

Efforts of The Burnham Family to Implement The Ideal American Family in *American Beauty* Movie

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Abstrak

Keluarga sebagai gambaran masyarakat dalam skala terkecil merupakan obyek kajian yang selalu menarik untuk dibahas. Dalam skripsi ini, penulis mengangkat keluarga Burnham pada film American Beauty sebagai fokus utama kajian yang merepresentasikan keluarga Amerika yang hidup dan tinggal di era modern dimana nilai-nilai dan tuntutan sosial sebuah keluarga telah berganti, meninggalkan nilai-nilai yang konvensional (tradisional) ke yang lebih kini. Untuk menganalisa obyek kajian, penulis menggunakan metode studi pustaka dan pendekatan sosiologi sastra yang mengaplikasikan teori-teori sosial sebagai alat untuk membedah obyek kajian.

Penulis ingin menganalisa kehidupan keluarga Burnham yang digambarkan sebagai keluarga kecil yang memiliki berbagai konflik namun tetap berusaha menjadi serta menampilkan diri sebagai keluarga yang berfungsi dengan baik di masyarakat.

Tujuan ditulisnya skripsi ini adalah untuk mengetahui latar belakang sosial pada masyarakat, nilai-nilai yang berlaku dan mendorong perilaku keluarga Burnham, juga gambaran keluarga ideal yang dipercaya oleh masyarakat yang berusaha diwujudkan oleh keluarga tersebut.

Penulis pada akhirnya menyimpulkan bahwa keluarga Burnham gagal dalam mempertahankan keharmonisan keluarga mereka. Mereka tak dapat menjadi sebuah keluarga ideal seperti yang dicitrakan karena sangat kurangnya komunikasi dan kebersamaan antar anggota keluarga. Kondisi ini menyebabkan ketidakmampuan keluarga Burnham untuk memperbaiki keadaan serta menyelesaikan konflik dalam keluarga mereka. Dalam film ini, tujuan keluarga Burnham bukan lagi untuk membuat anggotanya bahagia, namun lebih untuk memenuhi fungsi sosial semata.

Kata kunci: keluarga, sosial, konflik, *the Burnhams*.

1. Introduction

Since declaring its independence in 1776, the United States of America has undergone many changes in various aspects. The state is dynamic; it transforms rapidly to grow from once a vast savage land to the big modern

United States of America. So does the society or to be precise, its smallest form of society: family.

Families of America are no longer bound to traditional values. They transform together with the demands of modern world, and do not look or function the same as they did. This

phenomena can be observed from media and literatures. And one of many movies which depicts an experience of modern America family is '*American Beauty*'.

In this research, the film is treated as literary object that can be analyzed with literary theory. Leonard Quart and Albert Auster stated "During the past 30 years, a number of historians and culture critics have begun to give films their due as important social and cultural evidence" (2011:3). Moreover, to strengthen the treatment of film as literary object, Mario Klater says "film as semi-textual genre both influenced by and exerting influence on literature and literary criticism" (2004:56). By the theories mentioned above, the writer believes that analyzing society through film is acceptable and comes to the decision to analyze *American Beauty* as she is keen to know more about the concept, meaning and ideal depiction of family for American society. The writer hopes that the thesis, entitled *Efforts of The Burnham Family to Implement The Ideal American Family in "American Beauty" Movie*, will answer and give a comprehensive understanding.

2. Methodology

The writer uses library research to gather credible information, references, and articles in regard to the discussed topic to help the study and analysis for the thesis. Library research is a research that collects materials to be used in research project. The method was conducted by studying collection of books, or other sources of

information such as online materials, journals, manuscripts, and films.

Method of approach is also necessary to analyze the research object. Writer will use exponential approach to analyze the narrative and cinematic elements of the movie. Meanwhile, to analyze the extrinsic aspect, the sociology of literature approach is used to match the fact on the society with the story of *American Beauty*, and to determine whether *American Beauty* really represents America family.

3. Literary Review

3.1 Literary Review on The Work Studied

As a film that considered controversial, *American Beauty* attracts many film critiques. For a film that was filmed in 1999, *American Beauty* stirs many reactions and controversy.

"*American Beauty*" -- which took home five Academy Awards, including best picture, best actor for Kevin Spacey and best director for Mendes -- is a dazzling tale of loneliness, desire and the hollowness of conformity. "Beauty" is about the gap between our ideals of love, comfort and success, and the hands we finally get dealt. It's often funny and desperately sad in the same breath, but it acknowledges the absurdity and desolation of contemporary lives, and ultimately forgives and

loves its cast of seekers.
(Guthmann, 2000)

Deeper, in *American Beauty* (*Black Comedy*) the film is described as:

An acerbic, darkly comic critique of how social conventions can lead people into false, sterile and emotionally stunted lives, "American Beauty" is a real American original. Multilayered, bracingly resourceful and tweaked to push its many brash ideas to the edge and beyond. (1999)

McCarthy mentioned on how society perception could greatly drag people far from their happiness by false convention. While Skylar (2005) wrote that there is a chance that the controversy merges because the film could be interpreted in different ways.

Is it a typical Hollywood diatribe about the American dream and the nuclear family? ... Or is it, in contrast, a film that shows how petty and deluded people can become when they allow ennui and self-pity to consume them, so that they ultimately cannot see—until almost too late—the very real beauty that is in their own, presumably "ordinary" lives? (2005)

Almost every character in the movie deludes themselves. Lester deludes him self with fantasizing of Angela, Carolyn plays the role as a happy career woman, and Angela, who loaths being ordinary and boring, turns to act playful and flirting—boosting her sexual attractiveness. Yet, the more they try, the more they feel unhappy.

The main themes that the film draws attention to throughout the movie are that of materialism, appearance versus reality, denial and repression, control versus chaos, loneliness versus feeling connected, change and searching, and beauty (subjective and objective). (Deschler, 2002)

We could see many scenes in where the characters have to conform to the society demand, which left them blinded with what they really need. Conformity is something to be achieved, maintained, but is also the thing that trapped them.

The whole message of the film is in the title, *American Beauty*. One way to take it is that things that appear to be beauty in America, often are not. (Deschler, 2002)

3.2 Theory of Literature and Film

Theory of literature and film is the theory that deals with the narrative elements of the research object as well as the cinematic elements

(cinematography). Cinematic element includes camera angle, camera distance, mise-en-scene, lighting, and dialogue. Settings according to Abrams (1999) is not only where the events take place but also the time and the social backgrounds or a circumstance that occurs in the narrated story that may directly affects the involved characters' behavior and motivation (1999:284). Abrams also concludes that characters are the persons in literary work who are endowed with distinctive moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by the dialogue and their action (1999:32). Theme is the main idea of the story and it is usually about the meaning of life and human circumstance. The theme of work is not its subject but rather its central idea, which may be stated directly or indirectly (Cuddon, 1999).

3.3 Extrinsic Aspect

3.3.1 Family in America

Parlindungan Pardede writes, "family is the basic unit and one of the most important institutions in a society" (2010). Family serves for certain purpose, for American society, bringing happiness for each member is the purpose of a family and also a value for them. A strong family unit," according to *What Are Family Values*, "creates a safe, positive, and supportive place for all members to thrive". Parents set as the role models for their children, they are the first source of education and kids are likely to mimic their parents' behavior.

Having a good family will mostly produce kids with good characteristic. It is to be noted that there are three keys to embody a strong family. They are cohesion (feeling of belonging, closeness), flexibility (flexibility to adapt and together resolve stress, conflict, and anger), and communication (to express and convey what they feel in the family freely). If a family masters those three elements, they are ready to overcome any crisis and growing closer as they face it together. Furthermore, a happy family benefits the whole society for there is less crime, divorce, and emotional problem from kids grown in strong family.

However, modern family face conflicts that they would not meet in the past. Brian Powell, a sociology professor at the Indiana University in *What Makes A Family? Children, Say Many American* (2010), argues that people are leaving the concept of traditional family and moving toward a more modern definition complying to the standard of new society.

"Sociologically," says Eshleman, "the family is a social institution and a social system." (1993) It expected to conform to social goals, which consists of many components such as class and gender. These changes do not mean that the family definition develops worse, and not all changes happen in equal rate.

Furthermore, Eshleman concludes that there at least three meanings of marriage and family which is still valid now.

To some person and groups, marriage is sacred; to others, marriage is a social contract and success is viewed in terms of conformity to societal demands; and to still others, marriage is highly personal, highly individualistic concern. (1993:8)

3.3.2 Gender Roles in Family

In marriage, both sexes considered to have obligation and responsibility due to their biological nature: masculine and feminine. Male are expected to be the breadwinner of the family, the authority within the family, and a representative to the society. Male are likely to take the more aggressive, more defensive role in the family than their female counterparts (mother or wife) expected to support alongside her husband, child caring, house making, and so on.

It is true that in modern time, women gain more freedom to express their self, be more ambitious, and independent. It is normal to see women pursuing their career while still being a mother at the same time as it also helps family economy.

Additionally, the invention of contraception pills in 1960 also encourages career women. *Constantin* quotes Ann Marie Cunningham (1990) who argues that the pills give women more control of their body and they can think more seriously for their career since they can postpone birth. However, the woman empowerment also becomes the source of conflict. Cramaruc explains:

Most of the men consider women's career as a conflict source having arguments like: women will neglect their family attributions, the imminent change of man's authority, his uncertainty concerning the professional competition and the risk to deteriorate the marital relation (2007).

4. Analysis

4.1 General Description of Burnham Family

The Burnham Family is an upper middle family that lives in a decent suburb which consists of parents and a child, a small family unit that is common in modern family structure. The number of child in this family also make it possible for Carolyn to indulge more in pursuing her ambition than being a traditional house wife. Lester and Carolyn are both working a respectable job. Lester is an employee in advertising company before he quit and Carolyn pursues property career as housing agent that keeps the family economic runs well.

In the house, it is Carolyn who dominates more and Lester tends to be passive, letting Carolyn do as she please while Jane, as a result of bad parenting, become rebellious to her parents. Lester shows no motivation from the very first start of the movie, he looks tired and both his wife and daughter looks down on him. He says, "*Both my wife and daughter think I'm this gigantic loser, and.... they're right.*" (American Beauty, 00:03:48-00:03:52)

In dialogue below, Lester once tried to break the ice by speaking to Jane about his work where he almost get fired but it does not goes well.

LESTER : “--you couldn't possibly care any less, could you?”

JANE :” Well, what do you expect? You can't all of a sudden be my best friend, just because you had a bad day.”

JANE :”I mean, hello. You've barely even spoken to me for months.”
(American Beauty, 00:07:48 – 00:08-02)

It is obvious that lack of proper communication and sense of belonging makes the Burnham family not getting along well.

When Lester meets Angela Hayes, it is without doubt that he becomes so obsessed with her. He shows change of character and regains a determination to make him self get more intimate with his daughter's friend. Meanwhile Jane, neglected by both of her parents, expresses her feeling to Ricky Fitts that she needs a father who is a role model (American Beauty, 00:00:21-00:00:22), sharing her disappointment. Furthermore Jane also said:

JANE : “But it'd be nice if I was anywhere near as important to him as she is.”
(American Beauty, 01:20:18-01:20:22)

It shows that Jane, even though he often argues and shows hatred toward her parents, is just a lonely kid who does not get enough love and attention from her parents.

4.2 Friction of The Burnham Family

4.2.1 Lester and Carolyn

Since Lester is in dire relationship with Carolyn, he sometime fantasizes about Angela Hayes. In one scene he caught by Carolyn while he masturbates and they arguing with each other.

CAROLYN : “Lester. I refuse to live like this. This is not a marriage.”

LESTER : “This hasn't been a marriage for years. But you were happy as long as I kept my mouth shut. Well, guess what? I've changed.”

(American Beauty, 00:44:52-00:45:04)

The conversation above emphasizes how Carolyn and Lester feel about their marriage. Meanwhile, Carolyn cheats on Lester after seeing her rival, Buddy Kane. Carolyn dislikes of Buddy change into fondness and awe since she knows that Buddy shares the same vision as hers: “In order to be successful one must project an image of success at all times.” (American Beauty, 01:28:44-01:28:47)

There is also time when the couple seems to reconcile again and getting intimate. Lester who is already regaining his aggressiveness tries to get close to Carolyn, however the

attempt failed because his wife is worrying over her expensive couch which results in Lester's anger.

CAROLYN : "Lester. You're going to spill beer on the couch."

LESTER : "So what? It's just a couch."

CAROLYN : "This is a four thousand dollar sofa upholstered in Italian silk. This is not "just a couch."

LESTER : "It's just a couch!"

LESTER : "This isn't life. This is just stuff. And it's become more important to you than living. Well, honey, that's just nuts."

(American Beauty, 01:16:50-01:17:24)

It also does not take long after the incident that Lester caught Carolyn and Buddy cheating right before his eyes. Feeling like a victim of his husband newfound authority, Carolyn is listening to self-empowerment tape which repeatedly telling to stop being a victim while holding her gun, committing to end her husband's life.

Carolyn never shot Lester at the end because Lester already dead on the hand of Colonel Fitts. Upon seeing her husband death and realizing that he now gone forever Carolyn got really shocked and her true feeling emerges, she throws her gun into a closet and crying in woe while hugging Lester's clothes. Afterall, she still do care about her husband, but its all too late now.

4.2.2 Lester, Carolyn vs Jane

This sub-chapter will discuss problem that involves Jane with her father and or mother. And below is the

dialogue that involves Jane with Carolyn, quarrelling.

JANE : "Look, Mom, I really don't feel like having a Kodak moment here, okay?"

CAROLYN : "You ungrateful little brat. Just look at everything you have. When I was your age, I lived in a duplex. We didn't even have our own house."

(American Beauty, 01:08:26-01:08:43)

Carolyn's dialogue shows her big concern over material possession because of her childhood background. Both of them are anguished and angered. It makes Jane become more attached to Ricky and so does Carolyn with Buddy.

There is also one time Jane speaks to her father because she cannot stand the way Lester behave to Angela, however it turned out bad and their relationship got worse.

JANE : "I've been too embarrassed to bring her over. Because of you, and the way that you behave."

LESTER : "What are you talking about? I've barely even spoken to her."

JANE : "Dad! You stare at her all the time, like you're drunk! It's disgusting!"

LESTER : "You better watch yourself, Janie, or you're going to turn into a real bitch, just like your mother!"

(American Beauty, 01:24:31-01:24:48)

The above dialogue shows that Jane tried to build proper communication with Lester even though it does not end smooth. Lester regrets what he said later but Jane who feels disappointed left the conversation already.

4.2.3 Burnham Family vs Other Characters

The first character that leads drastic change to the family is Angela Hayes, a high school student that Lester taken interest to. Lester who is obviously in cold relationship with his wife so that he grows an unhealthy obsession and imagination since he met Angela Hayes

Ricky Fitts also play an important supporting character for Lester and Jane, he is the one that supplies weed stock to Lester and builds romantic feeling with Jane. When he kicked out from the house Ricky asks Jane to escape with him. Jane agrees to leave her house and her parents, pursuing her own happiness with Ricky At the same moment, Colonel Fitts sees Lester who is working out in the garage. The colonel mistaken Lester's words in suspicion of the scene where he mistaken his son for a homosexual. The man kissed Lester and was stopped by Lester by saying that he perceived his words wrong.

LESTER : *"Nope, our marriage is just for show. A commercial, for how normal we are. When we are anything but."*

LESTER : *"You're shaking."*

LESTER : *"We really should get*

you out of these clothes."

COLONEL : *"Yes..."*

LESTER : *"It's okay."*

COLONEL : *"I..."*

LESTER : *"Just tell me what you need."*

(Colonel Fitts kisses Lester)

LESTER : *"Whoa, whoa, whoa. I'm sorry. You got the wrong idea."*

(American Beauty, 1:40:00-1:41:17)

The scene above points out how Lester does not care about Carolyn's affair, he admits that their marriage is just for show, just to conform and get accepted by the society. He does not think his marriage is sacred, it is just a social contract like what Eshleman wrote about. As for the colonel, his marriage is also a camouflage for the society and a form of denial because as a man who serves in the military he cannot admit and cannot accept that he, in fact, a homosexual.

Colonel Fitts who is enraged and ashamed after opening his gayness to Lester then managed to shoot Lester, ended his life.

4.3 Image of Ideal Family Shown by The Burnhams

As a small part of society, it cannot be avoided that The Burnhams have to fit in even though Lester and Carolyn agrees that their marriage is not a real marriage anymore. They still maintain and show an image that can be accepted by the norm and standard. The evidences are shown throughout the movie.

Compiling to the economy and welfare standard, the Burnham couple both are working to fulfill the family need so that they have a nice living in a middle-upper class suburb. Furthermore, the family owns two cars and a well-furnished house. In brief, they do not lack anything crucial economically

The image of an ideal family also shown indirectly by placing family pictures on every corner of the house, there are several shots that focused on the family photographs hanged or put inside the house where everyone is smiling widely and looks happy. These photographs are signs of what impression does the Burnham family wants to convey for the guests who visit their house.

4.4 Efforts Shown to Implement Ideal American Family

The Burnham family always having dinner together even though we barely see any intimacy in dinnertime as the image below portrays. This can be considered as an effort to build togetherness inside the family even though it lacks warm feeling. Carolyn also tries to help the family condition. Knowing her daughter performing as cheerleader, she drags Lester to watch Jane's performance though he shows his hesitance in attending the game.

The efforts to create image of ideal family is also important for the sake of Carolyn who is stern in pursuing her career. Most of the time when Carolyn meets other people she will greet them in joyful and happy manner. She also demands Lester to support her by

looking happy when they are in a party.

CAROLYN : *“Now listen to me. This is an important business function. As you know, my business is selling an image. And part of my job is to live that image—”*

LESTER : *“Just say whatever you want to say and spare me the propaganda.”*

CAROLYN : *“---listen, just do me a favor. Act happy tonight.”*

(American Beauty, 00:29:56-00:30:16)

Carolyn has to look happy and perfect for her business, they also wear formal attire that looks luxurious. In the party also, when the couple meet Buddy Kane and converse with him, Lester intensely kisses Carolyn on the lips and afterwards says; *“We have a very healthy relationship.”* (American Beauty, 00:31:18-00:31:19)

From the evidences written in this subchapter, we can see that Carolyn really compile and care on the society perception while Lester more reluctant and gradually leaving society standard (e.g. smoking dope and quitting his job intentionally) Carolyn sometimes also tries to communicate with Lester and Jane to make things better but the continuous problems (and her over attachment to material pursue) cannot help repairing their family condition even though they still trying to maintain the family wellness.

5. Conclusion

American Beauty is a movie that has close resemblance to everyday life

and problems, which allows the viewers to connect them selves into the story world. It is a movie that succeeds in portraying the American culture from daily interaction to its social value and demand.

One of the values of American family is bringing happiness for each member of the family, it is the purpose and also a value for them. Traditionally, male take the aggressive role as breadwinner while the female counterpart take care of the domestic chores, yet nowadays, the value experience a shifting due to the modern development. At present, as can be seen in *American Beauty*, female can also pursue career and attains the role as the most dominant in the family, a change that makes new consequences emerges.

In this film, the Burnham family failed in becoming an ideal family because the members are not happy even though they own proper wealth, they are tearing inside and the family becoming dysfunctional.

The major cause of this dysfunctional family is the massive lack of communication; it triggered conflicts within the Burnham family. Communication failure, both in conveying and perceiving, also resulted in the inability to overcome conflicts.

However, even though the family unit failed to create happiness, the Burnham still plays the family role as the smallest society unit that expected to conform the social demand. Carolyn states how they need to look happy for her career and Lester also admits that their marriage is only for 'show'. The

marriage is not sacred and personal again, it changes into a social contract and status to conform the society belief. Embodying the idea of an ideal American family is not impossible, but in *American Beauty* the Burnham family failed.

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