

FAMILY AND SEPARATION

Once Upon My Mother (2025)

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The purpose of this material is to support the professional preparation for helping conversations in the frame of “Filmteràpiàs Filmklub” (Film-therapy - Filmclub). Its main goal is to help professionals start sensitisation, psycho-educational and self-reflective conversations with adolescents and young adults. It aims to provide the professionals facilitating the sessions with a structured psychological point of reference for the interactive conversation about the film *Once Upon My Mother* (2025) with particular focus on family relationships, changes in parent-child dynamics, and issues of separation and autonomy.

Processing the film creates an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their own family experiences, the dilemmas and ambivalent emotions occurring during the transition to adulthood within the safe framework of a fictional story. The sessions focus on investigating how parent-child relationships change in adolescence and young adulthood, what conflicts may appear between attachment and autonomy and how love and care can, despite their original function, turn into a restrictive and burdensome experience. The discussion about the film supports young people in reflecting more consciously on their own emotions, responses and needs for boundaries, in drawing more awareness on the resources and difficulties occurring in family relationships while developing a more understanding perspective toward parental behaviours and challenges. This material does not aim to judge or label but to support a more nuanced and complex understanding. The emphasis is on helping young people recognise that conflicts, ambivalent feelings and difficulties with separation are normative developmental phenomena at this age, which, when processed within appropriate frameworks, can contribute to identity development, emotional maturity and the strengthening of relational competencies. The processing dialogue provides an opportunity for enhancing self-awareness, developing social skills and promoting sensitivity among peers.

This material offers thematic aspects and questions for conversations. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the boundaries between these topics might be blurred, therefore it is not necessary to stick to the given structure, but to adapt it to the needs and dynamics of the group. Processing the topics is scaffolded by a wide range of materials and activities that help participants' active involvement and collective thinking. During the discussion, it is useful to prevent the shared experiences from becoming too intimate, since in a group setting it may cause anxiety. The role of the facilitator is to support participants in verbalising their experiences, but prevent the dialogue from becoming too personal. It might be useful, for instance, to help self-reflection with general examples, and questions that create a safe environment for expressing emotions, but at the same time avoid the risk of excessive self-disclosure. However, it is important to provide the possibility for sharing personal thoughts and experiences if needed. It is useful to emphasise empathy, acceptance of different perspectives, and the fact that there are more than one answer to a question.

1. Tuning in - First Impressions and Emotional Resonance

Sharing the first impressions and emotional experiences in connection with the film can help participants initiate self-reflection and begin thinking about their own inner processes within a safe framework. This phase of the discussion promotes the development of emotional awareness in adolescence and young adulthood, which is one of the key elements of self-awareness at this stage of life. When young people reflect on how the film affected them, they also practice identifying and verbalising their own emotional responses, which helps them to handle and communicate their feelings with greater awareness. The questions supporting tuning-in do not require deep or personal self-disclosure, but they create an opportunity for young people to express their experiences and impressions. In order to minimise potential anxiety, it is beneficial to emphasise at the beginning that each and every personal experience is valid and valued. Sharing feelings and associations create a shared experience, since the members of the group recognise that others have similar emotions and thoughts, which strengthens the connection and the feeling of security. All of these ensure that the processing discussion begins in an open, honest and safe atmosphere, laying the foundation for further collaborative work on heavier topics.

Conversation Starter Questions

- What feelings did the film leave you with?
- Which scenes had the greatest impact on you?
- If you had to describe the atmosphere or message of the film with one word, what would it be?

2. Suffocating Maternal Love and Overprotection - Processing the Film Experience and Seeking Points of Identification

The main topic in the film *Once Upon A Time... My Mother* is the parent - child relationship in which love, care and concern gradually turn into overprotection. The film portrays sensitively how parental love - despite its original intention - can transform into a "suffocating" force that undermines the child's autonomy, especially when parents connect to their children through their own fear, loss, desire and unprocessed emotions. Psychological overprotection refers to a disturbance in the parent - child relationship in which otherwise beneficial and normative parenting functions become extreme, resulting in excessive protective, supportive and controlling behaviours. In such cases parents become excessively involved in their children's everyday lives and attempt to monitor and control every aspect of their experiences (Csomortáni, 2014; Rousseau & Scharf, 2015). They see the natural challenges of life as potential dangers and try to neutralise all obstacles and conflicts occurring in their children's lives, however, in the long run, this attitude prevents their children from forming autonomy and makes it harder for them to get ready for adult roles (Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, Bauer, Murphy, 2012). Overprotective parents tend to project their own anxieties to

their children, often reinforcing their dependency by communicating the message that they are incapable of coping independently, thereby maintaining an infantilised and subordinate relationship (Csomortáni, 2014). Psychological control through hidden forms of manipulation, such as emotional pressure, guilt induction, excessive criticism, limits the child's psychological autonomy and development (Csomortáni, 2014).

While processing the film, it is aimed to create a safe and indirect space for reflection where participants can explore relational and developmental issues - that might be relevant for their lives too - through a fictional story. This phase of the processing offers an indirect approach. Young people can examine important issues through the characters' eyes. They are able to reflect on such topics as autonomy, the tension between attachment and detachment, the ambivalent nature of parental love and control and the consequences of overprotection without having to talk about their own family background. Even though the emotional life of young people (especially adolescents) is intense, they often struggle with verbalising and expressing their emotions, problems and anxieties. They often reflect on the decisions of a fictional character more easily, since this includes less personal involvement and makes it unnecessary to talk about their own insecurities and vulnerabilities. The film thus provides a projective space that creates an opportunity for participants to project their own experiences, insecurities, attempts at separation or conflicts of loyalties to the characters and situations occurring in the film.

This indirect approach helps with self-reflection while maintaining a safe emotional distance from excessive self-disclosure. The film-related personal associations create an opportunity for the participants to explore their own lives and relationships gradually, shifting slightly away from the narrative of the film to their own realities. The group discussion works as a model: it helps participants practice forming opinions, listening to others' perspectives and expressing thoughts within a safe and structured framework. This helps young people form a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of parent-child relationships and it prepares the ground for subsequent, more reflective processing that addresses issues of autonomy, separation, and reconnection.

In the course of processing the film *Once Upon A Time... My Mother*, the theme of "too much love" can easily activate loyalty conflicts, guilt or internal ambivalence in the participants. During adolescence and emerging adulthood, it is common for young people to experience a complex mixture of gratitude, attachment, and tension toward parental care. The role of the facilitator in this phase is to prevent the discussion from becoming judgemental or polarising (good vs. bad parent), and keep the complex and nuanced approach. It is beneficial to emphasise that experiencing love and tension, attachment and detachment simultaneously is normative at this age. It is not that the parents intend harm, rather, it reflects that the child's developmental needs are changing. It is also helpful to acknowledge that a behaviour may be well-intended, even though its impact can still be restrictive or burdensome. Avoid comparisons and judgments. The emphasis must be on the fact that different relationship patterns have different effects.

Conversation Starter Questions

- **How would you describe the mother-child relationship depicted in the film?** Which elements of the relationship do you find supportive or exemplary? Were there any relationship dynamics or behavioural patterns that you experienced as burdensome or restrictive, that you would not wish to see in your own life or relationships?
- **At which points did you feel that, despite the mother's good intentions and care, her presence was no longer supportive but rather had a hindering effect on her son?** How did you, as a viewer, experience the excessive love, concern and control depicted in the film? Did you notice any scenes in which the boundaries between care and control were particularly blurred? Why do you think it is difficult for a parent to keep these boundaries?
- **What impact do you think it has on a young person if the mother's presence is so strong that it sometimes feels suffocating?** What messages might a young person receive when love is regularly accompanied with control and excessive concern? What impact does this have on a young person's self-confidence, ability to make decisions or the perception of their own boundaries?
- **How did the boy react to the behaviour of his mother?** Were there examples in the film where the child gave feedback to the parent, set boundaries or communicated their needs? How did the mother react to this and what impact did it have on the dynamics of the relationship? In what ways can a child or adolescent signal to their parents that they need more independence and personal space?

3. The Conflicts of Parent-Child Relationship in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

During adolescence, the structure and emotional climate of the parent-child relationship undergo significant changes. Adolescence is the time of rearranging social relationships: young people gradually become more independent, separate from their parents, while peer relationships gain more importance (Nowell, Pfeifer, Enticott, Silk, & Vijayakumar, 2023). They expect more emotional support from their peers and romantic partners while parents may still function as a "safe harbour" (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). The parent-child relationship, characterised by hierarchy and dependence in childhood, begins to transform in adolescence (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). This phase is often full of tension and conflicts since adolescents try to extend their independence and parents need to adjust to the changes in the parent-child relationship. The development of autonomy manifests at both intrapsychic and relational levels (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). At an intrapsychic level, adolescents begin to perceive their parents in a more realistic way, there is a decrease in idealisation, and an increase in forming individual opinion

and creating personal values. At a relational level, this manifests in an increase in the freedom of decision making, a decrease in parental control and in more frequent conflicts and testing boundaries. The hormonal and neurological changes of puberty intensify the need for autonomy, while the systems responsible for behavioural regulation mature more slowly, creating tension between parental and adolescent expectations (Branje, 2018). According to the Expectancy Violation Theory, parents and adolescents think about the transformation of autonomy, responsibility, and control at different rates, and conflicts create opportunities for the renegotiation of these expectations. If this process succeeds, parents gradually decrease control, and the relationship becomes closer and more balanced with time. According to Smetana's (2011) research the conflicts often originate from the different categorisation of the same question by parents and children. While parents often see certain behaviours as conventional or moral questions (eg.: style, friendships, timetables), adolescents see them more as personal matters (autonomy, right to make decisions). When it comes to moral questions they tend to acknowledge parental authority and rules, however, for issues categorised by them as a part of the personal domain, obedience is considered less legitimate. This differentiated way of thinking shows that adolescents do not generally oppose parental regulation, but instead reevaluate its legitimacy and boundaries (Smetana, 2011).

During early and middle adolescence (12-16), the amount of turbulent relationships increases - characterised by low support, high rate of conflict and strong parental control occurring simultaneously, while the frequency of authoritative (i.e., supportive yet highly controlling) relationships decreases (Hadiwijaya, Klimstra, Vermont, Branje, & Meeus, 2017). During this period, the frequency and intensity of conflicts typically increase and emotional distancing intensifies, often accompanied by a temporary deterioration in the relationship, authority conflicts, and emotional fluctuations (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). For many young people this period is about questioning parental authority and an intensified need for autonomy (Hadiwijaya, Klimstra, Vermont, Branje, & Meeus, 2017). Cognitive development, especially the increasing capacity for abstract thinking, creates an opportunity for adolescents to perceive parental authority in a critical way, and to view an increasing number of issues as falling within their own sphere of personal decision - making (Branje, 2018). During late adolescence and emerging adulthood (16-20) however, in ideal circumstances, the relationship undergoes a qualitative transformation: reciprocity, greater equality, a more realistic view of the parents, autonomy and attachment occur simultaneously (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). A significant shift towards harmonious relationships can be observed, an increased number of young people report on more supportive and equal parent - child relationships (Hadiwijaya, Klimstra, Vermunt, Branje, & Meeus, 2017). Parents reduce control gradually, and family decision making processes are more commonly based on compromises between adolescents and parents (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Relationships are considered adaptive when both parties can experience negative emotions during conflicts without getting stuck in them, while still being able to express them. On the other hand, emotional rigidity makes it harder for the relationship to reorganise and can reduce its overall quality (Branje, 2018).

So that the parent-child relationships could be processed in a safe and development-oriented way, it is crucial to emphasise that conflicts at this age are not abnormalities but rather natural components of the developmental process. Communication about this topic helps with the normalisation of conflicts, and decreases the possibility of

young people seeing these conflicts exclusively as the deterioration of relationships or as their own personal fault. The discussion creates an opportunity for recognising that conflicts often arise from differences in perspectives. It is beneficial for the participants to understand the difference between parental intentions (safety, protection, responsibility) and its subjective effects (restriction, control, pressure). This division helps with avoiding simplified and polarised narratives ('good' vs 'bad' parents). It is useful to direct the discussion towards the question of '*What can help?*'. What communication techniques or changes can support the reorganisation of the relationship. This provides a perspective of hope and decreases the feeling of helplessness. The collective thinking of constructive conflict management improves young people's ability for changing perspectives and contributes to establish healthy relationships based on reciprocity. Working through this topic helps not only with family relationships but can also be transferred to romantic, work and other social relationships. The facilitator needs to emphasise that it is possible to love parents and still be critical about some of their functions at the same time. Communicating ambivalent feelings is not the lack of loyalty but a component of emotional maturity. It is important to support the participants in recognising that underlying conflicts are often unspoken feelings and needs. Verbalising feelings helps understand relationships and offers an opportunity against quarrels merely based on rules or power. The aim is making young people understand their reactions, feelings and need for boundaries more nuanced. While formulating the questions it is important to avoid personal disclosure. Talking about general and typical situations provide a safe space for the participants to share information within their own boundaries.

Conversation Starter Questions:

- **What changes can be observed in the parent- child relationship when the child enters adolescence?** What is behind all these changes? (eg.: stronger need for autonomy, peer relationships, testing boundaries) How does the role of the parents change in adolescence and emerging adulthood? What previously controlled parenting and educational functions do they need to let go? What are the new roles and functions that can occur in the relationship?
- **What do you think is considered as 'too strict' or 'too permissive' parenting?** In your opinion, what emotional effects does overly strict parenting or the lack of boundaries have on a young person? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these parenting styles from the perspective of their children? How does these strategies affect the formation of autonomy, feeling of security, self-confidence and the sense of responsibility?
- **What types of expectations do young people need to face in family settings?** (eg.: academic performance, behaviour, responsibility, loyalty, emotional roles, future plans) How can these expectations be perceived by young people? For instance, as supportive guidance, spoken or unspoken pressure or restraining duties? How do you think family expectations affect young people's self-confidence, decision making processes and need for autonomy? Under what circumstances can these expectations become motivating and when can they transform into excessive pressure or anxiety-inducing factors?
- **It can often be observed that the number and intensity of conflicts increase at the beginning of adolescence.** Along which themes do these parent-child conflicts most frequently occur? **What differences can be**

observed in the ways parents and adolescents interpret the same situations and decision making issues? How does these differences appear in time management, friendship circles, independent decision making or in taking responsibilities? Do you think this indicates the deterioration of the relationship or a natural component of separation and independence?

- **How can young people and their parents handle conflicts in a way that preserves or enhances the quality of their relationship, even when they have different opinions?** What factors help prevent a disagreement from escalating into an argument at home? What is the significance of expressing not only rules and expectations but also feelings and needs during conflicts? In your opinion, what factor can promote the development of a parent-child relationship towards a more mutual, cooperative, and egalitarian dynamic during the transition to adulthood? What changes are necessary on the part of both parents and adolescents to support this development?

4. Detachment and Reconnection - The Transformation of Parent-Child Relationship in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

One of the central developmental tasks of adolescence and emerging adulthood is the emotional detachment from parents and building an independent identity (Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011). Young people need to restructure their relationships with parents which is a necessary requirement for developing a mature adult identity (Kavčič, & Zupančič, 2019). Identity development and separation-individuation are interrelated psychosocial developmental traits. Their aim is to support the development of a healthy autonomy on both individual and social level (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). According to the “second individuation” process theory of Blos (2016), one of the main tasks of adolescents’ identity development is to override earlier parental internalisations and develop a new and independent ego structure (Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005, Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Healthy individuation means the redefinition of parent-child relationship, in which the individual is able to function autonomously while maintaining the possibility of psychological connection as well (Zupančič, Komidar, & Puklek Levpuscek, 2012). The characteristics of this new type of relationship are reciprocity and the striving for an adult-adult relationship based on equality (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Separation, therefore, does not mean isolation but a shift in the dynamics of the attachment (Koepke, 2012). Emotional detachment is a psychological distancing where the young person stops defining themselves alongside the opinions, feedback or approval of the parents (Sugimura, Hihara, Hatano, Nakama, Saiga, & Tsuzuki, 2023). Transitions, such as adolescence and emerging adulthood, are particularly sensitive phases of the development of family structures because they require new role expectations, boundary rules and emotional balance (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2011).

Identity and dynamics of parental relationships are temporally dynamic and flexibly organised systems that develop through social transactional interactions in which both young people and parents appear as active agents (Koepke, 2012; Reis, Buhl, 2008). Parents appear in their children’s lives not only as value mediators but also as identity organisers (Koepke & Denissen, 2012).

The parents face their own developmental traits (e.g.: redefinition of parental roles, letting go, re-evaluation of their own identity), that also have an effect on the

relationship (Koepke, 2012). They often react to their children's independence based on their own unresolved past conflicts which create such dynamics that can hinder the natural process of individuation (Zupančič, Komidar, & Puklek Levpuscek, 2012). Parents, often unconsciously, prevent their children from individuation (e.g.: guilt induction, overprotection, psychological control), and children often internalise their parents' fears and associate the striving for independence with anxiety that might lead to different pathological patterns (Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011). Too much dependency, denial and engulfment are all such maladaptive patterns that reflect a disruption in the balance between autonomy and attachment (Kavčič & Zupančič, 2019). It is crucial that parents handle their children's striving for independence flexibly (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). A mature parent-child relationship can handle ambivalence, expansion of boundaries and acceptance of differences (Zupačič, Komidar, & Puklek Levpuscek, 2012). The "independent autonomy " is the foundation of an optimal identity development, since it creates opportunities for young people to make independent decisions and detach emotionally so that the trusting and supportive nature of the relationship is preserved (Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005; Sugimura, Hihara, Hatano, Nakama, Saiga, & Tsuzuki, 2023). This ensures the stability of identity, the mutual development of mature attachment and independence (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). Families characterised by sensitive supportive interactions experience less difficulties (Brianje, 2018). The degree of emotional separation correlates with age , while parental trust stagnates or shows minimal decrease (Sugimura, Hihara, Hatano, Nakama, Saiga, & Tsuzuki, 2023).

Individuation is not an isolated event but a long-term developmental process which gains particular importance from the beginning of adolescence to the end of young adulthood (Zupancic, Komidar, & Puklek Levpuscek, 2012). Individuation is an active process in emerging adulthood as well which is strongly influenced by significant transitions in life, such as graduation, romantic relationships or financial independence (Reis, & Buhl, 2008). These transitions are accompanied with increased psychological sensitivity, so when it comes to adaptation family support becomes critical (Isik, Akin, Breeman, & Branje, 2024).

It is important to emphasise that separation does not mean disengagement but the rearrangement of the relationship: the relationship based on dependency gradually transforms into a more equal one. This helps reduce feelings of guilt and loyalty conflicts that often occur in connection with this topic. The discussion about this topic helps normalise the difficulties of separation and reduce the risk of young people interpreting their feelings as ingratitude, egoism or failure. One of the tasks of the facilitator is to emphasise that it is possible to experience the desire for independence and the need for connection at the same time. Controversial feelings are natural parts of development. It is beneficial to facilitate the discussion so that the feelings of both young people's and parents' sides become visible. This helps avoid blaming narratives and support empathy as well as develop the ability for changing perspectives. The overview of long-term consequences (eg.: the effects of stalled or conflicted separation) creates an opportunity for young people to think ahead about their relationship patterns, and identify the protective role of gradual, communication based separation not only in the family but also in later romantic and adult relationships. The important message is that separation is not an irreversible process, halts and conflicts can be rethought or rearranged later. It can be particularly helpful for those who experience their situation as hard or compromised.

Conversation Starter Questions

- **What do you think separation from parents mean in adolescence and young adulthood? Is it more like distancing, independence or the transformation of the relationship?** What is the difference between Individuation and complete emotional cutoff from parents? What difficulties do young people face when they want to become independent but also preserve the relationship with their parents?
- **Why can separation be hard for both young people and parents?** What emotions may occur on both sides? (E.g.: insecurity, fear, loss, guilt, ambivalence) What can young people lose, even if only temporarily, during individuation? What can they gain simultaneously? What can make the period of separation particularly difficult for parents? What support can you lean on during individuation (friends, school, workplace, hobbies)?
- **How can a young person experience more freedom and responsibilities?** What emotions may arise in this transitional period? (E.g.: liberation, insecurity, anxiety, pride) What conflicts may appear when your own desires do not align with parental expectations or previous patterns?
- **What are the things you want to decide independently about?** Why do you think these are the things that are important to decide independently about? What needs are in connection with these? (E.g.: self expression, taking responsibility, authenticity) What emotions do you experience when you have real choice in these situations? What happens when someone else is making decisions for you? Do you think there are areas where it is easier to accept parental guidance or restrictions and ones where it is more difficult?
- Have you ever experienced a situation where you felt parental presence in your decisions too much? In what situation was this particularly prominent? How did you react in these situations? What emotions occurred? (E.g.: anger, guilt, helplessness, ambivalence) What makes it particularly hard to articulate your needs? (E.g.: fear of conflict, loyalty, guilt, fear of refusal) How do you or can you signal towards your parents if you needed more space, independence, trust? What forms of communication could work well and which ones could not?
- **What long-term effects can occur if the process of individuation gets stuck, is prolonged or happens abruptly, with conflicts?** How can this affect young people's independence, stability of their identity, and self-confidence? What effect can stuck individuation have on young people's ability to make decisions, take responsibilities, or make mistakes? Do you think it is possible to rearrange a stuck individuation later on as well? What factors can support this?(mature communication, support from outside, time)
- **What does it mean that the parent-child relationship transforms into an adult-adult relationship with time?** What new qualities appear in this relationship? What is the difference between a relationship based on reciprocity and one where the parents have more as a controlling or guiding role? What new form of connection to your parents may occur? (E.g.: shared activity, humour, shared decision) what would you like to preserve from the relationship after individuation as well?

5. Closing Round - Thoughts to Take Away

This round helps with integration and closes the emotionally demanding process. It plays a key role in both the safety of the students and the follow -up. The discussed themes can be emotionally moving for the participants, especially if they are personally affected. That is why it is crucial to take enough time for reflection and create an opportunity for them to share their thoughts and experience about the session. They should be given time to articulate the lessons they learned, to connect to their feelings in order to close the session successfully. This closure supports psychological integration and emotional security. It would be beneficial to close the discussion with a question that focuses on the takeaway rather than the mistakes. It is beneficial to inform the participants about further possibilities to get help if it is needed (school psychologist, trusted adult, etc).

Conversation Starter Questions:

- What was the most memorable thing you heard today?
- What feelings arouse during the day?
- What is it that you take with you from today's session?

FAMILY

ONCE UPON MY MOTHER

(2025)

1. Introduction

The film *Once Upon My Mother* (Ma mère, Dieu et Sylvie Vartan. Ken Scott, 2025) is a bittersweet work infused with charming humour. It portrays a close-knit family and an unwavering mother-child relationship unfolding along the triad of illness, faith and love evoking intense emotions for the entire family.

It is Ken Scott sits in the director's chair and *Once Upon My Mother* marks his seventh feature film. He previously established himself with light-hearted "buddy" comedies such as *Starbuck* (2011), *Delivery Man* (2013), *Unfinished Business* (2015), or *The Extraordinary Journey of the Fakir* (2018). *Once Upon My Mother* represents his first venture into melodrama, while still incorporating the director's characteristic comic sensibility and the nostalgia typical of a generational mood film.

The film is based on the autobiographical novel of Roland Perez. Roland was born in 1963 in Paris as the sixth and youngest child of a Sephardic Jewish couple. His story begins as a tragedy: he is born with a clubfoot, which in the 1960-ies was considered an incurable and lifelong disability. Doctors, as well as many friends and acquaintances, attempt to comfort the family by encouraging them to accept the inevitable, claiming that the boy will never be able to live a full life. Roland's mother, Esther, however, the mother, Esther, refuses to accept this prognosis. She rejects medical aids that would label his son as disabled and continuously searches for alternative therapies that might help him walk and lead a full life. The film portrays Roland's long period of quiet anticipation, while his mother – guided by her faith and belief in alternative medicine - works tirelessly to improve his son's condition. This anticipation lasts for years, sometimes marked by forced stillness while straps and corrective devices do their work. During this time, the family, led by Esther develops a kind of cult around the French singer, Sylvie Vartan in order to distract Roland from boredom. The singer's persona becomes a symbolic point of reference for the family, conveying to Roland the reassuring message that everything will soon be fine. Meanwhile, Roland spends much of his time watching television from his bed. Through the screen, the events of contemporary France unfold before him: political and cultural developments, tabloid stories, and significant historical turning points. The film draws on these moments with a gentle sense of nostalgia, making it easy for the viewer to become immersed in the whirlwind of years that pass around the bed-bound boy. Eventually one of the treatments proves to be successful and Roland is able to stand on his feet again. This marks the beginning of the second phase of his life. Although he can now walk freely, he soon realises that while during he has changed during those years, but his mother has not. Esther continues to surround him with the same intensity of passion, care and love as before – an affection that gradually becomes suffocating as Roland attempts to live his own life, build a family and make independent decisions. In time, he recognises that this circle of overprotection his mother created may continue to shape his life indefinitely.

Thus, *Once Upon My Mother* becomes suitable for analysis from multiple perspectives. It may be interpreted as a work that belongs to the tradition of films employing the classical cinematic trope of the mother-child relationship, or it may also be approached from a psychoanalytic perspective, drawing on the theories of Freud, Jung and Lacan regarding the role of the mother in the development of the individual. At the same time, the film can also be examined through contemporary concepts such as the “toxic mother” or the “helicopter-parent “. In this context, these notions should not be used as psychological diagnoses, but rather as interpretative frameworks that highlight the tension between close parental care and delayed individuation surrounding the protagonist.

2. Remarkable Mothers, Remarkable Children - Cinematic Precedents of *Once Upon My Mother*

The depiction of the mother-child relationship is widely regarded as a classic trope in film history. When referring to this motif, it is also important to acknowledge that the figure of the woman and mother has long served as a conceptual foundation in mythology and art history. Even the earliest representations of this theme portray womanhood not merely in a narrative or emotional role, but as an ontological principle associated with the forces of nature - earth, water, grain, fertility and nourishment – and, in Greek mythology, with the very idea of genesis and creation.

The symbolism of this connection has also been inherited by cinema. Whenever filmmakers portray maternal figures protecting their children and preserving the integrity of the family unit, they draw on these early archetypes, ancient patterns and cultural norms. The cinematic offers a particularly effective framework for both the literal and symbolic representation of these patterns. *Once Upon My Mother* and the autobiographical book on which it is based present the personal story of Roland Perez. Yet, as the title itself suggests, the narrative ultimately focuses more on the mother than on the miraculously recovered boy. In order to better understand this maternal figure, it is helpful to consider two recurring cinematic tropes: the self-sacrificing mother and the smothering mother. In the film, Esther’s character delicately balances between these two maternal archetypal poles.

a. The Self-Sacrificing Mother

The trope of the self-sacrificing mother already appeared during the era of classical Hollywood cinema and soon became connected with emerging genres such as film noir. One of the classic examples within the noir tradition that centres on this maternal figure is *Mildred Pierce*, the adaptation of the novel by James M. Cain. From this point onward, the trope developed further, gradually breaking down into a variety of narrative and character variations, that continues to shape cinematic representations of motherhood to this day. This enduring influence can also be observed in *Once Upon My Mother*, where the motif of maternal sacrifice plays a central role.

A typical subgenre within this tradition focuses on films in which mothers caring for a sick child (husband, partner) occupy the central role. In these narratives, the moral

compass of the story is often defined by the mother's response to the illness: she becomes the primary source of support for the patient and is willing to make sacrifices in order to protect and advocate for them. Two recurring motifs frequently structure these stories: illness and talent. Illness manifests in the physical body and while talent often appears as a form of intellectual, emotional or creative potential. The dramatic stakes typically revolve around whether the mother can challenge the stigma imposed by society on the sick or disabled child and help both the child and the surrounding community recognise the individual's capabilities and possibilities. In doing so, the mother symbolically opens a path towards the future. Even if she cannot "repair" the body, she transforms the experience of disability into a form of moral strength and social recognition. Numerous films illustrate the trope of the self-sacrificing mother in film history: *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989), *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), *All About My Mother* (Todo sobre mi madre, Pedro Almodovar, 1999), *The Sea Inside* (Mar adentro, Alejandro Amenábar, 2004), *The Sessions* (Ben Lewin, 2012), *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990), *The Theory of Everything* (James Marsh, 2014), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (Le scaphandre et le papillon, Julian Schnabel, 2007).

Approximately halfway through *Once Upon My Mother*, the image of maternal presence begins to split in two contrasting forms. The first half of the film is clearly dominated by the figure of the self-sacrificing mother. Esther reorganises the entire life of the family in order to create the conditions in which her quiet, clubfooted son can live happily. In doing so, she comes into conflict with numerous people and institutions, including child protection services which at one point attempt to remove the boy from the family. Esther refuses to send him to school because she fears he might become the victim of cruelties of the outside world. At the same time, the boy's illness is deeply repressed within the family: it is symbolically exiled from the family's collective psyche. It becomes almost forbidden to speak about it, and Esther also rejects medical aids and prosthetics, since these would make the disability more visible. For Roland, the family's flat functions simultaneously as the domain of childhood and the domain of illness and isolation. It is the place where he plays with his siblings, but also the place where his physical limitations confine him. The family's relationship to the illness is also shaped by the mother's faith. Faith and illness functions as a kind of binary opposition. The illness must not be spoken about because naming it would make it real and visible; faith, on the other hand, must constantly be spoken aloud, because only through this repeated affirmation can divine help be invoked. In this way, faith becomes the family's primary strategy for coping with the boy's condition.

b. The Trope of the Smothering Mother

The trope of the smothering mother in cinema offers insight in an even more complex set of problems than the model of the self-sacrificing mother. In cinematic representations, this type of maternal figure *is* more than simply a negatively coded parent; rather she functions as a structural element that exposes the fragile boundaries of the mother-child relationship, particularly at the point where the child's autonomy is threatened and the foundations of individual identity begin to weaken. In these depictions, the mother is not necessarily portrayed as an evil or overtly toxic character. Instead, her presence becomes troubling precisely because of the boundlessness of her love and encouragement. This excessive emotional closeness penetrates the

child's psychological space and disrupts the process of separation and individuation. As a result, the child remains symbolically tied to the mother, their psyche suspended in a transitional state in which independent desires struggle to emerge. It is notable that different cinematic genres tend to be associated with these two maternal archetypes. Narratives centred on the self-sacrificing mother most often appear in melodrama, realist social dramas, or biographical films whereas the figure of the smothering mother frequently emerges in genres such as horror, science fiction, psychological thrillers, and certain forms of auteur cinema.

The history of cinema offers numerous examples of the development of the trope of the smothering mother. Several well-known films depict explicitly oppressive or abusive maternal figures, such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Carrie* (Brian de Palma, 1976), *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009). In these narratives, the mother appears as a clearly oppressive presence whose behaviour directly harms the child. On the other end of the trope are maternal figures who suffocate their children through excessive love and protection. These mothers often insist that they merely wish to help or protect their loved ones, yet their overwhelming emotional presence ultimately obstructs the process of separation and individuation. Their attachment binds the child psychologically and prevents the development of autonomy. This latter model can be observed in films such as *The Piano Teacher* (*La pianiste*, Michael Haneke, 2001), *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), *The Room* (Lenny Abrahamson, 2015), *Bubble Boy* (Blair Hayes, 2001), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011). In film theory, the figure of the smothering mother is often associated with genres such as horror, science fiction, or psychological thriller, particularly in the work of Barbara Creed. Yet many of the films mentioned above redirect this figure towards the terrain of melodrama. In these narratives, the mother's suffocating presence is not necessarily conscious or malicious; rather, it emerges from an intensely closed emotional bond that becomes threatened by the outside world.

The main character of *Once Upon My Mother* can only be fully understood if she is examined from a dual perspective: that of both the self-sacrificing and the smothering mother. The figure of the smothering Jewish mother emerged as a cultural and literary trope in the late 1960s, most famously with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth. Although the novel initially provoked considerable controversy, it soon became a key reference for discussions of Jewish family dynamics. Its psychoanalytic perspective and confessional narrative form continue to offer fertile ground for interpretation. Since then, the representation of the identity formation of the Jewish son in relation to a dominant maternal figure has gradually become a recurring motif in film and pop culture. Woody Allen famously developed this pattern through his portrayal of the neurotic, anxious urban intellectual, a figure deeply shaped by maternal influence. Later comedians such as Ben Stiller and Seth Rogan further transformed this motif into a form of self-reflective humour. The trope has also entered mainstream television culture, for example the character of Howard Wolowitz in the series *The Big Bang Theory*, whose humorous portrayal of the overbearing Jewish mother-son relationship illustrates the enduring popularity of this cultural pattern.

As noted earlier, the first half of *Once Upon My Mother* presents Esther primarily through the trope of the self-sacrificing mother. The dramatic turning point occurs when one of the alternative treatments begins to improve Roland's condition and his

foot eventually heals, making it possible for him to join his peers and participate more fully in social life. Significantly, Roland's reintegration into the community also depends on his mother's decision, since she is the one who finally lifts the prohibition surrounding the word "illness". In this sense, Roland symbolically becomes a "whole" person. Yet Esther does not allow the process of separation to begin. Instead, she continues to intervene in nearly every aspect of Roland's life: she communicates with his teachers, writes letters and appeals on his behalf without his knowledge, and gradually tightens the invisible bond that connects them. Roland occasionally attempts to resist this control, but he ultimately resigns himself to his mother's decisions. The underlying tension becomes more visible when Roland starts his own family and finds himself caught between the expectations of his wife and the overwhelming presence of his mother. At this point, the question of personal boundaries becomes unavoidable: where does maternal care end, and where does intrusion begin? Esther's devotion effectively traps Roland in an emotional bubble in which autonomy and distance are difficult to establish. Within this closed space, Roland remains less an independent individual, than an extension of his mother's desires.

3. Family as a Linguistic Space in *Once Upon My Mother*

Once Upon My Mother offers rich possibilities for analysis not only at the level of the representation of the mother figure, but also at the level of family structure. If the family is understood not merely as an emotional or biological unit but also as a deeper and less explicit linguistic space, another, less visible dimension of the film becomes apparent. In this sense, the family can be imagined as a community connected not only by blood but also by a closed linguistic code that remains largely inaccessible to the outside world. Within the family, communication is organised around three categories: things that can be said, things that must be repeated, and things that cannot be spoken about. Everyday conversations – comments about the outside world, tabloid news, or television programmes – belong to the first category. The second category consists of statements that must be constantly repeated: expressions of faith, the conviction that God will help, reassurance that Roland is just like any other boy and capable of achieving anything, or the comforting presence of the songs of Sylvie Vartan as a remedy for sadness. The third category includes those topics that are strictly forbidden: illness, chronic condition, disability and the use of medical aids. This linguistic structure forms the conceptual framework of Roland's world. Since he is largely confined to the family flat – often even to his bed – these discursive boundaries shape the development of his identity. As the film gradually reveals, this communicative order is almost entirely established and maintained by Esther. Roland's father remains largely passive, while Esther controls the family's symbolic universe and determines what may or may not be expressed. In this way, maternal care and protection gradually lead not only to emotional dependency but also to a kind of linguistic enclosure, a labyrinth of meanings through which Roland's identity is filtered and shaped.

Certain concepts from psychoanalysis may help to decode this complex linguistic system. In the work of Sigmund Freud, repression is described as a defense mechanism through which the individual removes painful or threatening thoughts, fears and experiences from conscious awareness and pushes them into unconscious. Freud initially applied this mechanism primarily to the psychic life of the individual. However, in his later writings, he also considered the possibility of collective forms of

repression. In *Totem and Taboo*, for example, Freud suggests that communities may develop shared silences, taboos and forms of collective guilt. Such mechanisms can structure the symbolic order of a group in ways that resemble individual psychological repression. If this idea is applied to the linguistic structure observed in the film, an important question emerges: do the subjects that cannot be spoken about – illness, disability, and physical limitation – become symbolically excluded not only from everyday conversation but also from the family’s shared psychological space? In other words, does the linguistic prohibition surrounding these topics function as a form of collective repression within the family.

This line of thoughts naturally leads to the theories of Jacques Lacan. Lacan reread the work of Freud through the perspectives of structural linguistics and philosophy, thereby introducing a new and influential framework for understanding the human psyche. According to Lacan, the human psyche is organised around three interacting registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In simplified terms, the Symbolic represents the domain of language, social law, and cultural order. It is also associated with the concept of the “Name-of-the-Father”, which signifies the symbolic structures that regulate social life. Everything that can be articulated through language and structured by symbolic markers can be integrated into the identity of the subject. By contrast, those aspects of experience that cannot be articulated linguistically – the “unspeakable” or the “impossible” – belong to the register of the Real. For Lacan, the Real marks the limits of the symbolic order. It represents a dimension that resists symbolisation and therefore appears threatening, uncontrollable, and ultimately impossible to fully grasp through language.

If Lacan’s three registers are used as an analytical framework, Esther’s behaviour can be interpreted as a continuous filtering and narrowing of the Symbolic order. As noted earlier, only those elements of experience that can be articulated linguistically can become symbolic markers and thus be integrated into the subject’s identity. Esther deliberately renders the illness – and many of the concepts associated with it – unspeakable. By excluding these terms from everyday life, she attempts to prevent Roland’s disability from becoming a defining symbolic marker within the family’s discourse. In other words, if the condition cannot be named, it cannot easily be incorporated into Roland’s identity. Instead, Esther repeatedly affirms the opposite narrative: Roland is capable of anything, he is not ill, he is no different from other children, and divine help will eventually arrive. Through constant repetition, these statements gradually move from describing reality to actively constructing it. The missing terms – such as “clubfoot” – are replaced by the excessive use of transcendental or emotionally charged concepts. As a result, the family’s linguistic space becomes organised around symbolic nodes such as God, love, normality, and the frequently evoked figure of Sylvie Vartan. This self-protective mechanism resembles mechanisms of repression or taboo. It shields Roland from internalising a fixed identity centred on illness or disability. Yet such linguistic strategies cannot permanently protect the family from what Jacques Lacan describes as the Real. The threat of illness persists as an unarticulated presence, exerting emotional pressure on the family space like a latent trauma that cannot be fully symbolised.

In this way, the film not only explores the physical and emotional dimensions of maternal care, but also raises questions about its linguistic and symbolic structure. Because the family’s linguistic space is largely shaped by Esther, Roland’s own voice

rarely appears as fully autonomous. Instead, it often seems as though Esther is narrating his life for him, while his identity is constructed from the symbolic markers she has assigned to him. It is therefore highly symbolic that Roland can speak openly about his illness only after his mother's death. Even then, however, he continues to refer to it as something that remained unspeakable within the family for many years. Seen from this perspective, the film's final scene becomes particularly meaningful. Standing before the roaring waves of the sea, Roland cries out, begging for his mother to truly disappear and never again haunt his life. Yet at the same time he must confront the paradox that the bond between them remains indestructible. This connection, formed through years of care, control and emotional dependence, proves easier to accept than to fully understand.

4. Processing Questions

- How did you feel while watching the film?
- Which character did you feel closest to, and why?
- How did you perceived Esther's character in the first half of the film and in the second half ? Do you think she changed or did she remain the same?
- Where do you think the boundary lies between parental care, help and control?
- In the film, the family tries not to talk about the illness? Why do you think they made this decision? Do you think it was a decision made by the whole family or mainly by the mother?
- Is it possible that avoiding certain topics can protect us from the harms of the outside world?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you preferred to stay silent about a certain problem? What happened afterwards? Did the problem disappear or was it transferred elsewhere?
- Esther strongly believes in positive thinking throughout the film. In your opinion, can maintaining a positive attitude help people cope with difficult situations?
- Do you think the mother made Roland feel guilty by telling him that she had done everything for him and that he was not grateful enough? What might Roland have felt in those moments?
- What do you think is more frightening for a parent: the fear of losing their child, or the possibility that the child might succeed without them?
- If you had been one of the characters, would you have said something out loud in order to ease the emotional burden?