





beauty east of eden

*Eric Spaulding
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Dr. Dayton - Expository Writing*

There are certain, powerful experiences that almost everyone encounters in his or her life. These moments seem to take us out of time, and are somehow captured in our memory to haunt us on occasion for the rest of our lives. This writer experienced such a moment while making a college campus visit as a senior in high school. As I talked with some students in one of the dorms, I happened to glance over to the door and saw a girl entering the room. One look at her immediately captured my full attention. Her face possessed a serenity and completeness that almost surprised me with its strength and calmness. It may sound overly dramatic, but I still remember how her dark eyes seemed so full of life, and her smile was brightly warm and inviting. Her radiant face somehow drew me in, and I soon found myself stammering through a conversation with her. We only talked for a few minutes, but I left with the impression that I had witnessed beauty in a woman. She was beautiful to me. Few realizations have affected this student's life in such a deep and memorable way. As a popular car advertisement explains, our first glance at a person doesn't prompt us to say, "Check her out; she looks loyal," or, "Whoa, look at the morals on that guy'." Rather, we are at least initially interested in someone of the opposite sex because of how he or she looks ("Love At First Sight"). We are inclined to label these beautiful people "attractive." But *what* attracts us? More importantly, what is beauty, and why do humans find it so compelling?

One noteworthy definition of beauty is a "quality or combination of qualities which charms the intellectual or moral faculties" ("Beauty" 1). John Keats offers a more poetic view of beauty: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (49-50). Interestingly, women are often the focus of beauty in our society, as well as in almost every other culture throughout history (Cowley and Springen 62). As feminine beauty seems to matter most for both sexes, our focus will be on this subject specifically. The reaction many people, especially men, have to a desirable female physique is fascinating. Beautiful women typically receive more attention from the opposite sex, and generally have a higher self-esteem as well. It seems all women, though, seek to impress both males and other females in order to feel good

about themselves (Thorp sec. 9). Certain features in a woman's face and body seem to contribute a great deal to this impression of beauty in her appearance.

When listing the criteria used in judging beauty, symmetry is a factor that often comes to the forefront. Our faces and bodies follow a pattern of bilateral symmetry, that is, our right side is an approximate mirror of our left. The degree of perfection in this symmetry seems to be related to the attractiveness of a person ("Beauty" 2). Makeup is often used in our society to achieve a more alluring look by hiding any unwanted inconsistencies - blemishes - in this symmetry. Attaining this form of beauty has made the cosmetics industry in America alone worth over \$16 billion dollars (Labi and Harrington 76). Apart from makeup, features such as large eyes, full lips, and a small nose and chin are considered beautiful in a feminine face (Cowley and Springen 63). The shape of a woman's body seems to matter as well. One study found that men from a broad spectrum of ages and nationalities almost unanimously considered a female figure with a waist-hip ratio of .7, where the waist is 70% the size of the hips, to be most attractive (Cowley and Springen 63, 66). Clearly, we place a great amount of value on beauty and good looks, and apparently, specific qualities in the face and shape of a woman's body are usually more appealing than others (Cowley and Springen 66).

Although receiving attention may be one motivation for women to look beautiful, it is still unclear why they are attractive to us in the first place. In our postmodern age, philosophers and psychologists typically employ a scientific approach to explain the appeal of beauty (Stolnitz 265). Evolutionary psychologists point out that the features found most attractive in men and women are also the most ideal for fertility and genetic robustness (Cowley and Springen 65). Devendra Singh, a psychologist at the University of Texas, claims, "Judging beauty involves looking at another person and figuring out whether you want your children to carry that person's genes" (qtd. in Cowley and Springen 62). From this view, we may conclude that our attraction to beauty is primarily a sexual response to biological quality. In an evolutionary perspective, symmetrical people - those that we would likely classify as beautiful - possess better genes and would prefer to mate with others like themselves ("Beauty" 2). Certainly, having the same lengths for your legs and the same distance between your nose and each eye would help with running and seeing clearly. Another example is that the "ideal" female waist-hip ratio of .7 is the healthiest figure for most women (Cowley and Springen 65).

Thus, human evolution in a Darwinian model of natural selection would be assisted if humans were innately attracted to beauty. And it appears that we do, in fact, possess an inborn interest in beautiful people (Cowley and Springen 62-63). In one study, researchers found that six-month-old infants favor attractive female faces to unattractive ones, mimicking the preferences of undergraduate students (Rubenstein, Kalakanis, and Langlois 848, 850). As a result of this study and ones like it, we can conclude that popular culture and the media only reflect what we find beautiful; Hollywood flaunts beauty but does not necessarily influence our perception of it. Rather, we are creatures who are born with an awareness of beauty, and this ability may be beneficial in selecting a healthy mate with a quality genome.

However, our sense of beauty is more than a sexual response to a specific gene makeup, cute appearance, or appealing body proportion. For example, the same infant study that discovered babies favor attractive faces ruled out factors

such as symmetry, flawlessness, and youthfulness as the primary reasons for their preferences (Rubenstein, Kalakanis, and Langlois 850). In fact, it seems that slight variations in the bilateral symmetry of a woman's face makes her even more attractive ("Beauty" 2). A good example of this would be supermodel Cindy Crawford's mole, which some find to enhance the beauty of her complexion. Supermodels themselves introduce another quandary with the judging of feminine beauty. Apparently, even these women, deemed the most perfect models of the female form, are not necessarily the most beautiful. A recent survey of the Guinness Book of World Records reveals a number of objective rankings for supermodels and beauty pageants. World record categories include the "Highest Paid Supermodel," the "Longest Supermodel Career," and the model who appears on the "Most Magazine Covers" (Kynaston 147-150). However, there is no category for the "Most Beautiful Woman," or a record even close to its equivalent. It would seem feasible that if beauty were strictly based on objective, biological criteria that we could measure and judge the most symmetrical, perfectly-proportioned female in the world. Realistically, however, a consensus on this issue would never be reached. Humans, it would seem, experience beauty to differing degrees depending on their personal biases and interests. Although certain features seem to be more appealing to a majority of people, what one observer deems as beautiful in a woman is unlikely to be viewed the same way by others.

From this evidence, we see that the realization of beauty involves both an objective examination and a subjective experience of preference. Therefore, beauty's essence is in its exceptional ability to captivate our rational senses as well as our emotions and imagination. This at least partly explains why beauty is such a unique and powerful force, and why we value it so greatly. Experiencing beauty brings pleasure to all of our faculties, and it touches some of the deepest longings in our hearts. As a contrast with nature, we may look at an apple, see its symmetry and flawlessness, and say, "That apple looks tasty." But, when we notice a beautiful woman, something reaches out to us and prompts us to remark, "Whoa! There's something special about her... *she* is beautiful."

Harold Byron Hannum explains that in art, "to receive an impression of beauty, one must feel that the artist has succeeded in expressing what he intended to express" (23-24). In a sense, our affirmation of a woman's beauty expresses our belief that she is an example of the way God *intended* a woman to look. Indeed, God originally made Adam and Eve "to reflect an unstained glory," and we all long to have that perfection again (Thorp sec. 10). To some degree, seeing beauty in a person provides a doorway through which our minds can imagine the visage of Eden, untainted and eternal. In this imperfect world, though, the Bible observes that "beauty is fleeting" and temporary (New International Version, Proverbs 31:30). All people, no matter how beautiful, end up withering like the grass and falling as the flowers (New International Version, Isaiah 40:7). Author and counselor John Eldredge writes about humanity's grievous state:

At some deep level, we refuse to accept the fact
that this is the way things are, or must be, or
always will be... There are only two things that
pierce the human heart: beauty and affliction.
Moments we wish would last forever and
moments we wish had never begun. (8)

The human race is familiar with both rapturous beauty and scourging affliction, and it seems that we cannot appreciate or even experience one without knowing

the other. Eldredge claims that this is God's intention, in order to bring us into a relationship with Himself, the Creator, instead of merely worshipping the creation (93). Part of the affliction of sin is that we cannot experience the eternally beautiful in this life. It is important, therefore, that we do not seek our ultimate pleasure or sense of value from beauty.

We know, however, that God created us with a sense of beauty and consequently wants both men and women to delight in the miracle of His creation. Our attraction to beauty in the opposite sex is based partly on biological interest, but more importantly because we value the pleasure derived from its presence. For men, it is important to understand that seeking beauty is a God-given desire, but that it is essential to avoid lusting or constantly chasing after it. For women, being beautiful is significant and reflects well of an individual, but it should not be a primary source for one's personal worth. To summarize this view, Karen Thorp believes it is important that "every girl learns to see herself as beautiful and offer her beauty to those around her in appropriate ways" (sec. 10). For both men and women, experiencing beauty points to the richness and creativity of God, who gave us minds that can comprehend and adore the beautiful. However, the temporary nature of beauty in this sinful world is also His intention. We may thank the Creator for giving us beauty, for our innate sense of it, and for the pleasure we find in its experience. We should not, however, look to it instead of to God for our source of value, as whatever earthly beauty we see or possess will one day fade away. As John Keats observed, beauty is indeed truth, and truth is beauty (49-50): Our understanding of beauty's momentary existence helps us realize that God created man and woman to find their value in Him alone. And, in turn, comprehending this truth allows us to wonder in awe at God's creative abilities and His desire to ransom our hearts with a perfect and eternal love.

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