The Curse on American Women: The Ideal Destroys the Real

By

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Senior prom is an event to remember for almost any high school girl. In the sweltering heat of that day, I was excited to wear a gown and have my hair styled, and my mom was pretty excited as well. My boyfriend and I went with a group of friends, and we had a good time. Halfway through the evening, it was time for our class officers to announce the Prom King and Queen. Well, I certainly did not need to be there for that, so I went to the bathroom to fix my makeup and check my hair. Suddenly, I heard my name being called, and I ran up to the front of the building in my heels, no easy task, and I remember the class officers putting a tiara on my head and giving me a bouquet of flowers. Then, I had to dance in front of the entire senior class with the nominated king. Talk about surreal. I could not believe it had happened to me: one of the biggest honors for a girl to have in high school, and it was all mine. I had never considered myself materialistic or vain, but for the rest of that evening, I felt as though I was walking in the clouds. I felt beautiful, thin, popular, and envied. Up until that point, I had always felt like a wallflower; I was never the most popular and never had the nicest clothes. I was just a stubborn basketball player who hated public speaking. Yet at the moment that I became Prom Queen of Quakertown High School, I felt as though the rest of my life would be different because I was somebody now. I basked in the glory, grinning from ear to ear and having my photo taken with all my friends...and, suddenly, my acquaintances. For the longest time, I let the fact that I was Prom Queen for two hours make me feel validated about my life, basing my self-worth on the fact that other people thought I was pretty.

It took a while to come down from life in the clouds, but when I did, I realized that being prom queen was actually one of the most superficial moments of my life. I let other people tell me who I was and what I was worth, when in reality, I would have
to discover that in my own time and on my own terms. Unfortunately, my situation was not unique. Today, girls across America long for this same kind of acceptance and feelings of beauty because they are inundated on a daily basis by a montage of what Americans think is the ideal image of a woman. After women see picture-perfect, flawless images repeatedly, they begin to yearn for and strive for what they see. As a result, girls and women alike begin to change themselves physically and psycho-socially to become what they feel is the ideal. Through all types of media, women feel pressure to become what they see, and those effects have enormous potential for destruction.

**Defining the Image**

Over the past 300 years, the image of the ideal American woman has changed dramatically. What both men and women have perceived as desirable and beautiful changed with the times. American society is now obsessed with thinness and beauty, which is evident in the current perception of the ideal female body. This ideal has changed from past ideals, serving only to create a vicious cycle for women in which they can never fulfill the ideal entirely. As a result, they suffer psychologically, sociologically, and physically.

During the eighteenth century, they were expected to be sturdy, strong frontier women, capable of running a household and completing any chores. For instance, the women watching Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne were Hester’s “countrywomen; and the beef and ale of their native land, with a moral diet not a white more refined, entered largely into their composition. The bright morning sun, therefore, shone on broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and on round and ruddy cheeks” (B1360). Clearly, these women were larger and more solid than we are
used to seeing today. As times have changed, women have been forced to conform to these changes. According to psychologist Barbara A. Cohen, “[I]n 18th Century America the ‘idealized’ Colonial women were tough, big, muscular, strong and very fertile.” In the early nineteenth century, however, the ideal of a Victorian woman became that of a frail, thin woman prone to fainting and merely looking pretty.

Katherine Anne Porter’s novella, “Old Mortality,” depicts the expectations the aristocratic Old South had for an ideal woman and the judgments that they passed if a woman did not fit into such a mold. The novella is told through a young girl’s, Miranda’s, perspective as she learns from her elders about her Aunt Amy and her family. As Miranda tells the story, she tries to understand what beauty means in her family and the importance placed on women to be beautiful. The central ideal, Aunt Amy, was a beauty in her family and hometown, and throughout the story, it becomes evident that no woman can ever live up to the qualities she possessed. Not only was she an ideal in the novella, but she served as an ideal for female beauty of the time period in general. Miranda states:

There were points of beauty by which one was judged severely. First, a beauty must be tall; whatever color the eyes, the hair must be dark, the darker the better; the skin must be pale and smooth. Lightness and swiftness of movement were important points. A beauty must be a good dancer, superb on horseback, with a serene manner, an amiable gaiety tempered with dignity at all hours. Beautiful teeth and hands, of course, and over and above all this, some mysterious crown of enchantment that attracted and held the heart. It was all very exciting and discouraging. (176)

In the end, Aunt Amy dies from a suicide associated with the recent knowledge that she was pregnant, but she leaves most of her friends and family to think she died of tuberculosis, which was considered a much more romantic way to die. Miranda’s
grandmother departs some wisdom on her daughter. “I tried to tell her once more,” said the grandmother, “that marriage and children would cure her of everything. ‘All women of our family are delicate when they are young, I said. ‘Why, when I was your age no one expected me to live a year. It was called greensickness, and everybody knew there was only one cure’” (182). At this point in time, marriage was presumed to cure any woman’s discontentment or unhappiness and fulfill her in the way nothing else could satisfy her.

In order to be perceived as beautiful, women of the late nineteenth century were expected to look pale and weak in order to fit the proper role expected of them. One of the most important ways women achieved such a thin figure was through the use of corsets, which molded women into an hourglass figure, achieving the 18-inch waist every woman longed for. At one point, Amy of “Old Mortality” writes a letter to a family member, stating, “I now have an eighteen-inch waist, thanks to Madame Dure” (192). Achieving the 18-inch waist was a great accomplishment and worth bragging about during the late 1800s. According to Roland Marchand, “Advertising illustrations thus reinforced the tendency to interpret woman’s modernity in a ‘fashion’ sense and to define the status of ‘decorative object’ as one of her natural and appropriate roles” (185). On occasions where women wanted even smaller waist sizes, they would have ribs surgically removed to allow the corset to better fit their bodies, effectively dislocating and harming the kidneys and liver. Critic Thorstein Veblen states, “The corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject’s vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work” (269). Essentially, his point is that corsets and high heels were destructive towards women, who were merely ornamental in their houses. Their only duties were to obey
their husband and be submissive. At most, they were managers of the household but never did housework. Veblen states:

The dress of women goes even farther than that of men in the way of demonstrating the wearer’s abstinence from productive employment [. . .] The woman’s shoe adds the so-called French heel to the evidence of enforced leisure afforded by its polish; because this high heel obviously makes any, even the simplest and most necessary manual work extremely difficult. The like is true even in a higher degree of the skirt and the rest of the drapery which characterizes woman’s dress. The substantial reason for our tenacious attachment to the skirt is just this: it is expensive and it hampers the wearer at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion. (269)

Women may have looked beautiful and slim, but they were incapable of being anything other than merely decorative. As a result, “Femininity was synonymous with weakness, frailty, grace and romanticism. Beauty was defined as pallor of skin, tiny waist and a large bustle” (Cohen). Such frailty in women allowed men to feel even more powerful because they could wrap their arms easily around their wives and lift them up by their waists. More often than not, achieving an 18-inch waist was a physical impossibility, as were many of the images projected towards women. Scholar Cynthia Griffin Wolff explains, “The emphasis is different: woman’s capacity to be decorative is her chief attraction” (322). Because women wanted to fulfill the images of an ideal figure, they manipulated their bodies to the utmost extremes to be considered beautiful.

During this time, women were simultaneously supposed to exude their sexuality through their body shape and manner of dressing yet appear innocent and pure. This juxtaposition of ways a woman was supposed to look and behave merely served to confuse and frustrate women because it was virtually impossible to be a sexual and
sexless being at the same time. Amy of “Old Mortality” exhibited such behaviors at the parties she attended. For example, Miranda’s Cousin Eva explains:

Well, Amy carried herself with more spirit than the others, and she didn’t seem to be making any sort of fight, but she was simply sex-ridden, like the rest. She behaved as if she hadn’t a rival on earth, and she pretended not to know what marriage was about, but I know better. None of them had, and they didn’t want to have, anything else to think about, and they didn’t really know anything about that, so they simply festered inside—they festered. (216)

Clearly, women were expected to portray an image that they either knew nothing about or that they could not exhibit because of societal expectations. To fail at achieving this delicate balance of sexuality and sexlessness, women risked either seeming too prude or too sexual rather than being a normal, sexual being. Our society now promotes contradictory norms for female sexuality as well as female image. Schools and religion demand female chastity and a childlike asexual innocence (Cohen), while the media promote promiscuity and sexual experience.

As the twentieth century passed, the image of American women changed twice in major ways. According to Veblen, “Her sphere is within the household, which she should ‘beautify,’ and of which she should be the ‘chief ornament’” (270). Essentially, women of this time were ornamental at best, serving as a man’s trophy. In Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth, Lily Bart uses her body and sexuality to attract men so as to fulfill her needs for financial security and social acceptability by finding a husband quickly. This is evident when she partakes in the tableaux vivants in order to appeal to men who were already attracted to her slim, healthy figure. Wharton writes that Lily “yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings. Her pale draperies, and the background of foliage against which she stood, served only to
relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm" (106). She was not frail, and the appearance of her curves appealed to these men. On the surface, she appears to fulfill society's ideal of the female as merely decorative, subservient, dependent, and submissive, something every woman tried to be and most men wanted.

During the Jazz Age of the 1920s and 1930s, women were considered sexual beings, and they were expected to show their sexuality by looking desirable. According to Cohen, “To be socially acceptable, to be attractive, to win a husband, to keep a husband, women had to look sexy, free and available.” Many women exhibited loose behavior and obvious sexuality even though they had relatively boyish appearances, lacking curves where curves were once expected. Advertisements played a large role in creating the image women were expected to fulfill at this time. For example, Marchand explains that “[e]xactly what ‘look’ women should adopt to play their modern roles was defined less by the close-ups of soap and cosmetic ads than by the stances, silhouettes, and accessories of women in the whole range of social tableau advertisements” (179). Their manner of dressing was short bobbed haircuts and baggy dresses that exposed their arms and legs from the knees down. Hesse-Biber explains, “Even during the first wave of feminism, the slim, youthful, albeit rather sexless ‘flapper’ of the 1920s became the most important symbol of American beauty” (27). They were such an important symbol of American beauty because they indicated a false, superficial sense of prosperity that all social classes admired and desired. For the most part, the flapper style was limited to the upper class women, so they set the style and trend for the rest of America during the Roaring Twenties.
As the 1940s brought World War II to America, women took on a new role. With the men overseas fighting in the war, women had to enter the workforce while simultaneously taking care of their homes and children. They needed to be strong, tough, and capable of doing manual labor, embodied by the image of Rosie the Riveter. After the war was over, the men returned home and women were expected to move back into the home as homemakers once more. Around this time, women were expected to be content and happy as housewives and mothers. Marchand states, “Advertisers insistently reminded women that they might lose the very opportunity to embark on their ‘great adventure’ of homemaking or fail to hold their treasured positions as companions unless they repeatedly won these privileges in the ongoing ‘beauty contest of life’” (176). It appears that regardless of the time period, society overall seems to think that marriage and motherhood will fulfill a woman’s dreams and aspirations in life. In Alix Kates Shulman’s Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, the main character, Sasha Davis, became prom queen when she was in high school and subsequently focused the rest of her life around looking pretty and sleeping with men. One of the most important pieces of advice her mother gave her was on finding a husband. She explains, “First, she could make sure she did nothing to be kicked out of the market. Second, she could make herself available to the most eligible types. Third, and most important of all, whatever her natural endowment she could enhance her fine points to make herself as attractive as possible” (74). A woman making herself up in order to find a man was one of the goals every woman should have at this time. Following the war, women were also expected to become consumers and spend their time shopping for themselves, their families, and their homes. During the 1950s, the ideal image of a woman was voluptuous and curvaceous, epitomized by Marilyn
Monroe. Not only were the ideal women of the 1950s voluptuous and curvaceous, but they were also openly sexual and flirtatious. As the 1950s progressed, the patent for Barbie was obtained, and Barbie history was made, hinting at the impending change of the ideal woman in the upcoming years (“Barbie’s”). Her dimensions, at 36-18-33 if she were real, are absolutely impossible for any woman to possess, yet Barbie became a fictitious model for an ideal that girls vied for. Not only did they want her body, but they wanted her blonde hair, blue eyes, and wardrobe as well. Her body was perfect, if impossible to have, yet women saw a body like Barbie’s to be enviable and desirable.

The second half of the twentieth century brought about a drastic change in the ideal female body with the beginning of the women’s movement. Previously, women who had curves were desirable, but the ideal eventually became very nearly the opposite of the Marilyn Monroe figure. A young woman named Leslie Hornby appeared in America as the world’s first supermodel, better known as Twiggy (Hutton and Warner). She lacked the obvious curves seen only a decade ago in Marilyn Monroe and became the standard for the ideal woman’s body in the late 1960s. Because she lacked curves, she looked both boyish and childish, yet that was the desired look among women. In the past, weight had never been a prevalent issue among women, but when Twiggy became the norm, women suddenly shifted gears and became weight-conscious. Initially, she was an image of liberation for women because she did not have the curves that were the norm at that time. However, her image became so commercialized that she became associated with excessive thinness rather than liberation for all shapes of women. She was such a powerful image of what a woman should now look like that the Marilyn Monroe body type seemed incongruous with a woman’s body in the 1960s up through today.
Now that we have entered into the twenty-first century, women are still expected to be relatively thin yet have ample breasts. Typically, this is not physically possible for many women. While many women in the media today illustrate the various looks a woman can have in terms of facial features and hair color, for the most part they are all thin and petite. In the modeling world, however, women lack curves and are quite tall, usually standing at least 5'10". Today, an array of beautiful women splash the media, yet women are more bound than ever to uphold contradictory images. These contradictory images serve to confuse women and leave them in states of perpetual unhappiness because they cannot satisfy both ideals at once. Cohen explains that "We dye our hair, pluck our eyebrows, shave or wax our legs, wear high heeled shoes to cripple our feet, long nails that keep us from using our hands freely, make-up to enhance what we are convinced must be natural ugliness, perfume to cover our natural scent, tight clothes to cause us vaginal infections—all in the name of femininity." Women attempt to conform to what others actually find pleasing and
attractive and also to what they perceive others to consider pleasing and attractive. This beauty image is independent of possibility, health, and also of what men want. Society puts pressure on women to maintain a physique that, in most cases, is impossible to attain. American today are so inundated with what they think is desirable that they have very little room to decide for themselves what they like and dislike. Even if a woman does have the looks of the cultural ideal, she must still cope with the fact that she will not fit the ideal forever.

**Selling the Image**

Since the 1960s, one of the most harmful means by which women judge themselves is the flawless advertisements they see through various media. The images that are portrayed in movies, music videos, TV shows, and in magazines all depict thin yet shapely women. Most times, these women look undernourished as well, evident from protruding bones and tight clothing. Not only are these images self-defeating, but they surround us with unattainable ideals of female beauty. For instance, social scientist Jean Kilbourne contends that in 1987, advertising was already an over-$100 billion a year industry that spent enormous amounts of time, energy, and money on attaining an ideal based on flawlessness (*Still Killing Us Softly*). Obviously, it is virtually impossible for any woman to be entirely flawless, to be as beautiful as the media portrays. Because of so much focus on the female body, a woman often times becomes an object rather than a living, breathing person. The startling trend in the media currently is that women are portrayed as objects to be sold, not just as objects anymore.

One of the worst problems with objectification of women in the United States today is that men have an overall sex-driven attitude toward women, fueled by
magazines, such as GQ, Maxim, and Playboy, and movies exposing women at least partially nude. These strategic photographs serve to instill the mindset in men that all women look this way and therefore expect everyday women to fulfill those expectations. Women sit in provocative poses with very little clothing on, leaving little to the imagination. Not only are the cover photos sexually provocative, but the covers also have very little text, most likely because male readers are less interested in reading articles than in looking at photos. These types of magazines and the photos in them make women feel as though they must live up to how those women look or else they are worthless and ugly.

In women’s magazines such as Vogue and Cosmopolitan, however, the focus is upon how to achieve the beautiful and flattering look of movie stars and actresses. Essentially, the magazines define what is attractive to men so that women can conform. In these magazines, the photos of women are usually fully clothed; if they are
in underwear, it is to promote the purchase of such articles of clothing so as to look desirable for the men in their lives. Women’s magazines focus on how to improve the body and external appearance in order to make men happy and create a better relationship between couples. Both the articles and photos in women’s magazines make women actually want to look and become what the men’s magazines depict them as. Hesse-Biber states, “Capitalism and patriarchy most often use the media to project the culturally desirable body to women. These images are everywhere—on TV, in the movies, on billboards, in print. Women’s magazines, with their glossy pages of advertising, advertoirials, and beauty advice, hold up an especially devious mirror” (32). Not only do these magazine advertisements make women feel like they have to change how they look, but they also serve to sway men to expect that women can and should look like that. It sets up a self-defeating cycle and unrealistic expectations for both genders.

The obvious difference in choice of photos for men’s and for women’s magazines illustrates how women are objectified and how the media appeals to the two sexes in different ways to achieve the same goal. These media make it virtually impossible for women to escape the pressures of looking flawless, despite the fact that most women do not have the money or resources to alter their looks to conform to these images.

Advertisements and commercials also play a large part in distorting what women perceive that they should ideally look like. Many times in commercials, women are seen as thin, white, middle class, and young. In Still Killing Us Softly, Kilbourne states that many advertisements create an image of a passive, powerless, dependent woman that men think they will marry or live with. Kilbourne goes on to make important points
about advertising in conjunction with female body image. She states in her video lecture, “Women are considered acceptable only when they are young, thin, beautiful, made up, sprayed and scented, carefully groomed and polished, and of course, with all unwanted hair removed. Women who deviate from this image in any way, are viewed with contempt.” Despite society’s façade of acceptance toward women who are not stick-thin or drop-dead gorgeous, many women really feel that they must conform to such standards. Television commercials also show thin women eating fatty fast foods and looking gorgeous doing so, which sends mixed signals to both women and men viewers. As a result of such expectations, women are more and more often facing psychological as well as physical injuries stemming from what they see in the media, particularly photographs.

Up until the nineteenth century, sculptures and portraits were the primary way in which to capture the essence and ideal of a woman. As technology advanced in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it changed the way in which we capture how people look. To take one photograph took an hour initially, but even photography developed and progressed to the point in which we have Polaroid and high-tech digital cameras. We now even have enormous capacity to play and doctor the photos taken on these cameras through the use of computers. As a result, photography has completely changed the way in which women see themselves and are portrayed because it is now the main media by which to depict women. Because of the power of photography, it has become a source of cultural enforcement in placing women in a catch-22 situation about how they ought to look. More often than not, photos are now digitally altered to make women appear flawless, thereby presenting a false image of a model or actress that women viewers see as realistic and
natural. Social scientist Sharlene Hesse-Biber states, “Computer-enhanced photography has advanced far beyond the techniques that merely airbrushed blemishes, added highlights to hair, and lengthened the legs with a camera angle” (34). Airbrushing eliminates imperfections on the face, cellulite, chubbiness, unwanted hair, and can also whiten teeth and make eyes look more colorful. Many times, body parts are taken from one photo of a woman’s body and doctored to fit another woman’s body. As a means of portrayal, photographers also understand angles and lighting, both of which can make a woman look younger, slimmer, and taller in a photo. Women are made to look as perfect as possible in ads, and women who see these ads forget that computer technology allows photos to be altered and changed. Instead, women simply compare themselves to these ‘perfect’ images of women and begin a self-destructive process of trying to change themselves to become what they see in the media. Many advertisements take advantage of women’s’ insecurities by promising the perfect figure or lifestyle, which continually reinforce the idea of the ideal image of women. These advertisements are frequently found in magazines, which are an important outlet for what girls see and believe as portraying ideal women.

Magazines are an important media outlet in influencing young girls on what is beautiful, acceptable, and ideal today. Psychologist Liz Dittrich states, “Girls reported magazines as their primary source of information regarding diet and health.” Clearly, when girls look at magazines for health, fitness, and diet information, they will concurrently see these advertisements for diet products, fitness machines, clothes, and makeup that perpetuate the idea that women must be thin and stylish to be valued in society. Psychologist Barbara A. Cohen states, “But, we as women play a major role in perpetuating our culture’s ridiculous ideals by buying into the image with the purchase
of the magazines, diet books, beauty books and designer clothes thrust upon us, rather than developing an acceptable, personal idealized image of our own.” Most women know that they do not have to be perfect for the people who care about them, but that does not curb the fact that they feel pressured by outside forces. For Sasha Davis in *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, becoming prom queen made her feel important and significant in her life. She states:

> The others have disappeared. I’m all alone on the platform. The silver S.L.T. crown is on my head, and my arms enfold a huge bouquet of daffodils, tied with a blue satin ribbon on which are stitched in gold the letters S-L-T. In a circle below me everyone is singing out our song to the tune of ‘Stardust’ and watching me. I smile till my gums show. I feel tears stream down my cheeks. Cameras are flashing. I feel so foolish and so happy. I am the Queen (67)

Once she settles down with a man and has a child, aging and changing in physical appearance begin to unnerve her. When she is getting her hair cut and styled at the salon, she thinks, “Perhaps such things, like sex and motherhood, can be understood only when it is too late. Are not the products promoted in the magazines intended to halt precisely those developments that cannot be halted? Afflictions like acne have nothing in common with this other condition, despite surface appearances; one, time alone will cure; the other, time will only worsen” (284). Advertisements have a propensity to distort women’s' images of themselves rather than solely promoting a product.

> Makeup and hair products all capitalize on making women feel that they should change their external appearance for the sake of looking good. Being natural is no longer good enough. Mascaras advertise that lashes can be more voluminous, longer, and thicker than normal; hair products allow for added volume, bounce, shine, and strength. Hair coloring products, such as Garnier Nutrisse and L’Oreal advertise that
women ought to change their natural hair color or add highlights because men will think it adds sex appeal and older women should be hiding grey hairs. Even lipsticks promise fuller, lush lips. They have active ingredients intended to plump up lips naturally.

A more recent advertising gimmick that operates on two levels is the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty. Dove has created an image of endorsing the natural beauty of women of all ages, races, shapes, and sizes. Commercials depict these diverse women standing together in plain white underwear, clearly happy and content with themselves. The website has discussion boards where women can talk live to one another about body image, older women, and unconventional looks. Dove has also created a self-esteem fund for young girls to help them boost their self-esteem, and the most recent commercial has clips of different little girls all wishing they looked differently or telling the audience what part of their bodies/ faces they dislike. All of these tactics are seemingly poignant and heartfelt, but it seems to be greatly diminished by the fact that on Dove’s regular website, they sell products that promote the exact opposite message. For example, a woman who shops online or in a store for a Dove product may choose from beauty bars; brightening eye cream; moisturizer with self-tanners; intensive firming lotion, cream, and body wash; anti-aging moisturizer and eye cream; and restoring night cream. All of these products are reputed to diminish the signs of aging, create a darker skin tone, or supposedly improve the skin’s elasticity in only a few weeks. Although it seems admirable to promote “real” beauty, Dove’s product line destroys any sense of real or natural beauty they promote in their Real Beauty campaign.
Also, diet foods and diet pills send the message to American women that regular foods are too fattening and unhealthy. Pills claim that users can lose multiple pounds in a single week, something that is not healthy for any person’s body. Health foods promise low-fat, low-calorie, low-carb, high-protein, sugar-free, and gluten-free, all of which lead to lack of flavor and, most times, lack of vital nutrients, minerals, and vitamins. The appearance of multiple diets, such as the Atkins, Sonoma, South Beach, and Zone all promise weight loss using different foods as their core group, which sends contradictory messages to both men and women about what is necessary for a balanced diet. It is also impossible to page through a magazine, newspaper, or watch TV without seeing ads for Weight Watchers, L.A. Weight Loss, eDiets.com, Nutri-System, and Jenny Craig—most of which are aimed towards women and claim that they can help them lose weight quickly using an elaborate scheme rather than simply eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly.

Fitness and exercise have also been tweaked to appeal to women and encourage them to get in shape. Exercise is no longer done to improve cardiovascular health and lower the risks of many types of diseases, but it has become one of the major methods by which to obtain an ideal image, even when many women are not overweight to begin with. For example, the advent of Curves, Slim and Tone, and Slender Lady all appeal to women and the desire to be thin and attractive. Most of their advertisements say nothing about all-around good health and well-being. The goal is to be thin, and these gyms all promise it. Even regular home-town gyms have become inundated with women who frequent them multiple times a day on a daily basis. For example, if they had ice cream with their kids the night before, they feel compelled to work out an extra 30 minutes the next day, or if they had two pancakes
for breakfast instead of an egg white, they will punish themselves later at the gym. Many times, the gym becomes a burden for women because they are not enjoying their activity by running outside, going for a nature hike or walk, or swimming. They pick stationary machines that become monotonous, boring, and sometimes lead to disgust at the very thing they want to help them.

Other indirect ways the media make women feel inadequate is through commercials that use the ideal image of a woman to sell a product. Car companies use this method all the time to make men and women associate beauty and sexiness with ownership of the car. Beer and hard liquor advertisements depict women scantily clad with gorgeous bodies, having a great time with girlfriends and with men in a social setting. These ads infiltrate the minds of both men and women with the notion that women need to look like this in order to have a fantastic life like the one shown. Even typical food commercials use sexual innuendos and have gorgeous women in them. For example, Dannon’s laCreme yogurt commercial shows a wife and mother dressed up in a little French maid outfit sitting in her husband’s lap serving spoonfuls of yogurt to him while speaking in a French accent. Most couples do not act this way, but the commercial makes it seem not only like the product can make a couple interact this way but also that the wife should be sexy, seductive, and maybe even a little naughty. Not only do commercials depict ideal images of women, but television shows themselves constantly barrage viewers with these ideal images.

Reality television has completely revolutionized how the American public views plastic surgery. With the advent of television shows such as Extreme Makeover, The Swan, Nip/Tuck, and I Want a Famous Face, people have sought out plastic surgery as a quick-fix option for what they consider problem areas. These shows essentially
legitimate plastic surgery as self-improvement rather than invasive and costly. Dr. Robert Hummel, from the Plastic Surgery Group in Cincinnati, “believes makeover shows inflate expectations. ‘Some people are much better candidates than others,’ he said. ‘Extreme Makeover has the luxury of choosing from a large number of potential candidates and picking the ones with the most dramatic and aesthetically pleasing results. Many people won’t get the same results’” (Bryant). Clearly, these TV shows create situations where people with physical problems can turn into the ideal with the help of a scalpel. Additionally, Hummel states, “‘Earlier this week, on The Swan, one patient wanted procedures done in order to be a better person. Another said, ‘This cosmetic change will turn my life around.’ It’s a red flag if the patient’s self-worth is tied up in how they look’” (Bryant). Without a doubt, people today associate plastic surgery as a way to improve all areas of their lives, when in reality, it usually causes adverse changes that are difficult to cope with, such as being viewed negatively by family and friends or not looking how the patient expected to afterwards.

Modeling and beauty pageants are two enormous venues for Americans to witness what an ideal woman should look like. Women who become models adhere to strict dieting rules and deprive themselves of food groups or food altogether. They typically are underweight for their height, and their bones protrude from underneath their skin. Often times, models have a ghostly pallor and unnatural facial features due to vitamin deprivation. Despite beauty pageants claiming that women enter them to positively change society, earn scholarships, or advance a cause, the fact that pageants still require a swim-suit and evening gown competition simply objectifies women. Young women must prance around in these outfits, baring their bodies for the cameras and audience. Even in beauty pageants for young girls, they prance around
in outfits that make these little girls look cute and pretty rather than hone in on talents or intelligence.

Movie entertainment is yet another way in which young girls are subjected to what American culture deems beautiful and ideal for a woman. Even the seemingly harmless heroines of Disney stories and fairy tales have created ideal images for little girls to admire and yearn to look like. In Aladdin, Princess Jasmine wears a bra top and low-rise pants, baring an extremely petite midriff. Entering a city wearing such clothing was not a wise choice to make as a woman because she put herself in a vulnerable position where men may try to take advantage of her or assume things about her based on the way she was dressed. Ariel of The Little Mermaid wears shells as her bra and bares her midriff as well. Aurora from Sleeping Beauty has a perfect figure for being only 15 years old, complete with full lips, beautiful and long golden hair, and blue eyes. Snow White also was depicted as a beautiful, petite woman with perfect facial features. Her beauty was a central focus of the tale and she was considered to be the fairest in the land after she grew older. In Cinderella, when the Prince must find which girl the glass slipper fits, it fits Cinderella, not her sisters whose feet are too big. This implies that girls must be small; the big girls do not have good luck or happiness, which was the case with Cinderella’s stepsisters. Their images clearly objectify women by illustrating what little girls see at impressionable ages and internalize as they grow older.
Each of these Disney princesses have passive personalities whereby they show their naiveté about life and allow other people to make decisions for them. In Aladdin, Princess Jasmine is completely naïve about the real world when she enters Agrabah. Ariel completely abandons her dreams and her way of living for the man she loves. She is not interested in compromise and she never attempts to assert her own views or dreams to the Prince. Sleeping Beauty is another example of how the female is depicted as passive and dependent because she allows the three good fairies to take care of her and tell her when she may return to her parents. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Cinderella, perhaps more than any other tales, focus on female competition, unhealthy at the level depicted in these tales. The insecurity about not being the most beautiful woman threatened the evil stepmother, causing her to plan a way to kill Snow White. Anastasia, Driselle, and Cinderella’s evil stepmother all felt threatened by Cinderella’s kindness and beauty, causing them to prevent her from attending the ball and also from allowing the prince to find the woman whose foot fit
the glass slipper. Lastly, Cinderella creates an image of a young woman who allows everything to happen to her rather than actively seeking change in her life. She permits the malignant forces of her stepfamily to rule her childhood and young adulthood, and then she allows her fairy godmother to take care of her love life until she falls happily into the arms of the prince at the end of the story. Without a doubt, these passive, naïve personalities put these heroines in harm’s way and create an ideal of women that promotes inaccurate images of who a young girl should become.

Additionally, the happiness of many of these Disney heroines exists solely because of the male agency found in their fathers or lovers. Aladdin sets the stage for Princess Jasmine to run away from home, only to need the help of a male to return her happily to her father, save her from an evil male advisor, and make her happy through marriage. Ariel also allows her father to control her life while she is a mermaid, and when she finally rebels, she allows Prince Eric to whisk her away into his world without ever hesitating to assert her own independence. Sleeping Beauty sets up an idealized tale where love and the male conquer all. The plotline serves only to encourage girls to think such ideas are true, which can be quite disappointing as they grow older. Snow White also sends the message to young female viewers that beauty will not only guarantee finding a husband but is also necessary in finding one. She sings a song entitled “Someday My Prince Will Come,” indicating that fulfillment will not occur in her life until she meets a man. Additionally, Snow White caters to seven men while she lives in the woods, acting willingly as a maid. Cinderella wants to go the ball, which is specifically for the purpose of allowing the Prince to find a woman to marry. She instantly falls in love and the ending states that they lived happily ever after, as though her life is complete now that she is married. In each of these Disney tales, the primary
male characters all control the women in their lives, serving to reinforce an ideal image of a male-dominated woman.

Combined together, these Disney heroines become an ideal package for what little girls want to be as they grow older. Unfortunately, they are usually disappointed and disheartened to learn that they will never have the perfect body, or if they do have the perfect body according to the ideal image of the time, they will not have it for their entire life. It also promotes the idealized notion of romance and love, which does not happen like it is depicted in these Disney tales.

One of the worst yet most popular advertisements for an ideal body image was, and still is, Barbie. According to Hesse-Biber:

Barbie demonstrates that while your roles can change over time, you may never find relief from the Cult of Thinness. ‘She was a model in 1959, a career girl in 1963, a surgeon in 1973, and an aerobics instructor in 1984,’ but her body dimensions have never changed. They include exaggerated breasts, impossibly long legs, nonexistent hips, and a waist tinier than a Victorian lady’s. This is the perfect figure presented to little girls as ‘ideal.’ (28-29)

Little girls grow up loving dolls and playing with them, yet as they grow older, they begin to want to look like them.
Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* presents the fullest measure of disaster and destruction in the little African-American girl, Pecola, who wants to look like her blonde hair, blue-eyed doll. Pecola goes for help, pleading, “‘I can’t go to school no more. And I thought maybe you could help me.’ ‘Help you how? Tell me. Don’t be frightened.’ ‘My eyes.’ ‘What about your eyes?’ ‘I want them blue’” (137). Pecola wanted blue eyes more than anything because she thought society would consider her beautiful that way. Even her African-American friend, Claudia, recognized the way a woman had to look to be beautiful. She thought to herself:

> What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred. But before that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world. It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls. The big, the special, the loving fit was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. (19-20)

The black adult community of her town felt as though white women with blonde hair and blue eyes were the standard for beauty and anything deviating from that description was ugly. Unfortunately for both Pecola and Claudia, they felt ugly because they were little black girls with dark skin, black hair, and deep brown eyes. Toni Morrison’s novel depicts the hegemony and dominance of the stereotypical white woman and the stereotypical image of beauty that Americans have. Claudia actually has an intense fascination with the doll, exhibited by her desire to pick it apart and understand what makes it so special that society wants to see all girls look just like the doll and all girls want to look just like the doll. Claudia tells us:

> I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-
haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. ‘Here,’ they said, ‘this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it.’ I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. (20)

The little doll in this novel represents what so many millions of Americans envision as a beautiful and ideal woman. However, the diversity in this country guarantees that very few women have such standard, stereotypical features, but it is difficult to embrace this diversity when Americans thrive on only one image of beautiful at any given time period.

**Effects of the Image**

Now more than ever, women experience strong and uniform social pressure to buy into the ideal image of the female body and to conform to what is considered popular and desirable. Usually, these attempts inflict some sort of damage upon women through psychological, sociological, and physical effects.

Without a doubt, psychological effects are the most harmful and important because they affect everything else about a person. These harmful effects range from lowered self-esteem and insecurity to depression and self-loathing. As women compare themselves to images of perfection, they feel inadequate because they cannot possibly compete with, match, or measure up to these images. This inadequacy leads to diminished self-esteem, where women never feel good enough and ascribe qualities to themselves that are not realistic. A woman who compares herself to these images in the media begins to feel frumpy, ugly, chubby, or overweight, when in reality she is not. This leads to insecurity as well because women question
whether they are good enough for their significant others, whether they possess the
correct image for their job, and whether they are worthy of what they have earned in life.
Self-doubt and self-loathing frequently plague the weight-conscious, ultimately leading
to depression. Depression may manifest itself in discreet ways, but it is an all-too-
common side effect of the obsession to be thin and beautiful. Usually, depression is the
culmination of self-doubt, self-loathing, insecurity, and other self-defeating behaviors.
On occasion, women may even choose suicide because the internal and external
pressures they feel placed upon them drive them to feel hopeless and helpless about
who they are. A prime example of where debilitating psychological effects may begin
is in Porter’s short story. She states:

He was a pleasant, everyday sort of father, who held his
daughters on his knee if they were prettily dressed and well
behaved, and push them away if they had not freshly
combed hair and nicely scrubbed fingernails. ‘Go away,
you’re disgusting,’ he would say, in a matter-of-fact voice.
(184)

One of the worst psychological effects of these standards of beauty on women
results from the fact that men expect them to live up to unrealistic standards,
sometimes aspects that women have no control over. The father of two young girls in
Porter’s novella states, “It’s not very good. Her hair and her smile were her chief
beauties, and they aren’t shown at all. She was much slimmer than that, too. There
were never any fat women in the family, thank God’” (174). Clearly, the father says
things to his little girls that make them feel inferior and want to be beautiful because
they associate beauty with acceptance. In Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, Sasha
explains:

With a vanity refined to perversion, I cut school to hide that I
cared to be smart, telling no one about my books, and I
affected slopping to hide how much I wanted to be
beautiful, locking away my beauty charts in my desk drawer. 
I began to look for trouble so it wouldn’t take me by surprise. 
If I asked for it, I thought, maybe I could control it. (53)

She was afraid of being smart and of being beautiful, thus setting up a mindset for 
failure regardless of which path she took. Dittrich states, “Women and girls are also 
consistently taught from an early age that their self-worth is largely dependent on how 
they look. The fact that women earn more money than men in only two job categories, 
those of modeling and prostitution serves to illustrate this point.” When young girls 
associate their self-worth with how they look, their insecurities increase as they second-guess how closely they fit the ideal of the time. The fact that women with modeling 
and prostitution jobs earn more money than men in those jobs proves the emphasis 
placed upon objectifying women’s bodies and fulfilling ideal images.

After a while, the objectification of the body wears down the psyche of a 
woman, reducing her to believing that she truly is nothing more than an object, and 
thereby dissociating her mind from her body. Some of these negative effects include 
women believing their minds, personalities, and abilities no longer matter in comparison 
to their bodies; and practicing unhealthy living habits such as extreme dieting, 
exercising, and self-criticizing. Women learn from the media to analyze, accept, or 
reject their individual parts more often than seeing themselves as a whole person. 
Compliments are nearly impossible to accept, and if one is extended, the woman will 
generally call fault to some other area of her life in which she feels as though comes up 
short. This sets up a dichotomy in which the woman is striving for recognition but does 
not feel that she deserves it when it arrives. It is not what a woman is that holds her 
back, it is what she thinks she is not. A woman’s insecurity keeps her in a constant state 
of dissatisfaction—forever needing to improve on a good thing.
In *The House of Mirth*, the main character, Lily Bart, eventually dies at the end of the novel, effectively ruined by her attempts to secure a wealthy future with a man of her choice. Wharton explains that “[s]he was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty” (246-47). Her dignity and personal integrity killed her because she took no active role in marrying a rich man. This led her to lose everything and resort to overdosing on chloral. Lily realizes that “[s]he had long since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must increase it. She knew she took a slight risk in doing so—she remembered the chemist’s warning [. . .] the recovered warmth flowed through her once more, she yielded to it, sank into it, and slept” (250-51). In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola also dies, but she is driven insane by her obsession to have blue eyes and be pretty. As Morrison observes, “A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (158). Both situations illustrate the harm that attempting to fulfill ideal images can cause because it surpasses mere psychological damage; in the cases of Lily and Pecola, it literally kills them.

Women also beat themselves up psychologically when they “slip up” with their diets or neglect going to the gym as often as they would like to. They berate themselves through negative self-talk about their bodies or work ethic. To compensate for these “mistakes,” women may also take measures that harm themselves physically. For example, when women skip the gym one day or indulge in an unhealthy food, they may severely restrict their calories for days in a row or over-exercise by going to the gym multiples times a day. Frequently, caloric restriction leads to nutrient deprivation, as well as deprivation from enjoyable food, which finally results in binging on unhealthy foods
or healthy foods in excessive quantities. If a woman reaches this point, she may feel so horribly about her binging that she purges what she just ate, thus beginning the vicious cycle of binge-purge known as Bulimia Nervosa.

Bulimia Nervosa is a vicious condition in which women will consume thousands of calories in one sitting and then vomit soon afterwards to rid their bodies of the food. They either use food to fill a void or eat things they like and then get rid of it once their cravings subside or emotional state has changed. Bulimics have behavior consisting of recurrent binges; sneak eating; self-induced purging; repeatedly attempting to lose weight by way of excessive and strict dieting; vomiting; laxative and diuretic use; frequent fluctuation in weight due to binge/fast cycles; depression and self-hate as a result of obsession; preoccupation with exercise as a means of weight control; and an intense fear of being or becoming fat. According to Hesse-Biber:

Purging may be a means for some women to vent the anger and frustration they feel in dealing with their home environment, sexual abuse, or mistreatment from society. They may experience secondary advantages such as weight loss, but this may not be their primary motivation. Some women may feel an important sense of control in the decision to eat or not to eat. Food is a means for self-expression and power. (83)

Many women are concerned with being able to control their lives in a male-dominated society, and if they are restricted professionally or personally in some ways, controlling their body through binging and purging allows them the gratification of feeling control over at least one area of their lives. One of the most frightening aspects of Bulimia is that it can often go undetected because these women still eat. Hesse-Biber explains:

Bulimics are usually secretive about their gorge-and-purge episodes, and since there is often nothing about their external appearance to alert anyone to the presence of the disorder, the condition goes undiagnosed unless they seek help themselves. The number of women dying from bulimia
is hard to estimate, but bulima [sic] can have serious medical consequences, like gastrointestinal damage. The emotional toll of these disorders can include feelings of despair, self-loathing, guilt, depression, low self-esteem, and an inability to conduct normal relationships. (81)

The effects of Bulimia are not only psychological in nature; effects are also physical because much of the damage takes place inside the body which other people cannot detect. Bulimics oftentimes think that they can control their lives after they begin to binge-purge, but they usually wind up losing control because they cannot control the disease or admit that they have an eating disorder.

Even in Hollywood today, many female actresses and singers feel the pressure to be thin. They succumb to drastic measures, such as Bulimia, in order to look their best in the media. Many American women look to singers and actresses to set an example, and as a result, they begin losing weight through unhealthy means. Lindsay Lohan is a prime example of a rising star who has lost a great deal of weight. She claims that she was never bulimic, but her modest weight dropped from healthy to sickly rapidly. Young girls and teenagers look to these women to set an example, so they feel as though they should lose weight as well. Even though Lohan was never overweight, she succumbed to the pressure of the media to be thinner, which in turn sets the stage for eating disorders.

Anorexia Nervosa is another type of eating disorder in which women basically starve themselves. When eating in front of others, they will pick at their food in order to seem as though they eat, but in reality, they do not eat on a regular basis. Cohen explains, “Anorexia nervosa is voluntary self-starvation to the point of losing 25% of body weight, which sometimes leads to death.” As with Bulimia, Anorexia wreaks havoc on the mind as well as the body. Psychological symptoms of an anorexic include phobias
concerning changes in bodily appearance, obsessive thinking about food intake, obsessive-compulsive rituals, feelings of inferiority, all-or-nothing thinking and behavior, disinterest in sexual activities, and denial of reality with delusional thinking. Women anorexics tend to be perfectionists as well and will engage in behaviors such as weighing themselves multiple times a day, exercising more than necessary, and obsessing about how overweight they think they are, when they actually are becoming more and more emaciated. A prime example of an anorexic woman is the famous singer and drummer, Karen Carpenter. She was a petite woman who broke into the world of music with her older brother in the 1960s and 1970s. As she became immersed in fame, one particular tabloid cited her as Richard Carpenter’s “chubby sister” (The Karen Carpenter Story). From that moment on, Carpenter exercised frequently, restricted calories to an extreme, tried a water diet in which she would consume only water throughout the day, and refused to sing out front on stage, opting instead to hide behind her drumset. Her family eventually forced her into therapy to overcome her physical and psychological disorder, but the physical damage had already been done—she had already done irreparable damage to her heart. After years of torturing her own body, she fainted onstage at one of her concerts due to her condition. At the age of 32, she suffered from heart failure and died in her home long before she would have died had she not destroyed herself by self-starvation.

Another harmful yet less-documented disorder is compulsive eating. With women who eat compulsively, they use food as a coping mechanism. Cohen explains, “They binge, eating alot of food in a short period of time; sometimes eat secretly, are a compulsive weight watcher and diet, have frequent weight fluctuations, mood swings based on weight, depression and self-hate.” This disorder resembles bulimia in every
way except for the fact that these women do not actually purge the food they binge on. This is harmful because it leads to a cycle where they feel the need to overindulge and then punish themselves by extreme dieting afterwards while mentally beating themselves up for succumbing to food. Many times, these women focus a great deal of their attention on how they hate their bodies and begin to separate their bodies from their person as if they are not one in the same. This act of depersonalization is common among the weight conscious (Cohen). Since these women face two different beings when they look into the mirror every day, it causes intense trauma to their minds. Some women even taunt and berate themselves rather than encourage themselves to change their mindset and adopt a positive attitude towards their body.

Today, there are more health clubs, spas, diet books, diet supplements, diet foods, newspaper and magazine articles, and experts in the field of weight loss than ever before in the history of our country, and there is also more obesity than ever before. The message delivered to women from the advertising industry is that we are not acceptable the way we are naturally. In today’s world, “Thinness has not only come to represent attractiveness, but also has come to symbolize success, self-control and higher socioeconomic status,” and the average size of idealized women is roughly 13-19% below the standard physical weight today (Dittrich). Clearly, these idealized women are unhealthy themselves, projecting these images onto young girls and teenagers who yearn to look identical. One of the primary ways that young girls attempt to achieve this ideal look is through dieting, which girls are doing at younger and younger ages. “Dieting is more common than not dieting, with 95% of the female population having dieted at some time” (Dittrich). When girls restrict calories, they may experience depression, anxiety, and irritability, all of which they deem worth the
trouble. The best kept secret of the industry seems to be that diets rarely work permanently; they are usually only a temporary solution to a problem. Statistics show that less than 5% of the people who diet lose weight permanently because they want quick results, and these dieters become impatient when they don’t lose weight immediately (Cohen). Since weight is such a visible symptom, it is often regarded as a measure of that individual’s success or failure. One of the most serious consequences of dieting is that it causes people to think obsessively about food. Diets keep people a victim of food forever, and they reinforce the belief that food has control over their lives. When dieting, dieters are not allowed to eat according to their body’s needs or desires. This builds up a backlog of deprivation that brings on a binge cycle. Diets reinforce many of these problems and destroy many women’s’ self esteem instead of improving it.

Young girls are drawn to weight-control to improve their self-worth. Kindergarteners through fifth graders have eating disorders and engage in dieting activities on a daily basis today, illustrating just how widespread the obsession and quest for thinness and the ideal image is. In a study of almost five hundred schoolgirls, 81% of the ten-year-olds reported that they had dieted at least once” (Dittrich). This is a startling and incredibly important fact, given that most girls’s bodies have not even developed and stopped changing naturally yet. Additionally, negative body image is associated with a higher suicide risk for girls (Dittrich). Without a doubt, the ramifications of objectifying the female body are drastic and long-lasting, particularly when girls may become frustrated and disheartened about their bodies that they resort to suicide.

Another commonplace practice for achieving the ideal today is opting for plastic surgery more than ever before. More than 6.3 million women chose to have
cosmetic plastic surgery in 2000 ("Cosmetic"). Six years later, the numbers have only increased for all types of minimal and extensive plastic surgeries. Additionally, women comprised 86 percent of all cosmetic plastic surgery procedures in 2000 ("Cosmetic"). From the littlest procedure to total body makeovers, women have begun to think that the only way to fit the image of the ideal body is to quickly change their own through surgery rather than through lifestyle changes. In some cases, women do not even look like themselves after various surgeries, which the media portrays with Hollywood celebrities all the time. Women would rather look like an entirely new woman rather than admit they are aging or not perfect. Cohen explains:

Today it’s not ribs we remove but fat. We attempt to melt it away with chemicals applied to the skin’s surface, we exercise strenuously to burn it out of our bodies, we go to have the excess fat sucked out of areas that displease us by their appearance, we get the fat surgically removed, cut away, and have ourselves stitched back up again. We also get plastic surgery to increase, lift, or reduce the size of our breasts, to tuck away excess skin on the face or other body areas, get noses reshaped and jawlines redefined. (Cohen)

Unquestionably, the lengths women go to in order to achieve the ideal is unbelievable; they will put themselves in harm’s way in for the sake of beauty. Depending upon how extensive the surgery is, they put their entire bodies at risk—not just the area being worked on. Many times, women become so disheartened about not being able to lose weight rapidly through diet and exercise that they resort to stomach-stapling or gastric bypass surgery. These surgeries are drastic measures that put women at serious health risks both during and after the surgery. Sometimes, their ability to consume food has become so restricted that they vomit if they eat more than a few ounces of food.

Although many women choose surgical procedures, they also partake in less invasive, non-surgical procedures, including chemical peels, Botox injections, and laser
hair removal ("Cosmetic"). Sometimes, women put their own lives on the line all for the sake of beauty and appearance. Hardly any women are perfectly content with their bodies, but more and more women have a quick-fix attitude toward so-called problem areas and features they dislike.

Although women resort to changing their physical appearance for the sake of fitting an ideal, they also experience conflict in social settings. In addition to dealing with advertisements, women must deal with other women, all of whom are encouraged and stimulated to be jealous, insecure, and disgusted with their own bodies. The resulting antagonism pits women against other women in competition for superior beauty. This is nearly identical to the opening of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs when Snow White’s evil stepmother asks her wall mirror, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of us all?” Also, it makes women even more self-conscious because they are comparing themselves to other women in their lives rather than just the women they see in the media. This happens frequently to Sasha in Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, particularly while she is still in high school. At one point, she reflects:

My avowed distinctions were purely negative; they did not even photograph well. The excellence of my nose was its insignificance; the virtue of my skin was its odd refusal to erupt. When everyone else’s pimples cleared up, what then? Could my looks outlive the disappearance of their blackheads? Could I base my future on anything so trivial as skin? Unlike BUST, CHARM, SEX APPEAL, PERSONALITY, POISE, SENSE OF HUMOR, and HAIR, which as they grew in mass grew in value, my acknowledged assets were self-limiting. While the girls with positive charms, even immaterial ones, could look for daily gains, the best I could hope for was relief that no flaws had yet surfaced. (50)

Without a doubt, Sasha perceives most assets a woman can have in terms of physical assets, which she compares to other girls in her high school. The competition felt among girls in high school is widespread throughout America, frequently troubling
young women more than academics. Sadly, this competition and insecurity follows a
woman into college and beyond because the media is omni-present and infiltrates
their minds at all stages of life. Also, in Porter’s story, Eva states:

‘Those parties and dances were their market, a girl couldn’t
afford to miss out, there were always rivals waiting to cut the
ground from under her. The rivalry—’ said Cousin Eva, and
her head lifted, she arched like cavalry horse getting a whiff
of the battlefield—‘you can’t imagine what the rivalry was
like. The way those girls treated each other—nothing was
too mean, nothing too false.’ (216)

Even Bertha Dorset had a fierce animosity towards Lily Bart in The House of Mirth,
competing viciously and vying for the attention of various men in their lives. She treats
Lily ruthlessly and without restraint. One of Lily and Bertha’s mutual acquaintances
states, “‘At first I thought Lily was going to play her cards well this time, but there are
rumours that Bertha is jealous of her success here and at Cannes, and I shouldn’t be
surprised if there were a break any day’” (148). Clearly, Bertha’s jealousy consumes her
and threatens to upset the enjoyable vacation they are on. In Memoirs of an Ex-Prom
Queen, Sasha states, “The previous Friday and the following were for business; but this
one was for Round Table only: pure confrontation. Around the circle clockwise the
word would pass, exploding in scandal, wrath, or outrage” (54-55). They compare
themselves to women who are strangers, friends, co-workers, and sometimes even
sisters and mothers rather than to enjoy one another’s company. For example, Sasha
further explains that “But at once I realize my skinniness is there only as an ideal, and
quickly I take my cue. ‘You look beautiful to me, Mom, you don’t look heavy at all. You
still glow, you never change’” (238). Everything becomes a competition and women
can never be free to enjoy their beauty as it is; it is always how she looks compared to
someone else.
Within literature, it is obvious that the animosity directed against other women creates a self-deprecating and vicious cycle in which women feel self-hatred. Sometimes, this self-hate can be taken too far and result in death. In the cases of Lily Bart, Aunt Amy, and Pecola Breedlove, the longing for the ideal and competition to fit the ideal gave way in lethal consequences. Lily ruined her reputation, effectively ending her life through suicidal means. Amy made herself sick through excessive partying, also killing herself in the end when she discovered she was pregnant and had tuberculosis. Lastly, Pecola drove herself insane as a young girl with the dream of having blue eyes because the rest of the community hated her current physical appearance.

Clearly, these social and cultural pressures on girls and women prevent us from attaining complete happiness and a healthy level of self-confidence. The only way in which we can begin to accept and love ourselves as we are is to change our ways both as individuals and as communities.

There are numerous things women can do as parents as well, both now and in the future. A pivotal way in which to encourage children at a young age to accept their own bodies and avoid problems associated with obesity and eating disorders later in life is to provide a healthy, balanced diet from birth. Snack foods should play a minimal role in a child’s diet, and encouraging children to discuss problems and fears will also curb the tendency to become an emotional eater. On a societal level, it is important to increase awareness of physical disorders by instituting health classes in school curricula as early as fourth and fifth grades for all children.

As individuals, it is of vital importance to be aware of the effects of the media and consequently limit exposure to all of it. A key way is for us to put ourselves into
another environment, such as communities of women, of work, and of worship. If it is difficult to find such environments of caring, accepting people, it is necessary then to create an environment that will provide and foster such values. Unless we can value one another as human beings and not ideal images, it will be impossible to work towards acceptance for all women in the future. Another important step for us to take as grown women is to limit certain types of television and movie viewing, as well as Internet use, for younger girls through childhood and early adolescence. These are impressionable years for young girls, and if they are not incessantly inundated by images of “ideal” women, they will be less likely to believe they should conform to these ideals. Even with seemingly harmless Disney movies, diversifying a young girl’s choices of movies would improve her chances of focusing less upon the ones that portray stereotypically passive, beautiful, thin females. Additionally, it is important to encourage activities that do not involve mass media, such as outdoor activities, reading, volunteer work, church activities, and so on. These types of activities will allow us to develop our own imaginations and be around passionate individuals whose actions help improve people and communities.

Four years after being crowned Prom Queen, I can look back and see how I have changed. I am no longer Prom Queen. I am another woman preparing to enter a world that excites me and terrifies me at the same time. It promises me so much potential for success and happiness, but I must first learn to love who I am and how I look. As of my senior year in college, I have not yet been able to surpass the temptation of comparing myself to other women and ideal images from the media entirely, but I live each day with the hope that someday, my time will come when I can honestly tell myself that I like who I am and I am comfortable in my own skin. I want that
for my future and for the future of all women in my life. We deserve the same respect across the board, regardless of hair color, eye color, height, or weight. I am confident that one day young girls and women alike will understand and resist the dangers of succumbing to the ideal image of women and will be able to simply enjoy the diversity that composes American life. Only then will women be able to be happy with who they are on both the inside and the outside.

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