

American beauty essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

American Beauty is a complex film that relies so heavily on mis-en-scene and cinematography to portray its message that the story could have been told with no dialogue at all. The film focuses on Lester Burnham. Lester appears to have the American dream, however he still feels empty. His marriage is falling apart, he has a poor relationship with his daughter, and he is on the verge of a major mid-life crisis. The film shows the many hidden problems in the white picket fence American dream. It also addresses the problems many Americans have with feeling free and accepting their identity.

The film shows the vastly different worlds people can live in while still living on the same street, and the chaos and disarray that lies veiled in a society we try to portray to be as perfect as possible. In doing so, it reveals that the only way to calm the chaos and find peace is to find beauty in everything, and to accept one's own identity.. The movie opens with a grainy shot of Jane Burnham reclining on a bed, complaining about her father. An unseen boy (presumably the camera operator) asks her if she wants him to kill her father, to which she replies, " Yeah.

Would you? " The audience learns in the very first lines of the movie that Jane's dad, Lester, is not the father that she wants. The opening credits roll, and the shot switches to an aerial view of a neighborhood. The exact location is not specified, and that is very intentional. It is important that this not be a critique of a specific area, but of American culture as a whole. As Sikivu Hutchinson states, " the aerial view is a meditation on the premature death of the suburban ideal, and the tradition of American frontierism from which it emerges.

As we fly over suburban America, Lester Burnham begins to speak, introducing himself to the audience and informing them, “ in less than a year, I’ll be dead. ” The shot then transitions into Lester Burnham’s bedroom, where he is sleeping alone. An irritating alarm rings, and Lester, still in voice-over, ruminates on his sense that “ in a way, I’m dead already. ” The voice-over continues as the camera follows Lester Burnham into the shower, where he masturbates – the “ high point” of his day. The shot is framed so that Lester is trapped in between the panes of the glass.

This created a prison-like imagery that is repeated throughout the film. For example, In another shot we see Lester looking out the window, and again he is trapped between the panes. He is watching his neighbors start their days. He is inside, while they are outside, further highlighting the separation between Lester and others in the world. Even in Lester’s job we see his imprisonment. Lester works in a very large office, confined to a cubicle. In a conversation with his superior, Lester is shown again from a high angle while his boss, Brad, is shown in superiority from a low angle.

There is emphasis on Brad’s name plate on his desk, indicating that he is concerned with himself and not his employees. Lester is shown sitting in a chair with not many things around him The next shot is a close-up of a beautiful red rose. The camera pans out to show Carolyn Burnham snipping roses from her garden with pruning shears that match her gardening clogs. The American beauty rose is a major element of this film’s mis-en-scene. The American beauty is a breed of rose that, while being known for its beauty, tends to rot from the roots and branches of the plant.

Rose imagery can be seen throughout the film, particularly prominent during Lester's fantasy scenes with Angela. Rose petals can be seen raining from the sky, filling up a tub with her, or even filling the entire frame with Angela lying on top covered only by more rose petals. This, once realized, is a very blatant nudge to the message of the film. It shows that Angela, who is the embodiment of the falsified American glamour concept, may appear beautiful and desirable; however she is rotten from the roots. Underneath the beauty is a temptation that will only lead Lester to trouble and despair.

Similarly, The American society, while seemingly idealistic, has many foul underlying foundations. As Kim Goudreau puts it, " The whole message of the film is in the title, American Beauty. One way to take it is that things that appear to be beauty in America, often are not. Angela, the perfect American girl-a blonde, young, cute, thin, cheerleader, is actually cold and cruel, while Jane, the not so thin, not so (conventionally) gorgeous and lively girl is truly caring and beautiful (which Ricky recognizes) (34)"

Ricky is the only character in the film that rejects the American culture from the beginning. He finds beauty in things most would never notice or find repulsive. For example, he films a dead bird and a plastic bag flying in the wind, because he finds them beautiful. He is constantly filming with his handheld camcorder to capture everyday beauty. This is a much deeper kind of beauty than is represented by Angela. It is beauty on a deeper level that simply the way looks in the eyes of society. It is beauty in the sense of appreciation for things we see every day.

Another important character to the film's significance is Colonel Frank Fitts. Frank feels that he needs to cover who he really is with a harsh American stereotype of an insensitive, homophobic, ruthless military man. Frank's character is established with shots of his gun collection, which he takes tremendous pride in. We later learn, however, that Frank is a closeted homosexual. Even though they live on the same safe, suburban street, the Burnham and Fitts families are enormously dissimilar. The Burnhams are a perfectly typical American family (at least on the surface).

The Fitts family, however, is clearly abnormal – the wife is seriously damaged, the father is angry and bitter, and the son is a drug dealer doing whatever he can to survive in his dangerous environment. There is serious tension in the Fitts house, but despite the fact that their problems seem more profound, their issues do not seem to invalidate the Burnhams'. This shows that the two families, while living next to each other, are living in different worlds. Despite these differences, however, there are also common links that context the families.

Both fathers have an issue with their identity- Lester with his age and status and Frank with his homosexuality. The children of both families are outcasts who resent their parents. When these worlds collide, we see that they do not mix, as one destroys the other when Frank kills Lester. He kills Lester due to a misunderstanding. Looking through a window, he thought he saw his son engaging in homosexual activity with Lester. This, however, was not the case. This is a throwback to the beginning of the movie, when we see Lester looking out the window at his neighbors.

He thought they were happier than he was, however this was also a facade. Similarly, Frank thought he saw his son embracing the identity he had always rejected, which filled him with emotion that eventually led him to kiss Lester, be rejected, and then kill him. One important subtlety that can be noted in the film is the makeup of Jane and Angela. As the film progresses, Jane uses progressively less make-up and Angela uses progressively more. This is done to show the transformation of the characters and their perceptions of themselves.

Angela is becoming closer and closer to the shallow, plastic shell of “American beauty” while Jane is parting from it, becoming more natural and self-accepting. This further implies that American beauty is not a real, tangible thing, but a mask that covers what is real. Jane and Angela offer two very different perspectives on the issue of desirability. Indeed, they are so very different that it is often difficult to see what binds them together in friendship. Angela takes her desirability as a given and uses her experiences to justify her beliefs. At the same time, however, Angela’s definition of “desire” is limited and degrading.

As Stephen Tapscott puts it, “Jane clearly doubts her own desirability, and thus takes extreme pleasure in Ricky’s bizarre signals that he finds her desirable. Though Jane clearly suffers from a serious lack of self-confidence, her willingness to reveal her insecurities makes them, in some ways, less profound than Angela’s. It is difficult, for example, to imagine Jane getting pleasure out of someone’s father awkwardly flirting with her; Angela, however, takes pride in Lester’s interest because any signal that a male finds her attractive bolsters her flailing self-esteem.”

At the same time, Jane is tremendously hurt by her father's interest in Angela because it validates Angela's worldview – that she is attractive, and that Jane is not. Similarly, Angela views Ricky as dangerous because he threatens her worldview by finding Jane more attractive than her. Yet another important, but somewhat subtle scene of the film is when Lester is in the car during his rebellion, high, listening to the song “ American Woman”. It is easy to get caught up in the characters actions in this scene and miss the significance of the song being played.

“ American Woman” can very much be taken as a song that rejects American society with lyrics such as “ I don't need your war machines I don't need your ghetto scenes colored lights can hypnotize sparkle someone else's eyes” and of course the chorus “ American woman, get away from me”. This fortifies the connotation of the film; that American culture, while sparkly and hypnotizing, is ultimately a false promise and is better left discarded.

Towards the end of the film, Ricky and Jane run away together. When Jane tells Ricky that her parents will look for her, to which Ricky responds that his won't.

While there is a clear distinction between their problems (Jane's are, technically speaking, far less serious) we see that, to Jane, her problems don't feel less serious. Her desire to get away from her parents and to stop being affected by their insanity is no less significant than Ricky's desire to have parents who will love him no matter what. Ricky doesn't even care if his father shows his love by drug testing him or hitting him. Ricky only gives up on his father when his father literally throws him out of the house. This film is constantly contrasting opposing worlds.

We see the objectified beauty that Angela represents, and the deeper beauty shown by Jane. We see overbearing parents opposed to harsh, unloving parents. We see a masculine, military personality masking a homosexuality. The film shows that all of these very different worlds exist in American culture, and when they collide, they destroy each other. However, in death, Lester comes to realize what he could not in life. He realizes that the key to happiness is not only in freedom and in tangible things, but in loving those close to you, and finding beauty in daily life.