

 PRAGDA | SPANISH FILM CLUB

DISCUSSION GUIDE



BABYGIRL (LA HEMBRITA)

A film by LAURA AMELIA GUZMÁN

Dominican Republic / 2023 / 92 min
Spanish with English subtitles

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BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from. Learning about the filmmaker is also a relevant way to gain insight on the context in which the film was produced. You can learn more about Laura Amelia Guzmán at <https://pragda.com/film/babygirl/>

INTRODUCING THE FILM

A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film's narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film's marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this synopsis for *BABYGIRL*:

Set in an upper-class neighborhood of the Dominican Republic, *Babygirl* is an unsettling portrait of a middle-aged woman, Dominique, and her relations with family, servants, and entourage.

From the very first scene, the film manages to astutely depict her privilege and buried longings. As a woman whose identity is deeply attached to her role, Dominique finds herself alone after the departure of her children. One day, the maid brings home her granddaughter and, shortly after, inexplicably disappears. The little girl re-awakens Dominique's maternal instinct – but neither her relatives nor her friends seem to think it a good decision to keep her.

With neat precision and calculated detachment, *Babygirl* paints a society of strong racial and class differences. Appearances and disappearances are shrouded in mystery; hints at corporate corruption are left unresolved; and nods to Lucrecia Martel's *The Headless Woman* (2008) can be felt.

- From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film? From this same text, try to identify the main events of the film's plot and the socio-political context of the film.
- Do you think that the film will have a political message? Cite specific language from the synopsis to support your answer.
- How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- Viewing the marketing materials alone (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images available at <https://pragda.com/film/babygirl/>) without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?



AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

NARRATIVE

- From the beginning of the film, how is Dominique presented to us (economic status, state of mind, etc.)? What clues are provided that help us make these inferences?
- What activity sees Dominique and the girl truly bonding for the first time? How does the film's temporal setting catalyze their growing bond?
- The movie attempts to find meaning in small moments and comparisons through self-reflexivity, for instance when Carmen is brushing the girl's hair in an early scene and when Dominique is washing her hair in another. How are these two scenes different? What does their difference symbolize in terms of the girl's relationship to Dominique and Carmen respectively?
- Around the film's midway point, what uninvited guest does Dominique find in her home? We had previously only heard about this character through dialogue descriptions—Is this character how you expected? Despite everything, what is he there for?
- What is the doctor's opinion regarding Dominique raising Yanet? Why do you think she holds this stance? Do you think Dominique will take her advice?
- What do you think was the real reason for Nuñez requesting time off? What was Dominique's reaction, and why do you think she reacted this way?
- Think back to Dominique shopping alone at the beginning of the movie and compare it to when she's shopping with Yanet. How does Dominique seem different? To what or whom can this difference be attributed?
- The final scene shows Dominique driving away from Wander's home only to find Yanet blocking the alleyway. Dominique then gets out and hugs her until the camera cuts to black. What do you think happens? Do you think the hug is symbolic of a bittersweet goodbye or the beginning of their new life together?
- What do you think happened to Carmen? What evidence is there to back up your theory?

CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- Dominique's home, both the exterior and interior, is often illuminated with bright natural light and an almost blinding whiteness. What affect does this lighting and color choice have on our perception of Dominique's livelihood?
- An early scene sees Dominique in a disagreement with her husband regarding their upcoming trip to Canada. Explain how the scene's camera framing expresses the couple's growing detachment.
- Around the 30-minute mark, there is a brief sequence showing Carmen tending to the girl as she sleeps, and then cutting to Dominique at the gala. Describe the cinematography and music in this sequence, and what quality it gives off as a result.



CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES *continued*

- There is a scene that cuts between Dominique and the Doctor arguing in the kitchen about what Dominique should do with the girl, and the girl playing on the piano. How does the diegetic piano music fit the mood of this scene? What about the lighting?
- Many scenes are staged through mirrors, the action playing out through reflections. Why do you think the filmmaker made this stylistic decision? What effect does this directorial choice have on these scenes?

What role do the radio broadcasts play in the film? Do you think this cinematic technique was effective in providing exposition?
- There is a long take that lasts almost two minutes after Dominique drives Wander and Yanet to his home. Why do you think the filmmaker chose to let the camera linger in this scene? What effect does it have?
- Do you think the pacing of the film was fast or slow? How do you think this editing choice shapes the scope and perspective of the film?

THEMES

- The film frequently alludes to its Christmastime setting. How does the film's setting around Christmas tie into its themes? How would the film be different with a different seasonal setting?
- The movie seems interested in exploring the concept of "family" beyond just genetic ties. Would you characterize Dominique and Clarisse as family? If so, what evidence is there to support this? What about Carmen and Dominique's sons?
- We often see Dominique in one of two distinct positions: either the strong-willed boss of the house, or the somewhat more reserved housewife and mother. How does our perception of Dominique change when she's in the presence of men? What does this imply about gender dynamics within the family?
- Reflect on Dominique's reaction to her Facetime with her son when he tells her his baby was born unexpectedly early and is a boy. Did she seem excited or disappointed? Do you think her reaction was due to missing the baby's birth or to the baby's gender? Why do you think so?
- Everyone occupying a station of service, from the housemaid to mall employees, are played by darker skin actors, whereas the lighter-skinned characters, including Dominique, are frequently in positions of higher status. Do you think this choice was deliberate by the filmmakers? What do you think this implies about racial politics in Dominican society?
- Interclass dynamics is a major theme in the film, and Dominique herself characterizes this as an upper-class woman now raising a girl from a lower-class family. How do her family and friends react to the situation? How do "lower-class" characters react? What do you think is the reason for this divergence? Do you think Dominique's own beliefs changed over the course of the film?
- Reflect on the dilemma facing Alfonso and his business, and on Carmen's son Wander and his implied gangster lifestyle. What qualities do these two seemingly dissimilar characters share? Do you think the filmmakers were deliberate in making this connection? Why?