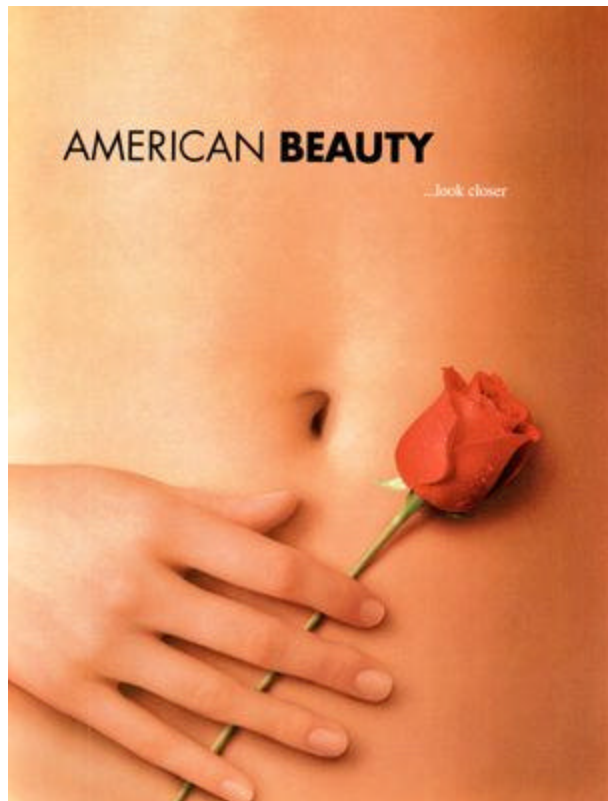


Lolita, Darling, Join Me in the Rose Garden: Loss and Redemption in *American Beauty*



*Angela Hayes (Mena Suvari)
as the American Beauty*

Rating: *1/2 (1999) Running time: 120 minutes.**
Rated R (for strong sexuality, language, violence, and drug content).

Credits

Director: Sam Mendes

Director of Photography: Conrad L. Hall

Production Design: Naomi Shohan

Music: Thomas Newman

Screenplay: Alan Ball

Producers: Bruce Cohen and Dan Jinks

Art Director: David S. Lazan

Editing: Tariq Anwar and Chris Greenbury

Cast

Lester Burnham: Kevin Spacey

Jane Burnham: Thora Birch

Angela Hayes: Mena Suvari

Buddy Kane, (Real Estate Agent):
Peter Gallagher

Carolyn Burnham: Annette Bening

Ricky Fitts: Wes Bentley

Colonel Fitts: Chris Cooper

Barbara Fitts: Allison Janney

by T. Larry Verburg

American Beauty is a kind of *Lolita* for the new millennium, an imaginative look at contemporary American society. In director Sam Mendes's reappraisal of American mores, that American suburban scene is killing dull—an oppressive miasma looms depleting the atmosphere of oxygen and covering those captive in its oppressive clouds with a deep layer of pain and angst. What *American Beauty* chronicles is a collective failure, both of energy and of spirit in American society. What has become defunct in our me-first, dot-com society is our capacity for wonder and our ability to conduct valid human interaction. What we now have, instead, is a tremendous vacuum and a collective longing that must be filled at any price.

The film has the New-Age flavor of people seeking desperately for meaning in their lives and for spiritual sustenance. *American Beauty* depicts middle-aged suburbanites Lester and Carolyn Burnhams' misguided attempts to exorcise this longing through extra-marital sexual liaisons. These desperate attempts to recapture love and security are obviously doomed from the start. Lester (Kevin Spacey) becomes infatuated with his daughter's beautiful friend, Angela, and Carolyn (Annette Bening) initiates an affair with fellow real estate agent Buddy Kane. These parallel quests to recapture what they have lost—Lester in pursuing the specious passion of youth, and Carolyn by imbibing the lethe of her career and new love interest—create the dramatic tension of the film.

Lester is a walking dead man. This is not a spoiler; we learn this fact in the first few minutes of the film. The film comprises, then, a kind of retrospective of the dead, a look at what went wrong in Lester's life and marriage—and why. The film does not provide any useful answers for the audience, however, who, we assume, may very well be suffering in some degree the same problems that plagued Lester prior to his death. Any implied solutions are easily negated by the fact that Lester has little time to savor his new-found wisdom, for he is snuffed out, a victim of a cruel twist of fate. And this is not exactly a fair return for one's troubles. Given these considerations, it is difficult for me to believe that Lester especially wanted to die, after finally having solved his angst and his spiritual and sexual frustrations.

As we first see them, the once-happy couple live in not-so-quite desperation. In their thoughtless quest for a non-existent El Dorado, the couple's failure translates into the potent but amorphous sexual metaphors so evident in the film—Lester's obliterating desire for the young beauty that captures his eye with her perfect body gives the film its name, and Carolyn's heady lust for her professional superior is a violation of the marital bond. Carolyn's is the more prolonged and insidious quest, as it proves to be simply an excuse for a metaphorical sleep, in its own way as deadly as the sleep that has descended upon her new neighbor, Barbara Fitts (Allison Janney). But Carolyn's complex personality also provides a second metaphor for the ambiguous symbol of the rose. We see her happy and smiling only while she works in her garden, growing and cultivating that very American Beauty rose that becomes a perverted symbol of Lester's quest for lost youth and happiness.



Carolyn and her roses

Carolyn is not as aware as Lester that there is a deep emptiness in their lives. But she too seeks some value some thing in which to believe, and this becomes here career which soon subsumes all of her other passions and interests (except, perhaps her gardening). In an earlier decade she would have been a political radical, as Eric Hoffer terms it, a "true believer." She approaches her work as a real estate agent as if were a religion that will save her from the emptiness she feels in her life. One morning we see her compulsively cleaning a thoroughly dirty house she wishes to show later that day. She is almost frenzied in her effort, almost losing control at one point, until she cries her mantra, "Successful people project an aura of success." But mere capitalism, however decadent, is not to blame here.

Carolyn's priorities have been turned upside down; instead of serving cause, country, family, or mankind, she serves her own narrow vision of personal success. Since Lester does not share her unquestioning belief in the fruits of labor, she treats him as a loser, that most untouchable cast of American society. Lester, in denigrating work-a-day capitalism, represented by the magazine where he has labored for 14 years, denies the great Protestant ethic. As the Protestant ethic, or its modern equivalent, becomes Carolyn's world, its *zeitgeist*, Lester becomes for her a non-person, hardly worth her attention, much less her care. She feels that all of her efforts to maintain a seemingly happy suburban home are wasted on Lester. And if Lester is a non-person, how much more so is Jane, with whom she shares little except gender.

Success becomes for Carolyn a new religion into which she blindly thrusts all of her emotional and physical energies. But wealth and success in the public sector do not guarantee success in private life. She has become emotionally distanced, not only from Lester, but also from the more traditional values of home and family that had sustained her earlier. This fact is underscored by her disintegrating relationship with her daughter,

Jane. At one point, she tries to sincerely communicate with Jane but only ends up slapping her in a sudden burst of rage. The tremendous frustration and barely suppressed violence that we perceive in Carolyn leads us to suspect she intends to murder Lester, when her affair with Buddy "King" Kane (Peter Gallagher) is suddenly and unemotionally terminated.



Her attempt to find meaning, emotional health, and security through her sexual liaison with Kane is doomed to failure. Carolyn submerges her identity in the larger cause of career, but her success is a specious gift because it requires her to sacrifice all her personal energies in its maintenance. She has nothing of any value to share with Lester or Jane, and the mockery of their routine family dinners leads to one of the defining moments in the film. For this is where Lester finally determines to change his life, with or without the cooperation of Carolyn, and the plate he throws against the wall sums up his attitude to the status quo—he is satiated and will have no more.

Carolyn compulsively at work

American males (and I am not exempting myself in this accusation) appear to be plagued by a fetish about certain female institutions: cheerleaders (because they remind us of our lost youth, Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days"), and young girls (the Lolita syndrome) for the same reason. Both are subconscious attempts to recapture our lost youth, a time when sex was a mysterious "potentiality" and sexuality still a potent, mythical force in our lives. If we wish to verify the truth of the Lolita syndrome, we only have to remind ourselves of the debacle on Long Island a half dozen years ago. The press sensationalized Amy Fisher (Joe Buttafuko's 16-year-old lover) as the "Long Island Lolita." She has recently been granted parole and is writing a book about her experiences. Perhaps we shall be seeing this book made into a picture by Hollywood?

In *American Beauty*, the rose is an ambiguous symbol at best. The more one reflects on the symbol, the more it resonates with meaning upon meaning. Traditionally, in literature, the rose has been a symbol of perfection. In T. S. Eliot we have the rose garden as the ultimate symbol for man's vision of perfection, the ultimate epiphany, and farther back we have Dante's vision of God as a multifoliate rose, a beatific vision of paradise. In the film, we have the rose as sexual metaphor, and not a very subtle one at that. The "American Beauty" is a type of rose, of course, the very type that Carolyn cultivates, and the "American Beauty" is also the daughter's friend, the object of

Lester's lust and his misplaced romantic idealism.

Angela (Mena Suvari), the "American Beauty" of the title, makes an interesting case study of the contemporary female teen. She is a braggart, boasting of her many sexual conquests in much the same way that boys of a certain temperament used to do when gathered in the locker rooms and bathrooms of countless high schools across the nation. Even as we watch the film, we wonder if she is all mouth. Certainly, no one could really be proud of being such a slut. When in the climactic scene, Lester learns the truth, we say to ourselves "Humm, I thought so."



Lester and Carolyn prepare to talk

But *American Beauty* is not a study in the maturation of the female teen, and in the end, unfortunately, Angela is still the clueless person she was at the beginning. It's hard to believe, and I see little (or no) evidence that any of the others in the film—Lester's wife, Carolyn; his daughter, Jane (Thora Birch); Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley), his daughter's love interest; or Colonel Fitts, his temporary neighbor—learn anything positive from their experience. The film leaves us with no small hope, no subtle promise, that they will become better people. The thought of the colonel, with his deep-seated masculine identity problems, behind bars in some grim prison certainly gives one pause. Has Lester died in vain?

What I do remember in *American Beauty* as absolutely stunning is the remarkable, if painful to watch, acting job done by Chris Cooper as Colonel Fitts. (We remember Cooper fondly as the sheriff in John Sayles's *Lone Star* [1996] and his acting in Joe Johnston's brilliant film *October Sky* [1999], where his portrayal of a father unable to communicate with his son should have won him an oscar.)

Peter Gallagher is absolutely wonderful as the egotistical real estate agent Buddy "King" Kane, on the make for money, sex, and fame. Why does Carolyn fall for such an obvious phoney as Kane? He is a textbook case of the narcissistic personality. Even Kane's own, shallow, yuppie wife eventually leaves him because he is too "focused" on his career. That Carolyn initiates an affair with this creep by fanning his vanity is a comment on her state of mind and spirit. That she deludes herself into having wild, uninhibited sex with this self-promoting huckster proves that she has lost touch with reality. Those scenes were certainly not the highlights of the film; perhaps they were intended as comic relief?

Certainly the acting in the film is impeccable, even though I don't believe the film really

deserved the oscar as best picture. That honor, I believe, should have gone to N. Night Shyamalan's *Sixth Sense*, in many ways a remarkable and intriguing film, with astonishingly good acting by Haley Joel Osment and Bruce Willis's best performance to date. (But then I also preferred 1998's *Elizabeth* to the relatively shallow *Shakespeare In Love*.) I say this about *American Beauty* primarily because, for me, the characters in the film lack appeal. It is very difficult to feel sympathy for or to empathize fully with anyone in the film, even Lester, though we certainly feel closer to him than to the others.

Ultimately, I believe this lack of a sympathetic focus is a serious flaw in the film. I don't think this was an intentional decision on the director's part; I suspect that this flaw stems from problems in the original screenplay. I also believe that Lester and Jane *are* intended to be sympathetic characters. It's important for the film's narrative structure that we *at least* be able to empathize, first of all, with Lester and then with Jane, or even Carolyn. And this just doesn't happen.

Nor is Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley), as the "outsider" and "underdog" a completely sympathetic or convincing character. He may represent the latent peeper in all of us males, but his large, deep-set eyes are not the kind we would like to see our daughters involved with: they are too different somehow, too unnatural, when we remember his smile as he regards all things dead, even poor old Lester. They remind me more of Anthony Perkins's eyes in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).

Perhaps what is often said in criticism of Henry James—that we love to discuss his novels but not to read them—may also be said, in a way, about *American Beauty*. It is a seriously flawed film, with many purple patches held together with coincidence, improbability, and melodrama, but it is also an extremely interesting and rich film nonetheless. In *American Beauty*, Hollywood does hold up some metaphorical mirrors to the audience, however distorted or cracked the reflections are, and however weakly they depict the reality of urban American society.



Lester and Jane attempt to communicate

Many of society's trends are explored, such as the quest for identity, in the plight of the young lovers, Jane and Ricky. Identity (maturation, C. G. Jung's *individuation*) is a perennial problem for each new generation that must rediscover and redefine its cultural and psychic values anew. The problem of homosexuality is explored, in the tortured antics of Colonel Fitts, though not in the depth of Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999).

The problems of perverse sexuality are, however, given a broad range. The question of incestuous desire is manifest by the nature of Lester's infatuation with Angela, who is, after all, the same age as Jane, and is her friend and confidant, and may be her *doppelganger* (or twin). The alluring vixenish Angela is a more guilt-free choice for Lester than Jane, his daughter.

For whatever reason, Lester's relationship with Jane has certainly deteriorated, along with his relationship with Carolyn. At one point, Jane says to Angela, with uncharacteristic sadness, that her father hardly looks at her any more. This certainly implies that at one time father and daughter did indeed have a more normal relationship, the kind of caring, loving bond that is important in a girl's life. So why has Lester abandoned Jane just as surely as he has abandoned Carolyn? Well, actually Carolyn has abandoned Lester, but then Lester has also stopped caring about anyone, except Angela and himself. Again we see the face of the narcissist, and a good argument could be made that all of the characters in *American Beauty* are, to one degree or another, all narcissists.

In keeping with Angela, Jane's sexuality has also obviously blossomed, as well as her perception of this sexuality. At one point in the film, for example, when she and her boyfriend are contemplating running away, Jane tells Ricky that she has several thousand dollars saved up for a "boob job." This revelation comes after she has performed a sort of striptease for Ricky, who watches her from his bedroom window next door. The fact that their bedrooms face one another is significant. I doubt that the similarity between these scenes and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) is gratuitous: both films depict men with thinly veiled voyeuristic tendencies (and women who are exhibitionists). And Ricky (like James Stewart in the Hitchcock film) has an obvious visual fixation, and films everything he sees with the avidity of the true compulsive.



In any case, Jane is certainly in many ways more attractive than her glamorous friend Angela, if she would lose the sullen, pouty quality she affects at home. Aside from the Freudian issues of incestuous desires, the question of the relationship between Lester and Jane is a complex one. We are told, as if we can't see it in the film, that Jane and Lester have grown apart. Perhaps this is due in part to her burgeoning sexuality and her obvious awareness of her father as a "horny geek" who is infatuated with her glamorous sexually liberated friend.

Lester communes with his dream girl, Angela

It is logical, natural, and even likely, that someone in Lester's place, who is not having sex with his wife, would turn to a surrogate. But for that surrogate to be so closely tied to his daughter is a little surprising. Surprising too is the fact that Lester falls so clumsily and profoundly in love with Angela, idealizing her to the point of fantasizing about her lying naked beneath layer upon layer of deep red rose petals.

What we see criticised in *American Beauty* is a hollow vision of material wealth and moral and spiritual complacency. Where once only the very rich, as portrayed in F. Scott Fitzgerald's wonderful novels, were constantly breaking things that society had to clean up after them, now it is the chief occupation of middle class America. We can no longer respond to that American Dream that nourished countless thousands of immigrants. All has grown outmoded, stale, and cliché. We can no longer evoke a sense of that enchanted land that Jay Gatsby recognized and saw in a blinding vision in his most lucid moment, "for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, . . . face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."

The verdict is in, and we, along with Lester and Carolyn, have all lost our capacity to engender that magic spark and experience enchantment—and that is indeed a "grimm" reality. Compared with *American Beauty*, Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* today looks positively old-fashioned. *Lolita* seems, in contrast to *American Beauty*, to be almost nostalgically American, and in some profound ways, a thing of great antiquity. If we compare the great media uproar over the original Kubrick film, released in 1962, the reaction of today's rather blazé audience to the explicit atmosphere of sexuality in *American Beauty*, repressed and otherwise, was rather tepid.

The imagery in *American Beauty* is very sensuous, very sexual, very seductive—almost oriental. It suggests the exotic, hints of the Muslim paradise, odors of perfume, sun-baked walls, and desert oasis. But is this the reality to which Lester aspires? Is Lester's quest not, more importantly, regaining Carolyn's love and respect which he has lost—in rekindling the fire and romance of his marriage, and recapturing the love and warmth that has somehow disappeared like escaping oxygen into the darkness of interstellar space? If not, then why do we have the two voice-overs, one at the beginning and one at the end, and what do they represent?

Presumably, had Lester lived, he would, with his newfound wisdom have been able to effect a reclamation of his heart, home, and family—the very things with which he is occupied immediately before the bullet takes him. Why else risk the inward journey if not to have something useful as a reward for your troubles, for having faced and tamed your personal demons and the monkey demons of Carolyn and Jane, into the bargain? To say that we find perfection only in death is a real cop-out. But that seems to be what Lester is saying—"I'm happy I'm dead, as you too, viewer, will also be sooner or later. So gather ye rose buds while ye may; make the most of life. Discover what jewels and pearls are within your grasp." One thing is certain. All of the characters in *American Beauty* would certainly agree with Voltaire, who wrote in his 1759 comic mock-epic, *Candide*, "We must cultivate our [rose] garden."



*Lolita as myth: Mena Suvari as
the American Beauty girl*

The American Beauty Web Site

By the way, there is very interesting official Website for *American Beauty*: <http://www.americanbeautymovie.com/english.htm>. The site boasts a nice Flash Player 4 show with haunting music from the film. (Yes, the music really is quite haunting, if somewhat pretentious.) The Website may be a bit heavy-handed (or too artsy, not sure which one) with its manufactured symbolism. For example, a picture of Lester in a business suit is labeled "dead," while a picture of Lester as a dropout in a t-shirt is labeled "alive." For some reason, when I saw this, the phrase, "He was never so alive as when he was dead," started playing in the back of my mind.

This labeling of pictures is done for all the actors, and some of the labeling actually fits, as when we see Carolyn "sad" when doing the real estate agent bit and "happy" when gardening her roses. (Perhaps we do need reminding that there was a time when Carolyn really was happy.) Some of the labeling is less effective, however, as when a picture of Angela, the young nymphet, dancing as a cheerleader is labeled "brutal," and a picture of the dead bird that so fascinated Ricky is labeled "tender." What this is supposed to mean is not at all clear to me. Personally, I like looking at Mena Suvari more than the dead bird.

A picture of the peeper's mother (not much acting required there) is labeled "asleep" (perhaps "catatonic" is a better word), and the teenage peeper from next door is labeled "awake." I'm not sure how "awake" he is, but his hormones have certainly started kicking in. (I know whereof I speak, as a Dad with two teenage sons.)

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Please send any comments or suggestions to: lverburg@mindspring.com