What's Eating Gilbert Grape?

Dir. Lasse Hallström
Character map

Overview
   About the author
   Synopsis
   Character summaries

Background & context

Genre, structure & language

Scene-by-scene analysis

Characters & relationships

Themes, ideas & values

Different interpretations

Questions & answers

Sample answer

References & reading
**CHARACTER MAP**

**Gilbert Grape**
A frustrated young man working a dull job, taking care of his disabled brother and housebound mother. Has an affair with Betty, falls in love with Becky and finds himself longing for a life outside his small town of Endora, Iowa.

- **Mr Carver**
  - Unaware of his wife’s affair with Gilbert, dies unexpectedly
  - Friends

- **Tucker**
  - Optimistic and positive, Gilbert’s closest friend
  - Friends

- **Betty Carver**
  - Has an affair with Gilbert, leaves town when her husband dies
  - Lovers (Affair)

- **Becky**
  - Free-spirited new girl in town who awakens Gilbert’s inner life
  - Grandmother/Granddaughter

- **Grandmother**
  - Welcoming to Gilbert, adores Becky
  - Mutual acceptance

- **Bobby**
  - Son of the town undertaker, Gilbert’s friend
  - Friends

- **Mr Lamson**
  - Owner of unpopular grocery store, saddened by changes taking place in Endora
  - Romantic relationship

- **Arnie Grape**
  - Developmentally disabled 17-year-old, very close to Gilbert
  - Siblings

- **Larry Grape**
  - Eldest son in the Grape family, left home
  - Siblings

- **Mama (Bonnie) Grape**
  - Obese and housebound, a widow and mother
  - Parents/Children

- **Mr Grape**
  - Committed suicide for reasons unknown
  - (also of Ellen, Amy, and Gilbert)

- **Ellen Grape**
  - Youngest child, unhelpful, badly behaved
  - Siblings

- **Amy Grape**
  - Eldest sister and mother figure
  - Siblings

- **Larry Grape**
  - Eldest son in the Grape family, left home
  - Parents/Children
OVERVIEW

About the director

Swedish director Lasse Hallström has been nominated twice for the Academy Award for Best Director. He directed music videos prior to working in film and was responsible for most of the music videos for internationally successful Swedish pop group ABBA. He is also a writer and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for *My Life as a Dog* (1985). As a director, his most notable films are *The Cider House Rules*, *Chocolat*, *The Shipping News* and *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*.

About the screenwriter

Peter Hedges adapted his own novel (also called *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*) for the film version of the story. Hedges has written other screenplays and books, including the 2002 blockbuster *About a Boy*, for which he wrote the screenplay and for which he was nominated for an Academy Award (Best Adapted Screenplay). He is also a playwright and wrote eight plays between 1984 and 1995. In addition to *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*, he has written two other novels: *An Ocean in Iowa* and *The Heights*. *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* was Hedges’ first novel and was based on a play he wrote while teaching creative writing. It is quite different from the screenplay, darker in tone and with several plot points and characters that were not included in the film. His novels have been translated into 15 languages and published all over the world.

Synopsis

Gilbert is one of five children in the Grape family, three sons and two daughters, and is the main carer for his 17-year-old brother, Arnie, who suffers from developmental disabilities. The family lives in a somewhat economically depressed town called Endora in Iowa, where there are few options for employment or socialising. In addition to his responsibilities
with Arnie, Gilbert helps to care for his housebound mother, known as Mama, who has become morbidly obese following the suicide of her husband. When the film opens, she has not left the house for seven years. Everything changes for Gilbert when a new girl, Becky, arrives in town with her grandmother and is forced to stay for a short time due to mechanical problems with their camper van. Gilbert and Becky embark on a romantic relationship, and Gilbert, whose life to date has involved little contact with the outside world – or even genuine interpersonal connection – finds himself longing for more than the life he has known.

**Character summaries**

**Gilbert Grape**
The protagonist of the film, Gilbert works as a stock clerk at Lamson’s Grocery, the local grocery store, which has become unpopular since a large chain store (Foodland) opened nearby. He acts as the male head of his family as his father is dead. He is also the main caregiver for Arnie, his younger brother, who is unable to care for himself as he is developmentally disabled. Gilbert loves Arnie deeply but has mixed feelings about having to care for him constantly. Gilbert has an affair with a married woman, Betty Carver, but seems unenthusiastic about it. He is often frustrated and negative in his thinking, but is generally patient and kind in his actions, especially when dealing with Arnie. There are, however, times when he becomes extremely frustrated, even hitting Arnie at one point. When he falls in love with Becky, a new girl in town, the experience stirs up intense emotions, both negative and positive. He is an emotionally complex character, struggling with issues around duty and identity.

**Arnie Grape**
He is 17 years old when the movie opens but Arnie has the mental capacity of a very young child. He is very excited about his 18th birthday party, a central event of the movie. Arnie is generally a happy child, and he clearly loves his family, delighting in playing games with them. He is usually cheerful and kind, though occasionally he displays other,
negative emotions, e.g. he can become hysterical when upset. In one scene, after forgiving Gilbert for hitting him, he strikes Gilbert back (s.12), presumably in play but quite forcefully. Arnie also sometimes has trouble with expectations and understanding cause and effect, as demonstrated when he delights in crushing a grasshopper’s head in the mailbox but then cries when he sees what he has done. He sometimes serves as an unexpected source of wisdom, much as a child character might.

Betty Carver
A married woman with two sons, living in Endora, Betty Carver often shops at Lamson’s Grocery in order to see Gilbert, despite the new grocery store being more popular. She and Gilbert have been carrying on an affair for an unspecified amount of time (the affair is, however, understood to have been going on for at least one year as Betty makes reference to their ‘anniversary’ [s.4]). When Becky arrives in town, Betty is jealous of Gilbert’s attentions towards her. She engages in risky behaviour with Gilbert, and seems less worried than he is about being caught in the affair. When Betty’s husband dies, she leaves town, claiming that everyone thinks she killed him.

Becky
Becky and her grandmother arrive in town when the car towing their camper breaks down. Gilbert becomes romantically interested in her and she reciprocates, although Gilbert’s responsibility for caring for Arnie sometimes interferes with their romance. Becky is kind and free-spirited, friendly and patient with Arnie and often encourages Gilbert to think about what he wants and to pursue his own happiness. She has apparently had a similarly positive effect on her grandmother, who (prior to living with Becky in the camper) had travelled very little.

Becky becomes a source of refuge and inspiration for Gilbert. Little is known about her background apart from the fact that her parents are divorced and that she is travelling with her grandmother, who clearly adores her. She is portrayed as resilient, open and adventurous. She is shown in the water more than once, presumably as a metaphor for her willingness to ‘plunge into’ her life and fully experience things.
Mama (Bonnie Grape)
Mama is described as having been the town beauty before she became obese. She is a widow; her husband committed suicide by hanging himself in their basement without warning – an event to which she reacted by overeating, becoming morbidly obese and abdicating much of her parental responsibility. She leaves her older children, Gilbert and Amy, to manage the family and care for Arnie. She is housebound and an object of ridicule in the town; small children sometimes peer through the windows in hopes of catching a glimpse of her. Mama, despite her extreme reaction to her husband’s suicide, is generally a kind person, loving towards her children and particularly tender with Arnie. Her death near the end of the film is a highly emotional event for her children, as they experience grief as well as a sense of relief, along with a visceral need to protect their mother from further ridicule. It is possible to view Mama as manipulative, as she has forced Amy and Gilbert into positions where their only real choices are either to become surrogate parent figures or to abandon their family. While Mama is certainly not manipulating her children consciously, the effects of her choices may be her unconscious way of controlling them and ensuring they do not abandon her as their father did.

Amy Grape
Amy is the oldest daughter in the Grape family and very responsible. She and Gilbert share most of the household chores and together take care of Mama. Amy is generally very positive and patient, playing with Arnie and keeping her temper better than Gilbert or Ellen. She is a mother figure despite the fact that Mama is still alive.

Ellen Grape
The youngest Grape child, Ellen is 15 years old. She is constantly negative and often criticises Gilbert for small lapses in his care of Arnie, despite doing very little to contribute to Arnie’s care herself. It is unclear whether Ellen has always been this way or whether her attitude is a result of her age or a reaction to her father’s suicide. As she is the youngest member
of the family, there is less pressure on Ellen (than on Gilbert and Amy) to perform a parental role, allowing her to act out her frustration about the Grapes’ (and indeed the whole town’s) stagnation in a way that Gilbert is unable to do.

**Larry Grape**

Little is known about Larry, the eldest son in the Grape family, other than the fact (supplied by Gilbert in the opening voiceover) that he ‘got away’ (s.2). He is never mentioned again, nor is he ever heard from. It is unclear whether he is even made aware that Mama has died and the children have burnt down the family home, as Gilbert does not mention him in his closing voiceover when he notes what each member of the family is doing a year after Mama’s death.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Historical setting

*What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* is set in the fictional town of Endora, Iowa, USA, based on the actual town of Hedrick, Iowa, with which the writer, Peter Hedges, was personally familiar. Hedrick has a population of approximately 800 people, making it an extremely small town by US standards (and slightly smaller than Endora’s fictional population of just over 1000). A town in Texas was used to stand in for Endora during filming, despite the two states’ wildly different climates.

The time period is not given specifically but can be understood to be the late 1980s or early 1990s. This is identifiable from details such as some of the characters’ clothing and the models of cars seen around town (though most of the characters drive cars quite a bit older than the setting, implying they are not overly prosperous). Indeed, despite the actual period in which the film is set, the aesthetics and appearance of Endora more closely resemble 1960s America, making it very behind the times. It is important to understand that, in the 1980s, North American consumer culture shifted significantly to be based more on shopping malls and national or multinational chain stores rather than independent businesses. It is partly this economic shift that is causing tension and difficulties in Endora, as exemplified by the rivalry between the new, large, franchised grocery store Foodland and the small, independent grocery store run by Mr Lamson and his wife. When various shots of the town are presented during Gilbert’s opening voiceover, each of the businesses filmed is shown as empty, as if to imply that Endora is a virtual ghost town. In an explicit joke about this theme, a store called ‘Endora OF THE LINE Drugs’ is shown during the opening sequence.

In terms of film history, the 1990s was a decade characterised by serious and thought-provoking dramas produced by Hollywood studios, a trend which has since faded in favour of newer trends such as film series based on novels for younger audiences and films adapted from comic books and graphic novels. Film trends tend to happen over long
periods of time – decades rather than months or years – due to the time-consuming nature of film production. In the 1990s, the adaptation of contemporary novels was seen as an excellent source of high-quality dramatic films, which were often made with the intention or ambition of gaining attention for the Academy Awards. Other examples include *Schindler’s List*, *The English Patient* and *The Cider House Rules* (also directed by Lasse Hallström).

The casting of the film is also notable, as most of the relatively small cast went on to become quite successful – a rare feat for any film. Actors including Leonardo DiCaprio (Arnie), Johnny Depp (Gilbert), John C Reily (Tucker) and Crispin Glover (Bobby) have all enjoyed successful film careers.

**Director’s historical context**

Lasse Hallström was born in 1946, making him 47 years old when the film was released. Relatively young for a director, he had already achieved success in the international film community. *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* was considered his first mainstream American success and confirmed his reputation in the Hollywood film industry. He was able to cast the film before the screenplay was written, simply on the strength of the novel. Since *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*, he has directed ten films between 1995 and 2011, including the Academy Award–nominated *The Cider House Rules*. He worked with actor Johnny Depp again in the 2000 film *Chocolat*, implying the two have a positive working relationship.

Hallström has attributed some of his success to cinematographer Sven Nykvist, whom he has referred to as his idol. Nykvist, also Swedish and twice nominated for the Academy Award for Best Cinematography, was known for working with legendary director Ingmar Bergman. Nykvist is responsible for the distinctive lighting in *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*, from the expansive sunsets that Gilbert witnesses with Becky to the dull, dingy lighting in which the town of Endora is first presented. The atmospheric mood of the film is strongly influenced by the lighting design. Hallström shows himself to be a very collaborative designer in acknowledging the influence of Nykvist.