

Barbara Smith's "Minor Alterations" is an exploration of individual and cultural perceptions of beauty and self-image. Told from Marnie's perspective, but in the third person, "Minor Alterations" exposes the reader to Western culture's narrow view of beauty by relating some of Marnie's experiences and thought processes. Marnie recalls numerous situations when her appearance attracted the unwanted, and often thoughtless, attention of a variety of people. From the time she was a child, into her working adult life, and throughout her relationship with Harold, Marnie has encountered cultural views of the body that clearly demonstrate how atypical she is. Marnie's experiences clearly demonstrate, however, that women are not the exclusive targets of this kind of pressure; men too feel the need to fit into the homogenous images of beauty held by Western society.

Instead of allowing Marnie to develop a sense of her own beauty and to appreciate her uniqueness, Marnie's mother attempts to hide her daughter's developing breasts. Perhaps intimidated by her own perceptions of the sexual connotation of large breasts, Marnie's mother teaches her daughter that she should hide her physical appearance because it does not conform to what most people consider 'normal'. When a stranger feels the need to comment on the size of her breasts, Marnie simply walks away from him, but his joke has the same effect as her mother's behaviour. Marnie again feels the need to hide her imperfect breasts "with underwires and thick straps, an ugly contraption with lace trim" (231). Her boss, on the other hand, encourages Marnie to exploit her ample bosom for his personal financial gain, regardless of own personal beliefs. Marnie views her larger-than-normal breasts as a sexual entity that exists apart from her, belonging to "anyone who wanted to crack a joke, cop a feel" (239).

At the beginning of her relationship with Harold, Marnie feels beautiful and loved. After their first weekend together, Marnie finds that she no longer feels "fleshy" and "curvy" (229), but "beautiful" and "cherished" (232). Unfortunately, this feeling does not last. After several small incidents where Harold tries to prod Marnie into changing her appearance, he coerces her into having her face waxed. The technician in the shop immediately understands what it is that Harold wants to have done, and

comments that “we can have [her] fixed up in no time” (236), implying that Marnie is, in fact, in need of fixing. Despite reassurances that the procedure is “quite simple” (236), Marnie endures a significant amount of physical pain during this episode, but does not voice any protest. Harold only continues to make suggestions for ‘improvement’. Her feelings of inferiority stemming from this repeated reinforcement of societal standards of beauty and the ideal body form, Marnie finally meets with a plastic surgeon about breast reduction surgery, at Harold’s insistence. Generally, the plastic surgeon minimizes the impacts of the procedure, “quite simple really” (233), and tries to reassure Marnie that most women “seem to feel the end results are worth” (233) the discomfort and risks. The surgeon's suggestion to Marnie that she talk about the procedure with Harold implies that the opinions of others are just as important as, if not more important than, her own self-perception.

As Marnie has learned, cultural ideals of the female body dictate that she ought to be thin, have smaller breasts, not have facial hair, and that it should be ‘quite simple’ to change her appearance to suit others if she truly wanted to do so. Marnie feels flawed and inferior because of the actions of individuals who may truly believe that they are ‘helping’ her to reach a goal that others have set for her. Male characters in the text are not immune to the pressures of societal norms and values where body image is concerned, however, the pressures on them seem less direct.

The males within the story have obviously been conditioned to conform to societal norms for physical appearance. The plastic surgeon that meets with Marnie presents a very polished image, ostensibly to inspire confidence in his patients. His entire way of life centres on the concept of correcting the apparent physical imperfections of his clientele, and to improve their self-perception of body image. The rude customer in the restaurant where Marnie works is so taken aback by the apparent imbalance of her body structure, the significant deviation from the accepted norms, that it compels him to remark upon it. Marnie’s boss, Zaros, would rather that she exploit her ample chest in order to make money for them both. Zaros understands that people associate large breasts with sexuality and

sensuality, and that her physical appearance is more important for financial gain than her personality or abilities as a waitress.

Harold, Marnie's boyfriend, is the primary male figure in the story and his behaviour clearly indicates that he feels pressured to maintain his image to the standards held by society. Harold feels the need to be slim and fit, not necessarily because it is healthy, but because appearances are taken to reflect the worth of an individual within western culture. Harold sees a lack of desire for physical perfection as a character flaw in need of correction. His careful dress and precise handling of the eating utensils speak to his innate desire to have people perceive him as refined and polished – he places more value on approval from strangers than he does on his own feelings of self-worth. In his treatment of Marnie, the same drive for perfection and physical beauty overrides his ability to see and appreciate her as she is. Harold sees flaws within her personal appearance and within her character that are in need of changing, and when Marnie passively resists he drags her into a waxing salon and arranges an appointment with a plastic surgeon. Marnie's own views of her body are quite irrelevant – society judges' people based on appearances, and thus she ought to be must conform.

Society as a whole has fallen prey to the economic imperative of perceived inadequacy; as long as individuals think that appearances are more important than personality, and that body image can be improved upon, they continue to buy the products and services offered for that purpose. The body becomes something apart from the person, and the search for a new and improved body image shapes how we perceive ourselves and our worth as individuals. Obviously cultural constructs of physical beauty play a central role in the behaviour of the characters in this story. Both men and women focus on an idealized version of the human body as opposed to seeing the beauty that exists in everyone. The characters in this story are, with the possible exception of Marine herself in the end, incapable of looking at the human body without assessing its beauty as defined by western culture.

Works Cited

Smith, Barbara. "Minor Alterations". Required Readings for Literary Topics 1: Prairie Literature. Ed. S. Mahoney. Winnipeg, University of Manitoba, 2003.