

Analysis of mise-en-scene in the film 'american beauty'

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



How does mise-en-scene create meaning and provoke response in the opening of American Beauty? The opening scene of American Beauty shows a teenage girl lying in a bed, venting her feelings towards her father. In this, the audience sees her in dull clothing and colours, minimal make-up and has greasy-looking hair. As she sits up, her hair falls around her face and she stares directly into the camera, giving a sense of unease to the audience. The next shot is an establishing shot, showing the street where the main character, Leister, lives.

Its fall/autumn time and the trees are bare or dying, possibly indicating and foreshadowing a death later on in the movie. Also the streets are very linear, all vertical and in uniform, as it were. The opening very much portrays emptiness and dysfunctional family relationships. A perfect example of this would be the bedroom shot; the room is very empty and bland. The colour scheme looks very neutral as the walls, carpets, sheets and even lamps are creams and white- a clean look.

The bedroom is also divided and symmetrical; the audience gets the feel that the relationship between Leister and his wife is not very close and intimacy is lacking. Also, the lamps and bedside tables placed either side of the bed suggests separation and how their relationship seems very "Mr&Mrs". Leister is also a disruption to the room- his checked pyjamas are in linear and in uniform with the rest of the room- as he looks out of place, sprawled in the bed, sheets ruffled and contrasting with the colour scheme of the room.

When Leister then moves into the shower, the audience sees him ease his face into the pouring water, suggesting how he might ease his way into life situations slowly and cautiously. The next shot pans across the room as Leister masturbates in the shower, indicating the lack of intimacy in his relationship and that he feels the need and obligation to satisfy his own sexual needs. The shot shows the shower doors and the vertical lines around the door frame, looking like bars almost, suggesting he is enclosed. This sense of enclosure and being trapped is repeated and a recurring theme throughout the sequence.

This opening introduces the family's lifestyle and sets the scene for the audience, from the shot following Leister's shower, the audience gets the sense that the wife is the head of the house as she gardens in a bright, contemporary looking garden. The camera goes to a close up on the rose as the woman clips it from the bush. This rose is called American Beauty which is also the name of the film. She is dressed in a plain grey suit and a clean white apron, again fitting in with the colour scheme of the interior decor.

She also wears pearl earrings and a pearl necklace with her hair perfectly framing this and has impeccable make up, indicating what the perfect American housewife should resemble. She also converses with the homosexual neighbours about the secret to her roses flourishing so well; she seems happy and overly enthusiastic. The audience then see a shot of Leister, again, enclosed in an environment- this time the window. The audience sees him behind the window panes, in between two bright blue

shutters, indicating his isolation and loneliness within his own home. The colour blue is also an interesting choice by the director.

Blue suggests calm and tranquillity within the home, and also reflects on the colour of the perfect blue sky. Leister seems to fit in as he reflects on his own life and his past happiness, and also seems unsettled within himself, contrasting to the natural connotations of the colour blue. Following this shot, the daughter, Janey, is introduced as she types on her computer in her bedroom. Janey wears a jumper with roses embellished across the top half, with stripes down the arms, it is a very 'busy' jumper and again her sleeves represents a similar linear lifestyle to that of the rest of the house.

The camera then moves to a point of view shot so the audience can see what she is looking at- as she shuts down a list of some sort, a web page on 'Breast Augmentation' is shown for a few seconds, giving the audience enough time to read the title of the page and respond. This is deemed to be something a teenaged girl uncomfortable in her own body would typically look at. Janey then walks over to her mirror and turns to the side and stares at her breast and visually inspects them in disgust.

She seems disheartened and is dressed in a pair of beige/khaki trousers which completely contrast to her jumper, making her look 'frumpy' and out of place. The outside of the house is then shown in a long shot as Janey and Leister exit the house to the family car. The house looks bright and contemporary with bright blue shutters, a red door to compliment the roses in the bushes, perfect green lawn and a white picket fence, again representing enclosure, the feeling that Leister is trapped in a cage. The

house looks like a family home that wishes to portray friendliness and welcome guests.

Also, the family car is much too large for the family; there is too much space inside. This shows how empty the family life is and suggests the proximity of relationships within the family. The family positioning in the car is also odd, the wife in the front seat driving, Janey in the passenger seat and Leister taking a nap, hugging his suitcase to his chest in the back seat; Leister has almost taken the child's role in the family. The camera then shows the audience the view from the back window, and focuses on one small, lonesome cloud that has broken away from the others.

This could show Leister's isolation and how he feels like he is 'sedated', cast away from the other people and disconnected and alone. Overall, this opening sequence really uses mise-en scene to provoke empathy for Leister and to an extent, Janey, and show a deeper meaning into the family's lifestyle. The director has used mise-en-scene throughout the opening sequence to show how dysfunctional a seemingly 'perfect' family is and unravels family problems and struggles within the first four minutes just by using props, patterns and structuring settings.