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American Beauty

Analytical Essay

Life is strife, and dreams are the only thing that keep people going; this was the concept that the movie *American Beauty* displayed very well, trying to break away from the common plot of movies: a happy ending. Throughout the movie an audience watches a main character, Lester, grow and find himself, until a surprising and realistic climax. Lester's life was hard--which is how it is supposed to be--and for those who try to make it better and find happiness, they end up not living long. Throughout the early part of the movie, *American Beauty*, Lester was shown always being trapped at home and work, and inferior to everyone, even his own wife and daughter. His only happiness came from fantasizing about a young girl named Angela. However, through the arts of camera angles, lighting, and coloring, Lester becomes stronger and happier, until his peak of happiness.

Throughout the beginning of the movie Lester had problems at his job, in his home, and even in his own car: Lester was trapped and inferior. At the beginning of the movie Lester masturbates in his shower, but as he pleases himself the scene gives an illusion that he is caged inside the shower: Being barely noticed through a thick sheet of

glass and steam. After leaving his home he rides in the backseat of his car while his daughter and wife sit in the front, Lester appears to be trapped behind the car door--as he slouches back in his seat and stares off--longing to be part of the outside world. Finally, when he reaches his work he sits at his computer and the reflection on his computer puts him behind bars of numbers. Also, while at work Lester must speak to his young and naive boss, who seems to be superior to Lester. When Lester talked to his boss the camera angles showed how important Lester truly was compared to his boss, who almost seemed to be larger than life when compared to Lester. Lester almost seems to be small as a child, while the boss, a giant. The sad thing about Lester being inferior, it begins in the morning at home. Lester peers at his wife socializing with neighbors through his living room that seemed to trap him from the outside world. He gazes at his wife, longing to be able to be free and socialize. His inferiority--compared to her—shows right near the beginning of the movie, almost like foreshadowing. This is only one of the scenes where Lester is seen inferior to his wife.

In fact throughout all the early scenes with Lester and his wife there is a power struggle evident, most of the time vaguely. When together the angles of the camera always face upward towards his wife, Carolyn, while downwards at Lester. Kevin Spacey, the actor who portrayed Lester, is taller than the actress who played Carolyn, yet he is often seen shorter than Carolyn throughout the beginning of the movie to show the ranks of power of the two. Carolyn invites Lester to join her at a company dinner party but treats him like her child instead of a husband; telling him how to act and what to say, truly expressing how submissive Lester could be. In that scene Lester seemed so much shorter than Carolyn as they greeted the other guests. Lester also appeared inferior to his

wife when he had to hurry to receive a ride to work, the camera angles face downward at Lester and upward when focused on Carolyn. However, the boss and Carolyn are not the only people who appear to be superior to Lester; Lester's daughter, Janie, is also seen as a superior person in the family.

Not only do the camera angles express the importance of a character, but also lighting and colors express the importance. In the beginning of the movie Lester wears dull colors and is always dimly lit, while his wife and daughter are always brightly lit and wears bright clothing. This contrast with the surrounding bright colors and other lighted characters shows the audience who is in charge and who should be focused on. The scene where the family is sitting at the dinner table together, Lester is lost within the shadows while his wife has a little more light, but the daughter is illuminated far more than her parents. The bright lights around Janie grab the audience as she sits in high authority in the center of the table in the first dinner scene. When Lester tries to talk to Janie about how bad his day was, she responds by saying, "You can't be my friend when you have a bad day; you haven't even talked to me for months now." (Movie). Also, when Lester tries to apologize to his daughter he seems to be shorter than her, and the camera angles face downwards upon him, while the angles face upwards on Janie. Janie has so much disgust for her father that she says that someone should put him out of his misery at the beginning of the movie. She has this disgust for him because Lester flirts with her friend, Angela, when she comes over.

The only time Lester is ever content is when he fantasizes; only then does the viewers see Lester in a brightened lit area, or wearing brighter clothing. The red that is appears in his fantasies are intense and almost become another character; you know when

Lester is having a wonderful dream when he is in the light and bright, red rose petals appear. Whenever the rose petals are in a scene, Lester is dreaming about Angela and him being intimate. When he first notices Angela, he was at a game where his daughter danced as a cheerleader; his eyes quickly focused on Angela as she danced next to his daughter. Soon Lester and Angela were the only people in the gym; as she gave him a private dance, ending with her revealing herself to him behind a beautiful array of bright, red rose petals. The lighting and camera angles also show the importance in the scenes. In every fantasy the camera focuses on Lester's eyes and Angela's hands, and Angela's face is brightly lit, showing her beauty. When Lester finally meets Angela he is once again in the shadows, while Angela was brightly lit. Angela was only the beginning of Lester reaching freedom and happiness.

Only after hearing a conversation between Angela and Janie where Janie states that Lester would be hot, only if he worked out, does Lester begin to pump iron. Not only did he begin to workout, in order to impress Angela, but Lester also met his next-door neighbor--Ricky--who introduces him to marijuana. It seemed weird that Lester only started to feel joy when his life became more confusing: a life that was filled with fantasies and drugs. These moments of freedom even changed his fantasies. In the beginning they focused on his eyes and Angela's hands, but all of a sudden they begin to focus less on his eyes and more on his hands. The fantasy scene where Lester enters the bathroom, while Angela is resting in the tub, there are several different speeds that are used when focused on Lester's hands as he reached into the tub. His fantasies also grew more and more sexual as time went on; the first fantasy Lester had only involved a dance, but by the third or fourth fantasy Lester was touching Angela in erotic places. In fact,

after his second fantasy Lester began to masturbate. The scene where his wife catches him masturbating in bed is very important because it was a huge turn around in his life and the way he acted. Carolyn was shocked that Lester would masturbate and confronted him on the issue, but Lester did not stay docile, he spoke his mind and let her know how he felt. It was the first time in the movie that Lester stood up for himself and his feelings. After that scene Lester found himself standing up for himself more and more. The only time, in the entire movie, Lester smiled was when working out and getting high. Even when his wife catches him getting high Lester kept his cool as he told her off. As his wife stormed off--after being humiliated by him--Lester smiled and kept pumping iron. In all his experiences of freedom Lester kept his cool; even after catching his wife cheating. Lester got so close to being happy and free, but as stated before, once you reach happiness it does not last long.

Lester was sitting at the dinner table looking at a picture of his family and trying to remember how their family used to be, when someone comes from behind of him at ends it all. The ironic thing though is he never looked so happy before; he lay in his blood dead with a huge smile as he finally reached true contentment. Lester took years to find his happiness. And after being freed from his dull job, controlling wife, and his unloving daughter Lester finds his happiness in fantasizing, working out, and getting high. At the end of his life he finally appreciates life and is content, which is all our destinies.