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Little Miss Sunshine

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Little Miss Sunshine

Abstract

This is a review of *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006).

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At its core, *Little Miss Sunshine* is a movie about acceptance, particularly the acceptance of family members whose frailties and social unorthodoxy are vibrantly and intentionally unsubtle. There is the suicidal homosexual scholar Frank (Steve Carell), the foul-mouthed and drug-addicted pervert Grandpa (Alan Arkin), the megalomaniacal perfectionist Richard (Greg Kinnear), and the conventional, although refreshingly unordinary, rebellious teenager Dwayne (Paul Dano). All of these are supported by the overstressed mother/wife/sister/daughter figure Sheryl (Toni Collette), whose own frustration and neglect are evident, but continually overshadowed by her felt need to moderate the arguments among her male relatives. These fights sometimes hit close to home, not only because of the quality of acting but also the occasional use of a hand-held camera, emphasizing the reality of family drama to which most of us can so painfully relate. In the middle of it all is the seven-year-old Olive (Abigail Breslin), whose pure innocence and beauty is enough to drown out whatever sadness, embarrassment, and anger we feel toward the rest of the family. It is in fact she who brings out their good points, the one who is plainly loved by them all in spite of their inability to love themselves and each other.

The plot is somewhat contrived but filmically necessary to mediate the development of the characters. Olive has won a regional beauty pageant near the family's home in Arizona and discovers that she is qualified to enter the larger Little

Miss Sunshine pageant in southern California. Various factors require that if she is to participate, the entire family must make the road trip with her. Throughout the course of the journey, each of the four male leads discovers that even what little comfort he has to hold on to is slipping away, forcing each to reconsider what he truly values. Sheryl likewise is loosened from her anxiety through these transformations, and their love for Olive and growing acceptance of each other gives them strength to face their futures with some hope.

The directors' (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris) portrayal of the beauty pageant suggests that even with all of the problems and tragedy surrounding the family, its genuineness is to be valued above the superficiality of the pageant and everything for which it stands. The shots of the other contestants, wearing too much make-up, high heels, swimsuits, glamorous dresses, and constant smiles, at first present them as laughable. Eventually, when we realize that some parents really do make their children do such things, and some kids really are this misguided, the entire pageant becomes a target of derision and disgust for the audience. Near the end, the teenager Dwayne makes this sentiment clear in a poignant statement to his uncle Frank. "You know what? Fuck beauty contests. Life is one fucking beauty contest after another."

The film's critique of contemporary Western culture's idea of beauty creates space for a new definition of what it means to be beautiful. The filmmakers suggest

that key to this new meaning is love; both love of others who are different from you and with whom you may not even get along, and love of yourself. As the family dynamics of *Little Miss Sunshine* move from intolerance and criticism toward acceptance and mutual concern, it becomes more beautiful. Moreover, the characters' abilities to accept themselves and the good things in their lives in the face of personal disappointments in fact hinges on being so accepted by the other members of the family. As interpersonal love grows, so does self love; and Olive is the catalyst for this mutually constitutive dynamic by just being beautifully herself.

The religious significance of this should be obvious, but let me reflect for a moment on my Judeo-Christian tradition. I cannot help but think that whoever wrote "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain" (Proverbs 31:30) had something like beauty pageants in mind, or at least the superficiality which gives rise to such contests. The rest of the verse is also striking: "...but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." This suggests that more important than physical beauty is right relation to both God and neighbor (since fear of God in the Bible is simultaneously religious and ethical). It is in fact this relation which the people of God understood as more beautiful than the formal aesthetic definition which came down through the Western tradition¹...and so says Little Miss Sunshine.

An epilogue: In order to make some editorial corrections, I rented the film from my local video store. When I set the DVD down to pay for it, the young woman behind the counter, at no instigation from me, proceeded to tell me how much she loves this movie because she was just like Olive as a little girl and, in fact, still does not conform to popular ideas of beauty. She said that she wept when seeing it the first time, and almost cried again in front of me, only stopping herself upon fear of embarrassment, I suspect. I was taken aback, and could say no other but to affirm her. It was a powerful and incarnate reminder to me of why I watch movies, and why we love them so much as a culture, and why those of us who posit or study some religion do so well to truly hear them.

¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 366.