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## **The Importance of Appearances in Literature: What Does It Mean to Be a Redhead in Literature?**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

The Importance of Appearances in Literature: What Does It Mean to Be a Redhead in  
Literature?

by

Chelsea Anderson

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## Abstract

In literature, appearances always seem to play a major part of each character. The physical descriptions of each character are important to the development of the story. Therefore, it seems that a character's physical appearance becomes an important part of character development, and his/her physical traits help to determine the type of character he/she will be. Often times, different hair colors carry associations along with them. Redheads have been associated with certain temperaments and personality traits throughout history. In literature, red-headed characters often have the temperaments, traits, and negative connotations associated with redheads. One of the major assumptions made about redheads is that they are witches. Libba Bray's young adult novel *A Great and Terrible Beauty* (2003) exemplifies the connection between red hair and witchcraft. This thesis will expose redhead stereotypes by analyzing the main character Gemma Doyle of Bray's novel. By targeting those stereotypes most commonly associated with redheads specifically, I will demonstrate that appearance, especially hair color, becomes an identifier of certain traits about a character to other characters as well as to the reader.

Key words: hair color, children and young adult literature, witchcraft, stereotypes, redheads

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Appearances play a large role in how people are perceived and treated in society. This transfers into literature as well. Different physical characteristics carry different stereotypes and then those stereotypes are utilized to represent certain personality traits within literary characters. One major physical trait that carries different stereotypes is hair color. As Druann Heckert and Amy Best state in their research, “Hair is an important aspect of how people define themselves and how other people define them” (365). Michelle Beddow’s, Robert Hymes’s, and Pamela McAuslan’s sociological research on hair color stereotypes show how different hair colors are perceived differently and people are treated differently depending on the color of their hair.

Physical traits, such as hair color, have become identifiers of certain traits a character has, and have since developed into signifiers of those certain to both other characters in literature as well as the readers. However, these physical traits do not always define a character. Though Libba Bray’s *A Great and Terrible Beauty* exemplifies how stereotypes have defined associations of traits with hair color and physical appearance, she also demonstrates how those traits do not always define a character.

The representation of redheads within literature is an example of how appearances have become a signifier of specific characteristics. Because of religious and historical influence, literature has used red hair as a trope for specific characteristics countless times. Many children’s and young adult novels contain red headed characters that have many of these stereotypical traits and associations. For example, the Weasleys from the popular children’s series *Harry Potter* (1997) are a family of red-headed wizards and

witches. Two of the Weasley children, Fred and George Weasley, are portrayed as very mischievous, and they are troublemakers throughout the entire series. The twins exemplify many of the stereotypes existent for redheads, and the Weasley family's connection to the magical world also fulfills the stereotypes of redheads having a connection to the mystical and magical world. Another red-headed character in children's and young adult literature is Anne Shirley from the novel *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). Though Anne does not have any magical powers, she is a very imaginative and talkative little girl. Redheads are often portrayed as being very spirited and temperamental, and Anne's character exemplifies these traits throughout the novel. Uriah Heep is another male red-headed character from Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*. Heep's character is greedy, dishonest and repulsive in the novel. He is also patronizing to David Copperfield and is a villain of the novel. Heep's character demonstrates many of the negative connotations associated with red-heads, especially that of male red-heads being seen as undesirable. The character of Brenda Starr from the comic strip *Brenda Starr, Reporter* of the 1940s and 50s is another representation of red hair in literature. Unlike the imaginative little girl character of Anne Shirley or the goofy Weasley twins, Brenda Starr's character is a sexy, strong and adventurous woman. Along with these few red-headed characters from children and young adult literature, there is Libba Bray's free-spirited sorceress Gemma Doyle in *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, set in Victorian England. I will use existing research on the personality traits of redheads and other hair colors along with a character analysis of the red-headed protagonist to demonstrate how red hair has been used as a trope in literature. Using the sociological and behavioral findings of Druann Heckert and Amy Best that relate red hair to certain personality traits,



I will show how red hair has developed into a trope for literature, specifically in relation to the magical and mystical world. Both stereotypes about redheads' personalities and religious aspects play a large role in the treatment of redheads; literature and history often represent redheads as being related to the magical or the mystical world. Drawing upon existing research, I will demonstrate the stereotypes associated with red hair and use them as a way to characterize the red-headed literary character. I will also be using existing research from sociological and psychological studies, which are based on hair color in general and the effects on personality traits. By illustrating how redheads are received within society, I am showing how many authors would have perceived redheads, affecting the ways in which they represent them within literature.

*A Great and Terrible Beauty* is the first novel in a series about a young, red-headed girl named Gemma Doyle who is sent off to a boarding school, Spence Academy, after the sudden murder of her mother. While at this boarding school, Gemma finds a diary that leads to her discovery of her mystical powers and her connection to a group of witches called the Order. Gemma is a very powerful sorceress, and the villain of the novel, Circe, must find Gemma and use her to steal the power of the old runes that hold all of the power in the realms, a mystical world Gemma can access through a "door of light" (Bray 108). Along the way, Gemma becomes friends with a group of girls from the boarding school, Felicity, Pippa, and Ann. These girls join her as she travels into the realms and learns about herself and the power she holds. Though Felicity, Pippa, and Ann have no powers of their own, they are fascinated with Gemma's powers. A young boy named Kartik also helps Gemma understand the dangers she faces. In the novel, Bray

explores the importance of appearances through each of the girls' characters, and she utilizes as well as disproves many of the stereotypes associated with hair color.

## **Chapter Two: Stereotypes and History**

### *Hair Color*

Beddow, Hymes, and McAuslan's research focuses on the differing opinions and preferences of many different hair colors, along with the stereotypes associated with hair color. In an earlier study conducted in 1978, males' highest preference was for blondes, while females preferred dark-haired males, and "83% of both genders disliked red-headed individuals" (Beddow, Hymes, and McAuslan 13). Multiple studies conclude that stereotypes are linked to hair colors. Based on the findings of these different studies, Beddow, Hymes and McAuslan conclude the following:

...Researchers used an interview approach to discover the cause of hostility toward redheads. Participants generally believed that redheads were known for their flaring tempers. Furthermore, other stereotypes of redheads included clown, weird, and wimpy men...Generally, people perceive individuals with brown hair as normal...Interestingly, people perceive brunette women as more competent and intelligent than blondes and redheads...(13)

Their findings also included the concept of the "dumb blonde", and they found that there are not very many negative or positive opinions on brunettes (Beddow, Hymes, and McAuslan 13). With each hair color having some form of stereotype attached to it, this study confirms the direct relation of physical appearances to a person's character. A person's hair color can cause viewers to assume specific characteristics about that person. These findings force us to consider the importance of appearances in perceptions of

people in general; if hair color is cause to stereotype someone, people can make assumptions about a person's entire character based on their physical appearance. So just how much of a character's physical appearance plays a role in the characterization of the characters in a novel?

Heckert and Best's research on red hair utilizes labeling theory, which focuses on how symbols cause deviation. Labeling theory conceptualizes the idea that certain symbols become deviant because of the stigmatization of those symbols. Though their research specifically targets the perceptions of red hair in culture, Heckert and Best's research determined that hair color serves as a basis for a lot of cultural stereotyping. In their research, red hair is a symbol that has been stigmatized throughout history and has thus become a form of deviance. As stated on page 367, "Goffman defined stigma as 'attribute that is deeply discrediting' to the individual, based on the connections between such attributes and the stereotypes that accompany those attributes." Historically, redheads have been treated a certain way because of their hair color. Red hair carries certain connotations along with it, allowing for it to become a stigma. The stigmatization of red hair leads to the stereotyping of redheads, and those stereotypes range from personality characteristics to expectations about ethnicity. The stereotypes recorded in Heckert and Best's research are as follows: the flaring temper, the clown, the weird redhead, the redhead as Irish, the redhead as sun challenged, red-headed women as wild and red-headed men as wimps, and the redhead as intellectually superior. Fred and George Weasley demonstrate the concept of the redhead as "the clown." The Weasley twins embody the ideals of redheads as being zany and frivolous with all of the practical jokes and pranks they pull throughout the series. The comic strip character Brenda Starr

is an example of “the redhead as intellectually superior.” Starr is a highly intelligent reporter who pursues her own career and always makes the deadlines. In Bray’s novel, the character of Gemma embodies “the flaring temper” and “red-headed women as wild” stereotypes. Gemma’s feathers are quite easily ruffled in the novel. Also, her inability to control her wild hair and her lack of “proper” Victorian manners encourage the stereotype of a wild redhead that cannot be tamed.

Before the 1500s, theater used the redhead to represent the image of the scapegoat Jew. Towards the end of the 1500s, influenced by Elizabeth I’s rulings against witchcraft, the image of the witch became a universal evil throughout culture. Unfortunately for redheads, “the role of the red-haired woman was both transfused with the fear of an ancient taboo and mantled with a scapegoat’s blame” (Roach 56). Just as society needs someone to blame for negative events, theater also requires a scapegoat, or villain, to blame for all of the negative events occurring. According to Wendy Cooper, “At the height of Europe’s witch hunts, in the 16th and 17th centuries, many women suffered the shame and pain of being stripped, shaved, and ‘pricked’ by a witch-hunter, endured torture, and were put to death, simply because they were redheads” (75). Cooper theorizes that the fear of red hair could have developed from the idea that Judas had red hair (75). As red hair became increasingly stigmatized and as the witch hunt during the 1600s moved to America, redheads became immediately associated with witchcraft simply because of their hair color. Less than four percent of the American population actually had red hair, allowing for redheads to stand out tremendously during this time. Red hair became a target because of the color red and its association with the “personification and colorization of Satan” (Roach 58). The entire basis for redheads’

association with witchcraft was hearsay, though. There was never any actual proof of the connection between red hair and witchcraft, but the strong belief that redheads were witches continued on throughout the entirety of the American witch hunt. That belief also continues to influence opinions of redheads. Roach quotes Susan Cocalis on the opinion of all redheads being witches: “[The red-hair witch connection] has long been a folk belief in Germanic culture and has been used as a symbol of a connection to hell in literature well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Roach 60).

One major figure often represented with red hair is the sorceress Circe. Circe is known to be skilled in the power of illusion and the dark arts of necromancy. Though there are many different myths about the origins of the goddess and sorceress Circe, she is often represented as a very powerful sorceress, “with flaming red hair” who “took many lovers and many a tale warned of their fate as swine after she had her fill of them” (“Goddess Circe” 2007). In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Circe is a fair-locked witch-goddess that turns Odysseus’s men into pigs; Odysseus conquers Circe, becomes her lover, and then spends a year living in luxury with her. Circe’s great power and the recurring depiction of her red hair strengthen the development of the image of redheads as witches, and her sexual deviance most likely influenced the sexualizing of redheads.

Along with the association to witchcraft and the personality traits associated with red hair, red-headed woman are often highly sexualized. Red-headed woman play the role of a very sexual being, the object of desire in many men’s eyes through both literary characters as well as in culture, even today. Red-headed males, on the other hand, often receive quite the opposite response, with women finding them less appealing or attractive. According to Roach’s research, the sexualizing of red-headed women stems

from the belief of their direct connection to the devil. It was believed that menstrual blood was the way in which the devil entered women and infused them with the power of desire. The development of this sexualized idea of red-headed woman stems from the red-headed women of early history. Some of the earliest representations of red hair comes from Greek mythology, such as Cassandra of *The Iliad* and Persephone, the wife of Hades. The beautiful red-headed Cassandra is desired for her beauty by Apollo, Ajax the Lesser, and finally Agamemnon, and she is raped by one and becomes the sex slave of another. Persephone becomes the queen of the Underworld alongside Hades, and she is often associated with symbols of fertility, represented almost exclusively as a redhead. The reformed Mary Magdalene of the bible is implied to have come by her red hair by associations with the devil. Mary Magdalene serves as a “poster girl for that fine line between good and evil...” (Roach 161-162). Whether it is Cassandra, Persephone, or the reformed prostitute Mary Magdalene, throughout history, redheads have been an image that portrays sexuality. The ideas of red-headed women being more passionate lovers could also affect the sexuality associated with red hair in more recent literature, such as Bray’s novel. Red hair signifies sexuality, just as blonde hair has been known to represent innocence and virginity. In Wendy Cooper’s book, *Hair*, she states that fair hair symbolizes purity, possibly because fair hair is the least associated to pubic hair, making it the furthest from any sexual associations. According to Cooper, “it is possible to argue that purity implies innocence, innocence may mean ignorance, and ignorance denotes stupidity” (76). This argument is one explanation for the theory of the dumb blonde that is so often referenced. Cooper also notes that blondes were seen as natural deceivers

because their hair color can so easily be achieved through hair dye, and brunettes were believed to be more honest in nature (77).

### *The Victorian Woman*

In *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, the importance of appearance for character comes from the societal pressures of the Victorian period, which is when the novel takes place. Victorian England impressed the ideas of a “perfect” woman that was domestic, virtuous, and submissive. Nineteenth-century American society also pressed on these ideas with the “Cult of True Womanhood,” which requires women to uphold the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Women were supposed to be the moral center of the household and were supposed to retreat into a domestic lifestyle to support the males of their home. Women of the Victorian period were seen as weaker than men, and the literal physical strains caused by the heavy clothing and tight corsets only aided in that opinion (Amies 542). Victorian era women were supposed to be the “Angel in the House,” a term first used by Coventry Patmore that represented a woman that was sympathetic, unselfish, and well-versed in family affairs. She embodies everything that Victorian society stands for. In Bray’s novel, *Spence Academy* focuses on what makes each of their students into an “Angel in the House.” The school’s motto is fittingly “Grace, charm, and beauty” (Bray 54). Those Victorian ideals include one aspect important to my research: beauty. Though grace and charm are also important when considering the behaviors women were expected to uphold in society, beauty implies that appearances are one of the most important aspects of a woman’s role. Thus, women that had average or unattractive appearances were deemed to become governesses, joining the working middle class to provide for themselves. This is demonstrated in the novel



through the character Ann. Bray's novel exhibits those ideas about beauty being an important quality for a woman to have. In Victorian society, appearances were very important to a woman's success, just like appearances affect the outcome of a character's development in literature.

### **Chapter Three: Analysis of *a Great and Terrible Beauty***

#### **Gemma Doyle**

. In the third chapter of *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, the reader gets the first description of Gemma Doyle. She describes herself having "...freckled skin and [an] unruly mane of red hair..." (Bray 22). This is the very first description of her hair as "unruly." As the novel begins, Gemma is presented as a selfish, unruly young girl that always gets her way, and this unruly, reckless nature is represented through her wild red hair that she can never seem to tame. This demanding personality type confirms the personality type of being controlling and temperamental that is often associated with red heads. Gemma describes her hair as being a "mane," making her seem carnal and animalistic. Also, pointing out her freckles demonstrates how she feels that they are imperfections, or blemishes, on her fair skin. She immediately goes on to describe how her physical appearance is unpleasant and her only chance of a marriage is if she attends a finishing school (Bray 22), where she can learn to dress herself appropriately and learn to behave herself. Even in the first description of Gemma, Bray is already utilizing the stereotype that redheads are wild women that need to be tamed.

Bray utilizes Gemma's unruly nature to contrast with the ideal Victorian woman. Gemma's brother Tom discusses what men want from women, including ideals such as being "well groomed." In a later chapter of the novel, Bray demonstrates the need for Gemma's hair to be tamed, this time acknowledging not the hair color as a sign of unruliness, but referencing the texture of Gemma's hair: "...[I] sweep a brush through my Medusa curls and secure them in a tight coil at the base of my neck" (Bray 91). Gemma's

“unruly” hair and wild temperament suggest that she could never embody those ideals of the perfect Victorian woman. The school has a strict dress code for the girls, including a uniform consisting of a corseted top and a skirt. Along with the uniform, the girls must wear their hair pinned back in a bun, “as young ladies must wear their hair” (Bray 47). Gemma feels restricted by both the corset and the requirement of wearing her hair pinned back and away from her face. Just after Gemma contains the wildness of her hair, she must then also contain herself within a corset, which she describes as being “uncomfortable” (Bray 91). By containing both her hair and her body, Gemma becomes an image of the ideal Victorian woman of the period. The interesting part of this scene is the requirement of Gemma to alter her physical appearance just to imply certain characteristics, such as domesticity and virtue. Women confined their bodies within the tight-fitted corsets to appear to be the ideal Victorian woman. Gemma says that their “...corsets bind and bend [them] to [a] fashionable taste, even though it makes [them] short of breath and sometimes ill from the pressure” (Bray 222). Corsets were often worn so tight that they eventually caused illnesses like tuberculosis and scoliosis because of the compression of their rib cages as well as their internal organs. Women literally made themselves ill just to embody an ideal image of the Victorian woman (Fee, Brown, Lazarus, and Theerman 1085). By being pulled together with the corset, Gemma portrays the image of being pulled together and prepared for the domestic life. Although Gemma may not actually embody those Victorian ideals, her appearance suggests that she embodies those values. Along with the embodiment of the ideal Victorian woman, Gemma says that “men are rumoured to prefer waists” (Bray 222), demonstrating how physical appearance was a desirable trait as well. Thus, physical appearance is

acknowledged as the most noticeable and important aspect of a girl's character. Though women must embody those Victorian principles of the ideal "Angel in the House," she must look the part, first and foremost.

Gemma's self-consciousness, especially in comparison to Pippa, confronts the ideas about redheads being and feeling inferior to others because of their hair color, or as Heckert and Best refers to it, "feelings of differentness" (379). Heckert and Best elaborate about the sense of being different that redheads develop throughout their lives because of their obviously different hair color. This sense of differentness increases, causing red-heads to feel inferior or to feel like outcasts. The envy that Gemma towards her friend Pippa also demonstrates the preference that people tend to have for brunettes over redheads. When Gemma first arrives and is told she must change from her "mourning weeds" to the uniform that the other girls wear, she says she is "grateful for the chance to look like everybody else" (Bray 41). Though she would stand out because of her different clothing, her comment also embodies the idea of the feeling of differentness that redheads often feel. She knows that she will stand out because of her physical appearance, along with her mourning clothes she would be wearing. Gemma also describes herself as "an oddity of one, my strangeness too complicated to explain or share," (Bray 92). Once again, she demonstrates the feeling of differentness, feeling inferior because of her differences and making herself an outcast with those differences.

Early in the novel, Gemma recognizes a poster of a famous actress, Lily Trimble, with "auburn hair, loose and wild" (Bray 26). When Gemma sees this woman, she thinks of how lovely and sophisticated the actress is; however, her brother is first to jump in and discuss how the actress will "never be accepted in society as a proper lady" (Bray 27).

Using “loose” as one of the terms to describe the actress’s hair not only simply describes her hair, though. It also implies a lack of sexual morality, which could be specifically because of her red hair. Throughout the Victorian period, actresses were often associated with prostitutes and believed to display inappropriate sexual conduct (Davis 221).

Gemma sees Lily Trimble as being ravishing and beautiful, while Tom simply feels that she lacks the characteristics that make up a proper lady. Gemma’s opinions about the actress stem from the feeling of differentness and inferiority that is associated with her red hair. Because she has red hair like Lily Trimble, Gemma feels a link to the actress. Tom, however, sees the actress as a kind of harlot, or outsider, also playing upon the feeling of differentness associated with red hair. Tom emphasizes the opinions that others have about red hair, including ideas about sexuality.

Gemma’s mother is described as having “red-gold hair” (Bray 14) , which Gemma later notes is very similar to hers. When Tom and Gemma are discussing the qualities that he believes a woman should have, Gemma argues that her mother was her father’s equal. However, Tom comments on how her mother’s lack of submissiveness could have been the cause of her own death. Their conversation implies that while their mother was around, she was a dominating personality that wanted just as much control, if not more, than their father. Because she has red hair, Gemma’s mother is portrayed as someone who likes to be in control. Red heads are often portrayed as being controlling or demanding and Bray demonstrates this through the description of the mother. Her mother keeping identity as Mary Dowd a secret was still deceptive. Red hair is often associated with sin, and Virginia Doyle’s deliberate deception of her own daughter demonstrates the darker side of redheads.

Along many of the other stereotypes about redheads that Gemma demonstrates throughout the novel, Gemma also portrays the sexuality that is associated with red hair. Chapter eighteen contains a scene between a male character of the novel, Kartik, in which he and Gemma kiss. Gemma feels an “overpowering hunger for more” and even questions herself, thinking, “What kind of girl am I to enjoy a kiss I’ve seized so boldly, without waiting to have it asked for and taken from me, the way I should?” (210). Gemma’s internal struggle is between her own natural sexual desires and the pressures that society puts upon her to be the ideal virtuous Victorian women. In chapter nineteen, Gemma experiences a sexual dream about Kartik. The sex dream is very vivid, and after she wakes up, Gemma must convince herself that it was not an actual experience. However, she concludes that, even though it was a dream, she wishes that it was not (Bray 218 – 219). One of the Victorian values for women is their purity. Once Gemma wakes up from her dream, she even says, “I put my fingers to my lips. They’re not swollen with kissing. I’m still whole. Pure. A useful commodity” (Bray 219). Bray is emphasizing the value of women’s purity through Gemma’s thoughts about remaining useful. The loss of her purity would mean that she becomes invaluable, or useless, in society. Both of these scenes between Gemma and Kartik demonstrate how Gemma is in tune with her sexuality.

The villain or evil force in Bray’s novel is the sorceress Circe, so in opposition to the untamed and brazen girl Gemma is the dark power of the enchantress Circe, who originally was a young brunette girl named Sarah Rees-Toome. Bray strays from the usual representation of Circe as a redhead to demonstrate the strength of Gemma’s power. Circe is weaker than Gemma because of her lack of red hair. In the novel, Circe

must find Gemma to access powers because she has lost her own. Bray's decision to make Gemma a redhead demonstrates the connection of red hair and mystical power. Though Circe is not actually present throughout the novel, she is always looming in the back of Gemma's mind. In the realms, Gemma is able to visit with her mother's spirit, and her mother guides her and helps her deal with her powers, Circe, and the Order. Gemma eventually discovers from a picture of Sarah Rees-Toome and Mary that her mother was a woman named Mary Dowd who was associated with the Order and Circe. After discovering that her mother was actually a woman named Mary Dowd that she had learned so much about from a diary she found, Gemma struggles with forgiving her mother for keeping her identity a secret from her, and she even confronts her mother about her lying about her identity. Her mother tells her that she kept her identity a secret as an attempt to protect Gemma from everything that had to do with the Order and keep her hidden from Circe. Ironically, before Gemma can decide to forgive her mother, the end of the novel reveals that Circe has been pretending to be Gemma's mother every time that Gemma has visited the realms. By embodying Gemma's mother, who has red hair, Circe then embodies the ideas about red hair being connected with evil. Gemma must even fight against her mother's image because Circe tries Gemma's weakness for her mother against her. In the end, though, Gemma discovers that the reason Circe is after her is because she is the most powerful sorceress in the world, not Circe. Circe relies on Gemma to try and gain power from the realms. Because Gemma has red hair and Circe was originally a brunette, the novel implies that Gemma's great power stems from her having red hair, thus making red hair a symbol of power in respect to witchcraft, rather than inferiority.

Though the novel reflects many outside opinions about what Gemma's red hair represents, Gemma has her own perceptions about her red hair and what it means for her to have red hair. One of the main things that Gemma associates with her hair is the connection to her mother. She references a few times throughout the novel the similarities between her and her mother, such as her striking green eyes and unruly hair, and it seems that hair is a representation of, or a link to, her mother. The link to her mother is important because she is the only other character in the novel that has red hair. Her connection to her mother lessens Gemma's feeling of differentness because her mother is like her. Also, Gemma's mother is a strong and independent woman, and Gemma's link to her mother through her red hair gives her strength. Gemma also feels her red hair makes her inferior. She is constantly comparing herself to Felicity and Pippa in the novel, especially Pippa because of Kartik's attraction to her. Though Gemma's connection to her mother because of her hair goes against the normal stereotypes of red hair of feeling weak and inferior, her feelings of insecurity based on her looks exemplifies the "feeling of differentness" that Heckert and Best discovered in their research.

In Galia Ofek's research on hair in Victorian literature and culture, she indicates that Charles Reade defines "domestic" as meaning "tame," which developed into the conclusion that fair-haired women were designed for domesticity. Ofek also acknowledges the dichotomy between fair-haired and dark-haired women (Thorpe 241-242). Though the main character of Bray's novel, Gemma, has red hair, she is not the only character whose appearance affects the development of their character. The other girls of the novel, Felicity, Ann, and Pippa, each have their own appearances that affect the outcome of their characters.



## **Felicity**

Felicity is described as having “white-blonde” hair (Bray 47), and she is the leader of the girls throughout the novel. Everyone at the girls’ school admires Felicity and longs for her approval. In Heckert and Best’s article, they cite Anthony Synnot’s research, stating that “males described...blondes as ‘beautiful, rich, and extremely feminine’” (Best and Heckert 371). Felicity is clearly rich in the novel, always flaunting her high class with the expensive jewelry and gifts that her parents send to her. Cooper’s research showed that blonde hair was often associated with deceit, which follows along with Felicity’s personality very well. In the beginning of the novel, she is slick and tricks both Ann and Gemma by using the power of her popularity. She tricks Ann by pretending to be her friend so that she can attempt to get her in trouble for stealing a ring of hers (Bray 61-65). Then, she later tricks Gemma the same night by trapping her in the chapel after telling her to retrieve the communion wine so that she can become a part of her “inner circle” (Bray 70-76).

Though Ofek’s research states that domesticity is associated with fair hair, Bray’s character Felicity disproves this idea. Throughout the novel, Felicity is shown to be a leader. Gemma’s first impression of Felicity is that “her white-blonde hair is arranged neatly in a bun...but even so, it seems a bit wild, as if the pins won’t really hold” (Bray 47). Felicity’s hair represents her ability to appear to have control when she really is quite out of control. For example, Felicity’s father never comes to visit her, even though he continues to make promises and sends gifts and letters to her. He continually disappoints her, and her lack of control over that situation infuriates her. Felicity becomes obsessed and jealous of Gemma’s ability to access the realms and the power that she holds to

access that magical space, demonstrating a control that Felicity wish she could have. Towards the end of the novel, Felicity completely disproves the idea of fair hair representing domesticity; her obsession with gaining power and having control causes her to strip down naked in the forest and kill a deer, essentially losing all control. This scene represents the polar opposite of being tame and domestic; in this scene, Felicity becomes wild and animalistic. Though Felicity is expected to behave as domestic because of her fair hair, she goes against the stereotypes presented with her hair color.

### **Ann**

Alongside Beddown, Hymes, and McAuslan's description of brunettes as being the norm, the first description of Ann in the novel is that she is "a doughy, plain girl, which is doubly damning" (Bray 48). In a society where having a thin waist is one of the most desirable qualities in a woman, Ann will never be considered desirable like the other girls because she is a little bigger, along with her plain-looking appearance. A lot of Ann's insecurities come from the pressures of society to have a "wasp-thin" (Bray 222) waist like Pippa's, when she has a "chubby body," as Gemma describes (Bray 296). Ann is also said to be a scholarship student, which Gemma says "is a nice way of saying 'one of our charity cases'" (Bray 44). Bray plays into stereotypes with Ann's character, presenting the mousy, average brunette that is smart and competent. Throughout the novel, Ann's main concern is being beautiful. She hates herself because of her average appearance, and she even cuts herself because of that self-loathing. The first time that the girls gather in the middle of the night to try to go to the realms, they confess their heart's desires to each other. Ann confesses that hers is "to be beautiful" (Bray 154). When the girls finally visit the realm, they are able to possess their greatest desires. Later in the

novel, Gemma learns how to take power from the realms and bring it back into the real world. With this power, Ann is able to be beautiful in the real world as she is in the realms. Ann's constant obsession with her appearance emphasizes just how important appearances are in the society that she lives in. As Pippa says, Ann is "not the sort of girl people are constantly fussing over....no one wants [her]" (Bray 312); in contrast, Pippa is beautiful and hates being beautiful because people feel as if they have a right to control her because of her beauty.

Bray represents two different stereotypes associated with brunettes. On one end of the spectrum, Pippa is very beautiful, going along with the stereotype of brunettes being the most desirable. On the other end of the spectrum, Ann is plain and competent, blending into the background because she is simply average. Ann knows that she is not pretty, and she realizes that she will never have any opportunities in life because of her average appearance. She is attending Spence Academy on a scholarship to become a governess because she knows that she is not desirable to men and will probably never be married. When Gemma's brother comes to visit, Ann meets him and develops a kind of crush on him. However, Gemma acknowledges that Tom would never be interested in Ann because he is "looking for a rich wife, probably a pretty one, too, and...[Ann] will never be able to compete" (Bray 290). Even Gemma knows that Ann is not seen as a pretty girl in the real world; she is only beautiful within the realms. Because Ann lacks beauty, she also lacks power. Her average appearance allows her to go unnoticed in the world around her, which takes away from her ability to have any control over a situation. With Ann's character, Bray demonstrates the importance of beauty in respect to power. Being beautiful makes a girl feel more powerful; Ann is timid and weak because she is

not beautiful. Though Ann appears beautiful in the realms, she never attempts to access any other power within the realm. Ann's powerlessness shows that outer beauty is what brings power in Bray's novel. Even though Ann may appear beautiful on the outside, it is her inner beauty shining through, which implies that outer beauty holds the true power. Bray explores the relation between power and beauty through the characters of Ann and Pippa, making Ann weak because of her lack of beauty. Gemma references how Pippa does not even realize the effect she has on men and the power that her beauty gives her (185). Bray seems to be criticizing Ann's desire to be beautiful throughout the novel by making her weak, and making her a follower of the beautiful girls in the novel. She wants desperately to be loved and seen as beautiful, but Bray represents those desires as a flaw because, even Pippa's beauty has what she believes are flaws.

### **Pippa**

Pippa's character is first described as "dark-haired" and "perfect and lovely" by Gemma (Bray 47). Though Pippa does not immediately demand the attention of the room like Felicity, she is described as being the most beautiful of the girls in the novel. This goes alongside a 1970s study conducted by E. D. Lawson demonstrating that both sexes prefer brown hair over any other. Beddow, Hymes, and McAuslan's research revealed that brunettes are perceived to be the most feminine. Bray's character Pippa falls in line directly with these stereotypes and preferences. Gemma continuously describes Pippa as being the most desirable of the four girls, and Gemma even struggles with Kartik's attraction to Pippa throughout the novel. Throughout the novel, Gemma references Pippa's beauty, especially in an envious way; for example, she says, "...I'll never have what she has – a beauty so powerful it brings things to you," (Bray 211). Gemma thinks

that Pippa's beauty brings such as attention from men like Kartik. Bray once again references the importance of beauty in respect to power. However, as beautiful as Pippa is, she has what she considers to be a major flaw: epilepsy. Because of this illness, Pippa believes that she will never be able to be married. Her parents promise her to an older man named Mr. Bumble, and they keep her affliction a secret. Bumble is simply beside himself to marry such a beautiful girl, which demonstrates the shallowness that comes with the desire for Pippa's beauty. Just his name alone, Bumble, implies being shallow. Kartik also desires Pippa because of her great beauty. However, once Mr. Bumble finds out about Pippa's epilepsy, he calls of the engagement. By hiding her affliction behind her beautiful face, Bray is demonstrating that even perfect beauty has its flaws. Bray demonstrates that even though Gemma and Ann think that beauty is what brings power, Pippa has beauty and still no real power. Though her appearance is a major part of her character and what makes her so desirable to men, she has an illness that, in the Victorian period, would make her unfit for marriage. Pippa's character exemplifies that appearance is not always what defines a person. Gemma is the least concerned with her beauty in the novel, and she is the most powerful in the novel. The differences of beauty through each of these characters demonstrates Bray's critique of the idea that beauty brings power.

## Chapter Four: Discussion

Through historical context, character analysis, and even sociological research, this thesis has demonstrated how red hair in literature has come to represent certain stereotypes in characters. On a broader scale, however, this thesis has also demonstrated the importance of appearance to a woman's character development within a story. Red hair has come to be associated with witchcraft because of the associations with the color red along with Satan. It is also used as a trope to represent sexuality or a flaring temper. Brunettes and blondes have just as many stereotypes associated with their hair colors as red heads, though. In Bray's novel, she demonstrates the many different and conflicting stereotypes of different hair colors, and her novel as a whole emphasizes the importance of appearances in relation to a character's development.

Bray contradicts stereotypes throughout the novel with Felicity's lack of domesticity, and she even disproves many of the attached stereotypes by representing her characters in ways other than what is expected of them based on their appearances. For example, Pippa's beauty is continuously described as being perfect, but she feels that she is flawed in that she suffers from epilepsy. By giving Pippa an undesirable quality, Bray takes the opinions about outward appearance and throws them out the window. Bray also embodies many of the stereotypes of certain physical traits, though. Gemma's character demonstrates many of the stereotypical qualities that are associated with red hair, such as her ability to connect to the mystical world, as well as her innate sexuality and wild disposition. Each of Bray's characters is judged based on their appearances throughout the novel, and Bray herself makes the appearance of each character one of the defining qualities of that character's personality. By assuming certain stereotypes in their

characterizations, Bray's novel emphasizes the concept of appearances being one of the major aspects of character development in a novel.

Overall, Bray's novel demonstrates the stereotypes associated with hair color, and it emphasizes the importance of hair color. With the character of Gemma, Bray shows how red hair has come to be associated with witchcraft. She also demonstrates the sexualization of redheads, as well as the personality traits of being wild and unruly. She represents the differing research and opinions on brunettes with both Ann and Pippa. Ann covers the spectrum of brunettes being seen as competent and average, while Pippa embodies the opposite end of the spectrum where brunettes are seen to be the most desirable. Felicity is the one that challenges the stereotypes for her hair color the most. Though blondes are generally seen as innocent and dumb, Felicity is smart and out of control. Felicity is bold and brazen, which completely defies the stereotypes generally associated with blondes. However, she does embody the stereotype that blondes are deceptive. Though there are a few exceptions, Bray's novel demonstrates how certain stereotypes have become associated with hair colors and how authors utilize those stereotypes when developing a character.

Hair color is not the only physical characteristic that is demonstrated as important in Bray's novel. The girls' physical appearances in general are also important, not only for the development of their characters, but for the time period in which they live in. Society during the Victorian period in England pressured girls to be beautiful, have thin waists, and to embody every ideal of the "perfect woman." Gemma has to force her wild red hair into pins every day because she must display the ideals of domesticity and submissiveness that men look for in a wife. Just as she forces her hair into pins, she

forces her body into a corset to make her waist thin so that she will be seen as desirable to men. Gemma has to tame her “unruly” appearance in the novel to become the perfect Victorian woman. Pippa is the most beautiful of the four girls in the novel, as Gemma says, “...possibly the loveliest girl [she] has ever seen” (Bray 46). Because of her beauty, Pippa has many suitors, and her parents expect her to be married off quite soon. Ann’s “chubby body” and average appearance make it nearly impossible for her to ever be married or be desirable within the Victorian society. However, when she is in the realms, she becomes beautiful. Within the realms, Ann’s inner beauty shines through, and her outer beauty becomes clear as well. Each of these characters is influenced by their physical appearance, and their characters are developed from their physical attributes.

Though Bray does embody many of the stereotypes about hair color and other physical traits when developing the characters within *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, she also disproves many of the associations that go along with those stereotypes. For example, though Felicity embodies the deceptive blonde, she does not embody the domestic and tame blonde that is referenced by Galia Ofek. Though she has beauty, which should bring her power, Pippa lacks power because of what she feels is a major flaw: her epilepsy. She believes that she is undesirable to men because of her epilepsy, which makes her feel powerless when it comes to the outcome of her own life. Both Gemma and Ann feel that beauty brings power, and Bray does seem to imply that by making Ann’s character weak and timid, as well as plain. However, Pippa’s character demonstrates that beauty is no more powerful because even beauty has its flaws. Ann’s ability to be beautiful within the realms also goes against the constraints of the average-looking brunette. Each of these girls fights against the stereotypes being pressed upon



them, giving them character development outside of those stereotypes. Thus, it becomes clear that, though stereotypes can help to build and develop a character, those stereotypes do not have to completely define who that character is.

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