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# Spring 2014 Second Prize Essay

## BEAUTY VS. INTELLECT: A WOMAN'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

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Many girls consider college a time of new beginnings and sometimes, major transformations. Due to dichotomist thinking, women believe that they must choose either beauty or intellect because it seems as though it is impossible to have both. Some will choose to be the beauty on campus that every guy wants to date and every girl wants to be. Others will decide to delve into their studies, striving for excellence in their academics. For the girls who do not know which path to follow, this decision can be difficult. These girls, like most women in contemporary society, find value in both qualities and do not see one ranking above the other. Similar to this group of women, Flora Poste and Elfine Starkadder in *Cold Comfort Farm* and Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* choose to follow the path of both intellect and beauty. *Cold Comfort Farm* and *Legally Blonde* present female characters who actively pursue both beauty and intellect to gain confidence, power and love. Even though society influences and motivates women to believe problematic dichotomist thinking, these women prove throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into present day that it is possible to possess both qualities.

While these texts provide examples of women who reject the dichotomy, society attempts to make women believe they must choose either beauty or intellect because of many influences, one being a male's opinion. Although the dichotomy began long before this time, in Stella Gibbons' era, D. H. Lawrence was a driving force behind this mindset. According to Faye Hammill, "... he [Lawrence] attempted to elevate sexuality over intellectual activity" (843). Lawrence was an author who believed that women had no place in the intellectual world and only served as sexual objects. As time progressed, many men began to follow his beliefs. Men in this time period devalued women's intelligence and viewed them as being incapable of holding such a power. According to Hammill, Lawrence believed that "chaos ...would ensue if women were given increased power" (843). He and his supporters mocked the idea of ambitious, powerful women. Because of this degradation, women, too, began to believe that they were incapable of intellectual behavior and power, and therefore pursued a life of solely beauty and sexuality.

*Cold Comfort Farm* provides many examples of men who force the beauty-over-intelligence mindset upon women. Gibbons illustrates D. H. Lawrence's beliefs through the character of Mr. Mybug, who is incredibly sexist. His beliefs become exceptionally apparent to the reader in his remark to Flora that "[women's] bodies matter more than [intellect]" (Gibbons 101). Mr. Mybug belittles women by suggesting that they are incapable of intelligence, mirroring a belief commonly held in his society regarding women. He states that "a woman's success could only be estimated by the success of her sexual life" (Gibbons 122). Again, this remark suggests that women cannot be successful in life by using their minds, and therefore must use their bodies to progress. Mr. Mybug's character speaks for all men in society that believe that women are objects of sex and do not hold a position in the intellectual world, suppressing women from their true potential.

Similarly, *Legally Blonde* includes male characters who discourage Elle from pursuing her intellect because of her overwhelming beauty and sexuality. During the application process, her father represses her dream by telling her that "law school is for people who are boring and ugly and serious and ...[you] are none of those things" (*Legally Blonde*). Her father groups these characteristics together to insinuate

that people who are bright must automatically be ugly as well. He thinks that because Elle is beautiful, she is incapable of being intelligent. Along with her father, her professor feeds into this mindset in an encounter with Elle in his office. While discussing her future career plans, he tries to make a pass at Elle, implying that women must use their sexuality in order to be successful in life as opposed to their mind (*Legally Blonde*). His actions parallel Mr. Mybug's beliefs in *Cold Comfort Farm*. In order to be successful, women must be highly sexual. These characters provide a glimpse of men in society imposing their beliefs into the lives of women.

Although some women adapt to the beauty-over-intellect mindset through the duration of their lives because of male influence, many others will become cultured very early in life to this mindset through societal influences, such as fairytales. Fairytales teach young girls that in order to be successful in life, they must possess three character traits – beauty, delicateness, and submissiveness, none of which have anything to do with their mind (Lieberman 385). However, these stories do have a significant amount to say about the intellect. According to Marcia R. Lieberman, "... those women [in fairytales] who are either partially or thoroughly evil are generally shown as active, ambitious, strong-willed, and most often ugly" (392). Women who possess intellect are powerful and active because of the use of their minds. Fairytales portray women who use even a fraction of their mind as wicked and undesirable to everyone around them. These fairytales link together character traits that are irrelevant and unrelated, such as intelligent and ugly, but they encourage girls to believe as they grow older that they are connected (Lieberman 385). This connection influences girls from a young age to strive to be beautiful, and refrain from any and all intellectual behavior if they want to be desirable in life because according to fairytales, the two cannot mix.

The main character in *Cold Comfort Farm*, Flora Poste, is portrayed as a very beautiful woman through her descriptions and interactions with other characters. Flora demonstrates how beauty provides confidence and power, specifically power to influence other women despite society's expectations. In Flora, Gibbons creates a very desirable character, a tall woman with dark golden hair who is "properly dressed" (Hammill 846). Through this description the reader gains a deep sense of Flora's beauty and knowledge in fashion. Flora uses this knowledge to advise and teach other characters to accentuate their own beauty. During her first meeting with her cousin Elfine, Flora advises her to wear shades of blue because this clothing will look best with her features (Gibbons 61). Her descriptions to Elfine of different aspects of clothing, such as the cut and simplicity of the material, enhance her credibility in fashion. Flora does not take the time to get to know Elfine or anything about her personality, rather, she immediately focuses on her appearance and how to bring out her beauty. Flora's infatuation with beauty and fashion suggests that society focuses solely on women's beauty as well.

As time progresses, the reader learns that others appreciate Flora for her beauty too, as she attracts many men for her looks. During her encounters with one such man, Mr. Mybug, he must restrain himself from his strong urge to seduce Flora. Her beauty is so strong that at times even he is unable to control himself, and others must detain him, such as the guards at the Hawk-Monitor ball (Gibbons 159). This behavior suggests that beauty is extremely sought-after in society, showing that possessing beauty is essential for women's empowerment. Gibbons creates an image that Flora's beauty is powerfully irresistible. Flora exposes her beauty in her interactions with other characters, and their responses to her beauty provide her with confidence.

While Flora seems to be very in-touch with her beauty and sexuality, her interactions with others bring forth her discrete but very present intellect, providing her with an alternate form of power. Flora chooses to live at Cold Comfort Farm in order to gain material to write about in her future novel. Flora shows her intellect through her interactions with the other residents on the farm. In an attempt to

encourage him to leave the farm, Flora tries to convince her uncle Amos to travel the country to preach his passion for God's word (Gibbons 91). Because Amos sees this action as selfish and "puffing himself up," Flora strategically twists his logic in order to bring about her desired outcome: "... isn't that rather putting your own miserable soul before the glory of the Lord?" (Gibbons 91). Flora uses her intelligence to make Amos think that his lack of spreading God's word is selfish, which ultimately persuades him to travel at the end of the novel. Because society expects women to suppress their intellect, Flora must pretend that she is only beautiful and slyly persuade Amos. While Amos attempts to reject Flora's recommendation, she cunningly retaliates to show her intellect and position of power.

**Ultimately, women have the final decision as to which traits they will choose to pursue, whether it be beauty, intellect, or a combination of both. However, in a society where a life of both characteristics is not only possible but encouraged, it can become a pressured decision.**

Along with Amos, Flora's intellect makes a large impact on others at the farm. While visiting the hired girl, Meriam, Flora discusses Meriam's annual pregnancies. Meriam's sexual urges supersede her self-control, leaving her powerless to resist her sexuality with no escape. Flora instructs Meriam that "nothing will happen to [her], if only [she] uses [her] intelligence and sees that it doesn't" (Gibbons 69). Contrary to the way Meriam sees her problem, Flora assures her that her mind can control her body. Flora knows that women are able to use their minds to make decisions, which include taking precautions against pregnancy. Flora acknowledges that women have sexual needs; however, she insists that women have the capability to use their intellect to control them. She asserts that intellect is equally as strong, if not stronger, than sexuality. In a society that encourages female stereotypes, such as primarily following beauty and sexuality, Flora secretly uses her intellect to establish control and influence over residents on the farm. She balances both beauty and intellect and shows that it is possible to reject this dichotomy.

Another character in *Cold Comfort Farm*, Elfine, similarly demonstrates how women can gain beauty without forfeiting intellect. Flora converts Elfine into a beautiful girl acceptable to be married to a county man such as Richard Hawk-Monitor. Her transformation, which includes a new dress, haircut, and accessories, proves to be effective as she catches the eye of every guest upon her arrival at the ball. She is the quintessence of beauty. Gibbons devotes a large amount of time emphasizing the importance of Elfine's arrival, including the clichéd staircase entrance with every eye turning towards her (Gibbons 156), which again suggests how focused society is with women's beauty. Unraveling Elfine's character further, the reader discovers her secret passion of reading and writing poetry. According to Flora, in order for Elfine to win Dick's love, she must abandon this intellectual behavior. Flora explains to Elfine that "most young men are alarmed on hearing that a young woman writes poetry... such an admission is almost fatal" (Gibbons 136). Culture in the 1930s viewed a woman who was intelligent not as desirable, but the opposite. Flora argues that men view women who have an interest in intellectual topics, such as poetry, as unappealing and intimidating, and therefore unattractive. Despite her transformation into a beautiful woman, Elfine refuses to detach herself from the poetic persona which defines her. While defending her intellect against Flora's wishes, she says "I shall write [poetry] secretly, and publish it when I am fifty" (Gibbons 136). While her society's standards insist that a woman's intellect is unattractive, Elfine is rebellious and chooses to hold onto this piece of her identity while still achieving beauty. Along with achieving both qualities, Elfine also receives a proposal of love from Richard Hawk-Monitor. Her

transformation not only proves that it is possible for a woman to possess both of these attributes and receive love, but that in gaining one, it is not necessary to lose the other.

While *Cold Comfort Farm* disproves the dichotomy, the film *Legally Blonde* reverses the dichotomy to establish a new similarly flawed value system where intellect is treasured more than beauty. Elle Woods is a woman who's overarching beauty and confidence initially defines her to her peers. The film introduces Elle to the audience solely with the image of beauty products on her dresser before showing her beauty routine: brushing her hair, painting her nails, and shaving her legs, etc. (*Legally Blonde*). Elle's introduction reinforces the fact that her beauty is her defining characteristic. This presentation also causes the audience to believe that a woman's beauty regime consumes her. Elle's boyfriend, Warner, he breaks up with Elle because "...[she] is too Marilyn" (*Legally Blonde*). This comment again emphasizes Elle's beauty and suggests society's association of women who focus solely on their beauty with Marilyn Monroe, a sex symbol in society, not known for her intellect. Following the break up with Warner, Elle chooses to walk home (*Legally Blonde*). After begging her multiple times to allow him to drive her home, Warner points out, knowing how important fashion is to her, that she will ruin her shoes by walking home (*Legally Blonde*). This comment demonstrates the cultural perception that women care primarily about their beauty, often putting fashion before all else, including their dignity. Elle's overwhelming beauty, and the confidence that comes with it, demonstrates how a woman's beauty can be beneficial yet can result in negative consequences with her peers.

As *Legally Blonde* progresses, Elle uncovers her hidden intelligence, as well as proves that beauty and intuition can complement each other. Elle's break-up fuels her pursuit of a degree at Harvard Law School in order to win back Warner's love and prove her intelligence. Following her first couple of successful months at Harvard, one of her professors takes on a murder case and chooses the top four interns, including Elle, to assist him (*Legally Blonde*). She combines her knowledge of beauty and intellect to bring forth a confession from a witness on the stand. The witness' alibi is that she did not hear the gunshot because she was taking a shower after getting a perm on the day of the murder (*Legally Blonde*). However, Elle uses her knowledge about beauty to prove that this alibi is not plausible. She explains that getting hair wet after a perm will deactivate the chemicals; Elle knows that this woman did not shower because her perm is still intact (*Legally Blonde*). Elle's knowledge of both fashion and law single-handedly wins the case and uncovers the real killer. Elle demonstrates not only that women are capable of possessing both beauty and intelligence, but also that the two characteristics can enhance each other.

While striving to be desirable and please society, women feel a need to impress their peers, which motivates their pursuit of beauty and/or intellect. However, women followed different avenues over the past century to obtain their desired outcome. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most women followed the path that Flora follows to please one's peers through beauty. Society, though primarily males, expected women to be beautiful and lack intelligence. During Elfine's transformation, Flora advises her that "she must learn to laugh when a book or string quartet is mentioned, but to confess that she was not brainy" (Gibbons 130). Like most women in this time period, Elfine must be conversant and desirable to those around her, but she must suppress her intellect in order to make a good impression. She must be beautiful, but hide her knowledge.

However as time progresses, this one dimensional woman of beauty is proving to no longer be sufficient, as shown in Elle's story. According to Nigella Lawson, "... it's not enough to be good at one thing, you have to excel in all spheres" (27). Society is searching for women not only to be beautiful, but also to have the intelligence to support it. Now, more than ever, society pressures women to have both of these characteristics in order to be impressionable. For example, in the 2003 Miss America Pageant, two of the finalists were Harvard Law Graduates (Bowler). Both of these programs accept only the elite;

Harvard wants only the brightest students, and the Miss America Pageant wants only the most beautiful women on stage. Because these two women conquered both spheres, they proved to society that women are able to have it all (Bowler). Beauty alone could not have made the impression on society that these two women have made, proving that a combination of beauty and intellect is the strongest characteristic a woman can possess.

Ultimately, women have the final decision as to which traits they will choose to pursue, whether it be beauty, intellect, or a combination of both. However, in a society where a life of both characteristics is not only possible but encouraged, it can become a pressured decision. Despite this pressure, the knowledge that different options are available can provide women with relief. Flora Poste, Elfine Starkadder, and Elle Woods provide examples of strong female characters who master both beauty and intellect, despite dominant male perspectives and societal influences. Their lives stand as models for women today, proving that regardless of what society expects, it is possible to be a beautiful intellectual and truly have it all.

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