Engaging the Text, and the Suggestions for Sustained Writing that follow each selection in this chapter. Another good way to learn the skills of definition is to read each of the essays in this chapter twice. On your first pass, simply make sure you understand each selection thoroughly and accurately. The second time around, ask yourself how you might define the term being explained, whether you agree with the author's perception, or if you can add information to make the definition even more credible. The method described above might require more time than you had planned to spend on this chapter, but it is the kind of mental exercise that will strengthen your analytical muscles and help you use definition as a powerful tool whenever you need to explain complex ideas.

Women's Beauty: Put Down or Power Source?

Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag (1933–2004) took her B.A. at the University of Chicago and her M.A. at Radcliffe College. She also studied at Oxford University. She was an accomplished novelist, film director, and writer of screenplays. Through her essays, which have been published in magazines and journals across the country, Sontag established a reputation as a critic of modern culture. She will probably be best remembered, however, for her contribution to the theory of aesthetics. In her best-known work, Against Interpretation *(1966), Sontag enunciates a theory of art based upon a reliance on the senses and not on the intellect. Her place of authority in the contemporary world of art criticism was confirmed when, in 1976, she published* On Photography. *Her novels include* The Benefactor *(1964) and* Death Kit *(1967). Sontag's nonfiction—*Trip to Hanoi *(1969),* Styles of Radical Will *(1969),* Vudu Urbano *(1985), and* AIDS and Its Metaphors *(1989)—demonstrate her ability to address current social and political realities with the same incisiveness that she approaches questions of art. In "Women's Beauty," which she first published in* Vogue *in 1975, Sontag provides us with a feminist interpretation of the uses and misuses of "beauty" throughout history.*

In "Women's Beauty" Sontag traces the sources of traditional notions of physical beauty and then explains their role in "the oppression of women." An essay important for its aesthetic and political implications, "Women's Beauty" also serves as a model for those who would question a variety of accepted moral, ethical, and social standards.

For the Greeks, beauty was a virtue: A kind of excellence. Persons then were 1
assumed to be what we now have to call—lamely, enviously—*whole* persons. If it did occur to the Greeks to distinguish between a person's "inside" and "outside," they still expected that inner beauty would be matched by beauty of the other kind. The well-born young Athenians who gathered around Socrates found it quite paradoxical that their hero was so intelligent, so brave,

so honorable, so seductive—and so ugly. One of Socrates' main pedagogical acts was to be ugly—and teach those innocent, no doubt splendid-looking disciples of his how full of paradoxes life really was.

2 They may have resisted Socrates' lesson. We do not. Several thousand years later, we are more wary of the enchantments of beauty. We not only split off—with the greatest facility—the "inside" (character, intellect) from the "outside" (looks); but we are actually surprised when someone who is beautiful is also intelligent, talented, good.

3 It was principally the influence of Christianity that deprived beauty of the central place it had in classical ideals of human excellence. By limiting excellence (*virtus* in Latin) to *moral* virtue only, Christianity set beauty adrift—as an alienated, arbitrary, superficial enchantment. And beauty has continued to lose prestige. For close to two centuries it has become a convention to attribute beauty to only one of the two sexes: The sex which, however Fair, is always Second. Associating beauty with women has put beauty even further on the defensive, morally.

4 A beautiful woman, we say in English. But a handsome man. "Handsome" is the masculine equivalent of—and refusal of—a compliment which has accumulated certain demeaning overtones, by being reserved for women only. That one can call a man "beautiful" in French and in Italian suggests that Catholic countries—unlike those countries shaped by the Protestant version of Christianity—still retain some vestiges of the pagan admiration for beauty. But the difference, if one exists, is of degree only. In every modern country that is Christian or post-Christian, women *are* the beautiful sex—to the detriment of the notion of beauty as well as of women.

5 To be called beautiful is thought to name something essential to women's character and concerns. (In contrast to men—whose essence is to be strong, or effective, or competent.) It does not take someone in the throes of advanced feminist awareness to perceive that the way women are taught to be involved with beauty encourages narcissism, reinforces dependence and immaturity. Everybody (women and men) knows that. For it is "everybody," a whole society, that has identified being feminine with caring about how one *looks*. (In contrast to being masculine—which is identified with caring about what one *is* and *does* and only secondarily, if at all, about how one looks.) Given these stereotypes, it is no wonder that beauty enjoys, at best, a rather mixed reputation.

6 It is not, of course, the desire to be beautiful that is wrong but the obligation to be—or to try. What is accepted by most women as a flattering idealization of their sex is a way of making women feel inferior to what they actually are—or normally grow to be. For the ideal of beauty is administered as a form of self-oppression. Women are taught to see their bodies in *parts*, and to evaluate each part separately. Breasts, feet, hips, waistline, neck, eyes, nose, complexion, hair, and so on—each in turn is submitted to an anxious, fretful, often despairing scrutiny. Even if some pass muster, some will always be found wanting. Nothing less than perfection will do.

7 In men, good looks is a whole, something taken in at a glance. It does not need to be confirmed by giving measurements of different regions of the body, nobody encourages a man to dissect his appearance, feature by feature. As for perfection, that is considered trivial—almost unmanly. Indeed, in the ideally good-looking man a small imperfection or blemish is considered positively desirable. According to one movie critic (a woman) who is a declared Robert Redford fan, it is having that cluster of skin-colored moles on one cheek that saves Redford from being merely a "pretty face." Think of the depreciation of women—as well as of beauty—that is implied in that judgment.

8 "The privileges of beauty are immense," said Cocteau. To be sure, beauty is a form of power. And deservedly so. What is lamentable is that it is the only form of power that most women are encouraged to seek. This power is always conceived in relation to men; it is not the power to do but the power to attract. It is a power that negates itself. For this power is not one that can be chosen freely—at least, not by women—or renounced without social censure.

9 To preen, for a woman, can never be just a pleasure. It is also a duty. It is her work. If a woman does real work—and even if she has clambered up to a leading position in politics, law, medicine, business, or whatever—she is always under pressure to confess that she still works at being attractive. But insofar as she is keeping up as one of the Fair Sex, she brings under suspicion her very capacity to be objective, professional, authoritative, thoughtful. Damned if they do—women are. And damned if they don't.

10 One could hardly ask for more important evidence of the dangers of considering persons as split between what is "inside" and what is "outside" than that interminable half-comic, half-tragic tale, the oppression of women. How easy it is to start off by defining women as caretakers of their surfaces, and then to disparage them (or find them adorable) for being "superficial." It is a crude trap, and it has worked for too long. But to get out of the trap requires that women get some critical distance from that excellence and privilege which is beauty, enough distance to see how much beauty itself has been abridged in order to prop up the mythology of the "feminine." There should be a way of saving beauty *from* women—and *for* them.

1975

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Content

a. What is Sontag's thesis?

b. Sontag makes it a point to explain the differences between the connotations of the word "handsome" and those of "beautiful." How does

this contrast help her develop her thesis? In what other ways does she use contrast as a method of development?

c. Is Sontag's message aimed at a predominantly female audience? At a predominantly male audience? At a mixed audience?
d. Consult appropriate sources in the reference section of your college library. Who are Socrates and Cocteau? Why does Sontag mention them (paragraphs 1 and 8, respectively)?
e. What was it that caused beauty to "lose prestige" (paragraph 3)? How does our conception of beauty differ from the one the Greeks had?
f. What is Sontag referring to when she talks about countries that are "post-Christian" (paragraph 4)?
g. If beauty is "a form of power" (paragraph 8), what about it is "lamentable"?
h. What does Sontag mean when she claims that women are "Damned if they do. . . . And damned if they don't" (paragraph 9)?

Strategy and Style

i. Sontag launches the essay by spending considerable time discussing notions of beauty through history. Is such a long introduction justified? Why or why not?
j. Does the essay's conclusion echo its introduction? Explain.
k. In some instances, Sontag seems to be addressing the reader directly. Find a few such instances, and explain their effect on you.
l. Analyze the author's style. What is the effect of her insistence on varying sentence length and structure?
m. Overall, how would you describe Sontag's tone?

ENGAGING THE TEXT

a. Rewrite Sontag's essay as song lyrics. An easy way to do this is to use the melody of a well-known song for the structure of your lyrics. Try to remain true to what you believe to be Sontag's meaning.
b. Write a short definition of "ugliness." Is it the antithesis of beauty, or do beauty and ugliness share some of the same characteristics?

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUSTAINED WRITING

a. In paragraph 5, the author claims that "the way women are taught to be involved with beauty encourages narcissism, reinforces dependence and immaturity." Think about some relevant television or magazine advertisements for beauty products. Is Sontag correct? Write an analytical essay in which you explain how such ads define *beauty* and

evaluate them against Sontag's claim. If this assignment doesn't interest you, ask yourself if there is such a thing as *inner beauty* as distinguished from one's physical appearance. Then write your own definition of *inner beauty*, but make sure to illustrate it with concrete details about a person or persons you know quite well.

b. Do you agree with Sontag's definition? Write an essay in which you take issue with all or some of her assumptions and conclusions. If this doesn't interest you, write an essay in which you use material from personal experience that supports or illustrates Sontag's ideas about beauty.
c. In the first paragraph, Sontag states that for the Greeks, "beauty was a virtue." Reread this paragraph. Then write an essay that, using library or Internet research, explains the Greek notion of physical beauty or artistic beauty. If this doesn't interest you, write a research paper in which you create a definition of physical beauty or artistic beauty as seen by a culture different from our own. You might focus on a contemporary culture. On the other hand, it might be fun to learn how beauty was defined by some past civilization.

READ MORE

Hitchens, Christopher. "Susan Sontag: Remembering an Intellectual Heroine" (http://slate.msn.com/id/2111506/).

Iannone, Carol. "At Play with Susan Sontag." *Commentary* 111.2 (2001): 55–59. *In-depth profile of Sontag, with special emphasis on her novels.*

Sontag, Susan. "Directions: Write, Read, Rewrite, Repeat Steps 2 and 3 as Needed." *The New York Times* 18 Dec. 2000: E1. *One in a series of authors commenting upon the process of writing, this piece expresses the author's ideas about writing and the critique of writing.*

"Susan Sontag (1933–2004)" (http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/sontag.htm): *Profiles the author and provides a bibliography of her works as well as a bibliography of criticism.*

What Is Poverty?

Jo Goodwin Parker

Although more than three decades old, "What Is Poverty?" holds as much meaning for us today as it did when first written. Parker's use of description and anecdote make this definition essay both moving and incisive. In some ways, however, Parker seems to verge on argument. This becomes especially clear as we realize that, by anticipating reader objections, Parker has framed a dialogue that keeps us engaged and fascinated.