

American Beauty

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American Beauty: The Alchemy of Transformation J. T. Kiehl Prelude "The opus magnum had two aims: the rescue of the human soul and the salvation of the cosmos..." [1] Films have the remarkable ability to move people's souls. The popularity of particular films, especially those that become surprise box office hits, indicates a power to awaken archetypal patterns from within. American Beauty is such a film. It surprised many by its popularity. What are the patterns that this movie aroused within us? Why were so many people talking about this movie? The theme of American Beauty centers on the redemption of one man's soul. The path of redemption follows many of the steps of Jungian analysis. Jung realized the path of individuation was presaged by the alchemical process. The present essay will explore the parallels between the film American Beauty and the stages of the alchemical process. The ultimate goal of the alchemical process was to create the Philosopher's Stone, or lapis. This Stone had many properties, but it was mainly identified as a transforming agent, that which transformed base metals into gold. Symbolically the Stone transformed an individual's consciousness. Beauty can have the same effect on an individual. It can lead to a change in consciousness, which begins at a physical level and reaches the spiritual. There are three basic stages in the production of the Stone, the nigredo, the albedo and the rubedo. Each step in the alchemical process has a parallel in the movie, American Beauty.

Nigredo "Right at the beginning you meet the "dragon," the chthonic spirit, the "devil" or, as the alchemists called it, the "blackness," the nigredo, and this encounter produces suffering..." [2] The film begins with a disembodied voice, the voice of Lester Burnham the main character in the movie. Lester's voice informs us that "This is my life. I'm forty-two years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead." [3] An early scene in the movie shows Lester in the shower, masturbating. Masturbation is physical love without the opposite. Thus, there is no conjunction. He tells us of the low state of his life. He exists, but does not live. The mid-life point where a man finds himself after working so many years. We are in the nigredo stage, that dark place of loneliness where the transformation process must begin. Separated from those we love, unable to relate. Even the name of this character tells us his state: Lester, i.e. lesser; Burnham, i.e. burnout. This is a place filled with shadows. Lester must face these shadows before he can move on to the next stage of transformation. The nigredo requires a dissolution of ourselves. We need to take apart the pieces of ourselves, so that we may better understand of what we are composed. This process requires the application of heat, or calcination. Lester introduces us to his wife, Carolyn who is tending her rose bushes; and to his daughter, Jane. The Burnham family forms a trinity of one man and two women. There is an imbalance, in that a complementary male figure, the shadow, is missing from this picture. Lester's first task in the nigredo will be to find his shadow, in order to bring about a quaternity. In the early phase of the movie, we learn that Carolyn is a domineering woman, who wants everything in her house to be 'just right'. She is separated from Lester both physically and mentally. There is no conjunction of opposites possible between Lester and Carolyn, just animosity. Carolyn seeks power in her work and at home. Power is not available to her in her failing real estate business, so she rants at her husband and child. Next, Lester learns that he is about to be laid off from his job of 14 years. He is angry that after so much time, the company is going to let him go. He has reached the bottom in his life. His marriage is a failure, his daughter is alienated from him, and he is about to lose his job. In a voice over, Lester states "I have lost something. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but I know I didn't always feel this ... sedated" [4]. Lester looks out the kitchen window, he feels like someone is watching him. It is Ricky Fitts, the teenager who has just moved next door to the Burnhams. Ricky is video taping Lester and Jane from his back yard. Ricky is a Mercurius figure. He begins as a shadow figure for Lester, but later becomes a more powerful symbol for the Self. Thus, he leads Lester to realize his state of despair, but also guides him to a new life. Ricky lives with his mother, Barbara, and father, Colonel Fitts. They are a family living in the shadow of repression. Colonel Fitts is a man possessed by anger and power. He physically abuses his son, and terrorizes the household, which he runs like a military unit. This family also forms a trinity, but one filled with two men and one woman, the mirror image of the Burnham family. The feminine, Barbara, is wounded to the point of psychosis. She is unable to relate. Thus, what is needed in the Fitts family is the functioning feminine. This family is even more dysfunctional than the Burnhams, a result of the abuse of power, both physical and psychological. Ricky survives through deception and secrecy, the way of Mercurius. He views his world through the lens of a video camera. He looks for beauty that he can record and view over and over. This provides a safe environment for him to live life. This way of life has also instilled wisdom within Ricky. Of all the characters in American Beauty, Ricky seems the most integrated. But Ricky also needs relationship with the feminine, just like Lester.

Albedo "In the alchemical work the nigredo is followed by the albedo. This phase corresponds in the individuation process to the integration of the inner contrasexual components, the anima in the case of the man, the animus with a woman." [5] The transformation begins when a man starts to touch the collective unconscious. The mediator in this process is the anima. Lester and Carolyn attend a basketball game where Jane is a cheerleader. While watching the performance, Lester sees Angela, Jane's friend, in the performance. Lester is captivated by Angela's beauty. Angela's name, i.e. Angel, Greek for messenger, clearly indicates that she is Lester's anima. Lester meets Angela and Jane after the game and he flirts with Angela, and she reciprocates. That night lying in bed, Lester imagines Angela hovering over him. Rose petals drift down on him. He thinks "I feel like I've been in a coma for about twenty years, and I'm just now waking up" [6]. The rose petals cover his face and he smiles. The rose is a mandala symbol of wholeness. The image of roses appears throughout the film. The presence of roses in the film relates to Aphrodite, Greek goddess of Love and Beauty. "She manifests herself in the magic bloom of gardens..." [7] "Ever on her hair she wears a garland of sweet-smelling roses..." [8] Aphrodite signifies that beauty which has a transformative power. She also represents feeling and relationship. These are the functions that are missing in both the Burnham and Fitts households. The feeling function, the ability to relate, is required for wholeness. Both families lack this

function, as do so many American families. Integration of the feeling function is needed in both families. "...[T]he psychological significance of the red flower...is... that in an intellectual man feeling is usually the fourth function, which means it is least accessible in everyday life. Developing it is always difficult and sometimes dangerous." [9]The wounds in the Fitts family are so great that healing is not possible. For the Burnham family, Lester's initial attraction to Angela offers the hope of integration. Aphrodite "... is beauty and smiling charm, she enraptures. Not the urge to take possession comes first, but rather the magic of an appearance that draws irresistibly into the rapture of union..." [10] "...her magic draws the contact of limited creatures into boundless dissolution". [11] Dissolution is an alchemical process that is needed for the albedo stage. It signifies a cleansing and breaking down into fundamental components. The 'irresistible draw' of Aphrodite evokes the anima. The process washes Lester clean of the dark matter that has dragged him down into his state of depression. This again shows the proximity of shadow and anima in the individuation process. The transformation has begun, he is waking from his 'sedated' life. In alchemy, this is likened to finding the rejected stone to begin the process. This stage is the albedo, the brightening phase. It depends on Lester working with the feminine side. Lester meets Ricky at a real estate agents party to which Carolyn has dragged him. Lester slips away from this party and meets Ricky in a dark back alley. A perfect place for shadow work. Ricky is working at the party as a server. He has slipped away to smoke a joint. He offers Lester the joint and this 'joins' Lester with his shadow, Ricky. Drugs lower the barrier between the conscious and the unconscious. Ricky later becomes Lester's drug supplier, and hence an agent of the unconscious. Carolyn finds Lester with Ricky and tells him that it is time for them to leave, but Lester stands up to Carolyn. The shadow and the anima can work together at the beginning of individuation. "Shadow and anima, being unconscious are contaminated with each other..." [12]. The separation finally takes place when "the existence of the anima (or the shadow) is accepted and understood". Thus, at the beginning, Ricky and Angela can both lead Lester to a deeper understanding. When Lester begins to stand up to Carolyn, the negative Mother, the separation begins and his relationship with Angela develops. Later that night, Lester overhears Angela tell Jane "Your dad's actually kind of cute ... If he worked out a little, he'd be hot." [13] These words from Angela enable Lester to act on his feelings of 'waking up'. He begins to exercise to look better. He threatens to reveal illicit company abuse and ends up leaving the company with a nice financial arrangement. On a lark he takes a job at a fast food place, similar to work he did as a teenager. He listens to rock music that he liked as a younger man. Here we see Lester's first manifestation at redemption as a regression to his younger days. This is the classic picture of the man at mid-life trying to physically become young again, the sports car, hair transplant, younger trophy bride syndrome. It is almost as if the psyche cannot find the ultimate source of energy-a soulful source-without first seeking to regain physical youth. This can be the end of the process for many. The soul remains in matter; the alchemical process is aborted. This is where shadow and anima can work in parallel to move the individual to a deeper source of energy. The alchemical process works in repeating stages. The opus is not completed in a single turn through all the stages. Thus, the shadow continues to re-appear as does the anima. Rubedo "In rubedo everything comes together and, in so doing, enters a different dimension. Above and below, Heaven and Earth, meet and marry. There is a sense of suspension here as well as timelessness- just as there is in all those moments when we experience ourselves as being outside of time... There is a marriage but there is also a death." [14] "The growing redness (rubedo) which now follows denotes an increase of warmth and light coming from the sun, consciousness. This corresponds to the increasing participation of consciousness, which now begins to react emotionally to the contents produced by the unconscious. At first the process of integration is a 'fiery' conflict, but gradually it leads over to the 'melting' or synthesis of the opposites. The alchemists termed this the rubedo, in which the marriage of the red man and the white woman, Sol and Luna, is consummated." [15] "But in this state of "whiteness" one does not live in the true sense of the word, it is a sort of abstract, ideal state. In order to make it come alive it must have "blood", it must have what the alchemists call the rubedo, the "redness" of life. Only the total experience of being can transform this ideal state of the albedo into a fully human mode of existence. Blood alone can reanimate a glorious state of consciousness in which the last trace of blackness is dissolved... Then the opus magnum is finished: the human soul is completely integrated." [16] Ricky and Jane are entering into a relationship. Ricky has been watching and video taping Jane since he moved next door to the Burnhams. Jane brings the feminine to the Fitts family. She opens up to Ricky and in turn Ricky begins to tell Jane about his feelings, something he is unable to do with his parents. He shows Jane a video of a plastic bag being blown by the wind, it is beautiful and moving. He tells Jane "That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid. Ever." [17] He also explains why he views life through his video camera: " Video's a poor excuse, I know. But it helps me remember...I need to remember..." [18] For Ricky, beauty in life keeps him from fear. He sees and records this beauty through his camera, a device that both re-collects and projects images of beauty. It is also at this time that Ricky shows Jane a plate with a Nazi swastika on it, a part of his father's war memorabilia. This act results in the beating of Ricky by his father. The plate is a symbol of evil of the collective unconscious. It represents the abusive power of Ricky's father. A symbol of fear that Ricky overcomes through his recording of beauty. He tells Jane "Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it...and my heart is going to cave in." [19] Jane and Ricky's relationship allows these two teenagers to manifest their love for each other. Jane is an anima figure for Ricky, and allows him to move away from the evil in the Fitts' household. Beauty is a central theme in this movie. Lester's attraction to Angela is based on her physical beauty. Angela is preoccupied with her physical beauty, she wants to be a fashion model. Jane is preoccupied with her physical beauty, since she keeps looking at herself in the mirror and is saving money for a 'boob job'. Carolyn takes pride in the physical appearance of her home and her rose garden. Ricky is able to see a deeper beauty in life. He sees that Jane is beautiful just as she is, and tells Angela that she is ordinary compared to Jane. How is beauty tied in with the alchemical process? Beauty is something we can perceive in objects separate from ourselves. The more conscious we are, the more we are able to perceive Beauty. Is Beauty inherent in the object of our perception, or do we project Beauty into the object? Perhaps both processes occur at the same time. No matter, the process of discovering Beauty in objects

and developing our awareness to Beauty parallels the alchemists attempt to perfect base matter, the prima materia, into the lapis or Stone, The alchemist is striving to find Spirit in matter. When the process is complete an awareness or awakening occurs. Beauty can be perceived in an object, it serves as the vehicle to awakening. Ricky is wise enough to realize this, and Lester is about to realize this as well. In the final day of Lester's life the consummation of the symbolic union of consciousness and unconsciousness takes place. Angela is staying over with Jane, but they have a fight because of Ricky. Angela leaves Jane's room and meets Lester. They flirt and finally Angela agrees to have sex with Lester. But then Angela tells Lester that she is a virgin. Lester finally awakens to what he is doing, and puts a blanket around Angela. There is a loud clap of thunder outside, and Lester smiles. He has reached a new state of awareness. He is happy. Later Angela asks him how he is doing. He says "God, it's been a long time since anybody asked me that", after a pause he smiles and says "I'm great"[20]. Through this American Beauty, Angela, Lester has been awakened to a greater realization. He sees Angela as a separate person. A beautiful young girl, and not a part of his projection. To consciously experience Beauty requires us to be separate of the object, which can only occur if our projections are withdrawn. He also realizes that his life is full. He stares at the picture of his family and smiles. At this blissful moment, we see a gun pointed at the back of Lester's head. The camera moves away and the trigger is pulled. The white kitchen walls are sprayed with Lester's blood. Lester has taken the final step in the rubedo process. Later we see that Colonel Fitts is the murderer. This violent act was precipitated by Lester decline of the colonel's homosexual overture to him. The colonel's persona is one of pure masculinity, the military paragon, where feeling and the feminine are denied. This persona is in direct conflict with the colonel's true repressed homosexual orientation. Outwardly, the colonel despises homosexuals. But the truth is that he is a homosexual. This tension between his persona and unconscious reality, produces a tremendous feeling of shame. In killing Lester, the colonel attempts to remove the perceived external cause of this shame. Ironically, the one couple in the Burnham-Fitts neighborhood that seems the most functional is the gay couple, Jim and Jim, who live to the left of the Burnham's. They exhibit a strong sense of feeling and wholeness. Unus Mundus "Everything good is costly, and the development of personality is one of the most costly of all things." [21] "The experiential experience of the unus mundus seems to be a transcendent one. The West Nigerians say, 'Only when a man dies does he discover the mystery of life.'" [22] Joining with the feminine implies relationship (L. relatio, a bringing back). Lester's experience with Angela creates the ability for him to relate not just to her but the world. The ultimate level of relationship is an awareness of our interdependence with all that surrounds us, which is the unus mundus. This is a state where our identity is preserved, consciousness is not lost, but expanded. The final scenes are pictures of Lester and his family. His voice is heard over these pictures. He says "I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me ... but it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst ... and then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life..."[23]. The state of the unus mundus is one where matter, mind and spirit are in a single unified existence. It transcends the separateness that we normally perceive. This state is described by Jung: "Yet there is so much that fills me: plants, animals, clouds, day and night, and the eternal in man. The more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things." [24] The state of awareness where barriers between matter and spirit no longer exist. Lester lives forever in this Beauty. Bibliography 1. C.G. Jung Speaking: Interviews and Encounters, ed. W. Mcguire and R.F.C. Hull, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1977, p. 228. 2. ibid 3. American Beauty, The Shooting Script, Alan Ball, Newmarket Press, N.Y., 1999, p. 1. 4. ibid, p. 5. 5. C.G. Jung: His Myth in Our Time, Marie-Louise von Franz, C.G. Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, N.Y., 1975, p. 223. 6. 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