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Mrs. Crawford

### Satirizing the Nineties

"The standardized American is largely a myth created not least by Americans themselves" (Edman). The 1990s is full of work, materialistic ideas, vanity, and drugs. The literary work *Survivor* by Chuck Palahniuk and the movie *American Beauty* both satirize the nineties with references to workaholics, materialism, vanity, and drug usage in the United States.

Throughout the nineties, Americans began to work longer hours for more money, putting in more hours than people in Western Europe and even Japan (Boroughs et al. 367-8). Lester Burnham, the main character of *American Beauty*, works for the same advertising company for fourteen years; then, when given the opportunity to save his job, he writes a letter to his boss saying:

...My job consists of basically masking my contempt for the assholes in charge, and at least once a day, retiring to the men's room so I can jerk off, while I fantasize about a life that doesn't so closely resemble hell. (*American Beauty*)

By Mr. Burnham writing this letter to his boss, demonstrating that Mr. Burnham cares little about his current job, is the exact opposite of what Americans are all about in the nineties; a “normal” worker would do anything he can to save his job, rather than not caring. Furthermore, after Mr. Burnham leaves his job at the advertising agency he goes and applies for a job at a local fast food joint with “the least amount of responsibility” (*American Beauty*). The fact that Mr. Burnham wants a job with little responsibility mocks the fact that Americans keep taking on new responsibilities—most of which they could not handle. Caroline Burnham, Mr. Burnham’s wife, demonstrates the workaholic American. Mrs. Burnham is determined to sell a house in one day; she cleans the house while repeatedly saying “I *will* sell this house today” (*American Beauty*). When she is unsuccessful with selling the house, she falls on the floor crying because she believes that she is a complete failure at her job. Mrs. Burnham is so wrapped up with selling the house because the American philosophy is the more money and objects one possesses the happier one will be. With the more houses she sells, the more money she will have and the happier she will be, that is according to the American attitude in the nineties. “Average Americans worked longer hours, often at more than one job, just to keep their economic and financial heads above water” (Boroughs et al. 368). Mrs. Burnham’s character is the archetype of the all

American worker of the nineties. She tires hard and works long hours, even though she is not always successful in her endeavors.

If people are not driven by ambition, they work because they are told what to do. Such is the case with Tender Branson, the main character in *Survivor*. When he lived in the Creedish Church District, he obeyed the Church Elder's every command. Once Branson is out in the "real" world, his rich employers pack his days full of chores, be it scrubbing the bricks on the fireplace or getting bloodstains out of various fabrics. Even when Branson is not working and is on the run with his brother, Adam, and friend, Fertility Hollis, he was bossed around by them. By constantly being told what to do, Branson's character demonstrates that Americans are always working like robots whether they liked it or not. Even though Americans did not have time to enjoy their new riches, that fact did not stop them from working longer hours just to be accepted by society.

"The world at large does not judge us by who we are and what we know; it judges us by what we have" (Brothers). Americans begin to show increasing interest in luxurious goods during the nineties.

Homes became larger and contained a greater variety of expensive amenities such as media rooms, home theaters, home offices, and music rooms.

There was a renewed emphasis on interior design.

Home security was an increasingly important concern. (Greene and Malvasi 341)

While growing up in the Creedish Church District, Branson learns all types of ways to get stains out of all types of fabrics. Throughout the book, he brags about this knowledge, "ask me how to get blood out of fur coats" or "ask me how to get tear stains out of a pillow case" (Palahniuk 262). This skill demonstrates Americans obsession with keeping all of their possessions in pristine condition. In *American Beauty*, Mr. Burnham trades in his Toyota Camry for a 1970 Pontiac Firebird. When Mrs. Burnham inquires about the car, Mr. Burnham replies, "Mine. 1970 Pontiac Firebird. The car I've always wanted and now I have it. I rule!" (*American Beauty*). Later in this scene, it dawns upon Mr. and Mrs. Burnham that they "have the whole house to" (*American Beauty*) themselves. As they are starting to get romantic, Mrs. Burnham bursts out, "Lester, you're going to spill beer on the couch." Lester replies, "So what? It's just a couch." Caroline rebuts, "This is a four thousand dollar sofa upholstered in Italian silk this is not 'just a couch'" (*American Beauty*). Appalled by his wife's response, Lester retorts, "This isn't life. This is just stuff. And it's become more important to you than living. Well, honey, that's just nuts" (*American Beauty*). Mr. Burnham's statement is correct—it is *just stuff*. Americans some how got the misconception that having all of the most expensive possessions in the world is what life is all about. Life should be about

having fun and enjoying oneself, not about being caught up in all of the trivial luxuries that just happen to be around in this day and age.

“When they discover the center of the universe, a lot of people will be disappointed to discover they are not it” (Bailey). In the “Narcissistic Nineties” (Akerman et al. 341), there is an increase in interest of personal appearance and self-esteem. According to the NBC Nightly News, more men are receiving plastic surgery than ever before (December 16, 1996). Along the same lines, in *American Beauty*, Mr. Burnham over hears a conversation between Janie, his daughter, and Angela, Janie’s friend, in which he is the topic of discussion. Angela said, “If he [Mr. Burnham] just worked out a little, he’d be hot. If he built up his chest and arms, I would totally fuck him” (*American Beauty*). After hearing, Angela say these words, Mr. Burnham runs down to the garage, strips off his clothes, and begins to work out while staring at his naked reflection in the window. While working out without clothes and staring at your reflection may be a bit on the extreme side, this particular instance demonstrates that Americans have an obsession with being accepted solely based on looks rather than personality. Now, not only do women care about their looks, but men have also become increasingly concerned with their outward appearance in the nineties. Moreover, in *Survivor*, Branson constantly works out on Stairmaster while he was on his way to stardom. Additionally, when he is on the run he does not have the chance to work out and is

constantly complaining to Fertility and Adam that he feels flabby and that he can feel the fat building up in his stomach and pecks (Palahniuk 56).

Not only is Branson falling out of shape physically because he is not exercising, he is not getting his daily shots of steroids. During the Super Bowl, Branson's personal trainer injects Branson with steroids and makes him sniff drugs in order for him to have that sparkle in his eyes and some color in his face (Palahniuk 74). As revealed in the novel, drug use is a major problem in the nineties.

While most youth crime began to decline, a notable exception was drug use. The number of teens illegally using alcohol also increased. More than half of high school seniors confessed to using illicit drugs (marijuana, stimulants, inhalants, LSD, cocaine, crack cocaine, steroids, and heroin). Marijuana was by far the most commonly used illicit drug. (McLeod 309-10)

An exceptional example of the teenage use of marijuana is in *American Beauty*. Throughout the movie, the teenage characters—Ricky, Angela, and Janie—are all seen either smoking or selling marijuana. Janie and Angela smoke marijuana in Angela's car after their high school basketball game. Ricky is seen smoking marijuana with Mr. Burnham outside of a

local social event. Not only does Ricky smoke marijuana, he also deals it. His stash of various qualities and quantities of marijuana is shown when he sells some of it to Mr. Burnham. Ricky's dad, the typical overbearing father, makes Ricky give a urine sample to him every six months to see if Ricky is a drug addict—little did Ricky's father know that one of Ricky's clients supplies him with clean urine samples. Again, Lester is seen smoking marijuana while driving his car around town. In reality, most people do not smoke marijuana out in the broad day light while driving in their cars, but this occurrence makes obvious the fact that drug use, in particular marijuana, has increased in popularity during the nineties. In addition to illicit drug use in the nineties, people abuse prescription and over-the-counter drugs as well. Branson's agent continually "feeds" him random prescriptions in order to keep him fit and good looking, or to counter the effects of the other prescription drug Branson was already taking. Additionally, during the nineties many herbal remedies flooded the market. From Melatonin for sleep to creatine for muscle increase and strength, the drugs were wide ranging in price and actual effect.

While *Survivor* mocks the nineties by exaggerating the decade's issues, *American Beauty* mocks the decade by providing an alternative scenario to these issues. *Survivor* and *American Beauty* beautifully satirize the nineties with their subtle yet important references to drugs, vanity,

materialism, and workaholics. "Please fasten your seat belts as we begin our terminal descent into oblivion" (Palahniuk 12).

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