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The Ugly Truth: Beauty with Consequence

“What truly is American Beauty?” In a world where people are desperately searching for what they conceive to be true beauty in modern society, notions of materialism, sexuality and self-liberation are challenged on a day-to-day basis. *American Beauty* (2000), written by Alan Ball and directed by Sam Mendes, is a film centered on a seemingly ordinary American family that resides in a middle-class suburban neighborhood. The film portrays the characters’ dysfunctional relationships as a direct symptom of their misleading conceptions of beauty, as well as their tendency to disillusion themselves from the harsh reality of their materialistic lives. In other words, this film is considered as a darkly cynical depiction of an appearance-obsessed society where conformity drives individuals to be stripped of their identities and ultimately succumb to isolation. Although literary elements may be imperative to any and all forms of artistic analysis, the film relies heavily on cinematography to translate the story into a personal experience for the audience. **Through employing the various effects of narration, symbolism, and camera angles, the film successfully depicts the theme of beauty, confinement, and the discrepancy of appearance and reality.**

As previously mentioned, the main theme of the film relies on the realistic portrayal of how people unknowingly isolate themselves through denying their true identities and caving into the norms of society. The main emphasis is placed on the Burnham family, which includes Lester Burnham, the father, his wife Carolyn, and their troubled teenage daughter Jane. The setting of the film takes place in the impeccable environment of the typical American middle-class neighborhood. The main plot of the film focuses on the life of Lester Burnham and his journey to find meaning in life after he becomes a victim to corporate downsizing at the company he has worked for over 14 years. Despite being the protagonist of

the film, Lester can basically be defined as the anti-hero, a person who resembles the most basic flaws of humanity and, thus, becomes an object of mockery and sympathy. Referring to himself as an “ordinary guy with nothing to lose,” Lester chooses to quit his job and uses this event as an opportunity to rebut the power that authority always had over him. He discharges himself of any responsibility and chooses to relive his own life through paying revenge for all the corporate torment that he had to endure all these years. Towards the end of the film, Lester is no longer the weak and unconfident worker who led a dull and repetitive life day to day, but a free man who seeks pleasure without boundaries. As his lust for an intimate relationship and sexuality is reawakened, he tries to recapture his youth through bonding with Janie's friend Angela. In comparison to Lester, Carolyn is one of the many characters who place importance on being liked by others. Due to the fact that she works for a real estate and is in need to sell houses, she requires positive impressions to be made upon her. She incessantly expresses the obligation to belong in society and repeatedly relates to her motto that “in order to be successful” one must project an “image of success.” Therefore, she is under strictly inadequate relationships with her daughter and husband. Angela is another character who suffers the consequences of wanting to be accepted into society. Initially a close friend of Jane's, Angela feels most confident when people are sexually attracted to her and believes that “nothing is worse than being ordinary.” She is a troubled young teenager who wishes to impress others through her beauty and boasting about her intimate relationships with multiple men. This causes Angela to lure Lester in order to prove the vulnerability of men's attraction towards her extreme beauty. This results in unexpected consequences in which Lester's relationship between Carolyn and Janie downfall drastically. However, although characters Carolyn and Angela are both striving towards their own perception on the beauty of life, deep down inside, they are fully aware of their confinement and loss of identity. In fact, all the characters, including Jane, her friend Ricky Fitts, and

Ricky's father, are just as lost as Lester is; they are simply diving in different directions to cope with their realities. **Hence, the characters' equal yearning for either the acceptance of other people or rebelling against the social norms motivates them to search for the true beauty of life.**

Moving on from the thematic elements of the story, the film also illustrates the plot through an almost comical point of view that combines the characteristics of the first and third person narrative. The first person narration is first introduced early on into the film while the camera looks down from the sky from a bird's eye view, zooming in to no house or street in particular. The voiceover comes from the main character Lester, implying that he is the one telling the story. Although voiceovers usually provide the audience with an unsettling feeling that they are encountering an unreliable narrator, this is not necessarily the case in *American Beauty*. In fact, Lester is not an omnipresent figure that narrates the entire movie, as the voiceover only appears three times throughout the film – the opening sequence, the beginning of Lester's final day, and at the end of the movie. In the beginning of the film, the opening sequence introduces the audience to the main protagonist Lester Burnham, his family, and his daily routines. Through a strangely calm and sardonic tone of voice, Lester claims that he is "42 years old" and that "[he] will be dead" in less than a year. Through this unconventional opening scene, the film has already established its dry sense of humor, its non-linear narration and its characters fate. In addition to foreshadowing the climax, the audience is also able to sense the beginnings of family tension. This form of unique narration serves the purpose of helping the audience to identify with a character that starts the movie as a largely unlikeable person. The wit of the voiceover and the sarcastic tone upgrades Lester's on-screen lameness, and his attitude about the people in his life colors the audience's own view towards them. This voice-over form of narration appears periodically during important moments of the film, such as a scene where Lester is fantasizing about Angela in his bed and

declares that he feels that he has been in “a coma for about twenty years” and that he is “just now waking up.” Thus, elaborating on the comedic features of the otherwise tragic film, the first-person narration successfully merges the qualities of both the modern tragedy and comedy in order to heighten and relieve tension of the tragic effect of Lester’s impending death. The comedic elements can be observed through the humorous and witty, yet often-degradable dialogue, which juxtapose with the scenes that usually provoke pity and sorrow. In contrast, since the story is based on several different plotlines that connect the lives of the main characters, the remainder of the film utilizes the third person narrative. Whilst using Point of View shots to enable the audience to see the action unfold from multiple perspectives, the camera serves as an omniscient lens that brings to life an entire world of diverse characters. **Through these different narration devices, the audience is able to grasp the bigger picture of suppressive suburban life and the dehumanizing reality of false appearances that are not always what they seem to be.**

Furthermore, the symbolism of the plastic bag featured in Ricky’s video, the color red, and the rose contribute to the underlying theme of suppression, confinement, and intrinsic value of beauty. Primarily, Ricky Fitts is one of the very few characters that are able to see beyond the beauty of materialistic things. He believes that beauty is all around him and desires to record these beauties through using his hand held camera, a device that illuminates the shaky and offbeat energy of natural beauty that cannot be controlled by man. One of the highlights during the film occurred when Ricky showed Jane “the most beautiful thing” that he has ever filmed. During this scene, Jane is exposed to a video where there is nothing to observe except for a small plastic bag that appears to be hovering along the sidewalk, floating mid-air in varying patterns. Ricky comments on the video through stating that there is “electricity in the air” and that the bag was “dancing” with him as if it were a living child. During the memorable fifteen minutes of the shooting the video, Ricky claims to

have completely forgotten all about his fears and finally felt at peace with the rest of the world. He confides in Jane that there is “so much beauty in the world” that he feels like he can't take it, and that his “heart is going to cave in.” The last quote relatively summarizes the enigma of the strange boy who films everything. Ricky is able to feel and observe “forces” that normal people aren't able to see, as all they ever feel is the emptiness of their sedated feelings, without a clue of what they are missing in life. **Hence, the plastic bag functions as a symbol that expresses how appearances are not always what they seem, and rather the simplest things in life can convey true beauty.**

Supplementary to the plastic bag, the color red is also a significant symbol used to unveil the central life force that struggles to defy the suppressive environment brought on by suburban life. In a way, the color red represents the suppressed identities of confined individuals who are disillusioned to an extent that they are no longer able to appreciate the beauty of life. For Lester, red is a symbol of his rebellion against the norms of society, as well as his approaching moment of critical self-discovery that leads to his final awakening. As the story progresses, red is shown to foreshadow Lester's uncivilized impulses as it is frequently seen in scenes where he is one step closer to finding his true identity. As an illustration, once Lester quits his job, he is compelled to start his life anew by buying a red sports car. This display of bravery demonstrates Lester's growing frustration with society and attempts to elude his imprisonment by making his fantasy a reality. The scene of his death also symbolizes his transcendence beyond the material world, which is marked by the gushing torrents of red blood that pours out after he is shot through the head. Drowning in his own blood, the final moments of Lester's life show that only during the imminent seconds before his death was he truly able to understand what he wanted out of life – a loving and supportive family uncontrolled by the materialistic values and norms of society. Conjointly, the imagery of the rose is a continuation of the symbolic red color that alludes to the actual Rosa

'American Beauty' species of roses. While famous for its beautiful crimson blooms and intoxicating fragrance, the 'American Beauty' is also notorious for its rapid deterioration. For this reason, the meaning behind the rose distinguishes Lester's fierce lust and desire to be free both mentally and physically. Ergo, the rose petals predominantly make an appearance on the screen whenever Lester has sexual fantasies about Angela. Most of these dreams consist of a naked Angela who is covered with a vibrant sea of lush rose petals. The petals are a sexual metaphor that is the object of Lester's growing lust and his erroneous romantic idealism, and can be used as a motif for Lester's desire towards Angela. On the other hand, when Carolyn possesses the roses, the roses represent the mass illusions of success that she uses as camouflage for the unpleasant reality of her professional and family life. This can be seen from a scene where Carolyn expresses that "as long as there can be roses, all is well", revealing her taste for success and beauty. **To conclude, the symbolism of the plastic bag featured in Ricky's video, the color red, and the rose all portray hidden messages implying the main theme of beauty and disillusionment of reality.**

Other than the literary elements that were mentioned beforehand, camera angles are also an important cinematographic effect used by the director in order to manipulate the audience's opinions of the main characters. For instance, whenever Lester is hopelessly disillusioned with his life, the camera carefully utilizes a high angle shot. This can be observed in an early scene where Lester is meeting with Brad the company's new efficiency expert. In this particular scene, Lester occupies a small portion of the frame and looks smaller. By placing him at the middle of an empty room, he is seemingly exposed to the higher authorities. The background is dimly lit and poorly decorated, with a dying plant and a painting that is too small of the wall as the only props placed in the background. This shows how Lester's job literally sucks the life out of him. The framing places Lester at the center-bottom, cutting his feet off, which serves as a visual representation of his meaningless life. In

contrast, Brad is shot through a low angle mid-shot to emphasize his dominant status as a younger more capable worker. His hand gestures push Lester down and the vertical patten of the blinds and the computer resemble a jail cell. Overall, these traits portray Brad's dominance, the company's soul-destroying nature, and Lester's hopelessness and vulnerability. Additionally, Carolyn is also characterized as an authority figure by using the similar low angle shots. This was evident when the camera viewed Carolyn in a low angle shot to appear powerful when she is beeping the horn of her car, urging Lester hurry up so as to not be late to work. On the contrary, Lester is again shown from a high angle shot as he comes rushing out of the house only to drop his bag, allowing the entire contents of his folder to make their way to the dirt in the grass. This further emphasizes Lester's weak, pathetic state that lacks any implication of self-respect. Eventually, a chain reaction of Lester's later victories is filmed through a progression of mid to high angle shots. For example, when Lester quits his job, much brighter lighting is used to show a more hopeful life, while also symbolizing a change in power. He is then finally filmed through a high angle shot to show how he has gained his own identity as a free man. **In general, camera angles are used to show Lester's place in society and his efforts to free himself from the self-forged manacles that social norms suppress and isolate him with.**

As a whole, the film expands on the general theme of of beauty, confinement, and the discrepancy of appearance and reality by using the effects of narration, symbolism, and camera angles. Similar to that of most first person narrated films, *American Beauty* integrates the occasional narration of the protagonist to accentuate the consequences of self-destruction brought by the suppression of a materialistic society. The essential symbolic images along with the slow evolution of diverse camera angles also accurately portray how people are so easily isolated in a world where their own identity is hidden by the loss of true beauty.

Beyond any doubt, *American Beauty* is a magnificent film that presents an ominously satirical

view of a modern suburban prison, where cultural norms enforced by society have left people to be confined and isolated by the deceitful beauty of fanatical materialism.