

Little Miss Sunshine Cultural Reading

Little Miss Sunshine shows its audience a realistic look at life in an attempt to point out the massive flaws in the commonly-idealised "American dream."

① The film Little Miss Sunshine presents the audience with a deep and critical look at the "American dream" and how it can change or damage people's lives. By grounding itself in everyday characters with realistic problems, this film shows an alternative to a lifestyle that so many people think will make them happy and yet very often turns out to be a disappointment.

The phrase "American dream" is characterised by certain conventions, such as material success, an orderly house, and a "normal" family life. Little Miss Sunshine confronts all of these stereotypes that supposedly make the 'American Dream' head-on and pulverises them, presenting to the audience instead a workaholic father, a mother who isn't the world's best cook, a drug-addicted grandfather and a little girl who, despite the fact that she isn't thin and blonde, still manages to make the best of her life. The film also draws attention to subjects that 'polite' society commonly labels as taboo or tries to avoid, such as homosexuality, suicide (shown collectively in Olive's uncle V Frank), divorce, death, bankruptcy, personal isolation and society's obsession with physical appearance. ②

① In the idea of the "American dream", people are always the most prominent feature; a person drives their own personal desire, feeding the want to be successful, popular and good-looking. Little Miss Sunshine takes each individual character stereotype and carefully and methodically picks it to pieces, using instead a much more grounded base for the people in the story. In other words, a member of the audience could analyse practically any of the main characters and find within their role a blatant subversion of the American dream "norm". The overall premise of the story itself, is based around the fulfilment of an American dream – that Olive would win a beauty pageant. ②

Olive's father Richard is perhaps one of the most fleshed-out examples of this. He is presented during the opening of the film as self-motivated and set in his goals, being somewhat set up as a likeable character, someone the audience can quite easily identify with, but very quickly the audience is forced to change their opinion of Richard when they see the way in which he tries to force his opinions down the throats of everyone else in the dinner table scene near the film's beginning. Also, in trying to shield Olive from being exposed two subjects he considers unsuitable (suicide and homosexuality, the latter of which he describes as being "sick in the head" during the family dinner scene), the audience sees Richard trying to build up the ideal life or what he thinks is the 'American Dream' around himself. He chooses to ignore aspects of the life around him that he sees as unacceptable or out of sync with his ideal lifestyle, trying instead to fulfil his role as the authoritative head of the family and provider. ② Ultimately however he fails in this goal, as his book deal falls through and subsequently leaves him bankrupt. He then takes on a more grateful outlook on life, in part influenced by the unexpected death of his father halfway through the film.

In the "ideal" family, one would expect Sheryl Hoover as the mother to be a model of femininity and homely values. However when she is introduced the audience does not even

see her immediately; instead there is a close-up of her hand on the steering wheel of a car, with a cigarette between two of her fingers. Her voice is heard and the audience makes the connection that she is talking on her mobile phone while driving, something that a model citizen should not do. She is clearly arguing with her husband Richard, and she looks worn-out and tired instead of sharp and glamorous. Sheryl Hoover's first impression on the audience is therefore of someone who considers practicality over style. The hurried way that Sheryl prepares dinner for her family reflect her personality as a mother who leaves things such as housework and cooking (stereotypically considered to be at the top of a housewife's priority list) to the last minute. This idea is reinforced when the grandfather complains that they "always have chicken," and that Sheryl always buys it rather than cooking her own.

Richard's father, far from being a jolly, Santa-Claus type figure, is a sexually frustrated heroin addict who has recently been evicted from his retirement home for taking drugs. However, he does come across as affectionate in his own way and turns out to be likeable, being perhaps the only character in the whole story who fully supports Olive in her dream to win the Little Miss Sunshine pageant. In some ways he is the character who most goes against the grain of the American dream, because despite his "unacceptable" habits of swearing, talking openly and explicitly about sex, and taking drugs, he still manages to be reasonably content with how things are working out in his life, proving to all of those people out there who follow the American dream that you don't necessarily need it to be happy. In fact he could be perceived by the audience as being the most relatable character because of his subversion and refusal to accept the American Dream stereotype the rest of the family believe in.

This film also shows the lifestyle of people on the other end of the scale; those who do appear to find their own "American dream" and hold onto it. The attendants of the beauty pageant in the second half of the film all fit into this category. The realistic approach to life that most people follow is carefully avoided by these people, as shown in the scene where the Hoovers enter the backstage dressing rooms and find prepubescent girls being made up essentially like show ponies, with spray tan, heavy makeup, and sexually evocative costumes. All of these ideas come across as very fake and unsatisfying; the happiness they offer is always short-lived and superficial. People like this are shown to be the polar opposites of the Hoover family: they are particular, proper and obsessed with the concept of physical image. In this way the filmmakers show the audience the downfalls of this lifestyle, in which appearance becomes everything and everyday, real problems are swept under the carpet rather than confronted. Life suddenly becomes very superficial.

Conclusively, the film Little Miss Sunshine methodically points out all of the flaws in the "American dream" that so many people today find themselves striving to achieve. The fact that the film also shows a flip side to this lifestyle, the more grounded and bittersweet relationships embodied in the Hoover family, is what makes the film so appealing and endearing; it convincingly shows its audience that you do not always have to be materially successful or socially compliant to be happy in life.