

American Beauty (1999)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours 2 min.

Our content advisories (1-10): Violence 4; Language 6;
Sex/Nudity 6.

Our Star rating (1-5): 5

*He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put
eternity into man's mind, yet*

*so that he cannot find out what God has done from the
beginning to the end.*

Ecclesiastes 3:11

We are the hollow men,

We are the stuffed men...

In this last of meeting places

We grope together

And avoid speech

Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

From T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men"

The title of this incredibly fine film can be taken several ways. It is the lovely Angela, the teenager who arouses jaded Lester Burnham from his lethargy and fills his erotic dreams day and night. It could be Carolyn Burnham's roses, whose petals cover parts of Angela's body in Lester's dreams. It could refer to the American dream, which Lester and Carolyn seem to be living. Or it could be the beauty which their new teenage neighbor Ricky Fitts sees everywhere, and especially in the Burnham's daughter Jane. *American Beauty* starts out as

a satire on American suburban life and values, but ends on a profound note of joy mixed with tragedy and a strangely triumphant message affirming the beauty of life.

When we first meet them the Burnhams (Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening) seem to be the perfect embodiment of T.S. Elliott's poem. Lester's awakening comes from two directions. His company has called in an efficiency expert to help them downsize. Part of their game is to have every staff member write a description of what they do. Lester sees that this is basically to be a futile plea for maintaining one's job. He has had enough of servility in a dead-end, so he refuses to cooperate, writing instead an outrageous note of rebellion. Because he knows of the peccadilloes of his boss, he is able to negotiate a fat severance package. On the home front he is struck by the beauty of Angela, the friend whom his surly daughter Jane has brought home. He almost drools over her, so long has it been since he has engaged in sex with his success-obsessed wife Carolyn. He enters into an amusing body-building regimen so as to impress her.

Carolyn, on the other hand, has become an obsequious would-be real estate tycoon whose model is the local agent celebrity Buddy Kane (Peter Gallagher). She has become so obsessed that she cannot give a moment's thought to Lester's leaving his job, other than to bemoan the loss of his income and status. In one poignant scene Lester asks her, "When did you become so joyless?" She enters into an affair shortly after she toadies up to Buddy at a realtor's meeting. In one of the funniest discoveries to be seen on film, she is found out by Lester when he takes a job at a burger restaurant and sees them passionately embracing while they are waiting for their order to be filled at the take-out window.

Meanwhile Jane (Thora Birch) has felt put-upon by her creepy next door neighbor Ricky (Wes Bentley). His hair cut unstylishly short military fashion, he keeps aiming his camcorder in her direction, even when she is at her bedroom

window. At school he comes up to her and Angela to introduce himself. Angela is upset because he obviously is interested in Jane rather than her. The blond beauty is not used to being passed over—she thoroughly enjoys the attention Jane's father gives her. Jane finally overcomes her repulsion over Ricky's videotaping her, discovering the beauty within herself that he sees but which she had not realized. He tells her in one scene that he sees beauty everywhere, that there is so much around him that he feels like bursting at times.

Ricky's father Colonel Fitts (Chris Cooper) is a control freak who makes life anything but beautiful for his son and mousy wife. When two gay neighbors, ironically the only ones in the film to be truly enjoying the suburban way of life, call on the Fitts to welcome them to the neighborhood, the Colonel's attitude is so frosty that you can almost see ice cubes forming in the air. The suspicious Colonel makes Ricky submit to him a urine sample weekly so that he can check to see if his son is using drugs! Ricky has retreated into his own world, one that includes drug dealing in order to pay for his expensive electronic equipment. We wonder where or how the boy has come to be so sensitive to the beauty of life, his own domestic life being so ugly.

It is hard to believe that this is the first film directed by Sam Mendes and the first screenplay to be produced by Alan Ball—though both are veterans of the stage, and Ball highly successful in television. Unfortunately there are some mixed signals sent out in their film, Ricky's drug dealing apparently accepted as a clever way of evading his father's constant surveillance and earning money for his hobbies. Despite this, however, this is that rare film which keeps one thinking long after the credits have faded. It is as funny as films get, and it is also an American tragedy, although not what it might at first seem like. The tragedy is not that one character dies, but that the one who lives is essentially dead to the beauty and glory of life that the other has discovered,

and which accompanies the deceased apparently even beyond death. The joy described in the film is very much like that which C.S. Lewis celebrates in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, although neither Ricky nor Lester could define its source as well.

Especially touching scene: Ricky shows Jane “the most beautiful thing I’ve filmed.” It is not a rose or other flower, but a simple plastic bag blown by the wind. The common object takes on a transcendent beauty as it seemingly dances along and above the ground. Ricky says that electricity seemed to fill the air as the bag danced for 15 minutes like a little kid. “I realized there was Something behind the thing, and this benevolent force wanted me to know everything is O.K. I need to remember. Sometimes there is so much beauty in the world that I can’t take it—and my heart is just going to cave in.” At that moment at least, Ricky is “not far from the kingdom of God,” as Someone might have said long ago.

Most profound of all, however is the strange conversion of Lester Burnham that begins with his meeting of Ricky and concludes like a Flannery O’Connor story. As soon as the film turns tragic it immediately becomes a resurrection comedy, albeit a dark one in which the darkness is swallowed by Light.