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Film Coursework

How does the exposition of American Beauty establish themes and character through the use of?

*American Beauty* was directed by Sam Mendes in 1999. It was released on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 2000 and won 5 Oscars. The film is about a man who is lonely and going through a mid-life crisis who ends up falling for a sixteen year old girl. The sequence I am analysing is exposition which establishes the character and theme of the film.

The first image is of the onscreen titles. The colour of the titles is red which could connote danger or lust but, referring to the word's "American beauty" it could suggest that it's to do with love. The beginning scene opens with an extreme long shot of a bird's eye view of suburbia. The colours are very desaturated and all we can see is trees that seem to cover the city. The camera then does a tilt and zooms in suggesting we are going to take a closer look at this world. This links to the theme and it also reflects in the notice at Lester's desk that says 'Look Closer'. As it is zooming in it reminds me of the film *Beetle Juice* where they zoom in on his life in this fake model board. It's like the audience are spectators and are watching from a position of objective superiority as a person's life unfolds.

It then cuts to the Lester Burnham the protagonist of the film asleep on his bed in his bedroom. The camera angle is a bird's eye view angle which makes it seem like we are looking down from heaven like a God character. There is a very bare minimalist scene and everything seems to be in symmetrical order which could connote that his everything is his life is in order. As we look at him lying on his side of the bed, we realise that the other half is bare/empty suggesting that something is missing in his life e.g. his wife. The colours are ordinary which shows that there is no excitement. The next shot is of him turning over; the audience then meets the protagonist. The camera angle is a mid shot and we seem to notice that he looks tired and that he is wearing a t-shirt underneath his pyjamas which shows that he might be cold. It then cuts to his feet slipping into some slippers which make the audience think that everything is superficially perfect when in reality it's not. With it being formal it suggests balance and a very static life style. The shower scene starts to set up a theme, as when the camera points to him you can't really see him because the shower door is in the way and is all fussy and faint. It shows that he is seeing reality through a not so real thing and that he is trapped behind something. The water also connotes that he is pure.

It then introduces Carolyn Burnham (his wife). The close up of the rose connotes youth, life and love but then the camera shows her cutting off the stem with the pliers which shows the audience how its life has ended, been cut off which could refer to the parents relationship. She then seems to be sedated as she looks at the rose, it's like she doesn't recognise what it is, and it's unfamiliar. The point of view shot from Lester's point of view seems to be done by a telephone lens which makes things look crisp and flat. The white fence in the garden refers to the perfect American life they seem to be living and the horizontal lines create peacefulness. It then cuts to Lester again but he is the main signifier in the shot which shows that he is important and the one vertical line of the window suggests his disturbed peaceful world.

The camera then cuts to the next door neighbours who are gay. Their sight of them together with dog makes the audience think 'aww' as they come across as cute but they are also grey and ordinary. As Carolyn and one of the neighbours are talking, you seem to notice Lester at the window watching them which is a mid shot. It looks symmetrical also like a triangle but as it focuses in on Lester in particular and you see that it looks like he is behind bars which is represented by the window frame it connotes prison bars. While they are talking you notice that the dominant colour is grey and there is coldness in the morning light.

As the family walk out of the house it shows the social order of the family. The wife is wearing a grey suit and the car is grey which connotes how dull it is in their life and her posture is upright and her movements are stiff which shows that she is repressing emotions. The mise-en-scene is symmetrical which suggests that superficially it's perfect and the way Carolyn talks to Lester shows that she is the sarcastic mother. She also seems to be highest as she is already at the car, then the daughter walks out and sits in the front seat next to her, they both are at a straight angle which shows they are equal. Then the last person to walk out is the father. His suit is dull and baggy, he is ill footed and he drops his briefcase and his papers go all over the pavement which shows he is disorganised. As he is on his knees picking the papers up, the camera switches to a low angle which shows he is powerless and makes the audience feel sorry for him. He falls asleep during the car ride when he is in the back seat which kind of shows that it is childlike. It could refer to him being a baby/kid. You can't tell he is there which connotes that he isn't considered important within the family which could show the audience that he might as well not exist. The reflection of the bare branches on the car window emphasises the emptiness in his life and as the camera pans to look at the sky it shows freedom, his escape which is ironic as he tells you that in less than a year he will be dead and it makes the audience feel that there could be a way out for him.

The next scene shows Lester sat at his desk at work. While he is looking at the computer the camera seems to make you see him behind bars like he is trapped. The colours are grey and lifeless which shows that there is no excitement at work or in his life. Next to his computer is a sticker which says "Look Closer" which could be telling him to look closer at his life.