

The Elusive Ideal of Beauty and Its Reimagining in Fairy Tale Retellings

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution and critique of feminine beauty ideals within fairy tale narratives, focusing specifically on Danielle Teller's *All the Ever Afters*. By retelling the Cinderella story from the stepmother's perspective, the novel disrupts traditional binaries that equate beauty with virtue and ugliness with vice. Drawing on feminist theory and cultural psychology, the study highlights how conventional fairy tales have reinforced patriarchal standards of physical attractiveness, shaping societal expectations of women. Teller's novel offers a subversive lens that reclaims the voices of marginalized female characters, emphasizing intelligence, resilience, and authenticity over superficial appearance. The article advocates for a broader and more inclusive understanding of beauty, one that challenges harmful stereotypes and affirms the value of diverse female identities.

Keywords:

Feminine beauty, feminist theory, fairy tales, Danielle Teller, *All the Ever Afters*, beauty stereotypes, Cinderella retelling, patriarchal norms, gender identity, cultural criticism.

Introduction

Plato once stated that every man's three deepest wishes are to be healthy, wealthy through honest efforts, and physically attractive. Among these, the idea of beauty—particularly physical beauty—has remained the most enigmatic. Although universally acknowledged and widely pursued, beauty lacks a precise, universally accepted definition. Its interpretation is subjective, often molded by personal, societal, and cultural factors. Elaine Hatfield and Susan Sprecher describe physical beauty as a reflection of an individual's ideal image—something that brings immense sensory pleasure (4). While some see beauty as something that lies in the beholder's eye, others are caught in its relentless pursuit, much like chasing a mirage. Beauty captivates emotions and imagination, influencing behaviors across cultures and historical epochs. From Cleopatra to Helen of Troy, historical narratives have elevated certain women as symbols of beauty. As Nancy Etcoff suggests, beauty, like ideals of truth and justice, is a Platonic essence—intangible and never fully manifest in the physical world (18).

Contemporary definitions, such as those from the Cambridge Dictionary, describe beauty as something or someone visually pleasing. In contrast, its antonym—ugliness—is perceived as visually displeasing. This dichotomy, deeply ingrained in popular narratives such as *Cinderella*, frames physical appearance as a moral and social marker. So embedded is this association that even dictionaries refer to the fairy tale's "ugly stepsisters" as archetypes.

Charles Darwin's theory of sexual selection, introduced in *The Descent of Man*, identifies beauty as a trait favored for reproductive success. Men, he noted, often chose partners based on perceived

signs of health and fertility, such as symmetry, smooth skin, and vibrant hair—features that today define many conventional beauty standards (263). David Symons reinforces this, suggesting that physical beauty became a subconscious marker of fertility and thus shaped the preferences of our ancestors (Taga 10).

Etcoff, in *Survival of the Prettiest*, highlights that our neurological responses to beauty are evolutionarily hardwired. She contends that our desire for features like symmetry and smooth skin stems from a survival instinct: the people most drawn to such traits often had more reproductive success, and we are their descendants (24). This biological inclination toward beauty has intensified under the pressures of modern society, where cosmetic industries and media propagate often unrealistic ideals. Across cultures and history, individuals have altered their bodies—through piercing, padding, painting, and scarring—to align with prevailing beauty norms (Etcoff 5). The lengths women have gone to emulate beauty ideals echo the violent acts of Cinderella’s stepsisters, who mutilated their feet to fit into the iconic glass slipper.

Beauty and Gender Representation in Fairy Tales

Fairy tales frequently underscore the theme of beauty, particularly feminine beauty, as a determinant of fate. While male beauty is occasionally mentioned, narratives primarily dwell on women’s appearances. Beauty becomes either a passport to royal favor or a source of peril, whereas unattractiveness renders female characters unworthy of love or kindness. As Lorber (qtd. in Baker et al. 711) notes, gender roles are reinforced through cultural representations, and fairy tales perpetuate the myth that beauty equals virtue.

In most tales, the heroine is lauded for her beauty using grandiose language. Her moral integrity is presumed due to her appearance, in line with the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype. Conversely, unattractive women are cast as antagonists—spiteful, jealous, and doomed. The tale *Mother Holle* exemplifies this binary: the beautiful and diligent daughter is rewarded, while her lazy and unattractive sister is punished.

Yet, beauty also invites danger. In *All Kinds of Fur*, a daughter's resemblance to her deceased mother puts her at risk of incest. Similarly, Snow White's beauty evokes lethal envy in her stepmother, underscoring how beauty can trigger both admiration and rivalry. Beauty, in these tales, becomes both a blessing and a curse.

Reimagining the Narrative: *All the Ever Afters*

Danielle Teller’s *All the Ever Afters* offers a counter-narrative to the traditional *Cinderella* tale. Told from the stepmother Agnes’s perspective, the novel reconfigures the dichotomy between beauty and virtue. Agnes’s daughters—Charlotte and Matilda—are intelligent and spirited, yet labeled as “ugly,” while Cinderella (Ella) remains the epitome of beauty and charm. This retelling reclaims the humanity and voice of characters previously villainized and scrutinizes the cultural obsession with feminine beauty.

Agnes's own journey, from a humble laundress to Ella's stepmother, reveals societal prejudices against women who lack physical beauty. The harsh judgment passed on her daughters due to their looks reflects Naomi Wolf's view in *The Beauty Myth*: beauty functions as a patriarchal tool to marginalize women (488–489). Agnes, aware of how society perceives her daughters, struggles between protecting them and reconciling their plainness with Ella's overwhelming radiance.

Teller's narrative suggests that beauty standards persist through comparison. Ella is beautiful not in isolation, but in contrast to those around her. This echoes Albrecht Dürer's assertion that no person is so beautiful that they could not be more beautiful (qtd. in Etcoff 11). Through Agnes's eyes, Ella becomes an unattainable ideal, casting shadows on those who do not meet the standard.

Agnes's daughters find fulfillment outside the pursuit of beauty. Matilda, despite her scarred face, becomes a respected Latin teacher; Charlotte finds success in illuminated manuscript work. These narrative arcs challenge the old tale's notion that a woman's worth lies solely in her appearance or marriageability. Instead, their inner qualities and talents lead them to rewarding lives.

Stereotypes and the Tyranny of Beauty

The association of physical beauty with moral superiority has ancient roots. Sappho, and later Friedrich Schiller, asserted that external beauty reflects internal virtue. This gave rise to physiognomic theories that judged character based on appearance (Begley). The *Cinderella* tale plays into this: Ella is good because she is beautiful, and her stepsisters are bad because they are ugly. This flawed reasoning shapes characters' destinies and reinforces societal biases.

Charlotte and Matilda are subjected to discrimination based on their appearances. They are bullied, ostracized, and dismissed. Their moral character is never questioned through actions, yet society deems them unworthy. Hatfield and Sprecher detail the stereotype's four-step process: from acknowledging the injustice of appearance-based discrimination to reinforcing it through differential treatment, ultimately creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (36).

Research by Dion, Berscheid, and Walster confirms the stereotype's existence, showing that attractive individuals are assumed to possess more desirable traits and lead better lives. Ella is adored by all, while Matilda's scars elicit aversion—even from Ella herself. Despite their talents, Charlotte and Matilda's appearances keep them marginalized until the story's end, when they are finally recognized for their intellect and character.

Female Acculturation Through Fairy Tales

Fairy tales act as implicit manuals for girls, instructing them that beauty is their greatest asset (Lieberman 395). Often structured around implicit beauty contests, these tales reward the most attractive with love, wealth, and social status. In *All the Ever Afters*, Ella's beauty makes her the center of attention at the ball, while Agnes's daughters are ignored.

These portrayals condition young girls to believe that beauty ensures affection and success. Even within the novel, Ella is praised for her silence and timidity—traits that uphold traditional gender

expectations. She is loved not for speaking her mind but for being aesthetically pleasing and demure.

Even children internalize beauty standards. Ella's comment to Matilda—"your face is lumpish and ugly"—reveals how early such conditioning begins (Teller 297). Despite the revised narrative, these early imprints of beauty and worth persist, requiring deliberate cultural efforts to dismantle.

Teller ultimately reframes beauty not as an essential virtue but as one quality among many. Charlotte and Matilda, once defined by their lack of beauty, grow into women of value through their intellect and kindness. Their eventual happiness, independent of a prince or magical intervention, marks a critical departure from traditional fairy tales.

Conclusion: Embracing Inclusive Beauty

Teller's *All the Ever Afters* deconstructs the glorification of beauty by presenting characters who challenge the stereotype that beauty equates to goodness. By giving voice to those traditionally silenced—namely, the stepmother and stepsisters—the novel destabilizes the binary of beautiful/good and ugly/evil. As Charles Darwin noted, without variation, beauty would cease to exist. Teller's retelling embraces this diversity, highlighting that every individual, regardless of outward appearance, has worth.

As Agnes says, Ella's brilliance is only possible because others are cast into shadow (Teller 372). Similarly, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* reflects on how one girl's perceived ugliness elevates others' sense of beauty. Both narratives compel readers to rethink the costs of idealizing beauty and the quiet violence of exclusion it breeds.

By expanding the discourse on beauty, Teller's retelling urges us to embrace a broader, more inclusive definition—one that honors character, intellect, and authenticity as much as appearance. Beauty may captivate the eye, but it is the soul that leaves a lasting impression.

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