

# American beauty

Countries



The family as a center of social life in an American culture has accomplished a means to legitimately survive in a leisurely comfortable manner. Over the years, the structure has learned to adapt tremendously to the physical and psychological changes brought about by modernity. It is noteworthy to observe how a great number become very resilient and adaptive to the changing circumstances around us. Yet, a significant number of American families are believed to be affected by a battle of values that raises the question of commitment between persons bound by family ties.

In the motion picture and film *American Beauty*, the domestic American family is implicated here as a declining unit in an urban society. The very foundations of the family as a basic social structure are faced with turbulent dramatic issues that revolved around discontent. The very nature of discontent among the members of the two different families in the movie is the cogent reason for the existence of two dysfunctional families of the Burnhams and the Fitts. The Burnham couple, Lester and Carolyn is a typical working couple who lived comfortably in the suburbs with their teen-age daughter Jane.

Lester Burnham is apparently at a turning point in his life and in an apparent approach to mid-life crisis. He harbors feelings of stagnation in his boring job without any psychological support from his ambitious wife, Carolyn. On the other hand, his wife Carolyn was intent on battling an inner drive to prove her worth and cope with increasing rivalry in the real estate world. Both strive to provide a family environment conducive to their child by "taking an active interest" in their daughter and attending a cheering show in school (Jane's statement, Scene 4).

Lester Burnham while sharing Carolyn's interest to see their daughter perform harbored an initial apprehension that Jane would resent their presence. This typical behavior is highly observed among parents of teenagers wishing to respect the privacy of young adults. A daughter's resentment is made manifest as Lester became captivated by Angela Hayes. For Jane, Angela Hayes's confidence and demeanor was the epitome of what she was not as an average teenager. Her father's latent childish admiration for the young and sultry Angela was too much for Jane who had longed for her father's attention.

She once said, " I need a father who's a role model, not some horny geek-boy who's gonna spray his shorts whenever I bring a girlfriend home from school". As Lester found in Angela an energetic force for his physical transformation in an effort to feel young again, he was able to muster enough courage to call for a change in his routine job. Like typical men undergoing a harrowing stage of crisis in the face of sexual frustration, Lester channels his physical energy to a workout regimen.

Carolyn Burnham was also confronted with an inner battle to succeed as feelings of inferiority and inadequacy seeped through her. She manifested this feeling at home by unknowingly picking on fights and striving to mark her dominion over her family. Used to getting what she wants, she began by having an affair with her biggest rival in the real estate business, Buddy Kane. This behavior could be explained as a necessary way to subdue a rival with the " if you can't beat them, join them" strategy.

On the other side of the fence, the Burnham's next door neighbor-- the Fitts moved in as a highly dysfunctional family. Colonel Fitts, had secrets of his

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own and subdued his weakness by managing a strict household for his only teenage son Ricky. His wife Barbara was apparently a figure in the household with clear signs of mental disorder, most likely as a result to a control-freak husband whose military training extended to the confines of his home. Barbara Fitts' inability to function well was made manifest in her physical movements like an automaton designed to obey her master without question.

Ricky Fitts, harbored his own demons with an obsessive desire to take camera footages of moving objects. With an apparent desire to be free from the bounds created by a dysfunctional family coupled with feelings of isolation from other teenagers, Ricky became engrossed in a hobby while amassing enough money. The confining structure imposed by his father made him lead a dual life as he portrayed a totally subservient son to his father while on the one hand risked selling marijuana to Lester. Lester learned two different sides to his father.

One side tolerated his chance to have a girlfriend, while another side clearly hated him dabbling in homosexuality. Jane and Ricky, two emotionally troubled teenagers swept against their own dysfunctional families soon bonded with each other as they both share and confront their inner feelings of inadequacy. Angela Hayes, Jane's girlfriend and Lester Burnham's object of desire is the ultimate picture of sensuality and youthful sophistication. This young adult created a world of her own with make-believe stories of her sexual escapades in an attempt to portray a cool character.

As she was visiting Jane, she accused Ricky and Jane of being freaks which made Ricky retorts that Angela was in fact “ ugly, ordinary and boring”.

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Apparently this revelation was too much for a teenager battling an inner identity crisis and allowed her to seek comfort and affection from a willing Lester, like a beast waiting to pounce on his prey. Lester's strong character as a father and as a responsible adult is exposed in the face of Angela's eagerness to surrender her chastity. Lester knew too well the reason for Angela's submission which actually did not include lust as an agenda.

The worlds soon collided for the two families as regret and discontent pervade in the air. Lester's knowledge about Carolyn's infidelity, Colonel Fitts homosexuality, his own inability to control and garner love and affection from his daughter and his total disgust over his life must have made death a welcome respite from feelings of isolation. Colonel Fitts, wrong knowledge which his son Ricky led him to believe that he had been serving gay men for money was a strong motivation for the weak father. Beneath his strong demeanor had lain a soft heart ready to submit to homosexual lust.

His revelation to Lester and Lester's mild mannered dismissal was too much for the overbearing man to handle. From his own collection of guns, he picked one which he used to pull the trigger against Lester Burnham's head. This Colonel Fitts did while his son Ricky and Jane spent some time together upstairs in Jane's room while Angela collected herself in the ladies room. The loud sound of gun burst was heard throughout the house signifying the end of life status for Lester as their common link. Carolyn's feeling of rejection had also been another factor that made her scout for an easy target to blame for her misery.

She saw in Lester as the sole perpetrator of her inadequacies and vowed to end him with a gun she acquired in training. Her arrival at home woke her to

the desperate truth that someone had taken Lester's life unexpectedly. Lester's sudden death made her realize that she had loved him after all! As the lives of the main characters intersect in many unexpected twists and turns in the movie, we are awakened to the sad fact about the actual deteriorating status of many American families. Newer forms of coupling and relations had evolved in order to adapt to the changes brought about by commercialization and modern development.

Seemingly, the ill effects of man's fervent desire to experience luxury have been seen as the root cause of much family disintegration. As feelings of discontent are entertained within the structure, many are usually enjoined to find a likely person to take the blame for the misery. This sad fact is the consequence brought about by constant changes to a society who has no regard for the inner spiritual wealth found in an American family structure. Reference DreamWorks and Mendes, Sam. (October, 1999). American Beauty [Motion Picture]. United States: DreamWorks Distribution and United International Pictures.