Do We TRULY Know Ourselves?

Do we truly know who we are? Socrates once said that “True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand about life, ourselves, and the world around us,” yet what does that mean? In a materialistic society, we tend to solely acknowledge the literal meaning and forget the metaphorical one. In other words, we think we know ourselves, but we do not given that there is much more to know and because we try to avoid the “reality” of our lives.

As a student, I used to hate analyzing poems because it was never concrete enough and, thus, harder to comprehend; however, I have come to realize that life is the same exact way. Life, in truth, is tougher to understand than any movie, television show, or piece of literature because it is real; the idea of comprehension seems simple, yet it indisputably is not. We, as humans, try to fool ourselves a lot more than we may admit. For instance, we try to play around the truth because of our ego; we only want to see what we want.

One of the biggest obstacles any human being will face is confronting their ego (or self). The ego is defined as the consciousness of ones own identity and the problem with that is most people want to keep that hidden. In other words, people tend to “put on a show” or hide behind some persona in order to not let others see the “shadow;” no one wants others to know their vulnerability.

In the movie, American Beauty, there are a range of examples that confirms the notion of people putting up a front and hiding their true feelings or thoughts. Lester Burnham, the main character of the film, spent his entire life being that person; the person that kept everything in the inside. For instance, in the beginning of the film, his wife, Carolyn, is a head of the household;
she is the one in charge, while Lester is the obedient husband that does everything she tells him to do even though Lester would rather not. To illustrate Carolyn’s dominance, there is a scene in the film where she instructs Lester on how to act at her business function: “Lester, listen to me. This is important . . . as you know, my business is selling an image. . . do me a favor and act happy.” However, as the plot progresses, there is an astounding change in Lester: he wakes up from being “dead.” Basically, he rebels and is no longer hiding behind that fake persona Carolyn has set for him. Lester, instead, begins to do what it is that he wants, while also beginning to look at life in a different way; a more dynamic and energetic way.

After witnessing this sudden transformation, Carolyn thinks her husband has lost all rationality given that he simply no longer cares, while she, on the other hand, cares about a great deal of things: work, money, looks, power, and her overall image. Carolyn, for example, comes across as a strong, resolute-minded woman who knows exactly what she wants and goes for it; but, deep down, she is still that vulnerable, little girl whose only wish is to make her mother proud. However, when looking at Carolyn, no one could ever guess her inner turmoil because she refuses to let anyone see; not even her own husband or daughter, Jane. In basic terms, Carolyn keeps herself tamed and “under wraps” because she likes power and considers weakness as being unacceptable; thus, feeling or letting others see her Achilles’ heel are intolerable.

In addition to her parents, Jane Burnham has her own problems as well: she is what is known as the “typical, insecure teenager.” Like many other young ladies her age, Jane is a very self-conscious, angry girl. In one point of the movie, she is looking at her reflection in the mirror with a disgusted expression on her face: she is judging herself. In other words, Jane does not believe she is beautiful by any means and, as a result, she tries to hide herself. In one scene, she enters the car and her mother asks Jane if she is “trying to look unattractive” and she answers my
simply saying “yes.” Jane dresses the way she does and befriends an overly-confident attractive
girl named Angela Hayes as a means to distract any attention that comes Jane’s way;
nonetheless, although she tries to avoid any notice, she truly yearns for it. In a Freudian
perspective, Jane is using a defense mechanism in order to protect her ego from losing all its self-
esteem.

In reality, we are not much different than the characters of the movie, *American Beauty*
given that the conflict between illusion and reality is everywhere: nothing is what it seems. As
humans we make the common mistake of trying to avoid the truth; trying to shun what is really
going on, especially when a loved one is involved. For instance, a man is at a coffee shop with
his fiancée and notices her eying another man; but, the man does not confront the woman he
loves because the possibility that she wants this stranger is too much for her fiancé to bear. In
other words, it was a hit to this man’s ego given that everything he was sure of has now been
threatened; therefore, instead of sorting out the issue, he ignores it.

We, in today’s society, try to prevent ourselves from seeing the inconceivable. We,
basically, do not want to see the realism of poverty, war, depression, hunger, global warming,
and so forth because everything is simply too much to fathom. That is why when we are flipping
television channels, we are more of a tendency to watch “Will and Grace” than the actual news.
If Sigmund Freud were alive, he would describe such behavior as denial given that our
consciousness refuses to acknowledge specific realities.

*American Beauty* capitalizes the notion of false impression; the idea that people hide
their true nature as a way of protection. Angela Hayes, Lester’s teenage obsession, is not
necessarily a main character, yet she has her issues. In the film, her worst fear is to be “ordinary”
and that is why she gives a front of being unordinary or unique; she wants people to notice her
given that she loves the attention. In other words, Angela feels good about herself when she is above everyone else and that is precisely the reason she began associating herself with Jane, a girl with many insecurities about her self-image. Angela basically used Jane as a pawn because being around her increased Angela’s opinion of herself; it made her feel better about herself. When Lester began showing interest in Angela, she enjoyed every moment while most people would feel uncomfortable with the entire situation; she, on the other hand, teased Lester as well as led him on since she loves to be noticed and his interest enlivened her. Towards the end of the movie, Ricky Fitts, Jane’s next door neighbor as well as boyfriend, finally enlightens Angela with the reality: “You’re boring, and you're totally ordinary, and you know it.” This is undoubtedly a hit to Angela’s ego because, deep down, she knows it to be true; however hearing it aloud, hurt her to the very core because she does not want to see the truth. As T.S. Eliot once said, “Humankind cannot bear very much reality.”

As humans, we basically want to see what we want. Reality, in simple terms, is the state of the world as it really is rather than as we might want it to be; it is the part we try to screen our eyes from seeing. For instance, the director of American Beauty captured many of the scenes as if he were a photographer given that the scenes were “frame-like;” in other words, each scene was a picture of truth.

When CSI agents, detectives, and so forth go to investigate a scene, they always bring a camera: pictures, for the most part, are evidence. On the whole, evidence is the method by which the truth of an alleged matter is investigated; therefore, when watching American Beauty, we are being investigators; we are seeing the fact behind the fakeness or the truth behind the illusion.

Truth versus illusion is a universal dilemma; it affects everyone. At times, reality can be too much for an individual to manage, which is why some people may “shut-down.” Basically,
these individuals close up and separate themselves from the rest of the world; they, in essence, lose consciousness and are no longer a part of society. One example of such a person would be Coronel Frank Fitt’s wife, Barbara from *American Beauty*.

Barbara Fitt is undeniably the saddest character of the entire movie; her unhappiness illuminates throughout the whole two and a half hours. Interestingly, her name is hardly ever mentioned; she is only described as “your mother” or “your wife.” This undoubtedly shows the audience that Barbara is fundamentally dead given that a name is what makes a person; therefore if she has no name, she is nonexistent. She spends a significant portion of her day cleaning, cooking, and in a daze; every scene Barbara is in, she is within the walls of the gloomy Fitt household: she is in utter prison. Barbara undoubtedly has no life outside her husband, Frank, and child, Ricky; she is the exemplary model of a submissive wife or the woman that does exactly what her husband asks without any question whatsoever. Carl Jung would assert that this situation is a clear representation of the anima/animus concept. In Jung’s view, the anima is the female spirit in a man and the animus is the male spirit in a woman; therefore, a woman might project the animus onto a man (such as her significant other) as a father-figure and, thus, become completely compliant given that “dad is always right.” In effect, Barbara is not the wife of Colonel Fitt; she is more like his daughter because a marriage is a partnership and instead of being equals, Barbara and her husband have a child-parent relationship where Frank is the sole decision-maker. In her heart, Barbara grasps that there is something not quite right about her marriage, but never expresses those emotions or thoughts; instead, she falls into a severe depression in order to close her eyes to what is right in front of her. Barbara may even know that her husband is actually a homosexual, but the audience never knows for sure given that she fails to show what she knows.
Colonel Frank Fitt is another character of *American Beauty* that refuses to face reality. He, for instances, uses a defense mechanism called reaction formation as a way to lie to himself and not see who he truly is. Sigmund Freud described reaction formation as a complete disguise of a motive/fantasy that it is expressed in a form that is directly opposite to its original intent. In the movie, Frank does exactly that since he puts all his anger and energy in hating homosexuals when he, in truth, is one. Colonel Fitt is a very torn character because he tries to be someone that he is not because he is simply afraid to be the person he is. The army, for instance, teaches boys how to become men: respect, authority, courage, strength, and basic manliness. Thus, Frank was taught that homosexuality is not manliness; that homosexuality is wrong and immoral. And, as a result, Colonel Fitt projects so much hate towards that certain group of people. In one scene, he tells his son, Ricky, “I’d rather you were dead than be a fuckin’ faggot.” In other words, Frank is saying, “I would rather be dead than let people know that I am a homosexual; I would rather be dead than have that shame.”

We, as humans, are incontestably the most challenging species to understand given that we refuse to understand; we refuse to see the truth. All in all, we want to believe what we want because sometimes the truth is too hard to absorb. We tend to protect ourselves even when we do not know exactly what we are shielding ourselves against merely because we fear pain; we do not want to have to endure that overwhelming emotion that feels as if our heart is shattering into small pieces. Everyone uses some sort of defense mechanism in order to spare themselves any pain: like releasing all negative energy like Lester, hiding their vulnerability like Carolyn, staying ordinary and out of the spotlight like Jane, trying to be unordinary like Angela, shutting down like Barbara, or being the opposite of what they are like Colonel Fitt. When all’s said and done, reality is the hardest thing anyone can ever face. As the saying goes, “reality bites.”
Bibliography


