

Lady Bird's Pain



There's an odd narrative thread in Greta Gerwig's 2017 *Lady Bird*. The titular hero lives out her senior year of high school against the backdrop of the Iraq War. Characters watch the war's escalation on televisions while debating boyfriends, mothers, friends, school plays, and sex. But the war has no direct bearing on the narrative—it is static to lower-middle class economic desperation in the aughts United States; a violent echo, a joke and a punch line, like the posters around Lady Bird's school encouraging students to remember 9/11.

Except for one scene.

Lady Bird loses her virginity to a boy who reads Howard Zinn, hates Dave Matthews, and rolls his own cigarettes. All the tics of suburban aughtian "rebellion." She is under the impression that he is a virgin too. Afterwards, he lets her know this wasn't his first time. She gets upset. He can't understand. "I just wanted it to be special," she says. "Why?" he asks. "You're going to have so much unspecial sex." He then gets upset when she gets even more upset. "Do you know how many innocent civilians have been killed today?" he asks,

pointing to the television and news of the Iraq invasion.

“Different things can be sad,” she says. “It’s not all war.”

War has a way of negating the particular. When used rhetorically, extreme violence shuts down conversation, or, worse, turns it into an endless series of self-justifying repetitions. It does not clarify; it excuses. Politicians [point](#) to military sacrifice as often as they can for a reason. Partisan advocates on Facebook [wax hysterical](#) about the suffering of our fighting forces for a reason. To point to mass violence distorts particular violence, makes it absurd—trivial and sentimental. Impossible.

But the particular is everything.

The boy Lady Bird sleeps with hates anything mainstream. Lady Bird also tries to separate herself from her peers and family. Not only does she take on a pretentious name, but she wants to leave California, to escape the horrors of suburban Sacramento, her given life, for something else, anything and anyone else other than the here and the now, this present.

Her boyfriend’s father is dying of cancer. Lady Bird’s father is dying of poverty. Her priest is dying of grief. The larger sweeps of history, these violent abstractions, weigh down on the details of experience. Make them silly. Banal. Sacramento rather than a sacrament.

Greek tragedians assumed pain brought wisdom or spiritual growth (*pathei mathos*). This is not necessarily true. Suffering can also make it impossible to think clearly about the relationships around us—it can pervert rationality, turn us into monsters possessed by the infinite and incapable of loving the finite. Worse, when we reference pain that is not ours—greater pain, greater suffering, bigger wars, bigger genocides—we risk excusing the specific pain we ourselves give on a daily basis.

"O Reason not the need," King Lear begs his daughters. "Our basest beggars

Are in the poorest thing superfluous./Allow not nature more than nature needs,

Man's life's as cheap as beast's."

Confronted by his daughters' irrefutable logic, Shakespeare's Lear warns that if we abandon ourselves to mathematical logic, if we insist on necessity, on reducing our experience to the quantifiable, proportion out our pain and empathy, we become blind to what we are, what makes us different than everything else that is. Deprived of particular wants, desires, and love, our human life becomes "as cheap as a beast's."

Lady Bird takes increasingly stupid risks to escape her life. She sabotages her mother's love by insistently pointing out her mother and father's failure as parents, their inability to meet the economic expectations of American "success." As she does her name, she denies the life she has been given. But, in the end, Lady Bird discovers a mysterious opening in the curves of her hometown roads, the lives lived there, the memories living there. She stops setting up a false contrast, what the rhetoricians call an either/or fallacy. She takes her given name. She accepts the "isness" of experience. She is able to say thank you. To be grateful for existence.

"You're going to have so much unspecial sex in your life," her boyfriend says.

This is true, but it misses the point.

In the last few month's allegations of sexual assault have dominated the headlines. Many in the United States are waking up to the particular pain silently endured by many for decades. This is a positive development. But the counterassault will soon come. Propagandists and their media teams will point to the big and the broad and the violent.

They will talk much of the real world, of the truth, of people suffering in the Middle East and Middle America. They will scream about the big picture, about men in positions of power making hard decisions. They will tell us many stories about War, of missile-button pushing and beaches stormed. They will teach us about History. They will preach Necessity.

They will say you don't know how good you have it.

Many of the accusers will begin to doubt the validity of their own pain. The victims will begin to wonder if they were selfish to be hurt in a world where people die in horrible ways and suffer so many horrible wrongs. How can their pain be special when there is so much pain? How can these violations mean anything in a world defined by greater violence? Greater violations?

But this misses the point. Pain is not quantifiable. And those who attempt to do so should wonder why they feel the need to do so, what they want to celebrate and what they want to excuse.

Like King Lear, Lady Bird, this confused suburban teenage girl, is a fool. She knows she is a fool and she persists in making a fool of herself because she cannot see any other way out (I was often reminded of Terrence Malick's *Badlands*, another story of American youth finding a dangerous self in a wilderness of media, poverty, and self-loathing). And she wants out. The other characters—the priests, the nuns, her mom, her father, her brother—endure great pain, great tragedy. She dances on, this fool, knowing nothing of death, of civilians dying halfway across the world, of the suicides in her midst, thinking only of herself and her pain and her escape.

But is her dance foolish? Are her trials necessarily lesser, less substantial, than those who deal out and insist on pain because they see the world as so much pain? Should her agony

be measured out, meted, compared, excused and denied by the pompous ineluctability of History and War? Don't her experiences, the extremity of her definite emotions, contain the radical possibility of all that is singular and incomparable? Can different things be sad? Is it all war?

Lady Bird begins with the very last line of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—"she put her lips together and smiled mysteriously." In the novel, Rose of Sharon's baby has just died. She feeds a dying man with her breast milk. Her lips. Her breast. Her smile.

Faced with the immensity of history, the refuge of the particular is not escapism. It is the thing itself. And so too this satisfying movie. It is the thing itself. Life.