

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

THE DARK SIDES OF LOVE

Constantinos V. PROIMOS

Hellenic Open University, Parodos Aristotelous 18, Patras, Greece
| School of Architecture, National Technical University of Athens,
Patisision Complex, Patisision Street 42, Athens, Greece

cvproimos@gmail.com

Abstract

My paper departs from the classic French fairy tale authored by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve about a handsome prince turned into a hideous beast by a magic spell that only love could break. The Beauty is a beautiful, young, albeit poor woman who eventually falls in love with the Beast and frees the prince from him. By pairing beauty with ugliness and attraction with repulsion, the fairytale allows introspection into the phenomenon of love, which is the natural and appropriate response to Beauty,

according to Plato. I am reading the story of the Beauty and the Beast together with Alexander Nehamas's Neoplatonist book *Only a Promise of Happiness. The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* trying, first, to establish who the Beauty is as the sovereign and who the Beast, and then inquire into the adventurous liaison of the couple. Finally, I argue that beauty not only promises happiness, as Stendhal's famous quote states, but also threatens its lovers with misery, frustration, and disorientation. Furthermore, in all love affairs, beauty alternates with ugliness, i.e., the one replaces the other, exactly as the Prince becomes the Beast only to turn again into a Prince, *ad infinitum*, thus representing desire and its psychic palimpsest.

Keywords: Alexander Nehamas, beauty, love, beast, Plato, Jacques Lacan.

Lepotica in zver. Temne strani ljubezni

Povzetek

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Članek izhaja iz klasične francoske pravljice Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve o čednem princu, spremenjenem v ostudno zver zaradi čarovnega uroka, ki ga lahko prekine samo ljubezen. Lepotica je lepa, mlada, a revna ženska, ki se sčasoma zaljubi v Zver in princa odreši spod njene oblasti. S tem ko lepoto vzporeja z grdoto in privlačnost z odporom, pravljica omogoča vpogled v fenomen ljubezni, ki je po Platonu naraven in primeren odziv na Lepoto. Zgodbo o Lepotici in Zveri berem skupaj z neoplatonistično knjigo Alexandra Nehamasa *Only a Promise of Happiness. The Place of Beauty in a World of Art (Samo obljuba sreče. Mesto lepote v svetu umetnosti)* pri čemer skušam najprej ugotoviti, kdo je Lepotica kot suveren in kdo Zver, in nato raziskati pustolovsko razmerje ljubezenskega para. Nazadnje zagovarjam trditev, da lepota ni samo obljuba sreče, kakor pravi Stendhalov znameniti citat, temveč ljubimca tudi ogroža z bedo, frustracijo in dezorientacijo. Poleg tega se znotraj vseh ljubezenskih razmerij lepota izmenjuje z grdoto, se pravi, ena nadomešča drugo natanko tako, kakor tudi Princ postane Zver samo zato, da se spet spremeni v Princa, *ad infinitum*, s čimer ponazarja željo in njen psihični palimpsest.

Ključne besede: Alexander Nehamas, lepota, ljubezen, zver, Platon, Jacques Lacan.

“You see I am trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not just to depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing. You can’t do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful. Because if it is all beautiful, you can’t believe in it. Things aren’t that way. It is only by showing both sides—3 dimensions and, if possible 4 that you can write the way I want to.”

Ernest Hemingway, from a letter to his father¹

Beauty and the Beast is a classic French fairy tale, the original version of which was authored by the 18th-century writer Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. It was made into a film in 1946 by Jean Cocteau, and subsequently became a Disney cartoon: first as an animated movie (1991) and recently as a musical (2017) (Image 1).

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¹ The excerpt comes from *Hemingway*, the 2021 documentary by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick on the American writer, a PBS production; quoted by Mr. Alexis Stamatis in his article in Greek “Hemingway, the Avatar, and Truth” (Stamatis 2021, 46–47). I thank Mr. Stamatis for his help and for making the English text available to me. This paper was first delivered at the annual conference of the Nordic Society of Aesthetics in Espoo, Finland, on May 28, 2019.



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Image 1:Jean Cocteau: *La Belle et la Bête*, 1946 (film poster).

The fairy tale is reputedly based on the ancient story of Eros and Psyche, which was written by Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis in the 2nd century AD (Image 2).² The French version involves a very handsome prince who is turned into a hideous Beast by a fairy because of his selfishness through a curse that can be broken only by love. Beauty is a beautiful, young woman, kind and pure of heart, but poor. After her father pledges her to the Beast in exchange for his own life, Beauty decides, for the sake of her family, to go and live with the Beast at his castle, honoring her father's agreement. Yet, while the Beast manages to win her friendship, she consistently refuses his marriage proposals. Only at the very last moment, when the Beast is about to die, does the Beauty shed a tear and confesses her love. Then, all of a sudden, the Beast becomes the handsome prince who had visited Beauty in her dreams and for whom she had been searching the castle in vain.

2 Cf. Bottigheimer 1989.

By pairing beauty with ugliness and attraction with repulsion, the fairy tale invites investigation into the phenomenon of love, which, according to Plato's *Symposium*, is the natural and appropriate response to beauty. As love cannot be imagined without seduction and the desire to conquer and possess the other, so beauty cannot be imagined without ugliness, that is, without a dark and deceptive aspect that is essential to it.



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Image 2:

Antonio Canova: *Eros and Psyche*, 1793 (Louvre, Paris).

Beauty falls in love with the Beast, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, is often portrayed in company with a satyr, a strange and ugly beast, part human and part animal, who is in permanent erection (Images 3 and 4).³ By reading *Beauty and the Beast* alongside Alexander Nehamas's Neoplatonist account of beauty in *Only a Promise of Happiness. The Place of Beauty in a*

³ Umberto Eco devotes an entire chapter to the beauty of the monsters and beasts, which he examines in a historical way starting from the Greeks, passing from the Church fathers, and concluding with Karl Rosenkrantz. A beautiful representation of ugliness renders it enchanting. See Eco 2004, 131–153. On the other hand, in his treatise *On Ugliness*, Umberto Eco claims that ugliness ought not be seen as simply the opposite of beauty and is far more complex especially in the Greek world, where it has an independent and positive existence and a role parallel to that of beauty. See Eco 2007, 34–42.

World of Art, largely inspired by Edouard Manet's 1863 *Olympia* painting (Image 5)⁴ as well as by Arthur Danto's seminal book *The Abuse of Beauty* (cf. Danto 2003), I shall attempt to establish who Beauty and the Beast are and then inquire in their adventurous liaison, in order to argue that beauty not only promises happiness as Stendhal famously states, but also threatens its enthusiasts with misery, frustration, and disorientation. In all love affairs, furthermore, beauty alternates with ugliness, the one replacing the other, exactly as the prince becomes the Beast only to turn again into a prince, *ad infinitum*, in this way representing desire and its psychic palimpsest.

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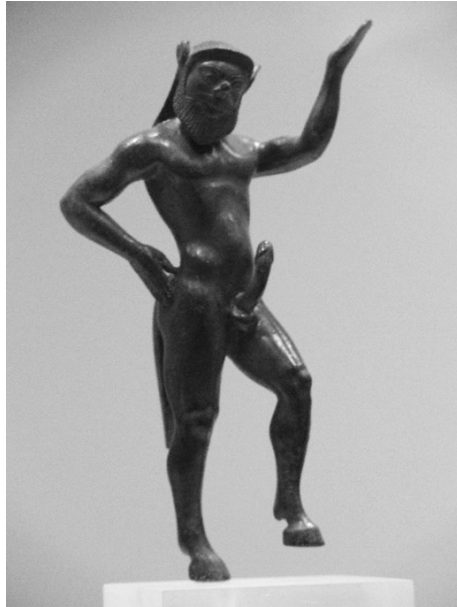


Image 3:

Statue of a Satyr, Silenus, from a Corinthian workshop, 6th century BC, discovered in Zeus's Temple at Dodoni (National Archaeological Museum, Athens).

4 One of the greatest merits of Alexander Nehamas as a philosopher is the fact that he takes time to seriously look at art and thus crosses "the boundary from philosophy to art history" avoiding both the philosophers' aversion for the untidiness of artistic actuality and the art historians' mistrust of philosophical reasoning. See Gaskell 2007.



Image 4:

Aphrodite, Pan and Eros, Hellenistic marble statue, c. 100 BC, discovered in Delos (National Archaeological Museum, Athens).

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The satyr attempts to remove Aphrodite's hand, with which she, out of modesty, covers her nudity while with her other hand she threatens to hit him with her sandal.



Image 5:

Edouard Manet: *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas (Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

Beauty is lovely, kind, and morally good, but unfortunately misunderstood

It is no accident that Nehamas begins his reflection on beauty with a quote from Plotinus: all beautiful things produce “awe and a shock of delight, passionate longing, love and a shudder of rupture” (Nehamas 2007, 1). Nehamas embeds himself in the long tradition of Neoplatonism: he thinks of beauty both as sensuous and as intelligible,⁵ and, in addition, as an ultimate value in life, a value that makes life worth living, according to Plato’s *Symposium*. For beauty, according to both Plato and Plotinus, is not solely the good looks of the beloved, but ultimately converges with moral goodness and virtue. A life devoted to beauty gives birth to beauty, that is, beautiful thoughts and actions (cf. Nehamas 2007, 131). Plato claims in the *Symposium* that we start by desiring a body that we deem beautiful,⁶ then ascend to the beauty of thought, the beauty of the soul, the beauty of institutions, laws and reason, until we reach the very idea of beauty itself. As beauty is inextricably linked with moral

474 goodness, so love of the beautiful means desire for the good, according to Plato’s contentious formulation (cf. Nehamas 2007, 127).

The desire to possess beauty is eros, which, according to Nehamas, does not mean to own beauty (ibid., 57), but to understand it and to interpret it for what is distinctly its own (ibid., 55 and 132). Every time we find someone beautiful, we are actively engaged in interpretation, i.e., we are trying to understand this person. This is because beauty is not easily discernible, especially at the highly intellectual steps of the Platonic ladder that are described by Diotima in the *Symposium*. Perceiving beauty requires critical intelligence (cf. Nehamas 2007, 16) and effort (ibid., 30), for it is revealed only partially in appearance (ibid., 70–71) as it is not a matter of perception alone (ibid., 99). According to Nehamas, beauty is a mystery (ibid., 78), that is always just beyond understanding (ibid., 76). Thus, the experience of beauty calls forth the movement of interpretation, which itself is always a work in progress (ibid., 105). There is always more to learn about the beautiful person in front of me that is valuable in ways I

5 See Plotinus 1992, 64–73.

6 Cf. Plato 1989, 10a4–d7.

can only subsequently understand (ibid., 76). Love is precisely the desire to know and understand (ibid., 120) beauty, which, according to Stendhal, is the promise of happiness (ibid., 63).

Love as the desire to possess beauty is fundamentally misunderstood, because modern philosophy is deeply suspicious of both love and desire, and thus relegates both to the realm of passions that need to be controlled, if not entirely side-lined. Love and desire are deemed inappropriate (ibid., 2) much in contrast to the ancients, above all Plato who celebrated them as means to attain goodness, wisdom, and truth (ibid.). The 21st century relegates beauty to biology, psychology, fashion, advertising, marketing, and philosophical aesthetics (ibid., 3), the latter having become the theory of art rather than beauty (ibid., 13), as artistic value is increasingly independent of beauty and pleasure (ibid., 28). Whereas Plato claimed that beauty calls for love and the desire to possess it, Immanuel Kant argued that beauty produces a satisfaction without interest, pleasure without desire, and can be approached by disinterested contemplation alone (ibid., 4). For Kant, the model of beauty is the rose whereas for Plato it is the beautiful boy. After Kant, then, beauty came to be replaced by the aesthetic, “which, completely isolated as it is from all relationships with the rest of the world, promises nothing that is not already present in it, is incapable of deception, and provokes no desire” (Nehamas 2007, 10). Exiled to the domain of everyday experience (ibid., 13), beauty signifies nothing beyond a stereotypical value judgment. In the modern world, beauty is divorced from both goodness and wisdom, a development, which has ultimately led to its demise. This demise is then reflected in the words of the highly respected modernist artist, Barnett Newman, that the “impulse of modern art is to destroy beauty” (ibid., 3).

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The Beast is dark, sexy, and lacking

Beauty is also deceptive, however, and has a dark side of its own (cf. Nehamas 2007, 9). We fundamentally do not know what beauty may ultimately bring to light, just as we do not know what we find beautiful, or why we love it as we do. The desires that beauty sparks and the pleasures it promises seem dubious, such that beauty may become “the seductive face of evil, a delightful appearance

masking the horrid skull beneath the skin” (ibid., 10), promising one thing and delivering another, “a mere surface and for that reason alone morally questionable” (ibid.). One may here quote, as an example, the Sirens, those nymph followers of Persephone, mentioned in *The Odyssey* who, according to the ancient Greek mythology, lured the sailors with their beauty and song, only to kill them once they approached near enough for their monstrous attack.⁷ However, this is the only world there is, as far as we know, and beauty is part of it, namely it participates in “the everyday world of purpose and desire, history and contingency, subjectivity and incompleteness” (Nehamas 2007, 35). Beauty calls forth love and, as Søren Kierkegaard claimed,⁸ love requires a leap of faith. Nevertheless, it is not guaranteed that I will put my faith in the right person; nothing ensures that my trust may not turn out to be a mistake (cf. Nehamas 2007, 58).

476 Nehamas reports that “love as Plato said is beauty’s attendant and constant companion and has no place for ugliness” (ibid., 60). According to this view, I cannot love someone I find ugly. Ugliness appears when love fades (ibid., 52). Yet, we often witness love for that which might be considered ugly. Towards the end of the *Symposium*, Alcibiades, the most handsome man in Athens, recounts how he pursued Socrates in vain in his younger years, wanting the latter to become his lover, despite the fact that Socrates was thought to be one of the ugliest men in Athens. How can we explain Alcibiades’s attraction to and love of Socrates? Does appearance no longer matter once we get to know people? Do we find people we love beautiful regardless of physical appearance (cf. Nehamas 2007, 59)? Or is it rather the case that “inner and outer beauty are distinct and is perfectly possible to love someone who is physically repulsive but psychologically or morally magnetic” (ibid.)? All the aforementioned are important factors, but the last of these is of course the case of Socrates in the *Symposium*, a satyr-like being on the outside, but a remarkable human on the inside. It may also be that there is a paradoxical love for the ugly (ibid., 61), for that which arouses dislike, disapproval, disgust, contempt, and hatred.⁹ Love

7 Cf. Homer 1999, 12, 39–54.

8 Cf. Kierkegaard 1992, 332.

9 See Ronald Moore’s entry on ugliness in the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* and his discussion of the paradox of ugliness leading to a pleasant, engaging, and ennobling

aroused by unworthiness leads to desire that is excited by sexual repulsiveness (ibid., 61). Love for better or for worse may be provoked by anything and thus may benefit or harm the lover (ibid., 99 and 104). This is why the relation of beauty and morality is always in question (ibid., 127). This is also the reason why, if we think of beauty as a promise of happiness then we must be ready to live with inescapable uncertainty, without assurance of success, a life that may equally be happy or miserable (ibid., 130–131).

Marcel Proust maintains that “love is born, it lives only for so long as there is something left to conquer. We love only that which we do not totally possess.” (Nehamas 2007, 63.) This is the reason why the measure of beauty does not lie in its past or in the present, but mostly “in its pledge for the future” (ibid., 72). Thus, beauty holds the promise of happiness, but is also “the emblem of what we lack” (ibid., 76). It is this lack that sparks our desire for beauty and directs our attention to everything that needs to be learned and acquired in order to possess it. Everything else recedes into the background and we are completely absorbed by the emergence of beauty precisely because of this constitutive lack that makes us promise to give to our loved what we do not have.¹⁰ This constitutional lack explains the origins and provenance of love according to ancient Greek mythology. Love, according to the myth recounted in the *Symposium*, is the offspring of *Poros* and *Penia*, Resourcefulness and Destitution or Lack, respectively. The impoverished mother, *Penia*, who initiates the love affair with *Poros*, has by definition nothing to give to her lover, except her constitutional lack, her *aporia*, her query and puzzlement, and this is what she finally gives. To accept one’s lack is, as Jacques Lacan emphasizes in his seminar on Plato’s *Symposium*, the essence of what it means to love, and one cannot love except by becoming someone who does not have, positively espousing the lack¹¹ and, furthermore, promising to give to the other that which one does not have, his or her flesh.¹²

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aesthetic experience (cf. Moore 1998, 417–421, particularly 420).

10 Cf. Lacan’s *Seminar V* (sessions of January 29, April 23, and May 7, 1958; cf. Lacan 1998) and *Seminar VIII* (1960–1961; cf. Lacan 1991).

11 For the Lacanian analysis of the *Symposium*, see *Seminar XII* (session of June 23, 1965). Cf. Lacan 2000.

12 Cf. Marion 2003, 239–242.

The couple. Who is finally Beauty and who the Beast?

In the fairy tale, Beauty is a woman and the Beast is a man, but these gender designations do not seem sufficient to characterize them, despite the fact that the love of beauty is the principal way, in which life generally perpetuates itself by sexually uniting men and women (cf. Nehamas 2007, 66). Thus, beauty is deeply ingrained in biology, although attraction is also a matter of psychological and other non-physical factors (ibid., 69). Despite the fact that attractiveness is close to beauty it would be wrong to identify the two. Likewise, it would be wrong to strictly identify Beauty with the woman and the Beast with the man (Image 6).



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Image 6:

Henri Rousseau: *La Belle et la Bête*, 1908 (private collection).

The print depicting the Beauty and the Beast offers a different reading of the story that emphasizes the bestial aspect of the relationship. The couple consists of a woman and an animal.

The fact that the prince transforms to a beast and then the beast transforms back to a prince demonstrates that things may be more fluid than the strict binaries of Beast/Beauty and man/woman, and suggests rather that Beauty and Beast are tropes, representing symbolic orders that shape the idea and regulative content of the couple, whether this consists of a man and a woman, two men, two women, or any other couple combination we may think of. It

indicates, furthermore, that beauty and ugliness alternate in every relationship, as do the symbolic orders of masculinity and femininity, which are now equally available to both sexes. This latter alternation between masculine and feminine roles is also indicated in artistic representations of the fairy throughout history: whereas in *Beauty and the Beast* it is the woman who saves the dying man, in the antecedent story of Eros and Psyche it is the man who saves the dying woman, as Canova indicates in his sculptural complex. Furthermore, representations of satyrs situate the “Beast” not only in the position of the lover or pursuer, but also in that of the pursued, or the beloved, that is as the object of desire (Image 7). The alternation between femininity and masculinity echoes the alternation in the power dynamic: Beauty is the sovereign with a privileged access to power, and the formation of law as the romance with the Beast is entirely dependent on her will and desire, after the Beast has fallen in love with her, whereas the Beast is inferior in terms of culture, but superior in terms of natural prowess.¹³

As the story unfolds, we see power shifting from the one individual to the other, just as in most contemporary couples. This shift interests Jacques Derrida for, in his own words:

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[...] the social, the political, and in them the value or the exercise of sovereignty are not but disguised manifestations of the animal force or conflicts of pure force whose zoology delivers the truth, to be blunt, the bestiality or the barbarism or the inhuman cruelty. (My translation; Derrida 2008, 35.)¹⁴

13 Cf. Derrida, 2008.

14 The French original of the first session (December 12, 2001) reads: “[...] le social, le politique, et en eux la valeur ou l’exercice de la souveraineté, ne sont que des manifestations déguisées de la force animale ou des conflits de force pure, dont la zoologie nous livre la vérité, c’est-à-dire au fond la bestialité ou la barbarie ou la cruauté inhumaine.”



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Image 7:

Barberini Faun, the drunken satyr, c. 3rd or 2nd century BC, discovered in Italy in 1620 (Glyptothek, Munich).

The fairy tale of Beauty and the Beast illustrates the light and dark sides of a couple's love, beginning with the pursuit of beauty heeding to the animal forces, the bestiality, barbarism, and inhuman cruelty of power associated with beauty and love. Although Nehamas does signal the dangers of love, its dark side, he ultimately affirms the claim of his title and the notion that beauty is the promise of happiness is preponderant and occupies most of his rhapsodic, highly personal, passionate, and felicitous book.¹⁵ While his Platonic notion of beauty impelled by love is quite compelling, it may be misleading and idealistic to the extent that it means assigning a prominent role to beauty to the expense of ugliness, discordance, irony, and the like, which make art and reality seem infinitely more complex, particularly nowadays (Image 8). Love does transform ugliness into beauty in the eyes of the lover, but ugliness also

15 Cf. Benfey 2007 and Donougho 2009.

has an independent and positive role and may also be the object of attraction and love. It is useful to remember that neither beauty nor love are pure by signaling their anarchic, dark, ugly, and dangerous sides, as the fairy tale does, precisely in order to “get the feeling of the actual life across.” Furthermore, to truly appreciate beauty and “believe in it,” as Hemingway claims, one must equally consider and appraise its other sides, the ones that are ugly, dangerous, and dark.¹⁶



Image 8:

Yasumasa Morimura: *Portrait (Futago)*, 1988, photograph (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco).

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¹⁶ It is one of the central points, which Friedrich Nietzsche attempted to make in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that the appreciation of the Apollonian aspects of Greek culture, beauty, harmony, restraint, and measure cannot be undertaken without appraising and taking under consideration its Dionysian aspects, ugliness, incongruity, dissonance, and excess. See Nietzsche 1967, 4.

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