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## Women's Strive For Perfection In Caroline Knapp's Essay

Over the past thirty to forty years, the desire to be perfect has become most women's number one concern. Having the perfect body is seemingly every woman's dream. Through media influence, expectations of male desire, and the expectations of peers, women, particularly young and pre-teen women, have been overtaken by this overwhelming need to have "perfect" bodies. Eating disorders have become a growing issue and many girls suffer from one at at least one point in their lives. In Caroline Knapp's essay, "Add Cake, Subtract Self-Esteem", she gives her audience a look into eating disorders, their influence, and the havoc they are wreaking on women in Western culture.

Over the last half a century, the idea of a woman's "perfect body" has changed drastically. The natural, curvy, healthy body type has become less desirable and instead been replaced by the desire to look like an emaciated runway model. Young women's attitudes toward food and appetite have completely changed. Women are urged to resist food, avoiding the consumption of calories and carbohydrates. Any woman with a decent appetite is deemed a pig, consuming anything she can find. This way of thinking influences women to the point of slipping into poor health due to a lack of nutrition. Eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, and extreme calorie counting have skyrocketed in recent years, particularly in the past couple of generations. These eating disorders affect a large number of the American female population; according to Knapp, they have become the third most common illness in the country for women. Everywhere women look, they are reminded of the shame they supposedly should feel about their bodies. The constant images and advertisements of stick thin women are on display at every corner for women to compare the models' bodies with their own. What makes a woman a woman, her breasts, hips, butt, legs, are supposed to be as small and slender as possible, making her daintier and according to these standards, more beautiful and desirable. Women who feel fat feel out of control and less sexy, thus creating an effect of low self-esteem.

Based on these standards of how heavy a woman should be and what her measurements should be, it further strengthens the idea that the world is a male dominated place. A woman who feels fat feels undesirable and unlovable by any man. At one point in time, the gold standard for sexiness was Marilyn Monroe. Men ogled at her for years and in turn, women wanted to look more like she did. This is a male pleasing outlook, but women still did not feel sexy unless they had the same curves as she did. According to Knapp, once the late 1970s and early 1980s rolled around, the slender Kate Moss look dominated the scene. No longer were wide hips and normal stomachs esteemed. It was all about the long, thin legs linked to the narrow hips. It was the same male pleasing outlook, however, this look was nearly impossible to achieve for most women. When women are bombarded with copious amounts of negative body image inducing messages everyday, it is hard for them to not feel poorly about themselves.

Knapp mentions that women spend approximately three years of their lifetimes watching commercials on the television. In today's marketing world, advertisers know exactly how to target women. For example, if a product looks good on an attractive model, the woman is more likely to buy the product in hopes that it will make her look that way. Knapp writes that after a while women's "hatred of fat...is so deeply embedded in the collective consciousness it can arouse a surprising depth of discomfort" (239). Young girls are exposed to these unrealistic

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body images through several media sources such as television, clothing advertisements, magazines, and music videos. During girls' pre-teen years, they are highly impressionable and vulnerable. According to Beth Teresa Bell and Helga Dittmar, the "relationship between media exposure, identification with ultra-thin media ideals, and negative body image is developmental" (7). During puberty especially, girls are already feeling poorly about themselves and in turn they are more malleable. With high exposure to stick-thin models, they are more likely to develop a negative body image.

During young girls' puberty and pre-puberty stages, everything about them is changing. Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann write, "during this time of remarkable transition, changes occur in each of the physical, cognitive, and social domains" (1). These girls are changing from children to adults and they look up to grown women as examples of what they should be. When they are completely surrounded by thin women who hate their own bodies and critique each other they get sucked into the cycle. They start to believe that it is normal, or even expected of them to act a certain way. They believe they are supposed to be hateful of their own bodies and criticize others for being a few pounds past stick thin. Enjoying food is considered a sin and a girl looks weak if she succumbs to eating a cupcake or slice of pizza. If a girl is a few pounds too heavy for the standard thin, she is ridiculed and bullied. She is not taken seriously and her opinion and voice suddenly becomes unheard.

Knapp mentions what Gail Dines, a sociology professor at Wheelock College and the director of women's studies, had to say on the matter in her lecture, "Sexy or Sexist: Images of Women in the Media". In the presentation, Dines pulls up a slide of postcard with a rather large woman in a bikini on the shores of Hawaii. On the front of the card, the words "Having A Whale Of A Time In Hawaii" were printed (239). This woman's weight was made the subject of a joke. Dines questions, "does she not have the right to the dignity that you and I have a right to?" (240). She brings up some valid points. This obviously condescending perspective on extra weight is a prime example of what makes women so afraid of fat. The woman in the picture suddenly has no voice or opinion. Suddenly she does not mean anything unless it is to make others laugh at her body. Images like these drive young girls and ultimately women into eating disorders, in desperate hopes to never be considered as "low" as that woman on the postcard.

The trend of eating disorders in the Western World has grown immensely. Much of it has been on account of how the media portrays heavy women. These messages fester in women's minds until they collapse and succumb to anorexia, bulimia, and even frantic calorie counting. The era of the desire to look like Marilyn Monroe is over and the era of the desire to look like Kate Moss has taken its place. The desire to have a "perfect body" has risen to prominence in many women's minds. If a woman does not have a slender figure, she believes she is ugly and completely undesirable. No longer can a woman just be herself and love herself for it. In this day in age, there will always be that little push to be a little skinnier.