

**Year 11 English (Advanced) student work sample – Ungraded**

*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.*

There are a variety of dangers the American dream faces, which have different and harsher consequences. In Sam Mendes' film American Beauty (1999) there are a variety of themes the characters undertake to demonstrate these dangers. Themes such as materialism, illusion versus reality and the consequences of individuality. Mendes uses a vast array of filmic techniques to convey these dangers along with Sally Field's thoughts on the dangers of the American Dream. These themes and techniques work together to illustrate the harsh consequences of the American Dream. An important theme of American Beauty that highlights the dangers of the American dream are the meaningful connections between people being at odds with materialism. Carolyn is the main materialist in the film, we instantly see this through her awe of real estate doyen (or "king") Buddy Kane who states to her, "In order to be successful, one must always portray an image of success." The fact that she uses the words "portray" and "image" suggests that there is nothing concrete or real here. Carolyn becomes so consumed by her materialistic values she forgets what is really important in her life. In the scene where Lester and Carolyn are home alone, Lester attempts to seduce Carolyn to show her that their dysfunctional marriage can still have some passion. He leans over her on the couch, about to kiss her when she stops him saying, "Lester, you're going to spill beer on the couch." They begin shouting at each other when Lester screams "It's just a couch. This is all just stuff and it's become more important to you than living." Mendes uses mise-en-scene here to illustrate Carolyn's materialistic obsessions. In the room there are many ornaments and curios to show her obsession, and the wall, furniture and everything inside is white. Being a very sterile, plain and almost cold colour it demonstrates the very little brightness and Joy they have left in their life. Carolyn's materialistic values underlines an important danger of the American Dream as these tenets can draw you away from the most important things in life.

The idea of an illusionary life as oppose to reality is another danger of the American dream. Each character in Beauty faces this on some level. Angela Hayes is a good example of an illusionary life. She projects a beautiful, confident and popular image of herself all the time and constantly states to Jane that the worst thing you can be in life is ordinary. However we later see in the film that inside she is scared, torn and ordinary. Colonel Fitts from next door portrays himself as the typical big, tough man's man who served in the military. He abhors homosexuals and constantly lets his son know. However later in the film, he kisses Lester revealing his own hidden, latent homosexuality. One of the few characters opposing this theme is Jim and Jim, the gay couple from next door. They challenge the idea that unconventionality is wrong and live a true, healthy, happy life. Ricky Fitts, however is the main foil to this theme. His interests are in the most basic things as he lives a simple, honest life. This is evident in the plastic bag scene. The non-diegetic music is transe-like, creating a sense of

calm and showing his interest in the most simple things. His outlook on life is reminiscent of the transcendentalist views that people are truly at their best when they are solely self-reliant, independent and true to themselves. Sally Field's voice recording also shows the illusionary life America is living. She explains it used to be an amazing place where anything was possible and it continues to project an image like that, however their leadership has changed the freedom and projection of America. Overall living this illusionary, fake life is an important danger to the American Dream as you are only lying to yourself, ruining your self-esteem and digging you into an even deeper hole.

The consequences of individuality is a smaller danger the American dream offers. When Lester quits his job and begins his new irresponsible, carefree lease of life, everything close to him falls further apart and it leads to his eventual death. He begins only caring about himself, smoking, buying new cars and doing weights and he begins saying awful things to his family as a course of the little care he has left for them. He calls his daughter Jane a "bitch" and his wife a "bloodless money grabbing freak". He ultimately destroys his relationship with his family due to his new individual lifestyle which highlights an important danger of the American Dream.

Overall, Sam Mendes' through American Beauty and a variety of film techniques has shown some important themes that illustrate and explain clear dangers the American dream faces. Sally Field also gave her opinion in the voice recording the danger that America faces today.

## Grade Commentary