

Hope and Madness:

The Myth of Sisyphus in *Little Miss Sunshine*

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In Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, his character contemplates, "Why did she give herself pain? Why like Sisyphus did she keep pushing her boulder uphill?" (Asher 52). The suffering of Sisyphus has baffled Western consciousnesses for thousands of years. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, directors Jonathon Dayton and Valerie Faris have created a film with undertones of this myth. Visually and thematically they have embodied its essence in their movie, where the obstacles of life thwart and disrupt their characters' feeble, desperate hopes.

The myth of Sisyphus helps explain the film's artistic form and provide a backdrop for interpreting *Little Miss Sunshine*. Three scenes illustrate the similarities of *Little Miss Sunshine* to the myth of Sisyphus: the opening scene, breakdown of the bus, and Dwayne's discovery of his colorblindness. Examining the cinematography and mise-en-scène (elements of the scene), one can see how Dayton and Faris' film is related to the myth of Sisyphus.

The cinematography in the opening scene establishes a comparison to the myth of Sisyphus. In this scene Olive, a plump child with dreams of winning beauty pageants, watches a pageant. The camera *pushes* in and tilts up to her. Thus, Olive is framed against the ceiling, demonstrating her immediate limitations.

In the next shot, Olive's father Richard is shot in low angle. Richard concludes a motivational speech about his "9 steps," which admonishes people to "refuse to lose". In the shot, Richard is framed with the top figure of his "9 steps" above him. In this sense, the directors comment that what is hoped for is unachievable; humanity is beneath the impossible.

Another hopeful character, Richard's stepson Dwayne, is presented in the opening scene as comparable to Sisyphus. In his introduction, Dwayne is bench-pressing. The camera is positioned directly above Dwayne, framing him with the floor. Focus is adjusted to stay on the barbell. The effect of "racking" focus is that it emphasizes the exercise rather than the person. In

the next series of shots of Dwayne, the camera is inches from the ground. Without changing angles, Dwayne jump-ropes, does sit-ups, and push-ups. In the next shot, he stands before a calendar with dozens of days crossed off. As Dwayne stoops to the bottom of his calendar, the camera tilts down quickly. Dwayne is training to become an Air Force pilot. Later we learn he cannot become a pilot because he is colorblind. Thus, these shots of Dwayne foreshadow his discovery: he is framed with the ground; the tilt down emphasizes the effect of falling. Hence Dwayne's "training" is like meaningless toil. Like Sisyphus, nothing rewards their sustained effort.

In a later scene, the family bus breaks down. The family fears defeat. Nevertheless, the mechanic tells them that if they can *push* the bus to speed, they can start it. This scene visually and thematically mirrors the toil of Sisyphus. Additionally, the idea of immobility and mobility are mirrored in the cinematography. While the family starts to push the bus, the camera remains static. In the next shots as they get the bus moving, the camera moves (tracks) alongside the bus. Thus as the bus gains momentum and the cinematography becomes mobile, hope is embodied.

Despite the family's newfound hope, the last shot of the bus scene portends their failure. As the camera was static in the beginning of the scene, it is also static in the final shot, concluding with a sense that the bus is anchored to defeat. The depth of field of the shot is wide enough that the mechanic, bus, and mountains in the background are all in focus, visually combining them together. The bus drives toward mountains—metaphors of impassability—and the mechanic remains, in a sense, grounding the family's aspirations. From this point on in the film, every stop in the trip is a tragedy. First, Richard learns that he cannot sell his "9 steps" program. At the motel, Grandpa dies. The eye charts from the hospital reveal Dwayne is colorblind.

A substantial theme of *Little Miss Sunshine* is the absurdity of hope. In the face of fated failure, mortals have no choice, but hope. One may argue that belief in falsity is a sign of mental disorder. In his work *The History of Madness*, Michel Foucault endeavors to analyze this disorder. He writes:

For in a general manner madness here is not linked to the world and its subterranean forms, but rather to man and his frailties, his dreams and illusions....Madness is only in each man, as it lies in the attachments that men have to themselves, and the illusions that they entertain about themselves (Murphy and Khalfa 23).

Foucault equates aspirations to a sort of madness, a delusion by which people cope with existence. This comparison helps explain why the Hoovers remain invested in Olive's dream—to hope. In the film, losing these illusions leads to ruin. Sheryl's brother Frank discovered his illusions and attempted suicide. Hopelessness, a symptom of suicide, consumed him (American Association of Suicidology). Yet, rekindling a sense of purpose through Olive's dream, Frank perseveres.

Dwayne, like Frank, loses hope when he learns he is colorblind. In the scene, while crying out in misery, Dwayne barrels into a ditch, collapsing at the bottom. Above him, his sympathetic family contemplates what to do. They cannot leave him, yet they cannot wait, or Olive will miss the pageant. His mother Sheryl goes down to him and pleads with him. Dwayne rejects her. Breaking his vow of silence for the first time in months, he accosts his mother and the rest of his family. Dwayne levels their illusions in an effort to make them feel the despair of his reality, futility.

Sheryl retreats up the hill. The family still unsure what to do, Olive goes down to her brother. By descending, she extends hope to Dwayne through comfort. Rekindled, he and Olive traverse the hill, and the family hurries to the pageant.

According to Albert Camus, who philosophized about the phenomenon of Sisyphus in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the essence of the struggle of Sisyphus is hope, however absurd. Although every day Sisyphus fails, the possibility that *he may* succeed drives him on (Perry, et al 45). This prospect of succeeding in spite of all odds, this hope however absurd and illusory, comprises the sum of human perseverance. It is madness for the sake of trying.

The myth of Sisyphus provides a backdrop for interpreting *Little Miss Sunshine*. Examining the cinematography and mise-en-scène, one can see the relationship between the myth and the movie, yet comprehend it because of the analyses of Camus and Foucault; they show the significance of hope despite the absurdity of its illusion. Describing madness in the dramatic structure, Foucault writes:

All that needs to be done is to push the illusion until it reaches the truth. At the heart of the structure, at its mechanical centre, it is at once a feigned conclusion that holds within it the promise of a new beginning, and an initiation to what will be recognized as reconciliation with truth and reason (Murphy and Khalfa 39-40).

The “truth” here is human limitation; the “reason” is perseverance; the “reconciliation”— *coping*.

Works Cited

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