

## Genre Reading

The film *Little Miss Sunshine* is a perfect example of a road movie, displaying all of the conventions that come together to complete a film of this genre. ①

In many ways the road movie can be interpreted as a metaphor. While the characters in a road movie are clearly on a journey in the physical sense, they also undertake a journey of a very different kind: a personal one. Each person will start out as being isolated or otherwise somehow "removed" from everyone else in some way, however upon the closing of the film they are much closer with each other. The characters are eventually forced to alter their outlook on life, thereby improving or otherwise altering themselves. This idea can certainly be recognised in *Little Miss Sunshine*, where the Hoover family start out as having very individual ideas of what they want out of life before they are forced to face disappointment and instead turn to happiness that can be found in the here and now (namely, watching Oliver perform at the beauty pageant). ②

The story is set up so that all of the different members of the Hoover family have their own personal goals, ones that they individually strive towards: Dwayne wants to be a pilot in the US Army, and has undertaken a vow of silence until he sees this through; Richard is determined to make his plan-to-succeed' method a reality, and in doing so tries to put himself ahead of the rest of the family (including Olive's dream of making it to the *Little Miss Sunshine* pageant); Olive's mother tries to keep her family together with varying degrees of success. However, over the course of the trip, each of the goals of the individual members of the family are stripped away one at a time--Richard's book deal is turned down, leaving him effectively bankrupt; Dwayne finds out that he is colourblind, and so cannot fly an aeroplane--and the Hoover family are left with only one dream left to cling on to: Olive's. It is this last, almost desperate attempt to see that something right comes out of their long journey that truly brings the Hoover family together. This is seen clearly in perhaps the most memorable scene of the film, in which the family overturn pageant etiquette and join Olive onstage to dance with her. As they dance, the audience gets a sense that the Hoover family are being summed up: they may have conflicts and they definitely have faults, but the fact that they are able to unite when faced with outside criticism presents them as being superior to all of the shallow pageant-goers around them. The filmmakers are clearly promoting familial loyalty over material success or physical appearance which reflects what the physical journey of the road movies has been about. ③ ⑤ ⑥

A central icon in any road movie is the vehicle, and *Little Miss Sunshine* is no exception to this convention. In many ways, the antique yellow van that the Hoovers use to drive to California can be seen as a reflection of the family themselves. For one thing, a yellow minibus is not a vehicle that would typically appeal to upper-class Americans; it is not a particularly "trendy" vehicle to have. Likewise the Hoovers, with all their faults and quirks, do not come across as an ideal family. On the way to Redondo Beach the family experiences several difficulties with the van: it develops a faulty clutch, a broken door and a stuck horn throughout the journey. The way in which the Hoovers deal with these problems can be interpreted as a mirror image of how they overcome the various conflicts that take place in ④

their lives. The van is mended upon the closing of the film, reinforcing the idea that the relationships between the various members of the Hoover family have also been repaired. 7

In conclusion, the film Little Miss Sunshine employs a ready-used genre and manages to turn out a completely refreshing storyline. The transformation undergone by the Hoovers is both touching and thought-provoking, offering many lessons for everyday people (such as Dwayne's message of "Do what you love and \_\_\_\_ the rest" while standing on a California wharf with Frank). The ideas behind the story are grounded in reality, as is the journey undertaken by the Hoover family; the fact that all of the scenarios are plausible, however unlikely, helps to drive the film's charm. Road movies are characterised by characters going on a journey in which the perspective of their everyday lives is changed because of the events they go through. Unlike many road movies though, like *Thelma and Louise* or *Easy Rider*, the family reach the end of their journey and have found redemption and happiness of a sort with each other. As a family they have been changed and while they will never be the same as what they were, they may go back home in a more positive, albeit realistic, state than before. 6