



## James Joyce's *American Beauty* The Pervert with the Heart of Gold

### [Susan Sutliff Brown](#)



Xerox collage © Susan Sutliff Brown, with a photo by Berenice Abbot.

James Joyce Wins an Oscar.

In the "Nausicaa" chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a virginal exhibitionist, Gerty McDowell, flashes her "knickers. . .the wondrous revealment, half-offered like those skirt-dancers" at Leopold Bloom, igniting his sexual fireworks on a beach in Dublin (366). In a film set almost a hundred years later in an American suburb, another virginal seductress flips her dance skirt, giving admirers a peek at her panties, and inspires a similar burst of auto-eroticism in Bloom's modern incarnation, Lester Burnham.

The "metempsychosis" of Leopold Bloom into Lester Burnham isn't the only astonishing similarity between *Ulysses* and *American Beauty*. When screenwriter Alan Ball accepted the 2000 Golden Globe and Academy Awards for his screenplay of *American Beauty*, he owed a substantial debt — albeit universally unnoticed and, as he claimed in a telephone interview, "unintended" — to Joyce's masterpiece, the book chosen just months earlier by the *Modern Library* editorial board as the "best novel" of the twentieth century.

Yes, the ending of *American Beauty* represents a major departure from the plot of Joyce's novel — but an explicable one in a modern update of the Ulysses saga. Late twentieth-century audiences, which have become desensitized to escalating media violence over the past hundred years and have, in fact, developed an appetite for gore, require a bloody resolution. Despite the ending, we are left with striking reincarnations of Irish urbanites into suburban American personalities.

Consider other parallels: heroes Leopold Bloom and Lester Burnham (same initials, LB) are both middle-aged, middle-class, mediocre, unappreciated admen (Lester describes himself as "a whore for the advertising industry"[49]), neither of whom has had sex with his wife in years. Ultimately both Bloom and Lester yearn to regain the past unity and warmth of their homes.

Bloom muses, "I was happier then" and fantasizes he could "somehow reappear reborn" to his marriage bed with wife Molly (728) while Lester tells us, "That's my wife Carolyn. . . . We used to be happy" and vows, "It's never too late to get it back" (2, 5). Likewise, both feel displaced by a growing estrangement from their teenage daughters: Bloom's surviving child, Milly, and Lester's only child, Jane.

To compensate for their non-existent sex lives, both Leopold and Lester turn first to solo sex in the bath (or in Lester's case, the shower) and both enjoy adulterous, guilty dreams of unorthodox sexual practices, often accompanied by flower imagery. Eventually, our heroes masturbate a second time in response to what Joyce describes in the "Ithaca" chapter of *Ulysses* as "the eroticism produced by feminine exhibitionism (rite of Onan)"(729).

In both novel and film, the young women share reciprocal fantasies with their voyeurs, although, in both stories, no sex beyond what one of Joyce's characters calls "a honeymoon in the hand" occurs (216).

To renew their flagging manhood, Leopold and Lester each turn to a muscle-building program, Bloom with "2 months of consecutive use of Sandow-Whiteley's pulley exerciser" to achieve "the most reprimination of juvenile agility" (681), and Lester by lifting weights in his garage and jogging so he can "look good naked" (44).

Meanwhile both wives are "getting it up" with slick impresarios who are advancing the women's careers: Molly Bloom with her music promoter, Blazes Boylan, "a bounder," "a billsticker," "a bester," "a boaster" (732) and Carolyn Burnham with her Boylan clone, the entrepreneurial "King of Real Estate," Buddy Kane.

Eventually both husbands respond to their wives' infidelity with resignation and understanding. Bloom reasons that Molly's sexual encounter with Boylan is "as natural as any and every natural act" deserving "more abnegation than jealousy, less envy than equanimity" (733). Likewise, despite his wife's sexual romps with the King of Real Estate, Lester contemplates a photograph of a laughing

Carolyn and murmurs her name, not with anger, but, as a stage direction in the shooting script instructs, "with love" (99).

A parallel course in both novel and movie recounts the hero's development of a vaguely homoerotic relationship as surrogate father to a brooding, precocious young man obsessed with theories of beauty. In both novel and movie, the young men leave home estranged from their own fathers, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus to escape the poverty and sordidness of a household in decline because of his father's selfish, drunken behavior and Ball's Ricky Fitts, to, as Ball's stage directions indicate, "break free" from a household in the clutches of the physically abusive and tyrannical "Colonel" (84).

Both young men have also lost the protection and love of their mothers; Stephen's mother is "beastly dead" (8) and Ricky's mother is eternally silent and ineffectual as the result of some form of battered-wife syndrome.

Beyond the parallel family situations, Stephen and his counterpart Ricky are aesthetes consumed with questions about the nature of beauty, particularly in mundane objects, and specifically in an ordinary container for groceries. The basket Stephen torturously dissects as he pontificates on the nature of beauty in *Portrait* becomes a wind-tossed plastic bag in *American Beauty*.

Pointing to "a basket which a butcher's boy had slung inverted on his head," Stephen tells us in *Portrait*, "The same object may not seem beautiful to all people," but the basket can have a beauty and "radiance" which is "felt by the artist when the esthetic image is first conceived in his imagination" (212-13). Similarly, Ricky says he learned from watching the dancing white plastic bag, "that there was this entire life behind things" and "there's so much beauty in the world" (60).

Stephen's lofty goal as writer/observer in the "Proteus" episode, "The signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot" (37) metamorphoses, with the help of modern technology, into Ricky's reading "the life behind things" (such as plastic bags and dead seagulls), through the lens of a video camera.

At the heart of both novel and movie, however, is the character whose initials are LB. Leopold Bloom is Joyce's special contribution to the pantheon of literary characters: the voyeur and masturbator who is also everyman. The pervert with the heart of gold. The character who experiences unorthodox sexual urges but is also a hero. The existence of characters like Bloom and Lester demonstrate that private, even disturbing, sexual peccadilloes are not incompatible with good. In fact, suggest both novel and film, they are inseparable from what is human. Joyce's Bloom — who falls on all fours squealing, "More, Mistress" in a sado-masochistic encounter in "Circe," tries on his wife's underwear, looks up women's skirts, and masturbates in public baths and on a public beach--has also inspired the admiration and tender regard of readers through the ages who celebrate him as what one Joycean character calls an "allroundman" (235).

In his seminal biography of Joyce, Richard Ellmann describes Bloom as "a nobody . . . yet there is god in him. . . .The divine part of Bloom is simply his humanity — his assumption of a bond between himself and other created beings" (372). Of the complicated emotions juggled by Kevin Spacey's Lester, Richard Schickel in *Time* comments that despite Burnham's inappropriate desire for the cheerleader, Lester, "boldly challenging our sympathies. . . . somehow wins them because, to borrow a phrase, he's a man in full."



Digital Film Still, *American Beauty*. Image captured by Dan Christiansen.

We admire both characters for their tolerance. Lester's voice-overs, spoken from the beyond after he's been murdered by his homophobic neighbor, sound like vintage Bloomian internal dialogue: "I guess I should be pretty pissed off about what happened to me. . .but it's so hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. . .And I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life" (100).

Lester Burnham at his ad-agency desk, *American Beauty*.  
"WE SEE THE CANVASSER AT WORK," James Joyce, *Ulysses*.

The personalities of other characters from *Ulysses* are also reproduced with apparent faithfulness in the film. The self-employed prima donna Molly Bloom feels no guilt about her infidelity, and her general attitude about Bloom, although tempered with affection, is "I'm not going to give him the satisfaction"(740). Like Molly, Carolyn plunges guiltlessly into her affair with Buddy and tells Lester, "There's a lot about me you don't know, Mr. Smarty-man" (68).

In addition, the difference between virginal exhibitionists Gerty McDowell, the dreamy reader of romance novels and ladies' popular magazines who is looking for a "manly man" and "the latest thing in footwear" (350-1), and Angela, a tough-talking mall brat brought up on MTV, graphic media sex, and Calvin Klein underwear ads reflects a difference in the historical periods in which they appear, not in their basic personalities. Had Gerty lived in the 1990's, she would have been a mall chick and wannabe cheerleader, trying to attract a male by dressing "hot."

Joyce, who reveled in the Protean world where "God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose" (50) would have appreciated the metempsychosis by which, almost a century later, a "canvasser of ads" becomes a telemarketer, a wife boffing a boaster becomes an adulteress getting it up with an egomaniac, a coy seductress becomes a bratty tease, and a misanthropic self-styled genius becomes "mental boy."

In addition to the plot parallels and replication of character, images and language patterns—such as the peek at underclothes beneath the "dancing skirt" of Gerty and Angela—resonate between the novel of the century and the film of the year. An echo of Bloom's poignant memory of first love with Molly ("Oh wonder! . . . Joy: . . . She kissed me. . . . Me. And me now" [176] and "Young kisses: the first. Far away now past" [66]) resounds in Lester's question to Carolyn, "When did you become so joyless?" (68).

To avoid the pain of marital betrayal, both husbands reduce the adulterous antics of their wives to the same juvenile sexual joke: potted meat. Whenever fears about Boylan's pending rendezvous with Molly pinch at Bloom's consciousness throughout the day, he quells them with a light jest by recalling the advertising slogan, "What's a home without Plumtree's Potted Meat?" Ironically, Bloom's fears are confirmed that night when he finds "some flakes of potted meat" along with "the imprint of a human form, male, not his" in his bed (731).

Keeping his own chin up, and according to the stage directions, speaking in a voice that is "overly cheerful," Lester makes the same defensive joke when he catches his wife with her lover at the fast-food joint where he's flipping hamburgers. As Carolyn and Buddy cruise into the drive-thru window to pick up some "junk food" after their sexual "workout," Lester appears at the window and beams, "Smile! You're at Mr. Smiley's! Would you like to try our new beef and cheese pot pie on a stick?" (77-78).

In addition, Bloom's admiration for Stephen Dedalus ("I know him. He's a gentleman, a poet"[591]), the character who first appeared in *Stephen Hero* before his more mature incarnation in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, resonates verbally and dramatically in Lester's awe of Ricky Fitts when he tells him "You've just become my personal hero" (33). Finally, a reminder of Stephen's bird girl in *Portrait* appears when Jane discovers Ricky video-taping a dead seagull. "I'm filming this dead bird because it's beautiful," he explains in a voice-over, as Jane's face fills the screen (52).

Did all of these stray ingredients accidentally emerge a century apart as the symptom of similar combined forces that define the twentieth century? The most obvious conclusion is that Ball intended his film as a tribute and contemporary reprise, set almost a hundred years later, of the century's most famous story. But, in a pre-Oscar telephone interview, Ball said, "No." In fact, he explained, he has not read *Ulysses*. Although he remembers studying *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he never flipped open the cover of Joyce's revered novel.

Confronted with the plot counterpoints, Ball was amazed and puzzled. He repeated several times, "I really don't know what to make of it," and finally added, "I guess I'm flattered."

Ultimately, said Ball, "I can only attribute the similarities to the existence of archetypes that dwell in everyone's consciousness, a Jungian collective unconscious." He pointed to the "themes and narratives that recur in cultures which have had no contact with one another."

In the same interview, Ball revealed another parallel. The genesis, said Ball, for the characters and themes in his filmscript emerged, as did Joyce's, directly from his personal experiences as an adult and a young man: "When I was writing *American Beauty*, I was in an advertising job I despised; I also grew up in a household not dissimilar to Ricky's. And I'm forty-two — Lester's age."

*Ulysses*, a book whose germination occurred, in part, while Joyce was working at a dead-end job as a bank clerk, was published on Joyce's fortieth birthday, and the two male protagonists of his novel are based on Joyce in his late thirties and as a young man growing up among what Joyce tells us in *Ulysses* are "houses of decay . . . Beauty is not there" (39).

As he puzzled over these parallels, Ball also pointed to a significant difference between the writing of *Ulysses* and that of *American Beauty*. Joyce labored alone for seven years while the final screenplay of *American Beauty*, Ball pointed out, was the product of filmmaking, one of the "collaborative arts." It was, said Ball, "an effort among the fortuitous mix of a great director and brilliant actors" who gave his characters "dimensions much deeper" than he, the writer, had intended.

For example, "under director Sam Mendes, Thora Birch (Jane) and Wes Bentley (Ricky) created characters of such depth and empathy" that Ball said he was prompted to "abandon his original, more sinister" ending for the film, the arrest of Ricky and Janey for Lester's murder. It was "too callous," he explained; "once the characters came alive in the filming," it was clear they were "too innocent" and had "too much heart."

Despite the modern ending, and although Ball collaborated with others and did not consciously intend the parallels with *Ulysses*, the similarities between the Irish novel of an urban mid-life crisis and the

film about an American suburban one are so specific that a final question lingers: If *Ulysses* is the best novel of the century and additionally one of the most popular titles in the Western world, often selling only second to and often ahead of the Bible, why has no movie-goer, reader, or reviewer recognized the similarity between Alan Ball's prize-winning screenplay and Joyce's famous book?



Digital Film Still, *American Beauty*. Image captured by Dan Christiansen.

Carolyn's Mr. Smarty-man scene,  
*American Beauty*.  
"I'm not giving him the satisfaction,"  
James Joyce, *Ulysses*.

Possibly because the novel, despite being the most universally owned by the reading public, is also the least read. As Joyce scholar Tom O'Shea pointed out at a recent James Joyce conference, ownership of *Ulysses* is part of a syndrome which includes the buyer's pledge to read the book "eventually," "some day," "honest," followed by one or two abandoned attempts. The unread *Ulysses* on the shelf functions as an icon, a status symbol, and a future project.

Ball's version of Joyce's plot and characters reflects how the world has changed since Bloom's "fireworks" on the beach in "Nausicaa" (published serially in the *Little Review* at the time) ignited confiscation, book burning, legal prosecution for obscenity, and banning in 1921 (Ellmann 518-19). In 2000, for a film with a similar nymphet-inspired masturbation scene, Ball received one of America's highest accolades, an Academy Award.

However, neither author exploited kinky sex for sensationalism and shock value. Both the early Modernist novel writer and the contemporary screenwriter embraced the same aesthetic goal in depicting unorthodox and traditionally taboo sexual behaviors. In *James Joyce and Sexuality*, Richard Brown concludes that Joyce "is most keen to present his central characters with a variety of shades of sexual tastes as if to suggest that such varieties are intrinsic to human psychology" (83).

Ball echoes Joyce's thinking when he claims his film illustrates that "although the puritanical would have us believe otherwise, there is room for beauty in every facet of life" (114). That both Joyce and Ball probed and exposed the secret sexual lives of their characters — while treating those characters with tolerance and love — marks the most distinctive parallel between them as writers and social critics.

What's next for Ball? A film with characters corresponding to the pilgrims in *Canterbury Tales*? Actually, he says he's planning to take his unread copy of Joyce's famous book off the shelf. Faced with the long list of parallels between Joyce's novel and his script, Ball says, "I'm now inspired to read *Ulysses*." Honest.

Previously published at [nasty](http://nasty.com), home of the brattiest academics on the web.

---

#### WORKS CITED

Ball, Alan. "Afterword." *The Shooting Script: American Beauty*. New York: Newmarket Press, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. Personal Interview. January 10, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Shooting Script: American Beauty*. New York: Newmarket Press, 1999.

Brown, Richard. *James Joyce and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.

Brown, Susan Sutliff. "The Joyce Brothers in Drag: Fraternal Incest in *Ulysses*." *Gender in Joyce*. Eds. Jolanta W. Wawrzycka and Marlena G. Corcoran. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1997. 8-28.

Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce*. New York: Oxford UP, 1959.

Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Viking Press, 1964.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Ulysses*. Random House, 1961.

Schickel, Richard. "Dark Side of the Dream." *Time*. 20 Sept. 1999: n. pag. Online. Juno. 9 Oct. 2000.