

Year 11 English (Advanced) student work sample – Grade A

Please note: The following work sample has been transcribed for readability. To assist with grading, spelling and grammatical errors have not been corrected and appear as written.

The American Dream is the idea that anyone can achieve success through hard work. In Sam Mendes film American Beauty (1999) the ideas of the dangers that the American Dream faces are portrayed through the major themes of materialism taking over human relationships, a state of delusion and falsity being at odds with contentment, the dangers of a dysfunctional family life and that everyone not conform to an accepted social image. The listening stimulus by Sally Field emphasises these major themes through specific quotes and literary devices.

Clear introduction displays a perceptive understanding of the concept of the American Dream

American Beauty portrays much criticism about contemporary American values where material goods seem to have taken over human relationships. Carolyn Burnham is a career-driven women who disregards her deteriorating relationship with her husband to pursue her career in Real Estate and increase her possessions. This is seen most evidently in the scene where she kisses Lester. The music builds to a crescendo as the viewer believes for a moment they might witness genuine human interaction. Carolyn, however, interjects with “Lester your going to spill beer on the coach.” Provocative dialogue is used to emphasise that she has chosen a material good over genuine human interaction. Sally Field’s speech returns to the ideas she is “frightened for America”, she is frightened that humans have become far to relint on tring to live the ‘perfect’ American life that they have forgotten the key aspects of living life.

Strong topic sentences contribute to a coherent structure

Skilfully supports argument through the perceptive analysis of film techniques

Mendes seems to speak through Lesters character and comments on the stereotypical middle American, vapid and materialistic. “This isn’t life, this is just stuff and it’s become more important to you then living.” The low camera angle portrays Lester as the dominant character (he is towering over Carolyn). This emphasises Mendes and Field’s voice of criticism that humans have become too reliant on material goods for happiness and the American Dream faces many dangers.

A central tension in the film rests on the idea that fantasy and delusion are at odds with contentment and fulfillment in the world. Lester’s story involves that of breaking free from the “dangers of the American Dream.” Lester has been living in a “coma” for “20 years”, a middle American Dream – Ambitious, conformist and stable. As the film progresses he takes a new lease on life and rejects these stereotypes. He becomes: carefree, irresponsible and honest. Lester’s “coma” is a metaphor for his (*indecipherable*) and entrapment in the malevolent cycle of life (wake up, work and sleep...)

Displays a well-developed understanding of the concept using textual evidence discerningly

Acting as a foil to Lester’s new lease on life is the real – estate doyen (or “king”) Buddy Kane who lives by the motto “in order to be successful one must always portray an image of success.” Sally Fields idea that “you can be whatever you want to be” ties into this idea of “portraying” “image” which suggests there is nothing concrete or real in the American Dream it is just a world of fantasy and delusional reality. Although Carolyn is in awe of Buddy’s concept it is antithetical of everything Lester now celebrates.

Detailed and well-selected examples demonstrate a perceptive understanding of how the texts relate to the concept

Tension between pretense and carefree honesty manifests itself significantly in the marital relationship and acts as a key taunt in undermining the rules of the American Dream, showing it is thrust with dangers.

Effectively communicates complex ideas

In American Beauty the myth of the idyll is punctured very quickly. The world re enter in a sordid world of generational and marital conflicts it is as though we are , as Sally Fields-suggests through the metaphor of “drunk behind the wagon” facing a world fill of dangers and misconceptions of the American Dream. The characters in American Beauty seem to be acting out a charade with one another and there is no genuine heartfelt emotion. This is evident in the ritualistic opening dinner scene. The camera shows the once “happy” life of the Burnham family which has now been corrupted by the dangers American Dream. The camera then slowly zooms into the dining room where each member of the Burnham family (June, Lester and Carolyn) is framed as a single entity and not until in any way centring to the photos that we just shown. Mendes justifies the romantic candle-lit room with the laconic dialogue. The candle scene gives the viewer insite into the once intimate life of the family.

Carefully selected textual references highlight the ability to think critically and analyse

Conformity is a major theme tackled in American Beauty. Intolerance is displayed through the characters of Frank and Angela who attempt to fit into an accepted social image. This is another danger and problem with the American Dream, that you become someone your not and you lose your identity and individuality. “There is nothing worse than being ordinary” and you should be able to “be whatever you want to be”. Angela tries to conform to the image of the All American Cheer leading nymph whilst Frank conforms to the straight-edge militaristic father (from the treatment of his son to his haircut). They both however only serve to isolate themselves from society. This idea combined with the greed for financial success creates a world where it is hard to find happiness because everyone and everything is unhappy. Mendes portrays this idea through the ironic Mr. Smiley’s where everyone seems to be frowning.

A perceptive understanding of complex ideas demonstrated through skilful analysis of characterisation

Lester finds happiness in his new job because of his lack of responsibility and his knowledge that living and conforming to the American Dream standards does not let you achieve a ‘happy life’. For the other workers at Mr Smiley’s they believe that by working hard they will be able to become successful, however as Lester finds out happiness is never achieved in the American Dream. It is always around the corner. Sally Fields idea for a happy life comes from new leadership and direction in the American Dream. She believes they need another Lincon to set them off into a better direction. In the end it comes down to personal performance and if you believe in the American Dream or not.

Draws upon the stimulus material to further the discussion of the concept

In conclusion both Sally Field’s stimulus and American Beauty have provided much insight into the ideas the dangers that the American Dream finds through the main thing of materialism vs human relationships, fantasy and obsession vs contentment, dysfunctional family life and conforming to American social standards.

Clear summative conclusion

Grade Commentary

Reese draws on a well-developed understanding of the concept of the American Dream to perceptively analyse and evaluate key scenes in the film *American Beauty*. This response would have been further strengthened by a more detailed and integrated discussion of the listening stimulus. This confident response was well structured and coherent, using detailed and well-selected examples from the texts to support the thesis.

This work sample, on balance, demonstrates characteristics of work typically produced by a student performing at a grade A standard.