

Little Miss Sunshine



Synopsis

By anyone's standards, the Hoover family consists of some decidedly odd characters. There's Richard (Greg Kinnear), a motivational speaker whose career downslide is starting to give the lie to his own philosophy; his wife Sheryl (Toni Collette), who's losing patience with both his crisis and their marriage; their teenage son Dwayne, who worships Nietzsche and has taken a vow of silence until he's old enough to become a fighter pilot; Sheryl's brother Frank (Steve Carell), a Proust scholar who lost a MacArthur grant and his lover but failed in his attempt to lose his life; Grandpa (Alan Arkin), who's been kicked out of his nursing home for snorting heroin; and Olive (Abigail Breslin), Richard and Sheryl's seven-year-old daughter, who isn't going to let a little weight problem get in the way of her winning the Little Miss Sunshine pageant. She's been rehearsing her talent programme with Grandpa and seems sure to win, so the family hops into a VW bus and drives Olive to the pageant for a chance to fulfil her dreams.

Introduction

This resource is suitable for students and teachers of GCSE, AS, A2 Film, Media and English.

Little Miss Sunshine and Genre

By looking at the trailers and reviews we can see that the film was sold as a comedy. Look at the poster. How is this confirmed by the choices made in the construction of the poster?

Comedy is a notoriously difficult form to analyse. We all know when a comedy works as we laugh or are at least amused. However, identifying a comedy genre is more difficult. Can we say that there are identifiable characters or setting to all comedies?

Little Miss Sunshine can also be thought of as a road trip. In this case the Hoover family are forced to spend time with each other and are unable to escape into their own worlds. This situation leads to the comic situations that we are witness to. In common with other road movies, the characters learn about themselves and each other during the course of the trip.

Something that comedies often have in common is a sense of opposition. Often characters play off one another; perhaps one character supplies another with the opportunity to deliver a funny line. The Hoover family provides a lot of opportunity for opposition; the most typical pairing is between Richard and other members of the family. Can you think of other examples of characters in opposition? What other devices are used to generate humour?



Playing with Stereotypes

Imagine that you are involved at the pre-production of the film and you've been given a list of characters. First on the list is 'Grandpa'. How would you have imagined the character? Was he anything like the character we meet in the film? Did you find any of his behaviour or attitudes shocking? Can you think of other characters from comedies that you've seen that have a shocking aspect to their character?

Olive provides a divided family with a focus. Her curiosity and innocence are an essential aspect of her character. Before the family leave for California we see them all having dinner together. The divide we see during the dinner sequence not only helps to establish character information but also reinforces her age and the ideas that the other grown up family members have about what is appropriate for a child.

Key questions:

- Think about this sequence and about the different situations that are discussed and how they are explained or avoided for Olive's benefit.
- What else does this scene tell us about the other members of the family?
- Is the Hoover family a typical representation of a modern family unit?
- During the trailer we learn that Olive has been able to go to the competition because another contestant has been disqualified because of '...something to do with diet pills'. Is Olive a typical contestant for a beauty pageant?
- Later in the film we see the family at a café, Olive orders ice cream. How does her father respond?
- What is the reaction of the rest of the family? Olive later asks Miss California at the pageant 'Do you eat ice cream?' to which she replies, 'Yes. My favourite is Chocolate Cherry Garcia. Except technically I think it's a frozen yogurt.' Why do you think Olive asks?
- How important do you think her family are in influencing her?
- Do you think these same pressures would be applied to Dwayne?

Production and Audience

We can see at the bottom of the poster the film is a Fox Searchlight film.

Key questions:

- What does this tell us about its production?
- How could it be described?
- Find out who owns Fox Searchlight.
- Why do you think Fox Searchlight might be an asset to them?
- Think about the projects link to Fox Searchlight and Twentieth Century Fox.
- Consider the audience for Little Miss Sunshine.
- Who do you think they are?
- Are there any similarities/differences between the texts and audiences?
- Why do you think this is?