



Beauty Standards, Social Privilege, and Self-Compassion in Jennifer Weiner's *Big Summer*: A Feminist Literary Analysis

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Abstract

*This study examines the representation of beauty standards in Jennifer Weiner's *Big Summer* and their impact on the protagonist's social experiences and psychological well-being. The novel portrays how culturally constructed ideals of beauty shape social privilege, self-perception, and interpersonal relationships. This research aims to identify the forms of beauty standards represented in the novel and to analyze how the main character responds to and negotiates these pressures. Employing a qualitative approach through textual interpretation and a narrative research design, this study explores the protagonist's lived experiences as depicted in the narrative. Nancy Etcoff's theory in *Survival of the Prettiest* (1999) is used to examine cross-cultural consistency in beauty ideals, social advantages associated with attractiveness, the influence of the beauty industry, and the psychological effects of beauty norms. Additionally, Kristin Neff's theory of self-compassion (2011) is applied to analyze the protagonist's coping strategies, including positive self-talk, confidence-building, and self-acceptance. The findings reveal that the novel reflects dominant cultural beauty standards that confer social privilege while simultaneously generating psychological pressure. However, the protagonist's development of self-compassion serves as a form of resistance, enabling her to challenge external validation and redefine her self-worth beyond conventional beauty norms. This study contributes to literary discussions on body image, gendered expectations, and the psychological dimensions of contemporary women's fiction.*

Keywords: *beauty standard, big summer, psychological effect, social advantages*

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, beauty standards have become more widespread through social media, advertising, and popular culture. These platforms promote similar images of ideal beauty which is often based on Western features that shape how individuals are judged and valued. As a result, physical appearance becomes socially significant, creating pressure to meet idealized and often unrealistic standards. This shows that beauty is not only personal, but also a social construct that influences people's lives and interactions.

Because of this, beauty standard today goes beyond simple appearance it shapes how people view themselves, how they are treated by others, and how they behave in everyday life. According to Etcoff (1999) in *Survival of the Prettiest*, beauty is a biological and psychological response that influences social behavior. She explains that beauty standard exists across cultures and affect how people are treated in society. Meanwhile, Wolf (1991) in *The Beauty Myth* argues that beauty is a form of social control used to maintain women's positions in society. These theories show that beauty standard is not only related to physical appearance but also have social and psychological effects on individuals, especially women who are often the target of these standards.

In her book *The Body Book: The Law of Hunger, the Science of Strength, and Other Ways to Love Your Amazing Body* published in 2013, Cameron Diaz explores the influence of Hollywood's beauty standard on individuals' self-image. Using her own experiences with body image, Diaz skilfully integrates personal narratives with scientific research on diet, physical activity, and psychological well-being to promote self-acceptance and optimal health above low standards. The writer offers an analysis of the unrealistic standards propagated by the media and the fashion sector, underscoring the need of a broader and more encompassing concept of beauty that appreciates a wide range of body types and supports a balanced lifestyle. The book serves as both an introspective work and a practical prescription for accepting one's physical form and challenging the standards of society.

In literary works, the issue of beauty standard is often portrayed through the experiences of female characters who struggle with self-image, social pressure, and personal acceptance. Many novels use the theme of beauty to reveal how society defines women's value through appearance. This kind of story helps readers understand the psychological and emotional impact caused by the beauty standard. *Big Summer* (2020) by Jennifer Weiner tells the story of Daphne Berg, a plus-size influencer who faces challenges in balancing her self-confidence with society's expectations of beauty. The novel explores her journey of friendship, betrayal, and self-acceptance as she prepares for her former friend's wedding. Daphne's experiences reflect how beauty standard influence her emotions, social life, and self-perception. Through her story, readers can see how external judgments affect internal struggles. The novel combines themes of appearance, identity, and personal growth.

This study provides a new perspective on how beauty standards are represented in Jennifer Weiner's *Big Summer* (2020), showing that beauty, while often rewarded, also brings emotional pressure and social expectations. Through its characters, Weiner critiques society's tendency to value women based on appearance and marginalize those who do not fit ideal standards. Using Nancy Etcoff's theory from *Survival of the Prettiest* (1999), this research examines how dependence on physical appearance can lead to insecurity, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Unlike studies that focus mainly on social inequality, this study emphasizes the psychological effects of beauty standards, particularly their influence on body image and mental well-being. By analyzing this novel, the research aims to show how beauty standards affect women's identity and interaction in modern culture, contributing to discussions of beauty, self-worth, and acceptance in contemporary literature. The title of this study is *Beauty Standard Represented in Big Summer (2020) by Jennifer Weiner*.

METHOD

This study is qualitative since it requires a process of comprehending the issue and modifying the topic. The writer did qualitative research since the data comes from an observation of a book script that comprises words, expressions, and phrases from the novel script. According to Patton (2002) Qualitative research has three types of data collection: first used interviews, observation, and finally used documents for the collection method.

In qualitative research within the context of literature, researchers analyze textual data from stories, identifying and comparing the issues presented in the narrative to social realities. The researcher draws upon textual interpretation and theoretical perspectives to explain how literary representations reflect broader social problems and cultural systems. In this study, the data source is essential because it provides insight into how patriarchy is constructed in the fictional world and how characters respond to it.

The primary data of this study were taken from Jennifer Weiner's novel *Big Summer* (2020), which contains narrative passages, dialogues, and descriptions that illustrate the dynamics of beauty standard. The data consist of selected quotations that describe how beauty standard is represented in the story and how the characters experience its issue.

In conducting this study, data collection was a crucial stage that determined the quality and validity of the results. This research used a specific method of collecting data by selecting quotations from *Big Summer* (2020) by Jennifer Weiner. The following steps were carried out:

1. Reading the novel *Big Summer* (2020) carefully and repeatedly as the main source of data to gain a thorough understanding of its themes and narrative.
2. Identifying quotations, dialogues, or passages that reflect beauty standard structures.

3. Marking and taking notes on the identified quotations relevant to the issues studied.
4. Classifying the quotations based on their relation to Nancy Etcoff's theory of *Survival of the Prettiest* (1999).

The data were analyzed in several steps. First, the writer gathered data from *Big Summer* (2020) novel. Second, the writer arranged the data based on the dialogue or sentences in the novel. Third, the writer categorized the data found and analyzed using *Survival of the Prettiest* theory by Nancy Etcoff and Kristin Neff theory *Self-Compassion* in the form of an essay. This aims to identify beauty standard issue experienced by the main character in the novel and how the character deals with the problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Specifically, this section will look at Jennifer Weiner's representation of beauty standard in *Big Summer* and how they relate to Nancy Etcoff's beauty theory in *Survival of the Prettiest*. This analysis also focuses on the portrayed of beauty standard and how the main character, Daphne Berg, deals with the psychological impacts of beauty standard and the benefits provided to those who meet the ideal beauty standard.

Beauty Standard Represented in Big Summer

Beauty standard in *Big Summer* novel depicted to something that have consistency and universal, especially through characters portrayal description that considered beauty.

In *Big Summer*, the representation of beauty standard consistently appears through Daphne's point of view as she compares herself to other women around her. For example, when describing Drue, Daphne said that.

"Her face was a perfect oval, her skin a creamy white with golden undertones and a sprinkling of freckles. Her nose was narrow and chiseled; her lips were full and pink; her shiny, streaky blond hair was gathered into a casually messy topknot" (Weiner, 2020, pp. 52–53).

This detailed observation illustrates Daphne's awareness of how Drue embodies universally admired traits, such as facial symmetry and flawless skin, which Etcoff (1999) argues are evolutionarily rooted in human preference. The fact that Daphne herself recognises and highlights these features shows how deeply internalised the cultural and biological markers of beauty are, shaping not only how she views Drue but also how she positions herself in relation to her. Drue's appearance thus becomes a mirror through which Daphne confronts her own insecurities and the social hierarchy that privileges those who fit the standard.

The conceptualizations of beauty apply a significant influence on the ways in which individuals are regarded and treated within the societal framework. The phenomenon

wherein physical appearance emerges as the predominant standards for success within social media platforms, which ideally ought to embody a more democratic values, causes critical examination. This indicates that the phenomenon of social privilege predicated upon beauty remains significantly entrenched and functions in an organized way, even within the context of the digital age. "Of course I had to suffer humiliation and shame to get my tiny toehold on the Internet, while petite, pretty blondes had fame and fortune handed to them" (Weiner, 2020, p. 82). This quotation serves to illustrate the indicated disparity in the treatment afforded to characters who do not meet to accepted beauty standard, compared against those individuals who are considered conventionally attractive, particularly in the context of societal preferences for 'petite, pretty blondes'. Individuals who match to current beauty standard are afforded immediate access to social popularity, financial prosperity, and societal acceptance. In contrast, those who fail to adjust to these established norms are often subjected to experiences of humiliation and shame, only to attain a little existence within the digital landscape. Etcoff (1999) stated that the concept of beauty has a social influence that is comparable in significance in terms of race or gender. In this context, the concept of beauty provides real social advantages upon individuals who are perceived as beautiful, thereby giving them with a form of 'social capital' that facilitates their experiences in various domains, including but not limited to employment opportunities, relationships, and social influence.

However, the fitness industry showcases unrealistic body ideals for the models and offers motivating narratives that marginalize women who do not conform to these norms, illustrates by "...and shots of slim, extraordinarily fit models with washboard abs and endless legs demonstrating the moves" (Weiner, 2020, p. 19). The statement highlights how the beauty and fitness industries create and maintain limited beauty standard that exclude plus-sized bodies. The phrase 'shots of slim, extraordinarily fit models with washboard abs and endless legs' represents the industry's ideal of a slim, toned, and tall physique. This portrayal shows an unreachable a standard for many and encourages the notion that beauty is confined to specific, limited physical attributes, as a result marginalizing body diversity. Nancy Etcoff (1999) states in *Survival of the Prettiest* that physical appearance is a socially created ideal, supported by the media and beauty industry, although Susan Bordo (2003) states that women's bodies are created by cultural influence, frequently via unrealistic, idealized portrayals. The focus on slimness in fitness marketing marginalizes plus-sized individuals, endorsing a beauty standard that only a limited number may achieve. The beauty industry not only offers items but also maintains a capitalist-driven standard of beauty that excludes and marginalizes diversity.

Beauty standard can influence the perceptions of individuals who do not conform to them, creating an ambition to transform into someone who does. "...that she looked the way I was supposed to look, effortlessly beautiful and stylish and cool." (Weiner, 2020, p.53) The quote illustrates the protagonist's psychological pressure coming from a feeling of failing to conform to societal beauty standard. The statement "the way I was supposed to look" suggests that societal standards have been internalised by the character, resulting in a perception that specific expectations must be achieved for social

acceptance or attention. This feeling not only represents societal beauty standard about physical appearance, but when the character sets up themselves with others who conform to that standard, they consider themselves as a failure and not enough, thereby creating a sense of insecurity. Nancy Etcoff (1999) addresses that culturally constructed beauty standard may negatively impact an individual's psychological state, particularly when one perceives a failure to attain them. Repeated social comparison to the idealised body image frequently results in feelings of shame, anxiety, and depression. The main character in this quote implicitly conveys a sense of worthlessness due to not being "effortlessly beautiful," thereby reinforcing the notion that beauty impacts social dynamics and profoundly affects an individual's psychological condition.

Daphne Responses Against Beauty Standard

Receiving things that are inappropriate or fail to meet established standards can be quite challenging. This includes not conforming to existing beauty standard, not having more privileges due to this nonconformity, and experiencing psychological problems from the perception of unworthiness, as exemplified by the protagonist in the novel. Various internal and external pressures can contribute to the character's stress. However, this does not leave the protagonist always defeated and gave up, the protagonist continues to attempt to fight these ideals by demonstrating its natural positivity.

Transforming the internal narrative to take on a more supportive perspective can significantly contribute to overcoming unrealistic beauty standard through positive self-talk. "Or that she was so beautiful, and I... was beautiful in a different way, I made myself say in my head." (Weiner, 2020, p. 85). In this moment of introspection, the main character attempts to counter feelings of unworthiness by affirming that beauty exists in diverse forms, including her own. Nancy Etcoff (1999) argues that beauty perception is closely tied to self-esteem and social acceptance, making positive self-talk crucial in resisting restrictive standards. Similarly, Kristin Neff (2003) emphasizes that "With self-compassion, we give ourselves the same kindness and care we'd give to a good friend." (Neff, 2011, p. 15). Daphne's affirmation that she is "beautiful in a different way" reflects this practice of self-compassion, as she chooses to respond to insecurities with kindness and acceptance rather than harsh self-criticism.

Individuals who have a high level of confidence choose to show a lowered dependence on external validation, particularly that which relates to their physical appearance. A foundation of self-confidence serves as a powerful defence against the negative impacts of dominant beauty standard, as individuals gain a recognition and appreciation of their own self-worth.

"I saw a woman with shiny hair and bright red lips; a woman who'd dive into the deep end and smile for the camera and live her life out in the open, as if she had just as much right to the world as anyone else" (Weiner, 2020, p. 18)

In the quotation, Daphne defines herself through strength and confidence, claiming her right to “live her life out in the open” and to shine like others. This marks a transformation from insecurity to confidence, as she no longer hides behind restrictive beauty standard but embraces self-expression. Self-confidence becomes a crucial tool for women to reclaim social spaces historically dominated by limiting ideals of femininity. As Susan Bordo (2003) explains in *Unbearable Weight*, women’s bodies are shaped by cultural forces but can also serve as instruments of resistance. Daphne’s confidence reflects this dual function, as she asserts ownership of her body and challenges the social control that once diminished her visibility. By openly affirming her right to be seen, she resists exclusionary beauty norms and redefines her identity on her own terms.

Self-acceptance represents a comprehensive process wherein individuals come to embrace both their physical attributes and emotional imperfections. In this quote, the main character shows that the act of embracing her physical form released her from societal pressures and facilitated a sense of inner peace. “and figuring out how to love myself, or at least, you know, tolerate myself, in the body that I had, has been the best decision of my life.” (Weiner, 2020, p. 21). Daphne expresses a profound realization that accepting her body, even if imperfect, is the most transformative decision of her life. Phrases like “love myself” and “tolerate myself” suggest that self-acceptance is not instant or flawless, but a practical and empowering step toward inner balance. Kristin Neff (2003) explains that “self-compassion requires taking a balanced approach to our negative emotions so that feelings are neither suppressed nor exaggerated” (p. 89). Daphne’s reflection embodies this principle of mindfulness, as she resists both harsh self-criticism and denial, choosing instead a more balanced and accepting relationship with her body. Through this process, she redefines beauty on her own terms, moving toward stronger self-acceptance and improved well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Big Summer* by Jennifer Weiner effectively portrays the pervasive influence of beauty standards and their psychological impact on the protagonist, Daphne Berg. Drawing on Nancy Etcoff’s theory in *Survival of the Prettiest* (1999), the analysis identifies four central dimensions of beauty standards represented in the novel: cross-cultural consistency, social advantages associated with attractiveness, the influence of the beauty industry, and the psychological consequences of beauty norms. These elements illustrate how ideals of beauty are socially constructed, reinforced through media and cultural expectations, and internalized by individuals, often resulting in emotional conflict and diminished self-worth.

Daphne’s experiences demonstrate that societal beauty ideals not only generate social inequality and external pressure but also shape women’s self-perception and mental well-being in profound ways. Furthermore, through the lens of Kristin Neff’s self-compassion theory (2011), the study reveals that Daphne resists and negotiates these pressures by cultivating confidence, engaging in positive self-talk, and developing self-

acceptance. These strategies enable her to reconstruct her identity beyond appearance-based validation.

Overall, this study highlights beauty standards as powerful social and psychological forces that influence identity formation. At the same time, it underscores self-compassion as a transformative mechanism that fosters empowerment, resilience, and personal growth in the face of restrictive cultural norms.

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