A critical analysis of the representation of Masculinity in American Beauty

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American Beauty (1999) is a film directed by Sam Mendes that shows the life of an American family that tried to look perfect for the outside world for the past twenty years, but goes through a major change during the film. There are three male roles that all seem to go through a different masculine transformation. This study will concentrate on the main character, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) and Col. Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper). According to Benshoff (2009), most of the critical work on gender issues in media has been devoted to analysing images of women. He states that the lack of studies on masculinity in a patriarchal culture can eventually make the social construction of gender seem to be an idea of importance only to women. This study will therefore concentrate on how masculinity is represented in American Beauty. What can we really tell about the representations of masculinity in Sam Mendes’ film?

Before we can say something about how masculinity is embodied in American Beauty, we need to know something about the history of gender studies. Although the representation of masculinity changed a lot throughout the years, Benshoff (2009) states that mass media representations of men consequently and consistently work to represent ‘real men’ as powerful active agents sexually desired by women, and to eradicate or denigrate any possible homoerotic or feminized aspects of masculinity. The social understanding of masculinity changed a lot through the years, as it was more acceptable for men to show certain emotions by the 1950s. “Actors like Marlon Brando and James Dean created characters that were introspective, tied in emotional knots and yearning for a sense of release from the stress of conforming to a set of expectations about traditional masculinity.” Characters could show more emotions, but the traditional dominant masculine male wasn’t out of the picture. Benshoff calls some characters of that time ‘cardboard cut-outs of male sturdiness and strength’ as some others were groomed to embody the traditional image of male power. As an example, Benshoff names Rock Hudson, who left an image on screen of being a strong dedicated and loyal male figure. In contrast to the more sensitive roles that James Dean played, Rock Hudson’s characters never seemed worried or insecure about their ability to
fulfill their patriarchal responsibilities. As we learn further on, American Beauty is a platform for a combination of different male roles.

The importance of gender and the way we define ‘sex roles’ is highly contested. If we look at the numerous attempts of producing a coherent science of masculinity, we can easily say that scientists did not found one generalizing science. Connell (2005 p. 67) states that this does not reveal the failure of scientists, but it is due to the impossibility of the task. She states that ‘roles’ are defined by expectations and norms, but ‘sex roles’ are defined by expectations attaching to biological status (p. 25). “This leads to a misperception of social reality, exaggerating differences between men and women (2005, p 26).” So if masculinity is not a coherent object about which a generalizing science can be produced, how can we try to read it? “Yet we can have coherent knowledge about the issues raised in these attempts. If we broaden the angle of vision, we can see masculinity, not as an isolated object, but as an aspect of a larger structure.” Feasey (2008, p.4) also says that we need to read gender in relation to wider social and sexual debates of the period. He thinks that this examination is crucial but, as he agrees with Connell, not because such representations are an accurate reflection of reality, but rather, because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted social relations, define sexual norms and provide 'common-sense' understandings about...identity for the contemporary audience.” For most film critics, the representation of masculinity and femininity tells a lot about the social, cultural and political environment of its particular era.

The film begins with an overview look of a suburban American street. We hear a voice over (Kevin Spacey) introducing himself: “My name is Lester Burnham... This is my life. I’m 42 years old, and in less than a year, I’ll be dead.” He introduces his wife Carolyn (Annette Benning) and his teenage daughter Jane (Thora Birch). Lester is going through a major midlife crisis. He is estranged from his wife, with the result that they hadn’t had sex in a long time, and the relationship is about to burst. The perfectionist Carolyn hates Lester. Lester also completely lost all contact with his daughter. In fact, his daughter hates him to. The only highlight of his day consists of masturbating in the shower. Next to the Burnham’s lives a gay couple, Jim and Jim. The house on the other side was empty for months but has recently found some knew owners; The family Fitts. The father of the family is Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper), a top Marine and absolutely obsessed by the army. His wife Barbara (Allison Janney) is a docile person and is completely under control of the father. Their son is Ricky (Wes Bentley). Ricky is the only child of the family and has had a difficult childhood. Ricky
tolerates no authority and is therefore often in conflict with his authoritarian father. All the main characters go through a major transformation due to life changing choices.

Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) appears to be in something that is beyond a mid life crisis. He hates his work, he hates his wife, and he hates his life. When we Lester for the first time, he is lying in his bed while the alarm clock wakes him up. Every scene from that moment on shows an image of a useless, dissatisfied middle-class white heterosexual male who shows no signs of hegemonic masculinity or whatsoever. If we look back at Benshoff’s statement about how representations of men ‘consequently and consistently work to represent ‘real men’ as powerful active agents sexually desired by women, and to eradicate or denigrate any possible homoerotic or feminized aspects of masculinity’, we can easily tell, only from the first few scenes, that this does not apply to the character of Lester. During these first few scenes, Lester does not show any signs of traditional masculinity. He looks more like a geek who appears numb. He does not show any emotions nor does he look insecure about his ability to fulfil his ‘patriarchal responsibilities’.

According to Connell: “the term 'hegemonic masculinity' describes those white, heterosexual, competitive, individualist and aggressive men in the paid labour force who dominate the moral, cultural and financial landscape (Connell 1995: 77). This does not come close to Lester’s masculinity although some things are about to change. His masculine behaviour changes when Lester and his wife go to a cheerleader performance of their daughter (Jane). Lester’s eye catches a glimpse of Jane's friend Angela, whom he develops an infatuation for.
From that moment, Lester changes his life entirely. He blackmails his boss, quits his job to work somewhere he has the least possible responsibilities and changes his Toyota for the car he always wanted, a Pontiac Firebird. He turns his garage into a personal gym and starts smoking weed, which he buys from his new neighbour Ricky Fitts. Lester is in some ways turning more into a traditional male. It is like he wants to relive his twenties. It seems that Jane’s friend Angela made loose a masculine figure that was always inside him, but never made it to the upper layer of his personality. Although Lester pictures an image of a men in his mid life crisis, he is also showing some insecurities. The film makes clear that his sudden change is due to his insecurity of being a good father and a good husband. The big apotheosis comes at the end. Angela is crying on the stares in Lester’s house because of an argument that she had with Jane and Ricky. Lester tries to calm her down and what follows is a sexual tension between both of them. Just before it actually happens the seduction is disrupted when she confesses that she is a virgin. Lester sees her as an innocent child, and immediately withdraws, his affections changing to that of a father-figure. In the next scene they are talking about their shared concern of Jane. Angela asks how he's feeling and he realizes, to his own surprise, that he feels great. Finally we see Lester sitting alone at a table with a picture of his family in better times and he’s smiling. Although Lester went through a major change during the film, the main representation of masculinity is, whatever you do in your life, the main thing every man should do is try to be a good father and a good husband. Lester finally realizes how lucky he is when all of a sudden a gun appears near his head.

Lester’s new neighbour Colonel Frank Fitts seems to go through the opposite of what Lester is going through. Colonel Fitts seems to be the exact definition of the hegemonic male.
Connell continuous his definition of the hegemonic male as ‘a strong, successful, capable and authoritative man who derives his reputation from the workplace and his self-esteem from the public sphere.’ Frank Fitts is extremely authoritative against his son Ricky Fitts, and shows some serious homophobic signs. Later it becomes clear that the son of the family Fitts frequently get’s beaten up by his father. As col. Fitts starts of showing an image of a hegemonic male, his representation seems to be driven by other things than his true masculinity. While heading towards the end, Col. Fitts thinks his son has sex with Lester for money. Ricky get’s into a fight with his father and thinks this is his way to get out of the life he is living. He decides to agree with his father and tells him that he has sex with men. His father is in total anger and throws Ricky out of the house to never see him again. Ricky packs his stuff and goes to the Burnham’s to pick up Jane and disappear. While Jane, Angela and Ricky are getting in a major argument about Jane’s decision to go away with Ricky, Col. Fitts looks through the window in the pouring rain how Lester is working out. As Lester sees Frank he opens the door to let him in. Frank seems to have an emotional breakdown and cries on Lester’s shoulder. All of a sudden he tries to kiss Lester. Lester, in total shock of what just happened, pushes Frank away. He turns around, still crying and goes home. While Lester’s representation of masculinity went from the opposite of a traditional male to a traditional male, Frank is having his transformation the other way around. He starts of by being the exact definition of the hegemonic male and turns into a sensitive, worried and insecure male at the end of the film. At the end of the film, it becomes clear that Col. Frank Fitts went back home to get a gun and that he is the one that killed Lester.
This study shows how representation of masculinity in popular film can learn us more about the way it was in that particular era. It does not show us a depiction of the heterosexual hegemonic dominant male, in contrast to the ‘ultimate’ male roles that for example Rock Hudson played in the 1950s, but plays with different types of insecurity and male struggles typical for the late 90s. It does not give us a look at what masculinity we want to compare ourselves with, but shows us something the audience can compare themselves with but can also take a distance from because its presented as a more darker satirical version. In an era where success and succeeding in life is more important then ever, the film pictures an image most of the viewers can in some way relate to. Some of the characterization are exaggerated but do not make the film more of a sarcastic depiction of the main characters struggles in life, but make it in fact a more dramatic one. This study proves that Feasey’s theory about reading gender in relation to wider social and sexual debates of the period is crucial in order to understand and find out more about that particular time, because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted social relations, define sexual norms and provide 'common-sense' understandings about identity for the contemporary audience.”
Bibliography


Videos:
