

The Weaponization of Physical Beauty in Victorian Storytelling

In Victorian Era England, one of the most important traits for a woman to have is physical beauty. This high standard for beauty affected how women were treated in society, and could determine their social mobility through marriage. If a woman, even of a lower class, was deemed pretty enough, she could marry a man of a higher class and gain greater power in society. Two novels of this era, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, contrast this ideal. Jane is often ridiculed for her lack of beauty while Lady Audley is aware of her beauty and uses it to her advantage. Furthermore, the criticism of Jane is often furthered through comparing her beauty to other higher class women. Lady Audley's emphasis on the importance of beauty extends to her love of her material objects. Despite both of these novels heavily focusing on the importance of beauty, they subvert the notion of the importance of beauty through the fates of the two women.

One of the most pivotal moments in Lady Audley's life is her marriage to Sir Michael Audley because of the wealth and power it grants her. When Sir Michael Audley first met Lady Audley, also known as Lucy Graham and Helen Talboys, he fell in love with her because of her beauty; Sir Michael "could no more resist the tender fascination of the soft and melting blue eyes...with its wealth of showering flaxen curls... and made all doubly charming in this woman" (Braddon 12). Sir Michael, along with everyone else in the village near Audley Court, could not believe how beautiful Lucy was. Everyone equated her beauty to her being charming and sweet, and believed that someone so beautiful could do no wrong. Sir Michael takes this belief even further by falling in love with her, and believing that "she was his destiny!... this fever, this

longing, this restless, uncertain, miserable hesitation..." (Braddon 12) is love. At this point in the novel, Sir Michael has only observed Lucy from afar; they have not spoken and Sir Audley has no knowledge of anything about her. All he knows is that she is beautiful, and therefore must be the love of his life. Lucy soon admits "I do not love any one in the world" (Braddon 16) when Sir Audley proposes marriage to her. Sir Audley is still blindly in love with Lucy despite this and continues on with their marriage. For Lucy, this is a marriage of convenience that she agrees to because of the wealth she will gain from it.

Throughout the novel, people often talk of Lady Audley's beauty, but she does not discuss her beauty and its advantages until her secret has been revealed. As Lady Audley is impatiently waiting for Robert Audley to reveal her secret, she focuses on continuing to look beautiful. Anxiety and distress is often "associated in our minds with loose, disordered garments, and disheveled hair" but Lady Audley is described as having "an appearance in every way the reverse" (Braddon 288). Lady Audley does not look distressed because she is hyper aware of how important her beauty is, and how it is the reason she has been able to attain a higher social status than one she is born into. She is also aware that she must at all times look beautiful to her husband, since it is the reason he loves her. While Lucy is getting prepared to face the truth, she "looked upon that beauty as a weapon, and she felt that she had now double need to be well armed" (Braddon 287). This thought process confirms that Lucy believes her beauty to be of the utmost importance and that it is her one advantage in life. Without her beauty, she would have continued to be poor and would have no influence in society.

In addition to Lady Audley's physical beauty, the beauty of Lady Audley's material goods are also deemed as an important sign of status. While preparing to leave Audley Court to

go to the madhouse, Lady Audley admires her apartment and “looked round at all the costly appointments of the room... My lady was thinking how much the things had cost, and how painfully probable it was that the luxurious apartment would soon pass out of her possession” (Braddon 317). Lady Audley does not mourn the loss of her life, her husband, or her freedom; she only cares about the materialistic aspects of her life. This materialism reflects the ideals of the time period, and how beauty and wealth are the most important aspects of life, especially to those within the upper classes.

In contrast to Lady Audley’s beauty, Jane Eyre and her appearance are frequently spoken about negatively. When Jane is still a child living at Gateshead with her aunt, the servants are discussing Jane’s misery of being an unloved orphan. The servants say “if she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that” (Brontë 31). Despite being a child, the servants are unable to feel any sympathy for the orphaned Jane because they believe her to be too ugly for sympathy. This seems to be an exaggerated view of the ideal of beauty at the time, but nevertheless reflects the importance of beauty. Furthermore, when St. John is asking Jane to marry him and become a missionary’s wife, he doesn’t believe she is beautiful or important enough to be loved. She tells her that she is “formed for labor, not for love” (Brontë 464). St. John says this because he doesn’t believe that love is important for someone like Jane who is not pretty enough to marry for love. St. John also decides to propose to Jane instead of someone pretty like Rosamund because of his belief that she is not pretty enough for love. Many people in Jane’s life view her as too ugly to be loved because society dictates that only beautiful women are able to be loved and to have influence in their social spheres.

Additionally, Jane's lack of beauty is often contrasted with other women's beauty. When Jane is a child, her cousin Georgiana is considered to be the standard of beauty, and Jane regularly feels self-conscious when compared to her. While the servants are discussing Jane's misfortunes, they say that "a beauty like Miss Georgiana would be more moving in the same condition" (Brontë 31). The servants, as stated before, believe Jane to be too ugly for sympathy. This cruelty is greatly emphasized by the comparison to the beautiful Georgiana. It is unfair and cruel to Jane to state that she could be loved and cared for if she were only as pretty as someone else. Likewise, Jane is made to feel insecure and ugly when compared to the beautiful Blanche Ingram. After Jane hears about Blanche's beauty from Mrs Fairfax, Jane determines to paint a portrait of her to remind herself that she is too ugly for Rochester; Jane determines that "Mr Rochester might probably win that noble lady's love, if he chose to strive for it; is it likely he would waste a serious thought on this indigent and insignificant plebeian?" (Brontë 187). Jane has been made to feel so insecure and threatened by other women's beauty, and has been convinced by society that she is unworthy of love because of her appearance. The comparison to Blanche makes Jane feel even uglier and more insecure because she feels like she must compete with Blanche for the love of Mr Rochester. Because of the many comparisons between Jane and other women, Jane is led to believe that she is not worthy of love and that she is unimportant to society and to others.

Despite Lady Audley and Jane having very different appearances, the endings of each of these women's stories overturn the notion that beauty is of the utmost importance. For instance, the last we hear of Lady Audley is that she "had expired peacefully at Villebrumeuse" (Braddon 379). Despite Lady Audley gaining wealth and influence from her beauty, she ended up dying

young in a madhouse. Her beauty could not save her from an untimely death and miserable fate. Contrastly, Jane got a fairy tale ending with Rochester; Jane states “Reader, I married him” (Brontë 517) and goes on to describe the happy life that she and Rochester created together. Jane, unlike Lady Audley, gets to live a happy life even though many people and society have told her that she is too ugly to be happy. These narratives lead readers to believe that beauty is important in order to be happy, and then subvert this belief through their differing endings. These stories challenge Victorian society’s belief of the importance of physical beauty, and show that beauty does not have to be the most important aspect of a woman for her to be influential.

Works Cited

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre (Penguin Classics)*. Penguin, 2011.

Braddon, M. E., and Lyn Pykett. *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Oxford University Press, 2012.