

MONTHLY

MOVIES

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A study in inner beauty

By T. Rob Brown

One thing my grandmother used to say often on the topic of beauty, “Beauty is only skin deep but ugly goes clean to the bone.”

We cannot deny the simple yet elegant power of outer beauty. Yet, a person’s personality and nature represent their true self. When someone is ill toward others, disrespectful, rude, self-centered or even just uncaring, they reveal that inner ugliness—especially when it occurs without remorse. That type of crudeness does indeed run clean to the bone.

Some might say my grandmother’s viewpoint was a bit old-fashioned or perhaps belittled the importance of beauty but that quote’s intent is to make us think about making sure our inner self stays just as beautiful as the outer self. Not everyone receives the blessing of outer beauty but who they are on the inside should be what really counts.

Have you ever met that person who was completely gorgeous on the outside but once you got to know them, they ended up disappointing you? Vice versa, sometimes you meet a person whose homeliness becomes overshadowed by their wonderful nature.

Then, on rarer occurrences, we meet that person who breaks the mold—someone who might seem as rare as a unicorn—who embodies both exterior and inner beauty. That person might become our best friend or, if we’re really fortunate, our spouse.

For Hal Larson (Jack Black) and his buddy Mauricio Wilson (Jason Alexander), they focused too much on the superficial nature of outer beauty and failed to see women's true selves. Touted as "The biggest love story ever told" on its movie posters, "Shallow Hal" (2001) stars Gwyneth Paltrow and Black in a Farrelly Brothers film focused on the power of inner beauty.

Through the hypnotic manipulations of a life coach (Tony Robbins) while they're trapped in an elevator together, Hal suddenly becomes able to only see a person's inner beauty. Unaware of his hypnotism, Hal meets Rosemary "Rosie" Shanahan (Paltrow). Rosie is the morbidly obese daughter of the president of the company Hal works for in the film.

Rather than seeing her physical form, he sees a beautiful "trophy blonde." Later in the film, a trigger phrase releases Hal from the hypnotism and he sees Rosie for the first time. As any shallow man, he begins to avoid the still beautiful yet 300-pound woman he now sees before him.

This film fulfills the basic three-act structure recipe for romance used for the majority of these types of films: 1. The couple meets. 2. Circumstances force them apart. This might be through a misunderstanding or due to a hostile third party that forces them apart. 3. One overcomes the opposition so they can reunite. For "Shallow Hal," the opposition is his own shallow nature. Rosie's heart is in shambles and the only way it can be fixed is for Hal to fix himself.

In my own personal world, I've long believed that we are better to be alone than to be with the wrong person. But we are at our best when we're with the right person. Hal himself begins to realize this truth as well. His true feelings acknowledged, he must overcome his shallowness, then face obstacles toward winning her back.

While I love the premise of this film, one of my biggest complaints about it is that despite its well-intended statement, the directors felt the need to hire the gorgeous yet slender Paltrow to play the lead female role. While that in itself isn't the issue—the issue stems from that. We are led to believe that in order to have inner beauty, you need to look like Paltrow on the outside—even in an obesity suit.

In order to better serve the premise and statement of the film, it would have been better to choose an overweight actor for the female lead and use CGI to slim them down for the hypnotic scenes. Paltrow's true form was seen in the hypnotic state and the non-hypnotic version was the fake in real life.

"Shallow Hall," rated PG-13, runs 1 hour and 54 minutes. It received a 5.9/10 International Movie Database rating, 49% on the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer and a 45% audience score.

Luckily, other films chose to feature overweight yet beautiful women in romantic comedies—like the hilarious yet beguiling Rebel Wilson in "Isn't It Romantic" (2019). This film takes a big stab at the unrealistic beauty standards often placed on women by society. Again, it looks more at the importance of inner beauty while also making fun of all the romantic comedy clichés.

As a young child, Natalie (Wilson) watches films like "Pretty Woman" and believes the romantic storylines. One day, her mother breaks her heart and tells her about her views on romantic films and flat out tells her, "You see, Natalie, life's not a fairy tale. Girls like us don't get that. Look in the mirror, doll. We're no Julia Roberts."

Flash forward 25 years and Natalie focuses on her career, practically ignoring her work buddy who has a crush on her. She gets into discussions with her coworkers about how cliché all of the

romance films are and her disenchantment with the entire genre. She automatically counts herself out of the picture anytime something romantic could occur.

“All those movies are lies set to terrible pop songs,” she tells her coworkers.

During a mugging, Natalie hits her head and wakes up in the most beautiful hospital most of us will ever see. Her life suddenly becomes perfect—well, too perfect. She has every pair of shoes she ever wanted, her apartment is considerably larger and much better decorated, her neighborhood is all cleaned up and smells great—even the birds fly overhead in perfect formations of heart shapes.

Men that would normally ignore her or treat her poorly, like the handsome businessman Blake (Liam Hemsworth), suddenly start calling her “beguiling” and fall over themselves to spend time with her. Not unlike our character of Shallow Hal, Natalie can’t see the young man who already adored her, Josh (Adam Devine). She is so stunned over Blake that she falls for him.

Often where matters of the heart are concerned, people desire that which they cannot have. Maybe it’s a sense of believing we’re owed the same happiness as everyone else. Maybe it’s that inner selfish dream or a “the grass is greener on the other side of the fence” scenario. Maybe it’s a sense of empowerment. But ... maybe ... just maybe, it’s an inability to see the forest for the trees. For Natalie, the latter certainly overshadows her love life.

But before Natalie realizes the latter, she must first experience the foremost of that list. It takes her seeing Josh with Isabella (Priyanka Chopra Jonas) before she realizes how much Josh means to her and how little she really cares for Blake.

Can she fix things before it’s too late?

What’s ironic about this film is that despite its own admission as a spoof of its own genre, it’s an extremely funny film that reminds us of how bad some romantic comedies can be—yet while also not apologetic and embraces that genre.

“Isn’t It Romantic,” rated PG-13, runs 1 hour and 29 minutes. Just like “Shallow Hall,” it received a 5.9/10 on imdb.com. It did earn a 70% on the Tomatometer but only a 47% audience score.

Another film that does a great job of tackling the contrast between inner and outer beauties is “I Feel Pretty” (2018), starring Amy Schumer.

“... Let’s be honest for a minute. No matter how many times we hear, ‘It’s what’s on the inside that matters,’ women know deep down, it’s what’s on the outside that the whole world judges,” Renee Bennett (Schumer) narrates.

Later she confides in a friend, “I’ve always wondered what it feels like to be just undeniably pretty.”

Not unlike our character of Natalie, Bennett hits her head and her world changes. Unlike Natalie, it’s not the world around her that changes—it’s her view of herself. Bennett sees herself in the mirror and sees a reflection much prettier than she can recall.

With her newfound beauty, her personality changes—she becomes more confident in her work and around men.

"I Feel Pretty," rated PG-13, runs 1 hour and 50 minutes. It received a 5.6/10 on imdb.com, a 35% on the Tomatometer and a 35% audience score.

And what study of films about inner beauty would be complete without the likes of Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" (2017) and the original animated film from 1991? This is the original fairy tale that set the standard on learning to see the beauty that resides in someone else—even in the heart of a monster.

This is the 30th anniversary of the original film, often considered one of Walt Disney Pictures' finest works. A film about curses, roses, mirrors, true love and, of course, that all pales in comparison to Gaston. "No one's slick as Gaston. No one's quick as Gaston. No one's neck's as incredibly thick as Gaston."

Seriously though, Gaston is a prime example of "ugly goes clean to the bone." On the exterior, he seems like this fine specimen of a man. But as people often say, "Don't judge a book by its cover." Once we get to know the real Gaston, we realize his looks definitely are only skin deep.

His nature is perfectly juxtaposed by the beast—a creature that comes across as cruel, spiteful, coarse, unrefined and filled with rage on a first meeting. Yet, deep within his beating chest lies the soul of a protector and a hurt individual in need of healing. Belle begins to see his true nature over time as it's revealed.

Despite that rugged exterior and frightful look, she ends up falling for him. These films don't disappoint in the "Once upon a time," and "They lived happily ever after," categories.

The animated "Beauty and the Beast," rated G, runs 1 hour and 24 minutes. It received an 8/10 on imdb.com, a certified fresh 94% on the Tomatometer and a 92% audience score.

The 2017 remake turned the film into a live-action fantasy musical starring Emma Watson (Belle), Dan Stevens (Beast), Luke Evans (Gaston) and an all-star cast of supporting actors including Josh Gad, Kevin Kline, Ewan McGregor, Ian McKellen, Emma Thompson, Stanley Tucci and more.

The live-action "Beauty and the Beast," rated PG, runs 2 hours and 9 minutes. It received a 7.1/10 on imdb.com, a 71% on the Tomatometer and an 80% audience score.

"The show must go on."