

American beauty as melodrama



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Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999) is a good example of melodrama's presence within the modern American film industry. Its moments of comedy and tragedy are a result of its essential melodramatic intentions. However, it differs from classical melodrama in the sense that the idea of maintaining a nuclear family is not an important theme. The film starts off in a style that can be considered "film noir-esque", similar to that of Billy Wilder's 1950 classic *Sunset Boulevard* in which we hear the voice of our protagonist Lester Burnham in a voice over. "I'll be dead in a year," he says. "In a way, I'm dead already." This solemn introduction by Lester Burnham parallels the introduction of *Sunset Boulevard* when we hear the voice over of William Holden narrating the story from the dead protagonist's perspective.

Similarly, both *American Beauty* and *Sunset Boulevard* are told in a flashback sequence of events all taking place in the recent past. Kevin Spacey plays Lester Burnham, the protagonist who is fed up with the lack of respect from his wife Carolyn and daughter Jane. As the film progresses, we learn more and more about Lester, while following him on a journey to achieve happiness. In one of the first sequences of the film, Lester narrates the story of his day-to-day life. There is a shot where Lester is clearly masturbating in the shower. In a voice over Lester says, "Look at me, jerking off in the shower. This will be the high point of my day. It's all downhill from here."

Lester's sexual repression is evident by this bold statement. Since Lester is a family man with a wife and daughter, and knowing that masturbation is the high point in his day, one would automatically assume that Lester's wife is not fulfilling his sexual needs and that his daughter does not respect him.

Melodramatically, the sexual longing for a desired mate is a cornerstone to the genre. There is always sexual tension that needs to be resolved, or in

some cases, unresolved. The film *Written on the Wind* (1956), for example, ends with the sexually repressed protagonist – who has also just lost her father and brother – crying at her father's desk and stroking a phallic oilrig statue that represents the family business. Such symbolism is quintessential to the melodramatic genre. The same kind of phallic symbolism, once used as a masked strategy to punctuate sexual connotations within the film's subtext, is still notably present in modern films. In one scene in *American Beauty*, the phallic beer bottle plays a pivotal role. Lester tries to seduce his wife. He leans over her on the couch, speaking sweet nothings into her ear. "Whatever happened to that girl... who used to run up to the roof of our first apartment to flash the traffic helicopters? I haven't forgotten about her." His wife seems to be responding to his overtures when she says, "Lester, you're going to spill beer on the couch!" and ruins the mood for them both. Lester recoils in disappointment. In one of the final sequences of *American Beauty*, the phallic beer bottle metaphor appears once again. Throughout the film, Lester tries to seduce his daughter's friend Angela Hayes. When he encounters her in the kitchen of his home, Lester is again holding a bottle of beer. "Do you want a sip?" he asks. She accepts his offer, taking a swig from the bottle. This metaphoric fellatio empowers Lester to continue pursuing her. The sexual blonde is a common figure in melodrama, most notably in actresses like Lana Turner, Kim Novak and Marilyn Monroe, and the Angela character supports the melodramatic nature of *American Beauty*. We see Lester's longing for Angela grow through dramatic and highly sexual dream sequences. When Lester first notices Angela, it is at a cheerleading rally for the high school basketball team. Halftime begins and the cheerleaders disperse on the court. The choreographed cheer commences normally, and

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then Lester catches a glimpse of Angela. The sequence shifts to Lester's point of view. The music changes with the point of view shift. It is clear that Lester is the looker while Angela is the object of his gaze. The foreground lights dim, shadowing the other cheerleaders, and Angela is the only one left visible. It appears that she is looking directly at Lester. The camera reverses angles and shows Lester sitting alone in the gymnasium bleachers while the rest of the crowd hides in the shadows. Angela performs a provocative dance, clearly portraying the sexualised, youthful female that Lester longs for. She dances while caressing herself. Multiple close-ups show details in Angela's body to heighten the sexual tension felt between these two characters. Angela is finally about to reveal her breasts – she pulls her cotton cheerleader's top open – but no breasts yet. A sequential triple-take shows Angela opening her sweater. On the third take, red rose pedals pour from inside her top, obstructing what Lester really wants to see. Back to reality. The rhythmic tempo from the cheerleading music continues while the cheerleaders finish their dance routine. Although the male gaze is a crucial part of Lester's sexually repressed character, it is equally crucial from Ricky Fitts' point of view. During the course of the film, the visual aesthetics change from the common 35 millimetre “Hollywood look” to that of a digital video camera. These instances emphasise the fact that the person or people being “seen” through the video camera are objects of a voyeur, in this case Ricky Fitts, the next door neighbour. Jane Burnham is Ricky's primary focal object. Although not sexualised by any means (she's not blonde and therefore, from a melodramatic perspective, not sexual) there is something about Jane that interests Ricky. “I remember this really creepy incident where you were filming me last night.” says Jane. “I didn't mean to scare

you, I just think you're interesting." However, not only does American Beauty display a traditional notion of the male gaze in the case of Ricky Fitts, it also represents a non-sexual object of desire, that of Jane's father Lester. "

Welcome to America's weirdest videos." He says as he peers through the lens of his video camera at Lester ruffling through old items in the garage. Later in the film, Carolyn and Lester attend a ballroom party for Carolyn's real estate agency. Coincidentally the catering company who is servicing the party employs Ricky. He introduces himself to Lester, and they hit it off instantly as they smoke a joint in the back parking lot. Although Lester and Ricky's gazes have similar intentions, they are entirely different. We notice the pace of the sequence changes when the audience realizes that Lester's focus of concentration is on Angela. The male gaze represents the desire for a female counterpart. In Ricky's case, the gaze is not of a sexual nature. His gaze represents an interest for both Jane and Lester. This dichotomy of the gaze is also evident in Joshua Logan's 1955 film Picnic. The more prominent of the two is the female gaze towards Hal. Hal is looked at from many female perspectives, and not just as a sexual object. When Hal first reaches the small town, he is looked at by Helen Potts, the widowed woman who lives next door to the Owens family. Her gaze is that of a sexual nature. When the Owens girls see Hal later in the scene, it is apparent that all three of them view Hal a little bit differently. Mrs. Owens' gaze for instance is that of an observatory nature. She does not see Hal as a sexual object. Instead, she wants to find a potential male companion for her daughter Madge, who is getting old according to her mother's traditional ideology. Millie, the tomboy daughter, sees Hal not as a sexual object, but as a male friend and perhaps even a role model. By contrast, when Hal first sees Madge, it is apparent that

he sees her as an object of desire. His gaze (almost pornographic in nature) suggests that Madge's good looks and youth symbolize the traditional notion of "desire" in the melodramatic genre. Many melodramatic films of the 1950s emphasize the concepts of beauty and youth as quintessential factors for one's object of desire. This theme runs parallel in *American Beauty*. The notion of beauty and youth is apparent in Lester's quest to obtain his object of desire, Angela Hayes. Lester overhears a conversation between Angela and Jane. "You're dad's actually kinda cute..." says Angela, "...if he just worked out a little, he'd be hot." This statement sends Lester on a quest to "buff up", reliving his youth in the meantime. During this realisation, Lester reacquaints himself with Ricky Fitts. Ricky sells Lester the same marijuana that they had smoked a few nights prior. Lester also regains his youth by listening to old rock bands such as The Guess Who and Bob Dylan. There is one scene in particular that encompasses all three of these transitions that Lester undergoes. Carolyn crosses the driveway after finishing some gardening work. She notices a strange smell coming from the garage. Lester is pumping weights in the garage, while listening to Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" and smoking dope. "I see you're smoking pot now. I'm so glad. I think using illegal psychotropic substances is a very positive example to set for our daughter." He retorts by saying, "You're one to talk, you bloodless, money-grubbing freak." In the next scene, Lester quits his job. He writes a letter to management stating why they should release him from his current position. A management representative reads Lester's resignation letter. "My job consists of basically masking the contempt for the assholes in charge, and, at least once a day, retiring to the men's room so I can jerk off, while I fantasize about a life that doesn't so closely resemble hell." It is

obvious that Lester does not want the responsibility of being an adult. He quits his job in pursuit of a life with fewer responsibilities. This is determined in the sequence when Lester applies for a part time position at local fast food restaurant. “ I’d like to fill out an application,” he says. “ There’s not jobs for manager, just for counter.” the clerk says. “ Good. I’m looking for the least possible amount of responsibility.” This notion of lack of responsibility connotes the privilege of being young. Not only does Lester want to look and act young, (by pumping iron and listening to ‘ 70s classic rock), but he wants to feel young again in order to obtain the confidence to pursue Angela Hayes. Youth and beauty represent the symbol of power in the melodramatic genre, if not always explicitly. For example, in Elia Kazan’s *Baby Doll* (1956), it is youth and beauty that gives Carroll Baker’s character (also blonde) the upper hand to decide which man she sleeps with. There is a competitive struggle between both Archie Lee and Silva to gain Baby Doll’s love and appreciation. Archie Lee must regain their furniture to make Baby Doll happy. This will in turn allow them to “ consummate the marriage”, or so he thinks. But Archie is in strong competition with Silva, the rival cotton gin owner who discovers Baby Doll when he heads over to the Meighan home to confront Archie about burning down his business. Both men perceive baby Doll as an object of desire. As the film progresses, she is the ultimate deciding factor as to which man she decides to be with. In the end, Baby Doll leaves Archie Lee to be with the sexualised, tall, dark and handsome Sicilian stud. Similarly, in *American Beauty*, it is Lester who with his sense of youth and his heightened self-confidence eventually comes to the point of confronting Angela about how he feels. After a fight with Jane, Angela is left abandoned in the Burnham kitchen crying while Jane and Ricky leave the

house. Lester approaches her, noticing that she had been crying. This is the scene where he offers Angela a sip of his beer. The sexualised blonde has lost her sexy edge. She is vulnerable and incomplete. This is when Lester makes his move. The lights are dim. Angela lies on the Burnham couch and Lester hovers over her thin body. “[Jane]’s mad because I said I think you’re sexy,” she says. “ So... are you going to tell me? What you want?” he responds. “ What do you want?” she asks. “ Are you kidding? I want you. I wanted you since the first moment I saw you. You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.” Lester proceeds to become the sexual aggressor that he has dreamed of. “ It’s my first time,” she says. At this instant, Lester’s newly found sexualised, youthful, confident character spins a full one hundred and eighty degrees. He never crosses the sexual barrier with Angela, arguably making him a moral man. However, this is also the point in our protagonist’s life that incidentally results in his death. In many film genres, guns represent power. Since the late 1930s and into the 1940s, it was the gangster film genre that portrayed tough mafia men as negative symbols of power. Even in current Hollywood cinema, guns are seen as something to be afraid of and it is usually the “ bad guy” who abuses this power. In the final scene of Scarface (1983) a crazed Al Pacino fires off many rounds (and kills) the gangsters that invade his home. But throughout American Beauty, the gun represents sexual release and the embodied power that goes along with that. By the end of the film, we realize that this is the point in our protagonist’s life that he mentions in the first few lines of the film. When Lester gets murdered, we do not see the person who murders him. There are some definite possibilities though. We know that at the beginning of the film, Ricky and Jane talk about killing Lester, and before the

killing occurs, Carolyn comes in from the rain holding a gun. But neither of these people is the murderer. Colonel Fitts is the character that murders Lester Burnham. Earlier on in the film, we realise that Colonel Fitts' character is a homophobic army veteran. He lectures Ricky about homosexuality. "How come these faggots always have to rub it in your face? How can they be so shameless?" says the Colonel. "That's the whole thing, Dad. They don't feel it's anything to be ashamed of," says Ricky matter-of-factly. "Well, it is." Before the shooting sequence, we figure out that Colonel Fitts actually is a homosexual and that he has repressed his feeling for a long time. He approaches Lester in the Burnham garage and tries to kiss him. Lester recoils by denying the Colonel of any homosexual activity. Colonel Fitts breaks into the Burnham house, killing Lester at point blank range. This power to kill Lester is the result of the Colonel's pent up sexual repression. Similarly, after Carolyn's first sexual encounter with Buddy Kane, he suggests that if Carolyn feels stressed, she should go fire a gun. "I've never fired a gun before," says Carolyn. "Oh, you've gotta try it. Nothing makes you feel more powerful..." We see Carolyn in a later scene at a firing range relieving tension by firing off several rounds to relieve her sexual stress that cannot be fulfilled without a man. American Beauty can indeed be classified as a modern day melodrama. The codes and conventions from the 1950s classical era of melodrama are present in this film, allowing for countless assimilations to be made paralleling this film with films of the classical period. While all the characters functioned as separate units, it is evident that they co-exist with relevance to the melodrama genre. Our protagonist Lester Burnham is the most apparent of characters. His longing for the sexualised blonde, his desire to be young again and his repressed sexuality

all comprise a character sketch that fits the classical melodramatic format.

Angela's youth, her sexual nature and her blonde hair complement Lester's character by adding a silent third party in the Burnham marriage.

Nevertheless, since Carolyn cheats on Lester with Buddy Kane, she obviously does not regard her marriage with much importance. And within the story of this struggling family in search of happiness comes the sub-plot with Ricky and Jane. These outcasts do not feel loved within their own families, thus leaving them to seek refuge with each other. So in essence, this modern melodramatic tale veers far from the cut and dry genre of the 1950s.

Although it incorporates many of the same themes and conventions, it steers clear from the conventional notion of the nuclear family as central importance. American Beauty exemplifies what a 1990s version of a 1950s Hollywood melodrama would be.