

Social values reflected in the film american beauty essay sample

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



The dominant value of the time in the USA held towards homosexuality was one of acceptance and that it is clearly a normal way to live your life. This is clearly reinforced in the text, *American Beauty*, where the audience are presented with a respected and loving couple, 'The Jims.' Given the events of the time, Clinton's push for gay rights through government, public outcry over a gay bashing of a student and sitcom *Will and Grace* with gay lead being released, the values of American people of the production pin the 1990's are clearly reflected in the film.

This is further enhanced through the portrayal of anti gay (yet closet-gay himself) Colonel Frank Fitts. His representation, cast in expressive negative light, for example shadows cast upon his face, and through his association with Nazi memorabilia, the audience can easily force judgement and not side or agree with this character's values- further endorsing the values of the production period towards homosexuality.

Likewise the values towards materialism in society is clearly supported in the film, presenting the dominant value that material wealth can be soul destroying. Post 1980's industrial and economic boom, the country's people prided themselves on how they looked and what they owned as a sign of success and also happiness! It wasn't until the 1990's that people began to realise that all these possessions did not equate to a happy life. However throughout the film the audience are provided with countless examples to support this. Carolyn's Mercedes and perfect garden may present the image of success but does not provide her with the happiness she so desires.

It is Lester's poignant comment, ' This isn't life, this is just stuff' that rings true at the conclusion of the film, somewhat justifying his midlife crisis and need to set things right. The negative portrayal of characters that desire ' material items' in lieu of happiness signal to the audience that this is not the right thing to aspire to. Whether it be Buddy's failed relationship to the gorgeous bimbo or even Lester's purchase of his ' dream car'. The conclusion of the film, the downfall of those who have sought happiness in this way, the realisation by Angela that truth and beauty go hand in hand and even the running away of Jane and Ricky to be happy together wherever they are, regardless of money- confirms to the audience the value the film believes and compliments the dominant value of the time. The surge in ' self-help' books released in the USA in the late 1990's also reinforces the American people's dominant views.

Controversially the film challenges the dominant values held at the time towards recreational use of the drug marijuana. During the production period American citizens were strongly against the use of any illegal drug in any form. In contrast the film portrays the use of the drug in a different light. The audience see each of the young central characters partaking in smoking the drug, none of which are caught nor penalised. (Although Colonel Fitts once again is against this, the portrayal of his character suggesting he is again wrong in this case also.) In fact it is further endorsed through the protagonist Lester- finding smoking drugs a way to improve his dreary life! The audience are quite obviously positioned to see that the use of drugs is an insignificant

part of these character's problems and attention would be much better focussed elsewhere.

Another social value that was beginning to change in the United States in American Beauty's production period was that in relation to the attitudes towards gun ownership. The dominant value in the USA has always been that of a right, 'all American's should and do have the right to own guns,' as the constitution suggests. However a spate of gun shootings in American high schools began to get people questioning this. While Americans were coming to terms with this new, emerging attitude towards guns, American Beauty presents a strong case against the use of guns and for stricter restrictions on ownership. The film challenges the dominant value of the time by giving the audience several examples of where guns are used for different purposes- and all of them presented in a negative light. Lester is killed by a gun at the hand of 'psycho' Colonel Fitts. Carolyn (in the heat of an affair with Buddy) is advised to 'pop off a few rounds' for stress release- and when gun in hand is led to contemplate the murder of her husband. It is painted very clearly for the audience to see that ownership of guns is should be heavily scrutinised which clearly links to the ethos in the United States at the time.

The film presents quite modern values yet are quite obvious and coherent for audiences to interpret. With additional consideration of the production period of American Beauty, it is clear to see the links and connections in a film not afraid to question the dominant beliefs of the time.