Uglies
Concept Analysis

Literary Text


Summary

It is set in a future post-scarcity dystopian world in which everyone is turned "Pretty" by extreme cosmetic surgery upon reaching age 16. It tells the story of teenager Tally Youngblood who rebels against her society's enforced conformity, after her new found friends Shay and David take her to a rebel society called the Smoke and show her the downsides to becoming a "pretty."

Written for young adults, Uglies deals with adolescent themes of change, both emotional and physical. The book is the first in what was originally a trilogy, The Uglies series which includes Pretties and Specials. The series has now has been extended with the publication of a fourth novel, Extras.

Organizational Patterns

Uglies is organized into parts and chapters. Each of the three parts has a subtitle and a quote from modern-day American life. Part I is called “Turning Pretty” with the quote “Is it not good to make society full of beautiful people?” from Yang Yuan, quoted in The New York Times. Part II is called “The Smoke” with the quote “There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in that proportion” from Francis Bacon, Essays, Civil and Moral, in “Of Beauty.” Part III is called “Into the Fire” with the quote “Beauty is that Medusa’s head/ Which men go armed to seek and sever./ It is most deadly when most dead,/ And dead will stare and sting forever” by Archibald MacLeish, from “Beauty.” The three parts each mark a change in Tally’s thinking, from wanting to be pretty, to joining the Smoke, to wanting to change her society.

The Central Question

From the back cover: “Everybody gets to be supermodel
gorgeous. What could be wrong with that?” Of course, the book explores what exactly is wrong with everyone looking flawless and biologically symmetrical. This is such a good question for adolescents to consider, since many of them, at first glance, would probably love to get the operation!

**Themes**

**Body Image**
The novel addresses a very relevant question: would we be happy if we could look perfect? In a society so obsessed with looks, this theme will resonate with many students. The book complicates coming up with a simple answer to this question. It does not advocate unhealthiness; in fact, school children learn about the old days “before the operation…a lot of people, especially young girls, became so ashamed at being fat that they stopped eating…that was one of the reasons they’d come up with the operation. No one got the disease anymore, since everyone knew at sixteen they’d turn beautiful” (200). Not everything is bad about the operation. But Tally has to decide whether looking beautiful is worth more than her friendship with Shay and the people at the Smoke. She also has to choose between staying with perfect-looking Peris or average-looking David. She learns that beauty is more than skin deep.

**Individuality**
Tally learns the terrible secret about the operation that makes people look pretty. The government also makes your brain “pretty,” by putting lesions in the brains of pretties, which take out any inclination to free-thinking or rebellion. “Maybe the reason war and all that other stuff went away is that there are no more controversies, no disagreements, no people demanding change. Just masses of smiling pretties, and a few people left to run things” (267). She comes to understand that freedom is more important that having fun all the time or always looking good.

**Environmental Issues**
Characters in the book frequently question the methods of the “Rusties,” who were essentially Americans in the 2000s and would cut down trees and pollute the air, something appalling to Tally’s culture. Tally, leaving for the Smoke, sees the ruins of the Rusties, who got their nickname from all the rust-covered machines and factories they left behind. Tally’s society has developed renewable energy and has population control. In school at Uglyville, “teachers always made the Rusties out to be so stupid. You almost couldn’t believe people lived like this, burning trees to clear land, burning oil for heat and power, setting the atmosphere on fire with their weapons” (63). These are issues in our world today, and students will want to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of Tally’s society.

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Setting

The story starts out in a futuristic version of America, about 300 years in the future after the oil in the world runs out. The society of the “Rusties,” or what would be our current society, has been replaced by a society with renewable energy, sustainable resources, and a fixed population. School children visit the “Rusty Ruins,” the remains of an old city, a “hulking reminder of back when there’d been way too many people, and everyone was incredibly stupid. And ugly” (48).

Children younger than sixteen, called Uglies, live in dorms and go to school in Uglyville. Once they undergo the operation to make them “pretty” they move to New Pretty town, which is a town for young Pretties who live in mansions and play in pleasure gardens.

Middle Pretties, or older Pretties, marry and live in suburban areas and grow old and turn into “Crumblies,” or grandparents. There is also a secret society which refuses to have the operation that lives in a place they call the Smoke located in the wilderness. The government is not visible, but police do appear as well as a group of Specials who work in a building called Special Circumstances.

Point of View/Narrative Voice

The novel is told in third person from the perspective of Tally Youngblood, the sixteen year old protagonist. Tally is extremely excited to become a Pretty and join her friend Peris in New Prettytown. However, her new friend, Shay, does not believe that everyone needs to be pretty. She tells Tally that Uglyville is “a game just designed to make us hate ourselves” (44). She is the one who introduces Tally to the Smoke, a secret society that lives in the wilderness and does not believe in the operation. They are the ones who discover that the operation is not just about your body; the government also messes with your brain.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Students will be able to relate to this novel very easily. The main character is an adolescent. Her society tells her she is ugly and needs to change her looks in order to be loved and fit in to the community. She is concerned with looking pretty, having friends, and fitting in, just like many students today.

However, Tally meets another society that tells her that she needs to be her own person and cannot blindly follow authority. So she is also, paradoxically, concerned with her individuality and freedom, an issue adolescents also struggle within their own lives. She decides to stop
following the orders of Dr. Cable and join the Smoke society, asserting her own authority over others and realizing “the almost unthinkable fact that she might really remain an ugly for life. But somehow not ugly at all” (281).

Other issues students will be able to relate with are the relationship problems Tally encounters. She loves her old friend, Peris, but he seems to have moved on from her. She starts to fall for David, but her best friend Shay already likes him. She has to make many decisions of the heart while balancing old friendships with new responsibilities.

Students will also be able to relate to Tally’s struggle to decide who she is. She is pulled between wanting to be a Pretty, working with Special Circumstances, and being true to her friends at the Smoke. She has to make some important decisions about her identity. When David tells Tally she is beautiful, she has a hard time believing him (276). What is more important? Following the rules or fighting for what you believe in? Being beautiful or loving who you are?

**Vocabulary**

There is a lot of new vocabulary in Tally’s world, including terms like uglies, pretties, crumblies, littlies, interface ring, hoverstruts, and hoverboard. There is also lots of advanced vocabulary in the novel, including words like infiltrator, expeditions, personified, disheveled, vigorously, set her teeth on edge, careened, and ally. I think students as young as seventh grade could read and comprehend the novel, though I would love to teach it to older students and discuss deeper issues it introduces.

**Background Knowledge**

The novel introduces a new society set in the future, with rules and settings different from ones students live in. The author explains most of the background knowledge a reader will need to navigate the book. It would be useful to know the current controversies regarding renewable energy. It would also be helpful for students to understand what a utopian society is and how it is different from a dystopian society. Students can decide which kind Tally lives in and if they would want to live in that kind of environment.
Implications for Students of Diversity

The single goal for all of Tally’s society is to get an operation that makes them “pretty.” Their definition of pretty is extremely dull and without any variety. Everyone looks perfect and everyone pretty much looks the same. Diversity is not an issue at all; however, there is an extreme divide between those who have had the operation and those that are still ugly. Uglies learn in school about a past society where “everyone judged everyone else based on their appearance. People who were taller got better jobs, and people even voted for some politicians just because they weren’t quite as ugly as everybody else…and people killed one another over stuff like having different skin color…So what if people are more alike now? It’s the only way to make people equal” (45).

Gender Issues

The book is very progressive in its portrayal of male and female roles. Tally, a girl, is the main character. She is very strong, fast, and intelligent. Others often rely on her to make decisions and get them out of messes. The antagonist, Dr. Cable, is also a woman. She is also very smart, though she uses her intelligence to manipulate others. Shay is the third most important character in the book. She is the catalyst for introducing Tally to the world outside of Uglyville and Pretty Town. David, Tally’s main love interest is a brave and sensitive boy who is very devoted to both his parents and his convictions. Peris, Tally’s other love interest, decides to stay pretty and not undo the operation, though he knows he will remain partially brain dead.

Project Ideas

Real Life Pretties
There could be many good projects to go along with this novel. Students could bring in pictures of what they imagine pretties would look like and then discuss if celebrities lives have problems. We could discuss plastic surgery and get into questions of reality. We could talk about the show America’s Next Top Model and see if those girls’ lives are happy when they are being judged on their body all the time.

Map
It would be useful for the students to be able to better visualize Tally’s world. They could draw the setting of the story out onto maps. This would be an easy in-class activity best suited probably for middle school aged students. They could even guess where on the United States map the story takes place.

Movie
Another project idea for students would be to make a short movie of one of the scenes from the book. This would require them to dig deep into the book and really understand what is going on. Student could then present their movie to the class. It would also help them learn presentation skills and make for a very entertaining class period.
Enrichment Resources

Additional Reading
I think reading books with a similar theme could enrich their reading of this novel. I thought of Fahrenheit 451, Hunger Games, Ray Bradbury’s short story “There Will Come Soft Rains,” Anthem, Animal Farm, and The Giver. We could read current magazine and news articles about environmental issues.

Of course, reading Pretties, Specials, and Extras, the sequels to Uglies, would be helpful. Carol Farley's short story “Lose Now, Pay Later” is about a society who gives up some freedom so they can eat delicious candy and lose all the weight. I also thought the picture story “The Sneetches” by Dr. Seuss would work really well, since it talks about everyone wanting to look the same.

Movies
I think showing a clip from The Stepford Wives, a movie about men who want perfect looking and acting wives. As a class, we could discuss the implications of expecting perfection from people.

Author Website
Scott Westerfeld’s website, http://scottwesterfeld.com/blog/, would be another good source of extra information for students. He often updates the site with his current events and it has lots of interviews with him talking about his books. He also recommends books he likes.

Film of the Book
Uglies is scheduled to be made into a movie in 2011. This will probably end up being a great enrichment resource for students. They will be able to see someone’s version of the book and compare it with their own version. I think it is always a good idea to read the book before seeing the movie so students can visualize their personal idea of the setting and characters.

Eating Disorders
I think another issue we could discuss as a class is the problem of eating disorders in our society, including anorexia and bulimia. We could talk about why this is a problem and what their body image is. How does this novel address the problem of body image disorders?