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English Composition I
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Summary of
“The Face of Beauty”
Revision

Diane Ackerman’s descriptive essay touches a sensitive subject for some people: BEAUTY. We all have our own image and definition of beauty but we also share common elements. The author develops this idea very well, through various examples from different studies.

The first study she describes is about dilated pupils and how our brain processes the information received through body language. Unconsciously, the brain “interprets” the dilated pupils as attractive. It’s pure body chemistry and as much as 30% of the men respond to “dilated pupils” (252). This first paragraph makes us feel somewhat uncomfortable but not as uncomfortable as the following one. The reader begins to get involved emotionally and starts to react to some of the studies described in the essay. Some of the studies revolt us; some make us wonder, and some take the reader by surprise.

It becomes even more difficult not to get involved, especially when in the second paragraph the author talks about school and how “attractive people do better in school” (253). She supports her idea by agreeing with Aristotle and by citing his statement that “beauty is far greater than any better letter of recommendation” (254). The paragraph continues with examples about how beauty can influence the behavior and decisions of

prisoners (they adjusted better after a cosmetic surgery), parents (prettier babies were treated better), and teachers (attractive children got higher grades).

The third paragraph describes the advantages of being beautiful. The author considers a woman's face, "to some extent a commodity" (253), and she talks about the advantages which beautiful women have had throughout history. She also talks about men: "Handsome men do better as well, but for a man the real commodity is height" (254).

The next two paragraphs talk about how our behavior and standards of beauty have changed throughout history. Culture also represents a key factor in trying to find out what beauty represents for some people.

The last paragraph is the reader's redemption. The paragraph starts with a recent computer study about what college men considered "the ideal components in a woman's face" (255). This part could make some readers feel uncomfortable and it escalates when the author asks: "What do those of us who aren't tall, flawlessly sculpted adolescents do?" (255). The answer: "Console ourselves with how relative beauty can be. Although it wins our first praise and the helpless gift of our attention, it can curdle before our eyes in a matter of moments" (255-256). The reader is at this point confused and still unhappy with the outcome; however, the next example clarifies the confusion and brings satisfaction to the reader.

The example talks about the admiration that the author had for the actor, Omar Sharif, and the fact that she found him astoundingly handsome the first time she saw him in a movie. Her feelings for the actor changed after she saw him interviewed, when he declared that “his only interest in life was playing bridge” (256). The actor was reduced to the image of an “unappealing man” (256). The author also talks about the reverse process when a “not-particularly-attractive stranger opened his mouth to speak and became ravishing” (256). The closing words bring total satisfaction for the reader: “Thank heavens that, though good looks may rally one’s attention, a lasting sense of a person’s beauty reveals itself in stages” (256).

Through this descriptive essay, Diane Ackerman forces the readers to re-evaluate their personal standards about beauty and to become aware of the danger of forgetting to look further than the first impression of the moment.

Works Cited

Ackerman, Diane. "The Face of Beauty." *Connections: A Multicultural Reader for Writers*. Editor Judith A. Stanford. California: Mayfield, 1997. 252-256.