

Societies role upon the woman of today

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



When I look at myself in the mirror, all I see is the flaws. I look in the mirror and think about the "image" that our media puts out there today. Women are heavily influenced by how we are expected to look, instead of what needs to be done in order for us to be successful. When women are looked at, they are judged immediately; by their looks, the way they dress, and even by the way women present themselves. To American society's standards, in order for someone to be considered beautiful she is obligated to have "perfect" skin, "perfect" structure, "perfect" everything. However, why shouldn't beauty be looked at inside and out? Women are not only physically beautiful, but should also have beauty inside of them that projects outward, wanting them to be wholly beautiful and powerful. This leads me to Susan Sontag's article, *Women's Beauty: Put Down or Power Source?* What is beauty? Beauty to the Greeks was a virtue. Sontag explains if it had occurred to the Greeks to see inner or outer beauty, both types of beauty would be looked upon; one beauty is not more significant than the other is. Through time, people are taught that those with beauty aren't exactly the brightest, and those that are intellectual aren't beautiful; however when we see someone beautiful and intelligent, we are surprised. Socrates, a Greek philosopher is an example of being the brightest but was considered "ugly." He taught the "splendid-looking" disciples and through his teachings, he showed his students how life is full of paradoxes. Sontag continues with how the influence of Christianity "deprived beauty" of classical ideals of human excellence. Through Christianity, beauty became something superficial, in turn alienating this word, causing it to lose its "prestige." For over two centuries, as Sontag puts it, the gender that is and continues to be inferior, is

women. Then she goes on explaining that correlating women to beauty puts it on a defense even further. In English women are beautiful, which is stated within the article. However, when we describe a man we have to call him handsome. Describing a man beautiful has degrading overtones, because beauty is mainly used for women and is considered feminine. Sontag states that countries such as Italy and France retain paganistic appreciation for beauty, in which men are considered beautiful, unlike those countries that are or have been influenced from Christian Protestantism. Sontag believes that though there is a difference between Christian and post - Christian views of beauty, this difference is dwindling, because women are associated and categorized as the beautiful sex. She then goes on saying that an essential characteristic of being a woman is being beautiful. Men aren't called beautiful because they are not concerned with how they look, more so with their intellect and competence. Within our American society, the expectation of beauty makes women become self-absorbed, thus creating superficial women. Women are "taught" to see themselves through individual parts. They are taught to feel obligated to this type of perception because they feel that need of being flattered by the opposite sex, as Sontag puts it. This feeling creates this atmosphere of being inferior to that of the male stature and gives men power. She then explains it is the obligation to be beautiful and not the desire of it that is wrong. Women often dissect and scrutinize each part of their body to the point where they want something done about it; they have to be perfect. Because of this, women self-oppress, trying to gain that "perfection" that our American society places upon them. Men don't look for perfection, because it's almost unmanly. Their

good looks are seen as a whole, unlike women who are seen through parts. In fact, some imperfections in men are desirable, according to a critic within the article, because it saves them from being feminine. Cocteau is quoted within Sontag's article, saying there are immense privileges to beauty. However, women are encouraged to only seek this power and nothing more. This power of beauty is a way to attract, not to do, as Sontag states. This power is what women have to work on. Women with real power, such as those in the medical, political, or business fields, are still obliged to work on their appearances besides that of their required jobs. Even though women try to keep up with the "Fair Sex," women are still looked upon as second to men: beautiful objects that men have a power over. Sontag explains how the oppression of women comes from people differentiating the perfection of the "inside" and "outside." She also feels that those who pay too much attention to themselves are superficial, while other women just take care of themselves without being too self-absorbed. There are two types of women: one who takes care of her body with care and the other who scrutinizes herself in order to become beautiful and achieve that perfection that our American society is demanding. In order to break the chain that has been placed on women and beauty, Sontag argues that women should distance themselves from beauty and question what it is to be feminine. Through Sontag's article, she establishes how women are obligated to be beautiful – physically through our society. She states in her article: It is not, of course, the desire to be beautiful that is wrong but the obligation to be – or to try. What is accepted by most women as a flattering idealization of their sex is a way of making women feel inferior to what they actually are –

or normally grow to be. For the ideal of beauty is administered as a form of self - oppression. Women are taught to see their bodies in parts, and to evaluate each part separately. (Sontag par. 6) According to Sontag the desire for beauty is not wrong but the obligation is. Women like being flattered by the opposite sex thus making women feel inferior. The ideal form of beauty that is set by American society makes women scrutinize every part of their bodies, which creates this self-oppression. Women want to achieve that perfection that men want from women in order to be considered beautiful. I agree with Sontag's claim, because women are judged thoroughly by how they look and what they must wear in order to achieve beauty. This forces women to analyze each part of their body, such as how Sontag explains, " Breasts, feet, hip ... each in turn is submitted to an anxious, fretful often despairing scrutiny" (par. 6). This gives them this obligation to BE beautiful and make changes. Men, however, are less compelled to be beautiful and don't feel the need to make changes. As a young adult - woman, most of the time I feel required to " dress-up" when I walk out of my dorm room. However, there are times that I look at myself and think why should I " dress-up?" However, I still do, just because I feel that obligation. The American media now a day plays a big role in stereotyping women and how they should appear. More and more, we see the American Media placing those anorexic looking women on the cover of magazines. In addition, we've seen a number of new technologies, mainly for women in our time, to improve their bodies. During the publication of Sontag's article, there wasn't as much pressure or technology for women to achieve the ideal beauty that the American society portrays. Women, in this day and age, undergo plastic

surgery, botox, and enhancements to be just like those women on the cover of Vogue or other influential magazines. Unlike women, men aren't dissected into different parts to improve their image, although there are ways to help improve men's appearances as well. Not only does the American Media portray those extremely thin, flawless skinned "beautiful" models on the cover, causing women to want that image, those models also portrays health issues that concern women, such as bulimia and anorexia. However, it is less common to see these sorts of health issues for men. Another article supporting Sontag's view, as well as my view, is by Tara Eastland. She explains the theories of sexuality, sexism, and cultural ideals. This article, "Eating Disorders: A Feminist Issue," explains how these theories lead women into developing eating disorders. In the beginning of this article, Eastland makes an argument by saying that fat is a symbol of women's sexuality and her power. She then supports her argument through Naomi Wolf, explaining that eating disorders are a way for women to defy the society of men and denying their own sexuality. Eastland then goes on stating that sexism is another reason for these eating disorders. Women have to keep up with the "ideal" feminine appearances and actions. Not only does sexuality and sexism develop these disorders, so does our cultural ideal of beauty. Eastland continues saying that women see eating disorder as some sort of an achievement. Thus, they feel as if they have gained that ideal beauty that our cultural ideal portrays. Eastland believes that our media, such as the fashion industry, exploit women's beauty. Men lead these industries and are the ones who promote this sort of beauty through placing skinny looking girls on magazines and televisions. She then goes on stating that in order to solve

this issue; the media/society should embrace all sorts of women's body types. In her article, Eastland summarizes that our society "instructs" women to fulfill certain behaviors and appearances; thus causing women to distort their body through eating disorders. Tara Eastland supports Sontag's and my view of how society depicts the beauty of a woman and how they should achieve that ideal perfection of beauty. Showing how sexist our society is such as how Eastland states "...female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience... If women cannot eat the same food as men, we cannot experience equal status in the community" (qtd. in Eastland par 2). This quote proves that if women aren't "obedient" they are considered unattractive. This causes women to feel bad about their looks because of how the patriarchal society depicts women. If women don't conform to the ideal standard of beauty they can't be considered beautiful. As clearly shown in Eastland's Eating Disorders: a Feminist Issue, there is an unfair standard of beauty between men and women. The sexism depicted within the article also plays a role in how society influences women. Eastland states that, "The anorexic may begin her journey defiant, but from the point of view of a male dominated society, she ends up as the perfect woman. She is weak, sexless, and voiceless, and can only with difficulty focus on world beyond her plate" (par. 5). This illustrates that when a woman transitions from this full figured woman to a thin stick, she is considered beautiful to a man; however, she then becomes weak - inferior, without real power, because she conforms to this sort of action. As a young college student, I was under the influence that being skinny would/will make me beautiful. It is observed that amongst

college women, there are disturbed eating habits (Eastland, par 11). During my first year, I had decided to become a vegetarian because I didn't want to gain the freshmen fifteen. Not only did I become a vegetarian, I would also skip meals, and go to the gym every day for two – three hours. I had felt that need to conform to American society's ideal standard of beauty. This incident reminded me of Eastland's argument which stated, that women who have eating disorders might challenge their pursuit for thinness aggressively, but in the end she will end up looking and feeling like the perfect woman because she finally attains society's ideal beauty (par 5). After I had returned home for the summer, I weighed myself and discovered I was 98 pounds, which was not normal for my height. My mother, family, friends, and even high school - teachers were saying that I looked thin. I was pleased by the comments, but then was also question if I was anorexic or bulimic. Of course the answer was no, but I still knew it was a form of an eating disorder as well as psychological mind games. Once I had attained that " look," I was pleased by it. However, I had realized that having this sort of diet was killing me inside. I was truly not happy, my energy was drained, and I lacked that vibe I once had. I slowly and continue to struggle with returning to " normal" diet: by eating regularly, exercising but not to an extreme, and decided to not be a vegetarian. Becoming " normal" again is a hard task because I still have to overcome the influence of the media. In Eastland's article states that sexist roles in society cause women to have a lower self – esteem and a loss of control resulting in eating disorders (par. 11). As a young adult, I look around and I feel as if I am judged because I am not going with the ideal standards of beauty. The fact that I feel as if I am being judged does lower my self –

esteem and brings me down emotionally. The damages of American society and media are not only seen through physically, but also mentally. Eastland states within her article: " The ideology of semistarvation undoes feminism; what happens to women's bodies happens to our minds. If women's bodies are and have always been wrong whereas men's are right ... Where feminism taught woman to put higher value on ourselves, hunger teaches us how to erode our self - esteem ..." (par. 17) The notion of women being categorized as only something good to look at forces women to self - oppress. However, there needs to be a radical change that should occur. Such a change could happen through altering the perception and accepting all types of women's beauty, by broadcasting it through our media - through television, magazines, even the fashion industry (par 17). Becoming influenced by male dominated society's standards of beauty, women become weak, sexless, and voiceless (par. 5). The fact that women compare themselves to these thin anorexic models is not mentally and physically healthy; women should embrace their body types and what they were given. After my realization of not being happy inside, my mind is affected because it appears as if I am being judged because I am not trying to achieve the ideal look. However, reading a statement in Eastland article, " Fat is sexual in women ... to ask women to become unnaturally thin is to ask them to relinquish their sexuality. Women who develop eating disorders, especially anorexia, are denying their sexuality and natural female body" stated in Eastland's article (par. 3). I realized that this is who I am. Women shouldn't look at their " flaws" as unattractive, but as something that makes them unique from other women. The American media places an " unequal burden on women" to

preserve that ideal feminine appearance, it is also stated that men profit from the thin ideal (par 7). Why not use this same method in promoting beauty of every woman? Beauty does not only come from the physical appearance but also from within. To be truly happy as a woman, one should appreciate what they have instead of being satisfied with superficial enhancements to attain American society's standard of beauty. Men and the American society should look at women wholly, as a person, not through individual parts - physically. Women have beauty that appears outward and inward, which shows through their personality, nurturance - kindness, and intelligence; similar to how the Greeks had looked at beauty outward and inward. Magazines and televisions should bring out these women's inner attributes because that is something that shows who they really are, not just by the ideal standards of American society. Many leading women in our generation project this sort of beauty of being successful as well as showing their physical attributes; look at Hillary Rodham Clinton, Tyra Banks, Oprah, and many more. These women have come a long way of becoming beautiful successful women that they are today. The beauty that personifies from these beautiful and successful women comes from their individual attributes as a whole. We as women should learn to believe in our own beauty inside and out. Works Cited Busceni, Santi and Smith, Charlotte. " 75 readings: An Anthology – Women's Beauty: Put Down or Power Source?" Eastland, Tara. " Eating Disorders: A Feminist Issue" Vanderbilt 14 Oct. 2006