

# Gilbert the giving tree: the cost of altruism in hedges's novel



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The popular children's book *The Giving Tree* tells the story of a tree that loves a boy so completely and selflessly that it is willing to give up everything it has for the boy. *Gilbert Grape* is a realistic version of just that—a young man who resentfully abandons his own dreams to support those of the people around him; in potent ways, the traits of strength, compassion, and sacrifice are seen in the novel *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* by Peter Hedges. Gilbert is a sort of contorted Giving Tree who ultimately is willing to sacrifice his own happiness to support his dysfunctional, borderline insane family. Instead of moving out of small-town Endora and making a life for himself, he stays to support his family, which is on the verge of falling apart. Everyone around him wants something from him—his mother wants food and cigarettes, his mentally disabled brother wants him to stay forever, and his older sister Amy wants him to support the house—literally.

Gilbert must not only keep his family from figurative collapse, but he must find a way to keep the house from collapsing under the weight of his massive mother. His entire family depends on him and a part of him hates them because of it. This is evident when Gilbert is sitting in his living room and thinks to himself, " I see the sagging floor, the wilting house...the mildew of my clothes, and I understand wanting to erase this place, erase these people" (Hedges 109). Gilbert is withering away to nothing and who resents everyone around him because of it. This resentment also stems from his fear of leaving. His roots are imbedded in Endora, and his past, present, and foreseeable future are all trapped there as well. Despite this, Gilbert understands that there is no life for him in his hometown anymore and he dreams constantly of escape. And while he resents his family for making him

stay, at the same time, he enjoys being needed and being looked up to. He fears that if he leaves, he will lose his family, not only in the sense that it might just fall apart, but also in that his family will resent him forever. His desire to be needed is seen when he reveals why he helped out some friends, “ Suddenly, I’m the greatest guy, and I leave, secure in their esteem” (218). His fear of leaving is also partly due to the fact that he has witnessed first hand his family’s reaction when his father hanged himself.

Perhaps one of Gilbert’s greatest fears is that of becoming his father—a man who was so overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being the father figure that he abandoned his family altogether. Despite his brutal honesty and cynical nature, we see that Gilbert truly is a good person. But, the years of putting his family before his own happiness have made him bitter and he longs for nothing more than to leave. Yet, there is a slight problem—his family’s entire well being depends on him staying. Without Gilbert, his brother might not make it to eighteen, his mother might fall through the floor, and his family might just crumble; each selfless action he completes drains him, until he is virtually a shell of a human being—a man who can no longer emote or form relations with anyone. This is evident when Becky says to him, “ You’re out of touch, out of sync. You don’t like yourself. You don’t even see yourself” (254). Gilbert has effectively given himself up completely for his family and is on the verge of meeting the same end as the Giving Tree. Yet the thing that keeps him from losing his will entirely is the same thing that has caused him so much suffering to begin with—his family.

Gilbert may be self-sacrificing, but his family is certainly not the equivalent of the boy who takes and takes until there is nothing left. His family can be <https://assignbuster.com/gilbert-the-giving-tree-the-cost-of-altruism-in-hedgess-novel/>

selfless too, even if they are completely dysfunctional. The only exception to this is Arnie, the mentally disabled brother who wants nothing more than his brother to stay with him forever. Everyone else, however, has given up something for the sake of the family, and everyone knows that there will come a time when Gilbert must leave to begin his own life. This can be seen when Amy comes into his room, finds his suitcase open on the floor, and says, " I know, Gilbert. I know how you feel... I may be a lot of things but I'm not dumb" (242). After everything, Gilbert knows that it is time to start fresh and with his family's support, decides to burn down the house after their mother dies. For once in Gilbert's life, things work out in his favor. Arnie makes it to his eighteenth birthday, Gilbert's mother dies happily, and the house that has caused him so much trouble is incinerated. The fire revitalizes Gilbert and ultimately gives him the strength to finally leave after years of dreaming to do just that. Somehow, the years of sacrificing his own happiness and putting his family first have paid off.

In tracing Gilbert's life, Hedges's novel celebrates the qualities that make us human - especially sacrifice and endurance, as Hedges portrays a life that is equally depressing and enlivening. In the end, Gilbert is revitalized, he has survived and now he is free. Just as the Giving Tree loved the boy, Gilbert would give every thing he had for the sake of family. But because his family understands sacrifice as well, his actions are eventually reciprocated. Gilbert Grape is a Giving Tree with a family that knows when to let him go.