

What is socially
believed to be
beautiful



You can never be too thin or too rich, said the Duchess of Windsor. She might have added " or too pretty. " What psychologists call the " attractiveness stereotype" is so strong that beauty is literally equated with goodness. Good-looking people are not only preferred for dates, friendships and jobs, they're believed to have more intelligence and integrity. It goes without saying that the beauty bias is even more powerful and universal for women. Beautiful women are thought to be more feminine, and femininity is associated with being emotional, passive and nurturing (Heilman).

There's not much bad news about being beautiful. Helena Maria Viramonte's " Miss Clairol" focuses on this point. She uses the characters of mother and daughter, Arlene and Champ, to emphasize the vanity of our culture and the reliance on the products required for a transformation into what is socially believed to be beautiful. Recently in history, women, who were far from being pawns and victims, used makeup to declare their freedom, identity, and sexual allure as they flocked to enter public life.

The first social history of American beauty culture: a richly textured account of how women created the cosmetics industry and how cosmetics created the modern woman. You don't need the latest census to tell you that America is, more than ever, a rainbow of faces with worldwide roots. More and more women of African, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American heritage are celebrating their own personal beauty, and the cosmetics industry is responding. Viramonte uses the character of Champ to show the changing mood in America towards the need to fall in line for men and the culture's expectations.

Arlene is from an older generation that requires a man for survival. This was a time of women's rights and freedom of expression. The women are entering the workplace side by side of men and the rules would change towards the belief of beauty is required to succeed in life (Heilman). It is very unfortunate, but very beautiful women are patronized in professional situations, sexually harassed in private and hassled on the street in greater numbers than their less stunning sisters.

A breathtaking beauty can be isolated by both the jealousy of other women and men's fear of rejection. Extremely beautiful women can also fall into their own snares. Some never challenge themselves beyond their looks, and end up in considerable fear of losing them. (In middle age, exceptional beauties have been found to be less happy than average-looking women.) But, considering all the advantages, " Please don't hate me because I'm beautiful" can sound like a ridiculous whine. Most of us would take the gamble.

Because what is beautiful is sex-typed, attractive men are thought more competent, and attractive women less competent (Heilman). " Attractive women have a significant edge landing management positions because they are more able to step out of sex roles in the job market," says psychologist Barry Gillen. The implication is that it pays to appear as unattractive and masculine as possible to succeed in traditional organizations. If all other factors being equal, the " good-looking" earn 10% more than the " homely," and that the situation was worse for men than women (Wall Street Journal).

Overall the attractive earn higher salaries, but a breakdown revealed that the advantage applied to men, older subjects and people in " male" jobs, but was not true for women, younger subjects and " female" jobs (Heilman). " The only aspect of corporate success that other executives don't associate in some way with either gender or appearance," says Madeline Heilman of New York University. A woman whose ascent is swift is considered to have risen due to her merit.

Maria Viramonte's " Miss Clair" hits on the point of how sex and achievement into adulthood. The characters are shown to be mere objects to men, and sex is only a tool required to transport them to their belief of the American dream: little yellow house with a white picket fence, couple of kids, a dog, and a wonderful hard working husband as shown on television. Young women are warned, " Men only want one thing! " Older women have been heard to say, " So where are those sex maniacs? " As comedians know, timing is everything.

Psychologists who examine biology to explain the differences between men's and women's attitudes toward sex connect men's greater concern with a partner's appearance to the evolutionary imperative to carry on the species: Men are seeking sex with a woman young enough to bear children. Women, on the other hand, look to a man's status (often indistinguishable in our society from his bank account) to ensure protection while bearing and caring for the next generation. It's a numbers game, say evolutionary psychologists: many sperm, few eggs. Men were programmed to sow as many seeds as possible (screw anything that moves).

Women were engineered to save their health and energy during the long human gestation period (could easily prefer a nap or a bite to eat). Though it may preserve elements of our evolutionary past, sexual attraction is more influenced by current cultural standards. The problem comes up when the standard is Barbie. Women judge themselves more harshly than men do. The majority of women believe men want them to be thinner, bustier and blonder than they are. Men prefer a larger ideal female figure than women do. Eighty-four percent of women think men prefer blonde hair; the real figure is 35%.

Men tend to favor women with the same hair color they have. Men tend to think they're fine just as they are. Women substantially overestimate society's fixation on large breasts (Peacock). Women, who want "better" bodies aren't just trying to please men, but are motivated by personal ideals. Today, 47% of normal-weight American women who think they are too fat are making themselves unhappy by buying into the improbable supermodel standard. Just as Champ is fixed on collecting all the photos of ideal women from magazines. Champ and all women are lost in a void of what they believe are the aesthetics of beauty.

What men want is not nearly as extraordinary as women might imagine. Psychologists and their term "attractiveness stereotype" are so strong that beauty is literally equated with goodness. Good-looking people are always going to have the advantage in our culture. That's just the way it is, and most likely always will be. The shift is towards truth and not ignorance; smart people are winning more battles. The truth of it all is that in the end the

battle of vanity, an undue pride in ourselves and our appearance will always end with us when we are all alone.