

Lacan's Concept of Desire Through Peter Turner and Gloria Grahame Age-Gap Relationship in *Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017)

Putri Angelika Nur Maghfiroh

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya

Putri.21067@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi hasrat dalam *Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017) dengan menyoroti bagaimana hasrat tokoh utama dibentuk oleh relasi perbedaan usia antara Peter Turner dan Gloria Grahame. Berlandaskan teori psikoanalisis Jacques Lacan, khususnya pada konsep lack (kekurangan), objet petit a, serta tiga ranah psikis seperti, The Imaginary, The Symbolic, dan The Real. Penelitian ini menelaah dinamika tak sadar yang membentuk pengalaman emosional dan hubungan interpersonal para tokoh. Melalui analisis mendalam terhadap adegan-adegan terpilih, kajian ini menelusuri bagaimana hasrat keduanya muncul dan berkembang sepanjang narasi. Penelaahan terhadap unsur sinematik, seperti dialog, perilaku tokoh, dan simbolisme visual, menunjukkan bahwa perbedaan usia memperumit kerinduan, ilusi, dan ketegangan emosional yang mereka alami. Temuan penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa hasrat dalam film tersebut tidak semata-mata bersifat romantis, melainkan dikonstruksi secara psikologis dalam kerangka kehilangan, idealisasi, dan batasan sosial.

Kata Kunci: hasrat, hubungan berbeda usia, Psikoanalisis Lacan

Abstract

This study explores the portrayal of desire in *Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017), focusing on how the main character's desire is depicted and how it is influenced by the age-gap relationship between Peter Turner and Gloria Grahame. Using Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concepts of lack, objet petit a, and the three orders such as, The Imaginary, The Symbolic, And The Real, this research investigates the unconscious forces shaping the characters' emotional experiences and interpersonal dynamics. This study applies close analysis of selected film scenes to reveal how Peter Turner and Gloria Grahame's desires emerge and evolve. By analyzing cinematic elements such as dialogue, character behavior, and visual symbolism, the study demonstrates how the age difference between the two characters adds complexity to their longing, illusions, and emotional breakdowns. The findings suggest that their desires are not merely romantic, but psychologically constructed within a system of loss, idealization, and social constraints.

Keywords: desire, age-gap relationship, Lacanian Psychoanalysis

INTRODUCTION

Human relationships have long been a central concern in literary and film studies, as they provide a lens through which psychological conflicts, identity formation, and social norms can be examined. Among various forms of romantic relationships, age-gap relationships occupy a particularly complex position because they often disrupt conventional expectations regarding love, power, gender roles, and emotional maturity. Such relationships frequently provoke social judgment and raise questions about desire, self-worth, and subjectivity, making them a rich site for critical and psychoanalytic inquiry, (Collisson & De Leon, 2018).

In age-gap relationships, desire involves more than just physical or sexual aspects. It also involves emotional demands, the pursuit of meaning in life, and efforts to prove oneself. In particular, age-gap relationships give rise to several issues, including asymmetrical emotional dependency, shifting power relations, negotiations of care and authority, and the social stigmatization attached to aging bodies and youthful desire, (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006). These issues complicate the formation of intimacy and challenge conventional assumptions about equality and reciprocity within romantic relationships.

In literary and cinematic representations, age-gap relationships are rarely depicted as merely romantic or harmonious. Instead, they often reveal deeper

psychological tensions in which desire operates not only as an expression of affection but also as a response to emotional lack, insecurity, and the search for meaning. Desire thus becomes a crucial element in shaping character motivation, interpersonal dynamics, and narrative conflict. When age difference intersects with issues of aging, identity, and societal expectation, characters are compelled to negotiate how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, leading to fragile self-perception and internal conflict.

Psychological studies from Lacanian perspective support the idea that romantic relationships are influenced not only by conscious choices, but also by unconscious desire. Desire arises from the unconscious, which is characterized by a fundamental lack (Gugane, 2022). These desires often stem from unresolved emotional needs, early relational experiences, and internalized societal ideals, forming a complex interplay between the self and the Other.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, especially through the lens of Jacques Lacan's theory, desire is not understood as a simple fulfillment of needs or romantic longing. Rather, desire emerges from a fundamental lack inherent in human subjectivity and is structured through the subject's relationship with the Other within the Symbolic order, (Evans, 1996). Lacanian theory emphasizes that desire is unconscious, never fully attainable, and continuously shaped by language, social norms, and symbolic structures.

Within age-gap relationships, this framework highlights how desire is often mediated by unconscious projections. The younger partner might unconsciously seek attributes such as stability, authority, or idealized affection, while the older partner may desire rejuvenation, validation, or a symbolic escape from the inevitability of aging. These unconscious motivations are not merely incidental but play a central role in structuring the dynamics of the relationship.

These psychological and symbolic tensions are prominently portrayed in the film *Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017), which depicts a consensual romantic relationship between Peter Turner, a young aspiring actor, and Gloria Grahame, an aging Hollywood actress. The film presents their relationship not merely as a romantic narrative but as a complex emotional bond shaped by age difference, career disparity, and social judgment.

Stars Don't Die in Liverpool (2017) is a British biographical romantic drama directed by Paul McGuigan and adapted from Peter Turner's memoir of the same title. Set in the late 1970s, the film recounts the real-life romance between Peter Turner, a struggling young actor from Liverpool, and Gloria Grahame, a once famous

Hollywood actress who was nearing the end of her career. The story follows their passionate yet complicated relationship, highlighting the emotional struggles that arise from their significant age-gap between Gloria, a fading star in her fifties, and Peter, a young actor in his twenties. As Gloria's health deteriorates, their bond increasingly exposes issues of care, dependency, and desire, revealing how love becomes intertwined with vulnerability and the fear of loss.

Their relationship is marked by psychological tension arising from age disparity, personal insecurity, and societal perception. Peter's desire is shaped by his need for recognition and emotional anchoring, while Gloria's desire reflects her struggle against invisibility, aging, and symbolic exclusion. As a result, the age-gap relationship functions as a structural condition through which desire and self-perception are continuously negotiated, rather than as a simple romantic attachment.

Moreover, *Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017) was chosen for this study because it offers an exceptionally clear and realistic setting to observe how Lacanian desire operates in everyday human interaction. Unlike melodramas that rely on exaggerated emotions or explicit declarations of love, this film presents an asymmetrical relationship between Gloria, a fading Hollywood actress, and Peter, an ordinary teenage boy where differences in age, social status, and life experience create a natural "gap" that perfectly triggers the mechanism of *objet petit a*.

Desire in this film does not arise from mutual understanding or equality; it emerges precisely from what remains unspoken and unreadable between them. Gloria's ambiguous intentions, Peter's hidden insecurities, and the silent spaces where each projects their own lack onto the other. These dynamics make the film an ideal case study because Lacan's theory argues that desire is born not from knowing the other, but from the mystery surrounding what the Other wants—and this film stages that mystery repeatedly through simple gestures, hesitant dialogues, and quiet glances.

Furthermore, age-gap relationships have long been a recurring theme in literature, film, and cultural studies. These relationships challenge traditional norms about love, power dynamics, and social expectations, often revealing deeper psychological and emotional conflicts. In literature, novels such as *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov and *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton explore the tensions between passion, societal expectations, and the personal struggles of individuals engaged in relationships with significant age-gaps. In cinema, films like *Lost in Translation* (2003) and *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) also

depict relationships where age differences play a crucial role in shaping the characters' emotional journeys.

Additionally, in Indonesia itself, the theme of age-gap relationships has become a common theme in literature and film. Several films and series such as, *Arini* (2008), *My Lecturer My Husband* (2020), *Duren Jatuh* (2025), and *Sugar Daddy* (2025) are proof that this theme is still popular. From a cultural studies perspective, age-gap relationships are often examined in relation to gender dynamics and power structures. In many cases, older men with younger women are perceived as socially acceptable, while older women with younger men face greater scrutiny. This double standard reflects broader societal attitudes toward aging, gender roles, and desirability.

Studies about age-gap and desire in literature works have been conducted for several times. The first one is performed by Sinaga et al. (2024), entitled *Representation of Age-gap in The Film Sweet 20*. The study using qualitative method by focusing on the portrayal of ageism and the age-gap within societal and familial contexts in the film *Sweet 20*. The study critically examines how the film reflects and challenges prevailing cultural attitudes between older and younger generations in various contexts such as family, peers, public places, as well as the desire to be young again. The study concludes that the film *Sweet 20* portrays significant ageism, depicting the older generation as unproductive and having little value or significant role within the family and society. The film reflects ageism as a common cultural and social structure that influences individual behavior. However, it also invites the audience to view the elderly more positively, appreciating their abilities and potential (Sinaga et al., 2024).

The second previous study is conducted by Kumari in 2020, with the title *Eroticism And Erosion Of Ethics: A Psychoanalytical Study Of Humbert In Vladimir Nabokov's Novel Lolita & David Lurie In J. M. Coetzee's Novel Disgrace*. The study explores the psychological and ethical dimensions of eroticism and moral failure in two literary characters, Humbert and David Lurie, from *Lolita* and *Disgrace* respectively. Using psychoanalytic theory, it examines their complex motivations, defense mechanisms, and internal conflicts rooted in unresolved childhood issues and desires for power and connection (Kumari, 2020).

A study using Jacques Lacan theory conducted by Afrani et al. (2024), entitled *Expression of Self-Improvement Language in the Novel "Luka Cita" by Valerie Patkar: A Psychoanalytic Study of Jacques Lacan*. The study employs qualitative and hermeneutic methods to explore how the protagonist, Tara, an aspiring chess athlete, undergoes identity formation across Lacan's three

stages: the imaginary, symbolic, and real. In this study, the theory is applied to examine how the main character's subjectivity is constructed linguistically and how this reflects her identity development and desires in the novel *Luka Cita* by Valerie Patkar. The results show that the main character's identity is reflected through language used as communication and fulfillment of desire (Afrani et al., 2024).

The next study using Lacanian psychoanalytic is performed by Prabhawita (2019), with the title *Triad Psikoanalisis Lacan Pada Tokoh Seth Dalam Film City Of Angels*. The study focus on analyzing *City Of Angel* which portrays the character Seth's internal conflict between desire and reality, highlighting his journey toward accepting real human experiences over eternal but illusory existence. The study aims to examine how Lacan's psychoanalytic triad named The Real, The Imaginary, and The Symbolic can explain in detail the development of a human subject from birth, through the mirror stage, access to language, and maturity within culture, as illustrated by the character Seth. Finally, the study conclude that Lacan's three key concepts help viewers understand and interpret Seth's psychological journey as he moves from an unspoken world (The Real), through self-construction (The Imaginary), to experiencing desires governed by social laws (The Symbolic). This progression reveals how fantasy and reality interact, leading to a sense of lack when desires are unmet (Prabhawita, 2019).

A study conducted by Brajannoto et al. (2018), also uses psychoanalytical theory based on Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to analyze the desires and psychic conflicts of the main female character in the movie *Arrival*. The study entitled *An Intuitive Logical Woman: Personality of Main Female Character in Arrival Movie by Eric Heisserer*. The approach applied in this study is literary psychology, focusing on personality and feminism as seen through the character's symptoms and behavior in the movie. Furthermore, the study focus on analyzing the character of Louise Banks from the movie *Arrival* through the lens of psychoanalytic theories by Freud and Lacan, focusing on her personality traits, psychic conflicts, and the interplay between her unconscious desires, rational thinking, and moral considerations (Brajannoto et al., 2018).

Previous studies have examined age-gap relationships and desire from various perspectives. Research on films such as *Sweet 20* has highlighted ageism and the social marginalization of older individuals, while psychoanalytic studies on works such as *Lolita* and *Disgrace* have focused on morally transgressive desire and power imbalance. Other Lacanian studies have explored identity formation, language, and subjectivity in literary

and cinematic texts. However, these studies tend to emphasize ethical transgression or social critique rather than examining how desire operates within a consensual age-gap romantic relationship through a specifically Lacanian framework.

Consequently, there remains a gap in scholarly discussion regarding how Lacanian concepts of desire, lack, and subject formation operate within age-gap relationships portrayed as emotionally mutual rather than overtly exploitative. This study seeks to address that gap by analyzing *Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017) through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. By focusing on the characters of Peter Turner and Gloria Grahame, this research aims to demonstrate that desire within their relationship is not merely personal or emotional but is rooted in unconscious lack and structured by the Symbolic order. Through this analysis, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how age-gap relationships function as sites where desire and self-perception are constructed and contested.

METHOD

The primary source of data for this study is conducted based on a biographical romantic drama film titled *Stars Don't Die in Liverpool*, which was released in 2017 and directed by Paul McGuigan. The film is based on the memoir of Peter Turner and tells the story of the real-life relationship between a young actor named Peter Turner, and an older Hollywood actress, Gloria Grahame. With the duration 1 hour 45 minutes, this study will focus specifically on the portrayal of desire through the experiences of the movie's characters, Peter Turner and Gloria Grahame, and analyzes their behavior, emotion, that caused by their age-gap relationship.

The textual data in this study obtained through the transcription of dialogues in the film, and the subtitles that appears on the scene. Meanwhile, the secondary data are taken from books, journal articles, and websites that discuss Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concepts of desire, the notion of lack, objet petit a, and the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Elusive Object Cause of Desire (Objet Petit a)

Objet petit a or sometimes transcribed as "object little a" signifies the elusive and unattainable object cause of desire or the thing someone hopes will eventually offer them satisfaction, yet always remains out of reach. It's not a physical thing but rather a placeholder for what is lacking in the subject's psychic structure. Furthermore, it arises from the gap between need and demand, fueling our never-ending pursuit of fulfillment, (Lacan, 1978).



Figure 1. Peter reveal his current job, leading to more deep conversation and comfortable atmosphere

Gloria : So, you're an actor, too, right?

Peter : Er well, I pretend to be.

Gloria: What are you working on?

Peter : Er, the usual. Table, chairs, sideboards.

Gloria: Huh?

Peter : I work in a second hand furniture shop right now. I'm in between acting jobs, I'm afraid.

Gloria: Oh, don't be afraid, honey. Happens to all of us.
(17:45-18:10)

At this scene, in Figure 1, Gloria is not merely asking when she asks him "So, you're an actor too, right?," she is acknowledging Peter as someone who belongs in her world, the world of actors and entertainers. However, Peter hesitantly answers "Er, well, I pretend to be". This sentence shows how Peter feels quite ashamed because the reality is different. He admits that he is currently selling tables, chairs, sideboards at a secondhand furniture store rather than doing an acting job. To Peter, this job made him feel like he had lost his goal, as if he had fallen out of his dream. Nevertheless, Gloria doesn't criticize him. Instead, she says gently and full of understanding that it might happen to everyone.

Moreover, what is really important is that because it reveals how objet petit a operates not as a physical person, but as the illusion of recognition that temporarily masks the subject's fundamental lack. When Peter admits he only "pretends" to be an actor and works in a furniture shop "in between jobs," his hesitation and the phrase "I'm afraid" expose his psychological vulnerability: He feels fragmented between who he is (a shop worker) and who he wants to be (a real actor), a gap that reflects Lacan's concept of manque-à-être, or the structural incompleteness at the heart of every subject.

Gloria's gentle reply, "Oh, don't be afraid, honey. Happens to all of us" does not solve his problem or give him work, but it does something far more powerful for desire. She refuses to see his lack. Instead of treating him as "just a furniture salesman," she implicitly accepts him as a fellow actor, holding up a mirror that reflects back his ideal self. This moment is where objet petit a emerges—not in Gloria herself, but in the effect she produces. The fleeting fantasy that the Other (Gloria) sees him as whole, valid, and belonging to the world he dreams of. Peter does not desire Gloria simply because she is famous, but he desires her because, in her gaze, he momentarily feels recognized as the person he longs to become.

Here, Gloria holds up a mirror that reflects his ideal self, which is the actor he wants to be, even though reality tells him otherwise. As Lacan puts it, “Desire is the desire of the Other,” (Evans, 1996). This means that sometimes we often want things or people because we believe they see something special in us that we cannot get to by ourselves. We want people to like us because they think we are special. At this moment, Gloria doesn’t give Peter any advice or even a promise.

What she gives him is recognition. That recognition becomes the spark of desire, it’s not romantic yet, but deeply emotional. Additionally, this scene matters precisely because it shows desire being born not from attraction to another’s qualities, but from the other’s capacity to reflect back a version of self they cannot see alone, where here is a fragile, illusory promise that makes Gloria not just a person to Peter, but also the cause of his desire itself.



Figure 2. Gloria reveals her wish lead to Peter misunderstanding

Gloria: I really wanna play Juliet for the RSC.

Peter: Juliet?

Gloria: Yeah.

Peter: You mean the nurse, don't you?

Gloria: No, I... Do you think I'm too old to play Juliet?

Peter: Well...

Gloria: Wait, you just think I'm an old lady? I'm just too old for you, that's what you're saying.

(23:36-24:39)

In Figure 2, this scene happens after Gloria spends the day with Peter. They went to a movie theater, watched a movie together that leads to a more intimate relationship. Gloria and Peter start to open up more to each other. When they get to a bar after that movie date, Gloria shares her truth. She reveals to Peter that she already has four children. An unexpected gaze from Peter says he is surprised, but deep down he tries to understand. Nonetheless, this truth makes a small gap to their closeness. When they reach Gloria’s room, she makes fun comments about her dream to play as Juliet for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). She is aiming for a part that represents sad youth, love, and beauty. This confession shows her desire to be perceived as youthful, passionate, and timeless rather than as a faded celebrity. However, in an attempt to be truthful or pragmatic, Peter blurts out, “You mean the nurse, don’t you?” implying that someone her age would only be cast as the older, humorous figure,

not the young heroine. The fantasy breaks at that very instant. Gloria feels hurt by that rejection.

Gloria asks, “Do you think I’m too old to play Juliet?” and then, more painfully, “Wait, you just think I’m an old lady? I’m just too old for you, that’s what you’re saying.” In this dialogue, she immediately changes from one about acting to her own feeling or desire. She is now inquiring as to whether Peter still thinks her attractive rather than talking about Shakespeare. Lacan’s concept of objet petit a also evident at this point. Up until now, Gloria has served as Peter’s objet petit a—an enigmatic, attractive, and full of endless potential. Here, however, the roles are reversed. Peter now takes on the role of the “Other,” whose gaze Gloria yearns to appease.

Additionally, Gloria needs Peter to accept her idea that she can still be Juliet, that she is still attractive, and that her color hasn’t been ruined by time. She feels vulnerable when he hesitates. Suddenly, it seems impossible to bridge the gap between who she is—a woman in her 50s, and who she aspires to be—eternally Juliet. In Lacan’s desire, we desire the other person because we believe they possess something we lack, (Lacan, 1978). However, if they show their own lack, the spell breaks. Peter’s hesitation here makes Gloria feel seen not as a fantasy, but as a real, aging woman, and feels like a loss.

Desire as Structured by Lack

According to Lacan (1978), “lack” is more than merely missing the daily stuff, it has a deeper concept. It is the feeling that something fundamental is missing from one’s innermost being, which is what drives desire. Humans are born into a world of words and symbols, and in doing so, they lose a sense of wholeness they never actually had—but they feel its absence. We desire things because of this “lack of being,” not because we think they will satisfy that inner emptiness, (Evans, 1996).



Figure 3. Gloria removes her names from the lampshade in a joint event

Gloria: What kind of a person hangs out in a joint where

you're labelled on the lampshade, anyway?

I don't know why I brought you here.

Peter: Why did you, then?

Gloria: I don't know. Maybe I wanted to impress you.

(01:00:56-01:01:13)

In this scene from figure 3, Gloria humorously reads “Go Ham” after removing her name “Gloria Grahame,” from the lampshade in a restaurant. It appears lighthearted on the surface, but in Lacanian words, it

indicates something more profound about identity and desire. Gloria attempts to break free from the label that defines her. Not simply as a well-known actress, but also as a fixed, public persona that other people put onto her. Furthermore, this has a direct connection on lack since Gloria is never truly “herselves” since her identities are always molded by the opinions of others. The name on the lampshade represents how society confines her to responsibilities and expectations, leaving her feeling trapped or unfulfilled inside.

By erasing her name, Gloria strives to break free from that image, becoming “ordinary” and nameless, so she can be perceived as a genuine person rather than a star or celebrity. However, this attempt will never be totally successful because desire is always based on lack, (Evans, 1996). Even in her desire to be “just Gloria,” she is still seeking recognition from Peter, from the world, and this longing demonstrates that the gap inside cannot be filled merely by erasing a name. Her urge to “impress” him implies that she is still trapped in the same cycle—wanting to be desired for who she truly is, even if that “real self” remains elusive.

Gloria: Peter, before we go... Tell me how I look.

Peter: Gloria, honey, you look beautiful.

*Gloria: So you don't think I'm some old maiden,
just trying to get my kicks out
of a handsome young man?
(01:01:49-01:02:08)*

In this dialogue, Gloria isn't just looking for a compliment when she asks Peter, “Tell me how I look.” She wants to be reassured that she is still important, that she is not invisible, that she is not obsolete, and not just a fading recollection of who she once was. Particularly, in an establishment where a young and famous actress, Liza Minnelli, is there. It intensifies Gloria's sense of erasure. Then, Peter answers with, “Gloria, honey, you look beautiful.” This act is basically an attempt to fill that lack, but it can never get fulfilled because desire is sustained by lack itself. If Gloria is convinced of her desirability, the tension between her and Peter will collapse.

Here, her doubt keeps desire alive. Her vulnerability is not a weakness—it is the engine of their relationship. In addition, Gloria's another question where she asks, “You don't think I'm some old maiden, just trying to get my kicks out of a handsome young man?” It expresses her fear or anxiety. She worries that what she offers is no longer attractive. She senses a gap between who she once was—the celebrated star, an object of admiration, and who she is now—an old, sick, overlook, and that her presence with Peter is seen as pathetic or desperate rather than meaningful

The Imaginary Stage

The imaginary stage thus marks the beginning of a split between the subject's lived disunity and the illusory wholeness of the specular image, anchoring the ego in a world of surface appearances, deception, and narcissistic

identification that stays structurally crucial throughout psychological existence, (Evans, 1996).



Figure 4. Gloria dancing alone in front of the mirror while imagining her young self

In one of the scene where it shows Gloria dancing in front of the mirror in her bedroom at Peter's house after her illness gets worse. The soft, nostalgic lighting and careful framing create a dreamlike atmosphere, blurring the distinction between past and present. Gloria moves with grace and precision, recalling gestures from her Hollywood heyday. She is consciously re-enacting an identity that previously defined her. In this moment, the mirror does not represent her current reality—an old, ill woman, but rather serves as a surface for projection, revealing the ideal-I which is the glamorous, powerful movie star she once was. According to Lacan, the mirror stage forms the ego by associating with a cohesive, outward image that conceals inner fragmentation.

Gloria relies on the same mechanism, by glancing at her mirror and repeating familiar gestures, she temporarily recovers a sense of wholeness and continuity that her body can no longer provide. Her look, which combines pride, longing, and despair, conveys the bittersweet realization that this unity is not real. The real Gloria is physically diminished, but her emotional self-image is stuck in the past, resulting in a terrible dissonance between who she is and who she wishes to see in the mirror. This division demonstrates the Imaginary's central dynamic where identity is perpetuated not by truth, but by misrecognition, in which the subject confuses an idealized image with the self. Gloria tries to close the gap between her fading present and her dazzling past by reenacting her former prominence.

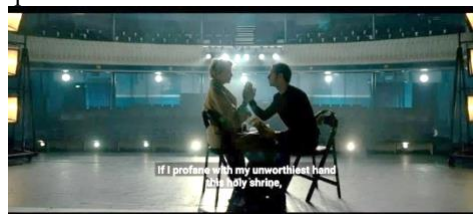


Figure 5. Gloria and Peter acting Romeo and Juliet in an empty theater

Gloria: What's this?

Peter: Well, I thought we'd have some fun.

Act one, scene five, shall we?

Gloria: Ok.

(01:26:59)

In this scene when Peter takes Gloria to an empty theater and invites her to play lines from *Romeo and Juliet*, their private rehearsal serves as a dramatic representation

of Lacan's Imaginary Order. The empty stage, devoid of audience, props, and real surroundings, serves as a blank canvas on which they project idealized versions of themselves. Peter as Romeo, Gloria as Juliet. This isn't just play acting, it's a mutual act of imaginative identification in which each sees themselves reflected in the other's gaze. For Gloria, playing Juliet allows her to temporarily recover the bright, attractive celebrity she once was—not as she is now, old and unwell, but as the timeless image recorded in film and memory.

For Peter, performing opposing her fuels his fantasy of being the devoted lover who can restore her glory. Their face-to-face position evokes the dual relationship central to Lacan's mirror stage. Each serves as both the mirror and the image for the other, resulting in a closed circuit of mutual recognition that feels complete and harmonic. However, this unity is essentially illusory—it is based on disregarding reality, such as her illness, his inexperience, the absence of an audience, yet it maintains a common narrative. In this way, the scenario reflects the essence of the Imaginary, a seductive, stabilizing fiction of completeness that conceals the underlying fragmentation of the self, providing brief relief from the painful gaps between who they are and who they want to be.

The Symbolic Stage

The symbolic is the realm of language, law, and social structure, where subjectivity is formed not through biological development, but through admission into a pre-existing network of signifiers. This register originates as a result of the child's immersion in language and social law, which is often mediated by the Oedipus complex and the involvement of the "Name-of-the-Father," who imposes prohibition and structure on primal desire, (Evans, 1996). Subjectivity in the Symbolic order is formed through signification, as the person conforms to the pre-existing network of language and cultural laws that control meaning, kinship, and social identity.



Figure 6. Gloria's mother disagreement to Peter and Gloria's relationship

Gloria's Mother: Peter please do us a favour.
Don't marry Gloria even if she begs.
It would be so embarrassing.

(In another place with Gloria, Peter gives her assurance)

Peter: That it doesn't matter what Joy says,
or thinks or your Mum, or anyone else.

Gloria: Really?

Peter: Not to me.

Gloria: Thank you, that's relief.

(41:02-41:11)

In this scene, during a dinner with Gloria's mother and sister, Gloria's mother expresses her disapproval of Peter and their relationship, urging him not to marry Gloria because of their big age gap where Peter is in her 20s, while Gloria already in her 50s. This scene highlights the Symbolic order, where language, social structures, and cultural narratives shape their identities and desires. Gloria's mother acts as a symbol of prohibition, expressing society judgment through the language of shame, *"It would be so embarrassing"* she says in an attempt to end the relationship by putting it as transgression.

Her intervention reflects Lacan's concept of the paternal metaphor, in which an external authority limits the desire to preserve symbolic bounds. The tension rises as Joy blurs generational lines by equating Peter with Gloria's child and mentioning Tony—Gloria's fourth husband and also happens to be her step-grandson—revealing how the relationship undermines traditional kinship standards. This collapse demonstrates the unstable state of symbolic categories when desire crosses socially sanctioned age and familial bounds.

Peter's assurance to Gloria that *"It doesn't matter what Joy says, or thinks or your Mum, or anyone else"* is a pointless attempt to break free from the control of the Symbolic order. However, this same statement is nonetheless confined to language, illustrating the symbolic dimension's unavoidability. Gloria's relief reaction serves as another example of how subjectivity is still dependent on outside approval; even when she rejects the opinions of others, her desire is acknowledged inside the same symbolic framework that condemns it.

Joe: Did you have fun? Did you have a nice time? Been on the piss, have you? Leaving her upstairs for all of us to deal with? I called an ambulance.

Peter: I told you to leave her, didn't I?
She doesn't want an ambulance!

Joe: The woman's dying. She's dying in me ma's house. Sick everywhere and me ma cleaning up after her and everything. She needs to go to hospital! She can't stay here! She can't stay upstairs.

(01:13:50-01:15:12)

The conflict between Joe and Peter dramatizes the Symbolic order as the realm of societal obligation, familial duty, and physical appropriateness at conflict with individual desires. Gloria, an outsider, occupies their mother's home while her decaying body, *"Sick everywhere,"* disturbs the expected order and calmness in the family home, which is why Joe is angry not just because it is inconvenient but also because symbolic boundaries have been violated. His focus on *"Me ma's house"* repeatedly highlights how familial connections impose obligations that go beyond personal affection, the mother's caregiving function becomes a symbolic load that

Peter's sexual attachment has carelessly transferred onto her.

Peter's defensive outburst, *"I told you to leave her!"* It reveals desire striving to fight symbolic law, but his position is untenable precisely because the symbolic order rules not just social connections but even the continual care of the abject body in illness. The ambulance, as an institutional intervention, reflects the ultimate power of the Symbolic as the medical and social institutions requiring Gloria's removal from the private familial realm and reintegration into regulated care structures. That scene therefore exemplifies how the Symbolic order pushes itself through crises, forcing subjects to confront the incompatibility of intimate desire and the unbending demands of kinship, duty, and bodily decency.

The Real Stage

The Real refers to what exists outside of language and cognitive comprehension like the raw, unassimilable surplus that undermines the coherence of symbolic meaning. Unlike ordinary reality, which is represented by language and images, the Real manifests as traumatic ruptures, physiological intensities, or encounters that resist narrative integration, for example, the shock of an unanticipated loss or the ineffable character of certain sensory experiences.



Figure 7. Peter's refusal when Gloria return to New York due to her illness

Peter: She can't get on a plane. The journey will kill her.

Joe SR: Peter... Tim is Gloria's son. If he makes that decision, then our family must support him.

Bella: It's time to let her go, love.

(01:33:10)

From this scene happens after Peter reluctantly calls Gloria's son, Tim. In the aftermath of his argument with his brother because of a disagreement of Gloria staying in Peter's parents' house, Tim comes to pick Gloria up. The argument between Peter and his brother leaves Gloria feeling guilty and it was uncomfortable to stay at Peter's family home. Tim, his son, said that Gloria wants to go to the doctor in New York. However, Peter worries that the trip would be dangerous for her. Furthermore, Peter's desperate claim that *"She can't get on a plane."* *"The journey will kill her,"* exposes his attempt to manage the uncontrollable. He relies on practical reasons to avoid addressing the deeper, unsymbolizable fact of Gloria's death.

His resistance serves as a barrier against the Real, attempting to avoid death through practical reasoning rather than confronting its inevitability. However, the discourse gradually removes these defenses. Joe Sr.'s calm response, *"Tim is Gloria's son. If he makes that decision, then our family must support him,"* this sentence shifts authority away from Peter's protective fantasy and toward biological fact, while Bella's kind but tragic phrase, *"It's time to let her go, love,"* identifies what everyone has been avoiding, the reality of loss. This scene, thus captures how the Real operates not through a dramatic spectacle, but through quiet, unavoidable moments when fantasy gives away to what simply is.

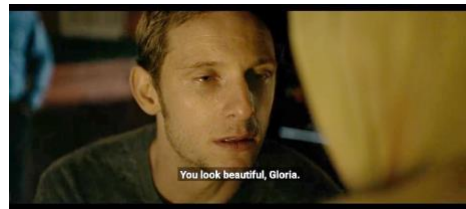


Figure 8. Peter and Gloria last conversation before got separated

Gloria: Hey... How do I look?

Peter: You look beautiful, Gloria. Forever...

(1:37:27)

In this scene, it happened after Tim, Gloria's son come to pick her to bring her back to New York. This is also happen to be the last conversation between Peter and Gloria before they got separated. In that scene, Peter looked at Gloria's eyes with his teary eyes. Knowing that he will no longer can feel her touch again. He stated that Gloria looks beautiful forever, illustrate how his love to Gloria remains full even in her aging souls. The Real in this scene is draws to what cannot be fully represented through language, images, or social codes. It is what lies beyond the Symbolic and Imaginary.

It is the raw, overwhelming truth that disrupts understanding. In this case, the Real is Gloria's approaching death, an event that Peter cannot control, soften, or rationalize. Unlike previous scenes filled with conversation, movement, or fantasy, this one is still and heavy with silence. Peter can no longer cling to the Imaginary image of Gloria as vibrant and ageless. Nor can he rely on the Symbolic structure of love, language, or commitment to make sense of the loss. What remains is absence, pain, and helplessness which is the core of the Real.



Figure 9. Peter watches Gloria slowly dissapearing as the taxi drives away

This scene shows on how Gloria finally leaves Peter, and leaving him in a broken and empty soul. Here, Lacan's idea of the Real as the incomprehensible emptiness that shatters symbolic attempts to deal with loss is embodied by Peter's lonely encounter with the disappearing taxi. Peter's sad silence as the taxi carrying Gloria vanishes into the night is the exact moment when absence turns from a feared possibility into an unchangeable reality—a reality that cannot be mediated by narrative, promise, or emotional bargaining. The image of the taxi vanishing into darkness reflects the purpose of the Real.

It is not just Gloria's actual departure but also the dismantling of Peter's metaphorical belief that love or concern might maintain control over death. Moreover, His tears, unlike previous moments of denial or negotiation, indicate a direct meeting with the Real. The raw, unnameable hole left when the object of love (Gloria) is irreversibly removed from the symbolic order. Lacan argues that the Real manifests as "That which does not stop not writing itself," a continual absence that disturbs the subject's ability to establish meaning through language or memory (Lacan, 1978). The dark street and Peter's frozen anguish highlight the futility of symbolic moments, such as farewells in the face of death's utter finality.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the portrayal of romantic desire and self-perception within an age-gap relationship in *Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017) through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. By applying the concepts of desire, lack, objet petit a, and the orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, this research seeks to demonstrate that romantic desire in the film is not merely emotional or personal, but is structured by unconscious psychological mechanisms and symbolic conditions.

In response to the first research question concerning how desire is depicted in the film, the findings indicate that desire is consistently represented as a structure shaped by lack rather than fulfillment. Both Peter Turner and Gloria Grahame experience desire as an ongoing condition marked by emotional absence, uncertainty, and longing. Through Lacan's concept of objet petit a, the analysis reveals that the characters do not seek complete satisfaction through the relationship, instead, they unconsciously position one another as the object-cause of desire that sustains emotional attachment. As a result, desire persists not because it is satisfied, but because it remains unresolved, reinforcing Lacan's assertion that desire is inherently elusive.

Regarding the second research question, this study finds that the age-gap relationship significantly influences the characters' self-perception through the interaction of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real orders. At the Imaginary level, the relationship enables processes of idealization and illusion, allowing both characters to construct desirable self-images in relation to one another. At the Symbolic level, social norms, cultural expectations regarding age, and familial discourse shape

and constrain their identities, positioning the relationship within broader systems of meaning and judgment. Meanwhile, encounters with the Real—particularly illness, loss, and emotional rupture, disrupt these symbolic structures and expose the impossibility of complete fulfillment, thereby intensifying the characters' confrontation with lack.

Finally, the Real erupts as the traumatic dimension shattering fantasy. Gloria's terminal cancer, the doctor's verdict that it may be too late, and ultimately her death. The age gap intensifies this confrontation with the Real, as Gloria's illness manifests not as abstract mortality but as accelerated, visible deterioration that aging makes inevitable. In the film's closing moments, as Peter watches Gloria's taxi disappear into darkness, language and image fail, only absence remains. This encounter with the Real exposes desire's ultimate impossibility: No amount of love or recognition can fill the void of mortality. The age difference thus becomes the visible marker of time's passage, making tangible what desire always seeks to deny the fundamental incompleteness and finitude.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations may be proposed for future research. First, future studies may expand the analysis of age-gap relationships by incorporating feminist or gender-based Lacanian perspectives, particularly to further examine issues of aging, femininity, and symbolic marginalization as experienced by female characters. Such approaches may offer deeper insights into how desire intersects with gendered expectations and power relations.

Second, comparative studies between cinematic adaptations and autobiographical or literary sources may provide a broader understanding of how desire and subjectivity are reshaped across different narrative forms. Examining the memoir *Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* alongside its film adaptation, for instance, could reveal how cinematic representation transforms psychological intimacy and emotional conflict.

Finally, future research may consider applying alternative psychoanalytic or interdisciplinary approaches, such as trauma theory, phenomenology, or cultural studies, to explore dimensions that fall outside the scope of this research. While this study is limited to Lacanian psychoanalysis and textual film analysis, subsequent studies may benefit from integrating social, historical, or audience-centered perspectives to further enrich discussions of desire and age-gap relationships in contemporary cinema.

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