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The Dangers of Unrealistic Cultural Ideals

My best family friends are blessed with a twenty-six year old mentally disabled daughter named Lizzie. Noticeably developing at a slower rate than other children her age, Liz was diagnosed with an unknown mental deficiency at age one. With the intelligence capacity of a two-year old child and, quite oppositely, the physical build of a twenty-six year old woman, Lizzie certainly stands out in a crowd. Ironically, much of the attention she draws is due to herself – or her excessively friendly character and lack of restraint in willingness to excitedly approach any stranger and express to them, in broken speech and nonsensical body language, her latest fascination (say, the flower she just picked from the bush). Lizzie is too limited in mental aptitude to understand that people around her are more cognitively developed than she is. She, therefore, wrongfully assumes that other people are just as awestruck by her flower (or “fla-er”, as she calls it). There are countless times that I have been with Lizzie in public places and watched peoples’ reactions around her as she free spiritedly skips up to them. Though Lizzie’s targets may each handle her in different ways, all of them have one thing in common: a contorted smile of discomfort upon their faces. The cultural logic of the metaphysics of appearances is a considerable explanation for this awkward smile being the common reaction to Lizzie.

As stated in the class hand-out “Disability & the Metaphysics of Appearances,” the metaphysics of appearances can be defined as “the notion that particular images possess larger-

than-life, transcendent, and ideal powers.” The ideal image of this concept does not leave room for those who cannot conform to it, such as people with disabilities or disfigurements. Consequently, “any appearance that doesn’t fit the ideal of the metaphysics of appearances... is often stigmatized, rejected, ignored, as well as repressed.” In this way, the general concept of disability has developed into “a value-laden, problematic ‘metaphor’” for evil or inhumanity in modern society. Where the socially constructed ideal of the metaphysics of appearances helps to shape a common view within the public, it can, in effect, disregard the fact that “abnormal” people exist at all. The inherent assumption is, therefore, that people like Lizzie are not part of our society. Most people – or those who fit such constructed ideals and are, thus, “normal” – feel uncomfortable around the disabled because of the denied truth that their disfigurements expose. The truth is that there is no ideal. Disabled people themselves fail to fit our widely accepted social “norms” and are, hence, proof that these norms are inadequate attempts to control the contingencies that create our world. Furthermore, the article “What Is Identity?” states that “if we do not take personal responsibility for the construction of our identities, the only options available to us will be the unconscious assumptions/attitudes/ideas that are dominant or popular at any particular moment.” In essence, this is what happens when we fall into the logic of the metaphysics of appearances – that is, when we accept the socially constructed notion of an ideal image – we fail to see that we are all imperfect or disabled to one degree or another. Awareness of the fact that disability is a concrete aspect of life that we must all confront will benefit both disabled as well as ‘normal’ people alike. This would allow us to “actualize a rather remarkable, creative say in how we assign meaning to our life experiences,” choosing to combat our tendencies toward personal as well as social alienation (“What is Identity?”). Only by doing this can we have true control over the construction of our identities and how they affect others.

In Tim O'Brien's short story "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," the character Mary Anne Bell provides an accurate example of how dangerous it is to let the conceptual acceptance of an ideal image define one's identity. Initially, it is apparent that Mary Anne fits the "normal" American idea of an American woman. She is closed-minded, girly, beautiful, and young – her role in Vietnam is described more accurately by a soldier as a "seventeen-year-old doll in her goddamn culottes, perky and fresh-faced, like a cheerleader visiting the opposing team's locker room" (O'Brien 497). At this point, Mary Anne clearly fits the metaphysics of appearances set forth in America circa the 1960s. Eventually, however, she loses these qualities when her overwhelming curiosity concerning the war gets to be so great that she subconsciously seeks refuge within the Green Berets. We soon understand that Mary Anne's "normal" American life is not really that perfect at all, but rather overwhelmed by social pressure and repression. Immediately, Mary Anne shifts from one character extreme to another: she transitions from a quintessential All-American beauty into a seemingly genderless person who is "one" with the destructive forces of nature. Thus, the apparent tragedy of Mary Anne's self-destruction and loss of her gendered identity occurs because of the fact that she has conformed to the societal female gender stereotypes her entire life. Once this oppression is lifted and, when she finds freedom in life with the Greenies, it is apparent that Mary Anne does not know who she is anymore. This is because she always conformed to American social ideals, which have stripped Mary Anne of the ability to construct her own identity as a unique individual. As a result, Mary Anne literally self-destructs. Towards the end of the story she says:

You just don't *know*... sometimes I just want to *eat* this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country – the dirt, the death – I just want to eat it and have it there inside me... I get scared sometimes – lots of times – but it's not *bad*. You know? I feel close to myself... I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else."
(O'Brien 507)

With this, we understand that Mary Anne wants to absorb everything and therefore escape her own lack of identity. Vietnam, or rather the freedom she feels there by being away from the pressures of her American life back home, becomes her drug, her addiction. She constructs her own overly-idealized identity there, doing so for the first time, which is why she regresses into an unconscious archetype of destruction (similar to the Hindu goddess Kali). She fails to find a healthy balance in identity between her old and new selves. With these words, Mary Anne clues readers into the fact that powerful life experiences are often more important than socially constructed notions of identity: her previously considered “normal” and cultured identity is revealed, quite oppositely, to be a self-destructive stereotype. The ultimate social commentary in this story is that constructed social ideals, like the power that the metaphysics of appearances possesses over Mary Anne to be the perfect young woman may be so unrealistic that they threaten to completely define her individual identity. In Mary Anne’s case, when she becomes free from oppression, she is really a lost soul. The way in which Mary Anne fails as a character implies that we should be wary of letting societal “norms” control our identities. Furthermore, the fact that Mary Anne fails as a female shows just how nihilistic gender stereotypes, in particular, can be.

Unlike Mary Anne who is initially an exemplary American female in both appearance and disposition, the narrator in Stacey Richter’s “The Beauty Treatment” only fits the metaphysics of appearances in her physical appearance; yet, in her own way, she also manages to enlighten us about how socially constructed ideals place grave strains upon our powers of identity construction. Regardless of whether we are traditionally disabled or not, the metaphysics of appearances can destroy what makes us unique individuals. Through the voice of a naïve and materialistic narrator, “The Beauty Treatment” represents an interesting dichotomy between the

superficial and the real; it is an overdone social satire that mocks widely accepted social ideals like the metaphysics of appearances. The Bitch (also known to be the narrator's best friend Katie) disfigures the narrator with a razor over the fact that Katie does not like the singer Brandy, which is a completely ludicrous but disturbing scenario. It satirically illuminates the fact that petty, materialistic disagreements have the tendency to be too important for many people in American society. When the two girls try to work things out toward the story's end, Katie says, "I've learned it's okay for us to like different things" (Richter 571). With this single sentence, the idea that socially constructed norms are both ridiculous and overly violent is apparent. The narrator was previously accepted by society for her supposedly privileged appearance, yet we quickly come to find that she is not beautiful on the inside at all. For example, upon first being facially mauled she says, "my first thought was Fuck, how embarrassing" (Richter 564). Therefore, when the narrator's image is damaged, her appearance finally matches her inside – hence, causing readers to question what really should be considered socially acceptable or 'normal'.

Where Mary Anne is initially beautiful inside and outside, the narrator in this story, prior to her encounter with Katie, is ugly inside and apparently beautiful outside. Both Mary Anne and Katie, though, fit the metaphysics of appearances in their respective societies: Mary Anne being the conventional American beauty of the 1960s and the narrator being a stereotypical rich and beautiful snob in the 1990s. Later, the narrator says, "so many people had asked me what was wrong with my face that it stopped bothering me and I began to have fun with it" (Richter 566). By finding humor in this horrible situation, the narrator learns to cope with what has happened in a productive capacity that does not destroy her identity. Thus, where Mary Anne is freed from the pressures of social ideals by being in Vietnam (or by being away from social control

mechanisms), the narrator in “The Beauty Treatment” becomes free by no longer being able to rely on her appearance as her only value in life. Thus, she is forced to deal with her disfigurement in the same society that once accepted her for the wrong reason. Furthermore, the narrator’s mother plays an extremely important role in pressuring her daughter to conform to social ideals, especially restrictive female gender roles. The narrator says:

That’s when I knew I was in for it. If my mother, who wanted nothing more than for me to marry a Jewish doctor like she had – to duplicate her glorious life and live bored and frustrated in the suburbs and flirt with other bald, wrinkled, fat, ugly doctors as the tennis club on Wednesday afternoons – if *this* mother was trying to usher me away from the prying eyes of young, male, pre-med students, I knew it was all over for me. I knew my looks were shot. (Richter 565)

This statement reveals that Richter is satirizing the metaphysics of appearances (from the high esteem that we can attribute to doctors to the glorious Wednesdays spent at a hoity-toity tennis club). We get the implication here that the narrator’s mother has given up on her; she thinks the rest of her daughter’s life is ruined because of this mutilation and, consequently, the narrator begins to feel the same way about herself. In fact, at one point she says, “But I will never be pretty and I will never be loved by the handsome men who roam this earth. My dear mother told me long ago that youth and beauty will get you everything. Well, mine’s fucked up and now I’ll never have Everything” (Richter 573). We do not know the familial background of Mary Anne, yet it is plausible that there is a figure at home for her – if not just American society itself – who plays a similar role to the narrator’s mother, having the same concerns and expectations for Mary Anne and forcing her to live under such repressive conditions. The narrator is never able to escape these pressures (or her mother’s influence), as Mary Anne does, and, consequently, her failure is different than Mary Anne’s: the narrator merely changes the way in which she conforms to societal norms while Mary Anne simply destroys herself. For example, the narrator learns to appreciate the fact that everyone feels sorry for her and she soaks in the pity. All of her

life, the narrator's identity had been defined by everything around her (by her mother and rich lifestyle) instead of herself and, in this way, Mary Anne and the narrator are alike. A subtle indication that social ideals are unattainable is revealed when the narrator talks about "The Accident as my mother called it, or The Beauty Treatment, as my father referred to it" (565). It seems as though her father is glad that his daughter is free from the burden of being beautiful and is now lucky to have the ability to see one's identity and self-worth in another light.

Though the narrator only begins to recognize this power of self-creation at the end of the story, readers would benefit by inferring this solution from the story. In this way, the metaphysics of appearances is an oppressive, alienating social force that needlessly limits women's capacities to self-create their own potentials and values in life. As the narrator stares at her disfigured reflection at the end of the story, she tells herself that she "actually was pretty," which implies that she can define her worth as an individual according to her own criteria – not society's (573). The narrator succeeds where Mary Anne fails because the narrator can create new possibilities for her identity and value as an individual whenever the pre-scripted gender role fails. Richter is implying here that suffering a disfigurement can actually free one from the tyranny of the metaphysics of appearances.

Art, such as short stories like these, provides us with the opportunity to learn vicarious lessons and knowledge from extreme situations. This is what both "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" and "The Beauty Treatment" accomplish for readers. Mary Anne and the narrator throughout most of Richter's story fail to independently define themselves within their respective societies, which exposes how dangerous socially constructed ideals can be. According to the hand-out "The Rhetoric of Images," "Idealized appearances/perceptions are solely ego projections of common human wishes... such shallow pleasures and desires do not offer any true

fulfillment”. This concept is exactly what Mary Anne in particular does not realize. In fact, this is exactly what society itself often refuses to realize: socially constructed ideals are unattainable and unrealistic desires because they place impossible conditions on our happiness. Social norms are constructed and, therefore, not concrete or inevitable at all; there is no “normal”.

Furthermore, according to the hand-out *The Rhetoric of Images*, “the inability to communicate or express our problems/failures is a profound social crisis”. In other words, it is a major problem if we cannot realize that we create social ideals because we deny the truth that everything and everyone is imperfect and should be embraced that way. The best thing about my “imperfect” friend Lizzie is her undying happiness. Though she is unaware that she is different, she does not know what she is missing and is, therefore, perfectly content in her two-year old worldview. Perhaps, though, Lizzie is lucky. If we all thought the way Lizzie does – if we disregarded alienating societal expectations – life could be a lot more pleasant and profound for all of us.

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