

Is beauty in the eye of the beholder?

'Beauty' is unexpectedly difficult to define, which is curious, as the word is used so often: beauty products, a beautiful day, the beautiful game and so on. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary has this: "That quality or combination of qualities which affords keen pleasure to the senses, *esp.* that of sight, or which charms the intellectual or moral faculties" (clause 1).

This definition firmly places beauty in the eye of the beholder. Am I able to see the beauty in a thing? For mathematicians, an equation can be beautiful, when they have the intellectual faculty to perceive it. What is a beautiful piece of music for one person may turn up as boring or cacophonous noise to another.

But there is more to it than that. The definition says that the senses are able to *perceive* the beauty. This is not what it is. The beauty itself originates in the 'quality or combination of qualities'. This notion is explored in fairy stories. Beauty is associated with goodness. In 'Beauty and the Beast', for example, the protagonist is named 'Beauty' because of her temperament as well as her looks. "She was a perfectly beautiful young creature; her good temper rendered her adorable. A generous and tender heart was visible in all her actions". So, is it that a person is seen as beautiful when they express a beautiful quality? Clause 2 of the Oxford Dictionary definition then makes sense: "The abstract quality personified".

Is it that beauty is like a beam of light that crosses the darkness of the universe, only to be perceived when it meets something that can intercept it? Is beauty in the eye of the beholder in that sense, in that the beholder is the one who can perceive it?

A final thought. In the fairy stories beauty is associated with a young girl, usually a princess. The male equivalent is the handsome prince. What is the connection between beauty and the feminine?

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