

**The Role of Emersonian Transcendentalism in  
Alan Ball's *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under***

by

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the manner in which Ralph Waldo Emerson's nineteenth century transcendentalist thought as described in his essays, *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, and *Self Reliance*, is present and appropriated in Alan Ball's HBO series', *Six Feet Under* (SFU), and film, *American Beauty* (AB). The discussion demonstrates that a modernized version of Emersonian transcendentalism is part of Ball's two works, mainly through his exploration of death, and it is within this topic that the protagonists of AB and SFU are able to transcend and appreciate life.

The thesis also explores the manner in which Alan Ball creates a space in AB and SFU for the critique and questioning of societal taboos and controversies. The methodology used consists of the literary analysis of specific SFU episodes and scenes in AB. The results demonstrate that Emersonian transcendentalism is clearly present in Ball's works and that most of his protagonists are indeed able to transcend as Emerson describes in *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, and *Self Reliance*.

## **Resumen**

Esta tesis explora la manera en la cual el pensamiento transcendentalista del siglo XIX, descrito en los ensayos “Nature”, “The American Scholar” y “Self Reliance” de Ralph Waldo Emerson, está presente en la serie de HBO de Alan Ball, “Six Feet Under” (SFU) y su película “American Beauty” (AB). La discusión demuestra que una versión moderna del transcendentalismo de Emerson forma parte de los trabajos de Ball, mayormente mediante su exploración de la muerte, y es mediante este tema que sus protagonistas logran transcender y apreciar mejor la vida.

También se explora la manera en que Ball crea un espacio para el cuestionamiento y la crítica de la sociedad moderna y sus tabúes. La metodología usada consiste en el análisis literario de ciertos episodios de SFU y escenas de AB. Los resultados dictan que claramente existe un transcendentalismo al estilo emersoniano en los trabajos de Ball y que la mayor parte de sus protagonistas logran transcender según lo describe Emerson en sus textos, “Nature”, “The American Scholar” y “Self Reliance”.

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This is for you...

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## Chapter I: Introduction

In today's world death has become a commonplace entertainment media occurrence and as such has representation in modern life. Daily we are overwhelmed with depictions of sensational and macabre narratives of death; so much so that there are serious dialogues concerning the desensitization of our society towards it. Using death to make life important and as a way to transcend is one of Alan Ball's themes and motifs in the 1999 Oscar winning film *American Beauty* (AB), and Golden Globe, Screen Actors Guild, Emmy Award winning, and critically acclaimed television series, HBO's *Six Feet Under* (SFU 2001 to 2005). In these, Ball uses very popular media platforms for presenting controversial and taboo-breaking topics such as homosexuality, religious fanaticism, and beauty. Ball within these two texts follows a very similar tradition, in terms of transcendence, as promoted by Ralph Waldo Emerson during the nineteenth century in such works as *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, and *Self Reliance*. Although these, AB and SFU, share similar scenarios for analysis and critique, the central and most important topic and motif is that of the contemplation of (or) a centering of death as the medium for an individual to transcend and have a greater appreciation of life. Just as one of the protagonists, Nate Fisher, says in SFU when asked why do people have to die: "to make life important" and just as Lester Burnham (AB) as narrator situated in another realm of existence, death, explains how there is so much beauty in the world that he couldn't possibly be upset at what has happened to him, these are echoes of Emerson's proclamations for the transcendent individual and society.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the most influential voices in American Transcendentalist thought during the 19th century. For him, transcendence meant to become a unique being, breaking away from what society, which he believed to be corrupt, postulated as

correct or 'the norm'. He urged individualism and the questioning of past concepts from previous generations as well as to seek original encounters with the world around us. Uniquely he implored his readers to search inside themselves for ultimate meaning and truth and to trust their instinct or intuition. He believed that it took great courage to live life as one desired. It was one thing to live as one pleased in solitude and another to live as one wished in their everyday public life. His ultimate goal was to make humanity realize that each individual could be unique and original if he/she wanted to; that we could transcend and therefore change and reform society as a whole by changing the fabric of reality. Although Ball presents death in a variety of ways, it is through the experience of death (whether their own or of others) that most of the protagonists in SFU and AB are able to transcend and realize the importance of their lives and the little things that are taken for granted. Through retrospection, death makes them appreciate, as *American Beauty's* Lester Burnham observes, their "stupid little lives" as full of value and beauty regardless of the paradigms established by society.

The plot of *Six Feet Under* develops around the Fisher Family and their funeral home. The family patriarch, Nathaniel, dies in the pilot episode, leaving behind his wife Ruth and their three offspring Nate, David, and Claire. Nate is in his late thirties and lives in Seattle but decides to move back to Los Angeles, where the Fisher household is situated, upon his mother's request after his father dies. David is a closeted homosexual in his early thirties. He is an active Catholic and no one knows much about his personal life except his partner, an African American cop named Keith Charles. Claire is the youngest of the three siblings; she is in her later teen years. As typical of that age, she is a bit of a rebel and is experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and sex. Last but not least, there is Ruth. She is the typical housewife, domestic and agreeable, always trying to please those around her, forgetting her own wants and needs.



Even though, spectators do not get to meet Nathaniel as closely as they meet the other characters, he appears throughout the entire series as a figment of the other main characters' imaginations and is able to have conversations with them. Throughout these imaginary meetings we get an insight into the Fisher's individual psyches.

Nathaniel is not the only dead character that forms part of the series. The deceased that are being taken care of in the Fisher and Sons Funeral Home also make an appearance but only to the Fisher family and to Federico "Rico" Diaz, the funeral home's amazingly talented restorative artist who ends up becoming partner to the business (later called Fisher and Diaz). These deceased Fisher clients are also able to have conversations with the Fishers (Rico included) and in this manner they are able to give spectators an insight into the complicated subconscious thoughts of each and every main character in the series.

Each episode in SFU starts out with the death of a person that ends up being a Fisher client. At times, these deaths are directly related to a situation one of the main characters is going through which makes them reflect upon their own lives and current situations. For example, in Season 1, Episode 12, entitled "Private Life" the Fishers attend to a young homosexual man who is brutally murdered by a group of men just because he was seen being affectionate with his partner publicly. This particular death affects David directly and through the conversations he has with the deceased young man, he is forced to evaluate his own life, helping him accept himself as a homosexual man. Also, through these deaths and the subsequent conversations, a space is created for the discussion and questioning of taboo subjects such as homosexuality and religious fanaticism (among others). It is evident that these exchanges are merely imaginative; both to the audience and to the Fishers, and that they occur

for the sole purpose of giving spectators a glimpse into the main characters' hidden thoughts as well as the challenging of social constructs.

As the series develops throughout its five seasons, many other characters are introduced. The relationships that form between the Fishers and these secondary characters help the plot become that much more complex and worthy of critical analysis. All these relationships form a complicated emotional web. They are explored throughout the series by the plot itself and by the interaction that goes on between the main characters and the deceased, which serve as the voicing of the subconscious thoughts that haunt the characters that are still alive, as explained before.

*American Beauty* is a film that also deals with death from the very beginning. It starts out with a voice over narration provided by the main character, Lester Burnham, whom is dead and wants to share his story with us from this new found perspective that death brings about: "My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighborhood. This is my street. This...is my life. I'm forty-two years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead. Of course, I don't know that yet. And in a way, I'm dead already" (*American Beauty* 1).

When alive, Lester Burnham was a 42 year old married man living in the suburbs, the epitome of the American Dream. He felt that he was 'dead already' even when he was physically alive. His individuality was almost unnoticed by his dysfunctional suburban family and at work as well. He lived to please and follow orders. He even pointed out that masturbating in the shower was the highpoint of his day. His wife, Carolyn Burnham, wanted to be a successful realtor; in fact, her life's philosophy was to project an image of success at all times in order to be successful. She lived off appearances and had no real passions or depth of her own, at least not anymore, that is until she began to have an affair with her rival realtor,

Buddy Kane. Once Lester found out, he began his transformation, rebelling against the direction his life had taken, and began to do the things that really made him happy. Their daughter, Jane, was a teenager that couldn't really relate to her parents anymore. She was solitary and rebellious, dedicated to being the opposite of her mother. Her only female friend was Angela Hayes, a snobbish, wannabe model who was obsessed with not being 'ordinary', also Jane's complete opposite. As the plot developed, Lester began to befriend Angela, leading to sexual desires and fantasies towards her, regardless of Jane's disgust and embarrassment. Angela liked the attention and began to respond to Lester's attraction towards her. When the time came to consummate his passion towards Angela, he surprisingly backed down when she admitted that she was still a virgin even though she behaved as though she was fully experienced in the public light. Jane also developed a relationship with her peculiar and solitary next-door neighbor, Ricky Fitts. As a voyeur, his hobby was to videotape anything that he considered to be beautiful such as dead birds, homeless people, and flying plastic bags. Ricky lived with his mother and father. His mother barely spoke and her mind seemed to be elsewhere, almost trance-like, shell shocked from her battle with the life she had. His father, Col. Fitts, ex-marine, was an extreme homophobic and tried to inculcate his beliefs to his son with no real success. The audience later discovers that Col. Fitts was really a closeted homosexual who later tried to make a pass at Lester but got turned down. This humiliation caused Col. Fitts to murder Lester.

Just as in *Six Feet Under*, *American Beauty* explores controversial subjects such as infidelity, homosexuality, and beauty. The main focus of the film is Lester's narrative and how he had to die in order to appreciate his 'stupid little life' as he clearly described it through voice over narration. AB also challenges popular concepts of what society considers beautiful and

tries to argue towards the idea that beauty can be found in the most unlikely places, even in death, if we are willing to be open to it.

If we compare what Emerson's works such as *Nature* (1836), *The American Scholar* (1837), and *Self-Reliance* (1841) argue in the 19th century to what Alan Ball is trying to convey in the 21st century through *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under*, one cannot fail to find parallels, similarities, and influences. Just as Emerson tries to ignite a fire of transcendence in order to make us realize that we can achieve a better life for ourselves through introspection, Alan Ball also, through his protagonists' introspection and the themes he explores, reveals a post-modern transcendence, which tackles the issues of self-concealment, self-denial, and fear of living life as one pleases; and the complacency of living one's life at the mercy of what society accepts and rejects from us. Ball argues within his two works that we have a limited amount of time in this world to achieve happiness and that only through introspection (usually ignited by death) can we achieve Emersonian transcendence. He uses death to open the gateway into a great realization, not of death but of life. Ball invites us into modern 21st century transcendence just as Emerson was doing in the past. He makes death the antidote for the mundane experience of human 'nothingness' rather than life's nemesis, as well as a medium for the critique of society's 'norm'. As Nate Fisher clearly describes it when asked why do people have to die, he responds "To make life important" (*Six Feet Under*).

This thesis, entitled *The Role of Emersonian Transcendentalism in Alan Ball's American Beauty and Six Feet Under* will develop in five chapters that will include the following:

Chapter I is an introduction to Alan Ball's works, *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under*, as well as Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism. Chapter II is a review of prior

publications in which Emerson's essential essays, *Nature* (1836), *The American Scholar* (1837), and *Self Reliance* (1841), as well as key terms in his discourse will be discussed and exemplified such as *The Common Man*, *Man Thinking*, *Conformists* and *Unconformists*. In that same chapter, key concepts presented in Ball's works such as death, mourning, the funeral or "death business", beauty, and societal taboos, among others, will be discussed in terms of what is relevant to Transcendentalist thought. Finally, a description of the contrasting way in which other means of popular culture have dealt and portrayed death will be explored. Chapter III will focus on the way Alan Ball manages to create a space for the discussion and critique of societal taboos and restrictions, such as homosexuality, religious fanaticism, infidelity, and beauty. The connection that certain deaths within the series have with the main characters of SFU and their personal psyches will also be further analyzed. Chapter IV will be a breakdown and comparison of the two types of characters within SFU and AB, those who achieve partial or complete transcendence, in accordance to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Alan Ball's Transcendentalism, and those who have not transcended and why. The last chapter, Chapter V, will summarize the arguments and conclusions that were reached within the thesis. It is expected that these same arguments and conclusions will prove the thesis statement or purpose within this investigation which is that Alan Ball makes death, in SFU and AB, an agent towards Transcendentalism, similar to 'Emersonian' tradition, as well as a discursive space for the discussion and critique of societal taboos and controversies.

## Chapter II: Previous Publications

Even though film and television series, such as Alan Ball's *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under*, are not traditionally considered literature per se, they can certainly be analyzed as text and/or literature. At first movies and films start out as scripts; one could argue that the only difference between a written work and a visual one, is its means of communication, one being paper and the other being a screen. As a result, the works under study in this thesis, *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under*, will be diagnosed and treated as text and narrative in which the technical aspects of filmmaking will not be discussed. The crucial elements that will form part of this study are the text and the narrative therein itself, what is being said or implied within these two works, and how are they related to Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism.

Bernard F. Dick agrees with this notion when he argues in his book entitled *Anatomy of Film: Fifth Edition*, that a narrative film is: "... one that tells a story. . . to capture the real but to re-create it: to show what could or might be; in other words, to tell a story" (3). In the case of SFU and AB, we are dealing with media that attempt to recreate life by telling a story. Dick also tells us that "A film is an audiovisual conflict; it embodies time-space relationship; it proceeds from a premise, through a progression, to a climax or ultimate term of action . . . images can carry as much weight as words" (4). As is evident, narrative works of the visual arts are very similar to literature and therefore can be analyzed as such with much the same critique and skills we would use to interpret any literary work, hence, we can interpret film as a text. This point is reinforced when he goes on to state that "A film can be subjected to the same criteria as a work of literature, and analyzed in terms of form, rhythm, imagery, and symbolism" (254).

As stated earlier, Alan Ball is first and foremost a playwright. Deciding to create a project like *Six Feet Under* for television, and a film like *American Beauty* for the silver screen instead of other means of communication serves a purpose. By the means of a mass media device such as television, one can create change on a much larger scale due to the vast audiences one will have. Ball mentions his purpose in an interview that forms part of the “Extra Features” section of the 5th and last Season of the series: “I wanted to bring death out of the closet” (*Six Feet Under*). In *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Second Edition* by John Storey, Herman Baussinger suggests that television is a vehicle for conversation and unity between people, be it family members or colleagues. Through television we are able to talk about certain topics in our everyday lives, which is precisely what Alan Ball does when dealing with many different themes such as the theme of death, human sexuality, and beauty. It could be assumed that Ball wants us to think about them, talk about them, make them part of our every day conversations in order to become more familiar with them and, in the case of the theme of death, less afraid of the natural process of dying, grieving, and the repercussions for the living. The series’ as well as the film’s such realistic approaches to these controversial topics makes audiences relate to them in a more personal level, perhaps the reason why *Six Feet Under*, which according to the Home Box Office website received an Emmy award for Outstanding Directing for a Drama Series (Alan Ball) as well as a Golden Globe for Best Television Series, and *American Beauty* has been praised by critics such as Janet Maslin from *The New York Times*:

*American Beauty* hammers heavily on the notion that nonconformity is needed here. That thought is repeated frequently and never carries a whit of surprise. But scene by scene, the film is full of its own brand of corrosive novelty . . . As these

characters struggle viciously -- and hilariously -- to escape the middle-class doldrums, the film also evinces a real and ever more stirring compassion. As it detects increasingly vital signs of life behind the absurd surfaces that Mr. Mendes presents so beautifully, the film takes on a gravity to match its evil zest. There's a haunting power to Lester's last narrative note to the viewer: that if you don't share the film's piercing vision of what really matters, someday you will.

As mentioned earlier and as Maslin recognizes, both works under discussion intend to make audiences more aware of the manner in which death might induce individuals into the appreciation of life and the little things that carry great importance.

*Six Feet Under* and *American Beauty* can also be defined and envisioned from a Cultural Studies point of view. John Storey defines key terms in Cultural Studies such as empiricist realism, which is a text that “. . . is considered realistic to the extent it adequately reflects that which exists outside itself” (26). In the case of the series and the film under discussion, this definition describes them in a very accurate manner. The series not only touches upon the cultural themes of death and bereavement, inseparable from human experience and condition, but also deals with many social issues that are part of the fictional world, that of *Six Feet Under*, but also reflect issues that are relevant in the actual world we live in and the space we occupy as human beings. As in SFU, the film, *American Beauty*, also touches upon crucial issues that are experienced by many in our contemporary culture such as homosexuality and homophobia, death, the modern concept of what beauty is, and drug abuse, amongst other things. By creating such strong connections between what is happening in the texts and what is happening in today's society, the texts under study for the purposes of this thesis, manage to create a space for the viewer to be able to think and talk about these



controversial subjects very much present in contemporary life. Alan Ball is able to reach his audiences on a deeper level by creating a fictional series and writing the screenplay for a film with empiricist realism's characteristics. Storey states that “. . . usually people like television that has empiricist realism because they can relate to it more” (27). Not only does the series and film reflect reality but they can also be categorized as having melodramatic imagination. According to Storey, this can be defined as: “. . . everyday existence, with its pains and triumphs, its victories and defeats, is as profoundly meaningful and significant as the grand human suffering of classical tragedy. It offers a means of organizing reality, cut loose from the certainties of religion, into meaningful contrasts and conflicts” (27). Alan Ball points to a way of organizing reality by portraying it on two very basic and realistic visual texts, which deal with happiness as well as with tragedy and that in return, make *Six Feet Under* and *American Beauty* greatly meaningful and deep, infiltrating into the darkest corners of the viewers' subconsciousness and therefore, making both works more significant than just mere entertainment. Therefore we can successfully argue that Alan Ball makes these two works a reflexive experience for audiences, which possibly might motivate them, as the narrative progresses, to transform their views about death, grieving, loss, the death business, and societal problems and/or taboos. It could possibly be argued that the relevancy achieved through empiricist realism and melodramatic imagination could promote positive changes in its viewers and bring them closer to going beyond a limit or range, of current thoughts or beliefs with regards to the issues presented.

The concepts for an individual to go beyond the limits or range of common societal beliefs, has a long tradition in the US since its promotion in the early 19th century by Ralph Waldo Emerson and other transcendentalists. Transcendence is not an easily definable word but

in order to make connections between Alan Ball's 'philosophy' and Emerson's Transcendentalism, Emerson's theory must be discussed and explained to create those relevant connections between the works under discussion. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a truly influential voice and leader in American Transcendentalist thought during the 19th century. Essays such as *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, and *Self-Reliance* still form part of the 21st century literary canon. His works promote more than just an intellectual stance; they encourage a life style, a belief, a politics, and a recipe for a better life through the means of transcending. In his quest to rebel against the encroachment of runaway capitalist industrialism, to transcend meant to become a unique being, breaking away from what society, which he believed to be corrupt, postulated as correct or 'the norm'. By 'corruption', Emerson meant that there was no uniqueness or sincerity in society's actions towards the improvement of the human condition, hence, one had to trust only oneself, and every action coming from society had to be questioned before it could ever be accepted as the 'norm'. Similarly, Ball does this in his works under discussion, a presentation of the corruption of society and how his characters transcend by seeking original encounters with the world around them. We can see this type of questioning mostly in the characters of Ricky Fitts (*American Beauty*) and Nate Fisher (*Six Feet Under*) as one questioned the concept of beauty and the latter questioned the concept of grief. For example, Ricky videotaped a dead woman because he believed it was beautiful and one could almost see God through it; Nate critiqued the way funerals sanitized death and denied the living of grieving publicly, which he believed to be healthy. Just as Nate and Ricky argued towards questioning and reflection, Emerson also promoted individualism and the questioning of past concepts from previous generations as well as to seek original encounters with the world around us. But uniquely, he urged his readers to search inside themselves for ultimate meaning

and truth. His eventual goal was to make humanity realize that each individual could be unique and original if they wanted to; that we could transcend and therefore, as self-reliant individuals, collectively change and reform society as a whole by changing the fabric of reality. In the discussion of *AB* the only living character that had already achieved or was on the verge of achieving this transcendence was Ricky Fitts. Lester Burnham, the film's protagonist and voice over narrator, on the other hand, had to die in order to fully grasp this enlightenment, nevertheless, he did. In *SFU*, Nate was the character closest to achieving this Emersonian type of realization about life while still alive. He managed to see things that others might not have noticed or simply ignored such as the unhealthy or unnatural way in which individuals around him dealt with mourning and loss. He questioned and fought for what he believed was closer to human nature such as grieving healthily, rather than what society prescribed as the norm.

In *Nature*, Emerson makes note that readers should strive to find their own meaning of life, not the meaning that others or tradition have described for them: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? . . . why should we grope among the dry bones of the past? . . . There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship" (486). He urges us to have a unique experience with the world around us in order to be able to question and arrive at our own interpretations. In *SFU*, the character of Claire, the youngest of the Fishers, was the rebel teenager who questioned 'norms' and expressed herself through art and photography, distinguishing her own original point of view about the world around her by the means of its critique, similarly to Ricky Fitts in *AB* by capturing his point of view of the world around him on video. They both took the time to review and carefully re-envision as Emerson suggests.

Emerson defines *Nature* as follows: “Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE” (486). Everything around us is connected and we are all part of what he defines as nature. Emerson also tells us that in order for individuals to get in direct contact with nature they must give up certain things such as society’s restraints and norms, which only corrupts and distracts them from the enlightenment nature offers. When describing stars, understood in his argument as symbolic of the allure and inaccessibility of nature to man’s imagination and understanding, he explains that: “The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are always inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence” (487). This is precisely what Alan Ball is trying to do, open our minds and our eyes to everyday things that we take for granted, things that cannot be found in the city (or material/commercial world) and to give them the importance they merit. Ricky Fitts does this all along through the film as well as some of the characters in SFU, mainly Nate, the closer death peers into their personal lives or the lives of their loved ones. Nevertheless, Emerson believes that most adults cannot see nature as he prescribes. It is easier for a child to appreciate it than it is for an adult:

The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. (487)

In other words, it is not that we have to be children in order to appreciate nature but that we have to have that sense of appreciation that children have towards new things in order not to take anything for granted and take advantage of the splendor and truth nature has to offer. Society takes away this innocence and methods of reason promoted and that is why we must retire from our prior life through education. In fact, it is in and through nature (individual contact) that we achieve to feel like a child in the sense that we get rid of the constraints of perception that make us unhappy or make us be unaware of the true happiness and understanding we can achieve through the interaction with nature. In nature we get in touch with our spirituality and greater understanding of life while on the other hand, everything that society offers seems trivial and toxic to the development of the individual:

In the woods we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, . . . I am a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all . . . I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages . . . For the one seeking the beauty and understanding of nature, he/she must keep an open eye . . . For, nature is not always tricked in holiday attire. (488)

This wisdom and sense of spirituality that nature offers us can also be found in places where the untrained eye traditionally does not see beauty. It is no accident the way Alan Ball deeply delves into such a complicated theme as is death, which is very much present in SFU and AB, in which beauty can be found in and through it.

In the section *Commodity in Nature*, Emerson discusses the concept of beauty. He tells us that everything within nature is beautiful, one way or the other: “There is no object so foul that intense light will not make beautiful . . . Even the corpse hath its own beauty” (490). He

argues that beauty is at times not easy to see and can be taken for granted quite easily but for those who are aware, beauty is very much part of nature and is meant to please us:

To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again . . . The creation of beauty is art . . . Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation. (491-3)

As suggested, we see the beauty in nature and we transform what we see into new creation which he calls art, just as Claire did in SFU when photographing corpses for a class, which were Fisher clients, and just as Ricky did in AB when videotaping a flying plastic bag because they were able to see beauty in it. Not only does beauty intend to satisfy the eye but it also unveils the mystery of the human mind and of the undeniable connection between all things within nature: “The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity . . . Nothing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests the universal grace” (493). Emerson also discusses the concept of beauty as fulfilling a spiritual need: “No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair” (493). This concept is implied by Ricky Fitts in AB as he explained to his girlfriend, Lester’s daughter, Jane, why he videotaped the strange things he did; because he saw beauty in them and in that beauty he could almost see God. Just as Emerson, Ball acknowledges that beauty can be found in untraditional settings. In *American Beauty*’s “Extra Features” section on the DVD, Alan Ball discusses this idea: “There is room

for beauty in every facet of existence . . . Beauty is in the strangest places. A piece of garbage floating in the wind and that beauty exists here in America. It exists everywhere. You have to develop an eye for it and be able to see it” (*American Beauty*).

Reason and spirituality are other concepts that Emerson discusses within his theory. He defines *Reason* as:

Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul, he calls Reason . . . That, which intellectually we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. (494)

When referring to *Spirit*, Emerson points out that in nature, spirit is the Father, in other words, God. He stresses that human beings cannot be understood by themselves; they form part of a greater force and only in unison can they be understood, hence, everything is connected and should be appreciated as a whole rather than single units. This is precisely what Lester Burnham (AB) was grasping right at the moment of his death as he saw his life flash before his eyes in sections that intertwined with one another up until the moment he died. He finally got to understand the beauty of his “stupid little life” as a whole and also acknowledged, using voice over narration, that the audience would also someday understand exactly what he was talking about, hence, implying that the human mind and spirit is not meant to be understood as one but as a whole.

Just as Emerson critiques society and its corruption during the 19th century, Alan Ball’s SFU and AB also create the space for the critique and questioning of today’s societal problems such as the evident importance given to moneymaking rather than human compassion.

According to Emerson's argument, language can be used as a means to fool and corrupt others. He explains this by stating that:

The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires, the desire of riches, the desire of pleasure, the desire of power, the desire of praise,---duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth. (495)

This same attack on a capitalist society is evidently portrayed through the Fisher's competing business and complete opposite, Kroehener Services, to which monetary gains were more important than human grief, compassion, and loss. In *American Beauty*, for example, Lester's wife, Carolyn Burnham, cared more for "things" than she did for her marriage and own personal happiness, impeding her from ever reaching transcendence. In both works, AB and SFU, there are two types of characters: those who are able to transcend the world of human commerce and those who are not. Kroehner Services and Carolyn Burnham are examples of those who did not reach this enlightenment, whereas, Ricky Fitts, Lester Burnham (AB), and Nate Fisher (SFU) were able to get much closer to Emersonian tradition of thought and contemplation as will be exemplified in subsequent chapters.

Just as Alan Ball manages to critique 21st century society through AB and SFU, Emerson does the same in the past. *The American Scholar* starts out by describing society: "The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,---a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man" (515). What he is trying to explain is the manner in which city life transforms individuals into mere workers, machines that work only for the pay, and they lose themselves



in this process, hence never really being a man/woman. Society is governed by labels and these titles become who we are, the farmer instead of Man on the farm, as Emerson clearly exemplifies, as well as Ball portrays it through the character of Carolyn Burnham in AB and David Fisher in SFU, workaholics whom forget what it is like to work not for economical relief but for happiness and self fulfillment, as will be explained further on. To avoid this dehumanization, Emerson suggests that we should strive to be what he calls a *Man Thinking*:

In the distribution of functions, the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state, he is *Man Thinking* in the degenerate state, when the victim or absorbed by society, the world of human commerce, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking. (515)

The crucial difference, as stated earlier, consists on those men/women who critically question and those who simply swallow every drop that society supplies them with. He mentions nature again and again and tells us that man/woman must know nature to know thyself: “[nature] Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind . . . So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess” (516). Emerson also advises us to avoid becoming what he calls a *bookworm* by striving to be the creators of our own stories and discover things for ourselves instead of relying on the findings and words of others. As clearly stated by him: “Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this” (516). Just as the past had Emersonian thought for guidance and critical thinking, this generation has Ball for similar purposes: to critique and question life as it is in the present in order to become more like a “man thinking”. Emerson continues to discuss the complete opposite of a bookworm, which is called the *Active Soul*:

The one thing in the world of value, is, the active soul,---the soul, free, sovereign, active. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth or creates . . . Man hopes. Genius creates. To create,---to create,---is the proof of a divine presence . . . When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings. (517-18)

Once again, Ricky Fitts is the only character within Ball's two visual texts, AB and SFU, to truly achieve this wisdom nearly in its entirety at such a young age as will be explained in later chapters. Nate gets very close to an understanding resembling transcendence and Lester has to die in order to be at the level of Ricky in terms of this enlightenment.

Emerson tells us that nature not only ignites the fuel of transcendence but also serves as a means for learning. Everything that forms part of nature is able to teach us something and this new knowledge knows no limits or boundaries. Those who are able to transcend seem to have a great privilege over those who have not yet reached such state of enlightenment: "What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the counsels of the creation, and feels by knowledge the privilege to BE! His insight refines him. The beauty of nature shines in his own breast" (*Nature* 499). He exhorts us to look within ourselves for answers and to trust our own minds: "...a guess is often more fruitful than an indisputable affirmation and that a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments" (*Nature* 509). Ball presents a similar concept in both his works, mainly through the most insightful characters such as Lester, Ricky, and Nate. In SFU, for example, there are daydream sequences in which main characters interact with the deceased. In these encounters what usually happens is that through

conversations with the dead, the characters explore their own psyches and mental restraints that have been embedded into them by society and their own personal fears. These self-confrontations bring about questioning and societal critique, helping them draw individual conclusions that bring them closer to transcendence.

Even though Emerson invites us to be the creators of our own truth and discover things for ourselves just as Ball does in SFU and AB, he does not disregard the importance of books and academic learning. He tells us that the purpose of this type of learning should be to inspire and modify attitudes:

Of course, there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office,---to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create . . . set the hearts of their youth on flame. (518)

We should search for meanings outside of the book. When we reach this state of inspiration, the scholar should take action in order to fully develop as a “man”. Emerson tells us that:

Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived . . . The true scholar grudges every opportunity of action past by, as a loss of power. (519)

By taking action, experience turns into thought and thought into knowledge, which makes us get that much closer to transcendence, as is evident in the character of Lester Burnham (AB) at the moment of his death; his life’s experiences transform into thought and those thoughts drive him into transcendence.

Once we reach this state, we begin to evaluate our own personal past. Emerson explains that:

The actions and events of our childhood and youth are now matters of calmest observation. They lie like fair pictures on the air. Not so with our recent actions,--with the business which we now have in hand. [. . .] In some contemplative hour, it detaches itself from the life like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind . . . Always now, it is an object of beauty. (519)

What this means is that we stop and think about our past and we begin to understand the beauty of it all, not taking anything for granted anymore. Every detail seems to have some special value causing us to realize that all of a sudden everything makes sense. We learn from life and experience: “Life is our dictionary . . . I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech” (520).

Within SFU and AB, Ball intends to portray life as just that, our best teacher. As the series develops, the main characters go through different situations, such as loss and self-acceptance that make them grow, for better or worse. Nate’s character is the one who struggles the most and it is the lessons he has learned from his troubles that lead him into appreciating life more and transcend. When Emerson describes what it means to be a “man thinking”, as he calls it, he tells us that “The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances, He plies the slow, unhonored, and unpaid task of observation” (521). This kind of observation comes about through experience in which “man thinking” becomes a role model to follow into transcendence. To become this “man thinking” is not an easy task nor is it reached by all characters of SFU and AB but what Alan Ball intends to teach us is just that, how to live our life to the fullest while we are still alive by becoming a

Man Thinking and therefore transcending in life, not death. He intends to do this through the characters that are in fact able to transcend, Lester, Ricky, and Nate; those who are closer to a “man thinking”.

Emerson makes it clear that to become “man thinking” many sacrifices must be made. He describes this process as follows:

In the long period of his preparation, he must betray often an ignorance and shiftlessness in popular arts, incurring the disdain of the able who shoulder him aside. Long he must stammer in his speech; often forego the living for the dead.

Worse yet, he must accept---how often! poverty and solitude. (521)

This type of individual is almost an outcast of society and this is his/her cross to bear. Nevertheless, the outcome is worth the sacrifice: “He is to find consolation in exercising the highest functions of human nature . . . He is the world’s eye. He is the world’s heart . . . it becomes him to feel all confidence in himself, and to defer never to the popular cry” (521-22). “Man thinking” reaches almost a divine state of being in which he sees and understands things that others are oblivious to. In this state of mind a great discovery is made: “He then learns that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds” (522). This is precisely the reason why Ricky Fitts could almost see God by observing the little things of everyday life that others may not have even noticed, as well as Nate’s critique and questioning of the robotic-like grieving process his brother David so promptly defended during season one, which deprived humanity from a healthy process of grief. These are concepts that have always been there but only those that can “see” are able to question and/or appreciate.

Fear becomes a thing of the past for “man thinking” according to Emerson. Only those who have not reached this level of transcendence are those who live in fear. When faced with fear, he goes on to recommend:

Manlike let him turn and face it. Let him look into his eye and search its nature, inspect its origin . . . he will find in himself a perfect comprehension of its nature and extent; he will have made his hands meet on the other side, and can henceforth defy it, and pass on superior. (522)

In the case of SFU for example, David Fisher’s biggest fear was to be rejected by others because of his sexuality. This fear, in return, distanced him from the spiritual freedom transcendence promotes. “Man thinking’s” purpose should be to transform himself as well as the minds of others into transcendence. In terms of beauty, Emerson stresses once again that “Man is surprised to find that things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote. The near explains the far. The drop is a small ocean. A man is related to all nature” (525). To transcend is an individual and personal process and must be taken about by oneself as is the case of nearly all major characters of both works, AB and SFU, in which their transcendence or lack of depends only on themselves and their taking of the world around them. Using David Fisher’s example once more, he lived denying himself the freedom to be happy because of fear and shame. Even though his partner, Keith Charles, pushed him into changing, David was not able to do so until his proper time came. It was a process he needed to go through on his own.

In the final essay relevant to this study entitled *Self-Reliance*, Emerson describes what being self-reliant means and entails. He urges us to be self-confident and trust our own genuine thoughts. He explains that “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts . .

. a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another” (539). He goes on to advice: “Trust thyself, every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries; the connexion of events” (540). This suggests that life is composed of a series of events that leads us to where we are supposed to be and what we should be doing; we have to trust that. Trusting it and taking it as our own is to transcend. Nate Fisher for example, never desired to be in the funeral business so he decided to move away at a young age from Los Angeles, where the series takes place, to Seattle. Nevertheless, he returned for his father’s funeral and upon his mother’s request, stayed much longer than he envisioned, becoming part of the Fisher business. It took him a while to accept his destiny but in time he understood he was right where he needed to be and began his transcendence and better understanding of life through interaction with death and dying.

Emerson also mentions the exploration of our subconscious thoughts and tells us that these should not be disregarded because they hold truth: “These are the voices we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (541). Within SFU, from the very first episode, the dead appear and speak to the living as if they were not dead at all, revealing the main character’s deepest thoughts and worries, their subconscious, through imaginary conversations between both parties but only in complete solitude. These encounters also open a space for the critique of societal taboos by the means of the topics of conversations between the living and the dead in which usually the dead challenge the living about x/y topic such as homosexuality or infidelity, keeping in mind that these encounters are merely the characters’ subconscious being spoken out loud for the audience to hear.

Emerson then moves on into defining what he calls a *Nonconformist*: “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind” (541). In other words, a nonconformist is that person that questions everything around him/her until he/she is satisfied. Just because others have taught us the difference between good and bad, between what is appropriate and what is not, does not mean that we have to accept these social standards as if they were a given, that is when the questioning and challenging of ideas takes place. Those who are able to transcend, live their lives as they please. Emerson acknowledges this by stating:

My life is not an apology, but a life. It is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should glittering and unsteady . . . What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what the people think. (542)

In the case of AB, Col. Fitts, Ricky’s father, did not live by this rule, living in denial and neglect of his own sexuality, hence never transcending, causing him to lash out in violent ways. On the other hand, David Fisher was able to live closely to the way Emerson advised and accepted himself as a homosexual man, therefore living his life the way he pleased, not the way society dictated. Nevertheless, Emerson recognizes that it takes great courage to live life as one desires: “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (542).

Emerson goes on to describe what he calls a conformist, which is a person that sticks to values or ideas that he/she might not necessarily agree with or believe in, just because he/she is



too afraid of change or challenging authority. To be a “man thinking” is to be the opposite of a conformist, which is precisely what Emerson is arguing for within his texts and Ball argues for in SFU and AB, challenging societal concepts and restraints. In terms of changing, Emerson tells us that “The other terror that scares us from our self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loathe to disappoint them” (543). In simple terms, a conformist does not choose to change because others know nothing else than what he/she has been in the past and he/she does not want to alter the vision others have about them because of fear. This is precisely the reason characters such as Col. Fitts and Carolyn Burnham (AB) do not reach transcendence, because of fear of showing their true selves. If they speak their minds as they please in a nonconformist fashion, some may say that they will be misunderstood but Emerson applauds this: “Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood” (544). One can argue that Ricky Fitts was greatly misunderstood and even considered a “freak” by most of the people around him when in fact he was the only character in Ball’s two texts that truly and entirely understood how to live life to the fullest extent in transcendentalism fashion. Emerson concludes his essay by telling us that “...[man] he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to forsee the future” (547). The “great man” will live his life as he wishes, to the fullest with no fear, with self-trust. This is what it means to transcend.

It has been stressed that Alan Ball’s texts discussed in this thesis (SFU and AB) deal with topics that address human behavior and condition, as well as abstract concepts such as

beauty and death with the purpose of a greater understanding and appreciation of life and transcendence while one is still alive. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that SFU also touches upon the technicalities and procedures that death brings about for the deceased as well as for the ones left behind, and the series richly explores this hidden reality about the death business. The purpose of this is to portray the manner in which even the most crucial human aspect, death, has been commercialized and de-humanized by society which in the early nineteenth century Emerson had already denominated as corrupt for reasons such as these. Within these lines, Ball intends to critique and question contemporary materialistic life in which revenues are more important than human compassion and connection. Emerson does the same by contrasting society vs. nature; society representing the world of commercial consumerism over the core of human condition and nature representing the path towards transcending into “man thinking”; into a spiritual realm while one is still alive.

Alan Ball touches upon the theme of death over and over within his texts. Death as a business has evolved with time; hence the way people took care for their deceased loved ones is not the same way they do it today. In Ball’s works under study, *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under*, he shows his audience many sides of death; the human or personal side of death as well as the consumerist or technical side. In *Six Feet Under* Ball makes the audience aware of everything that is going on behind the closed doors of the funeral parlor; the technicalities of death, an opportunity that might have never come along for audiences elsewhere. We get to see the process of preparing a body in order for it to be presentable at a viewing, giving it life-like appearance.

In *Reading Six Feet Under: TV to Die For*, Mandy Merck gives us a historical account of how the funeral business came to be in the United States. This is important because it allows

us to understand how Alan Ball portrays the ‘modern’ or 21st century way of dying and bereavement within Funeral Homes so that we can see how it has evolved and consequently become partly an almost impersonal process, alienating us from what is truly important about death and dying. Merck starts out by describing the way that funerals before the Civil War used to take place at home with a couple of the deceased family members and friends, a local doctor and perhaps a member of the church. It was a very personal and intimate event. Merck also describes the way in which funerals became what they are today:

The transfer of death’s ritual observance from the home of the deceased to commercial undertakers like *Six Feet Under’s* Fisher and Sons was largely a consequence of the American Civil War . . . By 1863 four embalming/undertaking firms were advertising their services in Washington, DC . . . In the 1880s undertakers renamed themselves ‘funeral directors’ . . . By the 1920’s the funeral ‘homes’ or ‘parlours’ of these professional undertakers---complete with preparation laboratories and funeral chapels---had replaced the actual home as the main site for the American care of the corpse. (61)

Merck’s description of the funeral business today is a fair description of the Fisher and Sons funeral home. Alan Ball not only wanted us to be aware of the ideal/healthy vs. modern process of grief but he also wanted us to understand the process of making a body ‘presentable’ for viewing in order for his audience to live through everything that goes on with loved ones, something that most of us don’t get to see in the actual world. As evident in Merck’s description, death is transformed from a very personal family event into a profiting business, which is what Ball precisely critiques within SFU. During the last seasons of the series Nate states that many of the services they sell are not even needed and he starts describing, as Merck

does, the way in which corpses were taken care of in the past. He gives more importance on simplifying and humanizing the process rather than making more money off of it.

What Ball is trying to do here, possibly using Nate as his own voice, is to make audiences understand that there is a hidden agenda behind things; that we should look closer and question. Similar to Ralph Waldo Emerson's own views on money making industries, Nate points out the way in which funerals just like any other business, have one goal in mind, to make money and we must question their intentions. Even though, the newly renamed Fisher and Diaz funeral home truly tries to sell a humanitarian service rather than an impersonal one, they still have to deal with competitive and insensitive enterprises such as Kroehner Services International, which represents precisely what Ball is attacking and what Emerson described as "society".

In the modern world, the funeral business is a growing market with competition rising every day; in *Six Feet Under* we see this from the very first episode. Once again, Ball not only wants to focus our attention at the natural process of death, grief, and dying, but also at the consumerist side to it. As mentioned before, in the series there is a funeral company named Kroehner Services International, which tries to buy off the Fisher and Sons funeral home during the very first episode and does not give up for many episodes more. This fast growing company's technique is to offer independent companies such as Fisher and Sons (later renamed Fisher and Diaz) a lot of money in order for them to monopolize the funeral business, hence, crush competition. Revenues are the most important thing for Kroehner Services and they sacrifice sensitivity for money making.

This phenomenon not only takes place within the setting of *Six Feet Under* but it is a growing problem in today's consumerist society. In an article entitled "Corporations take on

Independent Funeral Homes” by the *Economist Newspaper* this rising issue is being addressed. Just like in the series, independent businesses are being attacked by larger corporations. They mention an example in which a company called Service Corporation International (SCI), which is the biggest funeral company in America, tries to do the same thing as Kroehner, crush their competition by monopolizing territories. Not only do they eliminate competition but they also expand their own services to satisfy all tastes and needs possible in order to profit even more from death. As also occurs in *Six Feet Under* with Kroehner Services, SCI’s services are quite abrasive but they are impersonal and insensitive to the griever’s loss. The article states that “Independents say that the corporates’ prices are too high and that their service is too impersonal for such a delicate business. ‘Everything is bottom-line oriented,’ complains Jim Weeks, who recently bought back the funeral home once owned by his family in Savannah, Georgia, from SCI” (*Economist Newspaper*).

Death does not only involve grief, tears, moans, and cries; it also involves technicalities and money. As can be seen, Alan Ball wishes for us to get to know death from all angles, as is evident in SFU, to have a better understanding of the complex and complete process, from behind closed doors to the actual viewing, to the burial itself. To know all the facts, opens the door to questioning, making us more alike a “man thinking”, which is what Emerson wanted in the past and Ball invites us to do in the present.

What is unique about a series like this one is that it lets us delve into a business that has been mysterious and hidden to the ones still alive. As stated in *Six Feet Under: TV to Die For* in an article entitled “Exquisite corpse: Death as an Odalisque and the New American Gothic in *Six Feet Under*”:

...viewers have countless opportunities to both thrill and cringe as voyeurs of one of the most privatized, taboo and mysterious professions---the atmosphere, tools and challenges of the embalming room---without actually having to experience the actual panic, abjection and disorientation of standing two feet away from a body that has just expired . . . *Six Feet Under* skillfully plies the many visual and emotive conceits of death, dying and mourning while urging its audience to turn themselves inside out to have a look, if only for a short while. (Mark W. Bundy 37-38)

Modern day society is one that is not only afraid of death but is also in denial of it. People believe that by disguising death they will not have to deal with it. In *Six Feet Under* we get to see how Federico Diaz, partner to Fisher and Diaz, prepares the body to make it seem almost as if it were alive because this comforts the living. They want to see the person they loved and cared for as they looked in life, not as they looked at the time of their death. This marks a certain denial of the actual death, which is characteristic of 21st century life. *Reading Six Feet Under: TV to Die For* tells us about this denial of death in an article entitled “Death, Liminality and Transformation in *Six Feet Under*” by Rob Turnock:

---hiding the grotesqueness, making it acceptable for public viewing, and finally arranging for its disposal. The visual control of the dead body, by its sequestration of its troublesome properties from public gaze, and by its ultimate cremation or burial, powerfully articulates a simple but significant cultural proposition: ‘*out of sight, out of mind*’. (42)

The series makes us face death on many levels. We see the preparation of the body as well as the effect death has on the ones still alive.

With the passing of time, the “death business” has transformed our views of dying. Alan Ball tries to take us back into an earlier view of mortality even though the present seems far from it. As described before, death used to be a very personal event in which the deceased’s family members would take over the preparation and disposing of the body. Nowadays, family members are barely involved in the process, which helps to alienate death, making it a stranger to us. Turnock tells us that:

Without a cultural infrastructure to socialize mortality, the passage from life to death increasingly becomes an isolating and meaningless ‘non-event’. This is reflected in death rituals becoming more austere and sterile. Even where people still believe in traditional forms of religion, such as Christianity, the commercialized and industrialized nature of the death ritual leaves funerary rites devoid of psychological or social value. These ceremonies instead reveal the ways in which death has increasingly become a taboo subject and separated from the everyday. (45)

Precisely the reason why Alan Ball believes it is important to make us go through it all. In a way, he is trying to wake us up to the reality of it, while at the same time making the series one of a kind in terms of dealing with this taboo subject. As he clearly mentioned in an interview found in the “Extra Features” of the series: “I wanted to bring death out of the closet” (*Six Feet Under*).

Not only is there is a denial of death in modern day society but there is also a suppression of the grieving process. There are underlying rules that surround the bereaved. In the pilot episode of *Six Feet Under*, Ruth Fisher sobs hysterically at her husband's burial. David immediately tries to take her away from public gaze, while Nate, once again possibly serving as the voice of Ball himself, is in complete approval of letting her mourn in public. He agrees with the notion that one has to get his/her hands dirty in order to mourn healthily and naturally. Once again, this is not an event particular to the series; it is something that happens in the actual world. Turnock addresses this issue as well stating "The sociologist Henry Hockey has observed that during funerals in Britain, for example, clergymen pay particular attention to bereaved women and move in quickly when necessary to prevent them from uncontrollably breaking down" (46). Alan Ball questions why mourning should be such a hidden event when the matter of the fact is that it simply makes us human. He wants his audience to get their hands dirty with death and the process of bereavement. It is the only way in which one can grieve properly and healthily and it is human nature to do so. Anything else is a social construct. In an article by The *Washington Post* about SFU entitled "Alan Ball's Life after Death", Ball describes the series: "It's about moving on. About greeting grief, and being able to move past it" (Sharon Waxman). Turnock says it himself: "*Six Feet Under* emerges as progressive precisely because it breaks the taboo of death and the silence surrounding bereavement, as it places dying, the dead body and intense sorrow at the hearts of its drama" (49).

Another aspect that is important within Ball's works under study is its approach to a dark theme (death and dying) as a "safe zone". Many other prevailing mainstream representations explored in film and television approach death as gore and as the violent end of life, as in "slasher", war, and crime motivated movies in which death is alienated from us by



extreme and violent circumstances and made into an unreachable event to be feared. Ball on the other hand, deals with death in a much more personal way, his main focus being on death as a natural part of life and a means for transcendence for the ones still alive, rather than simply the end of life. For him, the topic of death should not be explored merely for entertainment. He explains it himself in the “Special Features” section of the series’ Fifth Season: “I think we live in a culture that denies that death exists. We make great entertainment out of it. We make all these slasher movies which in a way trivializes and don’t make it real...our culture doesn’t really acknowledge the reality of death” (*Six Feet Under*). He focuses our attention, most notably with *Six Feet Under*, but he does it with the best intentions, to humanize the experience of death and make us be more in acceptance of it, while managing to create a space in which taboo subjects can be talked about and reflected upon, which will be discussed further on. A life without the fear of death seems a bit utopic but a better understanding of it would definitely make the process less unbearable, which is one of the goals Ball tries to reach within these two works.

It is important to know how others have portrayed death in the media in order to fully appreciate the unique approach towards death in *Six Feet Under*. Death, in other series and films has been converted into an alien being that does not touch us directly, it merely entertains us. With these types of portrayals of death we create a distance and a denial of it since what we see in the screen before us are usually highly violent scenes or romanticized deaths. As described by Sarah McKenzie in her article entitled “Death: The New Pornography”, what we have seen on television during the 90s is quite different than what we are faced with in *Six Feet Under*. Television shows such as *ER* take us into the world of doctors and hospitals in which death and illness is present at every moment. The show focuses much more on the lives,

struggles, and challenges of the main characters than on the patients themselves. As McKenzie establishes, the show never truly explores the thoughts and worries of those who are facing death or those who are ill. The climaxes of these types of programs revolved around the heroic act of a doctor saving a life and the stress that this caused for the male and female protagonists of the show in which every decision was a life or death one. She goes on and states that:

While the ever-present threat of death formed the backbone of these shows, we rarely got a realistic insight into how and why death occurred and, more importantly, how people felt about death. We were encouraged to identify with, and worry about, the 'live' stars of the show, not to dwell too much on the depressing storylines of the dying patients. (96)

She describes that television shows such as *CSI*, *Silent Witness*, and *McCallum* were also about death. In these cases, the main goal of the program was to solve the particular case of murder that the episode dwelt with. It did not focus at all on the deceased or on their grieving loved ones. The entertainment value was based on solving the mystery of the deaths that took place during the shows. Once again, it made death into an unreachable entity, not making us think about what it meant to die and what the consequences and the process of grieving was all about for the ones still alive.

Not only do we have death on television but we are also highly entertained by big budget movies such as *Kill Bill: Volume One* by Quentin Tarantino as described by McKenzie. The film revolves around intense violence and action packed deaths. Here, the focus is more on the killing sprees than anything else. The audience gets to see body parts flying around and blood gushing everywhere to the point in which we are convinced that this could only take place on

the 'big screen', which is probably true. McKenzie asks herself why this is acceptable by spectators. What she concludes is that:

Perhaps we enjoy watching this kind of onscreen slaughter because it has nothing to do with 'real' death. While action and horror films revel in the depiction of bloody, gory, ultra-violent death, it seems that these films are so far removed from the reality that they are nothing more than cartoons to us. They are funny or entertaining because THAT would never happen to US. (96)

Such movies impersonalize death. Within *Six Feet Under* we have all types of death, even bloody ones. There is an episode in which a couple of people are stuck inside of an elevator, When one of the men manage to open the door and get out to help the others, the doors close on him and he is cut in half, splashing the remaining people with bright, red blood. The difference is that *Six Feet Under* does not obsess over the way in which this man dies; the series focuses on how these deaths affect the lives of others and how these deal with this great loss, acknowledging as well that death comes unexpectedly in many different shapes and forms and that anyone's day can be up when the person least expects it, therefore hinting at the idea that life has to be appreciated to the fullest while one is still alive.

McKenzie indirectly points out at what Alan Ball is trying to do with *Six Feet Under* by recognizing that a series that deals with death and grief might help its viewers deal with dying better and see it from a different perspective. She tells us that:

Perhaps we need to see the horror and reality of death to comprehend the enormity and the tragedy of these events. Perhaps we need to see these dead bodies and feel the shock of 'I have holidayed there – it could have been me' to really appreciate that we are alive and healthy. (97)

She goes on and states that “Thinking seriously about the fact that one day we will die can help us to work out what’s really important and make us realize how precious the time we have on earth is. It would be great if television and film helped us acknowledge and accept this universally painful concept” (97). This approach to death, dying, and bereavement is an ever present topic inside of the series’ setting, themes, and plot. Ball does not try to merely entertain us but he also wants us to think critically about what we are seeing in the screen before us in order to make death a less alienated event and therefore less intimidating and horrific or less entertaining for that matter. He wants to humanize the most intrinsic characteristic that we possess: dying.

*Six Feet Under* and its portrayal of death serve different purposes as has been discussed all along. Alan Ball want us to become more familiar with the entire process that encompasses death and the disposing of the body, and he also wants us to understand the process of grieving as a healthy and natural stepping stone into moving on with one’s life after the loss of a loved one. Death is all over the series, so much so that the main characters are able to have imaginary conversations with the dead through which their sub consciousness are revealed by these conversations. In *Reading Six Feet Under: TV to Die For*, Bob Turnock states that “This dimension is not just ritually framed by the structure of each episode, but is also visually articulated throughout the series in hallucinatory sequences where the dead come back to life, or in dream sequences where alternate realities are explored” (“Death, Liminality, and Transformation in *Six Feet Under*” 40).

Through the dead we get to know a side to the Fishers that is hidden; we get to read their minds. The dead serve as a link between the audience and the protagonists’ most private thoughts but they also serve as a space in which societal taboos and problems are being talked

about and discussed openly, such as homosexuality, infidelity, and religious fanaticism. In the introductory section of *Reading Six Feet Under: TV to Die For*, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe seem to agree with the notion that the series creates a space between life and death to explore such topics as mentioned before:

Structurally it deals with the liminal space between death and burial; thematically it focuses on cultural taboos---homosexuality, mental illness, old age, sickness, drug addiction, adolescence, race and class---which, in turn, are used to revisit traditional cultural certainties such as religion, marriage and the family---and it questions who we are. (3)

As Bob Turnock also observes in his article: "...each *Six Feet Under* episode offers a liminal space for exploring socially and culturally problematic themes and taboo subjects: it is a space for transformation where meaning collapses, and this is dramatically explored through the changes each character undergoes across the series" (40). An example of this discussion of taboo subjects is clearly described by Turnock himself: "...the dead 'come to life' and confront individual members of the Fisher family about their attitudes or failings . . . In season one, for example, the victim of a homophobic attack in 'A Private Life' taunt David about his sexuality" (42). Through the dialogue between David and the dead young man, like himself, the subject of homosexuality is being discussed between both men, giving audiences a chance to see both sides of the coin, the stereotypical and rejected side as envisioned by many members of society and the cruel reality of the difficulties of being and accepting oneself as a homosexual in today's world. He concludes his essay by telling readers that "The series also provides a space of liminality which allows not only for the themes of death to be openly acknowledged and discussed, but also for the deceased, the bereaved, and the central characters

to speak what cannot be said elsewhere” (48). This is very much true for both AB and SFU in which audiences can relate to the characters because they too have felt and maybe even uttered statements that are not socially appropriate but that many think about regardless. The difference is that in both of Ball’s visual texts, these taboo subjects are spoken about and treated as a reality in today’s society for audiences to think about and question as a “man thinking” should.

It could be said that one of the most recurring taboo subjects in SFU as well as in AB is human sexuality, be it between heterosexuals, bisexuals, or homosexuals, and homophobia. We see these types of relationships between David Fisher and Keith Charles (his African American partner), Nate Fisher and Brenda Chenoweth (Nate’s girlfriend), Brenda being a sex addict, Claire Fisher and her lesbian affair with Edie as well as young men she meets, Ruth and her different affairs, Col. Fitts living as a closet homosexual in denial, etc. Both the series and the film explore these types of relationships and indirectly critique society’s denial or rejection of their existence, treating them as taboo.

In an article that forms part of *Reading Six Feet Under: TV to Die For* written by Robert Deam Tobin, entitled “Politics, Tragedy and *Six Feet Under*: Camp Aesthetics and Strategies of Gay Mourning in Post-AIDS America”, Tobin tells readers that “In contrast to works such as Jonathan Demme’s 1993 blockbuster *Philadelphia*, which tried to explain AIDS from a straight perspective, *Six Feet Under* attempts, in the wake of AIDS, to apply the lesson of gay mourning to the human condition by uniting the tragic and the political” (85). The series does not treat sexuality as an illness, weakness of character, or sin but as human sexuality and as part of a relationship between two human beings, be it of the same sex or of the different sex. They manage to break away from the stereotype that homosexuality equals promiscuity, AIDS, or even death as usually promoted by society and religion. Tobin explains that:

*Six Feet Under* scrupulously avoids the pitfalls of linking same-sex desire and death. In no way is the gay community seen as excessively sexual or particularly kinky. If anything, the gay David is the most uptight sexually. In contrast Nate Fisher has had lots of girls in his life, . . . Brenda, in fact, becomes a full fledged sex addict. Claire Fisher is the one experimenting with crystal meth because her boyfriend, Gabe Dimas (Eric Balfour), says it makes sex more exciting. Even Ruth Fisher overcomes her inhibitions to have an active sex life. There is not a sense in *Six Feet Under* that sexuality per se is a danger needing suppression, or that homosexuals in particular are introducing some kind of virus in an otherwise healthy community. Indeed, that community---white, bourgeois America---is shown as deeply unhealthy and in need of reform. (88)

In terms of the topic of homophobia explored in SFU and AB, mainly through the characters of David Fisher and Col. Fitts, Tobin states that:

Homophobia, in the family and in organized religion receives significant attention as David tortuously and wrenchingly comes out of the closet . . . the series reveals how deep homophobia runs in American society . . . implies that homophobia is an even more entrenched problem than AIDS itself---that AIDS is in fact, a symptom of homophobia. (90)

Ball seems to want for his audience to see things from a different perspective, or from all perspectives for that matter, in order to grasp taboo situations with keen observation and critique and make a decision once one has fully understood both sides of the story.

In other words, AB and SFU, especially through the character of Col. Fitts and David Fisher, tries to explore human sexuality in general as one of the explored taboo subjects. He

manages this by humanizing these stereotypes, instead of merely attacking what society and/or religion rejects or what they consider the opposite of the “norm”. The purpose of the analysis of such taboo subjects is to create a space for societal critique and questioning of standards that brings us closer to becoming what Emerson called a “man thinking”, therefore making audiences closer to transcendence as Emerson preached in the past and Ball preaches in modern times.

Not only does Alan Ball wants us to become more aware of death, dying, and bereavement and to question societal restraints, but he also wants us to recognize the empowerment and transcendence we can achieve with a clear understanding of death and how this makes us have less fear of it. As stated by Tobin while describing the character of Fisher client, Tracy, in SFU, he tells us that “Tracy cries ‘Why do people have to die?’ When Nate answers her that people die in order to make life important, and urges her to make the most of each day the way her aunt had, he is able to articulate what Ball himself calls the message of the show” (89).

In *American Beauty* for instance, we have two major characters that directly deal with death: Lester Burnham and Ricky Fitts. Lester had to die in order to see the beauty and understanding of life that death brings about, at least in the case of the film. Only when he is dead is he able to transcend. As described in the book entitled *Considering Alan Ball*, Thomas Fahy tells us that “As Hall explains, Lester only understands the meaning of life through his death, and he shares this lesson with the audience at the end of the film. ‘Further he is able to amend Ricky’s original statement, reminding us that we can experience beauty not by American determination but by letting go’ ” (10). Ricky Fitts, unlike Lester, does not have to die in order to transcend, live his life to the fullest, and have absolutely no fear of death, which



empowers him greatly and makes him the strongest character in the film. As stated by Fahy: “Ricky is the visionary character, the artist whose strength, comes in part, from the fact that he doesn’t fear death . . . Ricky does not run from death, and what the film makes clear is that this courage enables Ricky not only to live but to share his life with another person” (10). Ricky’s artistic vision enables him to perhaps see what others cannot; as Emerson tells us, he is the “world’s eye”. In other words, he saw a whole world behind things, especially in death, that enabled him to be unafraid of it and appreciate its beauty, therefore live his life to the fullest. When describing Ricky, Fahy tells us: “His art is borne out of some understanding regarding the close relationship between life and death, the living and the dead, the physical and the spiritual” (10). What Alan Ball is trying to do here is to show his audience, through his characters, the more positive side of death. He tries to show us how death does not have to be the enemy but can actually be the pathway to the appreciation of life and to the understanding of the beauty behind things, making death the cure instead of the illness, the gateway into transcendence from the anesthetized human condition of 21st century life.

Alan Ball, as mentioned earlier, uses death in both works under study to enable an understanding of life and how it manages to help individuals transcend into a better appreciation of it while one is still alive. He also creates a space for the discussion and critique of taboo subjects and the corruption of society, which lead us away from transcendence. Throughout the discussion present in the following chapter, a better understanding of the way in which he creates these spaces will be exemplified and linked to Emerson’s own theory.

### **Chapter III: Alan Ball's Discussion of Societal Taboos and Restraints imbedded in *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under* in Relation to Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism**

Chapter III consists of an analysis of the way in which Alan Ball creates a space for the discussion and critique of societal dilemmas or taboos such as homosexuality, homophobia, gender roles, beauty, consumerism, among others, within his two works, *Six Feet Under* and *American Beauty*. Specific situations within the film and series' episodes will be exemplified and analyzed in terms of the particular taboo/societal dilemma they address. The goal of this section is to further discuss the manner in which Alan Ball serves as the voice of 21st century society for the critique and questioning of the dilemmas/taboo under discussion, ideally to move audiences into thinking critically and hopefully assimilating what Emerson denominated as "man thinking" within his transcendentalist discourse. The discussion will begin with the analysis of these topics in *American Beauty* followed by *Six Feet Under*.

#### **1. The Work Force**

In *American Beauty*, when Lester Burnham's job, the film's protagonist and voice over narrator, gets threatened by an inexperienced new manager, Lester is outraged: "I've been writing for this magazine for 14 years. You've been here how long? A whole month?" (*American Beauty* 7). He is asked to write a paper in which he should describe the exact responsibilities that he has in order for managers to decide if he is needed or if he is expendable. Not only is this situation the first in triggering Lester's change towards transcendence, but it also exemplifies the capitalist and consumerist approach to work and labor in which revenues and corporeal success are much more important and relevant than the worker or individual itself. Emerson describes it in his essay *The American Scholar*:

The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, ---a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man . . . He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. (515)

This growing problem is not only present in the employers but also in the employees. Emerson said it himself: “The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars” (*The American Scholar* 515). This means that workers or employees like Lester lose passion in what they do and they become lifeless, working only for the pay, not because they are truly interested in what they do, therefore becoming more like a conformist and less like a “man thinking”. For example, before they threatened his job, Lester did not take any action towards improving himself in his workplace, or towards demanding what he deserved after so many years of work he had provided for the company. Lester, that is before he transcends, represents the modern man or the conformist (as opposed to the “man thinking”) in a consumerist society in which as long as there is a paycheck at the end of the week, everything else is all right. There is no questioning and certainly no confrontation, simply blind acceptance towards the norm. Being a conformist (at least before he is able to transcend), as Emerson denominates it, makes Lester accustomed to becoming an under-achiever and for him, as well as society itself, creating change for the better is usually very frightening and challenging.

Carolyn Burnham, Lester’s wife, is obsessed with being successful in her profession, real estate. In her life, work comes first and she abandons her role as wife, mother, and woman without even realizing it, to take on the role of successful businesswoman. This is evident when she goes to a work related function and tells Lester “Now listen to me. This is an important

business function. As you know, my business is selling an image, and part of my job is to live that image . . . Do me a favor. Act happy tonight” (29). Even though her marriage is falling apart bit by bit, she still stresses the fact that they have to seem as if they are okay in order to project success as a couple in the world of business. When she meets her competition, Buddy Kane, “The Real Estate King”, she realizes that just like her, his biggest concerns and priority is to give out an image of success at all times. She takes what Buddy says straight to her heart and makes it her own personal motto. When Carolyn is not able to sell a house on a particular day, she goes hysterical, almost into an emotional breakdown, slapping herself in the face, and then awkwardly stops and goes on with her day as if nothing ever happened. For her, the most important thing is to be the best at her job. In one particular scene, Lester approaches his wife and caresses her on their sofa. He reminds her of the girl she used to be and she plays along. When she realizes that the beer Lester is holding might spill over the sofa she breaks away from the moment and tells him that he has to be careful in order to not spill beer on it. He tells her that it is just a couch. She screams that it is not just a couch, hinting at the fact that it is expensive. Lester is slowly but surely able to see the truly important things while Carolyn seems to only see the material and the road ahead towards what she considers success. As Emerson puts it “Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing . . . and the soul is subject to dollars” (*The American Scholar* 515). In this case, Carolyn is being metamorphosed into a thing whether she knows it or not, while Lester is her complete opposite and is slowly being able to see outside of the box and transcend.

## **2. Beauty**

Angela Hayes, Lester’s love interest and his daughter’s (Jane Burnham) best friend, represents the modern concept of what the media, and consequently society, considers

beautiful. She is young, thin, blond, blue eyed, and very sensual. She is the type of woman that society and the media have constructed as beautiful. Her character represents one type of beauty: the commercial, popular, shallow, and superficial beauty. For her, being ordinary is the worst thing in the world:

I'm used to guys drooling over me. It started when I was about 12. I'd go to dinner with my parents . . . Every guy there would stare at me when I walked in. And I knew what they were thinking, just like I knew guys at school thought about me when they jerked off . . . I liked it. I still like it. If people I don't even know look at me and want to fuck me, it means I really have a chance at being a model which is great because there's nothing worse in life than being ordinary.

(21)

In today's superficial society, being what others define as "beautiful" or "sexy" is of crucial importance to many women and men as well. What you see in the media is what you want to become. If you are lucky enough to resemble these media portraits of beauty then you are "in". If you are more like Jane Burnham, Lester's daughter and Angela's best friend, a different, more untraditional type of beauty, then you are not as admired and/or desired as Angela and this creates great anxiety over appearance, strong pressure over looks and physique. Surprisingly enough, even Jane who is not a commercial beauty like Angela, considers getting breast implants. Society has become obsessed with superficiality and Alan Ball tries to portray characters that see beyond, that look further to search on for deeper and more significant levels of beauty. Emerson as well describes beauty several times in his essays, telling us "There is no object so foul that intense light will not make beautiful . . . Even the corpse hath its own beauty" (*Nature* 490). In other words, we can find beauty in the remotest places, anywhere and

everywhere, we just need to train ourselves to see, just as Ball advises us in the “Special Features” section of the film: “Beauty is in the strangest places. A piece of garbage floating in the wind and that beauty exists here in America. It exists everywhere. You have to develop an eye for it and be able to see it” (*American Beauty*).

As the film progresses, we realize that Angela was never what she seemed to be, a sexual fantasy for the male population, and she is only able to open up to Lester, revealing that she is a virgin made to believe that she was a sex kitten by the way she acted and expressed herself with others such as Jane. Ball suggests that this kind of commercial beauty is a way to sell an image, similar to Caroline’s modus operandi in which she believes one must portray an image of success in order to be successful; it is empty and fake; the media is selling an image of beauty that is not a real one--leaving its follower hollow. The media hyped and commercialized societal constructs of beauty are only meant to reach the masses to reap capital profit. When Ricky Fitts, Jane’s boyfriend and neighbor, writes her name with fire under her window, Jane is sure he’s filming her, being the voyeur that he is. Angela starts to pose through the window for him, moving from side to side in a sexual manner to call the attention to her. Ricky does not even stop to film Angela; he films Jane’s face from a distance as she smiles at a mirror opposite to the camera. Ignoring the packaged blond commercial beauty, Ricky focuses on beauty where it is not typically found, in a girl like Jane. For all intents and purposes this makes him different than most of society in his definition of what beauty is supposed to be. He does not follow the media’s prescription of beauty but finds it where others overlook or ignore. Similar to Emerson’s description of beauty, that it can be found in the remotest of places, even in a corpse; one simply has to develop an eye for it, Ricky through Jane and everything else he

videotapes, such as a dead bird, a dead woman, Lester's bloody corpse, a flying plastic bag, etc; follows Emersonian aspirations.

### **3. Homophobia**

Col. Fitts, Ricky's father, represents the conservative, militaristic, ultra traditional American male. He never speaks of his feelings except when it comes to attacking homosexuals due to the fact that he is a closeted homosexual himself, only we do not discover this until the last scenes of the film. He is apparently extremely ashamed of this. Whenever he seems to want to have a genuine heart to heart with anyone else, he hesitates and stops, possibly because he believes men should not express their feelings in such manner due to societal gender roles. He is totally and utterly against homosexuality and is not shy to defend it. His shame of being a homosexual puts him into a state of severe homophobia. When he realizes that his neighbors are a gay couple he voices his disgust and imposes his beliefs on his son Ricky: "How come these faggots always have to rub it in your face? How can they be so shameless?". Ricky tells him that they believe they have nothing to be ashamed of and Col. Fitts, almost insulted responds, "Well it is". Finally Ricky tells his father exactly what he wants to hear: "Forgive me, sir, for speaking so bluntly, but these fags make me want to puke my fucking guts out" to which Col. Fitts responds "Well me too, son. Yeah. Me too" (*American Beauty* 25). Ricky only agrees because he knows that his father is intolerant to opposing viewpoints.

Later in the film, after Ricky becomes Lester's pot dealer, he goes next door to sell pot to Lester. As this happens Col. Fitts watches through the window and misinterprets what he sees, believing that Ricky is performing sexual favors on Lester for money. When Ricky comes

home, Col. Fitts is waiting for him in his room and questions him about how he got that money. Ricky tells him that it's from his job but Col. Fitts is convinced otherwise and does not budge:

Now I saw you with him. What does he make you do? Don't you laugh at me! I will not sit back and watch my only son become a cocksucker! I swear to God, I'll throw you out of this house and never look at you again! I'd rather you were dead than be a fuckin' faggot! (84)

Ricky then responds: "You're right. I suck dick for money. Two thousand dollars, I'm that good. You should see me fuck. I'm the best piece of ass in three states" (84). Infuriated, Col. Fitts throws him out: "Damn it, get out! I don't ever want to see you again", and Ricky ends the discussion by calmly looking into his father's eyes and telling him "What a sad... old man you are" (84). He then leaves the room, and Col. Fitts is left there holding back his tears, with his fists still held up in the air.

Once again, Ricky tells Col. Fitts exactly what he wants to hear but this time he just wants to prove "what a sad old man" his father is. Later that night, Col. Fitts walks over to Lester's house as heavy rain pours over him. Lester is in the garage working out and Col. Fitts seems very upset. Fitts asks Lester where Carolyn is and Lester responds that she is probably out having sex with the Realtor King and that he does not care. Fitts is quite surprised by this answer and Lester explains: "Our marriage is just for show. A commercial for how normal we are when we're anything but" (89). Col. Fitts begins to cry and surprisingly enough hugs Lester, his hands tightly grasping his back, and then he tries to kiss him on the mouth. Lester gently pulls away and tells him that he is sorry, that he must have had the wrong idea. Col. Fitts turns around slowly, out into the rain alone. From these two events we become aware that Fitts, the epitome of the "Macho Man", is truly a closeted homosexual who is too ashamed to



accept himself as such, so much so that his humiliation drives him into murdering Lester that same night after feeling that his openness has been rejected. The shame that he felt for being a homosexual is exactly what made his life unhappy. He was never brave enough to accept himself as he was and this denial blinded him from realizing that there was beauty to him as well, to everything and everyone. Emerson tells us that:

My life is not an apology, but a life. It is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should glittering and unsteady . . . What I must do, is all that concerns me, not what the people think. (*The American Scholar* 542)

Evidently, Col. Fitts was living in a world of appearances that certainly did not make him a happy man. As Emerson says “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (542). What Emerson is trying to convey here is that it is easy to be oneself when one is alone but the real challenge, what distinguishes a “man thinking” from a conformist, is to be that genuine individual in everyday life and not be ashamed or worried about what others might think. This self-acceptance brings us closer to transcendence and Col. Fitts’ character represented quite the opposite of such an epiphany, all because he acted as society expected him to, not as he truly desired.

#### **4. Consumerism**

Within, the series, *Six Feet Under*, similar taboo subjects are being explored and critiqued. Death, which is the primary taboo in the series, is looked at from a commercial point of view as well as from a personal loss point of view (human emotion/nature). Not only do we get these conflicts, but satirical commercials, which only form part of the series’ First Season,

are also shown between certain scenes, attacking consumerism and demonstrating that even in a delicate business, such as the “Death Industry”, consumerism, and commercialism are very much present.

The first commercial is an advertisement for a hearse in which a female model sensually slides her hand over the car. The underlying critique presented in this advertisement is first of all, sex sells. The hand of the female model is sensually caressing the hearse to attract the attention of potential male drivers, as well as indirectly stating that this type of hearse represents power and class, in other words, money. The advertisement cleverly uses the words “loved one” to convince consumers of the advertiser’s sensitivity and compassion towards their own personal situation when in reality, the only thing important for them is selling the product. Another commercial is shown in the same episode in which a deceased young male is being treated with the latest product in the funeral business to make him look the way he did when he was alive: “For a body that’s firm, yet flexible, for skin that begs to be touched, for the velvety appearance of actual living tissue, top morticians rely on Living Splendor embalming fluid. Living Splendor: Only Real Life is Better” (‘Pilot’, 1:1). In this advertisement what is being critiqued is vanity in which looking attractive even when we are dead is of great importance. The denial of death is also being diagnosed. As long as our loved one looks as good as new or as he/she did when he/she was alive, then accepting death is not as hard because we do not want to see our deceased loved one the way they looked when they perished, but the way they looked when they were alive and well.

Another thing that might be at game here is the competition between funeral businesses, which is an ongoing situation in today’s society in terms of monopoly. The ones who have the most modern and effective products will most likely sell more, and selling is the ultimate goal

of any business, regardless if it's a delicate one such as this one. The subject that is being critiqued here is the consumerist world we are living in, which as mentioned before, cares more for revenues than compassion and consideration for other people's sensitivity and personal loss.

Emerson in *Nature* describes this type of societal corruption as follows:

The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires, the desire of riches, the desire of pleasure, the desire of power, the desire of praise,---and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth. (495)

What Emerson is trying to exemplify here is that consumerism hides in fancy attire and beautiful language, just the way the advertisers picked phrases that seemed sensitive to the mourner's loss, but the reality of the situation is that the real purpose of all this is to make the most amount of money out of people's grief, not caring about the person him/herself but of revenues. The main objective of Ball's inclusion of these advertisements was not only to critique consumerism but also to make people realize that they have to question and think critically about what is being offered in order to make a decision. Emerson did the same, he trained us to question, think, and become a "man thinking" instead of a "common man" or a conformist.

Following Ball's line on the commercialization of modern society, the Fisher's funeral home's greatest competition is a company called Kroehner Services. Kroehner's main concern is selling as much as possible and monopolizing the smaller businesses such as Fisher and Sons. Death is being treated as an industry, not as the ultimate human condition, which connects us all through one same event, and this impersonal treatment is precisely why death is

being analyzed. The Fishers are able to maintain a balance between human compassion and business ordeals; a thing Kroehner Services is incapable of doing. Not only is an obsession with consumerism and revenues being critiqued here but also the way in which highly successful industries are taking over smaller, independent ones, putting them out of business with no type of remorse whatsoever. As long as the money is coming in, everything else is simply a stepping stone towards success; like the popular phrase says: “Its not personal, its business”.

## **5. Denial of Death**

*Six Feet Under* also explores the way our deceased loved ones are being taken care of as well as how the ones still alive grieve. Within the series there is a certain critique towards the denial of death, which disables us from grieving healthily or naturally. In the Pilot episode of the series Nathaniel Fisher senior, the family patriarch, dies in a car accident. When Ruth Fisher, Nathaniel’s wife, is asked by Nate to identify the body in the morgue, she tells him: “I can’t. I’ve seen too many dead people in my life. They’re work. I won’t see your father that way” (‘Pilot’, 1:1). By not seeing her husband’s body she is able to avoid dealing with the loss right away. When the Fishers are all gathered together at Nathaniel’s funeral, David, the youngest of the Fisher sons, as usual, is very professional about the ceremony and keeps to himself. Nate on the other hand is consumed in anger by this great loss, picks up dirt from the ground and throws it over his father’s casket. David tries to control him, telling him that the way they do it is the way it is traditionally done and Nate tells him:

I refuse to sanitize this anymore . . . Jesus, David, it’s like surgery---clean, antiseptic, business. He was our father! You can pump him full of chemicals, you can put make up on him and you can prop him up for a nap in the slumber room, but the fact remains, David, that the only father we are gonna have is gone.

Forever. And that sucks. But it's a goddamn part of life and you can't really accept it without getting your hands dirty. ('Pilot', 1:1)

From the very beginning, the only character that seems to have an emotional or natural approach towards death and dying is Nate. Perhaps working with bodies all day long and facing death and grieving every single day, is the reason why the other Fishers were so disconnected from the process of bereavement, because they lived it all the time and therefore became desensitized. When Ruth saw how Nate was reacting to the loss during the funeral, she also stood up, collected a bit of soil and threw it over the casket as well. Right then and there, she started sobbing hysterically. David continued to maintain a professional, almost indifferent attitude towards the entire situation. Through this episode, we get to see the kind of characters we will become more familiar with season through season as well as the denial of death and grieving present in the series' plot.

## **6. Stereotypes and Racism**

During the series, racial differences and stereotypes are also being explored as a taboo. In the Fourth episode of the First Season, the Fishers arrange a funeral for a Mexican gang member named Paco. David immediately solicits the help of his restorative artist, Federico "Rico" Diaz who is also a Latino but happens to be a Puerto Rican, not a Mexican. When David assumes Rico is Mexican, Rico is offended that after all the years working together David does not even know where he is from. When the fact that the deceased Paco was a gang member is brought into the attention of Rico, he tells David "Because I'm Latino I know about gangs?" David responds "Well you probably know more about it than I do"---"How come?"---"Well I just assumed that maybe somebody in your family might" and finally Rico responds

“No. No one in my family. Never”. Nate wants Rico to handle the service and tells David “David, we are so white. If we step in we will totally fuck up” (‘Familia’, 1:4).

Within this episode, racial issues of stereotyping are definitely being questioned. First of all, David assumes Federico and Paco are the same kind of person or at least have many things in common due to the fact that they both happen to be Latinos. For him, there does not seem to be a distinction between one culture and the other, he simply labels them as Latinos. Secondly, he assumes that because Rico is Latino he is familiar with gangs and violence, which is a racist and stereotypical assumption on the part of David. Third, when the funeral begins, we see that heavily tattooed men with thick, exaggerated Mexican accents surround the room. The room is filled with crosses and the traditional “Ave Maria” is playing. After the ceremony, to the Fishers’ surprise, the deceased’s family and loved ones ask the Fishers to join them in prayer and they thank them for the service. As they all hold hands in a circle, the differences between them seem to disappear. Grief unites them and they all seem to be part of one same group: humanity. So even though there are racial differences and stereotypes attached to every race and social community, “Familia” seems to point at the idea that we are all the same, we feel the same, we ache the same, regardless. Emerson tells us that “Nothing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests the universal grace” (*Nature* 493). In other words, it is in moments like this one that we realize the connection between all human beings in which we are not as different as we think. The Fishers, still mourning the loss of Nathaniel, were able to connect to a group of people that had little in common with them, except loss and grief. All stereotypes and racial issues vanished, leaving only human connection and it all happened through death. If we connect this to Emerson’s Transcendentalism, the one that transcends is the one that

understands this connection between all living things and the beauty behind this connectivity. It is through this global unity that true beauty can be measured and appreciated. It makes us realize that we are all the same, in the core, just as every living thing in Nature is part of the other. Through genuine human emotion, we go back to the core of nature.

## **7. Homophobia and Religion**

In Season 1, Episode 12, entitled “Private Life”, the Fishers have to take care of a deceased homosexual young man whom was murdered in a homophobic hate crime. The boy’s father is in total denial of his son’s sexual life and cannot even say the word “gay” believing that this is the reason why his son was murdered in the first place. The young man appears to David during the entire episode and he looks as bruised up as the ones who brutally beat him to death left him. He engages in a conversation with David in which he tells him: “I am the one who was sick. So I liked men. I never should have given into it. It’s not what God intended. I could’ve had a family, a normal life. You could’ve too” (*Six Feet Under*). David tells him that a life like that would have been a lie and that it would not have been fair to his family and to himself. The deceased man then tells him: “Not if I never looked back. Not if I had faith. God challenges us like this so we’ll choose good, so we’ll triumph over evil”. David tells him that being gay is not a choice one makes, rather a choice God makes. The young man then responds: “That’s just liberal propaganda to justify your own depravity; no matter how nice you try fix me up, I’m still going to hell, and you know it...cause you’re going there too”. David finally responds: “Who you are is nothing to be ashamed of”. This just might be the most essential episode in terms of homophobic critique. Not only are hate crimes being exposed and indirectly condemned but religion is also being questioned. Many religious groups, if not all, stand strongly against homosexual relationships and even believe that it can be changed

through faith. This is precisely what Alan Ball is critiquing and it is quite evident within the conversation that David has with the deceased young man. This same questioning that Ball invites us to do regardless of the religious backgrounds we might have, is the same questioning and challenging of the “norm” that Emerson preaches. Emerson tells us that we have to question in order to decide what works for us and what is simply a product of the corruptive restraints present in today’s society: “The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language . . . and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth” (*Nature* 495). Emerson wanted us to find the truth within ourselves and in the uncorrupted world of nature where all living things have beauty, one way or the other. The hand of man in society destroys and corrupts this vision of beauty and there is where we must keep an open eye to be able to see and to question, and consequently, transcend.

Critique of religious institutions continues in Episode 13 of SFU’s First Season, entitled “Knock-Knock”. When David (who serves as deacon in his church) gets together with other men from his church to decide whether or not they should ask Father Jack to resign over the suspicion that he is a homosexual, David opposes. One man tells David: “The church rejects homosexual practice as incompatible with scripture”. David responds “So because of their random genetics gay people should be denied any romantic or sexual love?” to which the man responds “That is liberal claptrap. It’s not genetics. It can be overcome”, and David finally answers: “Walter the only way you could know that for sure is if it’s something you overcame”. Then Walter asks David if he is gay and he responds “Yes” (‘Knock Knock’, 1:13). At the end of the episode David encounters the deceased young man once more. He thanks David with a warm smile in his face and disappears. We get a notion that David is not only fighting for himself but for all those that can no longer defend themselves or do not have the



courage to do so. The deceased young man's conversations with David pushed him into wanting to make a change even though these imaginary encounters merely reflected David's subconscious thoughts. Emerson discusses these inner thoughts in his essay entitled *Self Reliance*: "These are the voices we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" (541). As clearly exemplified by Emerson, the voices we hear in solitude are of great importance in order to decipher between the thoughts that are imbedded in our subconscious by the voices of society and the ones that are our very own, which reflect our true belief over the subject matter at hand. Even though David was opposing what the deceased young man was telling him about homosexuals and hell, it is evident that he was really merely fighting his own psyche and the ideas that religion and society had made him believe for most of his life. It was now that David was standing up and challenging these ideas in order to break free from them and stand for what he truly and really believed in, as any "man thinking" is supposed to do according to Emerson.

Not only does Alan Ball critique the way religion attacks homosexuality but he also wants audiences to realize that gay relationships are just like any other type of relationship by humanizing them. *SFU* focuses on the love between two people instead of focusing on the fact that they are from the same sex. In Season 3, Episode 4, entitled "Nobody Sleeps" this type of relationship is being portrayed. The episode begins with a get together of gay couples in a house in which one of the men is fatally ill while his partner takes care of him. All the men are sitting in the living room watching a film and laughing. All of a sudden, the sick man passes away silently and the only one who notices is his partner. In this touching moment, his still alive partner looks at him, smiles and holds his hand. The Fishers deal with the funeral of the

deceased gay man, and his partner explains to David that they had been together all their lives, 22 years, and that their families never accepted them as a couple. This makes David think about his relationship with Keith and how much they love each other. He realizes that what is important is not what others think or what religion accepts or rejects, but the love between them and surviving the ups and downs of such a controversial relationship, at least in the eyes of many. As explained before, the episode does not focus on the sexuality of these men but rather on the connection, devotion, love, and respect between them. This demonstrates that these emotions are not particular to heterosexual couples. Ball merely wants us to look at things from a different perspective that perhaps some of us have not yet taken time to analyze and understand. This way we might finally realize that certain human emotions, if not all, are part of all of us regardless of gender, race, sexual preference, etc. We are all one in essence and those of us who see this and understand it are closer to nature and transcendence.

In “The Opening”, Season 3, Episode 9, Keith and David are in a video club renting an adult film. As they arrive to the register to pay, they stumble upon Father Jack whom is also renting a video. When Father Jack approaches the clerk, the young employee tells him that he has not yet returned “Back to the Crack: Butt Munch 2”. Keith and David laugh softly and Father Jack awkwardly leaves the store. Ball intends to portray the way in which human sexuality is present in all individuals regardless of color, race, or profession. Even though priests are supposed to represent an image of purity and abstinence, in this particular case, we get to see, that like us, they too have sexual needs and likes which others might or might not be aware of and that it should not be taken so seriously, since we are all human beings, and like Emerson says, if one knows the secret of one mind, one knows the secret of all minds. We are all very much alike in essence whether we admit it or not and human sexuality is undeniably at

the core of our nature regardless of who we are. What society represents is a restraint from our own human nature, not just in sexuality, but in all areas of the human condition, as has been exemplified earlier.

During the beginning section of “In case of Rapture” from Season 4, Episode 2, a lady is driving her car while listening to a religious radio station that is discussing marriage and sex. The lady seems to agree with what she is listening to and it is evident that she is a religious fanatic. All of a sudden, a pick-up truck filled with blow up dolls, which are being transported from a sex shop nearby manage to get loose and begin to float all over the sky. The lady looks at them and what she sees are angels, dressed in white, with white wings, and areolas. She gets out of her car in the middle of the busy street, screaming “Oh my Lord! Praise Jesus!” at the top of her lungs, and just as she finishes uttering these words she is violently run over by a car. The woman’s husband decides to contact the Fishers for them to take care of the ceremony and burial. To Nate’s surprise, the man is very calm with the loss of his wife. Nate, having lost his first wife and mother of his daughter recently as well, Lisa Kimmel, in a mysterious death, which is never clearly explained, decides to talk about the man’s strange reaction with David:

He’s just using that happy-she’s-on her-way- to Jesus- horseshit to distance himself from the truth. The man lost his wife! He’s facing one of the worst things that can possibly happen to a person, and I just think he needs to feel...the loss and the rage. He was nowhere even near actual grief. (‘In Case of Rapture’, 4:2)

This particular episode questions is the way in which the blind belief in religious sects sometimes disables people from seeing reality. In the case of Dorothy, she was so convinced of her religious beliefs that she was not even able to distinguish between blow up dolls and angels coincidentally causing her to get run over and die. It is also attacking the way in which religion

usually relies on the existence of a higher power to not have to deal with the incredibly hard things that life throws at us such as the loss of a loved one. Like Nate suggested, they sometimes rely on the ‘God works in mysterious ways’ loophole to suppress their feelings and not deal with them healthily. In other words, Ball not only critiques the way religion attacks the freedom to love who ever one wants to love, be it a person from one’s same sex or not, but he also questions religious fanaticism and the way in which it blinds us from reality and from taking responsibility for our own feelings instead of relying on a higher being, which may or may not even exist.

As just evidenced throughout this chapter, Alan Ball not only creates a space for the discussion, critique, and questioning of societal taboos and restraints, but he also seems to point at the idea that through death (our own and those of our loved ones) we are able to see true beauty in the little things of life, and to transcend as Ralph Waldo Emerson recommended during the 19th century. In *American Beauty* this transcending is evident in the character of Ricky Fitts, and the film’s protagonist and voice-over narrator, Lester Burnham who speaks to us from another existence, death. In *Six Feet Under*, this transcendence is more evident in Nate Fisher than in any other character in which, through questioning and facing terrible loss, he is able to appreciate life while still alive and therefore transcends the most. In the following chapter, Chapter IV, a discussion and distinction of these characters who have transcended in Emersonian tradition, both in AB and SFU, will be explained and exemplified in opposition to the characters that were not able to transcend.

## **Chapter IV: Those who have Transcended in Alan Ball's *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under***

Transcendence, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, is a level of spirituality that could be reached by those who questioned society's corrupting ways towards mankind. He believed that we could all reach this level of enlightenment by searching within ourselves and keeping an open eye for the beauty that nature provided in every day things that mostly went unnoticed. It was more a lifestyle than a simple task and it took effort and, at times, even sacrifice. But once transcendence was reached, fear no longer resided in man's life and everything took on great meaning and beauty. Similarly, Alan Ball's modernized transcendence refers to the way an individual is able to see outside of the box we call "modern life". To him, an individual who has reached this type of enlightenment is able to see the beauty that the world has to offer, beauty that is not evident to most people for they have not developed the "eye" for it. He also believes that once able to reach this phase of transcendence, then he/she will be able to appreciate life for the little things and be rid of all fears and insignificant attachments, in other words, one will be able to let go and appreciate life and all its beauty.

As explained beforehand, in Alan Ball's works under study, *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under*, there are characters within its plot that have transcended as described by Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism and Alan Ball's own modernized view on transcendence. Within *American Beauty*, the characters of Ricky Fitts and Lester Burnham reached a level of transcendence similar to that described by Emerson, while the characters of Carolyn Burnham, Col. Fitts, and Angela Hayes were not able to reach such enlightenment. In this Chapter, those characters that have in fact reached a level of transcendence will be analyzed and exemplified, as will those who were not able to transcend in Emersonian tradition. In terms of *Six Feet*

*Under*, Nate Fisher, Ruth Fisher, Claire Fisher, and David Fisher all reach transcendence on some levels, especially the character of Nate.

### **1. Those who have *not* Transcended within AB**

Beginning with Carolyn Burnham (Lester Burnham's wife), as mentioned in prior chapters, she was a workaholic wife and mother who lost her individuality as her life progressed. Just as Lester described her, she used to be a fun woman who was full of life, but that with time became "joyless". Her life revolved around maintaining an image of success at all times in order to have success, regardless of the way she truly felt about certain areas in her personal life. Emerson describes this type of behavior in *The American Scholar* in which he says that "The state of society is one in which its members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,---a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man" (515). As Emerson describes, Carolyn forgot what it was to be human, to be a woman with emotions. Her only purpose in life was to be successful or at least portray success. When she referred to "success", it was evident that it meant making money and having economical status in society. Material things represented success for her, leaving her humanity and emotions way behind. When Lester and Carolyn finally have an intimate moment together, Carolyn, instead of giving in to the moment, focuses on what she believes is more important, material possessions. Lester on the other hand, knows that these are unimportant. We get to see how detached she actually is from all human emotion or personal contact with the people that are supposed to matter the most to her, like her husband. We also get to see the way she is almost obsessed with projecting an image of success at all times, forgetting to focus on what really matters in life. For her, getting ahead in her professional life is crucial and comes first than anything else, which is precisely why her marriage and personal connection to her

husband and daughter, has fallen apart over the years, hindering her from transcending and evolving as a human being.

The opposite of a character like Carolyn Burnham is what Emerson denominates as “man thinking” and in the case of the film, it would be Lester Burnham, which will be discussed further on. Emerson clearly describes the state in which Carolyn is in: “Men such as they are, very naturally seek money or power; and power because it is as good as money . . . and this, in their sleep-walking, they dream is highest. Wake them, and they shall quit the false good and leap to the true” (*The American Scholar* 523). Because she was blinded by what society expected from her, Carolyn Burnham was not able to enjoy the enlightenment that transcendence brings about. It is not until Lester is murdered at the end of the film that she is able to realize how much value he had in her life, as she goes to their closet, hugs his clothes, and sobs hysterically at realizing her loss. This is the only time we get to see any true and real emotion coming out of her. It is only at this moment that she realizes the beauty of the little things in her life, those things that commercial success cannot replace.

Another character that has not been able to transcend, is the character of Angela Hayes, Jane Burnham’s best friend, and Lester’s much younger love interest in the film. Hayes is the typical, all American teenage girl whose goal in life is to be the opposite of “ordinary” even though she is exactly that. For her, nothing is worse than being ordinary, as she mentions multiple times throughout the film. She is a blond, blue-eyed, thin, model look alike, sex symbol, who ignites the sexual fire in Lester as soon as he lays his eyes on her. It is in that moment that Lester, through voice-over narration, informs his audience that he feels as if he has come back to life from a very long coma. There are two sides to Hayes that we get to see in the film, the one she wants to portray and the one she really is. The image she strives to portray

is that of a sexually experienced young woman, a bombshell who is very much in charge of her good looks and sexuality. She is constantly speaking about her sexual encounters and even admits to a desire of having sex with Jane's father, Lester Burnham.

Like Carolyn, portraying an image was of crucial importance to Angela Hayes, in this case, the image of commercial beauty and exaggerated sexuality. For her, anything else, or "the ordinary" did not represent beauty. There are two kinds of people in the consumerist world we live in, the ones that are beautiful in accordance to the media and the rest who are not as "lucky" in societal standards of perfection. Emerson believes otherwise. He tells us that beauty can be found anywhere, even in ordinary, everyday things. He even believes that death holds beauty as well. For Angela, it was much more simpler than that, either you were beautiful (unordinary) or you were not (ordinary). For Emerson, it is quite the contrary. For the attentive eye, beauty can be found in all places but one has to have an "eye" for it. Alan Ball seems to agree with this notion of what "beauty" is as he briefly describes in the "Extra Features" of the film's DVD: "There is room for beauty in every facet of existence . . . Beauty is in the strangest places. A piece of garbage floating in the wind, and that beauty exists here in America. It exists everywhere. You have to develop an eye for it and be able to see it" (*American Beauty*). Like Emerson, he realizes that there is a connection between things and within this connection true beauty can be found. Angela, on the other hand, was completely repelled by untraditional scenes of beauty.

When Ricky Fitts, Jane Burnham's next-door neighbor and love interest, videotapes a dead bird, Angela is disgusted by this and even calls him a freak because she is not able to see what Fitts so easily does. He is much more in tune with the "beauty" that Emerson and Ball describe. As the film develops, we get to understand Angela's character a little better. The



audience realizes that she is not who she seems to be. At the moment in which she is about to have sex with Lester, she admits to him and only to him, that she is in fact a virgin and that this would be her first time. So, we see that like Carolyn, Hayes was not at all what she portrayed to be, and that deep down she was just as insecure as the next young teenager like herself, but the only man that gets to see this side to her is Lester Burnham. It is only with him that she humanizes and becomes a real, ordinary, young girl. Her distance from any actual transcendence disables her to see true beauty as Emerson suggests, and therefore keeps her restrained to a consumerist society's belief of what "beauty" is all about.

What Ball tries to describe through Angela's character is the superficial world we are living in, in which the pressure to be what the media considers "beautiful" is very much present in today's society. By focusing so much on appearances, individuals forget to look around and notice the other beautiful things surrounding them, things that Lester is able to see, as is Ricky. Angela focuses all her attention on portraying a certain image to please the masses and totally disregards the actual human being behind the commercialized mask she wears, hindering her from any true transcendence or spiritual growth.

Last but not least within those characters that have not transcended, we have the character of Col. Fitts. He is the epitome of the non-transcendent character within both works under study, AB and SFU. Col. Fitts is an ex-marine. He is the father of Ricky Fitts and a complete homophobic, to the point of despising homosexuals and he is not shy to express his hate. It is not until much later in the film that the audience realizes that his phobia towards the gay community is really self-hate, Col. Fitts being a closeted homosexual himself. He tries to pass on his beliefs to his son, Ricky Fitts: "How come these faggots always have to rub it in your face. How can they be so shameless?" to which Ricky responds: "That's the whole thing,

Dad. They don't feel that's anything to be ashamed of". Almost insulted, Col. Fitts disagrees: "Well, it is". Ricky, being the complete opposite of his father, realizes that there is no way of convincing him otherwise and simply pretends to agree with him by telling him what he believes he wants to hear: "Forgive me, sir, for speaking so bluntly, but those fags make me want to puke my fucking guts out". Col. Fitts finally responds by saying "Well, me too, son. Yeah. Me too" (25).

Ball intends to critique the prescribed thoughts of a man that wants to "fit in" into what society denominates as "masculinity". Being a victim of society, the words leave Col. Fitts's mouth almost as if they had been recited many times before. Like a robot, he utters what he believes he should think, not what he truly feels, as is evident by the end of the film, living by what society expects from him, not by his own true beliefs for he is too ashamed to accept them. As the film progresses, we get to know Col. Fitts a little better and we see the way he never expresses real emotions, except those of hate. He is constantly repressing any feelings of love he has inside, even love for himself. He is evidently ashamed of his true nature.

Emerson speaks of those who are ashamed, stating that they cannot transcend unless they self heal first: "The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because, man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand" (*Nature* 412). When Emerson uses the word "naturalist" he means those that are able to understand nature and its connection with the human soul and spirit, hence, those that transcend. As mentioned earlier, Col. Fitts is very much ashamed and even in denial of being a homosexual and this fact impedes his transcendence more than anything else. As long as he denies himself from his own happiness there is no chance he will be able to transcend. For lost souls like this, Emerson directs us into a

new frame of mind in which he tells us that our life is not an apology and we should be able to live the way we want without shame or self-denial. He goes on to explain the way fear of disappointing others or fear of change impedes us from transcending: “The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past at or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them” (*Self-Reliance* 543). In other words, Col. Fitts never comes out to anyone because he is ashamed and used to living the way he has lived; married to a woman he has no connection to whatsoever and father to a son he has nothing in common with. Change brings about great fear in him so maintaining his present attitude creates a safety net, leaving no room whatsoever for true happiness. “The Great Man”, as Emerson denominates him within his essays, is the one that lets go of those fears and lives his life as he pleases, no matter what. The only moment in the film in which we see that Col. Fitts slightly opens up is at the very end when he pays Lester a visit and puts a move on him only to be shut down by Lester who is not gay but straight. As he realizes what has just happened, humiliation takes a toll on him and he shoots Lester in the head in order to keep his “secret” safe and away from societal judgment. He much rather be judged by the law than make his homosexuality known by anyone, even if its just one man. After he kills Lester, we no longer hear from him again but it is evident that not only did he not transcend but managed to place himself farther away from such enlightenment. Col. Fitts became a lost soul for good all due to fear and self-denial.

These three characters were not able to transcend as Emerson and Ball suggest due to various factors. Carolyn Burnham was too obsessed with being economically successful, while Angela Hayes’s only goal in life was to be beautiful in commercial standards, and last but not least, Col. Fitts could not escape a life of self-hate and denial. These factors disabled them from

reaching transcendence of any kind. What these three characters share in common is the fact that they were never able to escape the materialism of society. They were not able to see beyond and let go of what society imposed on them. As a consequence, they became parrots of other people's thinking, as Emerson describes, alienating them from ever becoming "man thinking" and disabling them from ever seeing the true beauty that lies behind all things, including themselves, opposite to what Ball advises within his own modern transcendentalist agenda.

### **1.1 Those who *have* Transcended within AB**

Jane Burnham, Lester and Carolyn's daughter, is a teenage girl. She is pale skinned, has dark hair, and dresses all in black. Her personality is very sober, unlike Hayes' bubbly and flirtatious attitude. Jane does not seem to care for looks and superficiality as much as Hayes, even though we do get to see that she is considering breast augmentation surgery. So we do realize that she has insecurities like any other teenage girl but very different from Hayes'. Her life does not revolve around being "perfect". In fact, she keeps to herself, almost like an outcast. The audience is almost surprised that Hayes and Angela are friends at all, being so very different from one another. When others categorize Ricky Fitts as a freak or a crazy person, Jane sees beauty in him and consequently they engage in a romantic relationship regardless of Angela's disapproval. As Emerson and Ball preach, she sees beauty where others do not and that brings her closer to acknowledging nature and understanding the connection between beauty and life itself.

Ricky Fitts is a good example of a character achieving transcendence. We are first introduced to him in the film, as the new next-door neighbor to the Burnham's. He likes to film untraditional scenarios of what he denominates as beautiful, such as a dead bird, a dead

homeless lady, and a floating plastic bag dancing in the air. At first hand, the audience categorizes him as a freak but once they get to understand his nature and perspective, they can almost admire the way he sees beauty in the most unlikely places, just as Ball and Emerson advise. When Angela Hayes and Jane Burnham are first introduced to Ricky's odd hobby, they question why he is filming a dead bird on the ground. Hayes is automatically repulsed by this and wants to walk away, while Jane is almost inspired and decides to walk home with him. On their way home, he explains that he once filmed a dead homeless lady and Jane asks for the reasons to do so. He tells her: "When you see something like that, its like God is looking right at you, just for a second, and if you're careful, you can look right back". Jane then asks him what he sees and he responds "Beauty" (58). They get to his house and he asks her if she wants to see the most beautiful thing he has ever filmed. He inserts the videotape and the audience is surprised to see it's a plastic bag floating in the wind. He then goes and explains with evident emotion in his eyes:

That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things...and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid ever. Video's a poor excuse, I know, but it helps me remember. I need to remember. Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world. I feel like I can't take it. And my heart is just going to cave in. (60)

Emerson speaks of this exact connection between things: "Nothing is quite beautiful alone; nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace" (*Nature* 492). We get to see that there is so much more to Ricky than what he seems to be.

Emerson tells us that being this type of individual sometimes makes us become the freaks of the world and that this is in fact part of the process of transcendence: “Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood” (*Self-Reliance* 544). Nevertheless, Ricky is not able to publicly live his life the way he pleases even though he is fearless. He is in a way incarcerated by his father (as is his mother), Col. Fitts and trapped in his world of fear and self-denial regardless of the fact that he does not agree with his father’s way of thinking. He merely states what he believes his father wants to hear, not out of fear, but out of the recognition that his father is a lost soul that cannot be saved for he is too damaged. It is not until the end of the film that Ricky decides to leave home, possibly to live his life the way he pleases, not the way Col. Fitts or society demands. Lester befriends Ricky and even admires his courage to do whatever it is that he sees fit. It is within this friendship that Lester takes an initiative to change his own circumstances.

Being this type of man, “man thinking”, entails great responsibility as Emerson explains: “...he takes the cross of making his own, and of course, the self accusation, . . . For all this loss and scorn, what offset? He is to find consolation in exercising the highest functions of human nature . . . He is the world’s eye” (*The American Scholar* 521). The trait that we most admire about Ricky Fitts is his fearlessness and this is precisely what Lester is most fond of. Emerson tells us that “Brave; for fear is a thing a scholar by his very function puts behind him. Fear always springs from ignorance . . . Manlike let him turn and face it. Let him loom into its eye and search its nature, inspect its origin” (*The American Scholar* 522). This is exactly what Ricky does when he has one last argument with his father before he decides to leave home.

This time, instead of giving in, he stands up to him and verbalizes what he really believes, that his father is a sad old man, regardless of the consequences.

One thing that human beings fear the most, and this is most notable within the plot of *Six Feet Under*, is death. Ricky Fitts is not only unafraid of death, but sees great beauty in it. When Lester dies, his body is found in the kitchen. He is sitting in a chair, his head bathed in blood over the table, red smears over the wall and the floor below Lester. Ricky stays behind and stares. He turns his head to look at Lester's face, which seems almost to be smiling and Ricky smiles back. The scene is almost haunting but we understand that what Ricky is seeing is, once again, beauty in Lester's death. Others would typically feel disgusted or afraid, but because Ricky has been able to begin to transcend, he is fearless and sees only the bigger picture, the beauty and connection behind such a natural process of life: death. Perhaps, through Lester's death, he was able to see God, as he described to Jane on their walk home. Being one of the youngest characters, one can assume that the journey of his transcendence does not end there but will continue to develop throughout his life, beginning with his choice of leaving behind his comfort zone, his family and his home. As Emerson tells us, those who transcend must put aside all that they know and be prepared to live a life of solitude, rejecting societal exigencies and therefore living by their own rules.

The film's protagonist, Lester Burnham, was able to transcend but only after his death. Being the voice-over narrator of the film, we are able to know what he is thinking even after he is no longer part of the physical world. At the beginning of the film he tells us:

My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighborhood. This is my street. This is my life. I'm 42 years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead. Of course, I don't know that yet. And in a way, I'm dead already . . . Both my wife and daughter

think I'm this gigantic loser. And they're right. I have lost something. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but I know I didn't always feel this...sedated. But you know what? It's never too late to get it back. (1)

Lester seems like an average Joe, a man who is at first a complete conformist and who is obviously unhappy with his life. He tells us that the highlight of his day is masturbating in the shower, so we get an idea of how unsatisfied he is with his life. His transformation begins when he meets Ricky Fitts and also when he sees Angela Hayes for the very first time, his daughter's best friend. Inspired by Ricky's rebellious nature, Lester too, stands up for himself at his job and decides to quit for he had not been treated the way he had wanted and believed he deserved better than that.

The second encounter that pushes him into changing his ways is the first time he meets Angela Hayes. His infatuation with her wakes him up from what he described as a very long coma: "It's the weirdest thing, I feel like I've been in a coma for about twenty years, and I'm just now waking up. Spectacular" (19). Once he sees her he begins to feel alive again and even though his transformation and journey had little to do with Angela, she was in fact the icing on the cake for him. He begins to demand respect for himself in his household. No longer does he permit his wife Carolyn to push him around or his daughter Jane to treat him indifferently. He begins to take action and that makes him feel empowered and alive again. Emerson tells us that this is in fact part of the transformation towards transcendence: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man . . . Inaction is cowardice . . . the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action" (*The American Scholar* 519). Once he realizes that Carolyn is cheating on him with a fellow realtor,



he truly finds the power he needs to do whatever he has always wanted to do. Kevin Spacey while describing his character in an interview about the film tells us that:

Something happens to Lester that perhaps makes him realize that the lack of honesty in his life, the lack of communication, the lack of being able to say what he actually feels and do what he actually wants. Lester rediscovers the ability to amuse himself and find those things in life that are worth laughing at. (*American Beauty*)

On the night of his death, Angela asks him how he is and he tells her that it has been a long time since anyone had asked him that, to which he responds with a warm smile “great”. She then goes to the bathroom and he stays in the kitchen looking at a picture of Carolyn, Jane, and himself. He smiles emotionally, still holding the frame in his hand, and repeats to himself “I’m great”. That is when he gets shot in the head from behind by Col. Fitts. When this happens, we hear Lester’s final monologue through voiceover narration:

I have always heard your entire life flashes in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second isn’t a second at all. It stretches on forever, like an ocean of time. For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars. And yellow leaves from the maple trees that lined our street. Or my grandmother’s hands and the way her skin seemed like paper. And the first time I saw my cousin Tony’s brand new Firebird. And Janie. And Janie. And...Carolyn. I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me, but it’s hard to stay mad when there is so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I’m seeing it all at once and it’s too much. My heart fills up like a balloon that’s about to burst. And then I remember to relax and stop trying

to hold on to it. And then it flows through me like rain, and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life. You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure. But don't worry. You will some day. (97-100)

This is the moment that we realize that Lester had become the "all seeing eye", as Emerson describes it. What he says in his final monologue resembles what Ricky spoke about when describing filming the plastic bag. His advantage over Ricky is the fact that he was able to look back at his life and appreciate every single moment, fearlessly and full of appreciation. He was able to really see what Ricky could only describe while still alive. It is through his death that he is able to understand the meaning of it all, the meaning of his "stupid little life" in relation to the bigger picture and to what is truly important. We can see that he is no longer regretful or bitter, but happy to be surrounded by so much beauty. He has in fact, transcended. When Lester tells us that we will understand what he means "some day", he is acknowledging that he has discovered what Emerson described in his philosophy: "He then learns that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds" (*The American Scholar* 522). In other words, by transcending he has discovered an ultimate truth that is inside all minds, not just his. Ricky fortunately enough had begun to understand it at a very young age but Lester had now actually seen it, and so will we some day, according to him. At the moment of his death, when he has flashbacks of his life, is when he is able to appreciate his existence for the beauty it possesses, just as Emerson explains: "How calmly and genially the mind apprehends one after another the laws of physics! What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the counsels of the creation, and feels by knowledge the privilege to BE! His insight refines him. The beauty of nature shines in his own breast" (*Nature* 499). As is evident, Lester at the moment of his death, finally transcended and appreciated his "stupid little

life” as a whole as Emerson so advised: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men,---that is genius” (*Self-Reliance* 539); hence that is the meaning of transcending.

It could be argued that Alan Ball’s intention embedded in his two works, AB and SFU, is exactly that; to make his audience realize that beauty exists everywhere but that we have to develop they eye for it before its too late. He believes that we must appreciate every moment of our “stupid little lives” and its connection to all living things in order to truly transcend while still alive.

Within AB, only three characters were able to transcend. Jane saw beauty in unlikely places just like Ricky was able to. Lester was able to appreciate his life after he was no longer alive. Nevertheless, they understood things differently and that enabled them to transcend as Emerson and Ball described.

Most, if not all of the relevant characters in *Six Feet Under* have begun to transcend, therefore the discussion will focus on their journey towards that enlightenment. The character that reached the highest level of transcendence is Nate Fisher who is left for last. Examples and citations from the actual television series and from Emerson’s works as well, will be used to further explain the points that will be made, connecting them to Alan Ball’s modern take on transcendentalism.

## **2. Those who *have* Transcended within SFU**

Most *Six Feet Under* characters were deep thinkers and even got fairly close to a transcendentalist understanding of the world. This section will discuss those characters that did reach some level of transcendence.

Ruth Fisher was the matriarch of the family, Nathaniel Fisher's wife and mother to Nate, David, and Claire Fisher. She was a very traditional wife and mother, always putting everyone's needs first before her own. On the Pilot episode of the series, her husband Nathaniel, dies in a car accident. Ruth's transformation begins the moment her husband dies. She begins to make an effort to connect more with her children. Her mindset begins to transform: "Who knows how long any of us have left? We should do what makes us happy" ('The Foot', 1:3). It is here, when Ruth realizes that life has an expiration date and she begins try to live it to her fullest, and please her needs (personal and sexual as well) for the first time in her life. Nevertheless, she does obsess over the past. She regrets not doing what she always wanted to do from an early age, like her sister did. Emerson tells us to stop focusing on the past, and live the present: "But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or heedless of the riches that surround him, stand on tiptoe to foresee the future" (*Self-Reliance* 547). Ruth's inability to do this disables her from transcending to the fullest. Regardless of her clinging to the past, she manages to move on and be spontaneous. She weds George Sibley a few weeks after they meet and when he asks her if she thinks they are moving too fast, she responds "I'm just very aware of how important it is to enjoy what life gives you, when it gives it to you. Who knows George? You may be my last chance at finding love" ('Twilight', 3:3). She seems to not take her life for granted and does as she pleases because of the fact that she is surrounded by death in her personal and professional life as well, which prompts her to appreciate life more than others might. When she tells her children that she has decided to marry George, they disagree and ask her to postpone due to the fact that Nate's wife and mother of his daughter, has been missing. Ruth tells them "Life doesn't stop alright? We didn't die. We have this precious gift of life and its so terribly fleeting

and that is precisely why it is important to keep up living, to not give up hope” (‘I’m sorry I’m Lost’, 3:13). Soon after she marries George Sibley, Ruth discovers that he is mentally ill and her total attitude towards life changes. She is once again filled with regret. Claire, her daughter, takes an awkward picture of Ruth cleaning George’s jacket and Ruth gets terribly upset, to the point of slapping Claire across the face. When Nate asks Ruth what happened, she tells him “This is her way of saying I’m the fool who has to take care of a crazy person for the rest of my life! I don’t need a photograph to see that. I don’t need to have my face shoved in it”. Nate suggest hiring extra help and Ruth, heavily frustrated, declines: “God, no! I’m still the one that has to be there all day and every night. Because there is no one else!” (‘A Coat of White Primer’, 5:1). Even though she has begun to transform into a less traditional woman, she feels obligated to fulfill her duty as wife even if it makes her unhappy. Nevertheless, Ruth, through death, that of the ones around her, is able to appreciate life and the little details in it, but she is not able to let go of regret, and that makes her stand farther away from transcendence and true happiness. When her oldest son dies is when Ruth truly disintegrates. Not being able to be there, she is filled with guilt and agony. David discusses selling the business with her and asks her why they have held on to the past, to which Ruth responds “Because that’s when there was hope” (‘Everyone is Waiting’, 5:5). The only moment in which it is evident that she has gotten better from this great loss is when she asks Maggie, George Sibley’s daughter and Nate’s lover, if Nate felt happy on his last night alive, to which Maggie responds that he was. Ruth then feels better and begins to transform into a more positive person and realizes that she has to love as much as she can while she is still alive. Hence, she appreciates life more through death, which brings her closer to a transcendental state of mind and a fuller appreciation of life.

Alan Ball uses Ruth as an example similar to Carolyn Burnham; a woman who forgets who she is to take on the role she has imposed on herself, in this case wife and mother. Possibly due to what society expected from her, she cast herself into roles that did not fulfill her and through the loss of loved ones she began to realize how fleeting life truly was and how she was taking it for granted, hence, beginning her transformation into transcendence.

Claire Fisher, the youngest of the Fishers, is a teen rebel who uses drugs and dates the outcasts. She is a typical teenager in that sense. Nevertheless she is a deep thinker, an artist and photographer, similar to Ricky Fitts, who sees beauty where others might not, as Emerson describes. When Claire is assigned a paper on *Spoon River Anthology*, she decides to give her own interpretation of it by taking pictures of the deceased that form part of the Fisher clientele. She breaks with convention and decides to be creative, to be artistic, just like Emerson recommends: “The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again . . . It came to him---business; it went from him----poetry” (*The American Scholar* 516). In other words, she read the novel and interpreted it on her own way, which is what Emerson would call critical thinking or critical reading; the way any transcendentalist should think and read. Emerson also invites us to question and trust only our own mind. In Episode 10 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Season entitled “Someone Else’s Eyes”, Claire is having a conversation with Ruth and tells her that she is tired of everything: “Just all the lies we’re fed and all the bullshit we’re supposed to care about, how everyone is so scared from anything that’s different from everything else”. She is evidently questioning and going against the norm at a very young age, being merely 17 in the series, and that is exactly what Emerson preaches and calls Transcendence: “He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be

goodness, nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind” (*Self-Reliance* 541). Being creative as she is, she tells a friend that “See, if we live our lives the right way then every single thing we do becomes a work of art. That’s the whole fucking problem with the world right now. Its that we don’t try to be creative with every single thing we do” (‘Someone Else’s Eyes’, 2:10). She evidently sees beauty where others might not and that brings her closer to transcendence. When she graduates high school, she decides to become an art major. Her teacher tells her “We despise ourselves so much that we consider our point of view as trivial. Until you locate the inside eye, its all bullshit, like a coloring book. Every work you make has to be a surprise to the earth. A seeing that has never happened before...” almost exactly as Emerson describes it. She then makes a drawing for class that she believes is not good enough and her teacher tells her “Because you’re embarrassed by yourself. Because you don’t recognize the beauty of your own truth. You’re used to being a normal pathetic human who does only what other people want. But what the other people want is to fuck you and make money off you...” (‘Perfect Circles’, 3:1). Emerson at all times teaches us to trust ourselves and our inner voice, which is exactly what Claire’s teacher is trying to teach his students. He tells us to “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string” (*Self-Reliance* 540). From there on, Claire begins to trust her self more, her art and her eye for creativity; she begins to transcend. Even though she is insecure at first and unsure of her potential, she realizes that there is beauty within herself and expresses it through art and keen observation.

David Fisher is the youngest son, at first a closeted homosexual in denial of his own happiness and a follower of the ‘norm’, especially when it came to mourning and loss. Very different from his brother, Nate, David always seemed to restrain his emotions and was a bit of a control freak. At first, he permitted others to disrespect him and his partner, Keith Charles, for

being homosexuals and that created problems between them. Like Col. Fitts, he was embarrassed of being gay and at times even denied it. In the episode entitled “Familia” a Mexican gang leader is murdered and then appears to David, as is typical of the series, to try and teach him to stand up for himself against others, the way he did when he was alive. This is the moment that triggers David’s transformation. At the end of the episode, Keith and him are having brunch and they are asked if they are “together” to which David responds “Yeah, we are” (‘Familia’, 1:4). It is through this encounter with the deceased gang leader that David faces his own fears about coming out and standing up for himself. Emerson tells us that our lives are to be lived the way we please, not the way others dictate, even if that means that we will be rejected, as long as we do what is set in our hearts to do regardless of what others might think. David begins to feel much more comfortable in his own skin, not yet completely, but getting there. During that same season, a very controversial and touching episode narrates the murdering of a young gay man just for being affectionate to his partner in public. As is expected, this particular death touches David directly and the deceased young man appears to him once and again, showing the violent bruises that were left after his murder. They have many conversations in solitude about being gay and the repercussions of that from a religious perspective. The dead young man tells David that being gay went against what God intended for us and David tells him “Who you are is nothing to be ashamed of” (‘Private Life’, 1:12). Emerson tells us that these voices we hear are merely our own thoughts that society intends to destroy and silence. By listening to these voices and accepting his own thoughts, he is able to begin to transcend and accept himself for who he is. He then comes out to his mother and to Rico, and eventually he also comes out to his church as well. According to Emerson, it is easy to live as we please when we are alone but the great man is he who lives his life as he pleases in



the public eye. Therefore, David begins to behave much more like the “great man” Emerson so describes, no longer ashamed of who he is, but living his life as he pleases and sharing his true self with others, with no shame or fear. Alan Ball points at the notion that there is beauty in each and every one of us, regardless of who we are, and we should embrace it in order to achieve true happiness and transcend while still alive.

During the 5<sup>th</sup> Season of the series, David is having a very hard time dealing with Nate’s sudden death due to his illness, AVM. He is having hallucinations about a man dressed in a red hooded sweater that stalks him and tries to attack him. During the last episode he is able to have one last encounter with this anonymous, imaginary enemy and they get into a fight during a nightmare that he is having. David seems terrified at first, but then decides to stand up to his enemy and when he is able to uncover his hooded antagonist, he realizes that it is actually himself that he is fighting. When he realizes this, he takes this supposed “enemy” in his arms and hugs him. We realize that these imaginary encounters and nightmares were merely a metaphor for the battle that David had with himself and that his worst enemy was in fact David Fisher. As soon as he decided to face his demons, at least in his nightmare, he was able to accept himself fully and finally, and therefore be in peace for once and for all, in other words, he was able to transcend. When he awakes, he is in his bedroom and the vision of Nate is sitting beside him, smiling lovingly. It seems that Nate is pleased with the fact that David is no longer full of fear; that he has transcended at last, leaving his demons behind.

Last but not least is Nate, the oldest of the Fisher sons and the character that seemed to be the closest to transcendence from early on in the series. From the beginning, Nate is attracted to nature and feels at peace when in the outdoors regardless of the events that are occurring in his life. Emerson describes this feeling: “To the body and mind which have been

cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone” (*Nature* 490). When he dies in the 5<sup>th</sup> Season he is buried in the woods, in a natural “green” burial upon his request, with nothing between his body and the ground around him. From the very first episode, we get an idea of the kind of man Nate is. Very different from his younger brother, David, he was much more sensitive towards death and grief and truly believed that grief was a natural part of moving on after the loss of a loved one. During his father’s burial, Ruth breaks down in a hysterical sob and David is quick to try and control her in front of the others, believing it is inappropriate to behave that way. Nate believes otherwise and is not shy to speak his mind:

I refuse to sanitize this anymore . . . David, its like surgery—clear, antiseptic, business. He was our father! You can pump him full of chemicals, you can put make up on him and you can prop him up for a nap in the slumber room, but the fact remains, David, that the only father we are gonna have is gone. Forever. And that sucks. But it’s a goddamn part of life and you can’t really accept it without getting your hands dirty. (‘Pilot’, 1:1)

Nate always questioned the systematic ritual of the funeral business and always sought to humanize it, believing it was the healthier way to grieve. He was not afraid of grieving like most people were. When he begins to date Brenda Chenoweth, his future second wife and mother to his second daughter, he struggles to accept what destiny had in store for him, which was working in the funeral business. Brenda tells him “You channel other people’s pain” to which Nate responds “My father called it a gift” (‘Familia’, 1:4). He began to accept his role in this life just as Emerson recommended: “Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the conexxion of events” (*Self- Reliance* 540). If his

father had not died he would not have ended up living in LA again and therefore, would not have done what he was meant to do and what he was best at, as Brenda and his own father recognized in him. He is not the typical workingman whose heart is not part of his business. On the contrary, Nate loved what he did and always tried to make the business better and more humane. When Nate discovers he has AVM, a brain tumor, he is afraid for his life. He nevertheless decides to live life to the fullest while he is still alive. Emerson tells us that an individual who has transcended does not fear anything anymore; he leaves fear in the past, just like Nate does slowly but surely.

In a later episode, *Twilight*, Nate decides to personally take care of the pre-need of a cancer patient and makes a vow to come visit him everyday. He then witnesses the death of this young man as he is dying. This makes him fear for his own life, and helps him understand this young man's fear as well, consequently connecting to him. Emerson tells us that by knowing our own mind, we are able to know all minds and Nate was able to understand and connect to the cancer patient on a deeper level because of this sensibility that he possessed and because of his own illness. He was a truly spiritual character, which is very much part of transcendence.

During Season 5, we get to see that Nate, through the loss of loved ones, has become more and more appreciative of being alive, and has gotten closer to transcendence. He meets up with an old high school friend and they are talking about turning 40. His friend seems to be afraid of getting older and Nate explains:

I lie in bed awake at night thinking: 'Thank you, God, for letting me live this long.' I've just had a lot of serious shit happen to me in my life. And I really get it now that this doesn't last. And I'm no different from anybody else. Yes, indeed this will happen to me. It is happening to me a little bit each day. And that doesn't

freak me out. If anything, its liberating . . . Would you change anything? Because if you would do it now. Look, this is it Tom! This is all we have. Right here, right now. ('Dancing for Me', 5:2)

As can be understood, Nate moves forward in the understanding of life and appreciating it while one is still alive, he is not afraid, but appreciative. He lets go of old fears and restraints and tries to live his life to the fullest, not taking anything for granted. Through growing up close to death and dealing with his own illness, he is able to transcend and appreciate his life for as long as it lasted. He did not reach this wisdom in a day; his experiences shaped his frame of mind. As Emerson tells us, which is very much evident in Nate's character and in *Six Feet Under* as well: "Life is our dictionary . . . Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary" (*The American Scholar* 520). We learn from what we live through and some, like Nate are able to channel those experiences into transcendence. Emerson spoke of experience by saying "It is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products. A strange process too, this, by which experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin. The manufacturer goes forward at all hours" (*The American Scholar* 519). Just as he advised in this passage, Nate was able to have experiences that taught him and by converting them into thought, he was able to become wiser and therefore transcend.

During Season 5, Nate marries Brenda. They begin to have problems and Nate spends an evening with his ex step-sister, George Sibley's daughter, Maggie. They share a moment and he feels understood by her; he feels a connection to her. The same night that they have sex, he collapses due to his AVM and ends up in the hospital in a coma. When he finally awakes, he speaks to Brenda, his wife, with a clarity and calm like never before: "We're always having a hard time. There is all this pain and arguing and struggling here. I used to think it was passion,

but its just drama. We have to face the truth. We don't fit. We never have. We weren't meant to be. I'm 40 years old. And I see that there can be peace between a man and a woman and that's what I want" ('Ecotone', 5:9). Once again, through a near death experience, he is able to open his eyes and see things clearly, not fearing the consequences, but taking life by the horns while he is still alive. This is when he decides to be buried in an "ecotone" and he explains what this is: "It's the area where two ecological worlds overlap. You know like wilderness and civilization" ('Ecotone', 5:9). In a way this is like humanity itself. We have the side in us that has been corrupted by civilization, and we have the part of us that is still pure and waiting to transcend. Nate was able to learn from all his experiences and become a stronger person, a person that appreciated his life until the very end of it, and let go of fear in order to truly be happy. This did not make him selfish, it simply made him valiant and closer to transcendence. Lester Burnham had to die to have this realization while Nate, through living among death and loss, was able to reach this epiphany while he was still alive and appreciate life with its ups and downs.

As we can see, within SFU, most characters were able to reach some level of transcendence. Ruth Fisher was able to live her life in a more liberated fashion, seeking her own happiness for once. Claire Fisher was like Ricky Fitts; she was able to see beauty in odd places and transform what she saw into works of art. She also questioned and critiqued society's ways. David Fisher started out as a closeted homosexual and ended up as a man who loved and accepted himself regardless of what other might think, and last but not least Nate Fisher. He understood life from an early stage and was able to live it fearlessly from early on for he understood that time was limited. All these factors favored these characters' transcendence even if it was partial. What distinguished all these characters from those who

were not able to transcend was basically fear. Carolyn Burnham biggest fear was to not reach the level of success she desired. Angela's fear was to be 'ordinary', and Col. Fitts' fear was to accept himself as a homosexual man. This fear disabled them completely from reaching any type of transcendence.

## Chapter V: Conclusions

Many elements have been explored in *The Role of Emersonian Transcendentalism in Alan Ball's American Beauty and Six Feet Under*. Beginning with the thesis statement, it states that through the topic of death and themes related to it, Alan Ball is able to create a modernized version of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendence, as well as a space for the critique of societal taboos and controversies. What Alan Ball was able to do within his two works under study, *American Beauty* and *Six Feet Under*, was to explore and give life to a new type of transcendence, one that mostly came about through death, be it one's own or the death of a loved one.

In AB, Lester Burnham's death opened his eyes to the value of his life. His death also forced Carolyn Burnham to realize that success in society is not the most important thing in life. Emerson believed something very similar as he rejected society's rules and believed it to be corrupt. In SFU, Nathaniel Senior's death completely changed every character, especially Nate Fisher's character. Through dealing with the death of his father, the death of many close to him including his first wife, and his own brush with death, Nate was able to do the things that made him truly happy before it was too late to do so. Ruth Fisher also began to manifest her needs in a public and unapologetic way, something she had never done before. Emerson told us that it took great courage to live as one pleased in the public eye.

Not only was Alan Ball able to transform his characters in this manner but he also created a space for the critical analysis and critique of societal taboos and controversies. Within AB, homosexuality and homophobia was dissected through the character of Col. Fitts. His disgust with himself as a homosexual man was so deep that he ended up killing another man just to hide his true self from the rest of society, thus never being able to transcend. The

idea of beauty is also deeply explored through the character of Ricky Fitts and Angela Hayes. Fitts being able to see beauty where others did not, was able to transcend. As Emerson described in his own works, the ones who transcended were able to have the “eye” for true beauty. Angela Hayes on the other hand saw beauty through society’s filter and therefore was unhappy with herself and thus was not able to transcend.

What Emerson believed and discussed in his major works is similar in more ways than one to what Alan Ball has explored in the present through the two works under study. The differences between Emerson and Ball’s discourse are the times in which their transcendence takes place. Ball places it in modern times, with its problems and dilemmas, reflecting the issues of 21<sup>st</sup> century society, rather than 19<sup>th</sup> century society. Nevertheless, what is being said is essentially the same, perhaps pointing at the idea that the human condition does not change with time; we are all the same in the core. For these reasons we can conclude that there is Emersonian Transcendentalism very much present in Alan Ball’s AB and SFU.

Alan Ball, through his works, suggests that we are capable and able of going through a journey into transcendence. Instead of being pessimistic about today’s corrupted society, he is letting us know that there is hope. Even though the characters he has created have been through difficult moments, tragedies even, they still manage to learn something and realize that everything in life has beauty within it, even death. Through this appreciation of the little things we are able to see beauty just like Lester did at the moment of his death. The difference is that Ball offers us hope through the appreciation of life, not death. He does acknowledge that there are many things that require our attention and questioning but he also recognizes that there is so much beauty in the world that it would be hard to stay mad, all we have to do is develop the “eye” for it.



Alan Ball is an idealist, just as Emerson was back in the day, and they both share a belief in the human spirit and capacity to outgrow the restraints that society imposes on us. He does in fact criticize many aspects of the modern world we live in, in which materialism and consumerism reign, but by making his audiences question and look beyond, he manages to free us from misconceptions, therefore aiding in the process of transcending into the modern “man thinking”. What Emerson did in the past, Ball continues to do in the present. Therefore, it could be stated that Alan Ball is not just anyone; he is, like Emerson, a leader of modern times. He does not merely entertain us, but by creating these “visual texts” he is able to reach a larger audience and perhaps therefore, get his message through much more efficiently. Like Emerson, Ball has something important to say and we have to develop the “eye” in order to see it.

This study does not end here for there are other works that merit this type of analysis. Alan Ball’s highly controversial film *Towelhead* (2007) explores sexuality, racism, and gender, amongst other things. These topics are worthy of exploration and critique, especially through the film’s protagonist, Jasira Maroun. Within AB, the character of Barbara Fitts (Col. Fitts’s wife) is also worthy of further analysis due to her evident alienation from the world around her, most likely due to Col. Fitts. Ball’s new HBO series, *True Blood*, also touches upon themes worthy of analysis such as homophobia (disguised as Vampire phobia), and the powers found in nature, amongst many others. Once again, these are topics that can be touched upon from an Emersonian/transcendentalist point of view to develop this thesis further on. Last but not least, Ball’s transcendentalism could also be compared to another American Romantic author, Henry David Thoreau and his own views on transcending.

From a pedagogical point of view, the study of Alan Ball’s works within a classroom can be a great source of critical thinking and critical writing. AB, for example could be used to

explore the concept of transcendence and to compare it to Emerson's works. SFU could be studied in terms of the societal critique present in the plot and compare this 21<sup>st</sup> century critique to Emerson's own questioning and attack on 19<sup>th</sup> century society. This could be very helpful to better understand Emersonian transcendentalism and theory, especially in introductory courses.

By comparing both writers, Emerson and Ball, students can better understand the message that is being carried within the lines of the stories and therefore take better advantage of their learning process and critical thinking abilities. They can later use these skills for other academic purposes and in their own personal lives as well. Hopefully, they will not digest the material as merely academic, but they will understand the intellectual value these works have to offer and use their findings to become better individuals and perhaps even transcend.

## Discography

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