Perceptions of Beauty in “Beauty and the Beast”

In the introduction of Maria Tatar’s *The Classic Fairy Tales*, she discusses how Charlotte Brontë criticized female characters in fairy tales by writing *Jane Eyre* as a “one-woman crusade and act of resistance to the roles modeled of girls and women in fairy tales” (xvii). The role Brontë criticizes most likely has to do with the concept of superficial beauty in fairy tales and the weak portrayal of women – the stereotype of the beautiful, blonde, and useless princess who needs to be saved by the prince before she meets her demise. The opposition to this type of beauty is evident on Brontë’s novel, considering how the protagonist in *Jane Eyre* is a woman who does not focus on her appearance, or attempt to conceptualize beauty. Beauty, however, has multiple facets that Charlotte Brontë did not focus on, because beauty can also be internal – the type that embodies goodness and strong character. Jeanne-Marie Leprince De Beaumont’s fairytale “Beauty and the Beast,” and the animated movie adaption produced by Walt Disney Pictures, examine these multiple perceptions of beauty – the superficial and the internal – by creating characters who exemplify one or both of these concepts.

The tale by De Beaumont begins by introducing a merchant and his three daughters. All three girls are described as beautiful in appearance, but that is where the beauty ends for the two older sisters. De Beaumont describes the sisters as “vain and proud because their family [has] money” and they frequently pick on their younger sister (32). The sisters strongly believe they
deserve and will have everything, but when their father loses everything, the townspeople look down on them with shame and say, “It’s quite satisfying to see pride take a fall” (De Beaumont 33). Even when the sisters have none of their father’s money, they still feel entitled and proceed to sit around and do nothing, while their youngest sister does housework all day. Throughout the rest of the tale, the sisters do nothing but cause problems for their sister; however, they are punished. At the end, a fairy turns the girls into statues and says it would take “a miracle…to convert a heart filled with malice and envy” (De Beaumont 42). So while the sisters may be beautiful on the outside, on the inside they are ugly. This kind of outer, superficial beauty is what Charlotte Brontë criticizes with her novel.

In Jane Eyre, Jane’s cousin, St. John Rivers, is a representation of Beauty’s sisters. Brontë describes St. John as “tall, slender…a Greek face, very pure in outline,” with a beautiful face—so beautiful it’s uncommon (339). St. John appears to have good and godly intentions in regard to his missionary work; however, his motives for wanting to marry Jane are selfish. While he is not malicious or evil like Beauty’s sisters, he does hold Jane back from being with Mr. Rochester by trying to coerce her into marrying him and moving to India for missionary work. Brontë uses his proposal to represent the common theme of marriage in fairytales, and then in protest, she has her protagonist take a different path because Jane declines the proposal and is determined to keep ahold of her independence, at least for a short time, until she return to Mr. Rochester (Cadwallader 243). Much like the sisters’ motivations in “Beauty and the Beast,” St. John only focus on what would be best for himself. This superficial beauty and self-absorbed motivation is also present with the character Gaston in the 1991 Disney version of Beauty and the Beast.
The antagonist in the Disney version of *Beauty and the Beast* is a character named Gaston. Gaston is a tall, muscular man who has an obsession with his looks and feels a sense of entitlement because of his masculine and rugged appearance. He makes it known early on that intelligence, especially in a woman, is a bad thing. Faith Dickens, the author of an undergraduate research journal article from the University of Central Florida, claims this is the moment in the movie when the audience officially recognizes that Gaston is the antagonist because of his ignorance (82). Throughout the movie Gaston is solely focused on winning Belle’s hand in marriage, no matter what the cost. His love for her, however, only stems from her beauty. In the opening song “Belle,” Gaston sings about his plans for Belle: “Here in town there's only she, who is beautiful as me, so I'm making plans to woo and marry Belle” (Trousdale). Gaston only views Belle as a prize when he tells his lackey, Lefou, about his proposal plans for Belle by saying “I have my sights set on that one” (Trousdale). To him, Belle isn’t a person with feelings, but rather another trophy to add to his shelf.

When Belle rejects Gaston’s proposal he complains and doesn’t understand how she could turn him down. He doesn’t feel dejected because she said no, but instead he feels embarrassed because he was publically humiliated. The song in the movie that correlates with this scene is titled “Gaston,” and the entire song focuses on Gaston’s superficial attitudes about himself and life. The song begins when Lefou attempts to cheer Gaston up with compliments and praise. Gaston eventually stops sulking and joins in by complimenting himself when he sings: “As a specimen, yes, I’m intimidating” (Trousdale). Once again, the focus is only on his outer appearance. The rest of the song focuses on Gaston’s accomplishment – which includes his biceps, fighting skills, and his ability to spit far distances accurately.
When Gaston discovers that Belle is in love with the Beast, he automatically plots to kill him. His raging jealousy leads him to only think about himself and not about what Belle, or anyone else wants. When confronting the Beast, Gaston says to him: “Were you in love with her, Beast? Did you honestly think she'd want you when she had someone like me?” (Trousdale). Gaston – unable to recognize any value in a relationship or love aside from the aspect of superficial beauty – refuses to believe anyone could be in love with what he assumes to be a monster. Gaston falls to his death still with the belief that the most important aspect of life is outer appearance.

The sense of internal beauty begins with De Beaumont’s protagonist, Beauty, in “Beauty and the Beast.” From the beginning, it is made aware that Beauty is a better person than her two sisters, in all areas. In this instance, “Beauty’s qualities are directly linked to her physical appearance: Beauty, ‘as she was handsomer, was also better than her sisters’” (Cadwallader 237). She is not only beautiful in appearance, but is well behaved and intelligent because she “[spends] most of her time reading good books” (De Beaumont 32). Beauty’s internal beauty shines through when she decides she is willing to sacrifice her life to the Beast in place of her father’s. Beauty says to her family, “I feel fortunate to be able to sacrifice myself for him, since I will have the pleasure of saving my father and proving my feelings of tenderness for him (De Beaumont 36). Not only is she willing to die in the place of a loved one – which seems noble enough, but she feels honored to prove how far the love for her family extends.

Other facets of Beauty’s internal goodness are revealed at the first night in the Beast’s castle. “Beauty [is] forced into the brutal honesty [by] pronouncing [the] Beast [as] ugly during dinner conversations” (Cadwallader 235). The Beast asks Beauty if she finds him repulsive and she replies, “Yes I do, I don’t know how to lie. But I do think that you are very kind” (De
Beaumont 38). Here, honesty and understanding are the traits that make Beauty a good person. She outright tells the Beast what she thinks of his outward appearance, but she counters that by letting him know she only finds his personality and behavior to be important. This idea is extended upon when Beauty feels terrible guilt and remorse for staying away from the Beast for longer than she promised. She says to herself, “Is it his fault that he is ugly and lacks intelligence? He is kind. That’s worth more than anything else” (De Beaumont 40). Beauty rushes back to the castle and professes her feelings for the Beast in an attempt to mend her wrongdoing.

When Beauty decides to marry the Beast based on his kindness and generosity, regardless of his appearance, she breaks the spell an evil fairy cured the Beast with. A grand fairy arrives and says to Beauty, “come and receive the reward for your wise choice. You preferred virtue to looks and intelligence, and so you deserve to see those qualities united in a single person (De Beaumont 41-2). Beauty saw the best in the Beast and looked past his unfortunate, and cursed appearance, so she is praised for both her internal and external beauty. Because both the internal and external beauty are paired, the superficial beauty does not exist. Charlotte Brontë, however, seemed to believe that external beauty could not exist without the superficial aspect. This is evident with the protagonist of Jane Eyre.

Charlotte Brontë created Jane as a plain, humble, but intelligent young woman who cares little for her outer appearance. Jane’s physical appearance is one of the ways Brontë criticized the typical fairytale. Jane is not the typical beauty and this is, “perhaps the most striking physical aspect of Jane is her plainness, simply because it is a novelty not found in Western myths and fairy tales” (Heiniger 25). Jane made it her life’s focus to devote herself to education and morality. Her devotion is what forms her internal beauty. Her education began early with a
woman named Bessie who would read to her “passages of love and adventure taken from old
fairy tales and older ballads” (Brontë 13). This is similar to Beauty’s love for reading.
Throughout Jane’s childhood at Lowood, she learned what she could and eventually became a
teacher herself. When she leaves Lowood she moves to take on a pupil at Thornfield Hall. Jane
uses her intelligence as a way to define herself because she has built her life around it. She also
puts a focus on her morals and how her choices affect her life and those around her.

Jane decides it is best to leave Rochester after the marriage scandal with Bertha. She says
to Rochester before she departs, “The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I
am, the more I will respect myself. … Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no
temptation: they are for such moments…when body and soul rise in mutiny (Brontë 312). Jane,
at the time, believes that she is only moral and obedient when she is alone, and she will use those
morals to guide her the proper way. This is where Brontë took a stand against the typical
fairytale where the female character needs to depend on a male to survive; however, by the end
of the story Jane ends up with Rochester on her own. Regardless to Brontë’s opposition to
fairytales it seems as though she still believed in a classic ending – she just allowed her
protagonist that opportunity for complete independence: “Thus, [Jane] has the tenacity to achieve
her own happily-ever-after” (Heiniger 28).

The protagonist of the Disney movie adaption of Beauty and the Beast, similar to De
Beaumont’s fairytale, possess both external and internal beauty, and is given the name Belle. The
movie begins with a stroll through the village with Belle professing her love for literature,
education, and “women’s desire for adventure” (Dickens 81). She cares for her father and
subjects herself to the Beast in his place. This Disney princess, however, is defiant when it
comes to dealing with the Beast. If she doesn’t like how he is acting she makes it known –
disregarding the possible consequences. This is shown after the Beast becomes injured from saving Belle’s life during a wolf attack. She attempts to help him with the wounds on his arm, and he reacts violently because of the pain. They argue back and forth, which is something no one had ever attempted with the Beast before, given the frightened looks from the servants, and she ends the argument by telling him he should “learn to control [his] temper” (Trousdale).

Belle’s act of defiance against the Beast is another part of her internal beauty because she stands up for what she believes in, instead of backing down when she is challenged, or told otherwise. In this case, Belle exemplified both traditional masculine and feminine roles because she was brave when dealing with the volatile Beast, but she was also nurturing when she tended to his wounds (England et al., 564). In the end when Gaston tries to kill the Beast, it is Belle’s love that saves the day. Because she is able to look past his appearance and see the goodness inside, Belle is able to break the curse and the Beast transforms back into Prince Adam. Belle is responsible for her own happy ending because she possesses beauty on both the outside and inside.

The idea of superficial and internal beauty is present in the various forms of “Beauty and the Beast,” from the original fairytale by Jeanne-Marie Leprince De Beaumont, to the nineteenth century romantic classic Jane Eyre, and finally to the late twentieth century Disney movie adaption. All three of these adaptions examine superficial beauty relating to negative events and internal beauty and goodness correlating with events that are positive by producing characters that embody one, or both of these traits.
Works Cited


