

A question of beauty in beauty and the beast

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A Beautiful Comparison

Beauty, and the idea of beautiful people or objects, has been around since the beginning of time. Women are considered to be beautiful if they dress a certain way, or wear their hair in the right style. What about women who are not considered beautiful, but have great character? Or what about men? Can they be beautiful or are they only able to be a beastly thing that needs to be pitied? “Beauty and the Beast” has been a tale that has been retold and remade more times that need be counted ever since the story of “Cupid and Psyche” circa A. D. 150 (Griswold 15) which draws on stories centuries before that. This fairy tale addresses the concept of what can makes someone beautiful and what makes someone beastly.

Today’s society may be most drawn to Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont’s version of “Beauty and the Beast” from 1756 (Griswold 27) which may be called the ‘classic’ version of this beloved tale. In de Beaumont’s version, the idea of beauty is made up of inward and outward traits plays a major role in how the reader views the interactions between Beauty and Beast.

Outward beauty tends to deal with physical traits and appearances, whereas inward beauty is comprised of character, virtue, and kindness. While the characters of Beast and Beauty may seem completely opposite at first glance, they are in fact quite similar in the way they can perceive people’s beauty both physically and characteristically.

Beauty and Beast both are first described in connection to physical beauty. This may have led readers to ‘judge a book by its cover’ so to speak. For, Beauty was “very beautiful...admired by all” (de Beaumont 32) while Beast “

looked so dreadful” (35) and is often called a monster both by himself and by those around him. It is not until later in the story that we learn more about their inward beauty, or virtue. We are not told much about Beast’s virtue however, Beauty is quite obviously “ kindly, generous, humble, hardworking, patient, cheerful, etc.” (Griswold 41). Indeed, her “ virtues are stressed” and “ her looks are not mentioned,” except for her name, after the opening of the fairy tale (41).

This virtue of Beauty’s is what makes her so desirable for many men in the village. We know that even when her family lost their wealth, she was still approached with many offers of marriage, however, she turned them all down to “ comfort [her father] and help him with his work” (de Beaumont 33). Her inward “ virtues...stem from a willingness to sacrifice herself” (Tatar 26). Beauty’s beauty of selflessness and caring makes her an object of desire for “ a number of gentlemen” (de Beaumont 33). This virtuousness does not escape recognition from the Beast. When Beauty takes the place of her father in the castle she is asked if she “ had come of her own free will” which she had (37). To this act of selflessness Beast says, “ You are very kind...I am very grateful to you” (37). She does not go unrewarded for her virtue as the story later reveals.

As was said before, Beauty is desirable to men because of her inward beauty. On the other side of the one who is desirable is the one who does the desiring. In this case, “ the Beast functions as the desiring subject, Beauty as the desired object” (Korneeva 237). While some may view this as a bad thing, with “ the Beast...characterized as a hero on a quest for an

object” (241), I disagree. I believe Beast truly witnesses Beauty’s great virtue from the start. Although it may have begun as a hunt for a “ bride-object who can save him from his bestiality,” it became much more (238). Beast came to understand the value of Beauty’s character and wanted both her outward and inward beauty for himself.

The character of Beauty is adept at telling if someone is beautiful, both inside and out. In addition to identifying it when it is there, she also tries to believe that everyone has inward beauty somewhere. We can see this in the case of Beast when Beauty declares, “ I do think you are very kind...I am completely pleased with your good heart” (de Beaumont 38). While Beast may be considered “ ugly” and “ a monster” (38), Beauty is able to see past his outer looks to the core of his soul and “ be touched by the goodness of [his] character” (41).

This may be a great trait to have, being able to hope for good in people, however, Beauty sometimes gets trapped by it. Her sisters, for instance, do not seem to be capable of a single act of goodness, but Beauty still has hope for them, often getting caught by their ploys. The sisters are extremely malicious towards Beauty, though she does not detect it. When Beauty returns home to see her father, they attempt – and succeed – in detaining her by “ tearing out their hair and perform[ing] so well” (de Beaumont 40). Although this works at the time, their vanity and malice is rewarded in its own way at the end of the tale.

De Beaumont effectively warns readers to not become as them by having a fairy turn the sisters into statues. There is a way to cure their sudden

stoniness, however, while “[y]ou can correct pride, anger, gluttony, and laziness...a miracle is needed to convert a heart filled with malice and envy” (42). While the sisters’ rotten inward beauty is turned to stone, Beauty’s true inward beauty is rewarded with a throne and a handsome prince.

Selflessness and seeing goodness when it is not there, are not Beauty’s only virtues. She also helps Beast begin to see his own beauty. Beast thinks he is nothing but a stupid monster, and perhaps Beauty starts out believing so too. As the story goes on, however, Beauty “ sees past the Beast’s monstrous exterior and appreciates him for his character” (Dominguez 7). By the time she is allowed to return to her family, Beast’s love for her is reciprocated, though she does not fully know it yet.

Some readers of “ Beauty and the Beast” believe that Beauty’s love was not actually love, but instead Stockholm syndrome. I do not agree with this argument, but stand with the idea that Beauty’s love for Beast is true. I see her authentic love for Beast in the way that she says “ I thought t that I felt only friendship for you... [but I] realize that I can’t live without you” (de Beaumont 41). The fact that Beauty did not admit to herself that she loved him reveals that she does truly love Beast and she is not some prisoner loving her captor.

Beauty’s love for Beast is also exhibited when she is allowed to leave the castle and does. Had it been Stockholm, Beauty would not have wanted to leave her captor, however, she does leave and doing so forced her to come to the realization that she actually “ loved [the Beast] with all her heart” (de Beaumont 40). De Beaumont does a fantastic job in the way the story is

constructed to “ use[s] the tale to preach the transformative power of love, more specifically the importance of valuing essences over appearances” (Tatar 27).

Only after her prolonged stay at her father’s does Beauty finally understand that she really does love Beast, not for his looks but for his “ character, virtue, and kindness,” which coincidentally is what Beast loves about her (de Beaumont 40). Beauty’s love for Beast helped her understand that there are more amiable qualities than handsomeness in a husband. Only after she realized this and came to love him as he was could she find the prince within – literally and figuratively.

The other main character of this story may not seem like he has much to offer in the realm of beauty, his name is literally Beast, but there may be a surprise or two in store if you are willing to search. Like Beauty, Beast is able to see both people’s physical beauty and their virtuous beauty. The main difference, however, is that Beast does not try to place characteristic on someone if they do not have them. He is quite matter-of-fact about the virtues people have or do not have.

Beast does not tend to tolerate any who show poor qualities. This can be observed the first time we meet him in connection to Beauty’s father. At first Beast was quite willing to let the stranger take shelter and food at his castle, however, as soon as the guest became a thief, even if it was only a rose, Beast sentences him to death. Fortunately for Beauty’s father, he had a daughter who was truly virtuous. Beast senses this before he meets her and “[t]hough the Beast proposes to kill Beauty’s father, he promises a different

fate for the daughter who willingly joins him” (Dominguez 26). Instead of death, Beauty’s fate is a life of luxury and a marriage proposal every night.

Beast knows if Beauty will marry him the curse will be broken and he will be his princely, handsome self once again. The trouble Beast has with this is that he knows he is not handsome now, and why would Beauty want to marry a monster? Beast cannot identify his own outward beauty, which is why he needs Beauty to do so for him. Beast needed to learn from someone to look beyond the skin and view people as they truly are. Because “ the plots [of the fairy tale] hinge on conduct rather than on adventurous circumstances,” Beast had time to study Beauty’s character, or inner beauty (Korneeva 234). Thus, Beast learned from the way Beauty came to love him, to understand the importance of having beauty on the inside. By discovering this, Beast was able to express his inner beauty more and win Beauty’s love.

Through this, Beast also learns the value of having beauty on the outside that his good human looks were not something to take for granted. When his physical beauty was taken away from him and he was forced to rely on his inner beauty. Which he thought he did not have any of, saying to Beauty, “ I know very well I am nothing but a beast” (de Beaumont 38). This leads back to Beast learning from Beauty how to see himself as more than a monster. Beast is one big circle of having beauty, losing that beauty, wanting beauty he thinks he does not have, then gaining beauty back.

In the end, the reader comes to understand the importance of having virtuous character over good looks. The character of Beast helps further this understanding by his winning the heart of Beauty through his kindness and

good heart and not by his good looks. Beast also helps the reader discern that they must understand the value of both having and seeing beauty as a whole. The character of Beauty, just like Beast, emphasizes the need for inner beauty. Her good virtues of kindness and selflessness are rewarded while her sister's malice and hate is rewarded in its own way.

This fairy tale may be aimed at a younger audience, however, adults can learn a lesson or two from it as well. They can learn to appreciate those who have outward beauty, but must not be taken captive by their charming looks, because true beauty lies within. As Beast illustrated, confirming that others have beautiful characteristics comes naturally to us all, but realizing that you yourself are beautiful is more important. This realization grants self-confidence in appearances and the desire to be just as beautiful on the inside as they are on the outside.