



What's Eating Gilbert Grape

Study Guide: Sean Molony

What's Eating Gilbert Grape

Cast

Gilbert Grape	<i>Johnny Depp</i>
Arnie Grape	<i>Leonardo Di Caprio</i>
Becky	<i>Juliette Lewis</i>
Betty Carver	<i>Mary Steen Burgen</i>
Momma	<i>Darleen Cates</i>
Amy	<i>Laura Harrington</i>
Ellen	<i>Mary Kate Schellhardt</i>
Tucker	<i>John C. Reilly</i>
Bobby	<i>Crispin Glover</i>
Mr. Carver	<i>Kevin Tighe</i>

Crew

Director Of Photography	<i>Sven Nykvist</i>
Editor	<i>Andrew Monshein</i>
Music	<i>Alan Parker, Bjorn Isfalt</i>
Production Design	<i>Bernt Capra</i>
Costumes	<i>Renee Ehrlich Kalfus</i>
Screenplay	<i>Peter Hedges</i>
Producers	<i>Meir Teper, Bertil Ohlsson, David Matalon</i>
Director	<i>Lasse Hallstrom</i>

Lasse Hallström

Lasse Hallstrom began filmmaking at the tender age of ten, with an 8mm ten minute adventure entitled 'The Ghost Thief'. After highschool, Hallstrom spent ten years making short fillers for Swedish TV – usually writing, directing and editing his own projects. He trained as a producer, and the ensuing popularity of his TV projects enabled him to make his feature length directorial debut with 'A Guy and a Gal' (1975), a light hearted romantic comedy that depicted a young couple's relationship. In 1977, he made 'Abba:The Movie', a concert film featuring the Swedish supergroup. After the Oscar-nominated 'My Life As A Dog' (1985), Hallstrom remained in Sweden, making various childrens' movies, to much commercial success. His American feature debut came with the film 'Once Around' in 1991, a family comedy-drama set in Boston and starring Holly Hunter and Richard Dreyfuss; 'What's Eating Gilbert Grape' was made in 1993 and while it failed to become a massive commercial hit, remains one of Hallstrom's best regarded pieces of work. Hallstrom has since found critical acclaim with films such as 'The Cider House Rules', 'Chocolat' and most recently, 'The Shipping News.'

Selected Filmography

The Shipping News (2001)
 Chocolat (2000)
 The Cider House Rules (1999)
 Lumière and Company (1995)
 Something to Talk About *aka* Grace Under Pressure (1995)
 What's Eating Gilbert Grape (1992)
 Once Around (1991)
 The Children of Noisy Village (1986)
 Mitt liv som hund *aka* My Life as a Dog (1985)
 ABBA: The Movie (1977)

Introduction

Based on Peter Hedges novel, Lasse Halstrom's 1992 film 'What's Eating Gilbert Grape' details a complex family situation in which parental responsibility has been assumed by the eldest son, following the suicide of his father.

The youth, Gilbert, has the added difficulties of a mentally disabled brother and a grossly overweight mother to take care of. Family loyalty and guilt battle the desire of Gilbert to leave his home town and move on, creating the dramatic tension in this film. The film also boasts brave performances by Leonardo Di Caprio as the disabled Arnie Grape and Darlene Cates as the Mother. Johnny Depp continues his search for unusual vehicles for his acting talents in his role as Gilbert.

Both quirky and moving, the film is strong on characterisation and gives a powerful portrayal of life in small-town America, showing how an individual can become trapped in order to provide for the needs of others.

'What's Eating Gilbert Grape'

dir. Lasse Halstrom, USA, 1992, 118 mins

The Story

Gilbert and his younger brother Arnie are waiting by the side of the road. Arnie is mentally handicapped. A convoy of camper vans comes down the road. Arnie cheers them on. It is their yearly ritual to watch the camper vans pass them by. One camper has broken down. It is owned by a woman and her grand-daughter, Becky. Gilbert lives just outside a small town called Endora. He lives in a large wooden house, built by his father. It is Gilbert's job to maintain the repairs to the house. Amy, his older sister, does the cooking. Ellen is his younger, vain sister. Gilbert takes care of Arnie, who was not expected to live past the age of ten. It is one week before his eighteenth birthday. The children tend to their beloved obese mother, who has not left the house since the death of their father.

Gilbert works in Lansoms grocery store. The owner complains of the competition he is getting from the new superstore, Foodland, which has opened outside the town. Gilbert assures his boss that he would rather die than set foot inside the new store. His brother Arnie stays with him while he works. Gilbert is called upon to make a delivery to Betty Carver, a married woman with whom Gilbert is having a risky affair. He tells Arnie to wait in the truck. Their dalliances are interrupted when Betty's husband arrives home unexpectedly. Mr. Carver tips Gilbert and asks him to call around to his office during the week to have a serious talk. Gilbert goes to leave, but Arnie is not in the truck.

Arnie has climbed up the water tower that stands in the centre of the town. A crowd gathers to watch as Arnie climbs higher. The police are on the scene - this is a regular occurrence. Gilbert manages to coax Arnie down. Becky arrives with her grandmother - they are in town to try and find a spare part to repair the camper. Becky sees how Gilbert deals with Arnie. The police warn Gilbert, that if this happens again, they will have to take Arnie away for his own safety. Gilbert makes a delivery to Becky, to a site outside of town, where they are camped for the week.

Gilbert has two friends; Tucker, who helps with the repairs to the house and who dreams of owning a fast food franchise; and Bobby, who has a funeral business. Whilst carrying out repairs on the house with Tucker, Gilbert allows one of the town's children to peek at his obese mother, sitting on the couch. Tucker is disappointed at Gilbert's callousness. At dinner-time, Amy and Gilbert haul the dinner table into the open plan living room where their mother lives. They try to plan Arnie's birthday party. Gilbert fights with his younger sister Ellen. She taunts him in return. With this, Arnie has a fit. This greatly upsets their mother, who stamps the floor in frustration. Gilbert notices the floor shaking. The floor under the couch has become unstable, due to the enormous weight of their mother. Gilbert and his sisters watch from a distance, as their mother sits on the couch, causing further strain on the already ailing floorboards. Amy suggests to her mother that she spend that night in her bedroom upstairs. Mother declines, preferring instead to watch television from the couch. Gilbert secretly calls



his friend Tucker to assess the situation – they are worried that the floor will give way underneath the weight. Tucker points out that the floor was never built to withstand such weight. They smuggle in some wood to reinforce the floor from the basement but it is very heavy and they need help. Gilbert asks Arnie for help in sliding the wood into the basement. Arnie declines, saying that his father is down in the basement. Tucker had forgotten that their father has hung himself in the basement.

At home again, unpacking groceries, Gilbert's sister Amy points out that Arnie needs more care than Gilbert can provide. Gilbert, feeling trapped, drives off. He goes to Becky. They eat and talk into the evening. Gilbert shows Becky his house from a distance, and speaks of his mother. As the sun goes down, Gilbert remembers his duty to Arnie, and leaves Becky to bathe his brother. He leaves Arnie in the bath and returns to Becky. He spends the rest of the evening with her and it is late when he drops her home. The following morning, Gilbert finds Arnie still in the bath. His mother chastises him for neglecting Arnie.

At the grocery store, Gilbert is dispatched to make another delivery to Betty Carver's house. Her risky behaviour alarms Gilbert. She has called her husband at work, while Gilbert is with her. Gilbert leaves the house. He must face her husband. Mr. Carver informs Gilbert that he is drastic need of insurance, Mr. Carver's line of business. Mr. Carver then receives another call from his wife, who summons him home. Gilbert obliges him with a lift. Mr. Carver's wife has caused a minor commotion at home. Gilbert asks her why she chose him to have an affair with. She says she knew he would always remain in Endora.

At home, the birthday party draws near and Arnie has not allowed himself to be washed. Ellen, the younger sister, informs the family that Mr. Carver is dead. He has drowned in his children's paddling pool. At the café, Gilbert and his friends discuss the plausibility of foul play in the death of Mr. Carver. Becky arrives. Gilbert drives her back to her camper, with Arnie. She has bought the spare part needed to fix the camper truck. Gilbert hinders the repairs to the truck, to buy more time with Becky. Becky tries to coax Arnie to play in the nearby lake. Arnie refuses and Gilbert is coaxed in instead. Becky and Gilbert talk at length again. Once more, Arnie has disappeared. This time, he climbs

all the way up to the top of the water tower. Gilbert talks him down safely, but this time the police take him into custody. Back at home, mother decides to leave the house to retrieve her son from the police station. They arrive in town in an old car, which struggles under the weight of mother. Mother demands the return of her son, to the amusement and shock of the gathered townsfolk.

At the opening of Tuckers fast food outlet, Becky informs Gilbert that she must leave the following day. She asks to meet with his mother. He refuses - they part. At home again, Gilbert tries to catch Arnie, to give him a bath. Arnie knocks over the birthday cake that Amy was preparing for the party. Gilbert goes to Foodland to buy a replacement cake. His boss, Mr. Lamson sees him. That night, Arnie is caught eating the replacement cake. Gilbert drags him upstairs to the bath. Arnie fights with Gilbert. Gilbert hits Arnie. He takes off in the truck and heads out of Endora. Arnie, distressed, runs to Becky's camper. Becky tends to his wounds and suggests they go and play by the lake.

Now Gilbert has stopped the truck and pauses. He turns the truck around and makes his way to Becky's camper. There he sees Becky finally coax Arnie into the water. Gilbert watches from a distance as his sisters collect his brother from Becky. Gilbert and Arnie are reunited and stay together until morning. It is the day of Arnie's birthday. Gilbert goes home and makes his peace with Arnie. He then pledges his loyalty to his mother. Becky and her grandmother depart in their camper van.

After the party, Mother climbs that stairs to her bedroom and dies. Gilbert decides to burn the house down, with his mother inside, rather than have her ridiculed in the effort to remove her body from the house.

It is one year later. The convoy of camper vans comes down the road again. Gilbert and Arnie are reunited with Becky and her grandmother and they leave Endora behind them.

First Impressions

Your early perceptions of the film are important and you should use the points below to assess your first reaction to what you have seen.

Did you like or dislike the film? Why?

What did you think the theme of the film was?

What is your initial reaction to Gilbert? What sort of character was he?

Was the film an accurate portrayal of family life?

Context:

The Genesis of Gilbert Grape

Many writers use elements of their own life for their novels or screenplays. Peter Hedges is no exception. As writer of the novel and scriptwriter on the film, he looked at his own family for inspiration with 'What's Eating Gilbert Grape': "My Dad's weight has fluctuated. He's never been as large as Bonnie (Momma) is, but when I was a child he was a giant man and then he lost a lot of weight." Hedges suggests that there is some of the Gilbert character in himself: "My Dad did the cooking. And he did the grocery shopping and he loves food. As a child I never ate. And I was never forced to eat. I think it was my own sort of protest. Gilbert doesn't take a bite. And that, I suppose was me."

Hedges also utilised his responsibility for his brother in the work: "My brother is in no way Arnie, but he's two years younger than I am, and I was responsible for making sure that he got to where he was supposed to get... It was kind of the law that if he didn't get there, we were all at fault...it's an unfortunate way to be a child, because it's unjust, but it was how we managed."

Bonnie on the other hand, despite references to his Father, was not very evident in early versions of the story which was a theatrical vehicle for some actor friends. Hedges felt that

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this would be a character who would remain offstage: "I had to create a parent who isn't seen, but is talked about and that's when someone came up with the idea of the mother. I thought; 'we'll just have her inside all the time'."

Hedges feels the story explores the difficulty balancing act between the needs of the individual person and being part of a family unit: "How do you fulfil your individual purpose in life and yet be of a family? That's our task - to say we come from where we come, and we're composed of those who preceded us, and yet, we have to forge ahead. One of the ways to do that is to not run away. It's to stay present and to try and separate what's mine from what's theirs. And in that, there can be much dignity and much can be learned."

Why do you think writers use personal experience in their stories?

What do you think are the challenges involved in working this way?

Name some novels or films which you know are created from the authors personal experience. Read Tobias Wolfe's 'This Boy's Life' and watch the film version (which also stars Leonardo Di Caprio), and was based on Wolfe's teenage years.

Write a story based on your family life or an incident that happened to your family. Make one member the central character in the story

Relationships

Gilbert/Arnie

From the opening shot of the film, we can see the love/hate relationship that Gilbert has with his brother. The road is ahead of Gilbert, beckoning him to take it. He remains in a crouched position at the side of the road, tending to his brother's needs, offering him food, while they wait for the convoy of camper vans. At the same time, he mocks Arnie by giving him false information about how many more minutes it will take for the campers to arrive: 'Three million buddy.' In the scenes establishing his life with Arnie, he openly admits that he sometimes wishes Arnie were dead. Gilbert is however, the most qualified person to care for Arnie. When Arnie climbs the water tower, only Gilbert knows how his mind works and is thus able to coax him down with a little tune that they share as their own. Whenever Arnie climbs the tree next to the Grapes' house, Gilbert indulges him with the 'Where's Arnie' game.

Throughout the film, we see Gilbert as both a protective and harmful presence in Arnie's life. When Ellen bullies Arnie, Gilbert rushes to his defence. When he delivers the groceries to Becky, Arnie fumbles with the bags and Gilbert loses his patience but Gilbert's anxiety at Arnie's little mistakes are part of his protective instinct towards his brother.

This duty is tested more and more as he follows his heart in pursuing his relationship with Becky. He leaves Arnie alone in the bath, in the false hope that Arnie can care for himself for once. When he is with Becky at the lake, she asks him what he wants for himself out of life. He cites Arnie and the rest of his family, before he thinks of himself. Taking this time to discuss his hopes for the future, distracts him from the reality of caring for Arnie and as a result Arnie ends up in police custody for climbing the water tower again. Gilbert's patience and tolerance for his brother's condition is pushed to the limit, when he drags Arnie to the bathroom, after he has destroyed his birthday cake. Arnie resists Gilbert's demands to clean himself up and out of frustration,

Arnie hits Gilbert. Overwrought with guilt and confusion for his actions, Gilbert drives out of town. Arnie represents the weight of responsibility which Gilbert has had to absorb since his father opted out by committing suicide. Becky represents the freedom he can find if he listens to his own needs. Gilbert has to find the strength inside himself to balance both lives.

Find more instances of Gilberts protecting/harming his brother.



Can you think of other films where a man's duty to a family member is at odds with his own desire for freedom?

Gilbert/Mother

'With Momma, there's just no easy way to break it to you'.

Gilbert introduces his mother by means of an old black and white photograph on the refrigerator. He says she was the prettiest girl around in her day. The camera follows a large plate of food as it arrives at the massive figure of Momma. Gilbert uses offhand remarks against his mother. When Momma hugs Arnie after the water tower incident, Gilbert calls to her out of earshot, to let him go for fear of hurting him. We see him perform his duties to his brother, but he makes little effort to get along with his family at the dinner table.

He does not hide his shame at his Mother's obesity from his friends. While he and Tucker make repairs to the house, Gilbert helps one of the townchildren to peek at his mother through

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the window. He shows Becky where he lives, from a distance and says they cannot move because his mother is '...attached to the house...more like wedged in.' He refuses to allow Becky to see her and describes his mother as a 'beached whale'.

When the floor of the house becomes unstable, Gilbert jumps up and down to test the floorboards near his mother, before approaching her. Even as she sleeps, he mocks her with the television remote -control, waking her when he turns it off and putting her back to sleep with the on button. The repairs to the floorboards in the basement represent a mockery of her.

The turning point for Gilbert, in the way he perceives his mother, comes when after seven years, Momma leaves the house to rescue her son from the police station. Gilbert drives her and the family into town. He runs ahead of her to try and get his brother released. When his efforts fail, he steps aside, as his mother comes bellowing into the station. He is afraid to be near her. He watches with his sisters, as the gathered townspeople stare and laugh at their mother. That night, at the dinner table, when more children come to stare at their mother, Ellen throws a potato at them. Gilbert approves of this, wanting to defend his mother.

At Arnie's birthday party, Gilbert comes to terms with his feelings for his mother. Momma apologises for the way she has become. Gilbert no longer sees her as an embarrassment and a hindrance and hugs her in an act of reconciliation. She allows him to bring Becky to the house to meet her. His love for his mother is no longer in doubt. When she dies in her bed, her family fear more ridicule, in the spectacle of removing her body from the house. Gilbert smashes the supports of the floorboards and pledges he will not allow her to become a joke. They remove all their belongings from the house and set it alight. Gilbert would rather destroy his home than have a spectacle made of his mother. They cremate their mother with dignity.

Point out what scenes in the film Gilbert shows his unease with his mother's weight.

Why does Gilbert use humour when dealing with his mother?

Do you think Gilbert's mother retains more dignity by being cremated in the house than having a funeral service?

Casting

When putting together a project for filming, a producer often offers well known actors central roles, in order to encourage financiers or studios to fund the prospective project. Creating this 'package' - attractive enough for investors - is a central consideration as a project is being prepared. Obviously major stars sign on to projects if they are attracted to the role, they receive adequate fees and they, the producer and director feel they will be suitable. More minor or general roles in a production are cast by a Casting Director

Some actors may have to 'read' for the part i.e. have an audition to assess their abilities for the role they may play. For '...Gilbert Grape', Leonardo Di Caprio attended an audition for the role of Arnie. Lasse Halstrom was immediately taken with him: "I thought we needed somebody who wasn't good looking, but Leonardo's abilities were there in the first audition. All the actors who were auditioning for the role had watched the same tape of a retarded boy. Leonardo was the only one who picked up on the essentials, the body mannerisms and integrated them. He was the most observant."

Casting for the role of Momma was always going to prove difficult. Darlene Cates, who eventually got the role, tells us: "I was a member of a support group called TOPS (Taking Pounds Off Sensibly) and the producers of the Sally Jesse Raphael Show called the TOPS national headquarters and said they were doing a show about fat women who didn't want to leave their home, and they'd like somebody who was still trying to deal with their weight." With a few misgivings Cates went to New York to appear on the show. The writer Peter Hedges saw the show, taped it and brought the



copy to Sweeden to the director. Hedges recalls Hallstrom's reaction: "When he saw Cates on tape, he started to cry because he said that she was a grown woman, and yet, there was a quality about her that was almost like a little girl. That really appealed to him."

You're hired to recast a new version of '...Gilbert Grape'. Chose a group of new actors in the central roles of Gilbert, Arnie and Becky.

You're making a film about your family. Cast a group of actors to play each different part.

Find the meaning of the following terms: 'typecasting' and 'typage'

Improvisation

Directors and actors sometimes like to improvise scenes in theatre or on film. Improvisation means acting without a rehearsal or script. The aim in doing this is to get a more naturalistic or spontaneous feel to the scene. In this process, actors will be required to take on behavioural characteristics, create dialogue and follow the mood of the situation as it develops.

John C. Reilly, who plays Tucker in the film remembers: “[Hallstrom] let us improvise like crazy. All those café scenes were improvised. When Johnny Depp and Crispin Glover and I were sitting around discussing what was going on in the movie, he'd just load a twelve minute mag (of film) and say, okay well, get to this point and this point - how you get there or what you say is up to you.”

See if you can spot other scenes that were improvised in the movie.

Last Word

'What's Eating Gilbert Grape' is a film about responsibility and family loyalty, coupled with the desire of every individual to break away and forge their own path in life. Peter Hedges wishes for the film are simple: “I would hope that people might view their fellow beings with more empathy, more compassion and a desire to understand. Even if they can't know why people are the way they are, to understand that they're probably that way for a good reason. The second thing would have to do with the fact that we live in a time when so much is telling us how our life is supposed to be and who we are supposed to be; how our life should look and how we should look. And I suppose that is what I am trying to say; no life is small and no story is without it's value.”

