

A Psychiatric Analysis of the Film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*

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Today, to fulfill the assignment in my Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing class, I saw *What is Eating Gilbert Grape?* The assignment required a psychoanalytical description of the family dynamics of the Grape family. I had many mixed emotions about the film. Throughout the course of the movie, I felt anger, frustration, pity and sadness for the Grape family. In the film, we were able to observe the complex relationships among the members of this family. The Grapes were an obviously loving family that fought often, yet they were always supportive of each other. Like every family, the Grapes had many problems, but in this case it seemed all of the Grapes' problems came from the same person, Mama. She realized too late that her insecurities were hurting her children.

It was immediately obvious that Mama's many problems expressed themselves in her morbidly obese state. Her children were running around serving her every need. They were sacrificing their entire lives to support her need to be taken care of in every way. It seemed she was suffering from a dependent personality disorder, one which, according to Videbeck, is "characterized by a pervasive and excessive need to be taken care of" (p. 358). Mama lived on the couch in her living room and, from it, she watched her children live her life for her. Her children sacrificed their youth to help maintain their mother's avoidant personality, which was evident from her signs of a "pervasive pattern of social discomfort and reticence, low self-esteem, and hypersensitivity to negative evaluation" (Videbeck, p. 358). Mama kept repeating that she was beautiful and that she did not mean to turn out the way she did, yet she did nothing to change. She waited for her food to be brought to her and controlled her family from the couch. Once Mama began her downward spiral after her husband's suicide, it became apparent that she could not cope with the emotional and physical abandonment of her husband. Reviewing the different stages of grief leads me to believe that Mama was stuck in Bowlby's Phase III of the grieving process, showing "cognitive disorganization; emotional despair [and] difficulty functioning" (Videbeck, p. 218). With no job or home responsibilities, Mama was not functioning at all. She could not even look after her youngest son, Arnie. The abandonment of her husband was too much for her. She locked herself in her home, the place where she lost her husband; she seemed attached to it for this very reason. Her grief did not get any better when her eldest son, Larry, left just like his father. Losing another relationship further extended her grieving process.

Although many things were wrong with the Grape family, they were still united and supportive. Gilbert and Amy assumed the roles of mother and father, caregivers and providers, and did it all without complaining. Their roles in the family in fact showed a clear picture of enmeshment, defined by Videbeck as a lack of clear role boundaries amongst family members, and a loss of independence for the children (p. 398). Gilbert and Amy were not just the eldest children, they were the parents. They were being deprived of the opportunity to start their own lives. The children took care of their mother very well, but didn't realize that they were not only hurting their own futures, but hurting their mother by enabling her depression and eating disorders. Mama was a good example of secondary gain, which is defined by Videbeck as "the attention received from others [for experiencing anxiety and stress-related illnesses]" (p. 251). Often, family members will try to care for loved ones that are experiencing anxiety and stress, even if that means taking over their responsibilities, such as work and parenting other siblings (p. 251).

Gilbert and Amy could have left like their father and brother, but they stayed. Their best job was taking care of Arnie and loving him unconditionally. There was also Ellen, the typical teenager who cared more about her appearance than anything else. She argued with Gilbert all the time and was obviously frustrated by Arnie. She was selfish, but that can be common in teenagers (Potter/Perry, p. 213). She thought Gilbert was not doing enough, although he worked hard to bring food and money home. In her arguments with Gilbert it seemed like she was displacing some of her anger towards her father onto Gilbert. Her father was not around, so it was easy to snap at the closest thing she had to a father figure. Arnie was mentally underdeveloped for a young man of almost eighteen years, but he was the uniting factor in his family, even while he aroused much of the other characters' ambivalence. His brother and sisters took turns in looking out for him and protected him, although this was hard to do. Ellen was always frustrated with him and even went so far as to hit him when he caused a scene in town. Despite this frustration, Ellen was still able to help plan Arnie's birthday party. Gilbert also hit Arnie, but his ambivalence was more towards his mother than his brother. Gilbert loved his mother very much but was extremely embarrassed by her weight. He did not want to introduce her to Becky and he even turned away from her at the police precinct, where the entire town could see her.

Gilbert and Arnie had a unique relationship. Instead of being ashamed of him, Gilbert loved Arnie for who he was. He cured Arnie's bruises, bathed him, protected him from bullies, and helped teach him manners. Unlike Mama, who treated Arnie like a five-year-old, Gilbert tried to teach him a sense of right and wrong, or how to say thank you instead of good-bye. He always corrected him when he was acting inappropriately. Gilbert never treated Arnie like a disabled child.

Arnie and Ellen were close in age but they were on opposite ends of Erik Erikson's developmental stages. By age, Arnie and Ellen were both supposed to be in Erikson's stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion (Videbeck, p. 49). However, Arnie was developmentally at a pre-school level, which Erikson calls Initiative vs.

Guilt, when children are “beginning development of a conscience [and] learning to manage conflict and anxiety” (Videbeck, p. 49); for example, we see Arnie learning the consequence of his actions and crying inconsolably about the grasshopper he killed. Ellen, on the other hand, was definitely at an appropriate adolescent level, Identity vs. Role Confusion, when adolescents begin to “formulate a sense of self and belonging” (Videbeck, p. 49). She showed good social skills by caring about her appearance and joining her school band. Like many adolescents, she even feared the town’s reaction to her mother’s death. She began to cry after her mother died only after realizing that there would be a crowd watching her mother being pulled out of the home.

Arnie was the character with the most obvious mental health disorder. Mental retardation is defined as below-average intellectual functioning that greatly impairs a person’s ability to communicate effectively and take care of themselves (Videbeck, p. 434). Arnie had slow, delayed speech and motor functioning, could not complete an easy task such as bathing, and also blurted out anything on his mind. Videbeck states that people with mental retardation are passive and dependent, or aggressive and impulsive (p. 434). Arnie was definitely passive and dependent, listening most of the time to instructions, but still needing help with daily living. He was harmless, he never hurt anyone, but then he didn’t realize the harm some of his actions might cause, like when he continued to climb the water tower.

The Grape family resembled a typical family in many ways. They had their share of problems but they remained united. This was apparent when Arnie was arrested. For the first time in years, Mama left her home to get her son back. The rest of the family went as well. Although he seemed embarrassed, Gilbert took his mother to the precinct and I felt that he was also trying to protect her by asking her to stay in the car. Together, as a family, the Grapes got Arnie and walked back to their car. Even through many arguments, they were also able to put a party together to celebrate Arnie’s birthday. They clearly supported Arnie, even joining in on his games whenever he wanted to play hide-and-seek. The children also displayed the ultimate act of sacrifice and love for their mother when they burned down the house instead of allowing people to make a joke out of her death. Throughout the movie, the Grapes stood as a united front and were always able to overcome their hardships. The Grapes were a perfect example of resilience. They used every hardship to fortify their self-esteem and self-efficacy, and became mature young people who could care for themselves (Videbeck, p. 128). They used their mother’s legacy positively, to become productive members of society.

References

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