Dare Not to Speak the Name: A Closer Look at Greta Gerwig’s 'Lady Bird’

Stephen D'Arcy
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[Note: This interpretive essay does contain some plot spoilers.]

Although religions often imagine themselves to have a special monopoly on holiness, we have all seen enough religiosity to know that it is not always as holy as it claims to be. Conversely, when we really encounter something that is unambiguously holy, like the birth of a child, the pious airs and the righteousness of religious conviction can seem particularly irrelevant and out of place. Something is holy, in the irreligious, naturalistic sense that I have in mind, when it doesn’t have to change to be absolutely alright. Just as there is nothing we want to see repaired in the sunset or the wilderness, so in the case of the newborn baby we don’t demand that it be quieter or more self-reliant, or that it change its appearance or behaviour. It is perfect, not because it lacks all flaws, but because the very idea of evaluating it in terms of good-enough or not-good-enough misses entirely the point of the encounter. Flaws or no flaws, the newborn child is perfectly fine, exactly as it is, and so we revere and embrace it without qualification.

I dwell here on our reverence for the newborn baby because the film I want to review, writer-director Greta Gerwig’s Lady Bird, explores its central theme—shame and acceptability—in terms of the metaphor of baptism, the ceremonial act of accepting a baby into a community and giving it a name (the so-called ‘Christian’ name).
The film’s main character was ‘given’ the name of ‘Christine,’ at her baptism. Christine is obviously the Christian name *par excellence*. In the Catholic worldview, this name marks the belief that one is ‘made in the likeness’ of the divine. In this sense, she was given a name that wears a claim to ‘Christ-like’ holiness on its very surface. But being given something and receiving it can be two different things. Lacking the requisite confirmation of her adequacy, Christine could not (or wasn’t allowed to) receive her name, and so had to (as she puts it) ‘give herself’ a different name altogether, ‘Lady Bird.’ By rejecting her given name in this way, Lady Bird performs a kind of *reverse baptism*: a ceremonial marking of her own status as unacceptable, exiled, unholy.

The whole logic of *Lady Bird* hinges on the idea that, in an origin story (like the Book of Genesis, and this semi-autobiographical film itself), the event of naming something and the event of “seeing that it is good” are simultaneous: “God called the dry ground ‘land,’ and the gathered waters he called ‘seas. And God saw that it was good” (Genesis I: 9). Within the symbolic universe of *Lady Bird*, it is a corollary of this that, if one finds something unacceptable, one won’t be able to say its name at all.

Hers is not the only unspeakable name in *Lady Bird*. Names, in this movie, are continually being forgotten, crossed out, painted over or replaced, whenever the name’s bearer is deemed to be deficient in some discrediting and shameful way. More generally, not saying or hearing others say one’s name is, in this film, one’s only protection from the *Angst* of having to be seen as one truly is. To say an object’s name is to bring it out into the open — as when Lady Bird finds out that her father has suffered for years from depression precisely by noticing that his name was written on a container of prescription anti-depressant medication, a case of naming that eludes the attempt to keep it quiet. On the other hand, to withhold a name — as in the case of an ex-boyfriend’s closeted gay desire (which since the trial of Oscar Wilde has been euphemized as “the love that dare not speak its name”) — is a way to keep the shameful thing hidden. And, however emphatic she is that ‘Lady Bird’ is her real name, a point Christine always makes whenever her mother expresses disapproval, in fact the name ‘Lady Bird’ is, like the song and dance routine she rehearsed for the theatre group audition, a role to be performed, a theatrical mask to be donned, the very opposite of being herself.

Often enough, it turns out, others are only too happy to sign up for these conspiracies of silence. “Don’t tell your daughter [about my depression],” the priest says to Lady Bird’s mother. “No, of course not. Of course not,” she replies, in a scene that is repeated throughout the movie in different variations, notably when Lady Bird’s former boyfriend begs her not to tell anyone that he’s gay, and she eagerly promises to keep the secret. (Gerwig is keen to remind us, though, that we can *avoid* saying something by shouting about it, as when the gay boyfriend shouts about love displaced onto a star with a made-up male name; and we can reveal everything there is to say by remaining silent, like the mother and son in the hospital who show themselves to Lady Bird by simply assuming without reserve their wholly untheatrical facial expressions.)

Baptism is one of the seven sacraments of Roman Catholicism. The other six are the Eucharist, confession, confirmation, ordination, marriage and last rites (for the dying). All seven of these (especially baptism, marriage and confession) figure directly or indirectly in the plot and the conceptual framework that animates this film. Indeed, one could well say that Lady Bird and her friends and family inhabit a world of constant ceremonies and sacraments, a kind of sacrament city: Sacramento, California, to be exact. (The film is full of verbal and visual Christianity puns: Christine as Christian name; sacraments in Sacramento; the ‘crossing’ out of names when someone proves unacceptable, and so on.) Much of the plot is propelled by Lady Bird’s longing to escape Sacramento, to find an acceptable world in a far off land. In this respect, as in others, the film is in many ways a kind of covert remake of the *Wizard of Oz*, a point to which I return below.
But this isn’t a “plot” movie, about what happens to someone in a dramatic sequence of unfolding events. It isn’t even a “character study” or “coming of age tale,” first or foremost. Lady Bird is about an idea, not a character: the idea that unconditional acceptance by important others transfigures us, by a kind of secular and naturalistic thaumaturgy (miracle-working), into something holy, perfect regardless of flaws, just like Catholic rituals are imagined to turn bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus. I assume that Greta Gerwig is an atheist—something I tend to assume about everybody unless they startle me with some unexpected invocation of God or heaven. (On the other hand, Lady Bird herself says, with some consternation: “People go by the names their parents give them, but they don’t believe in God.”). But—religious or not—Gerwig is like GWF Hegel, that great exemplar of deep atheism (in contrast to the shallow atheism of people like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris), in that she finds in religious mythology a sophisticated symbolic architecture for articulating truths that we could also formulate, more prosaically, in philosophical terms.

When Lady Bird finally crosses out her assumed name, in order finally to assume her given name, it is not because she has at last become flawless. It is because she comes to grasp the import of a point she herself had raised early on in the film, in response to a visually disturbing anti-choice poster, designed to stigmatise and shame women who have had abortions. Just because something can be disturbing to look at, Lady Bird points out, it doesn’t mean that there’s something wrong with it.

By the end of the film, as Lady Bird arrives home, at long last, by travelling to a far off place, the film begins to resemble a kind of roundabout or indirect remake of The Wizard of Oz. In Lady Bird, the exilic state of shame, embodied in the unspeakable name, is symbolically elaborated by the figure of the ‘dream home.’ Symptomatically, the ‘favourite Sunday activity’ of Lady Bird and her mother is not to go to church, in the literal sense, but to attend open houses for high-end homes for sale on ‘the other side of the tracks,’ in the shame-free part of Sacramento. The ‘other side of the tracks’ is Lady Bird’s answer to Dorothy’s ‘over the rainbow.’ Throughout the film, homes continually figure in a dual role (corresponding to the Kansas/Oz pairing): one never feels at home or welcome in one’s real home, and one feels that one can be truly at home only in the faraway dream home. Here the parallel with Dorothy is exact: only by embarking on the fantastical dream-journey, in pursuit of what Dorothy calls ‘a place where there isn’t any trouble,’ does one finally find out how to arrive unflinchingly, wakefully, in the fullness of one’s real life, miraculously untroubled even by its undeniably and enduringly troubling parts. (Lady Bird only reclaims her original name after literally waking up from an unconscious state, in a direct quotation of Dorothy’s waking-up moment in Kansas.) Like Dorothy’s long journey to where she always already was, which ended with recitations of her kōan, ‘There’s no place like home, there’s no place like home,’ Lady Bird’s journey also ends with a breakthrough kōan: ‘thank you, thank you’—a signal that she has now received her given name, and has seen that it is good. ‘Christine....That’s the name you gave me. It’s a good name,’ she says.

Surfaces aside, the holiness alluded to in her name has nothing to do with a favourable comparison to Jesus or any other god, as if she were good as opposed to being bad. Her acceptability is generated—ex nihilo, as an act of creation—by the willingness of an important other to accept her as she is. As it turns out, Lady Bird receives this gift in the form of a series of letters—each one symptomatically lacking a signature, because the author of the letters couldn’t bring herself to sign her own name to them, much less to deliver them. What the letters do is perform a transfiguration of Lady Bird into Christine, welcomed home like a newborn. And yet, the gift is, on the face of it, not very impressive: letters rejected by their own author, unsigned, unsent, crumpled up, discarded, saturated with the author’s own self-shame and doubts about her adequacy as a mother. But this is part of what Gerwig wants us to see: the miracle that transfigures a flawed being into something perfect—beyond all notions of good or bad—only
works at all in the mode of reciprocity. It goes both ways or it doesn’t go at all (which is another Hegelian echo).

When Christine receives the letters, and then wakes up from the escapist fantasy of the ‘dream home,’ part of what she thereby sees is that the letters are perfect, in that it would be pointless to try to judge them. They don’t need to be in any way impressive. It is worth recalling here that, etymologically, our word ‘utopia’ comes from the Ancient Greek words for ‘no place’ (οὐ + τόπος). The ‘place where there isn’t any trouble’ that Dorothy hoped to find, in *Wizard of Oz*, turned out to be a no-place or utopia that was exactly like home. To be sure, it was the same old Kansas with the same old troubles, but it was perfect — inviting reverence — all the same. For Lady Bird, as for Dorothy, the difference was entirely in the waking up, which isn’t any difference at all, but only a dawning appreciation that sometimes judgments of adequacy or inadequacy have no place in our lives. What we have instead is just intimacy with the richness of an authentic encounter, or as a nun says to Lady Bird, more simply, just ‘paying attention.’

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[Source: https://medium.com/@steve.darcy/review-greta-gerwigs-lady-bird-4d35afa2ce1c]