

# Gilbert grape analysis: hardship and triumph essay sample

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



The film, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* revolves around a single-parent household and four children. The narration is from Gilbert's perspective, the third eldest brother of five, and his transition into adulthood as well as figuring out his life goals. Due to psychological stress on the children's mother and financial hardship, the children have more responsibility than most children their age, and this responsibility interferes with their goals for the future (*What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*). The content areas of focus are, Gilbert's quest to find his purpose in life, as well as a healthy romantic relationship, the parental role of the Grape children, and the quality of the Grape home environment, including their socioeconomic level, and familial dynamics.

Gilbert's quest to find his purpose in life and healthy romantic relationship Gilbert, a caretaker, grocery store clerk, and deemed responsible for the Grape family home repairs, is a lost young man. He was given a large task of taking care of his mentally challenged brother, Arnie, and mother at times, and barely had time to think about his own life goals (*What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*). Gilbert often seems to not have any passion and suffered witnessing his mother and brother suffer from "individual discrimination" (Seccombe, 2012), which is described as one giving poor treatment to someone else based on their individual differences, be it physical, ethnic, or belief differences. Because Gilbert's mother was severely obese, many children and adults of the town looked at her with amusement. Arnie was also viewed in a disrespectful way by people of the town. He would climb up the water tower ladder many times, and many townspeople either laughed

at him or clapped as he came down, instead of showing concern for his safety (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?).

Gilbert participated at times with laughter regarding his mother's weight, most likely out of resentment, because of the stress he endures to constantly help his brother or mother in various ways. He was in charge of home repairs in their old, rundown home, and often times seemed passionless (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?). Gilbert's ability to listen seemed to be dim due to his inability to hear what others said, or why they said certain comments.

Listening, as described by Seccombe (2012), is a process which incorporates hearing the words of others, and interpreting what is being said with understanding. Gilbert struggled with hearing what others were saying and seemed absent-minded, and as this habit became routine, he did not think fully about his future or what he really wanted. In fact, Becky, Gilbert's intimate partner, asked him once in the film what he wanted out of life. Instead of mentioning his goals or chosen pursuits, he mentioned what he wanted for other members of his family. He heard what Becky asked, but did not properly interpret her question nor answer with a sense of thorough thought.

Becky, an enthusiastic and free-spirited young woman catches the attention of Gilbert. She represented the opposite of his persona. Becky was thoughtful, imaginative, and passionate. She thought about others, but also of her own dreams and passions. Becky challenged Gilbert to think differently, and to hope for a better future (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?).

Seccombe (2012) states that people tend to date those they are in close

proximity with, which is known as propinquity, also defined as geographical closeness. If Becky did not pass through Endora due to her grandmother's car breaking down on their travels, she and Gilbert would likely not have met, thus making propinquity a strong component of their relationship. Their relationship can best be compared to Sternberg's triangular theory of love, as cited by Seccombe (2012), which consists of three parts: passion, intimacy, and commitment. Sternberg's triangular theory of love defines passion as sexual attraction, intimacy as sharing information with trust and comfort, and commitment which includes short and long term decisions of both parties to love one another (Seccombe, 2012).

Gilbert and Becky were initially physically and sexually attracted to one another, and sharing several kisses as their attraction grew for one another, this portion of their relationship representing passion. Gilbert became intimate with Becky by sharing deep thoughts about his father's suicide and his struggle to take care of family members. Prior to meeting Becky, he did not share thoughts about his familial issues, though they impacted his life in many ways. Becky also opened up to Gilbert about her parent's divorce and goals. As their intimacy grew, they became comfortable with one another and developed a mutual understanding of commitment. They were committed in the short term through Gilbert asking Becky to come to Arnie's 18th birthday party, and Becky committing to this request, depicting loyalty within the relationship. Another sign of short term commitment within their relationship was Gilbert introducing Becky to his mother. If he did not have

strong feelings for Becky, he likely may have not introduced them to one another.

In the long term, Gilbert and Becky eventually stay together and travel with one another, illustrating their love did not end after Gilbert's mother's death (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?). Sternberg's triangular theory of love (as cited by Seccombe, 2012) solidly represents three integral parts of Gilbert and Becky's relationship, as well as the growth which blossomed from acquaintances to partners. Though Gilbert did not originally generate thoughts about his future, he eventually realized that hiding behind familial obligation with no thoughts about his goals was not healthy. He also opened up to a caring woman who showed concern not only to him, but his family members as well. She showed him that a way out of Endora was possible, as well as being happy and in love. The Parental role of the Grape kids

Three out of the four children of the Grape home had two large responsibilities: their mother, and brother Arnie. Throughout the film it becomes apparent that the Grape kids have tough responsibilities because of their circumstances, which include a mentally challenged brother and morbidly obese mother. These circumstances make for a harsh reality of what living in the Grape household is like. More importantly, the type of relationships each child has with their mother highlights different expectations for each individual in the household (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?). Seccombe (2012) describes cognitive skills of an individual child as having a strong impact on the type of relationship between the mother and each child, as well as the role each child may have in the family. It

can impact what chores a child may be assigned, type of discipline used, and the types of activities which are allowed for different children (Seccombe, 2012). Gilbert has quite a parental responsibility within the family because of his mother's high expectation of him to take care of Arnie. She also had depended on Gilbert financially because he mentioned having to work extra hours in order to aide her food consumption.

Gilbert's sisters had to help maintain the home and provide assistance to their mother for each meal by cooking and maintaining cleanliness (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?). The normal interaction between Gilbert and his mother is not very positive for most of the film because Gilbert has such large financial and caretaker responsibilities. If Gilbert's mother did not have limitations in her activity and mental health, their relationship may have been healthier. The other Grape children were also expected to take care of Arnie and help plan for Arnie's 18th birthday. Gilbert was usually stressed because Arnie became involved in dangerous activities, such as climbing up the town water tower or running away. The police put pressure mainly on Gilbert, as well as his siblings, and Gilbert constantly had to explain to his mother that he did not catch Arnie in time. Both Amy and Ellen felt uneven responsibility when the family discussed planning Arnie's birthday party, because they were in charge of components such as food and decorations, while they felt Gilbert did not have enough to do. However, Gilbert was mainly taking care of Arnie (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?).

A scene which strongly depicts Gilbert as a main parental figure shows Arnie eating part of his birthday cake that was purchased by Gilbert after the

original cake was destroyed. Gilbert yells at Arnie and becomes frustrated because he had to pay a lot for the cake and work extra hours to purchase the cake. Overall, Arnie's health played a large role in facilitating a parental responsibility upon his siblings. According to Lee, Chen, Wang, & Chen (2007), families with disabled children face a lot of stress financially and when it comes to babysitting, primarily because finding an adequate babysitter is not easy and it is also difficult for a parent to cope to see one's child suffer, as guilt is often associated between families with a severely disabled child. Arnie's condition created a familial team of help, because without the help of his siblings taking on a parental role, his well-being and their mother's well-being would have greatly suffered. Quality of home environment/Grape family dynamics

The Grapes had several hardships which placed high stress among individuals of the Grape family. The father committed suicide, the mother became severely depressed and used food as comfort, causing her to become severely obese, and she did not leave the house the last seven years of her life. Arnie was mentally handicapped, and financially the Grapes struggled. It was common for arguments to happen frequently based on who would take care of Arnie in situations, who would help with which chore, or one of the kids lashing out in anger. It was found by Conger, Wallace, Sun, Simons, McLoyd, & Brody (2002) that increased economic pressure brings about emotional distress among romantic partners. It is evident in the film that the family has struggled for a long time, and the Grape family had a total of five children which would not be easy to maintain without a lot of

economic support. It is possible that the Grape parents suffered in their relationship due to economic stress before the father committed suicide.

Further, this economic strain could have had a large effect on the Grape children. Within the “ Extension of the Family Stress Model to the Lives of Children” by Conger & Conger (2002), and Conger et. al., 2002, it was found that inconsistent, uninvolved, or harsh parenting can lead to children’s emotional and behavioral problems as well as impaired competence. The Grape children suffered from inconsistent parenting because their mother had psychological and emotional problems which left them to provide for the family. An example of the stress within the Grape family was during the discussion about Arnie’s birthday party, Ellen accused Gilbert of doing nothing to help with the party. She states that he does not ever do anything to help (What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?). Ellen was practicing the concept of “ polarization” (Seccombe, 2012), which is described as an individual viewing issues in black and white. Ellen felt Gilbert was not contributing enough to help plan the birthday event. In this instance she ignored all of the tasks he performs on a daily basis for the family, thus viewing his familial contribution as nothing because of one aspect he did not greatly contribute to (What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?).

Another example of the negative aspect of the Grape family dynamics is the aforementioned scene in which Arnie eats part of the new birthday cake Gilbert had to purchase. Gilbert already had worked very hard to be able to afford the cake, and having to spend more money on another cake would not have been feasible for their financial situation. Also, Gilbert confessed to



Becky that he had to work extra hours at one point to pay for the extra food his mother consumed, contributing to more financial strain (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?). Though there are many negative and stressful interactions within the Grape home, there were positive aspects of various relationships as well. Towards the end of the film, Gilbert's mother calls him her "knight in shimmering armor," and when he corrects her to say "shining" (since this is the original phrase), she implied he is not shining, but shimmering and glowing, hinting that he was a son she could be proud of. In that moment, it was as if she said thank you to Gilbert for what he had done for the family (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?).

Gilbert's mother was following the notion that women tend to communicate using conversation, and her words were not just to ask him or tell him information (typical of men), but to indicate love for her son through an emotional statement (Seccombe, 2012). This positive interaction leads to the concept of resilience, which is defined as being able to re-establish oneself as a stronger individual after events such as, trauma, adversity, misfortune, or other crises (Walsh, 2006). Though Gilbert experienced a lot of stress from his mother, he was able to accomplish resilience by finding and interact with her positively, and uplift her spirits towards the end of her life. He also moved from Endora and maintained a healthy relationship with Becky. If he did not experience resilience, he may have stayed angry with his mother and continued to put down his father who did not stay alive to support his family (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?).

There is also the concept of familial protective factors, defined by Seccombe (2012) as families using cohesion, affection, warmth to bring family together after crisis. Arnie was told by doctors he would not live to be age 10 (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?), but his family did not let the crisis of his handicap affect the support they provided him. He was given love and attention, and though he frustrated his family due to being rambunctious and having a lot of energy, they still provided him with attention and concern. A great example of this is celebrating his 18th birthday and on the day of the event creating a warm, inviting atmosphere. They used communication early on by communicating what was needed for his birthday party to make it very enjoyable. Instead of letting the original diagnosis keep their spirits down while raising Arnie, they focused on his needs and did not treat him as if he were going to die (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?). The systems theory explains that a family relies more on the sum of all parts as a collective, working system of relationships including subsystems such as, sibling relationships, parent-child relationships, and married couple types (Seccombe, 2012).

Gilbert is in a sibling subsystem with his younger brother, since they communicate very frequently and have a strong bond. The mother has a subsystem with each child and has different expectations for each, placing the most responsibility upon Gilbert, and favoring her disabled son. She relied on Amy, her eldest daughter to cook, and her youngest daughter to assist her siblings (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?). Gilbert struggles very much with figuring out his future because his family frequently rely on one

another, holding him back from envisioning his needs and wants, and his brother and mother both relied on him very much, which caused an emphasized role on becoming a father figure and caretaker for his brother and financially for the family. The children's mother would not be able to live without their consistent effort to purchase groceries, provide for their disabled son outside of the home, and maintain a tidy home (What's Eating Gilbert Grape?). What's Eating Gilbert Grape? depicts a family whom struggles with maintaining healthy roles and as well as healthy lifestyle. Given Ernie is handicapped and the mother has dealt with losing her husband, and main provider, the family automatically has an abnormal household.

However, most young people who are wondering what to do with their lives, seem to struggle enough to find their life's work or passions. If someone at such a young age is already a full time caretaker and emotional shoulder for their family to cry on, one can lose themselves in this recipe for disaster. Gilbert no longer has time for himself because his responsibilities inhibit him from pursuing life elsewhere. His mother had decided to stay housebound due to her obesity, so the family does not have a choice to leave. Everyone in town knows his disabled brother Ernie, so there is no need to re-introduce him to a new place where he could be subject to bullying. The Grape household is a depressing place to be, since the older siblings have taken on roles much older than what is appropriate for their ages. Their home is not in the best condition and could be setup better for Ernie to be able to engage in developmental appropriate activities, and the mother could eat a lot less

while she is at home (the unfortunate reason she is in this position after her husband's death).

The mother could have also received counseling at some point to combat emotional eating so that in turn, her children would not have to live in such a stressful environment. I feel bad that the children live in such a difficult environment. Though they receive love from their mother, they also do not live in a household that promotes going after dreams or goals. Ernie has become Gilbert's responsibility when in reality, the mother could have taken better care of herself to look after him. It is awful that their father committed suicide, but the family needs a strong foundation, and this large of a responsibility should not be placed on young teens and adults who are trying to build their life up. I agree that they should help take care of their brother and mother, but to the degree that it prevents their future from being bright, is not fair. All in all, I enjoyed observing positive and negative interactions within the Grape family because no family is perfect, and there was a light at the end of the tunnel for the Grape children.

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