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**Critical Analysis of American Beauty (1999)**

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**A Search for Beauty**

There are many connecting themes in **American Beauty**. Through plot, characterization, and cinematography these themes are conveyed well. Overall, this film is highly successful in layered themes and counter themes. The main themes that the film draws attention to throughout the movie are that of materialism, appearance versus reality, denial and repression, control versus chaos, loneliness versus feeling connected, change and searching, and beauty (subjective and objective). Each character is an agent in one or more of the themes as explained below.

One of the most apparent themes in this film is that of the empty promises of materialism. The American Dream is what the Burnhams seem to have: good jobs, a house in the suburbs, children, two cars, and a nice home. The Art Culture Film website describes them as "trapped by the ideology of the American Dream" (Structural 1). Carolyn Burnham is obsessed with materialism and other's opinions of them (Newman 8). She loves her house and possessions and to her these things equal success. Mendes shows in the scene in which Lester is trying to kiss her and show Carolyn they can still experience passion. They are on the couch and she almost submits to the moment when out of the corner of her eye she notices that Lester is about to spill beer on her couch and warns him. Lester, frustrated, yells, "It's just a couch!" to which she replies that it is not just a couch, but one that cost $4,000 and is upholstered in Italian silk. In a scene in which she fights with her daughter, Carolyn yells at Jane for not appreciating the life she has (meaning the possessions she owns.) Material accumulation is what she views as a means to being happy, and does not understand that her daughter would benefit more from a close relationship with her mother.

This theme leads into that of appearance versus reality. Each character confronts this on some level. The more unhappy the characters in the film, the more we can see they cover reality with an illusion. Carolyn believes that the most important thing in life is success, and appearing successful (Huntely 7). She attempts to be happy through her career as a real estate agent. In a scene in which she cannot sell a house, she abuses herself mentally and physically: she cries, screams, and slaps herself in the face. All day she had cleaned the house (appearances) and repeated maniacally to herself, "I will sell this house today." Angela Hayes appears to be the model teen which others envy, but in reality has low self-esteem.. She is thin, blonde, gorgeous, popular and confident to the seeing eye. Inside she is scared and torn. She constantly criticizes others as being plain, when that is what she truly feels is her defect. Colonel Fitts appears to be a man's man. He served in the military, and lives a clean and decent life. More than anything, this man abhors homosexuals and constantly lets us (and Ricky) know it. In the end, he believes that Lester and his son are having a sexual affair. The distraught Colonel goes to see Lester, and kisses him, revealing to us that he is latently homosexual himself (Huntley 5.) These three characters are on the negative side of appearance versus reality. Critic Jeff Newman states that Ricky Fitts does not project a false image. Perhaps not in the same negative way as the others, he still appears something he is not. To his father he appears to work in after school jobs to earn money for his hobbies. Truly he is selling marijuana. Jane is what she appears which is a confused, sulky teen, with a glimmer of hope.

Another theme in the film is denial. Again, we have the three characters that hide their reality the most. Colonel Fitts. Carolyn Burnham, and Angela Hayes. Colonel Fitts is in utter denial about his sexuality (Huntley 5, Newman 6). Carolyn is in denial about life in general. She cannot come to terms with her insincere relationships with daughter and husband, and that she is not being fulfilled by her success in her career or her possessions. Angela is denying that she feels insecure, undesired, and unattractive by lashing out at others. While Lester may have been in denial in the beginning about his life being mundane, the film commences with his recognition of this, and attempt to change. Ricky is not in denial about anything, and is the most free and honest character in the film. Jane is not in denial either for she is too drawn inward to project anything false (Newman 3).

The three characters again that in the film are similar in negative ways, Col. Fitts, Angela, and Carolyn have a need to control people and things (Newman 4-5). Col. Fitts is totally controlling of Ricky (or at least believes he is) (Newman 12). He monitors his drug use by random urine samples and dominates his catatonic wife. Carolyn "wears the pants" in the family, controlling everything down to the music they listen to at dinner. Lester is connected to control in a different way by experimenting with different ways of regaining control, and therefore happiness of his life. He uses pot, works out, and listens to old rock music while racing in his new sports car that he always wanted. Jane cannot control anything, especially the physical appearance of her body, and toys with the idea of breast augmentation. Ricky controls his own destiny and makes his own decisions and, again, is the "hero" of the film.

Loneliness and a sense of feeling unconnected surfaces here. Many shots portray one character alone in the frame: Angela in the mirror, Jane in the mirror, Lester in the shower, Lester alone in the car, Lester alone in the garage, Carolyn alone in the car, Carolyn alone on the job, and so forth. Most of the characters have problems emotionally connecting with others and deteriorating relationships are present throughout (Lester and Jane, Lester and Carolyn, The Fitts's in general, Angela and Jane) (Newman 2). In fact one of the healthiest relationships is between the gay couple, Jim and Jim, showing that unconventionality is not wrong, and have a happy, healthy life that they alone it the film have (American 14). It is not until Jane meets Ricky and connects with him in a more honest way than ever does she begin to change. In the ending, after Angela and Lester do not make love is the first time in the film we see a human side to Angela, and a real emotional honest connection. Lester is trying to connect emotionally again (Newman 11). Carolyn never makes this connection. She attempts to by having an affair with Buddy Lane "The Real Estate King," but fails because it was not a genuine connection. Colonel Fitts never reaches this either. He attempts to by kissing Lester but does not receive a positive response back, thwarting his attempt.

Change is a debatable theme in this film. I believe most of the characters positively change. The film begins with Lester needing to change his life (Huntley 3). A review by Upcoming Movies says the film is about his rebirth to life. Lester, even though it is in the last seconds of his life, appreciates his life and feels alive. Jane is happier and in love. There is hope for change in Angela as shown when she breaks down to Lester and then washes her face in the mirror, as if to signify a clearing away of appearances. The last time we see Carolyn is right after she finds Lester murdered, even though one may conclude that she was about to perform the task herself. The shock of seeing Lester violently murdered has a traumatic effect on her and she collapses into Lester's clothes in the closet. This showing of remorse and emotion represents that she now that he is gone, she can feel the love she repressed. Perhaps the reality of actually seeing him dead, and knowing that he is truly gone, shocks her out of her cold shell that she was in when he was alive. The clothes represent Lester himself, and she falls into them as if suddenly realizing the terror of what has happened. Colonel Fitts does not reach a change, and is still a cruel, confused, lonely man. Ricky did not need to change, and was the catalysts for other's transformation (Newman 35-37).

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) (Huntley 6 and Newman 8). Beauty, as a meaning of conventionality, of the American dream is an illusion. Colonel Fitts is the idea man, except he is a physically abusive husband and father. Carolyn is successfully beautiful, but ugly in character. Another meaning of the title is the search for beauty. Lester is trying to regain the beauty he once saw in life by reverting back to his youth-pot smoking, lusting after a teenager, listening to seventies music, and working in a fast-food joint.

Ricky finds beauty in everything through his camera, even in the plastic bag being blown in circles by the wind (a breakthrough scene in which he explains that there is a beautiful energy behind everything in life) (Huntley 4.) The bag is symbolic of the everyday miracles that occur all the time which we tend to overlook (Structural 1). If we took the time to see beauty in everything, even in things that may seem ugly initially, perhaps we would leave happier, more meaningful lives. The rose is also symbolic of American Beauty. It shows up various times in the film, as well as the color red in general, which symbolizes passion, love, and joy (Structural 1). Carolyn grooms and cuts roses; perhaps the cutting is symbolic of cutting of all passion in life. Angela is enveloped in roses in Lester's fantasies of her, and at one point, Jane is seen sitting behind a vase of roses.

There are some problems in the film. In the end, the dead Lester explains how happy he was for his stupid little life and how it all was great (implying that everyone should be grateful for their lives.) However, many things in the film were not great circumstances that the characters should have been grateful for (American 3). I think the film would have benefited if he had explained that he was grateful for having the chance to feel alive again, and that he loved his wife and daughter and wished he could have shown them the way, as he was trying, and something along the lines of "keep the feeling of youth and passion alive in middle age" which is what I gained from the film. The theme of Ricky's voyeurism through the camera as a way to find beauty is also a little troubling. It is not explained as to why this medium is necessary. It seemed out of place in the story and took attention away to the things that were important.

Overall, I believe these themes were portrayed well through the action and characters. The message to love life and live honestly to yourself and others shone through. All of the characters are searching for a way to connect or to feel happy once again, and in harmony. Beauty can lead to happiness, if it is true beauty. Subsequent messages, such as acceptance of others, like homosexuals, came through as well. The joy, love, and passion for others and life in general is what this movie says to me, through its dialogue, actions, framing, and technique. It is a strong commentary on what lost inside of us when we see things as beautiful that are grotesque in reality. It shows that we sometimes confuse beauty with ugliness, and completely miss the beauty altogether. Mundane living and unappreciation for the everyday deaden what is alive in us.

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