# 'American Beauty':
# North American Changing Ideals of Masculinity


**Resumen**

Los prototipos de masculinidad son una parte fundamental de la identidad nacional estadounidense, así como de sus mitos fundacionales. Como consecuencia, los estudios de género y de masculinidad son una disciplina esencial para comprender la cultura norteamericana. En este artículo he intentado comprobar si el ideal de masculinidad estadounidense ha sufrido algún cambio a lo largo del tiempo. Teniendo en cuenta que los productos de ficción y los medios de comunicación tienden a reflejar los ideales de cada cultura, he analizado la película *American Beauty* (Cohen, Jinks & Mendes, 1999). Creo que esta película podría reflejar algunos de los cambios socioculturales que Estados Unidos experimentó al entrar en siglo XXI, y que algunos de sus personajes encarnan los ideales de masculinidad norteamericanos -ya sea en su forma original o en una forma evolucionada-. Este análisis nos permitirá discernir si los ideales de masculinidad norteamericanos son invariables, y, en caso contrario, averiguar en qué aspectos pueden haber evolucionado.



**Palabras claves:** Estudios culturales, Estudios de género, Masculinidad, EE.UU., Análisis de cine.



**Abstract**

Masculine archetypes have defined the United States' national identity and foundational myths. For this reason, gender and men's studies are fundamental to understanding basic North American culture. In this article I have explored whether the ideal of masculinity in the U.S. has undergone any changes throughout time. In order to do so, and considering that fiction and media objects tend to display sociocultural ideals, I have examined the motion picture *American Beauty* (Cohen, Jinks & Mendes, 1999). I believe that this film might reflect sociocultural changes in the U.S. at the turn of the Twenty-First Century and that several of its characters might embody North American ideals about masculinity -either in its original or in an evolved form-. Such an analysis will help us to determine whether North American ideals of masculinity are constant or variable, and, if variable, to determine in which aspects these might have evolved.



**Keywords**: Cultural studies, Gender studies, Masculinity, U.S., Film analysis.

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# 'American Beauty':
# North American Changing Ideals of Masculinity



**Eduardo Sierra Alonso**


"If manliness be in his heart / He noble birth may claim" (Douglass, 1872). Masculinity ideals have traditionally had a central role in the construction of the national identity of the United States of America. In this article I will seek the origins of the ideal of masculinity in the U.S. and explore whether this ideal has undergone any changes.

In order to do so, I will examine the motion picture *American Beauty* (Cohen, Jinks & Mendes, 1999), which might reflect sociocultural changes in the U.S. at the turn of the Twenty-First Century. I cannot guarantee that the image portrayed in the film corresponds to reality, but since our aim in this article is not only to describe social behaviour as it occurs in reality, but also the ideas of a particular society, I consider this film to be relevant for our work. Nevertheless, certain authors believe that men's social behaviour is influenced "by common-sense beliefs about and fantasies of masculinity" (MacKinnon, 2003, p. 15).

As a side note, I must clarify that, for a matter of legibility and style, I will sometimes be using the terms 'North America' and 'North American' so as to refer to the country known as the United States of America.

Most authors trace the North American ideal of masculinity back to a mythical prototype of man known as the 'self-made man'. According to sociologist Michael Kimmel (2004c), the self-made man is a free, diligent entrepreneur, willing to escalate in the social ladder after breaking loose from "European feudal notions of fixed statuses", and therefore the creator of his own destiny (2004c, pp. 702-703).

This ideal model probably became popular in the nineteenth century. As soon as in 1832, U.S. politicians described their people as "a nation of self-made men". Shortly afterwards, Alexis de Tocqueville described North Americans in a similar fashion, and in 1844, Reverend Calvin Colton defined the U.S. as "a country where men start from a humble origin and from small beginnings gradually rise in the world, as the reward of merit and industry" (Kimmel, 2004c, pp. 702-703).

Throughout time, the ideas of masculinity, struggle and progress would unify under the model of the self-made man. Kimmel (2004c) claims today that this prototype defined "the American ideal of masculinity" -Kimmel uses the word "American" so as to refer to the U.S.- (p. 702), and in fact back in the mid-nineteenth century, U.S. social reformer Frederick Douglass (1872) described it as "a particular type of manhood". Self-made men were, as stated by Douglass, those who "under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary help of favoring circumstances" attained "knowledge, usefulness, power and position" -although Douglass himself admitted that full individual independence was unachievable and impractical-. For this reason,

manhood was to be earned and demonstrated, and the place to do so would often be the workplace (Kimmel, 2004c, p. 703).

In the late nineteenth century, the self-made man ideal would become associated with the U.S. frontier. Frederick Jackson Turner (1921) described the frontiersman as "a self-made man" characterised by freedom, nonconformity, a desire of social change, and especially, by a rupture with European conventions (para. 213; para. 271). Over history, the frontiersman was reborn as a mythical figure associated to manliness. As a result, President Theodore Roosevelt would promote it as a model of "vigorous manhood" and identify it with the outdoors, sports, and warfare (Kimmel, 2004b, p. 326).

By the mid-twentieth century, the frontiersman was probably perceived as a powerfully masculine man, since several North American films and cultural objects depicted him as such. Performers John Wayne and Clint Eastwood are well known for their contributions to the North American myth of masculinity (MacKinnon, 2003, p. 42; Gabbard, 2004, p. 819). In fact, the Western film genre seemed to celebrate a time and place where manliness was an exemplary value (MacKinnon, 2003, p. 42). Simultaneously, an advertising icon known as The Marlboro Man appeared in the media. The Marlboro Man was often shown performing "activities associated with the Wild West and the early frontier days", and as a result became one of the leading symbols of masculinity in the U.S. (Carroll, 2004, p. 499).

But, as MacKinnon (2003) claims, gender ideals change with the course of history (p. 3). In the late 1990s, Alan Ball wrote the script of *American Beauty* (Cohen, Jinks & Mendes, 1999). I believe that this film might describe the ideals of middle-class North America of the time. The plot narrates the last year in the life of Lester Burnham, a white-collar, frustrated, middle-aged male, who lives in a middle-class suburban area with his wife and daughter. Secondary characters include: a U.S. Marine Corps colonel, his introvert son, and a gay couple who lives next door. Some of these characters, I suspect, embody North American changing ideals about masculinity. For this reason, I will analyse them in search of such values.

With regards to the leading character, I found that Lester Burnham represented North American values of masculinity in a rather controversial manner. Halfway through the film, due to a combination of increasing frustration and a refusal to be humiliated, Lester quits from his job and chooses to work at a fast-food establishment. This resignation implies and avoidance of struggle and could prompt downward mobility -in spite of his severance pay-. For such reasons, I believe that his attitude is inconsistent with the self-made man ideal, which proclaims that men should strive for upward mobility (Kimmel, 2004c, pp. 702-703; Douglass, 1872, pp. 6-7).

On the other hand, Lester's shift from a white-collar job to a lower-wage one fits the frontiersman ideal, which links manhood to "freedom of the individual to seek his own" (Turner, 1921, para. 213). His decision could be thus understood as a rupture from convention, so as to pursue a life of freedom and opportunities. As a matter of fact, Lester explains that he had worked at a fast-food establishment in the past, and speaks of this time as one when his "whole life was ahead" of him. At any rate, his resignation is a clear refusal to be subjugated by his boss. Such a refusal to submission could be read as an expression of manliness.

Everything considered, I found that Lester's behaviour throughout the film represent long-established ideals about masculinity. Halfway through the film, Lester acquires a vigorous-looking muscle car. Cars, according to Hardin (2004), have a "long-standing association in the American vernacular with male sexuality" (p. 5). In the second place, he engages in weight lifting -so as to develop his muscularity-, an activity that has been interpreted as a revision of the self-made man concept (Kimmel, 2004c, p. 703). At the same time, he partakes in athletic activities, traditionally associated to men in the U.S. (Davis, 2002; MacKinnon, 2003, pp. 101-102). And lastly, he picks beer as his drink of choice, defined by Capraro (2004) as the "quintessentially American drink" (p. 73). With regards to his use of recreational drugs, I could not ascertain whether this fits North American masculinity ideals or not, but it could easily constitute a rupture from chains and conventions, an idea which self-made men and frontiersmen stood for.

As for Lester's vintage muscle car, I presume that this is a symbol of masculinity in the U.S. Certain authors have noted that the advertising industry updated the frontiersman image by turning his horse into a car (MacKinnon, 2003, pp. 95-96, 99). At the same time, Lester's car seems to have a vigorous design and a powerful engine, which suggest potency and strength. And probably by chance, the car happens to be built by Pontiac, an automobile brand which used frontiersmen motifs in its advertising campaigns of the 1980s (MacKinnon, 2003, p. 96).

With regards to Lester's relationship with the female high-school student, I am uncertain about how to read this behaviour. Male potency, female objectification and sexual desire are distinctive elements of the ideal of masculinity (MacKinnon, 2003, pp. 13-14). But even so, his conduct is inconsistent with family values in the U.S. However, at the time of this story President Clinton's extra-marital affair was an already known scandal, which makes us wonder whether it had any impression on this particular film.

I suspect that female ideals in the U.S. have evolved, and as a result, embodied archetypal values of masculinity at the time of this film, 1999. Lester's wife's character, Carol, is portrayed as a determined, ambitious realtor, who has made her way up the social ladder. More particularly, she has done so in a patriarchal society, where men traditionally held the 'breadwinner' status. Such a portrayal indicates: 1) that the self-made man ideal has diversified and brought about a "self-made woman" variant; and 2) that the breadwinner role is no longer exclusive to male individuals in the U.S. Respecting this, statistics have shown that the share of mothers who are breadwinners in the United States increased from an 11.7% in 1967 to a 41.4% in 2009, and that that of co-breadwinner mothers escalated from a 27.7% to a 63.9% (Glynn, 2012). According to MacKinnon (2003), males lost their breadwinner status as technology advances gradually replaced male-potency skills in the workplace and traditional masculinity was critiqued by feminism (p. 62).

As a result of women sharing the breadwinner status, I feel inclined to think that the cultural tendency for males to dominate females has diminished nationwide. Apparently, Lester's wife, Carol, refuses to take a submissive role in her marriage. When the Burnhams ride in their car, it is Carol who sits in the driver's seat. Halfway through the film, Carol sings Bobby Darin's *Don't Rain on my Parade* emphatically: "Don't tell me not to fly, I've simply got to / . . . Nobody, I said nobody / Nobody had better rain on my parade" (Merrill & Styne, 1964). Most remarkably, she purchases a fire gun, an instrument which could place her in the dominant side of any power relation. Lastly, towards the end of the film Carol repeats the following mantra, which might express her resistance to submission: "I refuse to be a victim / I refuse to be a victim / I refuse to be a victim . . .".

As for the secondary characters, I found that some of them embodied masculinity ideals in a somehow peculiar manner. Colonel Fitts is a strict, homophobic military, who preaches systematic order and discipline. His military profession might lure us into identifying him with North American values, and in fact, his

advocacy of discipline can remind us of Douglass' self-made man. Yet, aside from discipline, Col. Fitts never mentions any of the prototypical qualities of the U.S. ideal of masculinity. And, even though Douglass (1872) referred to the idea of order in his speeches, he only seemed to conceive it as a path to upward mobility: "But another element of the secret of success demands a word [sic.]. That element is order, systematic endeavor". In the end, Col. Fitts' nearly authoritarian behaviour seems mostly incompatible with the ideal of freedom from servitude personified by frontiersmen (Turner, 1921, para. 22).

Nonetheless, I noticed a particular feature of this character which reveals masculinity ideals in North America: homophobia, which, according to Kimmel (2004a), has shaped the U.S. definition of manhood for around two centuries (pp. 147, 150-151). Kimmel (2004a) describes 'homophobia' as a fear that makes men "ashamed" of not being as manly as they pretend to be (p. 147), and as a matter of fact, Col. Fitts talks to his son about shame and humiliation several times throughout the film. This is not not incidental, since he is deeply embarrassed about his sexual orientation -as revealed at the end of the film-. Eventually, Col. Fitts' sexual orientation suggests that discipline and strictness have been a mask for his gay identity.

I also found that a new ideal of a softer masculinity might have spread across the U.S. Col. Fitts' son, Ricky, is a strange young man with a tender appreciation for beauty. He creates a bond with Lester's daughter, Jane, but instead of doing so by showing potency skills and sexual desire, he simply adopts an introvert and somehow gentle behaviour. In terms of sexism, their relationship seems like a rather equal one: none of the parties behaves in a dominant way. On this account, I believe that Ricky's character represents new softened ideals about masculinity.

On this subject, soft masculinity, U.S. masculinity studies have observed a 'new man' archetype in the U.S. media since the 1970s. Softer masculinities were exemplified by actor Alan Alda in the long-running television series *M*A*S*H** (1972-1983) (Diffrient, 2004, pp. 19-21). Frequently, the so-called 'new man' attempts to establish non-dominant relationships with women and to avoid female objectification (MacKinnon, 2003, pp. 13-15). But whereas MacKinnon describes the "new man" as a "middle-class professional . . . usually between mid-twenties and early forties" (2003, p. 13), our character here, Ricky, is a teenage, middle-class high school student. And I should nevertheless mention that for some authors the "new man" is simply an artefact of mass media, since these are "faced with the problem of how to sell 'soft' products and lifestyles to men" (McKay, Mikosza & Hutchins, 2005, p. 281).

With regards to gay masculinities, I found that these have become more visible in North American culture. Secondary characters in the film include a gay couple that lives next door to the Burnhams. This means that, out of three households shown in the film, at least one of them -and possibly another one as well- is home to gay masculinities. From the 1990s onwards, the portrayal of gay identities rose notably in the U.S. media and fiction. Several authors allude to fictional television series such as *Ellen* (1994-1998) and *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) as primary examples (Kanter, 2012, p. 14; MacKinnon, 2003, p. 78). And, although I could not find a specific explanation for this increasing exposure in the media, according to Kanter (2012), "many saw this growing trend as an increasing acceptance and appreciation for the GLBT community" (p. 7).

At any rate, I was most surprised to find that only a small percentage of people declare themselves gay in the U.S. According to 2012 statistics, only 3.3% of men said yes "when asked if they identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender" (Gates & Newport, 2012). Similarly, a survey published in 2011 found that only an estimate 3.5% of adults in the U.S. would identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Gates, 2011). I would not assert, however, how accurate these statistics are.

To conclude: by examining a North American contemporary work of fiction, I have found that, throughout time, North American cultural ideals about masculinity have possibly evolved, mixed and diversified. I have reasons to believe that this construct, which is rooted in the United States' foundational myths, is not static. Although the work of fiction I have analysed might not describe the reality of the North American society in a faithful manner, I am certain that masculine narratives will alter if society does, and that masculinity will remain central to North American fiction.

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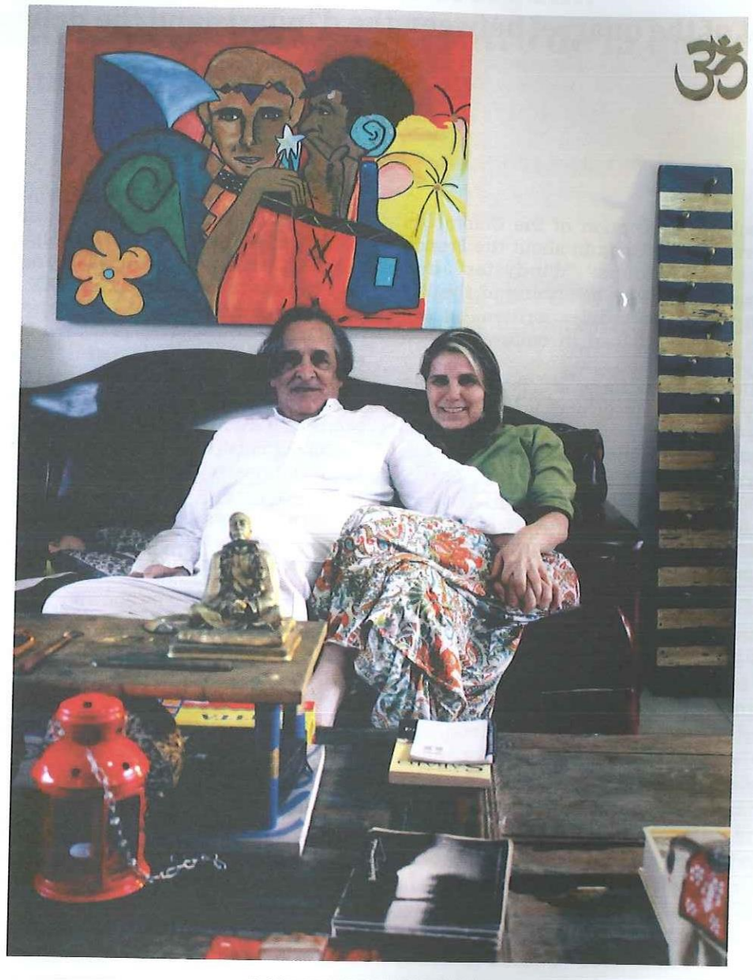

**Pablus Gallinazo y Tita Pulido**
por Andrea Naranjo