidbey Island, unable to discern her beliefs until she does. Mary Anne's presence simply reveals and exacerbates these polarized viewpoints.

Though *Lady Bird* is not as graphic or politicized as *When We Were Young and Unafraid*, the general sentiment remains the same. The protagonist's very name—Lady Bird—is an illustration of the complex relationship between mother and daughter. Lady Bird is not her birth name; it is one she chose for herself, telling her drama professor, “I gave it to myself. It's given. To me, by me” (Gerwig 18). Her mother disagrees, in a recurrent refrain of, “It's ridiculous. Your name is Christine” (Gerwig 4). As Richard Brody notes for *The New Yorker*, “[Lady Bird's] fierce struggle to be called by this name is the struggle over what she got from, or is given by, her parents” (Brody). Much as Penny is deciphering what her mother has given her outside of feminist rhetoric and a dark view of the outside world, Lady Bird is trying to find her own identity within what her mother and father have provided her with. Christine doesn't fit her bohemian persona, complete with a Kool-Aid dye job and a nerdy sidekick, so Lady Bird it must be. She rebels against her modest upbringing in ways reminiscent of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* or *Sex Education*: attempting to distance herself from who she grew up as, utilizing her senior year to figure out who she is apart from her parents. Lady Bird loses herself in a series of unsuccessful flings and substance experimentation.

This leads to several explosive fights with Marion, running parallel to Agnes and Penny's, punctuated with moments of comfort and love. The film bounces back and forth between the two with effective, realistic swiftness. When thrift shopping for a Thanksgiving dress, in the midst of an argument about not being with family and dragging one's feet, Lady Bird pulls out an eclectic pink number that has both mother and daughter oohing over it, a fantastic bout of comedic timing. When Lady Bird has just been broken up with by the young man she lost her virginity to, Marion is right there, though the two have been fighting, to hold her while she cries and take her out to look at homes for sale, their favorite pastime. Between the two aforementioned instances, there is a pivotal fight in which Marion, frustrated by

Lady Bird's bad grades and truancy problem, snappishly asks her how much she thinks it costs to raise her. Lady Bird replies, "You give me a number for how much it cost to raise me, and I'm going to get older and make a lot of money and write you a check for what I owe you so that *I never have to speak to you again*" (Gerwig 74). It is a moment seen often in fights between parents and their young adult children, money woes combining with insecurities and opposing viewpoints to create a mess of anger. Unfortunately, this one seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy within the film.

Throughout *Lady Bird*, Lady Bird has been applying to East Coast schools with her father's help, keeping the entire thing from her mother for fear of angering her. It is revealed only after she gets waitlisted for an unidentified college in New York City, and a friend of hers blurts out congratulations at dinner. After that, Marion gives Lady Bird a devastating cold shoulder. This painful rift is illustrated most profoundly in a close-up sequence of the two, Lady Bird trying to speak to a mute mother, growing more desperate and tearful as she continues: "Mom. Mom. Aren't you sort of proud that I'm so close to getting in? Just a little? Please, Mom, please, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you – I appreciate everything you've done for me, I'm ungrateful and I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry I wanted more...TALK TO ME! MOM! MOM! PLEASE! TALK TO ME. I know, I know, I know I'm so bad, just please! PLEASE" (Gerwig 100). The lack of speech or forgiveness continues on Marion's part until the very end, when she declines to go into the airport to see Lady Bird off to New York. The following sequence, of Marion sobbing in her car as she drives away, is one of the most poignant illustrations of mother-daughter dynamics in the film: a love that doesn't waver, in spite of anger and betrayal; a love that makes its owner stubborn enough to not show it.

Both duos—Agnes and Penny, Marion and Lady Bird—have resolution, though. Treem and Gerwig aren't so cruel as to leave their audiences with uncertainty and parental pain. Both play and film end in similar fashions: with a return to love. Penny comes back to the Island after attempting the San Francisco trip, realizing both that the dangerous life is not for her and that she needs her mother. Her final line to Agnes is, simply, "Will you wake me tomorrow, in time for school?" (Treem 122). Penny's query and Agnes's nod symbolize forgiveness, love, and a return to safety and identity. Both have realized that

they need the other. *Lady Bird*, on the other hand, ends with a phone call. Lady Bird calls her mother from New York, the final monologue of the film comprised of poetics on family and home: “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 112). She is wordier than Penny, but she says essentially the same thing. It is love. It is forgiveness. It is family.

Within the heartfelt stories of both *When We Were Young and Unafraid* and *Lady Bird*, there are powerful political statements on womanhood and identity. Both works take place in pivotal historical moments: the former during Second Wave feminism of the 1970s (*Roe v. Wade* had just been decided); the latter shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Though Treem’s play adopts its historical setting with a more explicit hand, both she and Gerwig utilize their moments in time as background noise affecting their characters. Throughout the film, the audience often sees news reports of the towers falling and its aftermath, *Lady Bird* even mentioning it at one point; throughout the play, several characters (notably womynist Hannah) spark discussions on feminist rhetoric. Regardless, both discuss what being a woman is like, and both touch on feminism in their own way.

Treem is more overt in her addressing. In fact, it is the entire point of her play. As Brantley states, the playwright “finds the feminist flux and foment in an era that has in recent years been more traditionally presented as comically quaint and awkward” (Brantley). Each female character—Agnes, Penny, Mary Anne, and Hannah—is there to provide a different feminist view, near-archetypes in how they’re presented. The *Hollywood Reporter* notes that “[Agnes’s] mission to provide a refuge is informed less by politicized views than by an innate caregiver instinct and a fundamental understanding of the traps awaiting women in unhealthy relationships” (THR Staff). That understanding has led Penny to be the feminist discussed earlier in this analysis. Mary Anne is a well-humanized representation of both the traditional housewife and why domestic abuse victims have a difficult time escaping. As she tells Agnes, “Leaving him is the hardest thing I have ever had to do. I did it and I’m never going back but *I still love him*” (Treem 112). Hannah represents the extreme feminist, abiding by the teachings of Ti-Grace

Atkinson's political lesbianism: "The only hope we have for gender parity is to live as the separate species," (Treem 116) she says. Within this four-way polarity is thrown the token man, Paul, for the male perspective, though he only appears in random moments to sing a little ditty or provide exclamations for the women's views (frankly, the piece would lose nothing without him). In short, *When We Were Young and Unafraid* is largely a philosophical piece, composed of Treem's own musings on feminism and attempting to inspire feminist query among her hopefully diverse audiences. While this writer loves seeing debate occur onstage, the lack of physical action and amplitude of in-the-mouth acting, as it were, is a possible trap of the piece. Treem's characters are given meandering monologues about their political ideologies, causing the play to drag at times, especially if not placed in the mouths of highly capable actors. It may feel like a soapbox play, if one is not careful.

*Lady Bird* holds no danger of dragging. Logistically speaking, Gerwig and cinematographer Sam Levy ensure audience attention simply by their use of quick cuts, unconventional framing, and choppy close-ups, crafting the feel of an indie film. That feel translates well both to and from (as it is, indeed, a relationship of cinematic ouroboros) the script, containing the same eclecticism of Penny's ramblings in a more-absorbable format. *Lady Bird*'s feminism is inherent to the film, not explicit. It is in Lady Bird's inability to accept the bare minimum. It is in her sexual inexperience not stopping her from experimentation. It is her dismissing and denying the judgement of her Catholic high school. It is in her ambition to get to the East Coast and find herself. It's even in her defense of her mom after her first boyfriend accuses Marion of being too harsh, saying, "She loves me a lot" (Gerwig 32). Coming out of a time with few female directors and even fewer female stories, this protagonist is a breath of fresh air, feminism without being suffocative. Lady Bird is ambitious, loud, evocative, insecure, stubborn, and deeply flawed, as is her mother. Instead of being the femme fatale or the helpless damsel, both take life into their own hands. By simply showing the coming-of-age story of a young woman, Gerwig is giving her audience a feminist piece. It is, notes Susan Wloszczyna, "the energy that drives one of the more accomplished female-led coming-of-age tales since the Golden Age of John Hughes" (Wloszczyna).

Both *When We Were Young and Unafraid* and *Lady Bird* are touching stories of womanhood, of feminism, of mothers and daughters, and of growing up. However, this writer would argue that *Lady Bird* is ultimately more successful. Treem, as noted, tends towards soapbox speeches instead of simply letting the audience grasp and understand the stance of each character themselves. Agnes, Penny, and Mary Anne, specifically, are well-crafted characters, with meaningful back stories and strong characteristics. They shouldn't need political monologues to get across their meaning; they just need to be. Gerwig understands that, and allows *Lady Bird* and Marion's existence to do all the talking. The story contains all the politicization and rhetoric one needs, enveloped in a heartstring-pulling tale of love and forgiveness in the midst of growing up. Treem would have done well to do the same. It's understandable that she wants her musings and queries to be understood, but it is far more effective to live them instead of tell them. The opposite may be off-putting to some audiences.

In short, familial relationships—especially that of mothers and daughters—are difficult. Add political viewpoints, ideological and identity exploration, feminism, and the trappings of coming-of-age into that, and the environment becomes ever rockier. Sarah Treem's *When We Were Young and Unafraid* and Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* illustrate that beautifully: two women telling the story of what it's like to be a woman.

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