

Beauty as a Mechanism of Social Control: Surveillance, Bodily Discipline, and Identity Formation in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* and *Pretties*

Mrs. S. Dharani

Research Scholar (Part Time), CNC Erode, Affiliated to Bharathiar University

Abstract

This study examines how beauty functions as a mechanism of social control in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* and *Pretties*. While previous scholarship has primarily focused on body image and adolescent identity, this paper investigates beauty as an interconnected system of surveillance, bodily discipline, consumer culture, and ideological conditioning. Using a qualitative research design and close textual analysis, the study applies Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, along with insights from Naomi Wolf, Susan Bordo, and Jean Baudrillard, to explore how compulsory cosmetic surgery operates as a political technology. The analysis reveals that the Pretty operation standardizes physical appearance, suppresses individuality, and incorporates neurological modifications that reduce critical thinking and encourage social conformity. The novels further demonstrate how surveillance, entertainment, and consumerism reinforce obedience by redirecting citizens' attention away from political awareness. Through Tally Youngblood's gradual awakening and resistance, Westerfeld exposes the hidden relationship between beauty and power and emphasizes the importance of intellectual autonomy and authentic identity. The study concludes that *Uglies* and *Pretties* offer a significant critique of contemporary beauty culture, media influence, and the commodification of the body, making the novels highly relevant to current discussions on digital self-presentation, cosmetic enhancement, and the politics of appearance.

Keywords: Dystopian Literature, Beauty Politics, Social Control, Michel Foucault, Young Adult Fiction, Scott Westerfeld

Introduction

Dystopian literature often reflects contemporary social concerns by presenting exaggerated versions of real-world issues. One of the most significant themes explored in modern dystopian fiction is the relationship between beauty, identity, and power. Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005) and *Pretties* (2005), the first two novels in the *Uglies* series, present a futuristic society where physical beauty is not a personal choice but a compulsory social institution. Every citizen must undergo cosmetic surgery at the age of sixteen to become a "Pretty," a transformation that promises equality, happiness, and acceptance. However, beneath the promise of perfection lies

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a carefully designed political system that uses beauty to regulate behaviour, eliminate individuality, and maintain absolute social control.

Westerfeld's novels challenge conventional assumptions about beauty by exposing how aesthetic ideals can become instruments of political authority. Rather than liberating individuals, beauty in these novels functions as a mechanism of surveillance, conformity, and psychological manipulation. The government not only transforms bodies but also alters minds, ensuring that citizens remain passive and incapable of questioning authority. Through Tally Youngblood's journey from unquestioning acceptance to critical resistance, Westerfeld critiques contemporary beauty culture, consumerism, media influence, and society's obsession with physical perfection. This paper argues that in *Uglies* and *Pretties*, beauty serves as a sophisticated mechanism of social control by enforcing conformity, manipulating identity, suppressing critical thought, and sustaining political power.

Major Themes and Their Function as Social Control

Theme	Evidence from the Novels	Function of Social Control
Beauty Standardization	Mandatory Pretty operation	Eliminates individuality
Cosmetic Surgery	Physical transformation and brain lesions	Produces obedient citizens
Surveillance	Social monitoring and institutional regulation	Encourages self-discipline
Consumer Culture	Parties, fashion, popularity	Distracts from political awareness
Identity	Tally's transformation	Demonstrates conflict between conformity and autonomy
Resistance	The Smoke and Tally's awakening	Challenges ideological control

Beauty as a Mechanism of Social Control in *Uglies* and *Pretties*

Scott Westerfeld presents beauty as one of the most effective tools of political domination in his dystopian world. Unlike traditional dictatorships that rely on fear and violence, the government in *Uglies* and *Pretties* controls its citizens through desire. Individuals willingly surrender their freedom because they believe becoming beautiful is the key to happiness, success, and social acceptance. This voluntary submission makes the government's control more powerful and less visible.

One of the primary ways beauty functions as social control is through mandatory cosmetic surgery. Every child grows up knowing that turning sixteen means receiving the operation that transforms an "Ugly" into a "Pretty." The surgery is presented as a celebration of equality

because everyone receives the same idealized appearance. However, this promise of equality actually destroys individuality. Citizens lose distinctive physical characteristics and become standardized according to government-approved definitions of attractiveness. Diversity, uniqueness, and personal identity disappear beneath artificially constructed perfection.

Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power helps explain this system. According to Foucault, modern societies often control individuals not through direct force but by encouraging them to internalize social norms and regulate themselves (Foucault, 1977). In Westerfeld's novels, citizens eagerly anticipate the operation because they have been conditioned from childhood to believe that ugliness is temporary and beauty is life's ultimate achievement. Consequently, they willingly participate in their own oppression without recognizing the loss of freedom.

The operation's true purpose extends far beyond physical appearance. In *Pretties*, readers discover that cosmetic surgery secretly includes neurological lesions that impair critical thinking and emotional independence. These brain modifications ensure that Pretty citizens remain cheerful, obedient, and uninterested in political affairs. Instead of questioning authority, they become preoccupied with parties, fashion, romance, and social popularity. Westerfeld reveals that beauty itself is not dangerous; rather, it becomes dangerous when it serves as a disguise for psychological manipulation.

The government's ability to alter both body and mind reflects Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses. Althusser argues that institutions shape individuals' beliefs so effectively that people voluntarily support systems that oppress them (Althusser, 1971). In Westerfeld's society, beauty functions as an ideology. Citizens genuinely believe the operation benefits them, making government control almost invisible. Because everyone accepts beauty as normal and desirable, few recognize it as an instrument of political domination.

Another important aspect of social control is the relationship between beauty and social hierarchy. Although the government claims that surgery eliminates inequality, it actually creates new forms of exclusion. Before surgery, Uglies live separately from Pretties, constantly reminded that they are incomplete and socially inferior. Their entire childhood becomes preparation for transformation, teaching them that acceptance depends entirely on physical appearance. This system ensures that young people rarely question authority because becoming Pretty remains their greatest aspiration.

Tally Youngblood initially embodies this ideology. At the beginning of *Uglies*, she eagerly anticipates the operation because she believes becoming Pretty will solve every problem in her life. Like other Uglies, she measures self-worth according to government standards of beauty. However, her friendship with Shay introduces alternative perspectives. Shay rejects surgery and chooses to join the Smoke, a community that values natural bodies and personal freedom. Through Shay and David, Tally begins recognizing that beauty is not synonymous with happiness but rather a carefully constructed political illusion.

The contrast between Pretty society and the Smoke demonstrates Westerfeld's critique of conformity. Members of the Smoke retain their natural appearances despite physical imperfections. They value intelligence, creativity, and individual choice over superficial

attractiveness. Although life in the Smoke is physically demanding, its residents enjoy genuine autonomy absent in Pretty society. This opposition emphasizes that freedom requires accepting diversity rather than pursuing artificial perfection.

Consumerism further strengthens governmental control. Pretty citizens devote most of their lives to entertainment, fashion, shopping, and social competition. Constant pleasure leaves little time for intellectual reflection or political engagement. Jean Baudrillard's theory of consumer society suggests that modern capitalism encourages individuals to consume symbols rather than meaningful experiences (Baudrillard, 1998). Similarly, Westerfeld's Pretties become consumers of beauty itself. Their identities depend on appearance, popularity, and material pleasure rather than authentic personal development.

Media and social expectations also reinforce conformity throughout the novels. Citizens constantly compare themselves with others according to standardized ideals. Even after surgery, competition continues through popularity rankings and exclusive social groups such as the Crims. Physical perfection alone is insufficient; individuals must continually perform beauty through fashionable behaviour and social status. This perpetual competition prevents collective resistance because citizens focus on personal success instead of systemic injustice.

Gender expectations add another layer to Westerfeld's critique. Although both men and women undergo surgery, female characters experience stronger pressure to conform to beauty standards. Tally's initial insecurity reflects real-world expectations placed upon young women regarding physical appearance. Westerfeld suggests that beauty standards often function as mechanisms of gendered control by encouraging women to prioritize appearance over autonomy and intellectual development. Nevertheless, his novels avoid portraying female characters solely as victims. Tally, Shay, and Zane demonstrate resilience, agency, and the capacity to challenge oppressive systems.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of beauty as social control is its relationship with identity. The operation not only changes appearances but also reshapes personality. Citizens gradually lose memories, independent judgment, and emotional complexity. Their authentic selves become replaced by socially acceptable versions designed by the state. This transformation raises philosophical questions about whether identity can survive when external authorities determine both physical appearance and mental processes.

Tally's resistance illustrates the possibility of reclaiming individuality despite overwhelming social pressure. Throughout *Pretties*, fragments of her original personality emerge despite the brain lesions. Her determination to remain "bubbly" symbolizes the struggle to preserve critical consciousness within systems designed to eliminate independent thought. Westerfeld ultimately presents resistance as an ongoing intellectual process rather than a single act of rebellion.

The novels also resonate strongly with contemporary society. Although mandatory cosmetic surgery does not exist, modern media frequently promotes narrow definitions of beauty through advertising, celebrity culture, and digital technologies. Social media platforms encourage users to modify photographs, compare appearances, and seek validation through physical attractiveness. Westerfeld exaggerates these tendencies to demonstrate how societies can

normalize unrealistic beauty standards that influence identity, self-esteem, and social relationships. His dystopian future serves as a warning that obsession with perfection may gradually erode individuality and critical thinking.

Ultimately, *Uglies* and *Pretties* argue that the most effective systems of oppression are those that appear desirable rather than coercive. Citizens rarely recognize their loss of freedom because control is disguised as privilege. Beauty becomes the language through which political authority exercises power, making obedience seem voluntary and resistance appear irrational. By exposing this paradox, Westerfeld invites readers to question both fictional and real-world systems that define human value according to appearance.

Surveillance, Self-Discipline, and the Internalization of Beauty

One of the most significant aspects of social control in *Uglies* and *Pretties* is the government's ability to transform surveillance into self-surveillance. Citizens are not constantly threatened by visible punishment; instead, they regulate their own behaviour because they have internalized the state's expectations. Westerfeld demonstrates that the most effective political systems are those in which individuals willingly monitor themselves, believing that conformity is a personal choice rather than an imposed obligation.

Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon provides a useful framework for understanding this process. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) argues that modern institutions exercise power through continuous observation, creating conditions in which individuals behave as though they are always being watched. Eventually, surveillance no longer requires a visible authority because people discipline themselves according to institutional norms. Westerfeld adapts this principle to a futuristic society where beauty itself becomes a form of surveillance.

The transformation begins long before the cosmetic operation. From childhood, *Uglies* are educated to believe that their natural appearance is temporary and undesirable. They compare themselves with *Pretties* and anticipate surgery as the defining event of their lives. This social conditioning encourages them to scrutinize their own bodies according to official standards of attractiveness. Consequently, surveillance becomes psychological rather than merely physical. The government no longer needs to force conformity because citizens voluntarily evaluate themselves through institutional definitions of beauty.

The architectural design of the cities further reinforces this system. *Uglies*, New *Pretties*, *Crims*, and older adults inhabit separate spaces, each representing a distinct stage of ideological development. Physical movement between these communities is carefully regulated, ensuring that citizens rarely encounter alternative ways of life. This spatial organization mirrors Foucauldian disciplinary institutions, where architecture itself becomes an instrument for shaping behaviour. The city functions not only as a place of residence but also as a mechanism for producing obedient subjects.

Surveillance also extends to language and social interaction. Characters frequently judge one another according to beauty, popularity, and conformity, reproducing governmental values without direct intervention from political authorities. Friends encourage one another to embrace surgery, celebrate physical transformation, and aspire to higher social status. The

state's ideology is therefore disseminated horizontally through peer relationships as much as vertically through official institutions. Social acceptance becomes dependent upon constant performance of approved behaviours.

This phenomenon demonstrates that power in Westerfeld's novels is productive rather than merely repressive. The government does not simply prohibit undesirable actions; it actively produces citizens who desire conformity. Beauty becomes a disciplinary discourse that shapes aspirations, relationships, and self-perception. As Foucault (1977) suggests, modern power operates most effectively when individuals internalize institutional expectations and reproduce them voluntarily.

The experiences of Tally Youngblood illustrate the tension between institutional conditioning and personal agency. Initially, Tally unquestioningly accepts the belief that becoming Pretty will provide happiness and fulfilment. Her thoughts, desires, and ambitions reflect the values imposed by society rather than independently developed convictions. However, her encounters with Shay and the Smoke expose alternative perspectives that challenge these assumptions. As Tally begins to question official narratives, she becomes increasingly aware of the invisible mechanisms through which her desires have been constructed.

This awakening reveals one of Westerfeld's central concerns: freedom cannot exist where individuals are unable to distinguish between authentic desire and ideological conditioning. The novels therefore encourage readers to examine how contemporary societies influence personal choices regarding beauty, identity, and social belonging.

Conclusion

Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* and *Pretties* present beauty not as a symbol of personal fulfilment but as an instrument of political and ideological control. Through compulsory cosmetic surgery, psychological manipulation, consumer culture, and standardized ideals of attractiveness, the government creates a society in which conformity replaces individuality and obedience substitutes for freedom. Tally Youngblood's transformation from a compliant citizen to an independent thinker demonstrates that true beauty lies not in physical perfection but in the ability to think critically, choose freely, and embrace one's authentic identity.

The novels remain relevant because they reflect contemporary anxieties surrounding cosmetic enhancement, media influence, digital beauty standards, and social conformity. Westerfeld warns that societies obsessed with appearance risk sacrificing diversity, creativity, and intellectual freedom. His dystopian vision encourages readers to resist superficial definitions of beauty and to recognize the importance of individuality in preserving human dignity. Ultimately, *Uglies* and *Pretties* reveal that beauty becomes dangerous when it is transformed from a personal expression into a political strategy for controlling society.

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