

VENUS ENVY

Susan A. Jones

One can not define beauty; it is beyond language, yet we struggle to capture its essence. Since the beginning of time civilizations have endured both tragic and humorous consequences the never-ending pursuit of beauty. Provoked by beauty's mysterious nature, scientists and artists have long struggled to define it with a formula. Ancient Greek mathematicians calculated that the ideal face was two-thirds as wide as it was high; Leonardo da Vinci showed in his famous anatomical drawings that a proper human form with its legs and arms extended formed a perfect circle and square. Real beauty is mysterious – there is no formula, only chemistry.

Attitudes about beauty have been quite inconsistent throughout history; tracing back along the time line one finds great extremes about the idea of beauty. Most sensitive to the pressures of this "beauty myth" are people from different cultures and classes. Not only are they forced to deal with the obvious differences of class and ethnicity, but also the beauty expectations based on the Media's depiction of beauty, so that African Americans, Native Americans, Latinas, and Asians are doubly affected by the "beauty myth." Western society is often blamed for its emphasis on a surface obsessed culture and its contribution to the consequences of the beauty myth: depression, bulimia, anorexia, unnecessary cosmetic surgery, as well as racism. And as a result of the Internet, there are few corners of the world left untouched by Western popular culture or resistant to its influences.

Beauty or the lack thereof, determines everything from what we wear to what we eat and how we perceive ourselves. Invisible virtues such as kindness, generosity and empathy are out of fashion today; instead we wear our identities on our backs – literally. Multibillion-dollar industries are built on creating images of beauty, with their foundation in part devoted to false advertisement. One cannot help but to see how these profound images effect the younger generations; girls in particular. During childhood, girls are taught to overvalue their appearances and later, suffer greater insecurity with the need to feel attractive. In 1998, 22,000 American teenagers had

cosmetic surgery--a 95 percent increase from 1992 (Underwood 4). The pursuit of mythical beauty turns one into an active consumer for life, sometimes as young as ten years old. Men are seldom referred to as "beautiful", but they are far from being immune to the media's hypnotic messages. Men are spending nine and a half billion dollars a year on plastic surgery, cosmetics, fitness equipment, and hair products, and comprise more than 10 percent of cosmetic surgeon's clients. With that kind of profit, the beauty business will continue to nurture the insecurities of the young, the old, the male and the female.

During the Renaissance, famous scientists and artists dictated what was beautiful, using guidelines based on symmetry, clarity, harmony, and vivid color. "Common to all these theories is the idea that the properties of beauty are the same whether we are seeing a beautiful woman, a flower, a landscape, or a circle" (qtd. In Etcoff 17). Today plastic surgeons still regard these non-supported theories as instrumental bases when re-sculpting and restructuring client's faces.

Every era brings a dominant beauty standard; in the 1920s, there were flappers with their youthful boyish look, and then came the curvaceous sex symbols of the 1960s like Monroe and Bardot. To keep up, "historically, women have always gone to great lengths to transform themselves to meet the changing cultural requirements of femininity" (qtd. In Hesse-Biber 5). It's an indisputable historical fact that standards of beauty are as whimsical, cruel, and ever changing as the stock market. Like it or not, we live in a society where all things are driven by consensus. When Julius Caesar wore red high heels, claiming that his ancestors, the Alban kings did too, his counsel laughed--at first. However, witnessing Caesar's charisma in the heels, they soon adopted the red-shoe look for themselves.

Plastic surgeons can often predict which services will be in high demand simply by seeing what images the media is putting on magazine covers, or who the hottest film and television stars are. Constant shifts and conflicting components of the ideal beauty set up impossible standards in which people who don't achieve this perfection feel a sense of helplessness and or depression--buying into the propaganda that appearance is self.

When the movies or music videos depict unrealistic images, the messages they send along with subtle assumptions register loud and clear. Women of different cultural backgrounds, other than Anglo-Saxon, are subject to the same pressures to conform but at greater costs. Usually women of color are first subjected to their own cultural standards, then those of the mainstream white ideal. "Capitalism is helping to spread (white) Western values across racial, class, and ethnic lines" (qtd. In Hesse-Biber 111-112).

Susan is in her second year at SMC. She is studying International Business and is considering transferring to USC.