

Cinematography: american beauty essay sample

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Introduction

American Beauty is a 1999 debut feature film for director Sam Mendes and playwright Alan Ball. Starring Annette Bening and Kevin Spacey this drama movie is set in contemporary American suburbs. The film won five Academy Awards including an award for Best Picture. Interestingly, Sam Mendes uses colour, especially the colour red to symbolize passion, love, life and danger as well as low key lighting, and both high and low contrasting to give reveal the characters attribute and theme of the scenes.

The colour red is persistently and cleverly used in the film, American Beauty. The film director, Sam Mendes uses the red colour as a pivotal motif to emphasise theme and mood, expose characters feelings and personality, and distinguish families. Note that, in America culture colour red gives various images and meanings. For instance, red colour represents blood or rather the core of life. In other words, it evokes the meaning of vitality, energy, anger, sacrifice, excitement, and power. Moreover, it is used to represent danger, sex, warmth, lust, death, beauty, and rage. It is used, further for women's possessions such as clothes and cars. At the finishing of the film, colour red is used to show Lester's blood spattered across a table, which is white in colour. All these meanings of red have been cleverly represented in the movie.

Red roses are also used in the film as a symbol of death, life and love. In some sense flowers symbolize love, caring and compassion. In fact, in the American Beauty they symbolize beauty. However, these aspects of the red roses are superseded with peril due to their thorns, which can pierce. The

title American Beauty is suitably explained with the use of the red roses as well as Angela, who is an ideal America woman with her long blonde hair, her red lips, blue eyes and her porcelain skin tone. The use of the red rose as a symbol of beauty, however, is not without flaws; the roses have thorns which are dangerous and the red colour is also a representation of blood that can mean death. All in all, red roses both a motif and stand for symbols in the film; they appear in almost every part of the movie. For instance, they are seen in the garden; and more or less every room in the dwelling have red roses. Furthermore, in they are the focus to the table in the dining room. It is worth to note that it at this table that the family is delineated.

The petals of the red rose are also used to represent sex. They are shown surrounding Angela (Gavrelis) for Lester; the roses burst out of Lester's mouth when he romanticizes of kissing her, they also pop out of Angela's blouse, and also they fall onto his face from the ceiling when he thinks of her. The colour red is also significant as a central motif in the film as shown with the red front door of the house. To note, this red door house is constantly referred to by the neighbours throughout the movie; it is known as the house with a red door.

However, inside the house the director cleverly limits the use of colours to blue-grey monochrome in an attempt to emphasise the separation between the Burnham's. Moreover, Lester flees from this lonely and cold dwelling through a domain that is framed in brown, and this isolates Lester further from the previous monochrome existence. To further elaborate the idea that Burnharm's home is only a snippet of more facts inside, Sam juxtaposes the

neighbours' houses with Burnfarm's home. Note that the more or less artificial bright colours of Burnham's house diverge from the Fitt's house, which so regimented, Amish and bland; it is absolutely without aesthetics including plants that characterize typical homes. Moreover, décor and furniture is limited, while the available furniture is wooden, plain and dark.

Moreover, the lighting in Burnfarm's home is dim with cream and white colours being persistent throughout. The Fritt's family is different. Sam Mendes highlights that by using melancholy, bland colours to surround the house and spaces them far from each other. Interestingly, the Burnfarm's family is dressed in black and white in the entire movie to externalize the isolation and loneliness between the society and the family. Other neighbours such as Jim and Jim who are very successful and initially seem to be abnormal, are shown in cheery and bright clothes (Gavrelis, 4) of primary colours, and are very lively. Contrastingly, these characters are the most normal in the whole movie. Colour, thus, is employed to both show juxtaposition in neighbourhoods as well as portray the characters.

The core of every character is cleverly captured with colour. Initially, Lester is shown in unsaturated chilly colours to insinuate a drained life and lack of vigour. However, as the movie progresses and Lester is transformed we begin to witness him in brighter view of life and his garments colours changes as well; they change to yellow, to green and ultimately to red. Further, Lester dons a red top, buys a red car and works in a job while in a white and red white costumes. Sam employs this transformation of colour to elaborate that Lester recalls what he initially wanted in life; he notices the

void in his life. The red outfits give Lester a sense of control and power over his own life. This transformation started as result of his initial encounter with Angela, who is the symbol of American beauty. Angela wears red outfits throughout the entire film. Moreover, she adorns red lipstick and bright colour clothes. These colours bring out passion and sexual sensations. Red is also dominant in lipstick and nail polish for every woman in the movie.

Caroline Burnham, a central female character, undergoes transformation as well. Although she outwardly seems controlling and isolated, inside she desires for power and passion. This is skilfully shown at the start of the film where Caroline wants to clean the house and she removes her clothes to reveal a red camisole beneath her yellow suit. Moreover, while Caroline cleans the shadowy and dark house the back is a brightly lit wall. Further, Caroline experiences a personal breakdown (Gavrelis, 5) and conceals her weeping face with the red nails, thus masking her atypical conduct. Carolyn tries to make up for her loneliness with acquiring things that she desires. She buys a car, house with a good garden, but fails to notice the big picture. Like Lester, Caroline transforms, into a more grounded and secure person.

Mendes shows this in the last episodes of the film when Caroline adorns a red velvet outfit. She becomes assertive and accepts to bond with Lester. Earlier it is apparent that Caroline is preoccupied with success and competes with Buddy Kane, the successful symbol in real estate. Note that a red sign is mounted in his home to publicize himself, and it denotes his powers and sexual attraction to Caroline.

Lighting is another technique used by Conrad Hall in the film to achieve various goals. It is used to add to the effectiveness of scenes. For instance, the point where Lester is shown as fixated on Angela and Angela herself is shown within the frame, lighting is used to further show that Angela is the point of Lester's attention. Lighting is employed to direct the audience's focus on Lester's eyes in an attempt to elaborate that Lester is being charmed by Angela. Elsewhere, as Angela appears alone in the frame, the background becomes absolutely black and a bright light shines on Angela. This light comes above Angela although its source is not clear. In this scene, lighting is low key and high contrast. It is low key lighting due to the fact that the shadow of Angela is visible behind her as well as Lester's entire face, except on his eyes. On the other hand, it is high contrast since the difference between darkness and light is obvious.

The lighting effects in the film make various contributions. Firstly, the shining of light on Angela alone helps elaborate to the audience that Angela is the focus of Lester's attention. Moreover, light is used to show good as light is used in the moments of sadness and bad things. Furthermore, light compliments the attributes of Angela who is a virgin. Because the lighting source is unknown, it would be worthwhile to assume that the light is originating from Heaven to shine on Angela as a sign of her innocence. Simultaneously, she is attempting to be someone else other than who she is. Angela time and again claims that she is experienced in terms of sex. What is more, the darkness that appears in the background is a revelation of what is going to happen if Angela continues with her lies. Note that, although she is a virgin, Lester is unaware and views her differently, and has bad thoughts

on her. He is sexually obsessed with her and his thoughts, which are highlighted with darkness, surrounds Angela together with her innocence.

As Lester is prepared to begin the sex act, Angela reveals that she is a virgin. It is at this point that Lester realizes what he is doing and stops. This shot is a dynamic shot with a crane. It is as if, by some divine intervention, Lester came to realize the error of his ways before it was too late. The scene concludes with a dynamic shot of Lester apologizing to Angela and, for the first time in this scene, they are scene in the same frame. This time, Lester is given the higher position in the frame.

Lighting is further used to symbolize various meaning, especially in the scene when Lester comes to the realization that Angela is a virgin.

Throughout the whole scene Angela shots are lighted. For instance, at the beginning of the scene, Angela is put on the white couch by Lester, she is dressed in a white blouse, and light from outside shine dimly on her. This emphasizes the point that she adorned in white. This combination of white colour and light effectively shows purity; that is Angela is a virgin. Elsewhere, Lester is revealed in lesser lighting. For instance, as his hands moves erotically on Angela's body, they are shown with little lighting so as to highlight the impurity of his action.

Moreover, this scene's lighting is both low key and low contrast. It is low contrast since the light is grey and dim implying mysteriousness as the audience uncovers that Caroline is about to murder Lester. On the other hand, it is low key since both Lester and Angela shadows are visible.

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