

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE: ZOYA'S INQUIRY-BASED RESEARCH ESSAY

What in your opinion makes a woman's smile beautiful?

- A) Shiny white teeth
- B) A huge plate in her lip
- C) Shark-like teeth
- D) Crooked teeth

The world as a whole does not live by the same standards or ideals. One of the most clashing and contrary aspects of culture is the way we see beauty, how we define it, and for what purpose certain beauty standards are set. Most living in American culture will most likely side with answer A as portraying typical beauty, but depending on where you go in the world, every one of these aspects is seen as beautiful. Obviously, these are all extremely diverse and different characteristics, but somehow they all designate and relate to the same word: *beauty*. How is this possible? Seeing all these elements put together, one may say that there is no set definition for beauty, and that is true. Each culture or society sets its own ideals and standards to create its own definition for the word. That's what makes us all so different. As for the reason behind these standards, it has become clear that for most people, the biggest motive for achieving "beauty" is to impress others, particularly those of the other sex, and to set a certain impression of oneself in society.

Beginning with a culture many are familiar with—American culture. In our own society, how do people perceive the definition of beauty? Taking a close look at stars in magazines, it's easy to say that we have set very clear guidelines. Most magazines portray a woman with a slim body, flawless, unblemished face, and luscious hair as the perfect image. Though obviously no magazine would say these exact words, offering a multitude of weight loss, hair growth, and skin care tips throughout every beauty magazine is easy evidence. It's a pretty indirect implication stating that women must change themselves in order to achieve that very image. A recent issue of *People* magazine included an article featuring their "50 Most Beautiful People." Almost every star who had captioned their photo had included the aspect of inner beauty playing the main role in their life. This, though, was a little off-putting when each star pictured had a perfect complexion, slim body, etc. One searching through the *People* website will also stumble upon Weight Watchers ads. What does this say about our culture? These examples portray a clashing view about what the actual definition of American beauty may really be: what many say it is—inner—and what it really ends up being—outer.

Now, taking American culture and its beauty values, ask the question "For what purpose are these beauty standards set?" To many, the answer varies. A recent

study put men and women into a room, and they were asked this very question. The first response came from women. Several expressed that the feeling of competition between other women is what drives them to look better or to dress to impress. Several others sided that the drive of impressing men, and trying to reflect a man's wants in a woman, is the main aspect that women consider. Hearing this, the men in the room agreed with the first group, coming to the conclusion that the whole issue of perceptions of beauty in our culture is driven by women. Which group was right? Seeing this study, I decided to conduct my own research based on what the second group said, trying to see how often women in our culture take their looks into account when they seek interest in someone. I asked around 20 female Okemos High School students how often they consider looks over personality traits when approaching a male, and around 95% of the girls said they consider outer looks over anything, hoping to make a good first impression. Seeing the results to both surveys, the conclusion that may be reached is that in an American society, a huge purpose behind setting beauty standards is to reflect the wants of the opposite sex.

Moving on to other cultures that many are less familiar with, one being African and the other Indonesian, a certain phenomenon that originated in Africa is the famous "Lip Plate." When a woman is ready to marry, a hole is made in her bottom lip with a wooden stick, which is expanded every day. When made big enough, a giant ring is inserted into the lip, and once this is achieved, the woman is considered the epitome of beauty. Relatable to this, an Indonesian trend is to "chisel," or sharpen, the edges of a woman's teeth with a man-made hammer-like tool, making them shark-like. Both of these processes, the African and Indonesian, are extremely painful, but represent far-fetched beauty in both cultures. Comparing them to the American standard of beauty, it's obvious most in our culture are not seen with a hole in their lip or pointed teeth, but in the three different cultures, beauty is represented in three completely different ways.

Continuing with African and Indonesian cultures, for what purpose are their beauty standards set? The answer to the question was much easier to find in these cases. The African ritual clearly stated that the whole purpose behind it was to please a man, in particular, their husband, and come off more beautifully to them. The Indonesian ritual stated likewise. One Indonesian woman, after the chiseling, said to an interviewer "Now that my teeth are sharp, I look more beautiful for my husband, so he won't leave me" (Pilonji qtd in Wong para. 4). Cultures like these fully devote the purpose of beauty to the pleasing of the opposite sex.

Most people living in our society (American) are used to the image of "straight teeth" as an ideal in the route to achieving ultimate beauty. Meanwhile, in Japan, a very different style has come forward, that of crooked teeth! It is called *yaeba*, also known as "tooth crowding." Women purposefully disarrange

their teeth to appear more attractive. And for what reason has this crazy (or what we'd think is crazy) idea occurred? The purpose behind this strange technique is to come off more endearing to men by giving them a thought that the woman is more approachable by being less perfect. Here, the whole meaning behind "flaws are what make us beautiful" is looked at with a whole new standpoint. Also, once again, the entire purpose behind a beauty ideal is to "impress and lure."

In the book that I have just finished reading, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, beauty is also taken into focus in quite a large way. One main character in the story, Quasimodo, has a large mole covering his eye, one single big eyebrow, and a large lump in his back. He is seen as so incredibly ugly and deformed, and is described "like the embattled parapet of a fortress" (Hugo, Chap, 7 pg 5), while on the contrary, the character La Esmeralda is viewed as a "Graceful and dazzling" character (Hugo, p. 44). She is slender, has dark hair, and emerald green eyes. The concept that much of the book is trying to portray is how people see and judge appearances and how differently people may respond to a certain appearance. Often, certain visual characteristics are directly linked to a positive or negative judgment. The way the book differs from previous ideas is in the way that it takes place in a time period much different from ours, and this shows us a very broad view of how judgment and the concept of beauty has changed over time through the evolution of cultures. Today, we have become more aware of one's inner beauty as well as outer. People's personalities are taken into account as part of their overall beauty, whereas at the time of *The Hunchback*, most people focused singlehandedly on appearance. The definition of beauty may not only change from the cultures existing today, but also from cultures in a different era.

In the end, it is clear that our culture affects how beauty appears to us. There is certainly no single way to describe perfection in a person. What one may view as sickening to the eye, another may view as striking. We are all different, and different is beautiful. "Beauty can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling. It can affect us in an unlimited variety of ways. Yet it is never viewed with indifference: beauty demands to be noticed; it speaks to us directly like the voice of an intimate friend" (Scruton, *Beauty*). Sometimes it may be hard to find a purpose behind striving for ultimate beauty, but one thing that we all have in common is the instinct to strike and make an impression on people. In today's world, first impressions often become more important than who a person truly is. As humanity develops, there is a great hope that there will once come a day that we will all fully understand the concept of beauty really being in "the eyes of the beholder." In that time, there will be an exact definition for beauty, that being "one's inner self."

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