

What is the measure
of unhappy



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The Simpsons, was a dysfunctional family, with no less than a rebellious son constantly getting into trouble in school and the community in general, and a drunkard father who would not hesitate to strangle said son at the slightest provocation. It is wacky and funny, owing to its cartoonish character and its brilliant writing. The same can be said of the Bluth family in Arrested Development, where between feuding siblings, a drunkard, former socialite mother and a fugitive father, at the center are values that remain somewhat intact.

Their dysfunction, and tragic circumstances are brought in a humorous light. Though with the title Little Miss Sunshine, we see nothing of the glamor we would expect a few minutes into the movie. This is no Simpsons—at least that family kept to their values, had the support of their Springfield neighborhood; this is no Arrested Development, as there is no one member left that is functional enough, strong enough to keep the ties together.

For all intents and purposes, the Hoovers of Little Miss Sunshine are estranged, and ready to tear to separate directions. We are immediately introduced to people at the end of their ropes—the grandfather is a heroin addict, the uncle recently failed in his suicide attempt, the father is a failed “self-help” author, the son has all but disowned his dysfunctional family. The mother, for all her efforts to keep her family together, is ironically nothing but a foil to make clearer how much in desperate circumstance the family has gone.

The movie centers around the eventual trip the family has to California, for a Little Miss Sunshine pageant for the youngest daughter, but here there is more opportunity to show how far down its members have gone. No one member is not dependent on the other—the suicidal uncle could not be left alone, or alone with his nephew; the grandfather, who has been with his granddaughter longest, is impliedly dependent on her for emotional support; this line of dependency eventually passes to the mother, and the father last. Everyone but the daughter is reluctantly pulled to the journey.

There is not much to be said about the acting done in the movie, as every character was subtly played. Steve Carrell plays a person different altogether from his previous roles as family man or comic hero—he plays a manic-depressive intellectual homosexual, and he delivers perfectly the consequential line where he explains to his niece why he tried to kill himself. Greg Kinnear, in portraying the straight-laced father who tries to maintain a semblance of reason to his family, successfully balances the seriousness of his mood while becoming involved in ridiculous situations.

Memorable—perhaps owing to him being at the center of the only “loud” scene in the entire movie—is Alan Arkin, the wise cracking grandfather who breaks the stereotype of the embittered old man trapped in the memories of days past or a war they might have taken part in. The “shining ray of light”, perhaps, in the household is the little daughter, Olive Hoover, who spends countless days dreaming about pageants and watching the coronation of beauty queens. From what we see of her and her actions throughout the film, we wonder whether she was oblivious to the situation her family was in.

There is a scene of her whooping with joy from room to room while from the kitchen the father and mother violently exchange words, eventually dragging the family in the argument in the process. In the aftermath of the scene, in comes Olive, still whooping with joy. She is also constantly sheltered by her mother and her father, in separate circumstances from what would be deemed “inappropriate” at her age. For those who would search for the comedy in the movie, there is none but dry, tired humor.

There are no exaggerated misadventures that the average Bluth or Simpson might encounter, but little troubles that could normally arise. Those who watched expecting serious or contemplative thought, would be the ones pleasantly surprised. For while in themselves the picture of a family running after the bus to catch a ride would be in itself funny, it does not break the gloom, but complement it. Eventually each of them are pushed to the limits of their patience, and comes face to face with the measure of unhappiness. What measure is unhappy?

The movie forces us to tackle this question head-on, in-between the humorous intakes of breath. Each of the family members sees their vision of life fall apart: the father sees the failure of his venture to promote his book; the uncle sees the vision of what he had lost come to life before him again; the son comes face to face with the prospect of a shattered dream, and there is a death in the family. Olive Hooper, protected from the harshness of their world, surprisingly becomes the one that shows them the light in it.

The son, who worships Nietzsche and sees the final end to his dream, finally and completely rejects everything—his family and his life. Only the quiet

gesture of his sister makes him realize that the trip is not about him, or his troubles. But her. And she was willing to sacrifice that time for him. When the mother, seeing her world start to come to pieces, finds support in the hug of her family, and her child. The father, coming to a point where he could choose to shatter his child's dream—knowing that he has, once and for all, been defeated—chooses instead to throw his worries away and join in the crazed merriment of his family.

If one was to watch the movie, and look for something better that would come the main characters' way, they would find the end underachieving. The family remains subdued, dysfunctional, and a failure in each of their respective right. There is, however, something different indeed—for by the end we learn that while each of us has dreams, we do not need to place standards of happiness on attaining them—we can be happy in being with family, being ourselves.

It's not the accomplishment of something, but the journey taken in its accomplishment that is important. In the end, happiness is not a state which we seek to attain—but a choice to be content with wherever we are. We could all take a cue on Olive. In the face of the troubles and misadventures of her family, the loss, and the pain each is faced with, she never loses the sunny disposition. And when she does lose it, everyone pitches in to rouse her from her gloom. It's because the inspiration for them to keep going, and to keep living.