
In stories to remember, ugliness and beauty transformed

BEAUTY REDEEMED

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THE FROG, KISSED, TURNS INTO A PRINCE.

We all know the story. The arrogant young princess had wanted nothing to do with the slimy, splay-toed creature who showed up right after her treasured golden ball bounced into a deep well. When the frog promised to

retrieve it if she would take him home with her, she airily agreed. She was a princess, used to getting what she wanted, and she had no thought of complying. Ball in hand, off she went. That evening, when the frog showed up at the castle, and demanded to eat from her plate and sleep in her bed, she turned her face in disgust. Her father, the king, however, insisted that she keep her word. Later—



Kolomon Moser [1868-1918]
1805, Bookplate

some say that very night, some say after days of eating and sleeping together—Frog asked for a kiss. When the princess complied or, as in an early version of the tale, when she hurled him against the wall in fury, she freed him from a spell that had been cast on him, and he turned into a handsome prince.

What's going on here?

On one level, it's easy. You can say: *kindness turns ugliness into beauty*. Digging deeper, Bruno Bettelheim believed that the story is a lesson about sexuality for the maturing adult; it promises that, with time and continued intimacy, disgust will fade and “we will experience a happy shock of recognition when complete closeness reveals sexuality's true beauty.”¹ True, perhaps, but the fascination in this and other stories in which ugliness, confronted, is transformed not just to beauty, but to the *original beauty* of the metamorphosed one, lingers on, past adolescence. Myths and fairy tales endure because they are complex and pliant. Lean into any particular spot of a myth, and the fabric, like an elaborately embroidered arras in a Shakespearean drama, will fold around you, and shape itself to your query.

So what is the shape of beauty in tales of an ugly creature redeemed through the attentions of another?

SHAPESHIFTING IS A FAMILIAR PLOY IN WORLD

MYTH. Gods and wizards can change their own forms in a blink. They can also transform others if provoked by anger, jealousy, or simply whim. Suddenly, a person looks down to see his familiar body subsumed in the limbs and skin of another creature, while his own acute human consciousness quails at the horror of the situation. Often, it is only an act of the gods that can turn the human back

again. In Greek myth, jealous Hera changes Io into a cow after Zeus—disguised as a cloud to hide his crime—has raped her. Then, after poor Io spends



N.C. Wyeth [1882-1945], *The Green Knight about to battle Sir Beaumains*. 1822, from *The Boy's King Arthur*

years wandering and bellowing around the world, Zeus has a moment of compassion and changes her back again. Sometimes, as in the Irish tale of the children of Lir, it is only time (in that case nine hundred years) that can reverse the spell. Every now and then the victim cures himself, as Lucius does in the Roman story, when he eats the roses that change him from an ass back to a man.

But in other tales from diverse lands and traditions, beauty is redeemed not by the gods, time, or an antidote, but by another human—like the imperious princess. Those rescuers don't have superpowers. They can't turn the tortured victim into some other creature, and, in fact, it would not occur to them

to try to do so, since the magic they enact is seldom deliberate. What they can do is change the ugly one back to his or her original—and beautiful—form through purely human behavior. In the process, two people transform: the ugly one whose beauty is redeemed, and the redeemer him- or herself.

IT IS NOT WITH THE PETULANCE OF A PRINCESS, but with a knight's sense of honor, that a human act restores lost beauty in the Arthurian tale of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell. King Arthur had been threatened with the loss of his head if he could not come up with the answer to the question posed by the ferocious Green Knight: "What do women want?" Traveling the kingdom in search of the answer, Arthur met Dame Ragnell, who, like Frog, was willing to exchange favors: she would tell him the answer if Arthur's knight, Sir Gawain, would marry her. Unfortunately, Dame Ragnell was "the most ugly hag mankind had ever seen: face red, nose snotted withal, mouth wide, teeth yellow

and hanging down over her lip, a long thick neck, and hanging heavy paps."² Sir Gawain conceded, however, and Arthur got his answer: *Sovereignty. What women want most is sovereignty.*

The Green Knight was defeated, and Gawain duly returned to Dame Ragnell and married her. On the wedding night, after he forced himself to lie down beside her, she asked teasingly for just one little kiss. Gallantly, the knight assured her that he would do more than merely kiss her, at which point she turned into a beautiful woman. She then presented her astonished bridegroom with a choice: she could be beautiful by day when others saw her, and ugly at night when they were alone; or she could be ugly during the day, and beautiful at night—just for him.

Sir Gawain had learned his lesson. "My lady," he replied, "the choice is up to you."

The supremacy of her autonomy acknowledged, Dame Ragnell declared that henceforth she would be beautiful all the time.

The Princess and the Frog



Sovereignty means being independent and unlimited by any other. It is often said that one nation “recognizes” the sovereignty of the other, as if the state of autonomy actually pre-existed a more recent one of subjugation. When we acknowledge the sovereignty of another person, we affirm that they are independent from us, whole and complete—hence beautiful—unto themselves. Avowing that he will make love to his hideous bride, Sir Gawain exceeds the conditions of the bargain and takes on the task of what Clarissa Pinkola Estés calls loving the not-beautiful:

What is the not-beautiful? Our own secret hunger to be loved is the not-beautiful. Our disuse and misuse of love is the not-beautiful. Our dereliction in loyalty and devotion is unlovely, our sense of soul-separateness is homely, our psychological warts, inadequacies, misunderstandings, and infantile fantasies are the not-beautiful. Additionally, the Life/Death/Life nature, which births, destroys, incubates and births again, is considered by our cultures the not-beautiful.³

Estés is writing here about another myth in which the rescuer extends himself in a patient, deliberate way, to transform the ugly back to the beautiful. In the Inuit tale of Skeleton Woman, a woman who had turned to bones and lay twisting and turning beneath the sea was pulled up in the net of a fisherman. When he first glimpsed this horrifying catch, the fisherman was appalled and wanted only to push her back into the depths. But his own humanity got the better of him, and he took her back to his snowhouse and carefully revived her by untangling her bones and laying them out aright. By and by she became again a whole woman, fleshy, warm-blooded, sensual.⁴



Skeleton of Zweeloo Woman. An iron age bog body excavated in 1951 in the Netherlands. Drents Museum, Assen, Netherlands

Both Sir Gawain and the fisherman show us that the beauty of the other is revealed only when we stop wishing for the ugliness to disappear, and accept the other person fully. But acceptance alone is not enough. Loving the ugly back to its original beauty is a task that cannot be accomplished passively. *Active* loving is necessary. Gawain can't simply marry Ragnell and then, wishing her a pleasant good night, shut himself away in his own

room. The fisherman can't dump that heap of bones on the beach and head home, consoling himself that somebody else will take the trouble to deal with the problem. To restore beauty, it is necessary to give beauty abundantly, even as instinct tells us to flee. In other words, we have to begin the metamorphosis by transforming our own expectations of what it is possible for us to do. We must move beyond the confines of what is safe and familiar, and even desired, and say *Yes!* to the scary, but compelling, possibility before us. Or, as the contemporary scholar of myth, Roberto Calasso, puts it, it is necessary to touch the monster. "The monster can pardon the hero who has killed him. But he will never pardon the hero who would not deign to touch him."⁵ Daring to touch the unbeautiful, we realize that not only are we not dragged down into something loathsome, but that just the reverse occurs. We feel empowered, joyous, connected with the other. To give beauty—to our own misshapen selves, to another person, to a group of people, even to a damaged place on the earth—is to move past the fear or repugnance that keep us separate from life itself. To restore beauty is to marry the world, outside us and within.

FOR THOSE WHO DO UNDERTAKE SUCH AN ACT of faith and courage, both redeemed and redeemer are even further transformed, as the Iroquois legend of Hiawatha beautifully shows. All the five nations of the Iroquois were at war with one another when the Peacemaker, Deganawidah, appeared among them in a canoe of white stone. He began going among the tribes, offering his teachings of peace, and eventually arrived at the house of the notorious Man Who Eats Humans. When Deganawidah climbed

onto the roof and peered down through the smoke hole, he saw the man setting onto the fire a kettle containing the meat of a human body. At that moment, the Man Who Eats Humans looked into the pot and saw, reflected in the water, Deganawidah's face imposed on his own, and in that moment he had a revelation. He realized that the man who possessed such a wise and noble face could never eat human flesh. Immediately he took the kettle outside and emptied it.

Deganawidah taught his message of peace to the reformed man, and the two of them continued on together to deliver the message to the tribes. Deganawidah called the man Hiawatha, He Who Combs, because he knew that he would have to confront and convert the greatest obstacle of all to peace, an Onondaga man named Atotarho, who was so cruel that his body had become twisted, and his hair a mass of writhing snakes. And so it was. At first Atotarho mocked the Great Law of Peace. Then he cast a spell on Hiawatha's wife and daughters that killed them. For a long time Hiawatha sat by a lake grieving, unable to go forth until Deganawidah came to comfort him. Then they continued with their mission.

At last all the tribes were united, but still Atotarho refused. Deganawidah promised him that he would be chief of all, and keeper of the fire. Still Atotarho balked, asking who had the power. The chiefs of the five tribes came together and Deganawidah said, "Here is power." Then Atotarho's mind was changed, and Hiawatha combed the snakes out of his hair, and the twisted body straightened.⁶

Transformed himself, Hiawatha goes on to change others, especially his enemy, Atotarho. This is the ultimate redemption. And it occurs not just once,

but in steps: with Hiawatha's realization of his own nobility, as reflected in the face of Degana-widah; his active participation in spreading the Great Law of Peace; his continued commitment to that new path, even after he has been plunged into great suffering; his willingness not only to teach peace to his enemy, but to give him the responsibility for maintaining it as chief; and finally, the touchingly personal and compassionate act of combing the snakes out of the

enemy's hair. This tale reminds us that confronting ugliness in ourselves enables us to penetrate and overturn it, since we know its difficult ways. Hiawatha's journey also assures us that we will be tested, that we must expect to encounter the unbeautiful in ever-new forms that will demand ever-new expressions of beauty.

IN EACH OF THESE STORIES, LOST BEAUTY and brokenness are redeemed through the fire of suffering. Not just one, but two

Augustus Saint-Gaudens [1848-1907],
Hiawatha [detail]. 1872, marble. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City



people undergo this trial, the one whose beauty has been stolen and then redeemed and the redeemer him- or herself, through the process of confronting the ugly. Beauty is superficial when it is untried. Lost, unseen, and unbelieved, and then, wonder of wonders, loved back to life, it flourishes, and both the beautified and the beautifier are stronger and wiser. Just as human consciousness remained locked within the victim during the time of trials, now, we hearers and readers of these tales assume, the memory of the hard times will endure after the transformation. One who has suffered and survived undergoes an alchemical process. She or he is like glass, which, as the nineteenth-century alchemist Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i wrote: after repeated fusings, refirings, and infusion of the magical Elixir, "becomes diamond. It is still glass and yet no—it is something other—but not so, it is certainly itself but itself after undergoing all these trials."⁷ The heroes in these tales are themselves, but themselves after undergoing all these trials.

Ample research has shown that facing ugliness or unpleasantness and giving of oneself to transform it, improves the psychological well-being of the giver. Taking this principle as a spiritual mandate, Zen master Roshi Bernie Glassman offers "street retreats" in downtown Los Angeles, during which his students live as the homeless do. He claims that this work enables spiritual seekers to confront parts of themselves that have been rejected.⁸ We can encounter and transform ugliness into beauty in countless ways: by helping one another, by acknowledging some fearsome secret in ourselves, and by rejecting our own propensity to victimhood and striving for vitality in bad situations. We can even

transform the physical world around us or, rather, we can transform our relationship with it. For the Global Earth Exchange in the summer of 2010, people all over the world went to natural places made ugly through mining, clear-cutting, pollution, and other assaults. After spending time there, they created a simple "act of beauty." Lucy Hinton of London went with three friends to a dump near an industrial site, where they made a sculpture out of trash. "It was as if the place had been dead before, and now it was alive," she wrote later. "When it was time to go, none of us wanted to leave. After spending time with the place in such an intimate way, it felt as though we had given some of ourselves to the place, and it to us. By the time we left, we felt relaxed, at home, like pioneers who had begun the process of breaking an invisible barrier that, until now, held this wounded place in some kind of soulless imprisonment. We dreamed of returning and helping to break up the baked hard topsoil so that seeds could emerge through the surface crust, and the birds and color might return once more."⁹

TOGETHER AND INDIVIDUALLY, myths and tales of beauty redeemed build a teaching in how to reveal the beautiful beneath the ugly:

show compassion;
acknowledge the sovereignty of the other;
confront the unbeautiful;
love actively;
turn suffering itself to beauty.

There is one more step we can take, if we dare. Persian legends relate the trials of Majnun, a crazy-in-love young man who devoted his whole life to searching for his beloved Layla, from whom he had



James Atkinson [1780-1852], original sketch, lithograph copy by L Schonberg, 1836, frontispiece to *Laila and Majnun*, a poem

long been separated. One day, a man noted for his piety came upon Majnun sifting through dirt in the middle of the road. “You claim to be so devoted to your beloved,” the holy man said scornfully. “If that is so, how can you grovel here, searching for a pearl like Layla in the midst of all this rubbish?”

“Well,” Majnun explained, “I seek Layla everywhere, so that one day I may find her somewhere.”¹⁰

As Majnun shows, we can choose not only not to avoid the ugly, we can place ourselves right in the midst of it. Even garbage can become beautiful, since our hands and intention must sort through it to come upon what is precious. Knowing

that the essence of beauty, love, and authenticity we seek could be anywhere, we look everywhere. Then we may discover for ourselves what Majnun knows with all his heart: searching for beauty, we have the opportunity to encounter beauty anywhere. ■

¹ Bruno Bettelheim, *THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT: THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF FAIRY TALES* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 288.

² Heinrich Zimmer, *THE KING AND THE CORPSE*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 90–91.

³ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *WOMEN WHO RUN WITH THE WOLVES* (London: Rider Books, 1992), 144.

⁴ Laura Simms tells another version of Skeleton Woman in “The Magic Drum,” *PARABOLA*, Vol. 23, No. 4, Winter 1998, 84–85.

⁵ Roberto Calasso, *THE MARRIAGE OF CADMUS AND HARMONY* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 344–45.

⁶ Recounted in “The Roots of Peace,” *PARABOLA*, Vol. 5, No. 3, August 1980, 53–54 and “Hiawatha,” *THE RED SWAN: MYTHS AND TALES OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS*, ed. John Bierhorst (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 194–97.

⁷ Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa’i, “Physiology of the Resurrection Body,” in Henry Corbin, *SPIRITUAL BODY AND CELESTIAL EARTH: FROM MAZDEAN IRAN TO SHI’ITE IRAN*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 201.

⁸ Bernie Glassman, “Bearing Witness on the Streets,” *BEARING WITNESS: A ZEN MASTER’S LESSONS IN MAKING PEACE* (New York: Bell Tower, 1998), 97–145.

⁹ Letter to author.

¹⁰ Farid Ud-Din Attar, *CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS*, trans. R.P. Masani, (Boston: Weiser Books, 2001), 34.