

# Mother! (2017)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 40 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 8; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 5.

Our star rating (1-5): 4. Our star rating (1-5): 4

*Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field."  
And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his  
brother Abel, and killed him.*

*Genesis 4:8*

*Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;  
all day long foes oppress me...*

*Psalms 56:1*

*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood ...*

*John 6:54*

One can expect dramatic excess and a strong dose of surrealism in a Darren Aronofsky film. Some may say that he outdoes himself in *Mother!* Certainly the critical reaction is split, several IMDB metacritics giving the film a 100 score, and others, led by Rex Reed of the New York Post, giving it 0. After sorting through my often-confused feelings when the credits faded from the screen, I find myself somewhere in between, perhaps a little closer to a positive than a negative response. One thing I can say for sure is that I never for a second felt bored and thus tempted to look away from the screen.

The opening is weird, even for Aronofsky: a man known only as Him places a large crystal on a pedestal inside the burnt-out hulk of a house, which then slowly changes back into its form

before the fire. We see Mother in bed, waking up and calling, "Baby?" Around the house she sees unsettling things like a beating heart within the walls and a bloody spot on the floor that returns no matter how much she scrubs it. References to Edgar Allen Poe?

Jennifer Lawrence plays the nameless Mother married to the much older Him, a famous writer portrayed by Javier Bardem. She keeps busy by painting and restoring his huge house, isolated out somewhere in the country. From the ruins of that fire Him had managed to extract from its charred ruins just the large, strangely-shaped crystal that he has enshrined in his study. Mother associates her restoration of the house with the Garden of Eden, at one point saying, "I want to make a Paradise." However, for Him Paradise has not brought happiness. He is suffering from a severe case of writer's block. Day after day he wads up and throws away the sheet of paper he is trying to fill with words. And, like in the Biblical story, a serpent soon shows up—or maybe we should say, a pair of them.

A stranger knocks on the door one night, the Man (Ed Harris) asking if the house is a bed and breakfast. When he says he is a doctor, Him invites him to stay for the night, much to the discomfort of Mother. The Man coughs a lot, and Him helps him when he vomits in the lavatory. The next day the doctor's wife, called simply Woman (Michelle Pfeiffer), arrives with her suitcase. Him welcomes her also, despite Mother's obvious hostile reception. She resents the intrusion of the world into what she regards as their sanctuary. Mother also discovers in the Man's luggage a series of photos of her husband, so she knows that he has been lying to them from the start. There follows a sequence of other home intruders that might remind you of the sequence in [The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey](#)—except that the intrusion of unwelcome guests in that film was played for laughs. Mr. Aronofsky's is a horror sequence, growing in violent intensity as if it were taken

from of those metaphysical paintings by Hieronymous Bosch. But then, maybe I am wrong here, the New York Times critic claiming that Aronofsky's whole film is actually a comedy—a “divine comedy” for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

During their intense conversations the Woman speaks to Mother as if she were a prosecuting attorney, and she and her husband show no respect for their hosts' privacy. Mother orders the nosey Woman out of Him's study, but the next day the Woman returns to it with her husband, the two clumsily knocking over and smashing Him's precious crystal. Now even Him has had it with the rude guests, so they both order the couple to get out. But then two more intruders rush in. They turn out to be the warring sons of the Woman and the Man (played by real life brothers Domnhall and Brian Gleeson). Their fierce argument over the family inheritance brings in the story of Cain and Abel, including its bloody denouement. The wake for the dead son draws in dozens of mourners, but they act so disrespectfully toward the house—the plumbing breaks and floods the floor—that the distraught Mother orders everyone to leave.

Mother berates Him, but they nevertheless engage in sex, after which she announces that she is pregnant. Him is so pleased that he finishes his poem. It becomes a runaway best seller. Mother prepares a sumptuous dinner to celebrate Him's triumph, but fans show up at the door, again invading their privacy like a swarm of locusts. Mother is outraged, but as with the their two earlier guests who had claimed to be his fans, Him is pleased by their adulation. Then seemingly hundreds of other visitors, also fans who apparently feel their devotion entitles them to be there, pour into the house. The surreal scenes worthy of a Dali painting include armed soldiers, executions, Him's female publisher, acts of cannibalism, a strange eucharistic rite akin to a witches' sabbath, and more. Driven to the point of madness, Mother orders them to leave, but they ignore her. Like crazed fans who have been known to

tear off strips from a celebrity's clothing in their frenzied adoration, they start to carry away the couple's possessions, even tearing away portions of the house. The terrorized Mother winds up in the basement, where...

Some, including star Jennifer Lawrence, see the film as an allegory that embodies elements of the Old and New Testament in which our culture and religion are held up for scathing criticism. Others see it as an ecological parable decrying our despoliation of Mother Earth—there is a striking overhead shot in which the octagonal house, sitting in a circular clearing of the forest, looks like a mother's breast and nipple. Whatever the filmmaker's intent, there is horror aplenty, perhaps the filmmaker's expression of his feelings arising from our treatment of Mother Earth, the latter too often associated with believers' misinterpretation of the Genesis second creation story as granting humanity the right to dominate the natural order. (Rather than to be stewards of creation, gratefully caring for it, as modern interpreters declare.)

As I think further about the film, I see it as a Rorschach test, it's meaning varying from viewer to viewer. Those interested in artists and their relationship to the public might see it as an allegory of how the artist needs and reacts to the public and the latter as finding in the work of an artist meaning and hope, some becoming so obsessed that they seem to feed upon the creator—witness all the Elvis impersonators and their fans, many of whom make an annual pilgrimage to the shrine known as Graceland.

Enhanced by cinematographer Matthew Libatique's handheld camera that weaves in and out of the various rooms, venturing outside just once for that overhead longshot of the house, the film feels claustrophobic because most of the shots are in close-up. There are almost no establishing shots, and what little we see of the background is blurred.

The film's excessive, often gory, symbolism made me think of some of Bob Dylan's cryptic songs or Don McClean's "American Pie," except that the latter are a lot more fun. I do recommend the film, but caution you to beware of those critics who think it is a masterpiece, the greatest thing to come along since *Citizen Kane*, or that is meaningless trash. This is not a film that will make you feel better about the world or hopeful for the future of humankind—I recall Mother using the word "apocalyptic." Shortly after seeing this phantasmagoria, I attended an advanced screening of *Stronger*, the story of a spectator struggling to rejoin the living after his legs were blown away by one of the bomb blasts at the Boston Marathon. Quite a contrast in outlook, and thus the way one felt at the end of the film! And yet, I feel no need to see the positive film again, as much as it inspired me, whereas I do want to watch Mr. Aronofsky's puzzler one more time. At this point I do not know if it is a pretentious piece of junk or the work of a master artist, but it almost demands a second viewing.

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the October issue of Visual Parables.*