

# psych of American Beauty

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April 2001 American Beauty Psychology Analysis American Beauty depicts modern dysfunctional families that appear to be happy on the outside, while on the inside they have tremendous deep-rooted problems. The movie begins to show many Freudian psychotic traits when unhappy Lester Burnham loses his job and begins a stereotypical male mid-life crisis by buying a red sports car, smoking marijuana, exercising maniacally, and fantasizing about younger women. He lusts after his daughter Jane's best friend a beautiful blond named Angela. Angela is really a virgin although she lies continually about sexual encounters with many men. She lusts after Lester as well (or so she says), and makes no attempt to hide the fact that she loves the father image in him. At the end of the movie when Lester gets his opportunity to take advantage of Angela's infatuation, he can't go through with it. He realizes that she is not the experienced woman she has made herself out and that he has envisioned her to be and she actually reminds him of his own daughter. Freud believed very strongly in the Oedipus and Elektra complexes, the sexual attraction of a child to the parent of the opposite sex. What he doesn't discuss however, is the attraction, if any, of the parent to the child. In my opinion, while the parent might be closer to that child because of the child's affection, only a parent with horrible mental problems would act upon that. Lester's mid-life crisis, like other men who experience the same dilemma, is, in my opinion, a battle between ego and superego. As a man moves from being young and fertile to middle age, he wants to retreat to his more youthful days. While his ego is trying to hold him in check with relation to his past experiences, present responsibilities, and future aspirations, the superego is projecting an image of vibrant youthfulness that in reality the man cannot achieve. This gives him a feeling of inadequacy, which can affect other areas of his life. In the movie, Lester attempted to free himself of his current obligations and become a strong, healthy man like he probably was previously. By feeding his superego's need of young girls and sports cars, Lester embodies what most men experience in a mid-life crisis. The Freudian term that comes to mind that best describes Lester's wife, Carolyn is "neurotic." She spends so much time outside tending to her garden so that the whole neighborhood can see what a good nurturer she is. Yet inside the house she is unable to nurture because her daughter and husband don't like her. Lester and Jane have nothing but contempt for her, though Lester has no problem with Carolyn being the primary money earner in the family. She attempts to escape the unfortunate scene at home by having an affair with her successful real estate competitor Buddy Kane. Lester finds out about their affair when they stop for a burger at the fast-foot restaurant where Lester has taken a job. Freud,

while not very interested in the psychoanalysis of women outside of the realm of sexuality, would find Carolyn intriguing. I think that he would point to her loss of nurturing in the home for her daughter and husband as the source of her problems. Because the woman's primary instinctual action is to nurture, once it was taken away prematurely, she was a lost soul. She tried to pour her energy into being a successful Realtor, but when she succumbed to the seduction of the man who she was trying to overcome, she felt internally defeated. The added stress of being caught by her husband drove her to a nervous breakdown in her car near the end of the movie. The Burnam's next-door-neighbors are Col. and Mrs. Fitts, and their eighteen-year-old son, Ricky. Col. Fitts is a paranoid homophobic who is violently abusive both physically and mentally to Ricky. Col. Fitts has taught Ricky that he should never show weakness or ever be tolerant of homosexuals. Ricky makes a lot of money dealing drugs without his father knowing. With his income he buys expensive video and audio equipment, spending a lot of time filming subjects ranging from plastic bags to the often-bizarre actions inside the Burnham house. When Ricky delivers drugs to Lester, his father watches through a window and thinks he sees Lester and Ricky engaging in homosexual sex-a case of classic Freudian projection. Fitts charges over to what we mistakenly think is to be an attack on Lester for corrupting his son. Fitts' expressed homophobia masks repressed homoeroticism, which Freud believed to be the origin of the male fear and hatred of homosexuals. As the movie progresses towards the end, there are a few people that could be the one to kill Lester. Carolyn, whom Lester has just caught cheating, Ricky, who promised Jane that he would kill her father as she asked, or Fitts, who has divulged to Lester his lust for men. We quickly rule out Ricky, with whom Jane has taken off to live a "better" life, thanks to Ricky's drug connections that he assures her will net them a comfortable income. The end result is that Col. Fitts kills Lester because he feels so ashamed of himself for sending his son away because of his own problems with homosexuality. In the end, Lester assures the audience that if we can't yet relate to the tragedy that befell his family, someday we will. Freud believes that the clashes of our Id, Ego, and Superego destine us to mid-life crisis and self-doubting that can cause problems for our families and us. This movie was so powerful because it brought to light the problems that so many families face in the privacy of the home. On the outside it would appear that the families on Robin Hood Trail were typical. Upon closer inspection though, we saw families whose inner conflicts created a situation that was terrible for all in the end.

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