

# AMERICAN BEAUTY (1999): A CRITICAL DEMYSTIFICATION OF AMERICAN DREAM

Noopura S Ajith<sup>1</sup>, Ananthakrishnan A<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Atul Jayakrishnan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India. noopuraa11@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India. 001ananthu@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India. beenajayakrishnan96@gmail.com

## Abstract

Sam Mendes' 1999, Academy Award winning directorial debut, *American Beauty* can be described as nothing short of a brilliant satire that is subtle yet evocative in critiquing the hollowness of the American Dream. Imbibing into it the new distillations of the Dream, the film presents before the audience the Burnhams, a picture-perfect American family of three. The family is nuclear and fits into the criteria of being heteronormative and continually striving. It comprises a father (Lester), a mother (Carolyn) and a school going teenage daughter (Jane) who are caught in a tangle. They struggle to get through their ordinary lives, with some striving to make it more happening while the others yearning for a way out. Their dreams get coalesced with the realities only to result in disappointments and conflicts. The film sheds light on the strivers and their relentless pursuit of the Dream while simultaneously addressing the repercussions of not being cognizant of the possible cracks in the facade of the same. This paper is devised to look into the characters' journey as they struggle their way up the social ladder, how individuals are victimised for failing to achieve material success, and the section of the American society that unknowingly becomes prey to the "homeland of the free" (Hughes line 16). It also aims to expose the hypocrisy of the American Dream and the discrepancy that exists between the preached ideals and the practised reality.

Keyword: American Dream, Façade, Materialism, Social Mobility

Dreams are unconscious manifestations of the 'unattainable'; dreamers are unarguably aspirers. Not every dreamer has the resources pooled to attain the 'unattainable' but if the tunnel offers light at the end, they don't refuse to chase it. America had always been a fascination centre for the downtrodden immigrants of the 1800s and the 1900s. They have dreamt of migrating to "the land of opportunities" in hope of new possibilities. With Independence, America was brimming with light, hope and confidence that it served before the world its national ethos, the American Dream, an idea that promised every world citizen life and sustainability in the States. Though cognizant of the existence of the idea, it was solidified only when James Truslow Adams coined and mainstreamed the term through his work *The Epic of America*. He professed his version of the American Dream, an idea, if it doesn't merely exist in an abstract state, could make life "better and richer and fuller for everyone" (Adams 404). To him, it was nothing but an opportunity that could inherently bring men and women to completion, that which lets them "attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable" (Adams 404). His idea of the American Dream wasn't purely materialistic. Though climbing the economic ladder was an indispensable part of the same, he did not restrict the idea solely to a way of making monetary progress. Adams states,

... The American dream, that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older

civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. (405)

The crux of the concept is aptly defined by the Merriam-Webster as "a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful". Though the definition has evolved from time to time, one aspect that remained the same all through the years is an ensured upward social mobility. The melting pot, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender, offered its citizens inalienable access to countless opportunities and a promise of betterment.

Family is the founding unit of the American Dream. Its role is to provide a supposed thrust for the individuals to thrive through hardships so as to secure their succeeding generation a better life and living. It's the building block and the most significant part of fostering the dream. Ever since the inception of the idea, an ideal suburban American family is described as the one owning a single-family house with a white picket fence. It was considered an achievement point and a milestone in the pursuit of the dream about which Archer attests;

The rapid expansion of single-family housing after mid-century, by accelerating the numbers of Americans realizing the dream, thus became a principal mechanism of American political stability and economic prosperity. And for the remainder of the century this arrangement worked. Indeed, it embodied all the hallmarks of a highly successful myth: it was taken for granted, as a bedrock tenet of American citizenship and culture, that to have that single-family house was to fulfill the dream, and it

was assumed that to fulfill the dream was to have “made it” in America. (8)

A picture-perfect family of heterosexual members who are impeccably dressed, happy and succeeding in life make up a traditional picture of what the Dream targets to achieve. However, the facade of a perfect suburban family that envelops the same is not often subjected to discussion. The dark underbelly of the perfect family can be deconstructed by carefully analysing the strained dynamic that exists within the Burnham household. A further distillation for grouping the members as pursuers or victims of the Dream can be done through multiple character dissections.

The Burnham household is a rather accomplished one and differs from what constitutes the early definition of the American Dream. Rather, they more likely identify with the newer, more inclusive one. They own a house, a car, have jobs, and are financially secure. They have seemingly achieved the material aspects of the dream. The image of a heteronormative nuclear family with the breadwinning father, the caretaker mother, and children is modified a tad-bit to include equally capable partners irrespective of their gender. Regardless of their relative well-being, the family is utterly dysfunctional and their inner dynamic is strained. The members are alienated from each other and from themselves. Each struggle to straddle their way through their monotonous existences while rigorously trying to meet the society's expectations. In the proximity of the society of dreamers, they wear a mask of deceit so as to conceal any traces of irregularities that might poke up through midway. This applies especially in the case of Carolyn, the wife, who adheres to every aspect of the Dream without ever giving up. Carolyn is a dreamer and a striver. Though the Burnham household is in bits and pieces, Carolyn is adamant at maintaining the facade of a picture-perfect American family that is content and succeeding. She gives paramount importance to outward appearances. She lives in a house which is kept decked up inside out. The rose garden that she maintains alongside her white fence seems rather intentional. Traditionally symbolising beauty, Carolyn might have wanted her red roses to add to the illusory world of facade she is living in- a world where beauty coincides with success. She, herself, is conventionally beautiful and maintains a sophisticated decorum outside. She dresses herself in the most stylish outfits, does her makeup meticulously, hair is done with immaculate craft and is often seen urging her ‘average’ looking daughter not to look “unattractive” (03:42). She is also seen attempting to impress the high society for her career growth. In one of the scenes, Carolyn is seen approaching Buddy Kane who is branded as “the ‘king’ of real estate” (10:41) while maintaining her usual outward pretentious countenance. She takes Lester along with her, pretending to be the perfect American couple, in an attempt to lure her adversary for business benefits. Buddy is the most established among the realtors and the association with him, Carolyn knows, would take her to heights that presently seem unachievable to her and to outdo every other competitor. To Carolyn, Buddy is the epitome of a true dreamer who, along his journey, has conquered insurmountable altitudes. This might be the reason for Carolyn starting affair with Buddy, a true distillation of the American Dream, rather than settling for a financially ‘impotent’ Lester. Carolyn is so success-driven that she exhibits a tendency to prioritise material benefits over her core relationships. She is emblematic of the greed and ambition that exists in a consumerist society where even relationships fall back in the pursuit of achieving material wealth. The luxury couch getting

dirtied by Lester's beer bottle is more of a big deal to her than being in an intimate space with him (1:17:02). Despite her attempts to enter into a financial elitedom, she falls into the pit of despair as she hops across the impracticality of the American Dream. She is deeply unhappy and is dejected over her inability to navigate her family up the social ladder and to achieve the assured upward mobility. Her fixation over the Dream and the steadfast determination she exhibits in its pursuit yields no results. She is not able to sell a house or to excel in the real-estate business that she slowly starts realising its hollowness.

The hollowness of the seemingly perfect dreamers' Dream was divulged when it was tagged as the “myth of the future”(American Heritage), where an uncertain future was said to render meaning to the concept. Langston Hughes, in his renowned poem, “Let America Be America Again” writes;

For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay—  
Except the dream that's almost dead today. (Hughes, lines 56-61)

Hughes's commentary was highly critical of the impracticality of the American Dream. He pinpoints at how America has overlooked the many impediments that would restrict the Dream from coming true and that hard work solely wins no grain. He says that the dream is almost dead and that it cannot easily be actualized unless America becomes “...the land where every man is free.” (Hughes, line 64).

However, Lester represents the section of the American suburbia who become prey to the shallowness of the American Dream and live within the arena of the suburban prison. He is not a pursuer of the dream but a victim who had to give in to the societal expectations of achieving material fortune. He is a middle-aged man who has never lived life according to his will. He had been in a rat-race all his life in an attempt to please the fellow dreamers and to meet the expectations the society had weighed upon him. Lester, unlike Carolyn, is absent-minded and uninterested in the dreamy aspects of the Dream. Rather, he is only bothered about how existential and meaningless his life has churned out to be. Though he seeks an escape, he reluctantly goes for his nine to five only to not let the ideals down. Pursuing the dream is tiring for Lester. He attempts to please the society by abiding the success formula only to realise that it drains him more often than not. His act of quitting the job speaks of his courage to choose the road that is not taken and to not follow the herd of the dreamers. He is complacent in not pursuing the dream unlike many, which includes his wife as well. Lester's subsequent breakaway is instrumental in his pursuit of happiness which he gets not from pursuing the dream, but by choosing to do what he likes. The argument can be substantiated with the help of Nietzsche's opinion on the “slave morality” or the “herd morality” as addressed in the book

*On the Genealogy of Morality*. Hendricks, in his article “The master and slave moralities: what Nietzsche really meant” summarises the concept. He writes,

The Slaves are less well off. Oppressed by the Masters, they cannot do what they like. They are weak, poor, and resentful. They initially view themselves as bad, as the Masters do, because they lack the concepts to do otherwise.

However, Nietzsche suggests that after some time, a “slave revolt” occurs. This is not a physical revolution, as the slaves are too weak for that kind of revenge, but a moral one. In this revolt, the slaves decide that they can only endure their suffering if they redefine it as both being good and a choice. The slaves begin to praise the meek, the poor, and those who are unable to end their suffering. (Hendricks, para 6-7)

Lester further moves away from the American Dream by being an unconventional patriarch. Contrary to the bread-winning father, the Burnham household is financially funded by Carolyn. As Lester quits his job to pursue his happiness, he becomes unbecoming of an ideal suburban husband. He recedes to the role of a house-husband which, sticking to the early definition of the American Dream, is what the wife of the family is supposed to perform. Lester, thus, becomes a threat to the Dream while parallelly acting as the collateral damage who falls prey to the dark side of the Dream.

Jane grapples with social expectations and the envisioned demands for the youth that come with the American Dream. Her experience clearly illustrates the dangerous tendencies associated with the drive for the so-called American Dream, particularly the emphasis on appearance and social status. Jane has a strained relationship with her parents. She feels lonely and increasingly uncomfortable in her own skin because of her mother's drive for perfection and her father's mid-life crisis. Her mother, Carolyn, embodies the relentless pursuit of the American dream and values the material and superficial aspects of the Dream over emotional ties. She lacks any love and compassion as traditionally expected from a mother. Carolyn's need to make it appear that everything is successful in life leads her to abandon the emotional needs even of her own family, particularly Jane's need for affection and understanding. This creates a communication gap, where Carolyn's superficial gestures are seen by Jane as insincere. In addition, Carolyn's quest for material perfection and her obsession over maintaining a flawless semblance cultivates a deep-seated insecurity in Jane that she pools resources to be able to afford breast augmentation one day. As a result, in many instances in the film, Carolyn's attempts to bond with Jane become futile, highlighting the lack of a deeper emotional connection. The expectations that have been garnered upon the girl put her in a disposition of feeling inadequate, while simultaneously developing a strong sense of aversion towards the ideals of the Dream. This aversion detaches her from pursuing the dream but nonetheless feels stuck in its entanglement. The victim in her feels compelled to isolate herself from her family and peers who are pursuers and to seek acceptance and a sense of belonging from other sources apart from her family.

The Burnham family exemplifies the dark side of the American Dream. Despite what could look like perfect lives from the outside, they are definitely not satisfied. This dysfunctional family environment leads to Jane's development of loneliness and similar feelings of neglect. She continues to lose faith in the type of life that the American dream has placed her in, as it stands in complete contrast to the general perception of unbound happiness that comes with it. However, her affair with Ricky Fitts, who captures the small and unnoticed moments of life, provides her with a thoroughly different paradigm from that of the American Dream. It is her association with Ricky that provides her with "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (The Declaration of Independence) and not the tenets of the American Dream.

Ricky Fitts portrayed by Wes Bentley is an antagonist to the materialistic aspect of the American Dream. Ricky is the son of a strict and abusive military father who lives an oppressive life at home. His father embodies the authoritarian and conformist aspects of this dream. Ricky, however, finds solace in his video camera, capturing the beauty in everyday moments that others miss. He discovers the true meaning of beauty within a floating plastic as he describes it as “the most beautiful thing I’ve ever filmed”(1:01:54). His ability to see beyond the superficial and appreciate the inherent beauty in the mundane serves as a critique of the materialism and superficiality that is often associated with the American Dream. Ricky's character suggests that there is happiness that comes from cherishing the simplest things people tend to overlook.

On the contrary, Ricky's father, Colonel Fitts, is seen to embody conventional morality and the façade of a man who has attained the ‘American Dream’ through dedication and hard work, and who is imbued with the spirit of the military. The stern demeanour and strict control over his household are ways to uphold his unspoken desire to maintain this facade. Beneath the superficiality, Colonel Fitts struggles with his own identity, particularly his repressed homosexuality. This repression and inner turmoil reveal the contradictions in his personality as well as in the ideals of the American Dream.

Fitts' behavioural patterns can be studied under the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The theory proposes the idea that gender is something that is acted out within a certain set of standards or norms assigned to identity categories. Butler, in her feminist writing *Gender Trouble*, describes identity categories as tending "to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalising categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (308). It introduces the idea that aligning oneself with an identity category can uphold or resist a specific hegemonic structure, as in the case of Colonel Fitts. Fitts' violent tendencies and obsessive need for control are manifestations of his internal conflict and dissatisfaction with himself and his identity. His aggressive behaviour and desire to have power over others stem from the same. His abuse towards his son, Ricky, and his physical assault on Lester Burnham are anger-responses to the social pressures that demand manliness that Fitts is unable to attain. His eventual violent outburst towards Lester Burnham is an extreme reaction to his own inability to reconcile his true self with the image he feels compelled to project. Furthermore, his presumed hatred towards Jim and Jim, the openly gay neighbour couple, can be understood as a projection of his internalised homophobia. He despises in them what he represses in himself. Jim and Jim represent a subversion of the traditional American Dream. Their stable, loving relationship challenges the heteronormative ideals that Colonel Fitts is trying to uphold. The American Dream often focuses on success and compliance with norms while disregarding one's internal struggles and identities. Colonel Fitts' homosexual tendencies which he fights to keep repressed symbolise the impossibility of the American Dream that imprisons those who do not conform to the neo-liberal mainstream. His character's arc illustrates the dark undercurrents beneath the surface of suburban life. This aptly captures the destructive nature of rigidly adhering to a flawed ideal of the American Dream, making Fitts a true victim of the same.

Additionally, Colonel Fitts' interactions with Lester are marked by suspicion and aggression. He misinterprets Lester's friendship with his son Ricky as a sexual relationship, projecting his fears and desires onto them. The pivotal scene where Colonel



Fitts makes a sexual advance towards Lester Burnham reveals his true desires. This momentary lapse in his performative facade results in intense vulnerability and subsequent violent reaction when rejected. Following this exposure, Colonel Fitts' violent reaction can be seen as an attempt to reaffirm his performative identity and thereby, to actualize the American Dream. The subsequent murder of Lester represents his ultimate failure to reconcile his true self with his performative identity. Lester Burnham's journey towards self-fulfilment also subverts the American Dream. By rejecting his traditional role, he seeks personal happiness outside the confines of societal expectations, challenging the notion of what it means to be successful. This irks Carolyn as well, as she herself is an upholder of the Dream. She projects herself as a victim of Lester's actions but affirms not to remain as one. This affirmation is followed by Carolyn deciding to eliminate the possible threat that Lester is. His subsequent death by murder can be seen as society's attempt to wipe out a possible threat that would disrupt the normative constructs of success and fulfilment and challenge the heteronormative expectations embedded in the American Dream.

Through the research, an attempt has been made to look into the facade and possibly expose the impracticality of the American Dream. To perform the same, *American Beauty* is taken as the primary reference; the plot and the characters have been analysed. The pursuers and the victims have been distinguished with both the sides ultimately failing in their separate pursuits. Carolyn is the only dreamer, who in spite of the ideals failing her, holds strong onto the dream. The rest of the characters are portrayed as rebelling in their own tiny ways against the suffocating air offered by the Dream. Jane struggles with the detrimental impact of these ideals on youth, fostering feelings of inadequacy and alienation. Ricky's character critiques the materialism and superficiality of the Dream, presenting a more meaningful alternative. Colonel Fitts' tragic arc exposes the destructive nature of repressing one's true identity to conform to societal expectations, thus becoming a strong critique on the fatal aspects of the Dream. Judith Butler's explanation on gender performativity has been employed to dissect the character arc of the Colonel. By careful analysis of the film's take on the topic, the discrepancies between the preached ideals of the American Dream and the lived realities of those who strive to attain it is summarised.

## References

1. Archer, John. *The Resilience of Myth: The Politics of the American Dream*.  
[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&profile=ehost&scope=site&authtype=crawler&jrnl=10502092&AN=97909840&h=h9rCmrqSbqZuEKpyMXjhvPGVNj92ShsF3Cxy8EizGlerWSClZRpjIcuBsLvwVlJlxaJf6BaVrVJ7o7MSEYIKg%3D%3D&crl=c](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&profile=ehost&scope=site&authtype=crawler&jrnl=10502092&AN=97909840&h=h9rCmrqSbqZuEKpyMXjhvPGVNj92ShsF3Cxy8EizGlerWSClZRpjIcuBsLvwVlJlxaJf6BaVrVJ7o7MSEYIKg%3D%3D&crl=c). Accessed 6 June 2024.
2. Brown. "LGBTQ+ Studies: An Open Textbook." *Gender Performativity | LGBTQ+ Studies: An Open Textbook*, [courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-lgbtq-studies/chapter/section-two-gender-performativity/](https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-lgbtq-studies/chapter/section-two-gender-performativity/). Accessed 6 June 2024.
3. Hendricks, Scotty. "The Master and Slave Moralities: What Nietzsche Really Meant." *Big Think*, 19 Apr. 2022, [bigthink.com/personal-growth/the-master-and-slave-moralities-what-nietzsche-really-meant/](https://bigthink.com/personal-growth/the-master-and-slave-moralities-what-nietzsche-really-meant/).
4. Hughes, Langston. "Let America Be America Again." *Poets.Org, Academy of American Poets*, 3 Feb. 2021, [poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again](https://poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again).
5. High, Madeline. *The Reality of the American Dream*, [www.exhibit.xavier.edu/xjur](http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/xjur). Accessed 5 July 2024.
6. Hochschild, Jennifer. "Chapter Ten. Distorting the Dream." *De Gruyter, Princeton University Press*, 5 Aug. 1996, [www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781400821730.184/html?lang=en](https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781400821730.184/html?lang=en).
7. Neitsche, Friedrich. "On the Genealogy of Morality." *Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation*, 3 June 2024, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On\\_the\\_Genealogy\\_of\\_Morality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Genealogy_of_Morality).
8. *The Epic of America—James Truslow Adams*, [olysmith.weebly.com/uploads/3/0/6/6/30669359/american\\_dream\\_tone\\_paragraph.pdf](https://olysmith.weebly.com/uploads/3/0/6/6/30669359/american_dream_tone_paragraph.pdf). Accessed 6 June 2024.
9. Wang, Yufei. *Exploring the Realization of the American Dream—Taking the Pursuit of Happiness as an Example*, [www.researchgate.net/publication/342983377\\_Exploring\\_the\\_Realization\\_of\\_the\\_American\\_Dream-Taking\\_the\\_Pursuit\\_of\\_Happiness\\_as\\_an\\_Example](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342983377_Exploring_the_Realization_of_the_American_Dream-Taking_the_Pursuit_of_Happiness_as_an_Example). Accessed 5 July 2024.