

Year 11 English (Advanced) student work sample – Grade A

Please note: The following work sample has been transcribed for readability. To assist with grading, spelling and grammatical errors have not been corrected and appear as written.

The American Dream is an ideology that forces the beholder of its values to fulfil certain requirements. The limitation of potential and the push for conformity creates high levels of dissatisfaction within those who have been lead to believe its promises of false prosperity. However, it is not that the American Dream is hurting the lives of Americans, it's that it is has, and the generation who have experienced its oppression now wish to eliminate the younger generation from their burden. The negative experience of the American Dream can be seen in Sam Mendes 1999 film, American Beauty, where we find the two characters, Lester and Carolyn Burham trapped by the ideology they had been raised with, as well as Ricky and Jane who serve to represent the new generation.

Lester Burham is shown to have everything in life that should make him happy; a good car; a large house and a seemingly happy family. However, after passing through the houses red door, we pass through the usual metaphor of the façade of the Burham family, we discover a household who betted its future on promises of false prosperity, and lost. Lester is a dreary, cynical and childlike man who feels that he has been “in a coma, for the past twenty years.” He is trapped within the American Dream, he gains no happiness from his job or his possessions and is left to simply continue onwards based on promises of a better future, which is always out of reach. Instead of accepting his predicament, Lester breaks free from the bonds of the American Dream. He seperates his sense of self worth from his job and feels that he has “nothing left to lose”. This shows the endangerment faced to the American Dream, not due to issues of leadership and unity contrary to the listening stimulus, “We need a strong leader”, but instead due to the prolonged suppression of the freedom and the wills of the individual who inevitably break the bonds and set their own direction.

Ricky is a character in American Beauty who showcases the younger generations ability to utilise elements of the American Dream without being impeded by it. Ricky takes from the aspirational traits of the American Dream, whilst ignoring elements which would be detrimental to his prosperity and happiness. Serving as foil to this is Colonel Fitts, who holds these values so strongly, that he pushes down his own latent homosexuality. When the Colonel accuses Ricky of being homosexual and a whore, Ricky replies simply, “What a sad old man you are”. This highlights both Ricky’s and the new generations ability to manipulate the American Dream, but also their ability and decisiveness to ignore the words of the previous generation, and to make their own path. This serves to be of great danger to the construction of the American Dream as it emphasises the new generations openness to change, and that they will strive towards change if the believe that that is what is right. This shows a change in moral values, from “What America was” (Listening Stimulus), to the ever changing, over mutating over insulation of the American Dream today.

Carolyn Burham should be an exemplar case of the success of the American Dream.

Perceptive statement highlighting a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Area of Study that engages with the concepts and presents a strong personal perspective

Detailed references to the film are explained within the context of the question

Critical comparison between the set text and listening stimulus displays perceptive understanding and critical thinking

Well-chosen textual references highlight different perceptions of the concept within the film

She has a steady job, a house and a plethora of goods all of which was obtained through hard work and the transition from poverty to wealth. Despite this, Carolyn is dissatisfied with her life. Contrary to the promises made to her in her youth, that possessions equals happiness, she remains unfulfilled. Instead of gaining a realisation of the true nature of the American Dream as Lester did, Carolyn instead only furthers her obsession with materialisation. She is obsessed with her career, “I will sell this house today”, and her possessions slowly begin to take over her life. “This is a \$4000 sofa, upholstered in Italian silk. This is not just a couch” – Carolyn

“It’s just a couch!” – Lester

Lester attempts to enlighten Carolyn of his viewpoint, however she resists. This can be seen through the use of camera angles. By the end of the film, both Lester and Carolyn are shot using mid-shot, highlighting both individuals struggles to better their own beliefs whilst being in contrast to each other. Yet it is not this obsession with materialism, and the resulting down trodden miserable life that accompanies it that endangers the American Dream, but the effect the Carolyns materialism has on their daughter, Jane. Jane is subject to the misery of her mother, and quickly associates her extensive obsession for materialism will her dystopic life. Jane is told the idea that of “You want it, work for it. Anything is possible” (listening stimulus), however due to her first hand experiences of the falsities of the American Dream, this does nothing but avidly deter her from further pursuing her mothers idealist materialism.

The most apparent example of the endangerment of the American Dream comes from Generational Conflict. It’s the opposing mindset of the old and the young which serves to bring about the altercation and the destruction of the previously held ideologies and values which were associated with the American Dream. The clash between the will of the young and the traditionalist views of the old as seen in the American Beauty through the juxtaposition of the characters of Lester, Carolyn and Colonel Fitts with that of Ricky. It is due to this juxtaposition of morals and mindsets, that American Dream will change, just as it has done previously, whether it be to the will or acknowledgement of the previous generation is irrelevant. Change is an inevitability, not simply an occurrence, and the American Dream will change no matter what is done by a “strong leader” (listening stimulus), or the wills of others, the future of these younger generation is to be decided by them and dictated by none.

Clear links between concepts and text are evident. This could be improved with further analysis

Thoughtful comparison between the set text and listening stimulus displays perceptive understanding of the concept

Well-chosen textual references highlight different perceptions of the concept within the texts

Grade Commentary

Quinn has demonstrated extensive knowledge and understanding of the concept of the American Dream and the way this has been represented in two texts in different media. This insightful response is well structured using carefully selected textual evidence to skilfully support the argument. Confident control of language and essay structure contributes to the cohesion of the response.

Quinn’s response, on balance, demonstrates characteristics of work typically produced by a student performing at a grade A standard.