

UNDER THE MASK OF APPEARANCE

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How do we define what is “feminine?” And since when has being beautiful and scrutinizing different parts of our bodies become an obligatory act for women to perform? And what might we say of the “masculine”—what is it and what has it become?

When Christianity limited the notion of excellence to moral virtue only, beauty was set adrift and sent away as an alienated, arbitrary, and superficial enchantment, as Susan Sontag tells us in her essay, “A Woman’s Beauty” (245). Woman, the only sex to which “beautiful” is applied, henceforth suffered from accumulating and demeaning overtones. Sontag writes that to be identified as “feminine” now largely involves caring about how one looks. Consequently, according to the social stereotype, the “beautiful” is thought to name something essential to a woman’s character and concerns (246). In other words, trying to be beautiful and attractive, usually in the eyes of men, has become the duty and “real” work of women. And, even if a woman does an excellent job in professional or cognitive work—she clambers up to a leading position in politics, law, medicine, or business—she is still under pressure to confess that she works at being attractive.

Women work so hard to reach the unreachable status that whole societies impose on them. They dissect “their bodies into *parts*”—“breasts, feet, hips, waistline, neck, eyes, nose, complexion, hair, and so on”—and compare each against perfection. Such scrutiny causes despair, for even if some parts “pass muster,” others are “always found wanting” (246). Despite the hardship and self-oppression women go through to approach beauty, people still so cruelly start off by defining them as caretakers of their surfaces. Then, they disparage women (or find women adorable) for being “superficial” (246). As Sontag writes, “[I]t does not take someone in the throes of advanced feminist awareness to perceive that the way women are taught to be involved with beauty encourages narcissism, reinforces dependence and immaturity” (246).

What is even more tragic is that many women participate in and foster their own unfair treatment. This vicious circle recurs again and again.

I lived a miserable life in junior high school due to many factors. I was lonely and reticent. It was thus easily understandable when I made friends with another lonely young woman when she appeared on the scene in my school. She was a math and science genius. We talked about grenades, discussing the speed of bullets in our free time. She even taught me how to break into a civil satellite system. She was so intelligent, yet she was fat, ugly, and a little bit dirty, too. What was worse is that, in being this way, she confirmed my view or expectation. Considering that I come from China, one of the few countries that officially has no religion, I should be free from the influence of Christianity. Yet, the opposition between the inside (character, intellect) and the outside (looks, appearances) is still so natural and familiar to me. Even my mother has told me that "it is normal to be intelligent and ugly at the same time, because if the Creator gives you both intelligence and beauty, that would be unfair. There is a balance between these two." As a result, because I felt that I was a normal human being, and I did not feel that God preferred me in any way, I became convinced of this perverse kind of balance, for years. No matter what the reasons may be, most of us view the inside and the outside of a woman separately, and more specifically, we often see beauty in women as a sign of inner superficiality. This bias becomes deeply embedded in our minds, and we respond almost automatically, unconsciously, because of it.

In terms of men, we often perversely make cowboys into the ideal of masculinity in a similar way. As Gretel Ehrlich shows us in her essay, "About Men," we emphasize their strong looks, gruff voices, and trigger-happy, laconic characters, even as we disesteem their true temperaments. However, things usually are not what they appear to be. Ehrlich argues that the cowboy is "strong and silent" because frequently there's no one to talk to (703). Moreover, if a cowboy "rides away into the sunset," it's likely because he has been on horseback since four in the morning, moving cattle, and he's trying, fifteen hours later, to get home to his family (703). Yet instead of being a tough, macho guy, a cowboy, Ehrlich claims, is actually "androgynous at the core": his weathered skin, calloused hands, squint in the eyes, and growling voice only mask his tenderness inside.

Since his part in the beef-raising industry is to help to birth and nurture calves and to take care of their mothers, what's required of the cowboy is an odd mixture of physical vigor and maternalism (703). If a calf is born sick, a cowboy may take her home, warm her in front of the kitchen fire, and massage her legs (704). If a horse is on the verge of drowning, he may cut her legs loose—his arm around her neck, lifeguard-style—and swim her to shore (704).

Ehrlich goes further, however, suggesting that under his formality and frequent standoffishness toward women, the cowboy is not a Jekyll and Hyde creature—gentle with animals and rough on women. Rather, cowboys don't know how to bring their tenderness into the house, and the geographical vastness and the social isolation of the American West hinder them from finding an appropriate vocabulary to express the complexity of what they feel (704). Dancing wildly all night subsequently becomes a metaphor for the explosive emotions that cowboys otherwise cannot unleash from inside (704). They ride through immense plains like rugged individualists, leaving handsome shadows behind, all the while clinging to an adolescent dependency on women to cook their meals, wash their clothes, and keep the ranch house warm in winter (704-705).

Because these men live with animals, outside of domesticity and in the landscape, their vulnerability is concealed behind great distances and dangers. Thus, the macho cultural artifact that the cowboy has become masks a man who possesses resilience, patience, and a form of courage that is most often like compassion (703-704). Their strength is also a form of softness, and their toughness is a rare delicacy (705).

Clearly, society's categories for masculinity and femininity are unrealistic. They do not capture how we truly feel, how we behave, or how we define ourselves. In fact, I wonder if we are all androgynous, both male and female, in our underlying characters.

Right after the publication of Hillary Rodham Clinton's latest book, *Hard Choices*, I went on the Internet and searched for some pictures and videos of her. As I scrolled down the page, I was shocked to see how beautiful she was when a photo of her at a young age appeared. Undoubtedly, she is still beautiful, after many years. Traces left by the past on her face only make her even more spirited. The wrinkles add to her maturity and sophistication.

Her vivacious, penetrating eyes display her determination and authority as the former Secretary of State and First Lady of the United States. As a U.S. senator representing New York during the period when the September 11 attacks took place, Clinton sought to obtain funds for the recovery efforts in New York City and for security improvements in her state. She is hitherto the only First Lady who has run for public office and who has played a significant role in public service. What's more, as the United States' Secretary of State, Clinton made decisions that influenced U.S. diplomacy and global conditions as much as any individual American could, besides the President. Few people would say that everything she's done has been aimed at being attractive. And even fewer view her beauty as a sign of superficiality. So, when it comes to struggling to define her as being feminine and masculine, taking her beauty, strength, and accomplishments into account, I wonder if we shouldn't proudly call her "androgynous."

All men have some so-called feminine traits, and all women have some so-called masculine traits. We may show different traits at different times. Among the general public, however, most of the time our "aberrant" characteristics are just hidden deeply inside us. Living under the pressure of social stereotypes, we will only give hints, accidentally, of who we actually are. Our cultures teach women and men to be opposites of each other in many ways. The truth may be that we are more alike than different, and our likeness should be what we remember.

WORKS CITED

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