
The Theme of Happiness in "American Beauty", "Death of a Salesman" and "The Great Gatsby"

Happiness can be defined in many different ways and is based on perception. In the eyes of every individual, the pursuit of happiness has a greater meaning where many of the characters try to find it in their own manner. People disguise their own happiness as an escape from reality and for a major part of people, materialism blindly robs you of your happiness. The Death of a Salesman, a play written by Arthur Miller, American Beauty, a film directed by Sam Mendes, The Great Gatsby a film directed by Baz Luhrmann and novel Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates. In society today there are individuals who struggle with depression from within but wear a mask, disguising their true self with a false image. Their happiness is like an illusion that they create from themselves where the reality does not exist in their world. We all have a point in life where true happiness comes and goes but it is a common struggle to define the meaning as many of the characters in the four texts attempt to live in other people's reality in regards to society today. Individuals who feel like this don't really know or like themselves that they need to please other people rather than please themselves because they don't really know who they are.

People disguise their own happiness as an escape from reality where the false image creates a deception. Some individuals give up their own happiness to please other people due to society. We've evolved to be emotionally sensitive to social disapproval. It provokes a cocktail of feelings that includes various proportions of fear, embarrassment, shame, and guilt. So, we tend to avoid pursuing personal desires that conflict with group expectations.

American Beauty, directed by Sam Mendes is a film that portrays the theme of Happiness as a goal, as a mask and disguise. All of the characters in this text are involved in the pursuit of happiness, although they have very different ideas about what happiness is and how it is discovered for themselves. A character that disguises their happiness and reality is Carolyn Burnham, the wife of Lester Burnham. The character of Carolyn Burnham represents the commonly-held belief that happiness is about perception, she's happy if others think she is. She is extremely concerned as to what people think of her, especially when it comes to her career life. Carolyn's job as a real estate is always first over everything, and her marriage turns into a facade. As she works, she chants "I will sell this house today" over and over again. She listens to self-help tapes and repeats phrases from motivational speeches to give an "image of success". When a sale of the house seems hopeless, she still carries a bright a positive belief to display for each new home showing. When she couldn't sell the house after 5 couples came and we see her break down, "Shut up. Stop it. You... Weak! You baby!" She doesn't allow

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herself the luxury of giving in to her emotions through and slaps herself until the tears stop. At one point she explains, "...my business is selling an image. And part of my job is to live that image."

Despite her insecurities and compulsions with her appearance, she finds a bit of fun when she sees her husband cutting loose and having no care about everything. The more Lester becomes pleased with his new life, the more Carolyn angrier and struggles against him and his attitude. He tries to bring them back to a time when they were young and they could laugh about life. Lester who has believes that this is as well still in Carolyn but she feels that Lester tries to undermine her position and backs away from him, building up even more loath. Confused by her husband's new perception in life, Carolyn's choices and her mindset changes when she sparks a relationship with a professional real estate rival, Buddy Kane. Mendes illustrated through Carolyn that looks can be deceiving. Having been married for about 20 years, Carolyn and Lester have drifted apart in their marriage throughout their time spent with one another. They try to keep their image of a perfect family and family, especially Carolyn but fail as the facade crumbles up to the last closing scenes.

The character of Lester Burnham finds his way through true happiness where his life improves for the better. He got in shape, changed his work situation, improved his well-being, and re-discovered the pleasures that he had long desired for. He finds his true happiness when he looks at his family picture but it was too late to do anything when he was shot in the head by Colonel Fitts. All these are realities in today's society but are not often portrayed in this way. The conclusions I can make from this text in regards of my theme statement is that we live live our daily routines every single day without realizing that this life is just a temporary state. American Beauty tells how life is short and you should make the best of it, don't get caught up in whatever society deems proper. Instead do what it takes to find happiness and be happy. Life is short and we all end up dead sooner or later, so we might as well enjoy the time we have left in the world.

Similarly, the play Death Of A Salesman by Arthur Miller deals with the protagonist Willy Loman trying to find happiness in someone else's reality and dream. Arthur Miller introduces us to the main character, Willy Loman, an old salesman living through depression of America and is rather an ordinary man. The theme statement of "People disguise their own happiness as an escape from reality where the false image creates a deception," relates to this text where Willy's idea of happiness is similar to American Beauty. Willy Loman is an insecure, self-deluded salesman. Willy lives a life of misconception as he thinks the key to happiness is to be successful and judged by his appearance. He believes in the American Dream of success and wealth, but he never achieves it. Willy's illusions about success impacted every part of his son's lives. This is shown in the quote "I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been." This is Biff coming to a conclusion with the fact that his father's illusions of success were just a

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facade. Biff has spent his life trying to live up to an impossible falsehood vision of himself that never existed. "I've got to get some seeds. I've got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the group." This is Willy realizing that his whole career has built up to nothing. He worked for 40 years and has nothing to show for it.

A character from American Beauty that shows false happiness is Lester Burnham. Lester thinks he can find happiness through re-living the menacer of his youth and not caring of his success in life while Willy thinks he can find happiness through only success and his appearance to everyone. The characters dreams are different but some of them are able to find false happiness. This is shown with Willy when he loses his job. Willy is so consumed by the idea of his philosophy that even though he is failing he convinces that he is successful. As with Lester, he quits his job and blackmails his boss into paying him money. This shows how both characters dreams are different but their goals in for a false happy life are extremely similar. Instead of finding his own key, he makes up a reality in which he pretends to be happy. By failing to discover your own personal and realistic dreams, you simply cannot be truly happy with life. Willy contradicts himself by saying that he is well-liked by others and frequently deceives himself about his success and wealth. The character gets trapped in the false image he has created, believing the lies he has been telling himself and to others for years. Regarding my theme statement, the character Willy Loman gives a false image towards everyone including his family and himself. His pride in being liked by everyone was the only thing that mattered in his reality although he didn't realize it himself that he has created a lie because he started to believe in his dream.

The novel, Revolutionary Road was written by Richard Yates focuses on the characters Frank and April Wheeler where they have fallen into a life that appears to most as being perfect. The text American Beauty and Revolutionary road are very similar as the lives of the Burnhams and the Wheelers create a deception to themselves and others. In Revolutionary Road, the Wheelers live in the suburbs with two young children. The society sees them as beautiful, successful and charismatic couple but the reality is nowhere near to that.

Frank Wheeler commutes to New York City where he works in an office job at a printing company while his wife April stays home as a housewife. As the novel continues, the writer tells the readers that the couple are not happy as they seem to the outside world. April is a failed actress and Frank hates his job although he has never figured out what his passion in life is. "Now you've said it. The hopeless emptiness. Hell, plenty of people are on to the emptiness part; out where I used to work, on the Coast, that's all we ever talked about. We'd sit around talking about emptiness all night." He felt as if he were sinking helplessly into the cushions and the papers and the bodies of his children like a man in quicksand. When things take a turn in the novel, April decides she will do whatever she has to to get herself out of her unhappy existence. This is what happens to most of us. Being trapped in relationships we don't want but

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has to live in them because there are no better alternatives. The change is the most fascinating thing and at the same time, it is the most difficult thing. Change is not easy. It is good in our dreams but when coming to action it's most difficult task to accomplish it.

At the start of the movie main protagonist, Frank wants to go to his dream country to start his passion on the advice of his wife. His wife advised this because she also just wants to release from the monotonous clutches of life by shifting to another country. When April finds out she is pregnant with her third child she attempts at abortion and intense fights lead to her committing suicide where her pregnancy is a big barrier to her escape. American Beauty develops around a married couple who appear normal, who try to act happy and are neither of those things. It's another story of a marriage falling apart, another warning that one day you might wake up and out of nowhere realize how miserable you are. They've endured a thankless marriage for years, and are bored with their suffering. Both stories spiral toward tragedy due to miscommunication and discontent or maybe inevitability. The novel, Revolutionary Road concerns itself with the exploration of the prison we find ourselves in, the jail which society and culture demands of us to be confined in. One of the biggest challenges in life is trying to be yourself in a world that is wanting you to be like everyone else.

For a major part of people, materialism blindly robs you of your happiness. People use materialism as a means to fill a cognitive void in their life. When people feel they are lacking something in their lives, they try to replace it with material possessions. What often happens is that people get a temporary boost of happiness from a particular product but the amusement and contentment tend to fade with time as they adapt to having it over time.

In the film, The Great Gatsby directed by Baz Luhrmann most of the characters use materialism as a way for happiness but it is only temporary. The character Jay Gatsby devotes his adult life trying to recapture his past but dies in its pursuit before he could accomplish his dream of having Daisy's heart. In the past, Gatsby had a love interest with a young rich girl, Daisy. Daisy and Jay had fallen in love with each other even though they knew that they could not marry because of the difference in their social status. For the first time in his life, Jay Gatsby was truly happy with her. During their romantic love for each other, Jay was sent off to war. When he returns from the war, Jay found out that Daisy had married a wealthy man by the name of Tom Buchanan. Jay then spends his life achieving wealth to reach her economic standards, in hope that he can rekindle their relationship of happiness that he once had. His love for Daisy was impossible in society because "he was at present a penniless young man without a past he had no comfortable family standing behind him" He knew that at that time a relationship of love was impossible with Daisy due to his low social standing. Gatsby became determined to rapture that gap between them. Gatsby is convinced that the more money he makes, the greater the chance his enticement to Daisy will increase. He believes that she will love him based on his money that's why he buys his huge mansion across from her.

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In Nick Carraway's narration, he says "Five lost years struggled on Daisy's lips. But all she could manage was, 'It's just... because I've never seen such beautiful shirts before.'" Nick witnesses the heartbreak in Daisy's face as she admires Gatsby's shirts. He says that while Daisy has so much to express to Gatsby after five years of having been separated, she can only comment on his many expensive shirts. After five years of yearning, her longing is now changing into a deep sadness as she realizes what she and Jay could have had things been different. The shirts only make everything more tragic and become symbols of her longing for Gatsby and his newfound wealth. She could not have married him five years earlier, because he was poor and their difference in social status. Now, however, he is a wealthy man, as represented by his shirts, and she can more easily imagine being in his life. Wealth is not the most important factors in our lives. It does not bring anyone happiness or love. Gatsby could not use money to buy Daisy's love. Also, although Gatsby knows many important people after he dies only a few people come to his funeral.

The theme statement of how materialism blindly robs you of your happiness is shown in the film *American Beauty* directed by Sam Mendes. The directors of *The Great Gatsby* and *American Beauty* both explain in their texts that the pursuit of the American Dream is futile. Attaining the American Dream required a perfect house, family, career, and life but this is completing impossible for everyone. Mendes uses the character of Carolyn to show the superficiality of this society. Carolyn is deliberately made a real-estate agent, a job she claims to "sell an image." She presents herself as having attained the dream through the clothes she wears, but it's all a facade. The Burnham's household is placed perfectly in an upmarket suburban neighborhood. The fact that the house is continuously in perfect condition creates the feeling that it is more like an open home rather than a comfortable family residence. Lester shuns Carolyn fixations on possessions, saying to his wife, "This isn't life. This is stuff. And it's become more important to you than living." The emptiness of their home mirrors the emptiness of their lives, which reflect the emotional poverty that has befallen the Burnham's due to Carolyn aspiring to things that will never fulfill her. Carolyn has fallen into the trap of believing that "In order to be successful one must project an image of success at all times," which means that she prioritizes her work over her relationship with her daughter and husband. Material accumulation is what she views as a means to be happy. Carolyn is used as an important symbol and is a character which represents capitalism and consumerism as she strives for success and wealth. She is obsessed with projecting a positive and successful image to her neighbors and others around her. "Lester you're going to spill beer on the couch." Lester replies that it's just a couch." However to Carolyn "It's not just a couch, it's a four thousand dollar sofa upholstered in Italian silk." We see that Carolyn values material objects as part of a false image she projects to other. The fact that Carolyn is willing to tarnish such a rare moment of intimacy with her husband for something as superficial as a couch proves the distressing extent of her materialism. She is obsessed with material possessions. At the beginning of the film *The Great Gatsby*, Luhrmann makes us believe that Gatsby has achieved his dream but throughout the course of the film, we see

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Gatsby as more and more deluded. He believes that Daisy will eventually win her heart based on his money. The director criticises the way materialism makes people yearn for unattainable goals.

American Beauty, Death of a Salesman, The Great Gatsby and Revolutionary Road are all texts that show the theme of Happiness in different aspects in their own significant way. People disguise their own happiness as an escape from reality and for a major part of people, materialism blindly robs you of your happiness.

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