

1 Sex sells. This truth is a boon¹ for marketing gurus and the pornography industry but a rather unfortunate situation for women. Every issue of *Playboy*, every lewd poster, and even the Victoria's Secret catalog transform real women into ornaments, valued exclusively for their outward appearance. These publications are responsible for defining what is sexy and reinforce the belief that aesthetic² appeal is a woman's highest virtue.

2 Some argue that the proliferation³ of pornography and other sexually explicit images of women is both harmless for society and inevitable. Just this point was made in a recent *Crimson* column titled "In Defense of Hooters and the St. Pauli Girl." In the tone of an expert, the author boldly claims that the objectification⁴ of women in the media does not affect the way men treat the real women in their lives, nor does it give those with pathological⁵ tendencies "the decisive nudge into misogyny."⁶ Furthermore, the author says, those women who feel pressure to conform to beauty standards set by the media are suffering from a classic psychosis in which they "confuse fiction with reality."

3 My first reaction was to ask how anyone could possibly believe that the pervasiveness⁷ of pornography and sexually explicit depictions of women could fail to have any sort of effect on society. Having spent twelve weeks working in a psychiatric hospital last summer, I am writing from a starkly different perspective.

4 During my first eight weeks at the hospital, I worked on an eating disorder unit in constant contact with anorexics and bulimics. Many patients on the unit were so emaciated⁸ that I could never accustom myself to their appearance; every time I saw them I experienced the same shock. Most had been in and out of countless other hospitals and treatment programs, improving slightly each time but always sliding back into eating-disordered behavior when released.

5 These people were truly at rock bottom, considered by many to be incurable. Their eating disorders had consumed them entirely, leaving no trace of the vibrant, intelligent people that once inhabited their now skeletal bodies. Certainly, these people also had family problems, alcoholic parents, histories of abuse and clinical depression, to name a few, all of which contribute to feelings of worthlessness and extremely low self-esteem—cited by experts as a major cause of eating disorders. What I find significant, however, is not the root of their problems but that these women (there were a few men, but never more than five percent of the patient population) turned to their bodies as a means of expression and self-healing. Profoundly influenced by the depiction of women by the fashion industry, they had been convinced that the only way to attain love, respect, and personal fulfillment was through a relentless pursuit of physical perfection. Most were perfectly aware that they would never look like a supermodel, but it was inconceivable not to try to do so. They found that they were good at dieting and that they were praised and rewarded for their success. And by the time things had gone too far, they had lost all sense of perspective.

6 Convinced by the media and popular culture to believe that, as women, they should look a certain way and that only if they looked that way would they be loved and respected, they turned to dieting as a means of personal fulfillment and self-definition. While cases as extreme as those I saw at the hospital are rare,

1. **boon**: a welcome benefit

2. **aesthetic**: having to do with beauty

3. **proliferation**: rapid growth

4. **objectification**: the treatment of a person as an object

5. **pathological**: abnormal, diseased

6. **misogyny**: hatred of women

7. **pervasiveness**: the extension or spread of one thing throughout something else

8. **emaciated**: extremely thin

Pause After reading her second paragraph, what do you predict that Beck will do in her essay?

Pause Underline the sentence that best expresses the main idea of paragraph 5.

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