

# Beauty

## Synthesis Cluster

### Directions

Reading Time: 30 minutes

Writing Time: 45 minutes

The following task is based on the accompanying seven sources.

This task requires you to synthesize three to five of the supplied sources into a thoughtful, effective essay of your own. Refer to the sources in support of your own argument. Do not merely summarize the sources; *your own* argument is vital. Integrate the sources into your essay so that they support *your* argument.

You must attribute both direct and indirect citations.

### Discourse Activities

Carefully read and annotate each source text, then complete the Discourse Activity that immediately follows each source. **Do not limit your observations and analysis to these specific questions.** Try to understand the sources in light of each other and the assignment stated below.

After you have concluded your annotation of the sources and responded to each Discourse Activity, review all your notes and responses. Work through the Activity: Planning Your Essay on page 28. Then, state your own position and form your own argument.

### Introduction

Many people regard physical beauty as a highly valued attribute, often associating it with ideals such as goodness, love, and truth. But some people suggest that beauty can be a deceptive mask, a surface condition that hides a person's authentic self. Do our images of beauty obscure its true character, or is its true character not an issue?

### Assignment

Read the following sources carefully. Then in an essay that draws upon three to five sources for support, articulate and argue for a viable definition of beauty, explaining how, based on that understanding, we ought to regard human beauty.

Refer to the sources either as Source A, Source B, etc. or by the corresponding designations in parentheses.

### Source List

- Source A (Etcoff)
- Source B (Peiss)
- Source C (Koggel)
- Source D (Rosen)
- Source E (Montez)
- Source F (Hickerson)
- Source G (Lebowitz)

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### Source A (Etcoff)

Etcoff, Nancy. *Survival of the Prettiest*. New York: Doubleday Books, 1999.

The following passage is taken from a book that examines the science of beauty. The author is a practicing psychologist and member of the Harvard Medical School faculty.

5 Paul Valéry would say that we suffer from the “three-body problem,” and can never resolve it. One body is the one we “possess,” that we live in. It is for each of us, he says, “the most important object in the world.” This is the self that we experience. The second body is the public façade, “the body which has form and is apprehended in the arts, the body on which materials, ornaments, armor sit, which love sees or wants to see, and yearns to touch.” We can call the second body the subject of traditional artistic portrayal. The third body is the physical machine that we know about “only for having dissected and dismembered it . . . nothing leads us to suspect a liver or brain or kidney.” It is the body we are most estranged from and that beauty covers and helps us to deny.

10 The reason we have a universal passion for adornment, the reason that photos are doctored and painted representations idealized, is that we long to be not only works of nature but works of art. We want to unite Valéry’s three bodies into a unified whole. In part, the longing is spiritual: to have an outer representation that matches our dreams and visions and moral aspirations. It is also a quest for love and acceptance, to have a face and a body that other people want to look at and know.

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### Discourse Activity

Explain why Etcoff chooses to focus on Valéry’s observations.

### Source B (Peiss)

Peiss, Kathy. *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998.

The following passage is excerpted from the introduction to a book about the social history of North American beauty culture. The author is a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts and has written extensively on history, culture, and women.

5 What do women declare when they “put on a face”? Is making up an act of deception, a confirmation of natural female identity, a self-conscious “put on”? By the light of today’s TV shopping channels, as celebrities hawk their cosmetic lines, it may seem that the promise of beauty is nothing but a commercial myth that binds women to its costly pursuit. Critics are not wrong to address the power of corporations, advertisers, and mass media to foster and profit from this myth. But they have overlooked the web of intimate rituals, social relationships, and female institutions that gave form to American beauty culture. Over the decades, mothers and daughters have taught each other about cosmetics, cliques have been formed around looks, women have shared their beauty secrets and, in the process, created intimacy. Not only tolls of deception and illusion, then, these little jars tell a rich history of women’s ambition, pleasure, and community.

10

### Discourse Activity

Identify the pivotal sentence in the passage and explain how it functions.

### Source C (Koggel)

Koggel, Christine. "Concepts of Beauty: A Feminist Philosopher Thinks About Paradigms and Consequences." Presented at Beauty: A Symposium. Center for Science in Society, Bryn Mawr College, March 23, 2004.  
<http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/local/scisoc/beauty/koggel.doc.html>.

*The following excerpt is taken from an address made by a professor of philosophy at a college symposium on beauty.*

Feminists have argued that the disinterested viewer has been predominantly male in the privileged position of assuming power over the object viewed. When the female is the object viewed, she is then the passive object whose chief purpose is to be posed for the enjoyment of the viewer. The term "male gaze" sums up an analysis of the privileged perspective of social dominance and patriarchal authority. Perception and pleasure become themselves gendered and in ways that have consequences for those who are objects of the "male gaze". It is important to note that the "male gaze" need not itself be a male perceiver. The notion of a male gaze captures the idea that any viewer learns to adopt this position in order to appreciate art or beauty according to accepted norms. Thus the link back to Wittgenstein of a community of language users learning the established norms and standards that define or give meaning to a word.

From practices of foot-binding in ancient China to contemporary alterations in the form of plastic surgery or anorexia, women have been prepared to go to great lengths to meet the cultural paradigms of feminine beauty. Although paradigms of beauty vary greatly from culture to culture and shift over the years, the underlying assumption seems to be that beauty is worth the time, money, pain, and sometimes even life itself. It is no wonder that feminists have cast a critical eye on women's involvement in the beauty system. The system includes women's countless everyday rituals of body improvement such as make-up and dieting as well as cosmetic and fashion industry, medical technologies such as cosmetic surgery, and advertising businesses with their use of idealized images of femininity. Feminists have shown how the practices and discourses of beauty are integral to the production and regulation of femininity and to asymmetrical relations of power between men and women and among women themselves. Not only is beauty gendered, but paradigms of it in our society are connected with white able bodied and rich women. Women are placed on a pedestal as exemplifying physical beauty at the same time as the great majority of women are considered drab, ugly, fat, loathsome. Being bombarded with messages about paradigms of beauty means not measuring up and often going to great lengths to attempt to measure up in some way.

Feminists have also described the system as one of suffering and oppression and of women as victims of these norms. In more recent years, feminists have been critical of the women as victim picture and have used beauty and discourses of beauty to challenge current norms and open up new possibilities for thinking about beauty practices in new ways. In this feminist work, fashion can be used as a site for creativity, subversion, and even empowerment. A good example of this work is by Ann Cahill in a recent special issue of *Hypatia* on Women, Art and Aesthetics. Cognizant of the feminist critique of beauty standards as oppressive, she takes the ritual she and her sisters engaged in of preparing for a wedding as a place where agency, subjectivity, and empowerment through group engagement with other women can happen—even as they put on all the standard aspects of makeup, hair, and clothing that go with being at a wedding.

### Discourse Activity

Identify words, phrases, concepts, observations, and insights that are crucial to your understanding of this passage.

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#### Discourse Activity

Identify words, phrases, concepts, observations, and insights that are crucial to your understanding of this passage.

### Source D (Rosen)

Rosen, Christine. "The Democratization of Beauty." In *The New Atlantis* 5 (Spring 2004).

*The following excerpts come from an essay about the personal and social impact of technology. The author holds a Ph.D. in history from Emory University.*

Cosmetic surgery thrives on our collective denial of aging and on our refusal to accept physiological limits. It feeds our envy of those who embody nature's most powerful but fleeting charms—youth, strength, beauty, and fertility. Its supporters praise its ability to change lives and its critics denounce it as the expression of our society's worst impulses. It is a useful fathometer for assessing the state of our democracy and a Rorschach test for people's views about much broader social currents: the glorification of youth, the tenor of popular culture, the peculiar but strenuous American anxiety about identity. It is also a wildly successful industry—one based on ingenuity and an array of constantly evolving techniques and products, overseen by an army of trained professionals eager to protect and enhance their market prestige.

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In a mere decade (between 1982 and 1992), according to the American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery, the number of people surveyed who said they approved of cosmetic surgery increased by 50 percent, and the number who disapproved declined by 66 percent. Consumer demand for surgery has skyrocketed alongside this evaporation of disapproval. As Alex Kuczynski wrote recently in *The New York Times*, "The American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reports that the overall number of cosmetic procedures has increased 228 percent since 1997. The numbers are likely to rise as the population ages, prices drop, younger patients seek out surgery, technology and genetic engineering generate new techniques, and more doctors from various fields offer cosmetic surgical procedures." At the very moment in history when we are living longer and healthier lives than any society before us, we want to stop aging. We want to live longer, but only if we can remain frozen in appearance as a rather distinguished but active 35 years for men or a still youthful and vivacious 25 for women.

But cosmetic surgery is not without potential harms—both to individuals and to society as a whole. Since cosmetic surgery is, as historians David and Sheila Rothman have noted, "enhancement at its most pure," it is a troubling case study of how American culture grapples with techniques designed for therapy that can be used to fulfill our personal desires. Buried in the logic of cosmetic surgery are some disturbing truths about what our culture believes: that it is acceptable to be satisfied by the external markers of success; that the pursuit of such markers is, in and of itself, a useful and psychologically healthy goal for people; that what used to be encouraged—a lifelong process of moral education—is less useful, in the long term, than the appearance of success, health, and beauty; and that if we can overcome the limits nature places on our physical bodies, we should. "One way to deny our dependence on nature," Christopher Lasch wrote many years ago in *The Culture of Narcissism*, "is to invent technologies designed to make ourselves masters of nature." This is what cosmetic surgery promises to do.

#### Discourse Activity

Identify how facts Rosen presents support her most prominent argument.

### Source E (Montez)

Montez, Lola. *The Arts of Beauty; or Secrets of a Lady's Toilet with Hints to Gentlemen on the Art of Fascinating*. 1858.

*The following passage is taken from "Female Beauty," the first chapter of a book filled with personal beauty tips written by a legendary, audacious, and, for her time, unconventional woman.*

It is a most difficult task to fix upon any general and satisfactory standard of female beauty, since forms and qualities the most opposite and contradictory are looked upon by different nations, and by different individuals, as the perfection of beauty. Some will have it that a beautiful woman must be *fair*, while others conceive nothing but brunettes to be handsome. A Chinese belle must be fat, have small eyes, short nose, high cheeks, and feet which are not larger than a man's finger. In the Labrador Islands no woman is beautiful who has not black teeth and white hair. In Greenland and some other northern countries, the women paint their faces blue, and some yellow. Some nations squeeze the heads of children between boards to make them square, while others prefer the shape of a *sugar-loaf* as the highest type of beauty for that important top-piece to the human form divine." So that there is nothing truer than the old proverb, that there is "no accounting for tastes." This difference of opinion with respect to beauty in various countries is, however, principally confined to *color* and *form*, and may, undoubtedly, be traced to national habits and customs. Nor is it fair, perhaps, to oppose the tastes of uncivilized people to the opinions of civilized nations. But then it must not be overlooked that the standard of beauty in civilized countries is by no means agreed upon. Neither the *buona roba* of the Italians, nor the *linda* of the Spaniards, nor the *embonpoint* of the French, can fully reach the mystical standard of beauty to the eye of American taste. And if I were to say that it consists of an indescribable combination of all these, still you would go beyond even that, before you would be content with the definition. Perhaps the best definition of beauty ever given, was by a French poet, who called it a certain *je ne sais quoi*, or *I don't know what!*

### Discourse Activity

Identify what you believe to be Montez's most compelling comment and explain its impact on your thinking.

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#### Discourse Activity

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### Source F (Hickerson)

Hickerson, Buddy. "We're lucky, aren't we, Isabella?" cartoon. August 8, 2006. [http://www.comicspage.com/comicspage/main.jsp?file=20060808cpqgm-a-p.jpg&refresh\\_content=1&component\\_id=3&custid=69&catid=1135&dir=%2Fquigmans](http://www.comicspage.com/comicspage/main.jsp?file=20060808cpqgm-a-p.jpg&refresh_content=1&component_id=3&custid=69&catid=1135&dir=%2Fquigmans).



"We're lucky, aren't we, Isabella?  
We're only ugly on the inside."

#### Discourse Activity

Explain how this text makes an argument concerning beauty. What does it claim and how does it support its claim?

### Source G (Lebowitz)

Lebowitz, Fran. "Beauty is Filthy Rich." In *What is Beauty?* by Dorothy Schefer. New York: Universe Publishing, 1997.

*The following passage is excerpted from an essay about the pursuit of beauty. The author frequently comments on contemporary American social currents.*

I remember once, many years ago, going to a studio to meet a friend. The makeup artist on the shoot was Way Bandy. Way Bandy painted faces on people—he gave people their face. This staggeringly beautiful girl with no makeup walks in, and I said, "How can you improve her?" And he went away, spent hours on her, and you know what? When she emerged, she looked fantastic. A billion times better. Which made me realize how accustomed we are to associating beauty with artifice.

I think the pursuit of great beauty by the average person is ridiculous. Not because I'm against artificiality. I'm a fan, and a connoisseur. But it's an absurd pursuit that breeds a tremendous amount of unhappiness. What's striking to me is that, as a culture, we understand that great intellect is a quirk of fate. Yet somehow we still believe we can create great beauty, when, in fact, staggering beauty is as genetic as staggering intellect. Few people would compare themselves to Isaiah Berlin<sup>1</sup>, but every eleven-year-old is comparing herself to Amber Valetta. Nobody stops to think girls like this are gleaned from a huge pool of beauties, and then gleaned again and again...and then given the best hair, the best makeup...and then airbrushed to death. Nobody looks like Amber Valetta—not even Amber Valetta.

### Discourse Activity

Define the relationship between these two paragraphs.

# Beauty

## Activity: Planning Your Essay

*Consider how these sources speak to each other.*

*After concluding initial discourse with the sources, state your own argument before proceeding to write your essay.*

*Specify the sources you will cite. Plan clear, distinct references to three to five sources that best support your argument, in this case a definition.*

<sup>1</sup> A prominent 20th century political philosopher and historian.