

# Mise-en-scene analytical essay

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



American Beauty (1999) tells the story of American suburbia and shows the audience the fatal flaws of the American dream. When the camera cuts to the first dinner scene of the film, the family can be seen seated at the table, with Jane who is surrounded by candles and is sitting directly behind the roses. This is apparently an allusion of how innocent her character is, or perhaps that she is the “rose” of the family. This also reminds the audience of the opening scenes of the film where Carolyn is shown taking care of the roses in the garden. It is apparent that Lester and Carolyn are no longer in love with each other, and the director seem to suggest this by the way Jane is seated in this scene.

The colors in this scene are mainly muted, thus the director once again seems to be displaying how dull the family actually is. The dinner scene also seems to suggest the lack of connection between the family because of their formal behavior during the scene and how they are separately seated from one another. It might not seem unusual that Jane’s parents are sitting directly opposite of one another, but this makes the situation in the scene even more formal and also alludes to the fact that the parents are “polar opposites.” The way Lester is sitting slumped in his chair and the way he retreats to the kitchen when his wife confronts him also show his submissive nature.

As the scene begins the camera is focusing various small tables in the room that have different pictures of Jane, who has a smile on her face in all of them with roses accompanying her. As the camera cuts, the dinner scene that was described above, can be seen in a wide shot. Apart from depicting Jane as “innocent,” her position at the center, in between her parents, also

seems to suggest that she is directly in amidst the conflict in between the two and that the parents are staying together only because of her.

The director makes the audience feel as if they are spying on the family because of the way the camera slowly zooms. In fact, viewers may actually feel that they are getting to look at the real life that the family is living instead of the one they are faking to others, which is seen at the beginning of the film in the difference in Carolyn's personality while she speaks to the neighbors. This sense of "spying" on the truth of their life is further felt at the end of the dinner scene, when Jane and Lester are in the kitchen with Ricky spying on them through his camera, and the camera zooms in the same slow way.

Apart from Jane's pictures, several family pictures are also shown up close in which the family seems to be happier than they are in this scene. In one of these family pictures, Lester can be seen standing above Carolyn, which shows that he was not always as submissive as he is now, and this perhaps adds to the regret that he feels. Jane refers to the music playing in this dinner scene as "elevator music," which is actually an old song. It becomes apparent from the dialogue that Carolyn chose the song and her choice reflects her old-fashioned nature. It also shows her dominance in the family since Lester and Jane do not appear to like the music but they do not seem to do something about it. This scene also reflects the repetitiveness of their life when Jane complains that they listen to this same music "always." Perhaps it also suggests that just like Lester, Carolyn also longs for the past or is regretful of it. The dinner scene in *American Beauty* (1999) may seem

like a scene involving a formal family dinner, which it certainly is, but it reveals more about the family than viewers might actually realize.

## **Works Cited**

Mendes, Sam, dir. *American Beauty*. Writ. Alan Ball. 1999. Film. 10 Dec 2012.

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