

"What's Eating Gilbert Grape" shows that relationships are both stifling and essential to personal happiness.

What's Eating Gilbert Grape portrays many different types of relationships. Gilbert's relationships with his family can at times be both stifling and essential. "Endora is where we are...it's like dancing to no music." With Arnie needing Gilbert's care all of the time this relationship creates tension in his life. The new girl in town, Becky, creates a relationship quintessential for Gilbert's life. She helps to open Gilbert up to his life and that he can in fact go anywhere.

The Grape family consists of Gilbert, Ellen, Amy, Mama, Larry, and of course, Arnie. The Grape family lives in an isolated town of Endora in a house that seems to be in a mess since their father, Albert Grape, died. Gilbert's difficulty seems to have started when his father committed suicide seventeen years ago in their basement, which drove his mother to obesity and a life confined to their home. Gilbert's mother accepts that she has become a "burden" on him and sees how he feels ashamed and humiliated by her. Gilbert even regards his mother as "a beached whale," and at one point lifts a young boy to the window to see her almost like she is an animal at the zoo. Gilbert's mother is not his only complication; his pointless affair with a frustrated housewife, Betty Carver, whose rash sexual demands have placed much hesitation on him. His oldest sister Amy is a very caring woman that tries to take on many responsibilities herself and the youngest sister Ellen, who is only fifteen, has many issues with her family that she is trying to overcome. The "yearly ritual" of Gilbert and Arnie watching the caravans that pass through Endora show what looks like a suppressive relationship between the two.

Gilbert's brother Arnie, who is mentally challenged, needs constant supervision, which places many ongoing responsibilities on Gilbert. Arnie is not your average boy; he is mentally challenged and was not expected to live to see his tenth birthday, let alone, his eighteenth, which he surpasses in the movie. The relationship between Arnie and Gilbert is at times a very hard relationship. Always having to keep a look out for Arnie, clean Arnie, and take him places. All these things provide a relationship that at times can be stifling to Gilbert's own life. All Arnie is associated with many heights in the movie as he is regularly seen dangling from the roof, climbing trees, and of course, his ritual of climbing the water tower. Although Arnie loves the heights, he can not seem to conquer the depths of the family basement. "I don't want to go down there, Gilbert; Dad's down there," thus voicing the repressed fear that no one in the family will talk about or get over their father's death some years ago. Arnie's water tower escapades are a source of great aggravation to the police and the Grape family always saying that Gilbert should "do better". Arnie obtains a fear of water when Gilbert abandons him in the bathtub for the night, and does not overcome his apprehension until he flees to Becky after a fight he had with Gilbert. Water has always been seen as a time when good occurs so to have Arnie scared of the water is a big deal. One to which Becky easily fixes with her essential relationship with Gilbert and Arnie. At the same time this relationship with Arnie and Becky is one that is a main part of Gilbert's life.

Becky, a young girl that traveled into town with her grandmother and their caravan found romance with Gilbert and a certain connection with Arnie accordingly.