

## Daughter's Soaring Ambitions and Mother's Growing Pains in *Lady Bird*

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**Abstract:** The paper would tease out the intricacies of maternal work through an analysis of a mother's "growing pains" in the film *Lady Bird* (2017). This coming-of-age narrative is as much about the trials of mothering an adamant and ambitious adolescent as it is about the bittersweet process of growing up. Sara Ruddick observes how "the dominant culture obscures even the existence, and certainly the difficulty, of the maternal task of letting a child grow into [your] life—which also means growing away" (91). *Lady Bird* foregrounds the involved, passionate and challenging nature of mothering. Marion McPherson struggles to respond adequately and reasonably to *Lady Bird*'s strong and evolving personality. The daughter's rites of passage are viewed equally from the perspective of the mother. When *Lady Bird* drives around in Sacramento, the way Marion does every day, she is able to embody her mother's being and see her hometown through new eyes. In this sombre and contemplative moment, *Lady Bird* recognises her deep connection to her mother and (female) roots. Marion's efforts to cope with her daughter's aspirations point to the complexity of mothering and the difficulty of "letting go". When *Lady Bird* leaves a poignant message for her mother, she reconciles the tension between a desire for autonomy and the need for affiliation.

**Keywords:** *Lady Bird*, mothering, Motherline, mother-daughter relationship, growing pains, rites of passage

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The film *Lady Bird* (2017), a coming-of-age narrative, examines both the bittersweet nature of budding youth and the heartbreak occasioned by the unpredictability of youthful inclinations. Even as the film portrays the ambivalence, insecurities and the "controlling" nature of mothering, it takes a sympathetic and realistic look at the financial and emotional toll taken by mothering, especially in difficult times—signalled by the father's loss of employment in a post-9/11 America. Though "letting go" is an important part of mothering, it is accompanied by its own separation pangs. Sara Ruddick observes how "the dominant culture obscures even the existence, and certainly the difficulty, of the maternal task of letting a child grow into her life—which also means growing away" (*Maternal Thinking* 91). By allowing the daughter's rites of passage to be viewed equally from the perspective of the mother, who visibly struggles to respond adequately and reasonably to *Lady Bird*'s changing personality, the film foregrounds the involved, passionate, challenging, and evolving nature of maternal work. *Lady Bird*'s attempt to finally see Sacramento through her mother's eyes—instead of viewing it with characteristic scorn—is a respectful acknowledgment of the sufficiency and sincerity of the latter's love and labour. The mother learns to accept *Lady Bird* as an independent, developing being, while the daughter imaginatively reconnects with her roots as she journeys into the world.

Marion McPherson, who is mother to *Lady Bird*, a name her daughter has given to herself, is a very recognisable maternal figure. She comes across as the more assertive parent, who lays down the rules and actively disciplines her teenage daughter. *Lady Bird* is not a problem child but she is also, like most teenagers, not easy to deal with. Her aspiration to attend college in New York, the seat of culture, as she sees it, is poorly matched by her work ethic. It is tempting to view the mother as playing the role of the Father in the family. In "The Idea of Fatherhood", Ruddick outlines the three defining functions of normative fatherhood: distant provision, protection, and disciplining the children. Both provision and disciplining is done by the mother, who is also very protective of her daughter. *Lady Bird*'s desire to go to New York triggers in her mother fears of being knifed or coming to harm. The father is a pleasant and friendly man but he is dealing with depression as well as the loss of his job. Mrs. McPherson might be the provider and discipliner but she is most certainly the mother and not the father. The patriarchal script seems to control her relations with her daughter and the world at large.

Mrs. McPherson might be more conservative and pushy because she is intensely involved in childrearing and therefore understands how complex and difficult it is to nurture a child's "developing spirit"—which, according to Ruddick, is essential for fostering growth—while also grooming and correcting her. At one point, Mrs. McPherson says to *Lady Bird*: "I want you to be the best version of yourself." To which the daughter replies: "What if this is the best version?" *Lady Bird* is right in her own way but her mother, like most mothers, must nudge her in the right direction to foster her growth, which is one of the three main maternal goals identified by Ruddick. It can also be argued or speculated that being a woman, Mrs. McPherson is more

vulnerable socially and is therefore more conservative and anxious. She is certainly overworked and financially strained. Her exasperation shows when Lady Bird is unable to fully appreciate that struggle. It is as if the mother and daughter are fated to be on a collision course, the way mothers and daughters often tend to be. While all of this plays out, the father is content to play the “nice guy”. He is a perfectly likeable father and individual but perhaps he is not socially wired to fret and strive like the mother, who must feel her parenting duties more keenly. She would definitely be judged more harshly if her daughter doesn’t turn out well. That must be a lot of pressure for one person but the pressures of mothering tend to be underestimated because the task itself seems to oversimplified and devalued across cultures.

The mother struggles to keep up with Lady Bird’s changes, including her sexual maturation. She seems to feel rejected or overlooked when Lady Bird stays away on her last Thanksgiving. One is so trained to be disapproving of a mother’s “clinginess”, “neediness”, or her desire to hold on to her children that the depth of Mrs. McPherson’s pangs of separation from her growing daughter is unlikely to be appreciated fully or at all. The equation of autonomy with separation, which the developmental theorists tend to make, is challenged in the *Mother Daughter Revolution*: “Separation and autonomy are not equivalent: a person need not separate from mothers emotionally to be autonomous. Under the dominion of experts, mothers are urged to create a separation and disconnection from daughters that their daughters do not want.” (Debold, et al 22). This emphasis on separation is responsible for the heartache suffered by the mother. This also leaves Lady Bird alone to stumble her way through adolescence and into adulthood. She struggles to carve her own path and discover herself; she forms and breaks ties with men.

Lady Bird’s rites of passage into adulthood involve flirtation and sexual exploration, minor rebellions against anti-abortion rhetoric and good-natured nuns at her school, among other things. She drops her ordinary-looking friend, Julie, to schmooze with the prima donna, Jenna Walton, of her batch. Her two dalliances soon turn bitter; the first boy, Danny, turns out to be struggling with his own sexuality and discovering his gay leanings, while the other, Kyle, seems elitist, rakish and non-committal.

It is worth noting that Lady Bird’s mother is not her confidant; her shrillest fights and arguments happen with her mother. She is inexorably drifting away from her mother. Apart from the psychological distance, there is also the physical distance created by Lady Bird’s inclination to stay out late, not spend her last Thanksgiving at home, and, finally, take admission in a college in post-9/11 New York much against her mother’s wishes.

Between all the stormy arguments, there are gentle, sombre moments of mother-daughter bonding. The film begins on one such note. Lady Bird asks her mother mutely if she looks like she is from Sacramento—her ambivalence towards the place is announced by the cheeky epigraph: Those who talk of California hedonism haven’t spent a Christmas in Sacramento. Her mother affirms that she is; the scene closes with Lady Bird affirming that she is ready to go home after their trip. The two are shown sleeping side by side, their heads almost touching. This picture of togetherness gives way to the heated exchange on their way back. Ambivalence is what characterises most of their exchanges. Their relatively friendly and peaceful moments dissolve into bickering. Unable to contain her suppressed disappointment, her mother would start sputtering in anger, while Lady Bird’s clenched adolescent rage would find release in hurtful pronouncements, hysterical outbursts, or muted resentment.

The growing distance and disconnection is felt more keenly by the mother than the father; Lady Bird’s equation with her father is not significantly altered by her growing pains. This is probably owing to what Andrea O’Reilly describes as the patriarchal script and narrative dividing daughters from mothers after the extraordinary closeness of early childhood. Instead of drawing strength from her mother’s experiences or consulting her along the way, Lady Bird follows the script and leaves her mother behind.

In “Across the Divide: Contemporary Anglo-American Feminist Theory on the Mother-Daughter Relationship”, Andrea O’Reilly explains how the mother-daughter estrangement narrative is built into cultural practices. She insists that this should be replaced by mother-daughter connection and empowerment. O’Reilly lists mother-blame and matrophobia among the reasons for mother-daughter disconnection. Mother-blame permeates the film narrative though this is not without mother-defence. When her first boyfriend alludes to her mother’s difficult, controlling nature, Lady Bird is quick to defend her mother. The complicated love between mother and daughter is full of the ambivalence born of identification with the powerless and, especially in this case, the overburdened. She surely doesn’t want to end up like her mother. Her desire to leave her hometown and explore new possibilities indicates a search for a new path or pattern. She, like most daughters, seems to suffer from “matrophobia”, which is “the fear not of one’s mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one’s mother*” (Rich 236). The ambivalence that characterises mother-daughter relations tends to make the task of training a daughter difficult because the daughter consciously avoids the oppressiveness of the maternal and wifely roles played by the mother. The mother, being of the same gender, is responsible for transmitting gender norms. There are at least two such instances when Lady Bird resists such attempts at grooming. When Mr. McPherson loses his job and Lady Bird ends staying out late in the night, Mrs. McPherson charges at her for

leaving her clothes lying unattended. She goes to the extent of pointing out how Lady Bird's friends' parents could actually be Mr. McPherson's future employers and they wouldn't hire him if his family looks like trash so Lady Bird had better mind her clothes and look presentable. In the second instance, Mrs. McPherson objects to Lady Bird dragging her feet while they are looking for a dress in a thrift store. She says it in a roundabout way but soon gets to the point. An exasperated Lady Bird calls her "annoying".

Things come to a head when Lady Bird manages to secure admission in a college in New York. That is when the mother and daughter fall out with each other. The mother simply doesn't want to talk anymore. The cord is all set to snap. Lady Bird leaves without being able to get through to her mother. Mrs. McPherson's steely front crumbles when it sinks in that her daughter has indeed left. She makes a last-minute dash to catch up with her but it is a bit late by then. The father becomes a bridge between the two when he passes on to Lady Bird the discarded drafts of a letter Mrs. McPherson was trying to write to her. The mother had wanted to tell Lady Bird what a miracle her birth was. It looks like a trip down memory lane, a process of coming to terms with her little girl's increasingly autonomous and separate being. When Lady Bird makes a phone call to her mother in the end and leaves a poignant message, she reaches out as an evolving adult who is trying to reconnect once again with her mother and her roots. It is a good example of how autonomy and interconnectedness are not mutually exclusive states of being.

In the message, Lady Bird describes her experience of driving around in the city in the days leading up to her departure. She is able to finally pass her driver's test, which is an important rite of passage. When Lady Bird surveys her neighbourhood while driving around, much the way her mother does every day, she seems to embody her mother's being and see the world through her mother's eyes, both in an immediate, literal sense and a larger metaphorical and metaphysical sense. That the experience has a metaphysical dimension becomes clear when one considers the relation Lady Bird bears to her hometown, which is probably her place of birth, and her mother, who has given birth to her. In this sombre and contemplative moment, her childhood, feminine roots, and the imminent and inevitable fact of separation seem to occupy her as she occupies her mother's place in the driving seat and really 'sees' her surroundings. The implicit focus on birth, connection and separation can be assumed as giving a metaphysical turn to her thoughts. Although this is a speculative argument, there can be no doubt that this is an exercise in retracing, and reconnecting with, her roots. The viewer can recognise the familiar landmarks that Lady Bird passes by. Lady Bird's transformed gaze and the heart-tugging background music bestow on Sacramento, depicted as a provincial and uneventful place, a nostalgic charm.

The connection that Lady Bird tries to forge can be her link to the "Motherline", a concept Naomi Ruth Lowinsky explores at length. Lowinsky describes the "Motherline" as an ancient world view and a forgotten wisdom that is found in the lore passed from one generation of women to another. These stories hold the knowledge of women's experiences, including their bodily changes. They bind generations of women together by mapping their life cycles and shared life experiences. The "feminist ambivalence about the feminine" (Lowinsky 30) has cut women off from their feminine roots, denying them "the authenticity and authority of their womanhood" (O'Reilly 106). Girls are required to distance themselves from their mothers and their preadolescent selves. They reject vital parts of themselves and their vital links to their mother and feminine heritage in order to fit into the roles created for them by a male-dominated society. Lady Bird's attempt to see the world through her mother's eyes, to understand her perspective and feel a kind of pride in the identification is an honest appreciation of the work mothers do and their world view. This realistic look at both the process of growing up and the pain that comes when children grow away from their parents, especially mothers, after so much labour and engagement, adds an important layer or dimension to this coming-of-age narrative.

When Lady Bird starts to sober up after a phase of heady, headlong exploration, she restores and celebrates her friendship with Danny and Julie. She rediscovers God, so much a part of her life and schooling in Sacramento, by visiting a church in New York. She embraces the name given to her by her parents, referring to herself as "Christine" instead of Lady Bird. She admits to her emotional bond with her hometown and, finally, she pays a somewhat belated, but still very timely, tribute to her mother by saying a simple but significant "thank you". When Lady Bird leaves a poignant message for her mother, she reconciles the tension between a desire for autonomy and the need for affiliation.

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