

# Lady Bird

## (Greta Gerwig, 2017)

### Component 1: US Independent Film

#### Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **The contexts of film**
- **Specialist writing**

**Rationale for study:** Greta Gerwig won critical acclaim and two Oscar nominations (for Best Director and Best Original Screenplay) with this bittersweet coming-of-age tale. Critics praised the nuanced portrayal of a young woman's ambitions, and how these create tensions between family and friends. *Lady Bird* was one of the first films to receive a 'perfect' 100% approval score on Rotten Tomatoes, although the criticism it later faced should provoke complex discussions amongst young people.

#### STARTING POINTS - Useful sequences and timings

'Opening scene: Car Ride With Mom'  
in: 00:00 out: 03:24

'College Decisions'  
in: 46:06 out: 47:06

#### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key elements of film form (micro features)

##### Cinematography

- Director Gerwig and cinematographer Sam Levy aimed to create the "visual texture of memory". "I didn't want the film to be 'intravenous'... I wanted the viewer to be connected but also distanced," said Gerwig in an interview with IndieWire.
- They avoided using handheld cameras, and decided to use a 'grain' (a term for the texture of the image) that is reminiscent of a colour photocopy.
- There is an interesting combination of close-ups and long-shots during particular sequences. When *Lady Bird* is contemplating or reacting to events, there are extended close-ups to encourage us to imagine what she is thinking about. When her interior world clashes with the lives and feelings of others – particularly during interactions with her mother – long shots are used so we can see both characters' full body language. This gives the impression *Lady Bird* is allowing other people into her mental space (even if her words seem to be rejecting them).



Image by Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

##### Mise-en-scène

- *Lady Bird*'s hair, make-up and costumes are designed to give the impression of a schoolgirl on the brink of becoming a young independent woman. Throughout much of the film, she wears the uniform of the Catholic school she attends, though she shortens the skirt length as a sign of rebellion. Her hair is dyed bright red (the same colour as her self-assigned name) and she wears punkish jewellery to emphasise her attempts at individuality.
- The contrast between upper and lower-middle class housing is emblematic of *Lady Bird*'s (and Marion's) ambitions to 'better themselves'.

Even though Lady Bird's home is spacious and comfy, it isn't like the mansion of the rich kids, or the blue house that Lady Bird aspires to live in. Another good use of set design is the *Vote Reagan* poster that shocks Lady Bird when she finally gets to go inside the blue house: her 'dream home' is incompatible with the values of the person that lives there.

### Sound

- One of the main pleasures in the film is the spiky dialogue. Lady Bird's language isn't full of teen slang, but instead packs in a lot of cultural references and puns. This effectively shows her intelligence (as well as her slight arrogance).
- The verbal clashes she has with her mother are particularly nuanced. The opening scene particularly shows the emotional bond between mother and daughter, and the way it can move from tenderness, to scathing parental criticism to outright hostility in a matter of seconds.
- To evoke the period (2003), numerous musical cues from artists such as Alanis Morissette and Dave Matthews Band are used, not just for authenticity, but also to underscore the action. Consider the two uses of the song *Crash Into Me* – in the car after the musical, and on the way to the prom – and how the lyrics and characters' responses contrast.

### Editing

- With such an emphasis on dialogue, especially back-and-forth arguments, the film is cut to show both the facial expressions of the speaker, and those of the listener. There is a brisk rhythm to these exchanges that heightens the emotional tension.
- In the last scene, there is an interesting use of cross-cutting between Lady Bird making the phone call, her own memories of driving around Sacramento, and the 'imagined memories' of her mother making the same journey. This reflects the character's epiphany that she and her mother maybe aren't that different.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - The contexts of film

### Social/cultural

- *Lady Bird* is a good example of the 'coming-of-age' genre, where a young person goes through an intense period of emotional, psychological or political development. Candidates may want to compare the film to other 'coming-of-age' films with a central female character such as *Pretty In Pink* (Hughes, 1986).
- Gerwig is one of the only female directors to be nominated for a Best Director Academy Award (along with five other major awards). Though her nomination was lauded, it also raises questions of gender bias in the Academy.

### Political

- *Lady Bird* is set in 2002/3, with a backdrop of Bush's post-9/11 USA, and the invasion of Iraq by US and UK forces. Bush was a controversial right wing Republican president, whose conservative politics Lady Bird is directly opposed to. The newscasts about Iraq are poignant in exposing how self-obsessed Lady Bird and the other teen characters are, putting their adolescent worries into perspective.

## ADDITIONAL STUDY AREA - STARTING POINTS - Specialist writing

- *Lady Bird* was one of the first films to achieve a 100% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes, though there were later some less favourable reviews.
- Critics praised the film as an “unapologetically feminist” teen movie. Lara Williams in *The Guardian* said the film was understated and nuanced, and a challenge to regular teen movie tropes involving teen pregnancy, drugs or gangs. She also said the emphasis was on personal, rather than sexual, discovery. Read the review here: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2018/feb/20/is-lady-bird-a-feminist-teen-movie-greta-gerwig-saoirse-ronan>.
- Many critics also praised the portrayal of the relationship between mother and daughter. Consider the scenes between the two characters. What are your impressions of Marion? Is she an example of “maternal love with necessary brutality” to make Lady Bird into a better person? What are Lady Bird’s responses to Marion’s criticisms? Are they justified? What about the end of the film – how have both characters changed?
- Other critics said the film was not a ‘bad’ movie, just not very remarkable. One accusation was that Lady Bird herself isn’t particularly interesting as a character. She comes from a stable (if struggling) lower middle-class family, attends a private school, yet has ambitions to ‘improve herself’ regardless of the privileged life she leads (as pointed out more than once by her mother). Some reviews also pointed out that the minor characters (e.g. Julie; the father with depression; her brother Miguel; the crying priest) are far more interesting! Consider the opinions in this article: <https://theweek.com/articles/741399/lady-birds-glaring-white-mediocrity>. Do you agree?

## KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

‘Opening scene: Car Ride With Mom’  
in: 00:00 out: 03:24

- Consider the opening shot, with Marion and Lady Bird asleep, in almost a mirror image. What does this tell you about the similarities and differences between the two women?
- The following scene takes place entirely within the car. Consider how the use of two-shot and POV/CU that cuts between the two characters shows their tender-yet-also-combative relationship?
- The mood of the journey changes very quickly. Listen carefully to the dialogue and consider at what points the conversation shifts, from tender to persecutory/defensive. What does Lady Bird say/do? What does Marion say/do?
- How is Lady Bird’s family situation – including her and Marion’s conflicting views – explained using dialogue?
- Consider how character is established in this opening scene. What are your impressions of the mother and daughter? Who do you empathise with most? Do you think either/both of the characters are being unfair? Do you find their exchange realistic? How do you feel about the shocking end to the scene?