

Metaphorical Criticism of “American Beauty”

A metaphor is generally an outward symbol that is used to depict something else. It is an outward decoration or ornamentation, a symbolic representation of one group of things which are in fact related to something else entirely. The film “American beauty” makes abundant use of metaphors in order to illustrate an inner message that is represented by the metaphorical allusions. The characters in the film are an average middle class American family and their neighbors, yet their portrayal in the film has been done in such a way that they do not appear quite real, rather the audience’s understanding of these characters is conditioned by metaphors that they represent, as revealed in the film through outward symbols such as a red rose and a floating garbage bag. The underlying message in the film is every human being’s quest for happiness and beauty, but this message is communicated through metaphors rather than stated directly in the dialogues. One of the most significant metaphors in the film is the use of the color red, as represented in the rose and rose petals that occur periodically in the film. The red symbolizes love and lust, yet it also symbolizes violence and death. Similarly, the metaphor of a garbage bag is used to present a message that is quite the opposite – that of beauty and transience.

Each one of the characters in the film is involved in the same search – the search for happiness, although in each character’s case, the object of happiness is different. For the protagonist Lester, happiness lies in sexual conquest of his daughter’s friend by becoming youthful again, which reflects his desire to pull himself out of his current family situation where he is controlled by his wife and her perceptions of what is socially correct. For his wife Carolyn, the object of happiness is material – that of becoming the best and richest real estate agent that she can be. The daughter finds her happiness with the neighbor’s son Ricky who shows her how to break free of the controlling influence of her family and friend.

A metaphor is an outward symbol that helps in the process of attaining knowledge about the world. It is a group of things related in a particular manner in order to discover similar relations within another group, through the agents of language, categorization, comparison and contrast. It presents visually, the message that is being transmitted mentally, through the cognitive abilities of association. In applying metaphor criticism, Foss(1996) identifies two major aspects (a) tenor and (b) vehicle (p. 360). The tenor of the metaphor is the actual

subject or the principal focus of the metaphor, while the vehicle is the means that is employed in order to convey the tenor and is therefore the secondary frame or the visual representation of the metaphor in the film. Therefore in analyzing the artifact that is at issue, one must first identify the metaphors that are being used in the presentation of this artifact. Each metaphor is associated with the tenor and its vehicle that help to transmit the metaphorical allusion to the viewer, in order that the underlying message that is associated with the artifact is transmitted through the metaphors.

Applying this in the case of the film “American beauty” it may therefore be seen that the metaphorical artifact that is being presented is a satirical look at suburban life in the desire of Lester’s household for happiness and new life. This has been achieved through the use of two major metaphors (a) the color red and (b) the garbage bag. In the various representations of these two metaphors throughout the film, there is a complex interaction which aids and enhances the conduit of the viewer into absorbing the artifact that is being presented in the film. Another important part of metaphorical criticism is also to analyze the impact of these metaphors on the viewer – does it portray the message that is intended to be conveyed and how effectively is this message conveyed? The rhetorical critic must therefore endeavor to “produce criticism concerned with intricacies of rhetorical strategies and the effects they are thought to have produced.” (Foss, 1989, p. 25).

The artifact in the film “American beauty” is presented through several metaphors, however, the primary focus of this paper will be two aspects (a) the color red and (b) the garbage bag. The tenor of the color red is used liberally in the film to reflect deeper emotions such as love and life. Perhaps the strongest and most effective vehicle through which this tenor is conveyed is the red rose. It appears in various forms – the red rose that Lester holds between his teeth symbolizing his love/lust for Angela, the young friend of his daughter. Lester sees her dancing and visualizes red petals falling out of her jacket, in another scene he sees her lying on a bed of rose petals. Yet again, she appears in a bath surrounded by red petals, inviting him to give her a bath. These representations reflect Lester’s underlying lust for Angela. The color red is associated with love and life, death and danger. It is vital and vibrant, symbolic of the sexual gusto with which Lester pursues the girl. It is the color of youth, which Lester puts on in his bid to attract her. When he goes jogging, his shirt is red,

and he buys himself a brand new red Pontiac firebird. He throws up his job with the typical recklessness of youth, putting on a new persona as he transforms from the dull middle aged man to the youthful man sporting red whenever he gets a chance. When he reports for his new job, he's wearing a red shirt and a red hat.

The tenor of red is not associated only with Lester. It is the same bright red that fires Carolyn as well. As she makes her bid to sell a house and pulls off her clothes, she is dressed in a red slip. Her home has a red door on it, her table had red flowers on it, all representing the sexuality and lust underlying the bland exterior. On the day that Lester dies, towards the end of the film, she is wearing a bright red dress as if she were celebrating the event. But while red is the color of life, it's also the color of death. Lester, in embracing it, also embraces danger which finally results in his death, for red is associated with violence and bloodshed. The film shows blood everywhere when Lester dies, there's blood on the wall, blood spattered on the furniture, all over his body on the carpet – he lies in a pool of blood towards the end of the film, reflecting on the few and precious moments that stand out in a lifetime of ennui. The red represents his search for beauty which is inherent in the youthful color, but this search ends in death – a colossal waste resulting from his failure to appreciate what he had. Similarly, the same disastrous result awaits Carolyn who is devastated at her husband's death and almost embraces the death of red herself, but stops herself at the very end, realizing that she has a family to look after.

Through the metaphor of red, the film conveys the message of lust and danger, a satirical look at the manner in which a couple who were once in love have drifted apart, each pursuing goals that are wasted and only serve as diversions from the real goal they are seeking.

The film conveys the sense of everything that has been missed, the element of regret, through the use of yet another tenor – garbage. While garbage is perceived as wasteful and worth discarding, the character of Ricky finds beauty in it. He has filmed a piece of plastic dancing in the wind and he says that the bag “is the most beautiful thing I have ever filmed.” (American Beauty). He is so moved by the beauty he sees in this piece of plastic that he tells

Jane, Lester's daughter; "Sometimes there is so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can't take it in, my heart's just going to cave in." (American Beauty).

Through the vehicle of the plastic bag, the film conveys the message that beauty and happiness can be found even in a piece of garbage – i.e, where one least expects it. The piece of plastic swirls around and around, it can be blown away by the wind any minute and this signifies that happiness is transient. The plastic is dancing in the wind, twirling and swirling with glee, but the happy freedom could disappear any moment. So is life... and through the tenor of garbage, the film reveals that happiness must be grabbed wherever it can be found, even in the most unlikely places – and it must be cherished because it could disappear any moment.

The garbage also represents confusion – it keeps going around and around without any purpose, blown in the wind. This is thus a symbolic representation of the confusion that is also inherent in life. This vehicle also demonstrates opposite sides to it, just like the tenor of red. While red represents life and death, lust and bloodshed, the garbage represents transience and aimlessness, happiness and confusion at the same time. Beauty may be found even in a piece of a garbage bag, as Ricky found it. The character of Ricky is a profound one, he is a boy who is in touch with his inner self and has the guts to search for and find happiness and beauty through the simple method of appreciation. On the other hand, the characters of Lester and Carolyn have lost this ability to appreciate each other and that has caused the failure of their marriage. The very title of the film is thus a metaphor: beauty can be found anywhere if one has the time and senses to appreciate it.

Thus, the film "American beauty" is a metaphorical look at life itself, a satirical representation of the so called suburban utopia, revealing that the source of happiness is in simple, everyday, ordinary things. In this, it reaches out to the viewer – not through anything strikingly unusual in the story but through the metaphorical use of symbols to represent a philosophical view of life and portray many insights that lie hidden in the tenors, visible to

the discerning viewer who is able to appreciate them, just as life's beauties are visible to those who can appreciate them.

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