Essay: *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*

## *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*, Directed by Lasse Hallström and released in 1993, deals with the issues and struggles of both typical and atypical family life. A young man, Gilbert Grape, played by a young Johnny Depp, must take care of his two sisters, autistic brother, and morbidly obese mother after his father’s suicide. An analysis of Lasse Hallström’s *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* reveals Hallström’s auteurist style, demonstrates his ability to develop secondary characters and effect how the audience responds to those characters, and reveals how filmmaking aspects such as camerawork, editing, and sound design affect the audience’s reception of a specific scene within the film.

## Timothy Corrigan, author of *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, describes an auteur study as a comparison of the works of a dominant figure, mainly a director or major star, which“[imply] that the unifying vision behind what you see on the screen is the director’s and that there are certain common themes and stylistic traits that link films by the same filmmaker” (Corrigan 85). An auteur study of Lasse Hallström, a Swedish director, reveals that he focuses his attention on character-driven stories that deal with both emotion and the struggles of life. In Katarina Lindell Voll’s article “Lasse Hallström: Making a Career with Films That Touch,” Voll quotes Hallström saying: “It seems like every film I make has interesting character performances and observations of human behavior…I am not usually interested in plot-written stories, because they seem to sacrifice characters for the plot” (Voll).

Hallström often adapts character-driven books into movies. He has worked with the author Nicholas Sparks twice, in *Safe Haven* (2013) and *Dear John* (2010). These films focus on relational struggle, such as the father and son in *Dear John* and the woman and her abusive husband in *Safe Haven*, and family drama, such as with the man and his wife, qwho has passed away due to cancer, in *Safe Haven*. These films also demonstrate how human beings deal with tragedy. *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* (Hallström 1993) was also based on the novel written by Peter Hedges. Gilbert Grape has to wrestle between what he wants for himself, a relationship with a new girl in town, and the responsibility he feels he owes to take care of his family. These three films are just a sample of the many films that Hallström has infused with both a gritty and sentimental view of life and human behavior.

Though the film focuses mostly on Gilbert Grape and how he deals with the responsibilities and issues in his life, the secondary characters are also fully developed and are not objectified. This is most evident with Gilbert’s mentally challenged brother, Arnie, played by a young Leonardo DiCaprio, and his mother, Bonnie, played by Darlene Cates. Hallström presents the characters as both caring and misunderstood, and he in turn makes the audience care for Arnie and Bonnie rather than just using them for their flaws: a mental disorder and morbid obesity. The editors of *Another Disability Studies Reader?: People with Learning Difficulties and a Disabling World* say, “By putting characters with disabilities at the center of a story, filmmakers would both enlighten neurotypical viewers about the differences and similarities of life with a developmental disability, and allow audience members with developmental disabilities an opportunity to view themselves as dynamically involved in character development” (130). Arnie is loved by his family because of his spirit and not just because they are related. Arnie’s siblings play hide-and-seek with him, Gilbert takes Arnie to work with him, and Gilbert also gives him baths. Arnie can’t help but be happy and loving to everyone that he meets though most people react poorly to his “unacceptable behavior.” Hallström uses others negative treatment of Arnie as a way to reach the audience. However, Hallström prevents the audience feeling only pity for Arnie because Arnie is also loved and cared for. Even though Arnie doesn’t usually listen when it comes to things like climbing the water tower in town, anyone who really knows Arnie, like his family, Gilbert’s boss, and Gilbert’s love interest, love Arnie because he ultimately has a gentle heart.

Hallström presents Gilbert’s mother, Bonnie, in a similar light. However, unlike Arnie, it takes until the end of the film for the audience to really connect with Bonnie’s character. Gilbert returns home to Arnie’s birthday party after angrily punching his brother and fleeing the night before. After he reconciles with his brother, Gilbert goes into the house to apologize to his mother. At first, Bonnie scolds him just as she does throughout the beginning of the film. However, she then expresses how worried she was when Gilbert left and asks him why he came back. This question is pivotal to Hallström’s development of Bonnie’s character, because in this question, she lets the audience know that she understands how hard she has been on Gilbert as well as the responsibility that has been placed on his shoulders after her husband’s suicide. She even says, “I can’t imagine how it’s been for you kids. I know what a burden I am.” It is evident that her confession to Gilbert is the first time that she has really been able to open up and acknowledge the pain she has been feeling. This instance really lets the audience, who has been struggling to understand why the kids have put up with their mother, admit that she really does have a sensitive heart and love for her children. She no longer seems cruel or favoring to her youngest son, Arnie. Rather, she becomes someone that the audience can accept and love, even with her flaws.

The sound design, camerawork, and editing are crucial within the film to convey significance and meaning. One of the most emotionally provocative scenes in *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* is Bonnie’s return to the car after retrieving her son, Arnie, from the police station. The camerawork is so essential because it helps the audience sympathize with Bonnie. The editing is then an extension of the camerawork and the tension that is being conveyed to the audience. The first image in the scene is of Arnie running out of the precinct. He holds up his hand and waves. A wide reverse shot reveals what he is waving to as he runs down the steps. An audience is gathering around the street to see Bonnie, who hasn’t left her house in years. Another reverse shot shows Bonnie exiting the precinct as the smile disappears from her face. A point of view shot then pans to reveal even more of a crowd gathering. This camera work is already setting up the tone of the scene and creates a feeling of anxiety for what will happen next. This feeling is only increased as the editing elongates the walk that Bonnie must take to the car. Images of the crowd taking pictures, laughing, and whispering are alternated with the reactions of Bonnie, her two daughters, and Gilbert. The constant cutting of these images lengthens the distance between Bonnie and the car. This builds tension for the audience and makes the scene painful to witness. The camerawork and editing allow the audience to be separated from the gathering crowd and feel sympathy for Bonnie in addition to putting the audience in Bonnie’s place.

As important as the camerawork and editing are to the significance of the scene, the sound design is just as essential. At first, there is only silence and the sound of Arnie’s footsteps as he runs from the station. Slowly, the audience starts to hear the sounds of snickering and the clicking of a bike’s tires as more people come to see Bonnie. Bonnie’s heavy footsteps are prominently audible as she shuffles towards the family’s car. The audience hears a young girl say, “That’s why she needs a cane!” and as more people talk and laugh louder, a sad piano melody quietly starts to play. At this point, the audience has already felt Bonnie’s pain and humiliation and the music only further expresses Bonnie’s sadness and defeat which grows along with the crowd.

Lasse Hallström was ultimately successful stylistically and thematically, as he is in many of his other films, in conveying a message that allowed the audience to relate and empathize with many of the characters’ struggles and flaws. Though he doesn’t always side with his characters, he makes them real and believable by providing them with challenges that reveal the good and bad within them. Hallström’s work with the script and actors as well as other aspects of filmmaking allow the characters to be attainable and relatable to the audience even though they deal with issues, such as obesity and mental disorders, that the audience may not have experience with.

Works Cited

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