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### Standing Out: Height, Gender, and the Politics of Beauty

If I were teaching a class on the politics of beauty and literature, I would include an additional unit on height as a gendered beauty standard. Height is an often-overlooked axis of physical difference that influences cultural understandings of gender, power, and desirability. While tall men are frequently admired for their perceived authority and leadership, tall women are read as anomalies that are only celebrated when their height aligns with male fantasies of model-like femininity. Likewise, short men are often derided as inadequate or less masculine due to their stature. Despite being an immutable trait, height functions as a visible, policed marker of gender performance. My unit would examine how height acts as a critical lens for understanding how beauty norms intersect with power, space, and identity. To explore these dynamics, I would teach *The Lady Daffodilia* by Evelyn Sharp, “What It’s Like to Be a Woman Who’s 6’2” by Ann Friedman, and selections from *The Tall Book: A Celebration of Life from on High* by Arianne Cohen. These texts, along with supporting secondary sources, reveal how height operates as an embodied form of social control and resistance.

Although rarely centered in mainstream beauty discourse to the extent other attributes like weight are, height functions as a powerful and persistent aesthetic norm for both men and women. As Gideon Lasco argues in his comprehensive review “Beyond Heightism and Height Premium,” height is not merely a biological trait but a distinct socio-cultural category that intersects with race, class, gender, and beauty norms without being reducible to any single one of

them alone (Lasco 1). Unlike other beauty practices such as fashion, hair, or cosmetics, height is non-negotiable. Height's immutability gives it a unique social and symbolic weight, making it a powerful but often silent standard of body normativity. Lasco builds upon sociologist Saul Feldman's "sociology of stature" by exploring how height operates as both a marker of difference and a form of power. He notes that societies often valorize tallness, associating it with masculine traits like dominance, intelligence, and leadership (Lasco 2). These associations put tall women in a contradictory space where their stature makes them hypervisible but challenges conventional feminine norms, which are tied to smallness, daintiness, and submissiveness. Additionally, Lasco highlights how height is pathologized and medicalized through normative growth standards, mentioning the fact that estrogen therapies have been historically used to suppress girls' growth to fit traditional beauty standards (Lasco 9). This mirrors broader critiques of the medicalization and moral judgement of bodies found in femininity and disability studies, further demonstrating why height belongs in any conversation about beauty politics. I argue that a unit investigating height's role in shaping beauty standards gives students an additional opportunity to see how physical characteristics can embody ideas of power, visibility, and desirability.

Evelyn Sharp's 1900 short story *The Lady Daffodilia* offers an early literary depiction of height-based gender dynamics, embedded within a whimsical, seemingly innocuous children's tale. The story centers on Lady Daffodilia, an "idle, careless, and thoughtless" twelve-year-old girl who is described as being a whole head taller than her friend Prince Brilliant, who is a year older than her (Sharp 149). She teases the prince for his height, prompting him to embark on a journey to grow taller and become her equal. In his absence, Lady Daffodilia is "clapped into prison" by "the people," presumably an ambiguous stand-in for society, who blame her for the

prince's disappearance (Sharp 153). After years, she emerges as a "dainty, winsome little lady" and is reunited with the prince, who is now taller than her (Sharp 158).

This seemingly innocent fairy tale reveals a deep engagement with beauty standards and bodily expectations, especially for young girls. Lady Daffodilia's height, teasing confidence, and refusal to conform is portrayed as socially disruptive. Her punishment is not just solitude but transformation, as she must become small and domesticated in order to be accepted. Her imprisonment is a metaphor that reflects how society disciplines girls who do not fit into conventional models of femininity. Her growth over the years is not intellectual or emotional, but one of softening and shrinking. The story reinforces the idea that tall girls, especially those who assert themselves, must learn how to take up less space to fit into a heteronormative gender order.

In stark contrast to this, Prince Brilliant's growth is framed as a heroic, mystical process. He is guided by a magical daddy-longlegs and spends years in a dream world preparing to become tall. His transformation is imagined, surreal, and aspirational. Where Lady Daffodilia is made small through containment, Prince Brilliant is allowed to become large through exploration and narrative privilege. This disparity relates to real-world gender dynamics, in which men are encouraged to grow physically, professionally, and intellectually, while women are taught to shrink. The story naturalizes this difference by positioning male tallness as earned and admirable, while female tallness is seen as excessive and needing correction. Ultimately, *The Lady Daffodilia*, despite being a children's fairy tale, can be read as a demonstration of gendered beauty conditioning. It encodes the lesson that feminine bodies must be the "right" size to be loveable and respectable, even if that means sacrificing bodily autonomy. By positioning Lady Daffodilia's height as both a simple physical trait and a metaphor for defiance, Sharp's story

exposes how even children's literature can prepare young children to internalize the politics of beauty.

Additionally, Ann Friedman's article "What It's Like to Be a Woman Who's 6'2"" provides a powerful real-world counterpart to the fictional literary themes of transformation and containment found in *The Lady Daffodilia*. Where Evelyn Sharp's tale demonstrates society's punishment of tall girls through fantasy, Friedman brings light to the everyday scrutiny and alienation that tall women face in contemporary life. Her narrative explores how height renders her hypervisible, inviting a constant stream of commentary, judgment, and unsolicited attention from strangers. She writes: "Being a very tall woman means being very visible. You know that feeling you had during your most awkward adolescent years—that everyone was staring at you? That feeling is my life. People are staring. And, often, they're not just staring. They want to talk about it" (Friedman). Because Friedman's body doesn't fit the norm, it becomes a kind of "public property" that is continually available for observation and evaluation, as if it exists for others to remark upon. She reflects on an experience she had when she was twelve, where she was shopping for pantyhose at a department store: "At 6'2", I was off the matrix. A total freak" (Friedman). Her height shifts from a simple physical fact to a form of aesthetic failure, as her inability to locate her height on the sizing chart (which is the matrix she is referring to) confirms to her that her body exists outside of what is deemed acceptable, desirable, or arguably even imaginable. Throughout the text, Friedman emphasizes the way her height becomes a trigger for unwanted conversations, usually delivered under the guise of compliments: "The questions are always the same: How tall are you? Are your parents tall? Do you ever wear heels? How tall is your boyfriend? Or, sometimes it's just a statement: You're really tall" (Friedman). Her constant

observation by strangers demonstrates the fact that height is not just a neutral measurement but a gendered and politicized trait that is heavily policed.

Furthermore, Friedman's essay is particularly relevant to the politics of beauty because it reveals the conditional nature of female admiration. Her height is only acceptable when it maps onto male fantasies of fashion models. She writes: "Every once in a while, a woman will say something along the lines of 'Are you a model?' ... It is because I have this one notable physical characteristic that is associated with one very particular profession—a profession that sets a standard that all women are pressured to measure themselves against" (Friedman). In this framing, Friedman's body is not simply tall—it is measured against an imagined ideal, and its value is filtered through the lens of the male gaze.

Much as Lady Daffodilia must shrink into a "dainty, winsome little lady" to be socially accepted, Friedman feels pressure to neutralize or justify her difference. However, unlike the fictional Lady Daffodilia, Friedman resists this pressure by naming and challenging the assumptions placed on her. Her willingness to call out the confusion and hypocrisy she encounters makes her essay not only a record of bodily discipline but also a form of refusal. "Height is different," she writes, "These conversations about it rest on the fact that we both know there's nothing that will make either of us shorter or taller" (Friedman). This recognition that height is an uncontrollable, immutable trait sharply contrasts with the way beauty standards tend to fixate on what can be altered, trimmed, concealed or corrected. By openly inhabiting a body that resists shrinking, Friedman turns her hypervisibility into a symbol of subtle defiance. Additionally, the immutable nature of height makes it an interesting trait to study in the context of a class on the politics of beauty, as it differs from a lot of other beauty ideals in this regard.

Another valuable literary text is Arianne Cohen's *The Tall Book: A Celebration of Life from on High*, which offers a cultural analysis and personal reflection on tallness from the perspective of a 6'3" woman. Unlike the fantastical narrative of *The Lady Daffodilia* or the raw personal account in "What It's Like to Be a Woman Who's 6'2"," Cohen's book is both a memoir and a form of research, as she blends interviews, statistics, humor, and her own personal experiences to explore how height shapes social belonging. While the title suggests an entirely celebratory tone, the book also examines the trade-offs and pressures tall women face when their bodies do not align with conventional ideals of femininity. Cohen's opening chapter, "A Primer on the Tall Life: Smarter, Richer, Longer, and Better," shows how height can function as a form of privilege for men: "Tall people are perceived as more dominant and often get treated that way, and if people treat you as dominant, then you de facto become more dominant in that group. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. And that is the tall advantage" (Cohen). She explores how taller people are often perceived as more competent and trustworthy, receive higher salaries, and are more likely to become CEOs. However, Cohen is careful to distinguish how these rewards are conditional and unequally distributed. For example, in her chapter "The Tall Fetish," she unpacks the complex experience of being a tall woman whose physical appearance simultaneously commands authority and invites objectification: "Tall fetishes are, at their heart, about power dynamics...To be tall is to be public, and to be public is to be an easy target" (Cohen). This demonstrates how height is a gendered trait that affects men and women differently.

Furthermore, Cohen also exposes the ways in which tall bodies are regulated and constrained. In the chapter "Tall Treatments: Sixty Years of Height-Reduction Pills," she documents how medical interventions, including estrogen therapy, have historically been used to limit growth in girls deemed too tall (Cohen). In addition to this historical context, she also

reflects upon her own experiences with her childhood endocrinologist visits. During her appointments, her height, age, and weight were continually plotted against a chart that represents the “normal” growth of a person her age: “I picked up my pink graph and with my finger traced my curve to its end: 6’5”. Wayyyy above all the other growth curves” (Cohen). Interestingly, Gideon Lasco also points to these same growth charts in “Beyond Heightism and Height Premium” as an example of how medicine institutionalizes cultural discomfort with large female bodies. Even something as mundane as shopping becomes a site of alienation in Cohen’s chapter “Retail Therapy: Buying Off the Rack and Other Pipe Dreams,” where she describes the impossibility of finding clothing that fits her (Cohen). These chapters echo Ann Friedman’s sentiment in “What It’s Like to Be a Woman Who’s 6’2”,” where she argues that being tall as a woman means often being left out of what’s considered “standard” or “normal,” whether in fashion, medicine, or social interactions.

Despite these challenges, Cohen’s *The Tall Book* ultimately contributes to a broader narrative of resistance and reframing. Cohen does not ask to be smaller, daintier, or less visible. Instead, she insists on visibility as a site of pride and power. She joins what might be called a subset of the wider body-positivity movement for tall women, encouraging readers to see height not as a deviation from femininity, but as a legitimate expression of it. Yet even this celebratory tone is tempered by Cohen’s acknowledgement of the real emotional labor tall women must perform. In the context of this unit, *The Tall Book* serves as a crucial literary work that connects a personal narrative to a much broader cultural critique. Where *Lady Daffodilia* dramatizes the shrinking of girls into socially acceptable heights and Friedman chronicles the daily reality of unsolicited commentary, Cohen offers tall women an expansive view and a sense of agency. Her

writing deepens the conversation about how beauty standards are not just visual, aesthetic ideals but systems of reward and punishment built into our social and material worlds.

To further contextualize height as a gendered beauty standard and its relevance in popular culture, Firzana Azhari's article "The Representation of Female Beauty Standards in the Movie *Tall Girl*: A Critical Discourse Analysis" analyzes how popular media negotiates the social meaning of tallness in girls through an academic lens. Azhari argues that the film *Tall Girl* offers a cultural case study of how tall female bodies are marginalized, scrutinized, and sometimes celebrated in film. The protagonist of the film *Tall Girl*, Jodi Kreyman, is a sixteen-year-old girl whose height renders her "abnormal" by high school standards. Due to the bullying she experiences, she internalizes the idea that her body is inherently flawed, saying things like "No one will ever like me because I don't look like other girls" (Azhari 82). Azhari links this to Sara Mill's feminist theory of subject-object positioning, claiming that Jodi is initially positioned as an object that is being acted upon—someone whose identity is shaped by the judgments of others rather than by her own agency (Azhari 80). However, the film shows Jodi's transformation from a passive object of ridicule to an active subject who reclaims her narrative. Azhari makes note of Jodi's climactic speech, where she declares "I am not going to apologize for being tall... Being tall is actually [what defines] me, I like me" (Azhari 80). This moment marks a key shift in Jodi's sense of self—she transitions from an object of mockery to a subject who embraces self-acceptance. This transformation from object to subject aligns with Mills's emphasis on how women in media can move from passive to active roles, shaping their own identities despite external standards (Azhari 78). By placing *Tall Girl* in conversation with earlier texts like *The Lady Daffodilia*, *The Tall Book*, and Friedman's personal essay, Azhari's analysis demonstrates how the media regulates gendered expectations about height. In all of these narratives, the tall

female body becomes a contested object that is controlled, managed, and ultimately transformed to satisfy or subvert normative feminine ideals. Including Azhari's article in a course on beauty and literature further demonstrates how film, just like literature, participates in constructing and challenging beauty norms.

Taken together, these texts reveal how height functions as a powerful yet under-discussed axis of beauty and gender politics. Each source highlights a different facet of how tall female bodies are perceived: as deviant, visible, publicly scrutinized, or sometimes symbols of power. From literary metaphors of containment, like those found in *The Lady Daffodilia*, to personal accounts of real-world scrutiny, like in "What It's Like to Be a Woman Who's 6'2"," the tall woman emerges as a figure who disrupts conventional femininity simply by taking up space. What unites these works is their insistence that height is not a neutral measurement but a socially-charged trait that is deeply intertwined with how society defines beauty and gender. Tall women are expected to perform femininity in ways that neutralize their physical differences, whether by shrinking emotionally, softening their appearance, or downplaying their presence. Thus, my proposed unit on height demonstrates that the cultural discomfort with women who are "too tall" stems not from the body itself but from a system that regulates who gets to be visible and under what terms. Including this unit in a politics of beauty and literature course would encourage students to recognize how beauty standards operate not only through appearance but through space, silence, and power dynamics. These readings demonstrate that height, much like weight, skin color, and hair texture, is an embodied category used to discipline and define women. At the same time, they offer stories of resistance, depicting women who reclaim their height as a site of identity and power rather than shame. In studying tallness as a cultural

construct, students can better understand how all bodies are made meaningful and how challenging those meanings can become a deeply political act.

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