

Films on Race and Sexuality

Presented by Rita and Bill Hadden

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8-week Outline (key film excerpts shown in class)

- 1. The Wedding Banquet (1993)
- 2. Gran Torino (2008)
- 3. The Crying Game (1992)
- 4. The Hate U Give (2018)
- 5. American Beauty (1999)
- 6. Passing (2021)
- 7. The Danish Girl (2015)
- 6. Green Book (2018)
- QUESTIONS?

American Beauty

- **Awards / recognition:**

- At the 72nd Academy Awards, the film won five Oscars, including Best Picture, along with Best Director for Mendes, Best Actor for Spacey, Best Original Screenplay for Ball, and Best Cinematography for Hall. The film was nominated for and won many other awards and honors, mainly for directing, writing, and acting.

- **Written by Alan Ball (film debut).**

American Beauty (2)

- **Director:** Sam Mendes (feature directorial debut).
 - Received lifetime achievement award from Directors Guild of Great Britain in 2005.
 - Best known films include: Revolutionary Road (2008), Skyfall (2012 James Bond), Spectre (2015 James Bond), 1917 (2019 war film).

American Beauty (3)

Synopsis:

A tele-sales operative becomes disillusioned with his existence and begins to hunger for fresh excitement in his life. As he experiences a new awakening of the senses, his wife and daughter also undergo changes that seriously affect their family.

American Beauty Themes (4)

- Sexuality and Repression
- Romantic and Paternal love
- Materialism
- Self-liberation
- Redemption.

American Beauty (5)

SETTING: upper middle-class neighborhood in unidentified American town.

MAIN CHARACTERS:

- Lester Burnham: an advertising executive;
- Carolyn: Lester's materialistic wife;
- Jane: Burnhams' insecure 16-yr old daughter;
- Angela: Jane's best friend;
- Col. Frank Fitts: Burnhams' new next-door neighbor;
- Ricky: Frank's teenage son;
- Buddy: Carolyn's lover.

DISCUSSION: what is American Beauty about and WHY?

- Yearning for youth, respect, power, and beauty?
- Satire about how beauty and personal satisfaction are perceived by the American middle class?
- A rite of passage film about imprisonment and escape from it?
- Monotony, loneliness, emptiness in life?
- A case against conformity?
- The hollow existence of the American suburbs?
- Masculinity in crisis?
- A portrait of the beauty underlying American miseries and misdeeds?

American Beauty (7)


Questions for discussion:

- How does this film define its characters through their sexuality?
- How does Ricky, Angela “liberate” Lester?
- How is the Col’s reaction to homosexuals different from Lester’s?
- In this film, how do men perceive women?
- How do women perceive men?
- Is Ricky like the other men? Are Angela and Jane like other women?

American Beauty (8)

Questions for discussion:

- In this film, what do men do? Women?
- Do they find what they do fun? Meaningful? Rewarding? Productive?
- What does the film say about growing up/old in America?
- Do you find irony in this film? Where?
- Why is this film a comedy AND a tragedy?



***For questions and information,
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