American Beauty by Sam Mendes

Summary and Analysis

Mendes' influence on American Beauty

The original script for American Beauty was markedly different from the finished product (the shooting script). The script that Alan Ball, the screenwriter, sent to Sam Mendes, the director, began with Jane and Ricky being put on trial for the murder of Lester Burnham. In the original script, Angela testifies against Jane in court, and Colonel Fitts brings in the tape he finds of Jane offering Ricky three thousand dollars to kill her father. The viewers learn that the tape was a joke immediately after Ricky turns off the camera - but one second too late for the defense. Also, the extended shot over the town with Lester's voice-over in the background that begins the shooting script originally included Lester in his pajamas, flying
Superman-like over the town and landing in his own bed. Mendes filmed the script almost as written, but afterwards he and editor Tariq Anwar made substantial changes, to the surprise of most of the cast and crew. Mendes cut the trial out entirely, and also eliminated the "Lester-flying" fantasy. He preserved Ricky and Jane's impact on the film by increasing their on-camera time throughout the movie.

Mendes' cuts had a tremendous affect on the themes and impact of the story. The question of guilt and the manipulation of evidence played a large role in the original film, but by editing out the trial Mendes shifted the focus from Lester Burnham's death to Lester Burnham's life. In hindsight, it seems possible that the original script would have produced a more unbalanced, less poignant film than the final product. Of course the universally exceptional work turned in by the actors was an important component in the film's success, but Mendes' cuts also had a significant influence on how these roles were perceived. In shifting the ultimate meaning of the film, Mendes essentially turned all of the roles into "character parts" rather than mainstream leading roles.

It seems likely that Mendes' background as a theatre director strongly influenced his approach to American Beauty. Mendes was used to directing stories that focused on character development and questions of perspective rather than a rapidly-moving plot. Furthermore, his work on the stage may have made him more comfortable with the less realistic aspects of American Beauty (such as Lester's fantasy sequences). Another aspect of Mendes' background that may have influenced his choices for the film is the fact that he is a British - rather than an American - director. Generally speaking, character-driven films are more widely accepted in Britain than they are in the United States. While American blockbusters are unquestionably popular in the U.K., British directors seem to have more freedom to explore characters who are not particularly admirable, important, or even likeable. In transforming American Beauty from a whodunit thriller into a deeply cerebral exploration of the human condition, Mendes went against the stereotypes that were thought to appeal to American audiences.

Major Themes

Happiness

Happiness exists in American Beauty as a myth, as a goal, and as a disguise. All of the characters are engaged in the pursuit of happiness, although they have very different ideas about what happiness is and how to find it. This is one of the qualities that truly make American Beauty a film about the modern American experience: if being American means having the intrinsic right to the pursuit of happiness, why is the "typical" American so deeply unhappy? At the beginning of the film, Lester Burnham realizes that despite the dire nature of his current state, it is still possible for him to become happy once again. Slowly - and then with growing intensity - he begins to pursue happiness by paying close attention to his true desires, and ignoring the screeching dictates of society (as embodied by his wife, Carolyn). At the close of the film, Lester finally realizes that he has found true happiness...and in the
most unlikely way. What makes this film so unique is that Lester pursues happiness in a manner that runs directly counter to the ideals of "respectable" society: he does drugs, takes a meaningless job, and pursues a sexual affair with a fifteen-year-old girl. Lester has become so blinded by his willingness to walk the straight and narrow that he must return to a fundamental - and arguably juvenile - state in order to recapture the happiness that he once enjoyed.

Meanwhile, Carolyn Burnham represents the commonly-held belief that happiness is about perception: she is happy if she seems pulled together, confident, and successful - in other words, she is happy if others think that she is happy. She believes that by pursuing success she is pursuing happiness, but in reality she is merely attempting to dampen her own misery over the wreckage of her marriage and the narrowness of her life. Her daughter Jane, in contrast, is completely immersed in her misery. She displays it for all to see, from the clothes she wears to the company she keeps. Jane is so used to living in a state of perpetual unhappiness that when she meets Ricky she continues to obsess about her terrible home life despite the fact that Ricky's situation is clearly far worse.

Ultimately, American Beauty endorses the pursuit of happiness as the only thing worth living for. At the end of the film, Lester's murder seems almost inconsequential; how can Lester's end be viewed as a tragedy when he was lucky enough to know true happiness in the months before he died, and when so many others never know it at all?

Identity

Many of the characters' problems stem from their failure to develop or maintain a coherent identity. Lester finds happiness by separating his sense of self-worth from his job and his home life. He learns that even though his boss and wife treat him as though he's worthless, that doesn't mean that he is. Angela believes that her identity is founded entirely on her sexuality. She fears being "ordinary" because she has confused ordinariness with physical plainness, and has confused physical plainness with having no identity. Carolyn Burnham is one of the film's most tragic characters because she has literally replaced her identity as a person with a collection of material things. Carolyn Burnham has a perfect suit, an expensive couch, and a new car, but she has lost the vivacious personality that Lester Burnham fell in love with. When he attempts to remind her of how she once was, she viciously defends her current state, thus protecting her belief that her priorities are in order and that she is successful because she possesses the "important" things in life. Ricky is the one character who does not fall victim to this problem of identity: his awe-inspiring strength comes from his ability to retain a clear sense of self despite constant abuse from his father. Even when he discovers that his father's love is truly conditional, Ricky is able to fearlessly pursue Jane's love and acceptance.

The power of identity is underscored by Lester Burnham's death. Colonel Fitts kills Lester because he has revealed his true self to him, and cannot bear the idea that some part of himself - a part that he has always tried to keep hidden - has been exposed. In killing Lester, the Colonel preserves an identity that he can live with, albeit a false one.

American Culture

From its title to its allusions to several iconic American texts, American Beauty explores different aspects of American culture and American identity. The title refers to three different
symbols of American culture: American Beauty roses (a popular variety), Angela as a representative of youthful, innocent, "American" loveliness, and the American aesthetic of beauty, as represented by Ricky's films. Lester Burnham has distinct similarities to Willy Loman, the everyman protagonist of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Lester, cognizant of his situation, reinvents his life in order to save himself from a similar end. Carolyn Burnham represents American consumerism and the unfortunate belief that things can replace relationships. Lester's job at a fast-food restaurant and Jane's participation on the cheerleading team (both "typical" American roles) inject a humorous note into Mendes' discussion of American culture. All the same, American Beauty forces the viewer to consider whether there is anything worth saving at the root of this culture. When American Beauty was released abroad, many critics were surprised that Americans responded so positively to a film that seemed so critical of traditional American values. Americans, it seems, were ready to question these values much as Lester does in the film, and move towards a more satisfying, emotionally fulfilling existence.

Love

It is the absence - rather than the presence - of love that is most noticeable in the first half of American Beauty. The Burnham family dinners simmer with anger and awkwardness; these are people who have fundamentally forgotten how to love each other. One of the saddest moments of the film occurs at the end, when Carolyn, faced with her husband's death, realizes that she will never again have the chance to love him. One of Ricky's most astounding characteristics is his apparent belief that his father loves him despite how he treats him, and that the beatings and the lack of trust are simply his unique way of showing this love. Ricky's ability to love Jane stems from this remarkable ability to trust in the inherent goodness of others.

On the whole, Mendes seems to portray love as unexpected, miraculous, fragile...and incredibly, incredibly important. Lester finds happiness not only because he learns to love himself, but because in loving himself he falls in love with life all over again. His newfound appreciation for the world around him enables him to look at Carolyn's face, lined with years of frustration and bitterness, hear the horrible things she says to him, and still smile at the memory of the happy, funny, lively woman he once knew. Once he has found all of that love inside him, Lester finds it impossible to hate.

Freedom

Freedom, of course, is another fundamental American ideal. While happiness is a more overt theme in American Beauty, the theme of freedom is significant precisely because free will is so rare and difficult to locate. One of the unifying characteristics in the film is that so many of the characters seem trapped: trapped by their lives, their jobs, themselves, their parents, and their fears. Many of the characters (e.g. Colonel Fitts and his wife, Barbara Fitts) end the film just as trapped as they were when it began, and some, such as Carolyn Burnham, only begin to free themselves from the circumstances that bind them in the moments just before the credits roll. A few characters seem to grasp that freedom is literally there for the taking, and that the only thing holding them back is themselves. When Jane and Ricky agree to go to New York, Jane warns Ricky that her parents will look for her, while Ricky confides that his won't. Ricky has freedom thrust upon him, but seems determined to make it his own nonetheless, while Jane sees its possibilities but isn't entirely sure that she's ready to embrace them. Only Lester entirely ignores his fears and embraces his free will. In the end, Lester
realizes that taking advantage of one's freedom doesn't necessarily go hand-in-hand with abandoning one's responsibilities. Ultimately, freedom has more to do with taking responsibility than anything else. In order to be free, Lester must stop blaming others for his unhappiness and take control of his own life.

Family

There are several different kinds of families in American Beauty. Each is struggling and disjointed, yet each is relatively functional for at least part of the film. Mendes takes a unique view of family in that he seems to question the idea that one must simply accept the members of one's family and love them unconditionally. Jane's desire to get away from her parents, though unrealistic, is certainly understandable. Ricky's desire to stick by his broken mother and angry father is touching in its impossibility. Ironically, the over-the-top antics of the Burnham and Fitts families almost overshadow one of the more interesting questions of the film: where is Angela's family? Where, for example, are Angela's parents during the rally at the gym? Why does Angela always stay at Jane's house, instead of offering her miserable friend a refuge? There is no clear answer, but perhaps Mendes is suggesting that no matter how bad your family may be, it is always preferable to have them there (lest you end up like Angela: a confused, sad, lonely girl). Given the careful, precise nature of the script, it seems likely that this omission was fully intended to underscore the importance of family to an individual's character and development.

Sex and Sexuality

On the one hand, American Beauty seems to be a film uniquely comfortable with sexuality. Mendes handles nudity, masturbation, and even extramarital sex with a masterful combination of sensuality and deft irony. At the same time, the film depicts a stunning variety of problematic sexual relationships. Angela lies about terrible sexual experiences in order to make people believe that she is much more sophisticated than she really is. Jane exposes herself through a bedroom window as a sign of trust, and is almost caught by Ricky's father. Carolyn has a torrid affair with Buddy Kane, yet both participants seem more aroused by Buddy's status than by anything else. Lester's newfound freedom is perfectly symbolized by his decision to masturbate in bed, next to his wife, rather than in his usual locale: the shower, where any "dirty" associations are literally washed away. Sex is one of the ways in which the characters' multiple dysfunctions are expressed; thus sex is rarely "just" sex. When Colonel Fitts sees Ricky and Lester together in Lester's house and mistakenly believes they are engaging in a sexual encounter, this perversion of the truth represents Colonel Fitts' suspicion and need for total control. When Lester refrains from having sex with Angela, his decision indicates his awareness that freedom does not equate with irresponsibility. Mendes seems to choose sex as a consistent metaphor not because of its associations with America, but rather because of its associations with modernity. In the contemporary age, sex serves as a unique expression of freedom and individuality, and is thus an ideal lens through which to view each character's progression.
Suggested Essay Questions

1. Lester Burnham reveals that he will die in the first few lines of the film. What purpose might this revelation serve? How does this knowledge affect the way a viewer might experience the film?

2. When introducing his wife, Carolyn, Lester Burnham comments that the handles of her gardening shears match her clogs. How does this information fit in with Carolyn's character as you perceive it? Does this line accurately sum up Carolyn, or is Lester being unfair in some way?

3. Examine the scenes of the film which the audience sees through the lens of Ricky's camera. How is the story that Ricky's films tell similar to or different from the film as a whole? What might Ricky's films reveal that couldn't have been revealed in any other way?

4. Ricky's behavior towards Jane would be viewed by many as inappropriate, or even dangerously obsessive. Indeed, Ricky himself might be considered relatively unstable, yet Mendes does not seem to intend the audience to feel concern over Ricky's relationship with Jane. How does Mendes communicate the innocence of their love to the audience?

5. Many of the characters in the film exhibit symptoms of severely low self-esteem. At the end of the film, many of these characters have begun to recover - to like themselves and their lives. Pick one such character and explain why his or her feelings undergo this dramatic transformation.

6. The film's name references the type of rose seen many times throughout the film - American Beauty roses. What other ideas and images might this title be referring to? Pick an idea or image of "American beauty" that you consider relevant and explain how it relates to the film. Be sure to cite specific evidence from the text to support your claim.

7. Angela and Jane are best friends, yet it is clear from the beginning that Jane is jealous of Angela and that Angela does her best to make Jane feel insecure. How does this friendship function despite these emotional undercurrents? Is the depiction of their friendship realistic, or the film merely satirizing a stereotypical high school relationship?

8. Is Lester Burnham a hero, or an anti-hero? Be sure to define both of these terms in your answer.

9. Consider the remarkable success enjoyed by American Beauty upon its release. What might have accounted for this success? What makes it somewhat surprising?

10. Why might the writer and/or director have chosen roses as one of the film's primary symbols? What ideas do roses convey that are important to the overall meaning of the film?