

A Study of Female Growth Narrative of Greta Gerwig's Coming-of-age Film

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Abstract: This article introduces the development of feminist films, explores the combination of coming-of-age films and feminism, and introduces Greta Gerwig's film history and her film works in the past six years. First, the article introduces the famous women director-Greta Gerwig and her career as an actress and director. Second, it introduces the background of the three films. Through the introduction of three films in the past six years, the paper believes that Greta Gerwig has formed her own unique style of female coming-of-age films. Third, this paper treats of the three ways that Greta Gerwig developed her style. These three ways are: highlighting the female perspective of the film through the "mumblecore" style, showing the diversity of modern feminist narratives through multiple narratives, and challenging the patriarchal world through the image of an object gazed at by men. Through unique cinematic practice, Greta Gerwig increasingly shows her own characteristics in feminist coming-of-age films.

Keywords: Greta Gerwig, *Lady Bird*, *Little Women*, *Barbie*, female growth narrative

1. Introduction

The feminist movement has evolved from the early 20th-century women's liberation movement to Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking work "The Second Sex" and has continued to progress, particularly in the Internet age. In short, feminist theory is primarily concerned with the idea that women constitute an oppressed and discriminated class compared to men, and it strives to achieve gender equality [1]. Sexism, on the other hand, delves into male-dominated social structures and addresses issues like gender inequality, job opportunities, and reproduction.

As feminism has grown into an influential ideology, serving as a crucial theoretical tool for reflecting on the structural inequalities that persist in all aspects of social life, feminist films have also made a significant impact on the traditional filmmaking landscape. Feminist films, by definition, adopt a female perspective and authentically portray women's experiences [2]. These movies typically feature female protagonists, center on women's stories, depict their challenges and growth, and convey women's perspectives on society and life.

From a global standpoint, female directors are significantly outnumbered by their male counterparts, and only a few have garnered international acclaim. In the history of the Oscars, only five female directors have won the Best Director award: Lena Wertmüller for *Seven Beauties* (1975),

Jane Campion for *The Piano* (1994), Sofia Coppola for *Lost in Translation* (2003), Kathryn Bigelow for *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and Greta Gerwig for *Lady Bird* (2018).

Among these feminist directors, Greta Gerwig stands out as a commercial success in the field. She has excelled as an actor, screenwriter, and director, with many of her works centered around feminist themes. Additionally, her films often focus on young women, highlighting the challenges and uncertainties they face during their journeys to adulthood.

Greta Gerwig's career gained momentum when she starred in Noah Baumbach's *Greenberg* and *Frances Ha*, earning recognition as a leading actress. Her directorial ventures, particularly *Lady Bird* and *Little Women*, received significant attention. In 2018, *Lady Bird* earned five Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, Best Director and Best Original Screenplay. *Little Women* secured six Oscar nominations in 2020, ultimately winning the Best Costume Design award. In 2023, her directorial work "Barbie" achieved substantial success, becoming the highest-grossing film of 2023, with a cumulative box office exceeding \$1.381 billion by September 4, 2023.

While many studies have examined the feminist aspects of Greta Gerwig's works, there has been limited exploration of the growth narrative strategies embedded in her films. This article aims to address this gap by analyzing the films *Lady Bird*, *Little Women* and *Barbie* to uncover the unique storytelling approaches used to convey themes of personal growth and development.

2. Background

2.1. *Lady Bird*

The movie *Lady Bird* was released in November 2017. The story takes place in Sacramento, California in 2002. It tells the story of the youth growth of a girl who named herself *Lady Bird*. Her name is Christine. She is already in high school, but she is still under the control of her mother. She wanted to go to college in New York, but her mother wanted her to enroll nearby. Although she loves her child very much, her mother still often undermines her self-confidence. In *Lady Bird*, Christine's family is centered on her mother, while her father suffers from depression and unemployment. The role of the father in the family is reduced, the value of the mother is highlighted, and the relationship between the protagonist and the mother is more focused [3]. In terms of the plot, *Lady Bird* experienced a series of challenges in her relationship with her best friends and with the opposite sex. The ending of the film is quite satisfactory. She finally succeeded in fighting her mother and went to New York. After leaving home, she realized the value of family.

2.2. *Little Women*

The movie *Little Women* was released in December 2019, representing the latest adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*. Set in the 19th century, the film unfolds the narrative of the March family in New England during the American Civil War. While their father is away fighting in the Civil War, their mother assumes the responsibility of raising the children at home and becomes a dedicated volunteer on the home front. The four daughters in the family are Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Meg aspires to become an actress, Jo is characterized by her intelligence, independence, and love for writing, Beth is gentle but frail and tragically passes away at a young age, and Amy is determined to pursue a career in painting and eventually marries their neighbor, Laurie.

This film, with its original author, director, and lead characters all being women, garnered substantial attention even before its release [4].

2.3. *Barbie*

The movie *Barbie* is a moderately feminist critique beneath its dazzlingly sexy veneer. Barbie portrays a world, “Barbie land”, where women rule the roost. They are the politicians, the judges, and the scientists while the main male occupation is the ambiguous “beach”. It is also a world where no money is required in shops, medical ailments are cured instantly, and there is apparently no concept of death [5]. A classic Barbie in the Barbie world wakes up in the morning and finds that her body and emotions begin to interact with her real-world owner. In order to find the reason, she and her boyfriend “Ken” set off to the real world. When they arrived, they were surprised to find that this was a male-dominated world. In Barbie’s world, women occupy a dominant position, but in the real world, Barbie, as a woman, has become a product to be watched and shaped by others. Barbie’s boyfriend “Ken” was also shocked in the real world. He returned to Barbie’s world early and built it into a patriarchal society. When Barbie discovered the cause of her body changes, she returned to Barbie’s world with her master in the real world, regained control, and reached an agreement with Ken: Barbie would no longer suppress Ken, and Ken would no longer suppress Barbie.

2.4. Literature Review of Coming-of-age Film

The coming-of-age film genre focuses on the growth and development of teenagers, typically involving their exploration, self-discovery, and journey toward maturity. Shi Dan mentioned the opinion that these films delve into the relationships between oneself and others, oneself and the environment, and the physical and psychological aspects of self, all aimed at achieving a harmonious balance [6]. This process of reconciliation often involves tears, pain, and grow-up experiences, as growth is inevitably accompanied by challenges and regrets.

According to Arnett and Jeffery Jensen, the moment entering adulthood is a crucial phase where young individuals explore various life possibilities, especially in the realms of love and work [7]. Through these explorations, they gain a better understanding of their own identities and aspirations.

The focus on teenagers in Hollywood cinema began in the 1920s, right after the World War I. The film industry experienced a slowdown during World War II, but it regained momentum with the postwar Italian Neorealism movement, refocusing on teenage growth. In the 1950s, the emergence of “youth crime movies” in the United States, such as Marlon Brando’s *The Wild One* in 1950 and *East of Eden* in 1954, marked a significant development in this genre.

While numerous classic coming-of-age movies have been produced over the years, many of them primarily feature male protagonists. The concept of adolescence and youth, as we understand it today, is closely linked to the postwar baby boom of the 1950s, the iconic image of rebellious youth portrayed by James Dean, and the counterculture movement of the 1960s. This has led to a narrative where “mature adulthood” is often associated with male stories, while female adulthood is frequently portrayed as a sacrifice of one’s self.

In contemporary narratives, coming-of-age stories tend to give more complexity and importance to male lives, while female-focused films often revolve around girls pursuing romantic interests, seeking popularity among peers, and emphasizing the perceived fragility and unpredictability of women. This narrative approach has been critiqued for catering primarily to male desires and neglecting the presence and significance of women both on and off the screen.

However, in films by directors like Greta Gerwig, women take on dominant roles and guide the plot’s development, reducing the emphasis on the male gaze and allowing women’s desires and perspectives to come to the forefront. This shift marks a departure from traditional film narratives and strives to provide a more inclusive and authentic representation of women’s experiences.

3. The Filmography of Greta Gerwig's Female Growth Narrative

3.1. Female Perspective Through the "Mumblecore" Style

Mumblecore movies have emerged as a significant independent movement within the American film industry in the 21st century, characterized by a focus on casual and unscripted dialogue. As the name implies, mumblecore places greater emphasis on character interactions through dialogue rather than complex plot developments. Performances in these films often involve improvisation, and the use of portable video equipment is prevalent. This movement tends to capture the lives of individuals in their twenties and thirties in real, non-studio settings [8].

Greta Gerwig has been a prominent figure in the mumblecore genre, appearing in notable works like *Laughing Right*, *Hannah Goes Up the Stairs* and *Paper Bag Head*. In her film *Lady Bird*, which initially appears as a Hollywood family drama, Gerwig demonstrates her adept filmmaking skills. While her earlier mumblecore projects had limited budgets that allowed for extensive improvisation, the increased budget for *Lady Bird* necessitated a different approach. Gerwig placed great emphasis on pre-filming rehearsals, involving four weeks of collective rehearsals for the actors. They would then take a break from the set before returning for official filming [9].

While Gerwig adhered closely to the script during filming, she allowed room for actors to infuse their performances with authenticity, ensuring that improvisation did not lead to time and resource wastage. This approach differs from the typical mumblecore style of spontaneous improvisation.

In both *Lady Bird* and *Little Women*, there are numerous scenes characterized by mumblecore-style dialogue, featuring fast-paced, densely packed conversations and the actors' natural and relaxed performances. These scenes effectively convey the conflicts between mother and daughter and the bonds among women. For instance, a central conflict in *Lady Bird* revolves around the protagonist's desire to escape her hometown, and her mother's opposition only fuels this aspiration. *Lady Bird* seeks not only to leave her hometown but also to break free from her family's constraints [10].

Feminist films often emphasize the importance of female friendships and solidarity. Director Greta Gerwig dedicates significant screen time to depicting sisterhood in her movies. The mumblecore-style elements in these films, specifically the 2 minutes and 47 seconds and 7 minutes and 21 seconds scenes, highlight Gerwig's attempt to shift the cinematic lens back to women themselves and eliminate the influence of the male gaze.

3.2. Retell the Story with Multiple Voices

In 1986, the world-renown theorist of narratology, Susan Lanser, made a groundbreaking contribution by integrating feminist literary criticism within narratology in her work *Constructive Feminist Narratology*. Later on, in 1992, in her book "The Authority of Fiction—Female Writers and Narrative Voices," Lanser classified fictional narrative voices in texts into three categories: authorial, individual, and collective [11].

Greta Gerwig's adaptation of *Little Women* deploys a multifaceted narrative approach. It not only weaves together narratives across seven-year time span but also blends the original novel's narrative with the adaptation, incorporating perspectives from both the main characters and supporting cast. The multilayered narrative contribute to the complexity of modern storytelling. It also serves as a unique textual space where female voices from various angles could be heard.

The first function of this multifaceted narrative is particularly evident in the ending of *Little Women*. It concludes with an open ending that leaves the audience speculating about whether Joe discovers whether Professor Bhaer is married or not when she chases him to the train station. The movie presents two different endings using warm and cold tones. While the professor appears at the

birthday party in one ending, the film implies that this is merely the conclusion of the novel within the movie. In the movie's narrative, the author of the novel remains unmarried throughout her life, mirroring the life of Louisa May Alcott who is the author of *Little Women*. This multi-layered narrative adds depth to the story, encompassing not only the fictional characters but also the original author herself, making it more relatable to modern female audiences.

Furthermore, the narrative with multiple perspective also establishes the intersection of past and present. For instance, the film introduces an innovative plot where Joe confidently negotiates royalties with the publishing house's boss, insisting on a net profit share of 6.6% instead of accepting a one-time payment of \$500. Such a choice was unconventional for female writers in the 19th century. In previous film adaptations, Amy was often portrayed as merely stealing the limelight from her sister. However, in Greta Gerwig's rendition of *Little Women*, Amy exhibits a clear understanding of the economic aspects of marriage and pursues her interest in painting, embodying the qualities of a modern woman [11].

3.3. Challenging the Patriarchal Norms Through the Subordinate Female Figures

In 1959, Barbie made her debut in the human world, embodying the image of a perfect life meticulously designed by top fashion designers. She became associated with various prestigious brands and seemed to be living a dreamlike existence. However, she quickly became a contested subject in gender studies, as her beauty primarily reflected male fantasies and objectification of the female form.

Barbie has been portrayed as "big-breasted, brainless, silly, and sweet", which is not reflecting the real condition of female existent for decades. Counter to the stereotypical image of Barbie, the film In the 2023 release of *Barbie*, a significant change is observed in the character of Barbie. In this adaptation, Barbie undergoes a transformation, exhibiting independent thought and critical skills. She begins to reflect on her subordinate social status within a patriarchal society. In this revised narrative, Barbie not only critiques the discrimination prevalent in a male-dominated society but also leads a rebellion within Barbie land, actively working to empower women and reclaim control. She is no longer depicted as a mere object created for the male gaze but emerges as a fully autonomous and self-determined female character with her own subjectivity and agency.

Laura Mulvey's perspective on cinema suggests that it often ignores the true existence of women and instead caters to the seductive "pleasure" of the male gaze [2]. Women are portrayed as visually and erotically appealing objects, shaping movies into illusions tailored to male desires. Barbie, as a representation of a sexy and brainless stereotype, also embodies these objectifying characteristics.

Furthermore, the movie presents an image of an aging and independent woman who rejects societal expectations, refuses to return to her toy box offered by Mattel, confronts a man who sexually harasses her in the real world, and rebuilds order in Barbie land. The film uses a young girl character's words to express criticism of such dolls in the human world, highlighting their role in perpetuating appearance anxiety and inferiority among women.

Later in the movie, with the help of Gloria (Barbie's owner), she delivers a powerful monologue, addressing the unrealistic and contradictory expectations placed on women. She discusses the pressure to maintain physical appearance, financial independence, motherhood, career success, and the scrutiny of their behavior. She concludes that women face an impossible and contradictory set of expectations, with no rewards, as all mistakes are ultimately blamed on them.

When Barbie helps Ken overthrow his new regime, she encourages him to break free from patriarchal visions of masculinity and his dependence on their relationship. As a result, the male gaze diminishes, women are portrayed neither as "angels" nor "femme fatales", and both Barbies

and Kens share power equally. The movie ultimately reveals the hidden male authority within patriarchal society, using an image that has been traditionally objectified to do so.

Barbie's journey to the real world provides a fresh perspective on the seriousness of male dominance in society. By narrating the entire story from Barbie's perspective, this film offers a critical insight into not only the problematic gender inequalities that females face but also the transformation of Barbie, who has long been perceived as a symbol of male sexual fantasy.

4. Conclusion

Greta Gerwig has skillfully fused feminist cinema with a sophisticated narrative approach, carving out her distinctive style in the film industry. She marries the essence of mumblecore with meticulously planned rehearsals to achieve performances that, while not improvised, maintain an authentic and spontaneous quality. Her characters are multi-dimensional, reflecting the complexities of modern women.

Gerwig's filmmaking challenges the patriarchal norms by subverting the idealized objectification often associated with the male gaze. Through her work as an actor, screenwriter, and director, she has honed her unique style. Her journey has taken her from small-budget comedies to grand-scale productions, from independent films to Hollywood blockbusters, and from family melodramas to period pieces and adaptations of intellectual property. With her evolving style and dedication, it's foreseeable that Greta Gerwig's influence in the world of cinema will continue to expand and evolve.

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