

Hidden beauty

by [Craig Detweiler](#) in the [October 20, 1999](#) issue

*American Beauty* (1999), directed by Sam Mendes

Extreme times demands extreme art, and *American Beauty* is extreme. It is an extremely funny, extremely touching, extremely disturbing look at the dysfunctions of suburban America. But it does not wallow in dysfunction. It dares to find hope amidst the horror.

The film opens by borrowing a page from Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*: the narrator introduces himself and his death. "My name is Lester Burnham. I'm 42 years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead." Lester (Kevin Spacey) is sleep walking through life and admits that "in a way, I'm dead already." His midlife crisis offers viewers laughs and the vicarious thrills of telling off the boss, quitting a dead-end job, and reverting to carefree, high school days of pursuing girls.

Lester's wife, Carolyn (Annette Bening), is a realtor who is uptight (as Lester says, "Her pruning shears match her gardening clogs") and money-hungry. Motivational tapes are her mantras. Not bothering to mask her contempt for Lester, she finds a mentor and lover in Buddy Kane, "the real estate king." Their creed: "To be successful, one must project an image of success at all times."

The film carefully observes the distance between parents and teens. Jane Burnham (Thora Birch) is smart, sullen, depressed. She finds solace in her new next-door neighbor, Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley in a powerful breakthrough performance). At first, Ricky's military style haircut, conservative clothes and constant videotaping of others disturb Jane. But she's attracted to his confident, centered presence. Ricky becomes the film's anchor, a catalyst to Lester and a comfort to Jane. He speaks with authority, as a survivor of harrowing abuse at the hands of his father, a marine colonel. Ricky knows when to cooperate with his father (Chris Cooper), answering "Sir, yes sir" as a form of protection, a means of buying the freedom to pursue marijuana, videos and Jane.

The title stems from the perfectly manicured roses blooming along the Burnhams' white picket fence. It also refers to Jane's best friend, Angela (Mena Suvari), a

supermodel in training. She fuels Lester's sexual fantasies and sparks his resolve to get in shape. The scenes between Lester and the underage Angela begin as comic, but end as appropriately creepy.

The insightful script by Alan Ball places responsibility for Jane and Ricky's problems at their parents' feet. "I need a father who's a role model, not some horny geek boy," declares Jane. Carolyn slaps Jane for failing to appreciate the wealth that's been accumulated for her. Colonel Fitts spies on Ricky, fearful that he's on dope again, and he beats Ricky to instill "structure" and "discipline."

*Beauty* suggests that such violence stems from hidden secrets. Carolyn hints at the insecurity of her upbringing. Colonel Fitts strikes his son after Ricky and Jane rummage through his war memorabilia. Carolyn and the colonel both take up arms to fight their frustrations. Ricky tells Lester, "Never underestimate the power of denial." In *American Beauty*, secrets culminate in deadly gunfire. But in a remarkable twist, the film evokes profound sympathy for a murderer. Like the Book of Ecclesiastes, *Beauty* rails against human vanities, but pushes past the evil men do and offers legitimate hope.

Ricky explains the ultimate meaning of the film's title when he talks about a homeless woman, frozen to death, that he captured on video. "When you see something like that, it's just like God is looking right at you, just for a second. And if you're careful, you can look right back." Having faced a host of horrors in his home life, Ricky has learned to look deeper, to find beauty amidst the pain of everyday life. He shows Jane "the most beautiful thing I ever filmed," a plastic bag blowing in the wind among leaves. Ricky recalls, "That's the day I knew there was this entire life behind things, and . . . this incredibly benevolent force, that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid. Ever." How did a pot-smoking, horribly abused teenager come to believe in a good God? He learned "how to step back and just . . . watch, and not to take everything so personally."

Lester eventually gains Ricky's perspective. Faced with the opportunity to indulge his obsession with Angela, he resists. He puts aside his wants and rediscovers his humanity. He takes comfort in Jane and Ricky's burgeoning love. To the simple but sincere question, "How are you?" Lester smiles at his surprising conclusion, "I'm great."

Audiences may be put off by the avarice, angst and depravity evident in the film. But the posters for *American Beauty* invite viewers to "Look closer." In the film's

most stunning shot, Ricky's eyes gleam before a deep crimson pool of Lester's blood. (To say more would spoil the dramatic impact of the movie.) How can Ricky stare at this horrible sight without fear or trembling? He already knows what Lester discovers in death: "It's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world." This profound, provocative film challenges us to find the beauty in America.