

An Iconic Portrayal of Feminism, Self-Identity and the Rite of Passage in Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*

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Abstract

Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017) is a poignant coming-of-age film that explores feminism, self-identity, and the rite of passage through the lens of its protagonist, Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson. The film portrays a young woman's struggle for independence and self-definition against the backdrop of societal expectations and family dynamics. Lady Bird's journey encapsulates feminist themes as she challenges traditional gender roles, seeks creative freedom, and asserts her autonomy. Her evolving relationship with her mother, Marion, serves as a central conflict that reflects generational and ideological differences in female identity formation. The film also examines the rite of passage through Lady Bird's transition from adolescence to adulthood, marked by experiences of love, friendship, ambition, and disillusionment. Her constant yearning for reinvention, whether through her name, social status, or aspirations, symbolizes the quest for self-identity in a world that often imposes rigid definitions of success and womanhood. By embracing an authentic, flawed, yet deeply personal narrative, Lady Bird becomes an iconic portrayal of feminist self-discovery and coming-of-age struggles. This study aims to analyze how Lady Bird employs cinematic techniques, character arcs, and thematic depth to depict the female experience in a patriarchal society. Through an intersectional lens, it explores the film's impact on contemporary feminist discourse and its relevance in shaping modern narratives of self-identity and empowerment.

Keywords: Lady Bird, feminism, self-identity, coming-of-age, rite of passage, female empowerment, mother-daughter relationship.

Movies hold a prominent position in literature and they prove to be the most entertaining aspect of literature. The history of Cinema started around 100 years ago and it thrives as the best platform to depict life as it is and also provides huge opportunities to test what the ideas look like, that go beyond human imagination. Not all movies are celebrated but every movie is a lesson and the outcome is decided through what one learns out of it. Great novels are adapted into movies and sometimes even the screenplays of great movies are released after the humungous reception by the audience, which are technically considered novels with scenic orientation. So, movies are inevitable in literature and they are the medium which transforms text into real motion pictures.

Lady Bird, an acclaimed American film directed by Greta Gerwig, offers a poignant exploration of adolescence and self-discovery. Set in Sacramento, California, the movie captures the tumultuous journey of Christine ‘Lady Bird’ McPherson as she navigates her final year of high school. With a sharp eye for the nuances of family dynamics and teenage angst, *Lady Bird* presents a deeply personal yet universally relatable narrative. The film's exploration of identity, belonging, and the bittersweet nature of growing up is a testament to Gerwig's skillful storytelling, making it a standout in contemporary American cinema.

Lady Bird, released in 2017, not only marked Greta Gerwig's solo directorial debut but also made history as the first film directed by a woman to achieve a 100% rating on Rotten Tomatoes with over 160 positive reviews. The film was shot in just 23 days on a modest budget, yet it earned five Academy Award nominations, including the Best Picture and Best Director.

The opening scene of the *Ladybird* proves to be one of the greatest introductory scenes of all time, which involves Christine and her mother are in a car and while her mother is driving, Christine tries to put on another audio tape after hearing the audiobook of ‘The Grapes of Wrath’, it creates an argument leading to the voluntary fall of Christine from the moving car and she causes the accident to herself resulting in breaking her right arm. This peak of stupidity is so special because the whole scene involves and thoroughly explains the self–identity theme. Her desire to attend another high school shows her broader search for freedom and her struggle to reveal who, she is outside of the environment she has always known. It's a clear expression of her thirst to carve out her path, which is central to the theme of self-identity. This scene also links to the theme of feminism, more subtly. Lady Bird’s desire to attend a different high school

and by extension leave Sacramento, is an act of assuring her autonomy and agency—key concepts within feminist thought. This scene touches on the theme of the rite of passage, as Lady Bird's desire to leave and explore a new world is a crucial part of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Her denial of her current surroundings reflects her desire to grow, change, and establish her own identity on her terms.

Lady Bird's Catholic upbringing has a prominent influence on her life by designing her values, beliefs, and experiences. The Mass scene, paired with the title card, shows the tension between her religious background and her quest for individuality. While she participates in the rituals of her faith, she is also questioning and rebelling against the expectations it imposes on her. This scenario emphasizes her internal conflict as she explores her self-identity, trying to reconcile her desires with the traditions she has been raised in.

The mother of Lady Bird, who wishes for her daughter to be flawless at all costs, ties into the themes of feminism and self-identity by reflecting the expectations society puts on women to follow rules. Her unwavering desire to see Lady Bird succeed in life—academically, socially, and morally—comes from a well-intentioned but ultimately oppressive compulsion to be in charge of her daughter's destiny. This relationship highlights the feminist criticism of how women are frequently held to unrealistic and false standards, which inevitably results in feelings of failure and inadequacy. Self-identity is emphasised by the mother and daughter's effort to balance their expectations with realities.

Christine, who wants to change her name to Lady Bird, is constructing her own identity outside of her Sacramento surroundings and her family's financial status. Her battle with belonging and self-worth is reflected in her desire for wealth and status. She views money as a means of escaping her present circumstances and evolving into the person she feels she ought to be, which is related to her quest for self-awareness. Her jealousy of wealthier people draws attention to the internal conflict she has over who she is and who she wants to be, highlighting the difficulties of forging an identity in a culture that frequently equates success with money. Feminist topics are also touched by Christine's jealousy, especially when it comes to the expectations society has of women.

This need for riches stems from a desire to attain not only material goods but also respect, authority, and independence in a culture where women are often marginalised due to

their financial situation. Christine's struggle is a reflection of a larger feminist critique of the way women are socialised to aspire unattainable goals, which breeds feelings of inferiority and rivalry with other people.

Although it appears brief overall, the scene in which Christine consumes the non-consecrated wafers is rich. Christine is consuming the non-consecrated wafers in a way that is both disrespectful and intimate. Her struggle with the religious components of her upbringing and identity is demonstrated in this moment. The consecrated wafers, a precious component of the Catholic Mass, stand for something pure and sacred. Christine is pushing the limits of her identity that her faith has shaped by eating them outside of their religious context. It's a modest but significant act of defiance that speaks to her larger struggle to establish herself independently of her family's expectations.

Another way to interpret this action is as a feminist declaration of agency. Numerous religious traditions, such as Catholicism, have rigid laws governing behaviour and frequently place women in subservient roles. Christine's carefree and almost light-hearted consumption of the wafers is a subtly disrespectful gesture against the church's authority and regulations. It's her means of taking back control of something that religious organisations are supposed to hold sacrosanct. She is expressing her independence and defying expectations of her behaviour as a young woman by doing this. Christine demonstrates her confidence by approaching her school crush, a male, without even thinking twice. This point in time represents Christine's increasing self-assurance and investigation of her developing identity as a young lady. She shows that she is willing to take chances, stand up for herself, and leave her comfort zone by approaching the boy without thinking twice. These are all essential components of her journey from youth to maturity.

Christine reaches a turning point in her journey when she starts to actively interact with the world, pushing boundaries and discovering new aspects of herself along the way. It makes her let go of some of the anxieties and uncertainties that sometimes accompany adolescence and embracing a braver, more self-assured version of herself. Her move to move forward and show initiative in a social situation is representative of her larger quest for maturity and self-discovery. Lady Bird briefly loses focus on her responsibilities in her quest for romantic attention, highlighting the conflict between her aspirations and her family's financial situation. She shows a gap in her developing identity when she buys something for the boy she's smitten with without

thinking twice, even though she knows her mother struggles to pay for groceries. This moment underscores the challenges of adolescence, where the pursuit of self-expression and fulfilment can sometimes lead to selfish choices. It also reflects the complexities of the rite of passage, as Lady Bird navigates the balance between her aspirations and the responsibilities that come with growing up.

In addition to spending money recklessly, Lady Bird's passion with the lad makes her overlook her genuine friendships. She starts to put her best friend Julie at a remove as she gets more consumed in her crush, dumping her in favour of shallower relationships. This conduct is indicative of the growing pains of adolescence, where the need to blend in and get attention can occasionally take precedence over more genuine relationships. Lady Bird is momentarily losing touch with her true self and her priorities by avoiding Julie. This is a crucial turning point in her rite of passage when she discovers the painful truth that authentic self-expression can be sacrificed in the name of social acceptance and self-identity.

The moment Lady Bird revealed that she detests being alone herself was illuminating. This claim emphasises Lady Bird's lack of self-awareness and her need for other people to provide her sense of self. She may still be figuring out who she is apart from her relationships and social circles, based on her anxiety about being by herself. As people navigate the difficult path of self-discovery, they frequently seek approval and a sense of belonging, which can lead to a dependency on others for validation during adolescence. Feminists might argue that Lady Bird's anxiety about being by herself is a reflection of cultural expectations for women to be emotionally and socially linked.

Feminism challenges the conventional wisdom that a woman's value is dependent on her interactions with other people in favour of women's independence and self-sufficiency. The internal fight between society's demands and the feminist ideal of independence is highlighted by Lady Bird's struggle with loneliness. Because it represents a turning point in Lady Bird's journey as she faces her need and fragility, this event also connects to the rite of passage motif. As she gets older and learns to support herself, she will have to get over her dread of being by herself. Being at ease with oneself is a skill that many people acquire as they grow older, and Lady Bird's admission of this worry is a significant step towards her independence and maturity.

A pivotal scene that connects to the idea of the rite of passage is when Lady Bird discovers her lover kissing another man. At first, she declines to be his girlfriend, but eventually, she comforts and encourages him. This is a pivotal point in Lady Bird's development into an adult since it shows emotional maturity and empathy. Her initial response is one of hurt and rejection, which makes sense considering the circumstances. But Lady Bird goes above her own emotions to console and understand her boyfriend when he confides in her and shares his anguish and perplexity. Her increasing maturity is evident in this change in priorities—from attending to her emotional reaction to putting other people's needs first.

Her choice to adopt a nurturing role and be a helpful friend demonstrates how her compassion and sense of duty have grown. Being "like a mom" implies that she is starting to realise how complicated relationships can be and how important it is to support people during difficult times. This scenario is crucial to Lady Bird's rite of passage because it shows how she can put aside her personal needs and fears to act compassionately and caring towards others. She transitions into a more mature role at this point, realising that sometimes meeting the needs of others comes before your own to be a good friend and person. Her development and expanding perception are shaped by this event.

In a moment of candour, Lady Bird explores her developing sexual identity and expresses her interest by asking her mother about having sex with other people. This query is representative of her larger quest for self-awareness as she works through the challenges of puberty and tries to comprehend her limits and wants. As she faces the realities of adulthood, including the exploration of her sexuality, the talk also represents a turning point in her rite of passage. Feminists view Lady Bird's readiness to talk to her mother about such a private matter as a brave declaration of her autonomy over her own body and decisions. This sequence highlights the film's examination of the difficulties and obligations associated with growing up.

Christine's rash statement directed at a woman talking about abortion and having children exposes her underlying resentment and complicated relationship with the expectations that are placed on women. This particular instance illustrates her struggle with self-identity as she resolves conflicting feelings about women, social expectations, and her convictions. Her outburst is related to the feminist issue, that might be interpreted as an attempt to express her independence and reject the traditional duties and expectations that are frequently placed on

women. Abortion is a particularly sensitive subject because it touches on questions of choice and physical autonomy, which are central to feminist thinking. It's also possible to interpret Christine's response as a part of her rite of passage, as she struggles to comprehend her principles and ideas in the face of mature problems.

Self-identity, rites of passage, and feminism can all be strongly related to this scene in *Lady Bird*, when Christine engages in intimacy with another man and feels deceived when she finds out it wasn't his first time. Christine's touching story of sleeping with another man and feeling betrayed when she finds out it wasn't his first time highlights her fragility and the difficulties she faces managing romantic relationships as part of her rite of passage. This interaction highlights the emotional difficulties that come with growing up and exploring one's sexuality because it breaks her expectations and makes her feel deceived. Christine shows her intense need for support and direction by calling out to her mother despite her attempts to be independent.

The conflict between Christine's expectations and the realities of intimacy and relationships in this scene highlights the larger issue of self-identity. Feminists might argue that her sense of deception stems from the double standards society has placed on sexual experience and purity, which frequently put unnecessary pressure on young women. As she discovers that adulthood entails not only physical experiences but also emotional resilience and self-respect, this moment is a crucial component of her journey towards understanding herself and the difficulties of adult relationships.

The scene where Christine, while trying on clothes, argues with her mother and says, "What if this is the best version?" is a powerful moment that ties into the themes of self-identity, the rite of passage, and the complex mother-daughter relationship in *Lady Bird*. Christine is frustrated with her mother during a stressful time when they are trying on clothes, and it reaches a breaking point when she responds, "What if this is the best version?" Her underlying anxieties and anxiety about living up to her mother's standards and social pressures are perfectly captured in this line. Christine struggles with the possibility that her identity may not be sufficient in the eyes of her mother or the others in her immediate environment, and this is a moment that speaks powerfully to the issue of self-identification.

This exchange is also an essential component of her rite of passage, emphasising the difficult truth that maturing frequently entails facing one's limitations and learning to accept oneself for who you are, imperfections and all. Furthermore, this conversation highlights women's often irrational expectations of themselves and others, according to feminist theory. Christine is fighting a major battle on her path to self-discovery and independence, and her plea reflects her wish to be accepted for who she is, rather than always trying to live up to an idealised version of herself.

An important sequence that connects to the themes of self-identity, the rite of passage, and the importance of genuine friendship is when Lady Bird decides to attend to prom with her best friend Julie instead of her new friends. Lady Bird demonstrates her profound friendship with Julie by electing to go to prom with her closest friend instead of her new, shallow pals during a crucial epiphany. A pivotal moment in Lady Bird's journey, signifies her understanding that real friendships and connections are worth more than the transient approval she craves from blending in with the wrong crowd. Through her reunion with Julie, Lady Bird recaptures a crucial aspect of her identity that she had briefly relinquished in her quest for social standing. Her actions demonstrate her growing maturity and realisation that the people who have supported you throughout the years are the ones who genuinely care about you. In a moment of self-awareness and loyalty, Lady Bird recognises the value of staying faithful to herself and the relationships that count. This underscores the film's examination of the difficulties associated with growing up and figuring out where one fits in the world.

The sentence "People call each other by names their parents made up for them, but they won't believe in God" from Lady Bird's discourse raises important questions about identity, belief, and the contradictions that exist in human nature. One stunning comment that captures Lady Bird's struggle with life's inconsistencies and beliefs is her statement, "People call each other by names their parents made up for them, but they won't believe in God." This statement captures her continuous search for purpose and self-identity as she works through the challenges of puberty and social pressure. On one level, it draws attention to how ironic it is that while individuals are usually able to accept more abstract and broader concepts like faith and spirituality, they find it difficult to accept particular traditions, such as the names their parents gave them.

Greta Gerwig depicts the turbulent path of adolescence in *Lady Bird* with such mastery that the quest for self-identity, the difficulties of feminism, and the tribulations of the rite of passage all converge. We see the common struggle of a young woman trying to define herself in a world full of competing expectations through Christine Lady Bird McPherson's experiences. Her path through relationships, cultural expectations, and her own goals is replete with moments of defiance, vulnerability, and deep self-discovery. In the end, *Lady Bird* is more than simply a tale of coming-of-age; it's a compelling examination of the difficulties of growing up as a young woman, where the pursuit of independence and authenticity results in a greater awareness of oneself and the outside world. We are reminded by *Lady Bird* that although the road to self-discovery is never easy, it is via these obstacles that we learn to accept and comprehend the real us.

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