How Do I Look?
Dysmorphophobia and Obsession at the Fin de Siècle

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Millions of Americans have a secret obsession. They're obsessed with how they look, with a perceived flaw in their appearance. They worry that their nose is too big, their breasts are too small, their skin is blemished, their hair is thinning, their body build is too small – any body part can be the focus of this obsession. . . . Most of us care about how we look – we think about our appearance and try to improve it. . . . While the concerns of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) echo these normal concerns, they're more extreme. People who have BDD not only dislike some aspect of how they look, they're preoccupied with it.


In 1986 psychiatrist Katharine Phillips introduced this definition of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). The condition, she explains, is a type of Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder where one experiences crushing preoccupations with one's perceived inability to live up to certain standards of beauty. Not to be confused with vanity, BDD, according to Phillips, is an obsession with a physical flaw that may or may not exist and which the sufferer sees as making him or her uglier than the average person.

The latter half of the twentieth century was a poignant time for the idea of BDD to emerge. Cosmetic surgery was, and still is, on the increase and this is no doubt due to the fact that, since the 1980s, both men and women have been under enormous strains to look as good as
people in the media. It is in response to this pressure, suggests Phillips, that BDD has been identified as a psychiatric condition. As media pressures to look attractive have multiplied, so too have the number of people suffering from a debilitating sense of their own ugliness. Psychiatry has responded to these developments with new ways of identifying and treating BDD.

It is not the aim of this chapter to question the links between media pressures and the prevalence of BDD. What I aim to do is show how the condition actually has its origins in the late-nineteenth century. It was at this time, for example, that theories of “dysmorphophobia” and obsession were first articulated and these classifications responded, like BDD, to enormous cultural anxieties to look good. It is possible to trace the dysmorphic idea through a range of writings, both literary and scientific, in the late-Victorian period. Although originating in the writings of psychologists like Jean Esquirol in the 1830s, the idea of being obsessed with one’s appearance was appropriated and modified by fictional narratives throughout the nineteenth century. In what follows I argue that the coinage of “dysmorphophobia” in 1891 owes a great deal to earlier fictional narratives and neurological models of consciousness propounded by mid-Victorian psychologists. Looking at some of these in detail allows one to understand how such responses to pressures to look good were part of the complex and protean discussions of descent and degeneration at the fin de siècle.

Following the 1859 publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, the nineteenth century developed a growing obsession with human breeding and healthy progeniture. The pressures of marrying well had been extant for centuries, but it was the Victorians who converted these issues into a scientific vocabulary. In 1865, for instance, Francis Galton, Darwin’s cousin, contributed to *Macmillan’s Magazine* with a couple of essays on “Hereditary Talent and Character.” The essays anticipated the publication of his *Hereditary Genius* (1869) and contained a suggestion that, in order to maintain a healthy familial stock, one needs to select one’s spouse carefully. He delivered a utopian vision of what the world would be like if men, in particular, were to make their conjugal choices with more care:

What an extraordinary effect might be produced on our race, if its object was to unite in marriage those who possessed the finest and most suitable natures, mental, moral, and physical! . . . An examination has . . . been conducted on established principles among all the young ladies of this country who are now of the age of twenty-one, and I need hardly remind you, that this examination takes note of grace, beauty, health, good temper, accomplished housewifery, and