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Traveling Together, Growing Apart: Mobility in *Good Luck Charlie, It's Christmas!*

INTRODUCTION

Road trip narratives, or road films, have long held a prominent place in American culture and cinema. These stories often symbolize the pursuit of freedom, self-discovery, and the exploration of new horizons. They provide a unique lens through which to examine the American ideal of mobility and the quest for personal growth. Films centered on road trips offer audiences a blend of adventure and introspection, reflecting broader cultural values and individual aspirations. Within the genre of road films, there is a smaller, more niche subset known as family road trip films. These films often explore and analyze family dynamics and specific relationships, using the journey as a backdrop for character development and relationship building. Through their narratives, these films offer insights into the complexities of family life and the transformative power of a shared experience.

Released in 2011, the Disney Channel Original Movie *Good Luck Charlie, It's Christmas!* follows the Duncan family attempting to spend their Christmas with the grandparents in Palm Springs, Florida. The narrative mostly focuses on Amy and Teddy Duncan, a mother-daughter duo that separates from the rest of their family and ends up on a long road trip. This paper explores how *Good Luck Charlie, It's Christmas!* uses the road trip narrative to examine themes of mobility, independence, and family dynamics, particularly through the

evolving relationship between Teddy and her mother, Amy. The film depicts mobility not only as a pathway to achieving personal freedom but also as a means of maintaining control.

This analysis is guided by two central research questions: How does the movie depict mobility as a means of achieving independence and as a means of maintaining control? How is this representation shown through Teddy and Amy's relationship? To address these questions, the paper will conduct a combined scene analysis and character study. It will identify key moments that highlight the themes of mobility and restraint while simultaneously focusing on Teddy's quest for independence and Amy's role as a mother. Finally, a comparative analysis will situate *Good Luck Charlie, It's Christmas!* within the broader tradition of road trip movies, highlighting common themes and unique contributions.

SCENE ANALYSIS AND CHARACTER STUDY

Teddy Gets Off the Plane

Teddy Duncan represents the typical teenage daughter navigating the ups and downs of adolescence. She desires autonomy, a concept that author Loren Lomasky describes as “the distinctively human capacity to be self-directing” (Lomasky). Teddy wants to go on a spring break trip to Florida with her best friend Ivy. The issue is that she would be traveling alone, without her mother or any other family members. Amy refuses to let Teddy fly alone, citing that she is not mature enough to travel on her own. After a long argument, Bob Duncan intervenes and decides that Teddy can fly alone if she is responsible enough to get her own plane ticket. For Teddy, traveling independently represents a crucial step toward adulthood and self-reliance. It is the idea that she can “go anywhere and become anyone” (Brigham). Teddy's limited mobility symbolizes Amy's desire to keep her daughter close and protect her from potential dangers. This conflict between mother and daughter underscores the theme of mobility as a means of achieving

independence, highlighting the emotional struggle Amy faces in letting go and the challenges Teddy encounters in asserting her autonomy.

When the Duncans finally make it onto their plane, a flight attendant comes on board with an announcement that changes everything. The plane is overbooked, and they are looking for one passenger to give up their seat. In return, the airline will get them on the next flight out and a free plane ticket to any destination. Sensing her chance, Teddy immediately volunteers. Amy protests, asking Teddy what she's doing and Teddy replies "I'm being responsible." As Teddy marches off the plane, her mother follows. This highlights Teddy's desire for independence and Amy's instinct to protect her. By following her off the plane, Amy is controlling Teddy's ability to be independently mobile. However, this ends up backfiring as there is no plane that can take the two of them and they are required to find other means of travel.

The Cheap Yugo

After a bus ride and a long walk, Teddy and Amy finally secure a beat-up Yugo for their journey. It is in this scene that the dynamics of their relationship are clearly illustrated through mobility.

As Teddy drives, Amy repeatedly asks if she can take control of the wheel, reflecting her reluctance to relinquish control. Teddy insists she can manage on her own, but as they careen down a steep hill with malfunctioning brakes, the reality of her inexperience surfaces. This moment symbolizes that while Teddy desires independence, she still relies on her mother for guidance and support, highlighting the balance between autonomy and parental protection.

Hitchhiking with Conspiracy Theorists

Teddy yet again takes control of their mobility when she suggests the two of them hitchhike after their car breaks down.

After having their car completely fall apart on them, the two end up in a diner where they overhear an older couple is heading towards Las Vegas. Much to Amy's dismay, Teddy sits with the couple and talks them into taking them in. This moment reinforces Teddy's consistent journey for independence, constantly striving to prove that she is going to get them out of this and prove her responsibility. During the ride, the elderly couple reveals that they are in fact 'alien abduction survivors' and the mother-daughter duo are stuck in an awkward situation. The woman notices Amy exhibiting symptoms typically associated with abduction but, to Teddy's shock, she correctly deduces that Amy is pregnant. This moment highlights how unexpected situations can force characters to confront new realities about themselves and their relationships. Their newfound mobility has made Teddy and Amy both reveal some things they would have rather kept secret.

HOW MOBILITY IS REPRESENTED

Mobility is represented in two different ways in *Good Luck Charlie, It's Christmas!*.

First, it's represented as a means of "freedom, speed, adventure, and independence" (Hensley). Teddy sees mobility, specifically being able to travel alone, as a way to grow away from her sometimes overbearing family. She wants a "high level of personal mobility", to be in control of where she goes and who she goes with (Walsh). What makes this view of mobility in *Good Luck Charlie, It's Christmas!* different from other road films is the variety of transportation modes the characters use. Unlike many road films that primarily feature their protagonists using cars, Teddy and her mother utilize public transportation, hitchhiking, and even a bike. This diversity in transportation highlights the unpredictability and flexibility required in their journey, emphasizing that mobility—and by extension, independence—can be achieved in multiple ways, not just through conventional means.

Conversely, Amy uses mobility as a means of control, limiting Teddy's independent movement and criticizing her when she exercises her autonomy. Amy's refusal to let Teddy travel alone exemplifies her need for control over Teddy. Even when Teddy proves that she is responsible and independent enough to do things on her own, Amy questions Teddy's every move. She views Teddy's quest for independence as a direct affront against her, meaning that she is willing to stop Teddy's mobility any chance she gets.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS TO OTHER ROAD FILMS

To understand how *Good Luck Charlie, It's Christmas!* fits within the broader genre of road trip films, a comparative analysis with similar movies is essential.

First, it is important to understand that road movies are not necessarily about the destination, but rather “how the journey affects the traveler's heart” (Widmar). This perspective allows for a deeper examination of character development and interpersonal relationships throughout the journey.

For instance, in films like *Little Miss Sunshine*, the road trip serves as a means for a dysfunctional family to confront their issues and grow closer together. Similarly, *Thelma & Louise* highlights the road as a space for liberation and self-discovery, showcasing how physical mobility can parallel emotional journeys (Man).

In a similar vein, *Good Luck Charlie, It's Christmas!* uses mobility not only as a means of adventure but also to explore the tension between independence and familial restraint. As Teddy strives for autonomy, her mother's protective instincts serve as a counterbalance, reflecting a complex dynamic often seen in family road films.

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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Good Luck Charlie, It's Christmas!* uses the road trip story to explore the themes of independence and family dynamics. The tension and dynamic between Amy and Teddy reflect larger themes that are common in road films, where the journey often leads to personal growth and changed relationships. The film highlights how journeys can shape individual identities and strengthen family bonds.

*** I will clean up the conclusion.*

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