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American Beauty- A Closer Look at the Shallow Realities behind the
Illusions of Happiness

The 1999 Oscar-winning film, *American Beauty*, written by Alan Ball and directed by Sam Mendes, follows the lives of several main characters, each of whom struggles to conform to a socially acceptable identity. *American Beauty* focuses on an extensive set of social controversies that allude to the traditional ideals of American culture. Movie critic from the *Seattle Post*, William Arnold calls it, “an uncompromisingly bleak look at the hollowness of the American Dream.”

The characters in this film are the driving force of the story. Each represents a specific issue relevant to contemporary life in America (PapJcik 27-28). Lester Burnham is a 42-year-old man experiencing a mid-life crisis. He feels that he has lost control over his life and sight of his happiness. His wife and daughter treat him like a loser and the responsibilities of being a husband, a father and provider, are not enough for Lester. His wife Carolyn, like many contemporary women, desperately seeks to be perceived by others as powerful, independent and successful. Because of the historical context in which women have been oppressed, Carolyn overcompensates for this and in turn surrenders her happiness and vivacious personality to live a life of materialism.

Their fifteen-year-old daughter Jane is experiencing what I call the teenage identity crisis. Because of her low self-esteem, she is shy and reserved. Angela Hayes, Jane’s best friend, offers a different angle on teenage angst by flaunting her sexuality and physical appearance. She chooses to overly exaggerate these things to combat her fear of

being seen as “ordinary.” At one point in the movie she explains her reasoning for a sexual escapade she had with a photographer for *Elle* magazine by bragging, “he’s a really well-known photographer. It would have been so *majorly stupid* of me to turn him down...that’s just how things are in the real world.” An overwhelming majority of young girls have this distorted concept that sexuality defines them as a person and should be used as a way to get things they want. In the end, we discover the truth of Angela’s virginity and realize everything she claimed to have done, were lies she told to feel and appear “special.”

Colonel Frank Fitts, a retired United States Marine, illustrates the issue of repressed homosexuality. He is overtly angry and takes his frustrations out physically on his son, Ricky. Each of these characters represents the ways in which people pose as masked illusions in order to feel accepted in society. Ricky Fitts, however, is the only character who is not wrapped up in the deceptions of suburbia. Looking through the lens of a video camera for most of the movie, he is able to see past his neighbor’s obscured lives and expose the hidden beauty of bare and naive truth.

Bouncing off these characters and the social issues they represent, this paper will employ the use of both the visual perspective as well as Marxist perspective to divulge the issues that arise with people’s zealous attempt to conform to a specific set of dominating ideologies in suburban America.

To understand how these theories apply to the film it is first imperative to break down the theories themselves. Much of the information that is fed to people is done so through the use of mediated visual imagery. Laura Mulvey, a British film theorist, argues that the “visual pleasure theory encourages viewers to look

pleasurably at female images via the male gaze” (Sellnow 144). This implies that viewers are not just watching images but “gazing” upon them as if they are objects. Most of the time, but not always, the act of “gazing” involves a man being the looker and the women as the object. According to Mulvey’s article, “Visual Pleasure Theory and Narrative Cinema,” “The straight set of male sexual feelings and desires are directly responsible for the decision and choices made in regards to what images are used in cinema” (6-7).

Throughout the movie Lester fantasizes about his teenage daughter’s friend, Angela Hayes. He dreams of her naked and covered in rose petals. These visions are meant to illustrate Lester’s re-discovery of passion and beauty in his life by using an image in the interest of the [male gaze](#). The male gaze is one of the two ways in which concepts of visual pleasure theory can be applied to this film. The other is voyeurism, which refers to the pleasure someone experiences when watching people without them knowing. Typically voyeurism has a negative connotation, but Mendes toys with this concept.

Ricky Fitts is first seen as a strange character, he videotapes people without them knowing, specifically Jane and her family. He finds that in filming people, he is able to capture the truth. Throughout the film, scenes are shown from his camera’s perspective. His videos capture a straightforward reality that pushes the audience to see things beyond what they appear. Because Ricky’s voyeurism is the only honest thing not tainted by superficiality, the audience is driven to accept the voyeuristic ways as a relief from the “puppet like” performances of the other characters.

Staying within the visual perspective, Roland Barthes, a French literary critic, developed the idea that signs or symbols could communicate messages. He explained that signs carry connotations, meaning they can represent something more than just their literal appearance. Throughout the movie, the color red is used to convey anger, love, passion and sex. The Burnham's red front door "symbolizes what is happening behind it, in the lives of those living in it" (Barbieri). For Carolyn red is meant to symbolize passion, and because she cuts her red roses often, this symbolizes her cutting away her passion in life. For Lester, seeing Angela covered in red rose petals indicates love and sexuality. Red pops up in almost every scene as a way to represent the overall understanding of how the characters feel.

American Beauty is also layered with symbols that are iconic to the American perspectives on success and beauty. For example, the Burnham's house is large and well manicured. They have a nice car and the curbs are lined with rose bushes. The viewer immediately recognizes these things to mean wealth and achievement. According to the Marxist theory, which I will talk about next, these images are considered economic metaphors. Sellnow describes these metaphors to be anything that represents a perspective on a culture's structure of norms, values and practices (Sellnow 73).

When analyzing from the Marxist perspective it is essential to reveal the ways in which popular culture text "reinforce status quo power structures as the norm." (Sellnow 71). The most important aspects of the Marxist perspective are the concepts of ideology and hegemony. Ideologies aim to define a unanimous perception about the way things are and manipulate assumptions on the way things should be. These ideas dictate what is socially acceptable and what is not. Hegemony refers to a widespread ideology that

empowers a dominating social group. These groups can be defined by socioeconomic status, gender, race and sexual orientation (Sellnow 72).

From a Neo-Marxist perspective I have explored the problems of materialism and exemplified the workings of hegemony that operate in several ways throughout the film including: men over women, young over old, and straight over gay.

The idea that everything in a society is based on concrete economic and physical conditions is known as Marxist materialism. Lester's wife, Carolyn is extremely concerned with how others perceive her and has based her success and happiness on the accumulation of material items. She has become so obsessed by the idea of Marxist materialism that she has lost her vivacious and loving personality that Lester fell in love with. In one scene Lester tries to passionately kiss his wife while holding a beer bottle. Carolyn realizes that Lester is going to spill the beer on the couch and pulls away. Lester gets upset and responds "it's just a couch," but Carolyn exclaims, "it's not just a couch, it's a four thousand dollar sofa upholstered in Italian silk." Lester tells her "this is not life," it's just stuff and you've made it more important to you than living." Her desire to be noticed as a successful individual, is so consuming that she even wears business clothes while working in the garden. Carolyn stands for the struggle women face to be considered successful and how trying to define an identity based on having expensive things will only provide a hollow and lonely life.

Lester chooses to ignore such materialism and pursues happiness outside of what society dictates. This acts as the driving force that positions the film to be a subverted oppositional message, meaning that it outright opposes the dominant ideology of Marxist materialism. However, despite this, Lester's actions reinforce the ideology of male

hegemony over women. He lacks to see the bigger picture in which Carolyn has been forced to work harder in order to be recognized as successful. He, as a man, is capable of rebelling against the system as he sarcastically jokes “let’s just sell our souls,” when Carolyn is telling him to stop being so dramatic and just do what the job asks of him. His apparent denial of society’s structured containment is a privilege he can have as a male. When Lester quits his job and starts living the life of a teenager, regularly smoking pot, working out in the garage everyday while listening to loud music, and taking a job at a fast food restaurant, he is seen as a hero. However if the roles were reversed and the wife were to do that, she would risk being seen as selfish and ungrateful for the life that has been “given” to her.

On the surface Lester would appear to be living an ideal life, but as movie critic, William Arnold points out, this film reveals a sad “hollowness” of the “American Dream” and the corruption of corporate America. Lester has worked as a writer for a magazine agency for 14 years. In the past month, a younger man, Brad, has taken a position as an efficiency expert, who Lester says “is basically there for the company to be justified in firing people.” Shortly after starting the job, Brad smugly asks all of the workers to write out a list of their duties and how they feel they individually contribute to the company. In doing this, Brad will be able to determine whether someone is valuable or expendable. This suggests that there is no such thing as “job security”; if a newer, younger and more “efficient” worker comes along, then others are left to be determined valuable or not. Brad casually refers to the situation as [“just business.”](#) This embodies how people are trained to accept things that are morally twisted as a probable and normal aspect of business. This also demonstrates the hegemony of a younger more able-bodied

individual, Brad, to have power over an older man, Lester, despite his years of dedication and loyalty to the company.

Lester responds to Brad's request of what he believes his job consists of with the blatant truth. He writes, and I am removing some of the vulgarities, "My job consists of basically masking my contempt for the jerks in charge, and at least once a day retiring to the men's room where I fantasize about a life that doesn't so closely resemble hell."

Brad shrugs and says "Whatever, management wants you gone by the end of the day."

Lester, feeling confident in his rebellion, threatens Brad with a sexual harassment suit if he isn't offered a proper severance package. Since Brad symbolizes the arrogant upstart being a puppet for corporate corruption, and Lester the "little people," his lewd actions are applauded for standing up to the system.

Colonel Fitts puts on a stereotypical tough guise, meaning a tough appearance or manner. He takes his anger out physically on his son Ricky, and his wife has clearly become mentally and emotionally checked out from the loveless relationship with her husband. Throughout the film Fitts emphasizes the importance of being manly to Ricky by showing little emotion, being aggressive and exhibiting a disdain for homosexuals. In the climax of the film there is a misunderstanding that leads Fitts to believe Lester is paying Ricky for sexual favors. In response to this he beats up Ricky and storms over to Lester's house. The audience is thrown off guard when Fitts does not beat Lester up too, but instead kisses him. Lester respectfully denies him and an embarrassed Fitts abruptly leaves. He later returns, however, to shoot Lester in the head as to make sure he could not reveal what had happened. This exposes a deeply rooted issue in society's perception on homosexuality, specifically in the military, and the hegemony of straight over gay.

Thankfully since this film, our military has succeeded in repealing the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy, but nonetheless this film still represents the severity to which some people feel the need to hide their sexuality.

After being shot, Lester recounts his life. He remembers his grandmother’s hands and the color of the maple leaves that lined his childhood street. He sees his daughter Jane and his wife Carolyn. In death, Lester finally realizes all the beauty in his life that he chose to ignore.

American Beauty, as the tagline states “looks closer” at the realities behind traditional ideals in American Culture and opens people’s minds to recognize issues that can arise in trying to conform to a shallow mold of idealness. Whether it be living a life defined by material wealth or a life of repressed identity, people can get so caught up in trying to commercialize an image of “normality” that they lose sight of truth.

I would like to end by recalling one of the most famous scenes in the movie, when Ricky shows Jane a video he had filmed of a [plastic grocery bag](#) blowing in the wind. The bag reveals the unseen beauty of the wind as it is given life, spinning and whirling through the air. Ricky describes it to be “dancing with him like a kid begging to play.” He stood for 15 minutes watching something that most people wouldn’t even notice, and it was that day that he said he “realized that there was this entire life behind things.” Most people, like the other characters, fail to see the existing beauty that surrounds us. By superficially narrowing our perceptions, we succumb to a bleak and constrained life of always trying to obtain a manufactured version of happiness. Allowing ourselves to recognize and appreciate the hidden beauty of the world, means allowing ourselves to be truly happy.

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