

Beauty: The Inner Beast

Beautiful women repulse me.

No. Beautiful women who build a life solely on the basis of their looks repulse me. Although I do not consider myself stunning, I am all right. I have had my fair share of compliments from strangers and the occasional double take in subway stations, but I am no Helen of Troy. The only war anyone would fight for me would be for my extensive collection of science fair medals—not my looks. I dislike Helen's mystifying powers on men, her beauty that spawned the upheaval of the entire Trojan nation. Yet even in all the praise, empowerment, and admiration, Helen viewed her beauty as a curse.

You could say I am a feminist. Of course I believe women should have the same rights as me, but not extra loopholes that favor a more pleasant face over another. There is a reason why the secretaries of large corporate firms or even the dentist's office are eerily all attractive women. The image is all too familiar: the dainty high heels only shadowed by the dress shirt with the first few buttons casually undone all tucked into a tight business skirt. They are nice to look at, to talk to, and to decorate any boring firm with the prospect of sexual tension.

The feminist in me loathes that loophole that gives women the option of living on their looks. I detest that women are objectified. What I detest more are women who let themselves be objectified. Yet I have spent hours admiring the symmetric faces of Helen-esque models in magazines, the flawless hair that naturally frames their delicate yet extraordinarily fit shoulders. I have idolized teenage pop stars and celebrity beauty queens, even plastered my entire bedroom wall with their posters depicting the embodiment of physical perfection. But if I am a committed feminist, then why am I one of them, a wannabe dreaming of the glamour and attention that accompanies a pretty face? Why do I paint my face every morning with makeup in the hopes of getting that second take on my way to work? Why do I wear ridiculously padded bras in the hopes of adding a cup-size to my breasts? Why did I enter into the most objectifying staple of American popular culture—the beauty pageant?

I had just finished my last tangy sweet sip of fruit punch when I saw her. She was just as stunning as I remembered. A bright red bra and matching polka dot panties adorned her slender figure, and a subtle shine outlined her flawless bronze skin. Jessica

was the cover girl of *Hooter's Magazine* with an eight page spread in both leopard-print lingerie and a full Hooters waitress uniform. I had found her magazine feature during my daily scour of facebook. Soon, I read, she would be off for the Hooter's International Swimsuit pageant nationally broadcast on Fox Sports.

I first met Jessica at the Miss Tennessee pageant during my senior year of high school. She had a long cascade of brilliant blonde curls that highlighted her sapphire blue eyes and perfectly aligned pearly white teeth. A charming Southern accent accentuated her delicate yet sharp features, enough to melt anyone into a puddle of babbling admiration. I remember that weekend in the extravagant hotel, where I was in awe of her and everyone else who was vying for the title of beauty.

The sudden stampede of delicate high-heel clicks on polished marble brought my eyes to focus on a cluster of young women. They walked with the confidence of an army of Terminator robots acutely aware of their intimidation factor—that nothing can stop them. The shades of lip gloss, eye shadow, lipstick, blush, and every other cosmetic on these porcelain dolls easily composed the entire spectrum of visible light. I could not stop staring. At the sight of an entire forest of killer long legs and unbelievably perky breasts, I stood up straight and made sure to stick my own chest out as far as my back would allow. The clicks abruptly stopped when each of them lined up at the America's Homecoming Queen Pageant registration table for the Tennessee state pageant.

I had arrived early and self-consciously put my crown and banner on, waiting for the interview portion of the pageant to begin. I never imagined myself as a beauty pageant contestant, much less a beauty queen, but there was scholarship money at stake, and I needed every bit of it for my upcoming college education at MIT. But the glitz and the glamour and the excuse to parade around in a crown like the Cinderella dress-up days of childhood was definitely a plus—in fact, it was frankly a huge ego-trip. After years of being recognized only by my academic achievements, other people—the pageant judges, the guests at the hotel, and my parents—saw me as the package of American success, beauty and brains packed in the frame of a petite teenage girl.

After two days of competition, I was crowned Tennessee's Homecoming Queen with a guaranteed scholarship—the amount of which depended on my ranking at the national pageant in California. It was a childhood dream realized. I was a queen with a 3 pound crown decked in cubic zirconium. It was beautiful—I was beautiful. The judges told me so.

Physical beauty is often perceived as a door, an opportunity for something more exciting in life. It is a standard to live up to, something to strive for, to fantasize about. It is an obsession that besets American culture, consuming not only insecure pre-adolescent girls, but also successful, intelligent adult women. Popular culture has consistently broadcast that with beauty comes attention, sex appeal, and most prominently, success, perhaps none more so than the American beauty pageant.

The first beauty pageant took place in 1921 on the board walks of Atlantic City, New Jersey as a way to keep tourism profits high after Labor Day as broadcast by PBS's *Miss America: The American Experience*. This festival that featured the most scantily-clad women at the time was a promotional gimmick from the minds of desperate businessmen. Leonard Horn, former CEO of the Miss America Organization, viewed the 1921 Atlantic City gimmick as the "marriage between advertising and the beauty of the female form." It was the first instance of mass capitalization on the country's obsession with beauty. For the Miss America contestants, it was an opportunity to escape the typical labor options available for women. It was a chance to go to Hollywood, to cheat the socioeconomic ladder and cash in on their looks. After all, Miss America of 1926 reportedly made over \$100,000 in appearance fees, more than Calvin Coolidge, the President of the United States of America.

It is Miss America. It is not Miss Pretty Face or, in the words of Julia Valrez in PBS's *Miss America: The American Experience*, "Miss Peach Blossoms." This is the woman who represents a nation, like the President of the United States, only in female form. It is the way to be *the woman* of one of the most powerful nations on earth.

The beauty pageant is about the American dream for many young women. While little boys dreamed of becoming the president, their female counterparts dreamed of one day wearing the Miss America crown. It is a dream of being beautiful, being loved and admired, being successful. Struggling to achieve that delicate balance of female perfection is essentially the summary of the American women's experience of the past century. In PBS's *Miss America: The American Experience*, an archival newsreel once referred to the list of contestants for a Miss America Pageant as, "this year's crop" of the "most beauteous bevy of breathtaking beauties in decades." Were those early contestants literally crops? Objects to be drooled over, to be commercialized for profit? In the words of the culture critic, Tricia Rose, "The pageant is this

example where you can be sort of nationalistic and patriotic and pro-American and get to see some ‘T and A’ all in the same event.”

Year after year, beauty pageants set out to pull off a string of perpetual contradictions. They claim to provide ambitious women with real career and education opportunities while objectifying them. They promote traditional feminine roles, such as the ideal homemaker and bountiful mother and wife, while superficially supporting women’s rights and independence. They idolize modesty and purity, while glamorizing female sexuality. The single pleasure of competing in these beauty contests is the feeling of self-satisfaction, of empowerment gained by successfully balancing this ideal—of portraying this valorized idea of femininity.

This early spectacle of beauty pageants slowly evolved over the next decades to become a national tradition devoted to defining the appearance, the values, and the aspirations of the representative ideal American woman. But has this supposed queen of the nation actually been representative of the American woman? According to PBS’s *Miss America: The American Experience*, up until the mid-1940s, beauty pageant title holders could have fit the same cookie-cutter mold—petite, beautiful, white, and Christian. Only in the 1945 Miss America pageant did a young Jewish woman take the title only to spend most of her reign speaking for the Jewish Anti-Defamation League instead of endorsing sponsor products and making public appearances. Pageant’s Executive Secretary at the time, Lenora Slaughter, even suggested a name change from Myerson to something “less Jewish” as a cover for her Jewish identity. The same year the Allies won World War II, pageant sponsors and supporters were not ready for a Jew to be the ideal woman and neither was America.

On September 7, 1968, Judi Ford was crowned Miss America to the background of a feminist protest on the boardwalk of Atlantic City that gained national media attention as reported by PBS’s *Miss America: The American Experience*. Immediately following the announcement of the new Miss America, the first Miss Black America Contest was held within miles in protest of the “white” Miss America pageant. In response, Pepsi Cola withdrew an 11-year sponsorship, siding with feminists and other protestors alike, claiming that the pageant was far from encompassing the actual “American woman.”

Perhaps the feminist protestors of the late 1960s were a little overzealous—crowning a goat and throwing cosmetics and other “instruments of female torture,” such as bras, girdles, and pots and pans into a “Freedom Trash Can,” as reported by Nell

Greenfieldboyce in a National Public Radio broadcast, but they had a point. For years, the Miss America pageant contract had a strict list of contestant guidelines. According to PBS's *Miss America: The American Experience*, the 1948 pageant contract explicitly stated that the "contestant must be in good health and of the *white race*." It is not surprising that a staple of American culture represents the attitudes of the nation. Various immigration acts starting from the late 1800s set a national quota system for limiting immigration. Segregation or "Jim Crow" laws were the standard in the South until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The second of the "Ten Points" of protest in the "*No More Miss America!*" brochure for 1968 Miss America Pageant was "Racism with Roses." At the time, there had not been one African-American finalist or a Puerto Rican, Alaskan, Hawaiian, or a true Miss America—a Native American. The beauty pageant system manages racial and cultural diversity by denying its existence. Race was finally introduced in the Miss America Pageant when Miss Alabama Lencola Sullivan became the first African American to make the top five finalists. According to Maxine Craig's review of Sarah Banet-Weiser's *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity*, black contestants like Sullivan and the first African-American Miss America, Vanessa Williams, felt it was necessary to "work overtime" to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes and the "social meanings of blackness" that years of oppression and racism have nurtured. Although many, including African-American Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, praised the nation for selecting a woman of color, according to PBS's *Miss America: The American Experience*, other members of the African American community assailed the new Miss America for not being "black enough." For the first time, Miss America received death threats and required bodyguards outside her hotel door. Conformity was still the secret to the crown.

Beyond the narrow racial oppression of the pageant system, there lies a bigger cultural issue. The number one grievance of the 1968 Miss America feminist protestors in the "*No More Miss America!*" brochure was "The Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol." While beauty contestants are not quite the "nervous animals" of the "4-H Club country fair," they do parade around a stage in front of an audience to be judged on the base of their physical appearance and abilities to perform talents or tricks. Both contestants and the general female population are conditioned to take these ridiculous beauty standards seriously, all in the name of judge approval.

Part of the fascination with beauty pageants is that there is an overall winner who is more beautiful, better than all the rest.

These rules, guidelines, and the point-tallying system define and quantify beauty and success. Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, as middle-school guidance counselors have advocated for years. There now stands a unified group of beholders who have the answer to what and who is beautiful. So, what is beautiful? As author Tricia Rose claims in PBS's *Miss America: The American Experience*, "It's not unlike high fashion supermodels in that the bodies that work are the bodies that are least like what women look like." The bodies of these beautiful pageant queens are unreal. There are no stretch marks or hair or any lines. But then who actually looks like that? Certainly not the average American woman. Then, who do the beauty queens represent? Comedian Margaret Cho sees it as, "Oh, then you think maybe they're the women, and I'm not the woman." If Miss America is not the representative American woman, then who is actually the American female ideal? The fantasy beauty queen or the real person? Perhaps, everyone is an imposter of sorts trying to live up to this anti-feminist ideal of beauty, but everyone just ends up feeling like a fraud.

In shock, I sat in the back of the audience in my shiny green formal wear, my long false lashes rhythmically beating my lower eyelid as I watched the title of America's Homecoming Queen being slipped onto a stunning six-foot-tall amateur model. I had made it to the finals in California as Miss Tennessee, but I felt like Benedict Arnold. I got caught up in the appeal of a title and let my ego-trip run out of control. I betrayed myself. I let three judges at a state scholarship pageant define my view of beauty and success. Now, I was judged no longer competitive. But with any contest, there is one winner, and the rest are losers. In a system that claims to promote beauty, intelligence, and the whole package, there is the contracting message of "you lose" to 49 of the 50 contestants.

The truth is I want to be beautiful, but more importantly, I want others to judge me as beautiful. As author Julia Alvarez said in PBS's *Miss America: The American Experience*, "There's a yearning in the human spirit, an aspiring for beauty. And the successful man still has a beautiful woman on his arm. That's the prize." Popular media has conditioned the American population to idolize and treasure the visually pleasing. With every ridiculously priced exotic car comes a classy babe straight from a James Bond movie. On the deck of any lavish yacht lie sunbathing beauties. On the arm of every successful man is a beautiful woman. That is what mass media and popular American culture defines as success. It is

rooted in the American power structure. Beauty is the “currency” of the nation.

As much as I wanted to cast the Hooters girl, Jessica, off as the “bimbo” she claimed others sometimes viewed her as, I could not. Here was a woman paying her own way through college as a broadcast journalism major. She had her own dream of becoming a model and eventually hosting her own travel show. Pageants, such as the America’s Homecoming Queen Scholarship Pageant and even the International Hooter’s Swimsuit Pageant, are more than simply ego-trips. They are a path to achieve her dream, to get the public exposure that could help launch her career after college. When I saw her “publicity” in the *Hooters Magazine* spread and photo shoots on the Fox Sports website, I was ready—no, I was *eager*—to dismiss her as nothing more than a beautiful face who got whatever she wanted with the twinkle of her eye. But she was more than that. Everyone is more than that.

Each year tens of thousands of women enter beauty and scholarship pageants in the hopes of jumpstarting their dream career, financing their college education, even shedding light on a previously ignored issue—of representing a nation of powerful women. Beauty pageants claim to provide women with a stepping stone to their life dream. But why do *women* need this stepping stone?

I realized it wasn’t Jessica I was eager to dismiss, who repulsed me—it was the culture that nurtured this institution. Who would not take advantage of their assets to get ahead, whether it is a natural flair for science or a pretty face? Given the opportunity and the body, I would definitely parade around in a bikini and heels if it meant my college and graduate education were paid for. The beauty pageant has sustained itself for nearly a century because American popular culture demands it. Contestants like Jessica and I merely stepped up to fill that demand in exchange for money, publicity, and even a short confidence boost. But these rewards, this sense of empowerment, do not come entirely unattached.

From the first pageant on the Atlantic City boardwalks, women traded on their bodies and pretty faces. Miss America is always beautiful *and* intelligent but never without the beautiful. Although modern pageants have expanded to include scholarship money and the promotion of a social issue, women are still trading on their physical appearance. Then, I wonder, is Miss America an upscale version of the female escort? Both are rewarded for their bodies and talents—only American culture has deemed it

acceptable for beauty contestants to make that trade, not prostitutes. Miss America is a chic pin-up who not only looks good, but who can also speak and perform tricks.

As Jessica learned, beauty is not so simple. Trading on her assets comes at a cost. With exposure, especially in a men's magazine, comes unwanted attention. The purely sexualized nature of her modeling contracts in Hooters merchandise, ads, calendar, and magazine portrays her as a tantalizing, scandalous beauty, a fantasy for many men. Although the fame is nice, Jessica claims it has caused significant tension in her personal relationships with men and in how others view her as a person. But she says that it is all in the name of her future.

Is it really about sacrificing to get ahead? Sacrifice hardly comes to mind as bearing through lingerie photo shoots, bikini pageants, and the social after-effects. The demand for skin and beauty has been masked as a unique "opportunity" for women to achieve their dreams and promote the social issue they are passionate about. Why should this opportunity for higher education and service work be dangled in front of women in the name of a skin show, in which judges determine a woman's worth on physical appearance? The easy answer is that it shouldn't. According to the PBS's *Miss America: The American Experience*, bad press and women's clubs protests shut the pageant down between 1929 and 1932 at the onset of the Great Depression, long before the 1968 feminist protest that received national attention. But Atlantic City sponsors revived the pageant soon after. Why? Because the public demanded it.

Maybe Helen of Troy was not so bad after all. She fulfilled, perhaps unwillingly, the public and private demands for beauty in her time. It was not her fault the population was obsessed with her beauty or even that nations decided to go to war over it. It was just the cultural scene.

Perhaps Helen was right. Sometimes, beauty is a curse.

* Note: Names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the parties' privacy.

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