

When Art Misrepresents Life

by Gerald Schoenewolf, Ph.D.

The author argues that "cultural mob rule" makes reasoned dissent on the gay issue impossible, and allows movies like American Beauty to be made without an honest critique of the political message.

The film *American Beauty*, written by Alan Ball and directed by Sam Mendes, has stirred up a lot of buzz since it opened in movie theaters across America. Before it opened it won top honors at the Toronto Film Festival, and it is scheduled to be the closer at the London Film Festival. Gene Shalit of the Today Show ranks it as one of the "finest movies of the '90s." Rod Dreher of the *New York Post* calls it "a flat-out masterpiece." Roger Ebert says it is "one of the strongest and most penetrating films of the year."

On the surface, the movie is a tragic comedy about the emptiness of American life, particularly life in the suburbs, and the twisted values that lead to this emptiness. However, underneath the surface lies a beautifully filmed, wonderfully acted, and well-written piece of gay propaganda. It caricatures mainstream community life as ugly and hypocritical, while idealizing gay life as enlightened and singularly healthy.

The main plot of *American Beauty* concerns a dysfunctional family living in the suburbs. The father is going through a midlife crisis. In the opening scene he is masturbating in the shower, and at another point in the movie he is masturbating in bed while his wife sleeps. He falls in lust with his daughter's 16-year-old best friend, a Lolita type. Meanwhile, his wife is going through a crisis of her own, has stopped having sex with him, and engages in an affair with another man. The daughter hates both the father and mother and falls in love with the next door neighbor, a boy who has been in a mental institution and makes his living selling drugs. The father of this boy is a retired U.S. Marine officer, who checks his son's urine every six months for signs of drugs and beats him. This man is portrayed as a rabid homophobe who hates two homosexuals who live nearby. In the end, he suspects his son of having a homosexual relationship with the protagonist (the man who is going through the midlife crisis). His hatred of gays is so overwhelming that in a fit of homophobic rage, he kills him.

The two homosexuals are both professionals, well dressed, and seemingly the only well-adjusted characters in the story. In one scene they are running in the early morning to stay in shape. They are apparently not narcissistically obsessed with their bodies or looks (as opposed to many gays in real life), but the main character is; he lifts weights every night in his garage. When the marine moves into the neighborhood, the gay couple knock on his door to welcome him to the neighborhood, but the Marine eyes them

suspiciously. All the heterosexuals in the movie are shown as neurotic, addictive, or even psychotic (particularly the homophobe).

Yet the homosexuals and deviates in the movie are etched sympathetically. The son of the Marine, who has been in a mental hospital and sells drugs for a living and deceives his father by using urine samples of other people for the six-month check-up, comes off as the hero of the movie. Meanwhile, his father, the homophobic marine is, of course, vilified. He physically abuses his son, has apparently driven his wife to schizophrenic withdrawal and, in the end, murders his neighbor.

The movie seems to be a tragi-comedy, but in fact it's a morality tale. It uses the technique of shaming to make its point: The marine is symbolically lynched (portrayed unsympathetically as an ugly person without any redeeming aspects) for all to see. "You see what happens if you don't approve of homosexuality!" the movie seems to say.

Of course reviewers are going to find this movie profound because they have been trained to do so by the climate of gay rage that has, for the last few decades, culturally whipped us into line. (Cultural issues such as the defense of families, children, and a drug-free society have far less potent defenders, while diseases such as cancer or diabetes, which kill three times as many Americans as AIDS, are also of less importance and urgency, since AIDS is an issue of human rights.) We are supposed to have only 100% positive feelings about gay life. If we dare to think that anal intercourse is even a little bit unhealthy or unnatural, there must be something really wrong with us. We're the marine in *American Beauty* -- lost, soulless, and ugly.

Imagine the outcry if somebody made a movie about a type of gay man we see all-too-often in urban communities, who lives the empty life of going from gay bar to gay bar, is full of insecurity about his looks and his masculinity, resents straight people, harbors deep anger toward women (while on a more superficial level, admires them and carries the banner of radical feminism), and contracts AIDS because of his irresponsible attitude toward life and sex. An objective movie of such a person, even if done sympathetically, could not be filmed today.

Unfortunately, today's values have been dictated by a kind of cultural mob rule, where honest debate is simply no longer possible. ■