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David L. Smith

Central Michigan University, smith1dl@cmich.edu

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"Beautiful Necessities:" American Beauty and the Idea of Freedom

Abstract

A central theme of *American Beauty* is the disjunction between the quests for liberation undertaken by its characters and the discoveries at which a few of them arrive. The world of the film is carefully structured as a culturally deterministic system. Nevertheless, a kind of freedom - epitomized by the experience of beauty - becomes possible for some of the characters even in the grip of fatal necessities. The Buddhist concept of mushotoku (non-attainment) and Emerson's idea of Beautiful Necessity are used to explicate the film's complex exploration of freedom and fate.

The mystery of *American Beauty* is the way it takes some of the most familiar themes in modern American popular culture - the attempt to change one's life, to achieve liberation from constraining circumstances, to become oneself - and gives them fresh and surprising life. What saves the film from cliché, I will argue, is its fine sense for the paradoxical nature of the quests for freedom it depicts. Paradox arises because the world of *American Beauty* is a closed, culturally deterministic system. Its characters are perfect creatures of their social locations. They may hope for something "more," but their very conception of this "more" derives from the culture that confines and defines their desires. Their stories are correspondingly bleak and self-defeating. And yet, *American Beauty* is not a bleak or pessimistic film. Possibilities of meaning and freedom emerge from its deterministic world that have little to do with its characters' conscious intentions. The film, we might say, is a meditation on the disconnect between the narrative quests of its characters and the meaning that, in a few cases, happens to them. My purpose in this paper, then, will be first to explicate the film from this point of view, showing how it plays with ironic disjunctions between quest and attainment, freedom and fate, and second, to suggest how certain analogues from religious thought, especially the Buddhist concept of non-attainment and certain themes from Emerson, can help us to unpack its paradoxes.

Admittedly, many of the film's reviewers have not shared my sense that the film succeeds in avoiding the undertow of cliché. For nay-sayers, *American Beauty* is simply another version of the numbingly familiar story of individual liberation from social convention, with a few extra elements of sensationalism thrown in to up the commercial ante (masturbation! recreational drugs! borderline pedophilia!).¹ Like films from *The Graduate* to *Pleasantville*,² it sets its drama of emancipation in suburbia, rehearsing the message that life tends to go stale within the confines of a picket-fence, consumerist, career-driven version of the American dream. Its particular characters and story-line are drawn in broad, even "cartoonish"³ strokes: man quits dead-end job in disgust, loosens up, and finds new life in adolescent fantasy; career-obsessed woman comes to a bad end; boy and girl, drawn together by hatred of their respective families, make plans to take off for the city. This tale of liberation through non-conformity is by now so familiar, so co-opted, so devoid of any real critical edge, that it is natural to wonder why anyone would be interested.⁴

Positive reviews of the film, on the other hand, have had a hard time identifying the secret of its power or substantiating the reasons for its extraordinary critical and popular success.⁵ Good acting is part of the answer; inspired cinematography likewise. But many viewers and reviewers also point to "something else." Kenneth Turan in the *LA Times*, for example, writes of

something "undefinable" about *American Beauty* that makes its satire seem "more familiar than it is."⁶ In the same spirit of puzzled wonder, the terms "mystical" and "spiritual" frequently crop up in connection with the rapt aesthetic of beauty that inspires some of the film's characters.⁷ Vague as such terms may be, I propose to take them seriously, and to try to explicate the "mystical" or more broadly spiritual aura of *American Beauty* as clearly as possible. This dimension of the film comes into focus, I will show, when we notice how *American Beauty* establishes two distinct critical or interpretive frames around its story which produce the film's deepest impressions through their interplay. One of these frameworks is social-psychological, the other broadly spiritual or religious.

First, the film is carefully structured to put its characters' social and psychological motives in critical perspective. Specifically, it shows how the characters' quests for freedom are, in every case, symptoms of their starting points, expressions of the complexes from which they are trying to escape. The formal organization of the film, including its "cartoonish" simplification of character, is designed to make this point. The story focuses on two families, the Fitts' and the Burnham's, who are next door neighbors and who inhabit two distinctive complexes of cultural values and personality types - two architectural and sociological boxes. The Fitts family represents what we might as well call the military-industrial complex. The head of the family is a retired Air Force Colonel, identified in the

script consistently as "the Colonel" rather than by name. The code of life he imposes on his family is a caricature of military discipline: relentless self-control above all, with a dedication to drawing and enforcing boundaries exemplified by his homophobia and violent response to rule-breaking. Next door, the Burnham household represents another typically contemporary complex of values. Robert Bellah might want to call it "expressive individualism," but I will call it the consumerist-entertainment complex. Lester, the father, works in advertising. Carolyn, the mother, is a kind of manic Martha Stewart who struggles to succeed at selling real estate, schools herself with self-improvement tapes, and dotes on material symbols of her achievement (Italian silk upholstery, a Mercedes SUV). The guiding light of the Burnham household, then, is desire - the drive for success, the drive for pleasure, and the drive towards a more perfect arrangement of appearances. ("See the way the handle on those pruning shears matches her gardening clogs?" says Lester in reference to Carolyn. "That's not an accident.")⁽²⁾⁸ If the Fitts illustrate the tragic effects of the repression of desire, the Burnhams represent the pitfalls of its pursuit.

The paths to emancipation taken by members of the respective families, in turn, reflect the complexes that nurtured them. Ricky Fitts, son of Colonel Fitts, uses and sells marijuana, but significantly, the variety he prefers was "genetically engineered by the U.S. Government."⁽⁴⁶⁾ That is to say, the culture of control, now

taking charge of the blueprints of life itself, gives Ricky the means by which he seeks to transcend his family, to escape the culture of control. Another way in which Ricky finds a kind of freedom is through the view-finder of his video camera. Ricky casts himself as a professional observer, a student of other peoples' lives with no compunctions about peeping through their windows. He transforms ordinary experience by distancing it on film, asserting a kind of control over life through the neat rows of tapes that line his bedroom. But here again, the influence of the military-industrial complex is clear. Who is more adept at surveillance than the military? And who engineered the sophisticated equipment by which Ricky engineers his detachment? Ricky is thus caught in a bind that is familiar to anyone who has reflected on the paradoxes of contemporary popular culture, where anti-technological life styles are celebrated with electric instruments and anti-capitalist rock bands are promoted by AOL *Time Warner*. The wildly mixed messages compel one to wonder how far emancipation by such means can go.

The rebellious members of the Burnham family are in a similar bind. They seek to mitigate or change their circumstances through drives, values, and impulses acquired from the cultural complexes they seek to escape. As products of the consumerist-entertainment complex, they seek satisfaction in raw desire - the yearning for self-completion through acquisition, through novel experience, and through the manipulation of appearances. Thus, young Jane builds for the future by

saving up her baby-sitting money for a "boob job." (72) Carolyn, whose kitsch romanticism extends to her choice of "Bali Hai" as dinner music, yearns her way into an affair with Buddy Kane, "the Real Estate King," who represents everything she longs to become. (His "personal philosophy" provides the perfect mantra for her preoccupation with appearances: "in order to be successful, one must project an image of success, at all times.")

Finally, Lester, in the film's main plot line, quits his job in order to get back his life, to renew himself by falling back on his instincts.⁹ His instincts turn out to be pretty regressive, however. He develops a crush on a teenage girl; devotes himself to working out because he wants to "look good naked;" (44) and buys on impulse a 1970 Firebird, the car he "always wanted." (68) (It's red, of course - the color of desire, like the Burnham's front door, Carolyn's roses, and Lester's own rose-petal fantasies). Lester's pursuit of the girl, Angela, becomes the center of attention in the film for a number of reasons, not the least of which is pure prurience. Nevertheless, we can see how it fits the themes under discussion here. As in *Lolita*, the hyper-romanticism of a tabooed attraction becomes a symbol of the culture that nurtures it - a culture of yearning, for which real life is always elsewhere. Lester Burnham is no Humbert Humbert, but his middle-class desires are a match in both intensity and inappropriateness for those of Nabokov's cultured émigré.¹⁰

This analysis of the characters' motives points to a conclusion that has become rather routine in academic Culture Studies: in short, no exit. Culture is a totalistic system that affords no leverage point by which a genuine project of emancipation could get itself off the ground. Every apparent way out is already subsumed, already co-opted. The system may offer mitigations and palliatives - ways to keep hope alive - but no real alternatives. Ricky gets his drugs; Jane, Lester, and Carolyn get their romantic visions; but these are too deeply implicated in the system for us to even imagine an "elsewhere" to which they might lead. The conclusion of the story makes the futility and fatality of their choices clear. Lester is dead. Carolyn has lost her lover, her family, and probably her sanity. Jane's plans for escape are about to be thwarted and the Fitts' - father, son, or both - will soon be picked up by the police for Lester's murder. (Lester's blood is on the Colonel's shirt; Ricky is on film offering to make the hit.)¹¹ In the end, then, history fails as a realm of freedom or source of meaning for any of the characters. It is rather a system of strict cause and effect, a karmic wheel, in which doing what one wants is equivalent to bondage under the iron law of one's conditioning.¹²

What hope is there, then, for freedom? The remarkable thing about *American Beauty* is that it does not take that question as rhetorical. Instead of settling for one of the stock contemporary responses to meaninglessness (playful nihilism, apocalyptic nihilism, existentialist posturing, or blind faith) it simply and

honestly treats the question as worth raising. If meaning is not to be found through emancipatory projects, then where is it to be found? If freedom does not consist in doing what one wants, then what is it?

To address these questions, the film constructs another critical frame around its story, loosely built of the moments in which various characters find their lives lit up by beauty. As noted above, the world of the film is not devoid of meaning. The kind of meaning its characters stumble across, however, is oblique or even irrelevant to their stories, to self-understandings that remain bound and blinkered by their circumstances. It has little to do with what anyone intends or thinks they are doing. And yet, when beauty emerges, it makes a difference, somehow transforming or opening up the realm of necessity from within. Thus, the world of *American Beauty* may offer no chance for freedom in the sense of escape, autonomy, or triumphant self-creation. It does, however, suggest something that Emerson discovered meditating on the similar themes in his essay "Fate:" namely, that necessity, without our knowing how or why, can sometimes appear as "Beautiful Necessity."¹³ For Emerson, this arose through the realization that "freedom is necessary"¹⁴ - that there is no gap between the conditions that seem to constrain us and the values we hope to realize. The trap is transformed, we might say, through the insight that the trap is what we are, and through the sense of aesthetic appropriateness or "beauty" that accompanies the realization. A similar

transvaluation of the problem of life through beauty is, to my mind, the real subject of American Beauty.

I have called this aspect of the film "spiritual" for a number of reasons. First and most obviously, I do so because beauty enters the film in moments the characters themselves find intense, extraordinary, and revelatory which they sometimes characterize in explicitly religious terms. Ricky Fitts is the source of the two clearest cases of religious interpretation. With reference to a video he once took of a homeless woman frozen to death on the sidewalk - a touchstone for him of the world's beauty and sadness - he says "When you see something like that, it's like God is looking right at you, just for a second. And if you're careful, you can look right back."(57) Second, there is Ricky's film of a plastic bag whirled by the wind, the film's central icon of beauty. About this Ricky says: "That's the day I realized that 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."(60) Less explicitly religious, but bearing a strong family resemblance to mystical literature through its theme of self-overcoming, is Lester's final comment in voice-over:

"Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst...and then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life..."(100)

Comments like these put the viewer in mind of fairly familiar notions of transcendence, suggesting alternative horizons of meaning that place the film's cynical take on history in a wider perspective.

A similar point is made through the literal "framing" of the film between Lester's voice-overs. We know from the start that our narrator is a dead man. He soars with the camera above the neighborhood whose formal layout shaped his life. He floats free of time. His story is over; he knows what the dead know. And so his presence at the edges of the film hints at a dimension beyond the story, even while it is being told.¹⁵ That dimension, however, has nothing to do with a literal promise of life after death, let alone with the stock Hollywood motif of the intervening angel. Rather, what Lester's perspective brings to the film is the suggestion of a larger structure of selfhood - a life "both in and out of the game," as Whitman put it.¹⁶ We are cued that the stories about to unfold are not going to tell us everything there is to know. Thus, like Ricky's God-language, the voice-overs introduce the promise of alternative sources of meaning.

Two episodes in the film stand out as fulfillments of that promise, moments in which the power of beauty becomes palpable to the audience as well as to the characters. First, there is Ricky's video of the dancing plastic bag - the film's most haunting visual image. Beauty, as epitomized in this scene, is an intrinsic value that is everywhere but seems to come out of nowhere. It emerges here from a situation

that is utterly deterministic - a scrap of plastic caught in a vortex of cross-winds - and utterly ordinary, encountered "in an empty parking lot on a cold gray day..." (echoing Emerson's similarly fortuitous moment on "a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky").¹⁷ (10) Ricky's other encounters with beauty are similarly quotidian and similarly fatal: in a dead bird, in an old woman frozen on the curb, and in the sadness of the girl next door. Whatever its occasion, though, beauty is intrinsically meaningful - a satisfaction unmatched by anything else represented in the film. It brings the characters who "get it" (Lester, Ricky, possibly Jane) a sense of meaning that is absolute and unquestionable - complete in a way that even threatens to cancel out the rest of life. As Ricky says, "sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it...and my heart is going to cave in." (60) A close neighbor of death, beauty is at once eschatologically and ontologically ultimate; it interrupts or puts an end to the stories we struggle to sustain and speaks from beyond them.¹⁸ It is thus appropriate that beauty is what evokes the film's only God-language. In those moments when Ricky feels that God is looking at him, beauty is what he sees when he looks back.

Insofar as beauty stands apart from the characters' intentional quests - as a gratuitous interruption of the life of desire rather than a moment within it - it is strictly useless. It is simply a way of seeing the world clearly, apart from what we would make of it. Nevertheless, this kind of clarity can also have consequences for

how life is lived. So in the film, a second focal moment in which meaning becomes palpable is a moral event: Lester's last-minute renunciation of his pursuit of Angela. Like the epiphanies of beauty, this moral epiphany is a simple matter of seeing clearly. Lester's desire for Angela had been driven by illusions and wishes - represented for us in the film's lurid fantasy sequences. Granted: his illusion about Angela is not too different from the illusion that Angela held about herself and tried, rather awkwardly, to project to others. This whole network of projection and self-deception dissolves, however, when, just as the flirtation is about to be consummated, Angela lets Lester see who she really is - admitting to her inexperience, changing her story. Lester, in turn, responds with poise, generosity, and tenderness. He does the right thing. It is not a triumph of principle, but a triumph of natural compassion and clear, unclouded perception. Lester in the end thus finds and exercises freedom - not the freedom to do what he wants, but the freedom to deal mindfully with what is real - and so discovers the beauty in his necessities.¹⁹ He has not found a way out of his circumstances, but he has found a way to own them that makes possible his final affectionate review of the moments of joy that punctuated his "stupid little life."⁽¹⁰⁰⁾²⁰

What sort of freedom is possible, then, in a deterministic system? What sort of liberation from the trap of culture is possible if the trap is what we are? What *American Beauty* suggests, I believe, is first of all that freedom, although it is not

likely to be achieved by intentional effort, nevertheless may occur to us as an experienced quality, like the beauty that emerges from the dance of the wind-driven bag. It is not found beyond fate (i.e. we do not become who we are by becoming other than we are). Rather, it comes as an affirmative moment within fate, as in Emerson's Nietzschean tribute to "Beautiful Necessity" or Lester Burnham's joyful post-mortem embrace of "every single moment of my stupid little life". Freedom is the discovery of beauty in our necessities, even as the trap is sprung and (in Lester's case, literally) the gun is put to our head.

What is "attained" in such freedom is thus paradoxical, because it brings nothing that one did not previously have. What is recovered is something from which one was never really separated. The spiritual "discoveries" of characters in *American Beauty* thus need to be understood on the model of something like what Soto Zen calls *mushotoku* or "non-attainment." According to this view, enlightenment, as an unconditioned reality, is outside all trains of cause and effect: not attained, not lost; neither an addition to life nor a subtraction from it. By its own seamless nature, it cannot come as the result of a quest or project in time; it cannot "come" at all, for it is not possible to be apart from it. Thus, as the Buddha reportedly says in the *Diamond Sutra*, "When I attained Absolute Perfect Enlightenment, I attained absolutely nothing. That is why it is called Absolute Perfect Enlightenment."²¹ Religious life may seem like a quest, a journey to the

other shore, and may actually be structured as one. However, the actual relation, if any, between effort and attainment is not constrained by this narrative logic. The way keeps to its own ways, or as a Ch'an poem puts it:

"Sitting quietly, doing nothing,

Spring comes and the grass grows by itself."²²

This is not to say that the characters' quests in *American Beauty* are completely irrelevant to the meaning they find. Ricky's pursuit of beauty on video-tape is in some sense a means to his discovery of beauty in odd places (as is, perhaps, his use of marijuana). Lester's growth in moral insight is a clear though unintended consequence of his restlessness. Because he quits his job, he loosens up; because he loosens up, he pays attention; and because he pays attention, he recovers his world. Nevertheless, my point in this paper has been that the genius of *American Beauty* is the way it places these relatively conventional narrative quests in the context of a wider skepticism and a wider promise. Time, in the world of the film, is a fools game, but not all of the characters are fools. Some of them manage to draw on sources that precede, exceed, and evade their own habits of self-reflection. They find themselves "both in and out of the game," and would not be themselves apart from this doubleness. In the end, it is the interplay between these perspectives - between the inescapable logic of the cultural game and the equally commanding moments in which we find ourselves apart from it; between the fatality of our traps

and the possibility of freedom that persists within them - that constitutes the mysterious achievement of *American Beauty*.

¹ Dismissive reviews from respected critics included Stuart Klawans in *The Nation* ("The Boys of Summer," 269 no. 11 (October 11, 1999) pp. 34-36; J. Hoberman in the *Village Voice* ("Boomer Bust"); and Stanley Kauffmann in *The New Republic* ("In Search of an Author" 221 no. 15 (October 11, 1999) pp. 36-38.

² My quick survey of other films and television shows with which *American Beauty* was compared by early reviewers turned up the following: *Sunset Boulevard* (for the dead narrator voice-overs), *Lolita*, *Sex, Lies & Videotape*, *Happiness*, *Election*, *The Apartment*, *Network*, *Blue Velvet*, *After Hours*, *It's a Wonderful Life* (for the "angel" motif), "*Married with Children*," *Welcome to the Dollhouse*" and *The Ice Storm*.

³ The cartoon quality of several of the characters, especially Carolyn and Colonel Fitts, is lamented by Richard Alleva in "No 'Leave It to Beaver'," *Commonweal* 19-20 126, no. 19 (November 5, 1999). Jay Carr in *The Boston Globe* (September 17, 1999) Arts & Film C4, refers to Carolyn as "a Stepford Wife on acid."

⁴ Like several otherwise appreciative reviewers, Janet Maslin in *The New York Times* saw the film as little more than a celebration of non-conformity. ("Dad's Dead, and He's Still a Funny Guy" September 15, 1999, Section E, page 1.) If this were all there was to be said about the movie, I would agree with its negative reviewers.

⁵ Within a year of its release, the film had grossed over 130 million dollars, starting from a 15 million dollar production budget. (See www.boxofficemojo.com/americanbeauty.html) It won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1999.

⁶ "The Rose's Thorns" September 15, 1999, Part F, p. 1. David Denby, "Transcending the Suburbs," *New Yorker* 75, no. 27 (September 20, 1999): pp. 133-135, for a sense of wonder at how well the film works.

⁷ See David Denby, "Transcending the Suburbs," *New Yorker* 75, no. 27 (September 20, 1999): pp. 133-135, for a sense of wonder at how well the film works.

⁸ Page numbers for quotes from the screenplay by Alan Ball refer to *American Beauty: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1999).

⁹ Kevin Spacey develops this view of Lester, the character he plays, in an interview with Jay Stone in *The Ottawa Citizen*, September 15, 1999, B8, Front.

¹⁰ N.b. Angela's last name is "Hayes," echoing Nabokov's Dolores Haze.

¹¹ An early version of script is available in the Internet which begins with Ricky in prison.

¹² A similar theme of entrapment is apparent in the conventions Alan Ball has established for his latest project, the TV serial "Six Feet Under." Each episode begins with a death, a fatality that can't be escaped but simply dealt with. Each of the regular characters, moreover, faces intractable confining circumstances, placing them in situations very much in keeping with the implications of the title and the visual theme of boxes in the show's opening credits.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays & Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), p. 967.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 953.

¹⁵ Reviewers have frequently compared this device to the famous use of a dead narrator in *Sunset Boulevard*. The comparison is close, but it only serves to highlight the differences between the films. In *Sunset Boulevard*, the voice-over is a tool of irony, allowing the narrator to crack jokes at his own expense and come to terms with the inevitability of his downfall. But something far more positive and spacious is achieved in *American Beauty* through the same device.

¹⁶ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), p. 191.

¹⁷ Emerson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁸ To invoke Emerson again, "Beauty is the creator of the universe" (*op. cit.*, p. 445) - present before time.

¹⁹ Significantly, I think, one catches an echo here of the slogan used on the film's publicity posters: "... look closer." The way this phrase is presented in the ads, layered over a close-up of Angela's naked belly, plays rather shamelessly on the prurience of the plot. Its second level of meaning, however, is a fair summary of the film's deepest theme - "Examine the motives that are drawing you to these images. Pay attention!" *American Beauty* is a film about prurience - about all that we find so desirable and entertaining in this world - that aims at disenchanting prurience. It is a film about desire in which desire is ultimately dissolved in clarity. And always, seeing is the key. Eyes and vision are recurring motifs throughout the film: notably, in Ricky's reference to the eye of God; in the unblinking, fearless intensity of Ricky's gaze, which so impresses Jane; and in the final look in Lester's eye at the moment of his death, which so impresses Ricky. (What is it that the dead know?)

²⁰ Like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," Lester dies still in the grip of his predicament, but nevertheless in a state of "vast and peaceful meditation," thinking back on his family life with "tenderness and joy." Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 135.

²¹ Diamond Sutra, A. F. Price translation, quoted in *The Enlightened Mind*, Stephen Mitchell, ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991) p. 35. For other examples of the logic of non-attainment, which is closely related to non-dualism, see David Loy, *Non-Duality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988; Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998).

²² Quoted in Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen*, p. 134.