



AMERICAN BEAUTY (Cert 18)

Reel Issues author: Ian Maher

Overview: Mid-life crisis drama that strips bare outwardly successful lives

Director: Sam Mendes, 1999

Distributor: United International Pictures

Caution: Contains strong language and some scenes of a sexual nature

SUMMARY OF PLOT

Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) is materially comfortable, but trapped in a depressing job and growing distant from his wife Carolyn (Annette Bening) and daughter Jane (Thora Birch). He also becomes obsessed with his daughter's friend Angela (Mena Suvari). But Lester is not the only one in crisis. Carolyn has an affair and teenager Jane is caught in her parents' emotional crossfire. Next door, the new neighbours are equally dysfunctional. Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper), a retired marine colonel and rampant homophobe is in turmoil about his own sexuality. His wife Barbara (Allison Janney) is passive and intimidated, and their son Ricky (Wes Bentley) deals in drugs. Lester quits his job in a bid to recover his lost youth; Carolyn's affair ends, driving her into despair; Jane and Ricky begin a relationship; and Frank makes a rejected homosexual advance towards Lester. The film closes with Lester being shot by Frank. As his life passes before him, Lester expresses gratitude for the gift of every moment of his life.

SOME KEY ISSUES

The damaging effect of social pressures, unrealistic expectations and stereotypes upon relationships – such things were tearing the Burnham and the Fitts families apart.

The consequences of taking for granted the things that matter most in life – almost unnoticed, Lester and Carolyn had drifted apart.

The deep-seated need for meaning and purpose – Lester's mid-life crisis faces him with the fact that the important things are slipping through his fingers.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1

Show the section of film where Carolyn unsuccessfully tries to sell a house and is reduced to tears when the last of the potential clients leave.

In pairs

Talk about any times in your own life when, like Carolyn, you felt your personal worth undermined by difficulties beyond your control, or valued only for what you do rather than who you are.

Small group activity/discussion

A volunteer assumes the role of Carolyn. The rest of the group then talks with "Carolyn" about her unhappiness. Try and offer some sensitive advice. Carolyn then comes out of role. What does someone in Carolyn's position most need to hear about herself, and why?

Clip 2

Show the section where Lester's life passes before his eyes – from his conversation with Angela just before he is shot, to the end of the film.

Individual exercise

Lester saw many familiar things as if for the first time. Imagine your own life passing before your eyes. Write down any things that you take for granted.

Feedback and whole group discussion

Gather in and write up responses on a large sheet of paper. Identify any common themes. Discuss why important things are often taken for granted and suggest some ideas for avoiding this danger. What do you think God regards as a person's priorities in life, and why?

GOD'S STORY

Identity is a vital component of being human. It is that sense of who we are in relation to each other and to God which defines us and gives us our sense of self-worth. Loss of identity can easily result in a sense of sense of despair, as we end up feeling like nothing more than cogs in a machine. The Bible, however, provides us with constant reminders that each and every one of us matters to God and is loved and valued by him in a unique way. For example, Psalm 139 reminds us of God's complete knowledge and care for us: "Lord, you have examined me and you know me. You know everything I do; from far away you understand all my thoughts" (Psalm 139.1, 2). In the New Testament, Jesus offers a wonderful reminder of God's amazing love for us: "For only a penny you can buy two sparrows, yet not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. As for you, even the hairs of your head have all been counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth much more than many sparrows!" (Matthew 10.29–31). St Paul reminds us: "Those who are led by God's Spirit are God's children. For the Spirit that God has given you does not make you slaves and cause you to be afraid; instead, the Spirit makes you God's children, and by the Spirit's power we cry out to God, 'Father! My Father!' God's Spirit joins himself to our spirits to declare that we are God's children" (Romans 8.14–17). If we take the Bible seriously, it will profoundly deepen and enrich our sense of intrinsic worth as unique individuals created in the image and likeness of God.

Some useful biblical passages in relation to the film

Matthew 6.24–34 (God and possessions); Luke 12.13–21 (the parable of the rich fool); Romans 8.12–17, 1 John 3.1–3 (status as God's children); 1 Corinthians 13 (the importance of sacrificial love).

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