



Grey Gardens Discussion Guide

Director: Albert and David Maysles

Year: 1975

Time: 100 min

You might know this director from:

Gimme Shelter (1970)

Salesman (1968)

FILM SUMMARY

GREY GARDENS is the unbelievable but true story of Mrs. Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter Edie, the aunt and first cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. They live together in their decaying 28-room East Hampton mansion known as “Grey Gardens,” a place that has fallen so far into disrepair, and inhabited by so many cats and raccoons, that the local authorities once threatened to evict them for violating building and sanitation codes- an incident that made national headlines, catching the attention of their first cousin, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, who in the wake of this attention swept in and invested in repairing the estate.

Mrs. Beale, a.k.a. “Big Edie,” was a born aristocrat and trained as a soprano singer. Her daughter “Little Edie” was an aspiring actress of striking beauty who put her New York life on hold to care for her mother - and never left her side again. Together they descended into a strange life of dependence and eccentricity that no one had ever shared until the Maysles arrived with a camera and tape recorder, and introduced them to the world.

Big Edie and Little Edie have captivated international audiences and secured a devoted cult following. The film is regularly referred to in pop culture and the story has spawned numerous interpretations of their story, including Broadway musical and a feature film starring Drew Barrymore and Jessica Lange.

FILM THEMES

GREY GARDENS shows the complex relationship between mother and daughter who seem irrevocably entwined in each other's lives. Both women have rejected the privileges of their social caste, and consequently, have been rejected by the men of the family. It's questionable if the women are eccentric free spirits living life on their own terms or if they are suffering from mental illness and need support.

CO-DEPENDENCE AND FAMILY DYNAMICS

GREY GARDENS explores the mutually dependent relationship between mother and daughter that both seem to need, but don't want to accept. Co-dependence goes beyond typical caretaking or self-sacrifice and exhibits characteristics of martyrship, poor communication, denial, and problems with intimate relationships. Yet the Beale's are not alone. Research has shown that people raised in a dysfunctional family setting or with an ill parent are far more likely to become co-dependent.

ROLE OF FILMMAKERS

The role of documentary filmmakers is often up for debate. When it comes to observational documentaries, filmmakers must build trust with their subjects but also not interfere, and capture private moments without invading the subject's privacy. When GREY GARDENS was released, film critics accused the Maysles of exploiting the Beale's, yet it is clear that both women willingly participated in the film and trusted the filmmakers, who at least attempted to follow a traditional code of conduct. We often hear the filmmakers reminding the Beale's to treat them like flies on the wall, but the women persist in throwing conventions aside and interact with the filmmakers like old friends.

FILM AS METAPHOR

Much like their sprawling house, the Beales are in a progressive state of decay. It could be said that the film's depiction of Grey Gardens is a metaphor for Big and Little Edie's psychological state. By telling the story of Grey Garden's in parallel with the women's stories, we are able to understand far more than what is revealed on the surface. While the Beale's might like to be seen as eccentric outsiders, the house tells another, far more troubling story of their mental state.

MONEY AS PRIVILEGE

The film raises questions about the consequences of rejecting social norms, especially for those in a "privileged" social class. It is unclear if Big Edie is just free-spirited, or if she's in denial about having been abandoned. Little Edie sees 'living life on her own terms' as a romantic concept, yet she is stuck somewhere between her mother and her dreams. Both are cut off from the men in their family and only receive much-needed support when there is a risk of spoiling the family's reputation in the press.

“You get very independent when you live alone. You get to be a real individual.”

Big Edie

“Last summer, out that broken window, when I screamed at Mother for the first time—‘It’s boring, boring, boring here! I’ll go anywhere to be free!’”

Little Edie

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Do you think Big and Little Edie are free spirits who want to live life on their own terms, or are they mentally ill, or both?

2. When GREY GARDENS first came out, directors David and Albert Maysles were accused of unethical filmmaking. They were criticized for framing the Beales in a manner that took advantage of the women. Do you agree or disagree? And why so?

3. Why didn't Little Edie ever get married? Was her mother to blame?

4. None of the wealthy men of the Beale family, either ex-husband/father Phelan Beale, nor sons/brothers, were willing to financially support Big and Little Edie. How do you feel about this? What would you have done if you were in their shoes?

5. Though Little Edie constantly disagrees with her mother and says she is bored of living at Grey Gardens, she doesn't leave. What do you think keeps her there?

6. Do you think the film would have become the cult classic it is if Big and Little Edie hadn't been related to Jacqueline Kennedy Onasis?

7. Do we have a different relationship to the film because the filmmakers, David and Albert Maysles, are clearly present in the film and therefore a part of the story? What is the role of documentary filmmakers? How intertwined should they become in other peoples' lives and stories?

8. Do you think the filmmakers would have made the same film, revealing all the details they did in GREY GARDENS, had Big and Little Edie been members of their own family?

9. Despite their eccentricities, by the end of the film do you like, or even admire, Big Edie? How about Little Edie?

10. What is your experience with co-dependent relationships, particularly between parents and children? Why do you think Big Edie and Little Edie could not separate, despite how critical they could of one another?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Little Edie's older brother, Phelan Jr., moved to Oklahoma and never came back.
- Two years after Big Edie died in 1977, Little Edie sold the house to Sally Quinn and Benjamin C. Bradlee, who undertook a massive renovation.
- Ben Bradlee, who bought Grey Gardens, was at the time of the purchase, the executive editor of The Washington Post.
- Big Edie was the sister of Black Jack Bouvier (Jackie Kennedy's father).
- Big and Little Edie often listened to Norman Vincent Peale, a minister and author famous for promoting the "power of positive thinking," which is also the title of one of his books.
- Lee Radziwill, mentioned throughout GREY GARDENS, was the younger sister of the late First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.
- Two Bouvier sisters, Jacqueline Onassis and Lee Radziwill, approached Albert and David Maysles about doing a documentary about their family. After several months of shooting, the Maysles decided there wasn't enough material for a movie focused on Jackie and Lee - but there seemed to be for a film about their eccentric relatives Edith and Edie.
- Directors Albert and David Maysles were brothers and collaborators. They are known for Gimme Shelter (1970) and Salesman (1968), but shot a total of 41 films.
- Growing up, Albert Maysles always held an interest in photography. Though he is best known for his work in direct cinema, Albert did not begin his career as a filmmaker. He got a Master of Arts from Boston University where he taught psychology for three years before making the switch to film. He took a trip to Russia to photograph a mental hospital and returned the next year with a camera that CBS gave him to film his first documentary.
- Jean-Luc Godard once called Albert Maysles "the best American cameraman".
- Little Edie died On January 9, 2002 at the age of 84.
- Designer Marc Jacobs created the "Little Edie" bag for his Fall 2007 collection.
- "Grey Gardens," the 2009 Emmy Award-winning made-for-television movie for HBO, starred Jessica Lange as "Big Edie" and Drew Barrymore as "Little Edie," with Jeanne Tripplehorn portraying Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Invite your friends and relatives into the bizarre world of GREY GARDENS.
2. Learn more about mental illness, its causes and what scientists are learning about brain function. According to the International Mental Health Research Organization, it's the #1 cause of adult disability worldwide.
3. Nearly every family has a "black sheep". Whether it's a sibling, cousin or lonely grandparent, or you are the black sheep yourself, consider spending time together, speaking openly and honestly with each other, and offering each other support. Appreciate the individual gifts, talents, and quirks of each your family members.
4. Big and Little Edie both cared deeply for animals. Consider adopting your next pet from an animal shelter or donate to an organization who works to advance the safety and well-being of animals.