

# Fetishism Reflected in Sam Mendes's *American Beauty*

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## Abstract

This study described the fetishism of the main character in Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* by using psychoanalytical analysis. The analysis was focused on the fetishism conducted by the main character, Lester. The main data was taken from the work entitled *American Beauty*, while the supporting ones were derived from some related books, English journals, and other sources on the internet. Data were collected, categorized, and analyzed before they were presented in a discussion. The writer used descriptive-analytic techniques to analyze the collected data, and the analysis was focused on the factors that make Lester become a fetishist and the effects of his fetishism on his life and family. It was found that Lester's id has the biggest role in causing his fetishism. Lester's fetishism is controlled mostly by his needs to fulfill his physical and psychological needs. Lester wants to fulfill the sexual pleasure that he cannot get from his wife, Carolyn.

**Keywords:** fetishism, *American Beauty*, psychoanalysis, id, ego, superego

## 1. Introduction

Movies and literature are two kinds of extraordinary works of art. Movies and literature have a close relationship in which they have similarities and differences. Both movies and literature take the readers and audience to a different world. Literature takes the readers into an imagination of what the readers read, while movies show the whole pictures on the screen visually that help the audience connect with the moment more closely and they do not need their imagination like what the readers of a literary work to do (Kidwai, 2018).

In other words, literature leads its readers to have imagination about what they read, while the movies show such an imaginative world to the audience and they do not have to have to develop their imagination. Movies are not different from novels, short stories, or dramas since movies are extended fictions that almost have similar elements such as plot, setting, theme, characterization, and so on. From movies, we can know about the social condition of a certain society, learn about human psychology, etc. The psychological aspect of the movie entitled *American Beauty* has attracted the writer to study.

*American Beauty*, written by Alan Ball, was directed by Sam Mendes. It reflects a social condition in American society. It reveals the disintegration in an American family in which the family member cannot carry out their roles well. The movie reflects a social psychology theory that reveals dissonance in role distribution in the stereotyped American society. It is necessary to pay special attention to the human psyche theory proposed by Sigmund Freud. In particular, the theory introduces such aspects as dream condensation, the Oedipus Complex, and fetishism being at the core of psychoanalysis (StudyCorgi, 2021).

Mariana McConnell wrote in *Cinema Blend* in 2008, "Though bestowed with the coveted Best Picture statuette, Sam Mendes' 1999 debut is not the withering analysis of curdled society in the suburban wasteland that the film was lauded as being. Rather, *American Beauty* is an insipid spook story about second adolescence, dressed up with ham-handed, unoriginal critiques." (Fetters, A & Zuckerman, E. 2014).

*American Beauty* talks about an image of recent society's gender roles. It displays the alteration of a man called Lester Burnham from an obedient man to an ascending one, the one who tries to achieve the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Sita., Dutta, & Das, K.V, 2021). *American Beauty* is about a middle-aged husband or a father who experiences a midlife crisis. *American Beauty* tells us about a lonely, unhappy, despaired, and galvanized husband who has a powerful erotic passion for a teenage cheerleader. His wife, who works as a property agent, emasculates and makes him like a lion without any fur and claws. He has not gotten his sexual pleasure from his wife for months.

He starts to have a fantasy to sleep with his daughter's friend, Angela; after he saw her when he visited his daughter at school.

This study analyzed the fetishism of the main character, Lester, especially the psychological factors that drive him to be a fetishist and the effects of his being a fetishist. The study used the psychoanalytical point of view to analyze the stated problems above.

Psychology defines fetishism as a form of sexual disorder that involves erotic attachment to a defunct object or an unordinary asexual part of the human body. Fetishism, as a mental condition, is also defined as the demand to use a non-genital object in order to fulfill a sexual desire. Its object can be some other parts of the body, an article of clothing, or, less frequently, some more impersonal object. This fetishism occurs mostly among males, and most of the used objects in the fetish are related to the female body or clothing. The primary objects of sexual attention such as long hair, hair color, the foot, or a type of body blemish, that are required to stimulate sexual desire, are also generally classified as fetishism. (<https://www.britannica.com/science/fetishism-psychology>).

The writer used the theory of psychoanalysis to analyze the psychological side of the character, especially the fetishism of the main character. Geurin in Sumarsono states that Freud's psychoanalysis has three premises, first most individual processes are unconscious, second libido or sexual energy motivates all human behavior, and third the power of social taboos is attached to certain sexual impulses. Based on the theory of psychoanalysis, Freud divided the psychic zones into three, namely the id, the ego, and the superego (Sumarsono, 2019).

Pervin stated that the id drives all energies of our life and death, our sexual and aggressive instincts, but to make us able to face the reality, we need the role of the ego. We also need the ego to protect the individual and society from the id's dangerous potentialities. The superego, on the other hand, functions as the moral branch of our functioning. It contains rewards and punishment, the reward that we get when we strive for the ideals, and the punishment we get when we break our ethical code (Pervin, 1984). The superego works like the one that controls human behavior by following the norms of society, offering a punishment for bad behavior and a reward for the good one.

## 2. Method

The main object of this study is to analyze Lester's fetishism and its effect on his behavior and life. In analyzing the problem, the writer used the theory of psychoanalysis. According to psychoanalysis, the id, the ego, and the superego control the human psyche. The main data are derived from the movie script entitled *American Beauty* (1999), written by Alan Ball, and from the related articles, e-books, journals of literature, and other sources on the internet. In collecting all the data, the writer conducted an intensive close reading of the materials, note-taking, classifying the data, interpreting, discussing the data, and displaying the collected data in a composition. The writer conducted a content analysis on *American Beauty* by watching the movie online and by reading the scripts of the film written by Alan Ball to search for themes regarding the fetishism of Lester's.

## 3. Literature Review

To analyze this study, the writer reads some articles written by other writers or researchers who studied *American Beauty*. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, in her article entitled "*Too Close for Comfort*": *American Beauty and the Incest Motif*, explains how the incest relationship between the father and daughter takes place, working through removal, has presented a narrative description that relates to a series of recent cultural activities: the sexualization of ever-younger girls, cinema's erasure of mothers and of career women as pitying figures, and efforts to emasculate the man or the father. The film displays the effect of Lester's fetishism by substituting the object of his sexual tension from his daughter, Jane, to Angela. At the same time, by conjuring up the incest scenario, Lester becomes a sympathetic victim, innocent of serious wrongdoing and ultimately redeemed by his martyrdom (Karlyn, 2004).

The second one that the writer had to read was the study conducted by Diandra Pramesti and Sukarni Suryaningsih in their article entitled *Efforts of the Burnham Family to Implement the Ideal American Family in American Beauty Movie*. In this article, Pramesti and Suryaningsih stated that the Burnham family fails to make their family an ideal one because they have serious problems that make the family torn inside and have the wrong function. The major problem of this familial function is the massive lack of communication among the members of the family that triggers their conflicts (Pramesti & Suryaningsih, 2013).

### 3.1 Fetishism

Freud in Dant defined fetishism as a distortion from the 'normal' sexual objective of sexual intercourse that leads to the liberation of sexual desire "...a gratification analogous to the satiation of hunger. It comprises a sexual overvaluation of a substitute object, that while connected to the sex object is nonetheless inappropriate to the normal sexual object.

'Overvaluation' refers to the propensity for the sexual objective to overhang the genitals to the whole body and indeed mind of the sex object (Dant, 1996).

### *3.2 The Id, the Ego, and the Superego*

Psychoanalysis divides the human psyche into three zones; the id, the ego, and the superego. These three elements collaborate with each other to create complex human behaviors (Boag, 2014). The id is the source of all human drive energies, while the ego protects the individual and society from the id's dangerous potentialities. The ego expands from the id and makes sure that the drives of the id can be expressed in a manner appropriate and acceptable in society (Pulcu, 2014). Superego is the one that represents the morality that humans have. It provides guidelines to make judgments. The superego has two parts namely, the conscience, which includes information about things that are considered wrong according to the social norms of society. These behaviors are often forbidden because they are against the social and religious norms, and lead to bad outcomes, punishments, or feelings of guilt and compassion. The second one is the ego ideal which includes the rules and standards for behaviors that the ego considers (Schalkwijk, 2018).

## **4. Finding and Discussion**

The writer divides the analysis into three parts. First, the writer analyzes the relationship between Lester, Carolyn, and Jane. The second one is focused on the influence of the id, the superego, and the ego on Lester's fetishism. The motives and effects of the fetishism of Lester on the family are the third part of the analysis.

### *4.1 The Relationship of Lester, Carolyn, and Jane*

Lester is a late 40 years old, married, has a daughter and a good house, and a decent job. He works as an employee in an advertising company before he quit. His family is an upper middle one who lives in a decent suburb and resembles the smallest unit, the common one in modern society. He has everything but happiness. His life is boring and monotonous. Having only one child indicates that his wife, Carolyn, has the ambition to gain success as a working woman more than just a traditional housewife. Carolyn pursues a property career as a housing agent that makes her able to keep the family economic runs well.

In marriage, both husband and wife have their responsibility. The husband has to keep the economy of the family run well. The husband is the one who holds more authority in the family. He is the one that is more active and defensive for the family, while the wife has to support the husband. Both husband and wife have their roles in the family. The wife should carry out her roles, and so does the husband. The wife cannot replace the husband's role. When both husband and wife do their roles well, the family will live happily.

In the family, Lester as the husband and the representative of the family in the society fails to run his role. Although he can earn money for his family, what he can earn is not more than what his wife can make. As the husband and the father, Lester fails to have a good relationship and communication with both his wife and daughter. His wife dominates him very much. That she works as a property agent makes her more independent. Carolyn is more active than Lester. He tends to be passive and lets Carolyn do as she pleases. The lack of communication in the family makes him have a bad relationship with his daughter, Jane. Jane is the result of bad parenting. She becomes rebellious toward her parents and has no respect, especially for Lester. Both Jane and his mother look down at him. They think that Lester is a loser.

The bad marital relationship between Lester and Carolyn makes them not able to fulfill their responsibility both as husband and wife. Lester and Carolyn have had no sex for months or maybe for years. The relationship between Lester and Carolyn becomes worse when Lester finds his wife's love affair with her rival, Buddy Kane. After she was found cheating on her husband, Carolyn has an intention to end Lester's life by shooting him with a gun, but she does not really do it because Lester is shot by another character namely Colonel Fitts.

Due to the bad parenting makes Lester and Carolyn have a bad relationship with their daughter, Jane. Carolyn, who lived in a worse condition than Jane now, is angry and has an argument with Jane when Jane talks about a Kodak moment.

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." (Ball, 68)

This quarrel makes Jane angry with her mother and it makes her get closer to Ricky, her new neighbor.

Lester's relationship with Jane also gets worse since Lester tries to seduce her friend at school, named Angela. Jane

cannot stand to see the way Lester behaves with her friend. He tries to talk about it with his father, but it makes the relationship get worse. Jane gets disappointed with her father and she loses her respect for him.

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!" (Ball, 79).

#### *4.2 The Roles of the Id, the Ego, and the Superego in Lester's Fetishism*

According to Freud's theory, the human psyche is composed of the id, the ego, and the superego. The id is the drive of all human desires, such as sex and aggression. The id is the overpowering desire that is usually satisfied by a person, regardless of any social and religious norms. Lester's id is to engage sexually with Angela as he has a fantasy when he sees her dancing erotically at the basketball games. However, the id cannot control Lester's psyche freely, there is the ego that encounters the role of the id. The ego helps Lester to find the balance between sexual drives and reality.

Lester is 40 years old, still strong, and has sexual desire, but he cannot get it since he has not had sex with his wife for months or years. In the family, he does not have full authority as a husband, especially after he quits his job. He is emasculated and dominated by his wife. He is treated like a child by his wife. He always sits on the passenger's chair when his wife drives the car. He has a fetishism, triggered by the domination conducted by his wife, for having sex with Angela. His fetishism is his way of fulfilling his sexual needs. He finds that Angela is sensual, and she also gives a positive response to him. He starts seducing Angela every time he has the opportunity to do.

Lester's fetishism is driven by his id, the part of his unconscious, to satisfy his sexual need and pleasure. The ego has the control to make Lester able to distinguish his fetishism from reality. It is the ego that prevents him from satisfying his sexual desire, while the superego is the one that accepts societal norms, moral, and religious principles.

Lester's fetishism began when he and Carolyn came to see Jane dancing at the basketball game at school. After he saw Angela dancing, he was attracted to her and started imagining her doing a sexy dance. From that moment, Lester has some sexual imagination or fetishism about Angela. The fetishism makes Lester starts finding everything done by Angela. He likes trying to listen to Jane and Angela's conversation about him from outside his daughter's bedroom door, calling her and hanging up when Angela answers the phone, and even beginning working out to try to impress her. This fetishism makes him like imagining to make love with Angela and doing masturbation. He likes masturbating when he takes a bath, and even when he sleeps in the same bed with his wife. Sometimes his wife finds him masturbating, and he starts to argue with her. He blames her since she does not want to make love with him, she does not want to be blamed.

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." (Ball, 45).

Angela is represented as the classical view of a feminine beautiful girl who has pale perfect skin, long blonde hair, and a perfect figure. Lester's fetishism is the way he takes to satisfy the sexual need that he cannot get from his wife, Carolyn. Lester's id has driven his unconsciousness to have a sexual fantasy with his daughter's best friend. This fantasy takes place since he cannot fulfill his sexual need from Carolyn. Carolyn has emasculated and dominated him. He is treated like a little kid. He does not get any respect from his wife. This condition drives him to find an escape, and he finds it from Angela. For him, Angela is very attractive and he is sure that she will be able to satisfy his sexual desire. Angela also has her own desire to be considered an unordinary girl. She wants to be different from the common girls. She believes that she can be a special girl if she can have a love affair with an older man.

Lester, who has had no sex for several months or years, starts to have a sexual fantasy with Angela. Lester's id makes him forget that he has a wife, Carolyn, and a daughter, Jane. He does not care what the effect on the family is when he has a love affair with Angela. Lester's sexual fantasy makes his relationship not only with his wife, but also with his daughter, get worse. Lester's id also makes him forget that there are social and religious norms that people have to obey.

His id comes to dominate all his actions and personality. And he does it just to satisfy his sexual desire. His id drives him of being a fetish and it is very clear after he is falling in love with Angela. He likes having sexual fantasies with her. He starts masturbating in the bathroom and even in the bed beside his wife. All his actions are carried out based on his id that drives his human psyche. Everything he does is just to fulfill what he needs that he cannot get from his wife. He has been emasculated by his wife and it has made his life is dead, and he needs to feel alive and he needs to

be different. All he does just to satisfy his desire.

The ego has the function to calm down the id by making someone satisfied realistically, while the superego makes someone obey the norms. The ego and the superego make Lester unable to continue to have sex with Angela when she confesses that she is still a virgin and is very sure that she is willing to do it with Lester. The ego and the superego make him realize that it is not good to make a girl lose her virginity in that way. It is against morality to make a girl whose age is as the same as his daughter lose her virginity. His ego makes him try to be a good citizen and live his life according to the social and religious norms, as he says at the beginning of the movie.

“My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighbourhood. This is my street. This... is my life.” (Ball, 2).

Lesner can stop his fetishism of having sex with Angela because he realizes that it is too bad to make her lose her virginity when she is still too young, the same age as his daughter. The roles of his ego and superego defeat the id from the evil action. Lester has to end his life being shot by his neighbour, Colonel Fitts. Carolyn, Lesner’s wife, who has the intention to kill him is so sad and regrets with her bad intention when she finds about Lester’s death.

## 5. Conclusion

The id, the ego, and the superego have the essential role in causing Lester’s fetishism. Lester’s fetishism appears from his lack of sexual fulfilment since his wife does not want to make love with him. His wife’s dominant role in the family has emasculated him. Being an emasculated man, Lester tries to find a way to satisfy his sexual desire. His id makes him have a fetishism to satisfy his sexual desire. He starts to a sexual fantasy or fetishism with Angela. His fetishism is his escapism from his wife’s emasculation and domination. The ego and the superego succeed in defeating Lester’s id. His ego and superego make him not to continue making love with Angela when he finds that she is still a virgin. His ego and superego make him realize that it is not good and against morality to make a girl lose her virginity in that way.

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