

STUDY GUIDES

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

The *Brains & Beauty* classroom suggestions on the following pages were prepared for the 2002 Chicago Humanities Festival: *Brains & Beauty*.

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Suggestions for the Classroom

There are countless ways of discussing *Brains & Beauty* in the classroom. To spark your own explorations, here are a number of suggestions. Many were developed or inspired by teachers.

1. In *Night*, Elie Wiesel comments on the intelligence of Mengele as he is making a “selection” in the concentration camps. What do we usually expect of, or at least hope for, from intelligent people? What is ironic about the use to which Mengele puts his intelligence?
2. In Alice Walker’s “1995 or You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down,” the narrator says she is very fat, yet still seen as attractive. By the end she says, “The fat is the hurt she would not admit to herself.” What is that hurt? What has she come to realize?
3. In George Orwell’s novel *1984*, beauty is essentially non-existent. The protagonist, Winston Smith, discovers a paperweight in the prole section of London and buys it, in part because of its beauty. The paperweight has much symbolic significance. What does it symbolize? Why would a totalitarian society that restricts knowledge also restrict beauty?
4. In both *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, the controlling governments prohibit the enjoyment of books and the enjoyment of nature. Why would a controlling government not want citizens to enjoy the beauty of nature or to gain knowledge?
5. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus compliments himself as being the master of guile. Penelope is described as being most fair. However, she too is most adept at guile. How does she use her brains to solve the problem that her beauty may have created (the demands of her suitors)?
6. In “The Birthmark” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the very smart doctor is consumed by the desire to make his beautiful wife perfectly beautiful by ridding her of her only blemish, the birthmark. What point does Hawthorne seem to be making about human nature regarding beauty, brains, and the desire for perfection?
7. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy says of her daughter, “I hope she grows up to be a beautiful little fool.” What does Daisy mean by that? Why would she want that for her daughter? What does that indicate she thinks the society values?
8. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett is an example of both brains and beauty. How does each aspect work in her favor? How does each work against her?

9. In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Curly's wife is described as very pretty, but we never even learn her name. Does she have intelligence? Why did Steinbeck choose not to name her? Is it possible to have identity based on beauty alone? Support your answer with modern, real life examples.
10. In Greek mythology, Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, chooses to marry the ugly god of metal working, Hephaestus. Why does she make that choice? What does each gain from the relationship?
11. In Mary Shelley's famous work *Frankenstein*, the monster seeks beauty in his life without success. Should Dr. Frankenstein, with all his brains, have foreseen the problems that would result from his experiment? What, if anything, is beautiful about the monster?
12. In Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, Kate is both beautiful and brainy. What problems does that cause for her? How do beauty and brains enter into solving these problems.

(Many thanks to Katherine M. Conover who suggested the previous questions.)

13. Edgar Allen Poe writes in "The Philosophy of Composition" that "the death. . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." Read "The Raven" with your students and debate Poe's assertion.
14. Why is Sandro Botticelli's Venus so revered as an image of beauty? Compare the image to Petrarch ("Her golden hair was loosed to the breeze, which turned it in a thousand sweet knots") and to Hogarth's *line of grace*.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, tempera on canvas, c. 1485-86, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, detail.

(A high-resolution reproduction of Botticelli's masterpiece can be accessed at <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/botticelli/venus/>.)

15. Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!" contrasts brains and beauty ("I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly"). What values does the poem express? What does the future hold for the speaker? What does the future hold for the enemy/friend?

(Special thanks to Arlene Gloria Hirsch for suggesting this poem.)

16. Why did Petrarch write his Poem XC in the past tense? Imagine what has happened between the past and present he describes. Compare this poem to Shakespeare's Sonnet CXXX.
17. The writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, and the paintings of Albert Bierstadt all relate beauty to nature. How has America defined beauty? How does it define beauty today?