

# The Devil Wears Prada: *An Unattractive Beauty*

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David Frankel's screen adaptation of Lauren Weisberger's novel *The Devil Wears Prada* was released conspicuously close to the arrival of *Ugly Betty* on US television screens in 2006. While both *Prada* and *Betty* are based on a remarkably similar premise, it is the film version of the anti-hero in the cut-throat fashion world which lends itself to classroom applications. The film, promoted as a 'boss-from-hell' movie, explores the tensions between inner and exterior beauty, interwoven with the struggle to maintain a person's true self in a world where "fashion is not a utility, it is an expression of identity".

## The Synopsis

*The Devil Wears Prada* traces the story of Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep), fierce editor of *Runway* Magazine and her newly appointed junior assistant, college graduate Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway). Miranda rules the *Runway* fashion empire with an iron (albeit meticulously manicured) fist, while Andy is yet another assistant in a line of many who have failed to impress their fierce employer.

Miranda (allegedly moulded on Anna Wintour, editor of *Vogue*), is the Prada-wearing diva, firing assistants at the drop of a finely crafted Italian hat and crushing \$300 000 deals with the purse of her glossy scarlet lips. As the stilettos carve their way up and down the *Runway* corridors, Miranda appears to have the fashion world at her immaculately polished fingertips, yet struggles to find and maintain a junior assistant willing to obey her every command. After a disastrous run of hiring fashionably beautiful assistants, Miranda takes her chance with Andy, the "smart fat girl".

Andy, dreaming of becoming a successful New York journalist, takes on the junior assistant role "a million girls would kill for", hoping that after a year she would be able to "get any job she wanted". As the new assistant arrives at *Runway*, dressed in "her Grandmother's skirt" and "lumpy blue

sweater", she is mocked by her glamorous colleagues. Although Andy lacks style, her determination more than compensates. While her unsuccessful predecessors could confidently parade their Chanel and Dolce, Andy, in her plain garb, simply refuses to fail and meets every demand of her devilish superior, even completing the impossible task of locating the unpublished manuscript of the next *Harry Potter* book for Miranda's twins. Despite her work ethic and ability, Andy's inner beauty is seemingly incomplete without a touch of Gucci.

Andy soon realises that if she is to make the most of this opportunity, regardless of her dedication and talent, she will need to sell her soul to the devil. The drab assistant gives in to temptation and with the help of *Runway*'s art director, Nigel, begins the process of recreating herself – in the image of Miranda. She learns to walk the walk, talk the talk and ensures her haute couture selections redeem her first impressions. Andy, now in her Jimmy Choo shoes begins to live a double life – manicured fashion diva by day; jean-wearing burger and fries eater by night.

As Miranda becomes more demanding, Andy's personal life begins to hang by a loosely-woven cashmere thread. Her college friends abandon the new, glamorous Andy. She loses her integrity after selling her soul and becomes one of the *Runway* girls, despite declaring that she is the "same Andy, just in better clothes". Outer beauty conquers her identity when her inner beauty is sold. The climax of Andy's transformation occurs when she sacrifices one of her colleagues in order to advance her own career. Ultimately, she crosses over to the dark (yet fashionably beautiful) side.

The more Andy becomes a disciple to the Prada wearing devil, the more she becomes her. Miranda soon reveals to Andy that she feels they share similar personalities. Andy, realising the accuracy of this statement and

the demise of her inner beauty, resigns from the job "a million girls would kill for" and gives away her designer wardrobe. She learns that with glory, comes great sacrifice and is more than willing to sacrifice her exterior image for her original integrity. Miranda indicates with a soft smile, after seeing Andy in her old attire, that she too recognises the value of inner beauty.

## Teaching Applications: exploring *The Devil Wears Prada*

On the surface, *The Devil Wears Prada* is a slick production satirically portraying the irony of ugly operations and management in the beauty industry. The film explores tensions and misinterpretations between inner and physical beauty. The film can therefore be used as a tool to analyse and reflect on these issues and others. For example:

- The tension between inner and physical beauty. – Through the main characters, Miranda and Andy, the film explores the tensions between inner and physical beauty. The plot traces Andy's transformation from an emphasis on inner beauty to the heightened value of artificial physical beauty and back again. Meanwhile, Miranda Priestly, void of an inner beauty represents dominance, success and superiority, primarily through her knowledge of physical beauty. The characters provide different insights into the constructed tension between physical and inner beauty. On one hand, we have Miranda, choosing the physical

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over the emotional. On the other, Andy attempts to balance her identity through her constructed physical beauty at the expense of her personal integrity. When exploring this tension, students may consider questions such as: How is inner and physical beauty managed by the characters? Can or should there be a balance? Who is beautiful? Why and how are they beautiful?

- A satirical view of beauty, produced by an industry obsessed with beauty. – *The Devil Wears Prada* presents a satirical view of a fashion industry obsessed with beautiful people and beautiful clothes. At the same time, the film industry which produced this satirical portrait shares that very same obsession. Or are both industries simply catering to consumer demand, and we the consumers are obsessed with images of beauty? The film adheres to popular cultural assumptions of beauty as being defined by physical appearance. After all, isn't that the basis for the multitude of multimillion dollar industries in the fields of high fashion and film? The characters, setting and production values are sharp and clean - reflecting the inherent value of beauty by the absence of non-beauty. This is further reinforced by costume design and make-up as Anne Hathaway's supposed absence of beauty is presented as a novelty. Students could explore representations of beauty in the film, considering their satirical nature in contrast to perceptions of beauty in other social contexts.
- The illusion of physical beauty equating to happiness and success. – Throughout the film there are various examples of physical beauty equating to success and happiness. We see the parallel between beauty and success in Miranda, and other 'Runway girls', while Andy attempts to become beautiful in order to guarantee her success. As Miranda reflects on her failed marriage, we see her in plain clothes and without make-up, reinforcing the connection between beauty and happiness. It is Andy that destroys the



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illusion at the end of the film as she successfully secures her dream job as a New York journalist, despite returning to her original wardrobe and apparent lack of style. This illusion lends itself to classroom explorations of the misconceptions surrounding beauty and success within and beyond the film.

**Teaching Applications: beyond the film**

Although *The Devil Wears Prada* can be used as a key resource to investigate representations, values and misconceptions of beauty, it can also act as stimulus material to investigate values and concepts beyond the film. Options for exploration include:

- **A representation of physical and inner beauty** – The film is an obvious launch pad for investigating representations of both physical and inner beauty in society. The film clearly defines one interpretation of physical beauty through the eye of *Runway* magazine. It also uses the strengths of Andy to define inner beauty and the value of integrity, friendship and various aspects of a desirable personality. Students could use these examples to critique and explore further definitions and understandings of physical beauty. Options also exist for students to create 'a beautiful mind' – defining what makes a person beautiful on the inside. While the film may provide a starting point for this investigation, exploring additional characters, theories and frameworks would assist students' ability to reflect on their own perceptions and definitions of physical and inner beauty.
- **Exterior appearance defines identity** – Andy's boyfriend claims "fashion is not a utility, it is an identity". Just as physical appearance helps define the identity of the characters in the film, so too does appearance help define many teenage subcultures. Students could be encouraged to reflect and consider how they define a person's identity by their physical appearance. As a response to Andy's transformation in the film, students may also reflect on how they manipulate their own physical appearance as an expression of their identity. They could consider ways in which they define themselves and others based solely on physical appearance. Furthermore, students could consider how and why

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groups are valued or marginalised based on appearance. This may lead to a discussion on school uniforms as 'identity silencers'. Do uniforms prevent an expression of one's identity? Encourage students to explore the function of uniforms in light of identity, beauty, and image. How would Runway be different if a corporate uniform were in place?

*The Devil Wears Prada* provides students with many opportunities to reflect on their own identities and values concerning beauty, fashion, identity, integrity, sacrifice and temptation. This film can be an ideal vehicle to examine the unattractive side of 'beauty'. 'Tempted?

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