

Ever Since I Lay Eye on You:
The Reality of Internal Beauty versus External Appearances

First impressions are everything and the opinion of one's external appearance coincides with such judgments. Whether good or bad, the nature of another person is instantly based upon how they are seen by the world. Inherently humans associate attractiveness with equally beautiful internal characteristics. However, more often than not these two sides constantly battle with each other for supremacy. The dichotomy of internal and external beauty remains prevalent throughout life and literature. Various stories are centered on this notion of appearance versus reality. A novel in which these themes are highlighted is Sheri Holman's fictional representation of an English town during the outbreak of cholera entitled, *The Dress Lodger*. Several of Holman's characters think oppositely to how others perceive them. A key representation of the falsehood of appearance and the reality of inner morals is embodied in the 'monstrous' Eye. The woman's frightening disfigurement deters others from seeking her kind heart. Although the truth of inner-beauty is often overshadowed by a negative outward appearance one's sincere compassion ultimately prevails as the most valuable attribute.

It is no secret that beauty is highly prized. Current society idolizes beautiful celebrities and becomes shocked upon hearing about any negative traits these people embody. Recently, the handsome, young and talented Chris Brown showed the world his violent tendencies and disrespect for women by beating his girlfriend and fellow singer, Rihanna. His true values were exposed in this monstrous fashion proving his external attractiveness to be a façade and society judged him accordingly. Holman writes her characters as judgmental as real people are and anticipates for her readers to follow suit. Although beauty stretches across boundaries, not everyone is blessed with such traits. In *The Dress Lodger*, Holman focuses on inner beauty as the essential trait across society. Playing upon this theme, she illustrates the goodness hidden beneath frightening exteriors. As Eye is introduced her initial description is less than flattering:

The old woman walks with her head down as though scenting prey...rain has plastered her gray hair to her cheeks...she walks with a bent head studying her own shoes...she wears a loose-fitted brown wool dress with a dirty handkerchief tied over the bosom and her hair pulled back in that old-fashioned no-style style. Nothing about her, from her slightly hunched back to her hairy ape arms, would distinguish her from any other old woman...until you looked into her slack-skinned turnip-colored face...You would see the shadow has an Eye. Not eyes, mind you, but an Eye: a single gray carbuncle. (Holman 10).

The intensely visual passage above forces the reader to develop an impression of the woman concluding her to be untrustworthy, weird and malevolent solely due to the description of her external appearance. Numerous reasons as to Eye's problems float around the town as rumors, Holman writes, "People have told a hundred different stories about how the shadow lost her other eye," (10). Gossip swirls regarding Eye as some foul object to discuss rather than a respectable human being. She is considered to be nothing more than a common rat, who as it is stated, "can detect the slightest disturbance," (Holman 10) further relating her to the low-life, high-sensed animal.

Shortly after her introduction as a gossip topic Holman writes, “she hasn’t spoken in so long, most people suppose she doesn’t know how,” (11) proving that no one has bothered to personally inquire further into the old woman’s personality. Without any interaction to back up what hearsay suggests, people can only surmise that Eye’s intentions are cruel because of her ‘evil’ appearance. Similarly, in David Lynch’s 1980 The Elephant Man, the main character John Merrick struggles with people shying away due to his appearance and refusing to explore into his truly kindhearted nature. Placed in a freak show, he emotionally suffers from nasty remarks and the uncaring public only interested in his disfigured form. Eye would be able to empathize, often parting crowds and driving people away as they gawk at her unusual figure. Assumption regarding these two characters stereotypes them as ‘evil’ completely ignoring their personal values.

Not only does the reader judge Eye but so does the novel’s heroine Gustine. She is constantly followed by Eye and as such has made harsh distinctions of her own as to who Eye is. Since becoming a lodger they have not exchange words, thus Gustine’s opinion is formulated by no more than Eye’s appearance. Holman describes Eye as stalking with, “an expression so suspicious and malevolent,” (84) that it is no surprise Gustine holds a negative opinion of Eye. Anyone followed by a strange and scary figure would find themselves fearful of said person. Constantly together, Eye is Gustine’s shadow that, “does not run after her, for shadows need never run; they are, by their very nature, inseparably, inexorably pulled along in the wake of their objects,” (Holman 8). This lonesome creature causes great stress and concern since Gustine “need never run” for the pair are “inseparable”. Stripped of her freedom and branded by her dress as a whore, Gustine is also not spared society’s external judgments.

Fearing for the future, Gustine passes along her concern about Eye, when speaking to her child Gustine states, “‘And you stayed far, far away from the Evil Eye, did you not, good baby?’ coos Gustine, herself casting a cold look at the old woman,” (Holman 79). Afraid of what the Eye might do, Gustine sneers silently warning the woman to stay away. Without being able to express herself verbally, Gustine must resort to using her outward appearance as a way of communication. The “cold look” informs Eye Gustine will not give up easily. The reader learns this hatred first began during the young heroine’s pregnancy, “Gustine would catch [Eye] watching her belly like a cat at a mouse hole waiting to pounce,” (Holman 142) which explains the protectiveness Gustine exhibits over her fragile baby. Evidently proof of Eye’s wickedness, Gustine blames her for the boy’s deformation saying:

It was clear to her now what the old woman had been trying to accomplish with her constant staring; it was clear to her now that the Eye had intended to draw out from her baby’s body its very heart and leave the poor thing dead inside her...She kept her baby far away from the evil Eye so that she might not be able to finish what she had started. (Holman 143).

Logic would suggest these events were mere coincidence, but Gustine feels she has no reason to confront Eye or give her a second chance to prove she is not a monster. The sickening behavior of the one-eyed creature has convinced her enough of her inner evil that she is, “a machine built solely to destroy her child,” (Holman 224). Without any indication of her inner beauty,

undoubtedly, it will take something drastic for Gustine to reconsider.

Much like John Merrick from The Elephant Man, Eye does not personally feel as each 'freak' is treated by the public. Both people want the approval of others and most of all to be normal. Unfortunately, years have gone by since Eye felt these desires. Her values and morals have been changed; grown cynical she judges others as much as they judge her, "Eye scowls up from her sewing at the scatterbrain in the doorway. That dreamy little rat...knows nothing about concentration. Eye looks sharp, for she understands the dangers of this quiet time of day," (Holman 201). Unbeknownst to anyone but Eye, she carefully watches Gustine in order to keep her safe since the girl "knows nothing about concentration". The naïve lodger allows herself to wander into danger, and Eye wonders, "What will it take to teach that careless rat?" (Holman 201). Since people dehumanize her, Eye has subjected the inhabitants of the world to be as low as rats. Ironically, others treated her in this very manner as well. In The Elephant Man, Merrick comparably feels this low when cornered like a rat and famously shouts, "I am not an animal, I am a human being! I am a man!" Those who are treated poorly can only impart a similar reaction to others lacking the compassion they have been exempt from. Within *The Dress Lodger*, Eye often refers to people as 'rats' defining them by their inexcusable actions and poor demeanor. Although most references to humans and animals as similarly functioning creatures come from Eye, it is not the only place. Furthering the concept of animals and humans being transposable, Holman includes two beings of differing species that confuse many readers. Mike and Pink. Although the former seems to indicate humanity, Mike is actually a ferret. Pink on the other hand is a young girl. Displaying their interchangeability, Holman writes:

Mike's got a frog. It's beneath his talents...Now Pink's got a frog. What did he do to deserve this? His six-year-old daughter skittering about the house on all fours, biting after filthy creatures. She looks up at him with her glittering black, pink-rimmed eyes, reptilian-scaly from years of infection, her pink-tipped nose twitching over the flailing frog in her mouth. It's no occupation for a champion ferret, let alone a little girl. (53).

Acting like an animal "skittering...on all fours" Pink exemplifies how people can change their demeanor even literally to reflect primitive creatures. The speaker's judgment about how his ferret should not be stooping to the level of chasing "filthy creatures" also shows that animals' stature can be raised up. This perception and understanding of animals and humans changing places translates into how Eye develops.

During the middle section of Holman's story Eye transforms from a bitter woman to openly expressing her concern for Gustine. Since Eye is knowledgeable of her own troubled past she plans to educate the girl so that she may escape Eye's terrible fate. However twisted, her plan had always been to dispatch of the baby "rat". Without its comfort, Gustine would come to know the world as the empty, judging place Eye grew up in. Holman lets the reader into Eye's mind as her plan backfires:

This is a baby, thinks she. There is no fur. No sharp teeth and naked tail. Eye has never held a baby. It is soft...Since the day of the accident, through the remainder of her whole long life, Eye has never been touched without anger or fear...as she grew more silent and further into herself, anyone who accidentally brushed against her pulled back in horror...But here is a baby,

patting her cheek, twining his fingers in her hair as if to pull her close and whisper a secret. Eye presses the child to her heart. Blue rat's baby loves her. (209-10).

Unable to differentiate between types of horrible people, Eye is surprised to discover the "rat" is "a baby". Eye's internal struggle with being socially ostracized is quelled when the baby displays affection for her. It has no regard for her shocking appearance and touches her comfortingly "without anger or fear". Gustine believes Eye to be horrid and malicious but in reality, Eye finally feels happy because another human has demonstrated fondness for her. When Gustine shouts and aggressively demands for her child, Eye thinks to herself, "Don't take it away. Don't take the heart baby. Eye love it," (Holman 210). Not only does she address the child with human denotation, but this admission resurrects Eye's compassion for others. Likewise, Merrick in The Elephant Man also discovered the deep seeded love people possess when a play is dedicated to him. Each disfigured human discards their former judgments in order to readopt their true altruistic values. As Eye finds, those around her are not horrible "rats", but caring and worth while people.

As the novel turns to its resolution, Gustine finally understands the woman who stalks her every move. For so long she had been obsessed with escaping the "evil" Eye. Her life was made a living hell constrained by an ever-watchful creature. But as it turns out, they are no different. Throughout the story she believed Eye to be a menace, someone to be feared. It only becomes clear she was wrong after her baby has passed away:

Gustine feels no pleasure on the Eye's side, no triumph or even grim satisfaction. She looks at the old woman and sees only that: an old woman. A sad, defeated, maimed old woman. Since the death of her baby, they have become twin ghosts haunting the streets...The girl and her shadow. (Holman 232).

Upon realizing their mutual affection for each other, Eye protectively directs Gustine away from danger and Gustine no longer fears Eye. They are both only human. Each has faults which are better accepted as a source for understanding rather than viewed as a weakness. Eye discovers the inner values she had long ignored: it is better to live together happily than alone and bitter.

Previously Eye's purpose was to shadow Gustine, to constrain her freedom. After realizing their sameness, she relaxes her hold over Gustine out of a new-found respect. Eye does not follow the girl as closely and as a result, "the Eye's absence only makes Gustine feel her more," (Holman 240). Slowly becoming "twin ghosts" Gustine cannot seemingly function without her shadow. Ironically Gustine formerly felt the Eye's presence as a burden and yet now craves the security. The pair unites against a common enemy and Gustine wonders:

Why help her now, when the Eye's whole life has been set in opposition to hers? But then, as if sleep has been wiped from her eyes and she is suddenly for the first time in two years, fully awake, the dress lodger sees and understands.

"You loved him, too? Didn't you?" Gustine asks. "You loved my child." And in acknowledgement, the shadow, of her own free will, disengages forever, turns and walks away. (Holman 268).

Out of respect for their mutual love, Eye refuses to follow Gustine any more, leaving the girl alone to live her life free of her shadow. Eye realizes that all along she and Gustine were the same, each craving to be understood. Holman has Eye think, “to guard something too well might be as bad as not guarding it well enough...she was not born to be either a prisoner or someone else’s prison. She had failed the child, but need not fail the mother,” (278). Eye is determined to close out their relationship on a better note than had sustained the majority of their interactions. Despite having been unable to protect the baby, Eye relinquishes the mother of the burden Eye once was. Over her fear of Eye and recognizing the woman as a caring human, she, “strokes the old woman’s matted hair...How did he do it? Gustine wonders...recall to life an organ so long still no one could remember the last time it stirred,” (Holman 282). Impressed with her child’s unconditional ability to love, Gustine has unknowingly embodied this attribute and looked past the woman’s exterior to see the kindness within.

Society seemingly values beauty as the most important trait a person could possess. The type of beauty seen externally generally ranks above the deeper internal beauty which is time and again glazed over. Considered a monster by society, Eye is solely known because of her disfigured form rather than the personality beneath. Her frightening outward appearance often overrules anyone from delving deeper to expose the reality of her inner benevolence. The old woman finds the heart of people when she and Gustine discover their mutual love of Gustine’s baby exposing their true selves to each other. Gustine’s preconceived notions about Eye derive from her haggard appearance since the pair initially do not speak. Meanwhile, Eye actually believes in values that are opposite to the way others perceive her and contradict her external looks. Despite being the most visually ugly character presented in Sheri Holman’s novel, *The Dress Lodger*, Eye eventually becomes the most respected by the reader. Stepping out of her way to help Gustine. She may have failed the baby, but she saved the mother from a life of pessimism that Eye herself suffered through. By overcoming the typecast her appearance suggests, Eye successfully proves that inner beauty is the most valuable of all.

Works Cited

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Lynch, David. The Elephant Man. Brooksfilm, 1980.