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## MASTER THESIS

Literature and Civilization

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# The Aesthetics of Decay in Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon*

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master Degree in Literature

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## DEDICATIONS

To my beloved parents, whose unwavering love, endless support, and constant encouragement have been the foundation of my life and aspirations. This achievement would not have been possible without your sacrifices and belief in me.

To my dear brother, Kamal, for his companionship and support throughout my journey.

To my wonderful sisters, Fatiha, Amina, and Samia, your love, guidance, and sisterly bond have always inspired me to reach for greater heights.

And to my precious nieces, Dihia and Dina, may this dedication serve as a testament to the power of hard work and dedication. May you always be inspired to pursue your dreams.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis interrogates the aesthetics of decay in Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon*, a novel that provocatively reframes conventional understandings of beauty and the human condition within a context of epidemic-induced social collapse. Challenging the inherent aversion to deterioration, this study examines the ways Bellatin employs decay, both corporeal and moral, as a central aesthetic and thematic device. Through close textual analysis informed by theories of the grotesque, the abject, the thesis deconstructs the novel's paradoxical presentation of decay as a source of beauty and meaning. The investigation proceeds through three key analytical vectors: first, an exploration of the interplay between physical decay and spiritual yearning. It argues that Bellatin juxtaposes the grotesque realities of bodily disintegration with the ethereal to expose humanity's search for transcendence amidst suffering; second, a critical examination of the subversion of traditional beauty standards to reveal how ugliness and transgression become alternative aesthetic forms that challenge normative perceptions; and third, an ethical assessment of Bellatin's aestheticization of decay to contend that the novel confronts and destabilizes the stigma associated with disease and social marginalization. This thesis argues that *Beauty Salon* utilizes the aesthetics of decay is not merely for shock value; it is a profound means of critiquing social values, questioning the boundaries of aesthetic appreciation, and prompting a re-evaluation of the human relationship with mortality and transformation. By embracing decay, Bellatin crafts a disconcerting and compelling narrative that compels readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of existence and reimagine the potential for beauty in the face of disintegration.

**Keywords:** abject; aesthetics; Mario Bellatin; decay; grotesque

## DECLARATION

I declare that the work presented in this Master's thesis, "*The Aesthetics of Decay in Mario Bellatin's Beauty Salon*," is the result of my own independent research and scholarly effort. All sources of information, including published and unpublished materials, have been duly acknowledged and cited in accordance with accepted academic conventions. I confirm that this thesis has not been previously submitted, in whole or in part, for assessment towards any other academic qualification. I have taken full responsibility for ensuring the accuracy and originality of the content within this thesis and have adhered to the highest standards of academic integrity.

**Karima KHACHEB**

**Signature:**

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# **General Introduction**

## General Introduction

This dissertation delves into the captivating world of Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon*; a novel that challenges conventional notions of beauty and confronts the harsh realities of decay. Set against the backdrop of a society ravaged by an unnamed epidemic, the narrative explores the physical and moral disintegration of its characters and their environment. This decay, far from being merely a source of horror, becomes a lens through which Bellatin examines the human condition and question social values. Bellatin view redefines aesthetic appreciation of beauty and decay. The statement of the problem lies in the paradoxical presentation of decay as something beautiful and meaningful, challenging our deeply ingrained aversion to it.

Bellatin uses the motif of physical deterioration to explore themes of isolation, mortality, and the search for meaning in a world stripped of its conventional values. The beauty salon, initially a sanctuary for aesthetic enhancement, transforms into a hospice for the terminally ill. The setting blurs the lines between beautification and decay. Through disturbing imagery, Bellatin forces readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of the body's fragility and the inevitability of death. He invites a deeper contemplation of what constitutes beauty and worth. The novel suggests that beauty can be found even in the most degraded and abject forms and offers a subversive perspective on social norms and the human experience. This provokes questions about our cultural obsession with youth and perfection and urges readers to reconsider the value of compassion, empathy, and acceptance in the face of suffering and decay.

### **The research main question:**

- How does Mario Bellatin employ the aesthetics of decay in *Beauty Salon* to challenge traditional notions of beauty, ethics, and the human condition?



**Sub-questions:**

To address this overarching question, the thesis is structured around three sub-questions:

- How does Bellatin portray the interplay between the corporeal and the ethereal in the face of decay?
- How does Beauty Salon deconstruct traditional standards of beauty by embracing ugliness and decay?
- What ethical implications arise from Bellatin's aestheticization of decay, particularly in relation to disease and social norms?

**Working thesis:**

It is hypothesized that:

- Bellatin juxtaposes the grotesque and abject realities of bodily decay with spiritual elements to explore the search for meaning and transcendence amidst suffering.
- Bellatin subverts conventional beauty norms by presenting decay and transgression as unconventional forms of beauty, thereby expanding aesthetic boundaries.
- Bellatin's work challenges the stigma associated with disease and decay, prompting a re-evaluation of societal values and ethical considerations.

**Objectives:**

The objectives of this thesis are threefold:

- To analyze Bellatin's portrayal of decay and its impact on the human body and spirit.
- To examine the ways in which Beauty Salon redefines beauty by embracing ugliness and decay.
- To explore the ethical dimensions of Bellatin's aesthetic choices and their implications for society.

## **The methodology**

The methodology for this analysis of Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* centers on a close reading of the text, informed by critical theories of the grotesque and the abject. This approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of Bellatin's narrative strategies in depicting decay and disintegration, and how these elements challenge conventional aesthetic and moral boundaries. The grotesque, as theorized by scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin, will be utilized to examine the novel's distorted and exaggerated representations of the body and its functions, revealing how Bellatin subverts traditional notions of beauty and order. Furthermore, Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject will be employed to explore the novel's engagement with themes of disgust, horror, and the breakdown of symbolic systems. The abject, as that which threatens the boundaries of the self, provides a lens through which to analyze the characters' encounters with the decaying bodies and environments within the beauty salon. This theoretical framework will be supplemented by a thorough review of existing scholarly literature on Bellatin's oeuvre, as well as broader studies of contemporary Latin American literature, to situate *Beauty Salon* within its appropriate cultural and literary context.

## **Chapter demarcation**

The thesis is structured into three chapters, each designed to answer one of the sub-questions. Chapter One, "The Corporeal and the Ethereal," examines the representation of bodily decay through the lenses of the grotesque and the abject, and explores the characters' spiritual responses to suffering. Chapter Two, "Deconstructing Beauty," analyzes how Bellatin challenges traditional beauty standards by embracing ugliness and decay as aesthetic categories. Chapter Three, "The Ethics of Decay," investigates the ethical implications of Bellatin's aestheticization of decay, focusing on the novel's questioning of social norms and deconstruction of the stigma of disease, viewing the beauty salon as a transformative space that challenges our perceptions of life, death, and beauty.

# **Chapter One: The Corporeal and the Ethereal**

## **1 Chapter One: The Corporeal and the Ethereal**

Introduction

1.1 The Body in Decay

1.1.1 The Grotesque Body

1.1.2 The Abject Body

1.2 The Spiritual

1.3 Rhetoric of Decay

1.4 Conclusion

## 1.1 Introduction

Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* presents a world saturated with decay, both physical and moral. It is not a world of pristine beauty, but it is the one where the body, particularly the diseased body, takes center stage. This chapter explores the ways Bellatin uses the decaying body as a central image to challenge conventional notions of beauty and examines the relationship between the physical and the spiritual aspect of human being. It also examines the representation of the body in decay through the lens of the grotesque and the abject. The researcher argues that Bellatin uses these images to explore profound questions about mortality and the limits of human compassion. Bellatin's spare, almost clinical prose style further enhances this sense of decay. He avoids sentimentality, and he forces the reader to confront the harsh realities of the novel.

The present chapter also establishes a clear framework for the analysis that follows. It helps the reader to understand the critical lens through which Bellatin's work is being examined. The emphasis on Bellatin's prose style highlights the importance of form in conveying the novel's themes. By noting the clinical and unsentimental nature of Bellatin's writing, it prepares the reader to consider how the author's stylistic choices contribute to the overall effect of the novel. The focus on Bellatin's unique approach to storytelling signals an engagement with the field of literary experimentation. It invites an exploration of how narrative techniques can challenge conventional expectations.

## 1.2 The Body in Decay

Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* is a story about the body ravaged by disease (AIDS). This epidemic transforms the protagonist's *beauty salon* into a hospice, and it forces a direct confrontation with the body's materiality, vulnerability, and inevitable decline. The body is not treated as an abstract concept, but it is depicted as a physical entity that is subjected to

suffering and decay. The novel has, thus, been seen as an account that highlights the tangible realities of illness and mortality. Bellatin confronts readers with the graphic details of this decay; he presents a vision of the body that is both disturbing and strangely compelling. Bellatin doesn't shy away from depicting the harsh realities of illness and death. He has rather forced the reader to confront uncomfortable images and sensations. This unflinching approach emphasizes the body's fragility and the limitations of the human form.

This focus on the decaying body can be seen as a direct challenge to the cultural obsession with youth and beauty that dominates contemporary society. As Susan Sontag argues in *Illness as Metaphor*, society often stigmatizes illness, and it views it as a moral failing or a sign of weakness (Sontag 5). Bellatin subverts this cultural narrative by presenting the decaying body as something to be hidden or feared, and as a site of profound human experience. Furthermore, Bellatin's detailed depiction of bodily decay invites a consideration of the ethics of representation. He forces the reader to confront the harsh realities of illness. Bellatin challenges the tendencies of a culture that often romanticizes suffering. As Arthur Frank suggests in *The Wounded Storyteller*, stories of illness can create empathy and understanding, but they can also risk exploiting the experiences of those who suffer (Frank 6). Bellatin navigates this ethical terrain by focusing on the concrete details of the decaying body. By this, he allows the reader to bear witness to the realities of illness and mortality without resorting to easy emotional appeals.

Bellatin's narrative choices prompt reflection on the implications of the ways individuals interact with bodies marked by disease. This gaze serves as a powerful commentary on social attitudes toward mortality and the human condition. Bellatin centers the narrative on the physical realities of illness, and he encourages a more compassionate understanding of suffering to reconsider readers' preconceptions on the body and its inherent vulnerabilities.

### 1.2.1 The Grotesque Body

The grotesque body, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, is characterized by its emphasis on the body's lower stratum – its orifices, its fluids, and its capacity for both creation and decay (Bakhtin 19). In *Beauty Salon*, the grotesque body is almost everywhere. The dying men are described in visceral terms; their bodies are marked by lesions, wasting away, and losing control of their bodily functions. For example, the narrator describes one of the men as having a "body [that] seemed to be dissolving from the inside out" (Bellatin 42). This image highlights the grotesque nature of the body in decay through which Bellatin sets the boundaries between the inside and outside. This pervasive presence of the grotesque serves to subvert traditional notions of beauty and the idealized body. Bellatin deliberately focuses on aspects of the body that are typically considered repulsive or taboo. He forces the reader to confront the physicality of decay and death. Bellatin shows the body's vulnerability and its tendency towards disintegration to challenge the cultural obsession with youthful perfection.

Moreover, Bellatin's use of the grotesque can be seen as a form of social critique. He depicts the marginalized bodies of the AIDS patients, and draws attention to the social inequalities and prejudices that contribute to their suffering. The grotesque, in this context, becomes a tool for exposing the hypocrisy and moral failings of a society that stigmatizes illness and abandons those deemed undesirable. As Halberstam notes, the grotesque often reveals "the ways in which bodies are disciplined and regulated by social norms" (Halberstam 2). Bellatin's use of the grotesque challenges the traditional aesthetic ideals that privilege beauty. He forces the reader to confront the reality of physical decline and the limitations of the human form. However, the grotesque in *Beauty Salon* is not simply about disgust. As Bakhtin argues, the grotesque also has a revolutionary energy that challenges social hierarchies and celebrates the body's inherent vitality (Bakhtin 78). In Bellatin's novel, the

grotesque bodies of the dying men become a site of resistance against the dominant culture's obsession with youth, health, and beauty.

Building upon this, the one can consider how the grotesque operates as a form of a reminder of mortality. By dwelling on the decaying body, Bellatin forces us to confront the inevitability of death and the transience of human existence. This confrontation carries the potential for liberation and urges the re-evaluation of individuals' priorities and to appreciate the fleeting beauty of life (Woodward 17). Moreover, the grotesque in *Beauty Salon* can be linked to the concept of queer aesthetics, which often embraces the abject and the marginalized as a form of resistance against heteronormative ideals. Bellatin stresses the narrative on the bodies of gay men dying of AIDS. He challenges the dominant culture's construction of the "normal" body and creates space for alternative forms of beauty and embodiment (Muñoz 88).

Bellatin's narrative choices compel a deep examination of the interactions with bodies experiencing disease and decay. They offer a harsh comment on social attitudes towards mortality and the human condition. Through his focus on the physical realities of illness, Bellatin fosters a more empathetic and complex comprehension of suffering. Eventually, he challenges readers to reconsider their preconceived notions about the body and its inherent vulnerabilities for more sympathetic understanding of the human experience.

### **1.2.2 The Abject Body**

Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject provides another useful framework for understanding Bellatin's representation of the decaying body. The abject threatens our sense of self, and cast out as impure or disgusting (Kristeva 4). In *Beauty Salon*, the diseased body becomes hopeless; they represent a threat to the protagonist's sense of order and control. The narrator's initial reaction to the dying men is one of a desire to distance himself from their



suffering. He attempts to maintain a sterile environment in the salon; he cleans it obsessively to contain the spread of disease. However, as the novel progresses, the narrator's relationship to the abject body undergoes a transformation. He begins to care for the dying men by tending to their needs and offers them comfort. In doing so, he confronts his own mortality and acknowledges the inherent vulnerability of the human condition. This confrontation with the abject leads to a breakdown of the boundaries between the self and the other, as the narrator becomes increasingly identified with the suffering of those he cares for.

This shift in the narrator's perspective mirrors what some theorists describe as a move toward an ethics of care. Instead of recoiling from the abject, he embraces it to find a sense of purpose in alleviating the suffering of others. As Joan Tronto argues, care involves not only meeting basic needs but also fostering a sense of dignity and connection (Tronto 126). By providing comfort and companionship to the dying men, the narrator actively resists the dehumanizing effects of disease and social neglect. Furthermore, the narrator's increasing identification with the suffering of others is interpreted through the lens of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of the *Other*<sup>1</sup>. Levinas argues that the *Other* makes an ethical demand and compels individuals to respond to their needs and acknowledge their inherent worth (Levinas 87). In *Beauty Salon*, the faces of the dying men become a powerful call to action for the narrator.

Examining this transformation further, the narrator's journey reflects a process of subjectivation, where the abject forces a re-evaluation of his own identity and values. As Judith Butler argues in *Psychic Life of Power*, the abject is not simply "out there," but it is constitutive of the subject itself to shape the sense of self through exclusion and negation (Butler 3). The narrator challenges the boundaries of his own identity to be more open and

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of "the *Other*" refers to anyone or anything perceived as different from oneself. It's fundamental in understanding how we form our identities, as encountering "otherness" helps define the boundaries of the "self".

empathetic. Moreover, Bellatin's portrayal of the narrator's evolving relationship with the abject is interpreted as a form of queer ethics<sup>1</sup>, which often challenges traditional notions of disgust and impurity. By centering the narrative on the bodies of men with AIDS, Bellatin disrupts the heteronormative association of the abject with the "unclean" or the "deviant," offering a more nuanced and compassionate understanding of human vulnerability, as explored by Leo Bersani in *Is the Rectum a Grave?* (Bersani 222)

Through the lens of Kristeva's theory, Bellatin's work reveals a profound exploration of the human capacity to confront and transcend revulsion, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of empathy and connection. This transformation underscores the potential for finding meaning and purpose in the face of suffering, challenging readers to reconsider their own boundaries and biases. By humanizing the abject, Bellatin encourages a more inclusive and compassionate vision of humanity, one that acknowledges the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their physical condition.

### 1.3 The Spiritual

Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* focuses on the physical realities of decay and death. It also explores the possibility of spiritual transcendence. The protagonist's act of caring for the dying men is seen as a form of secular devotion: a way of finding meaning and purpose in the face of suffering. The novel itself becomes a liminal space; a place where the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual become blurred. The aquarium, with its colorful fish and tranquil atmosphere, provides a contrast to the suffering that permeates the rest of the salon. It represents a realm of beauty, serenity and a reminder of the possibility of transcendence amidst the grim of life's realities. The protagonist's fascination with the aquarium suggests a yearning for something beyond the material world; it is a desire to escape

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<sup>1</sup> Queer ethics is an approach to ethics that critiques traditional moral frameworks. It focuses on how norms around sexuality, gender, and relationships shape our understanding of right and wrong.

the limitations of the body to find solace in the realm of the spiritual. This yearning for transcendence aligns with Mircea Eliade's concept of the sacred and the profane. While the decaying bodies and the AIDS epidemic represent the profane, the aquarium and the act of selfless care hint at the sacred that constitutes a realm of meaning and spiritual significance (Eliade 25). The protagonist's journey can be interpreted as a search for the sacred within the profane. It symbolizes his way of finding meaning and connection in a world marked by suffering and loss.

Furthermore, the beauty salon's transformation into a hospice creates a unique space where traditional notions of beauty are redefined. Instead of offering superficial enhancements, the salon becomes a sanctuary for a place where compassion and human connection take precedence over physical appearance. This inversion of values suggests a move towards a more profound understanding of beauty that encompasses the spiritual and the ethical dimensions of human existence (Hart 15).

This pursuit of transcendence reveals a longing for connection to something greater than oneself. It offers a path toward finding a meaning amid the challenges of human existence. The blurring of boundaries between the physical and spiritual realms reveals the potential for finding beauty and significance in unexpected places. Bellain reimages the concept of beauty beyond superficial appearances, as he invites a deeper appreciation for the spiritual and ethical dimensions of human life.

#### **1.4 Rhetoric of Decay**

Bellatin's writing style reinforces the themes of decay and disintegration. His style is often fragmented and elliptical. It mirrors the fragmented both bodies and minds of the characters. He uses repetition of images to create a sense of unease and disorientation to immerse the reader in the decaying world of the Beauty Salon. The lack of clear narrative

structure further contributes to this sense of disintegration; it reflects the breakdown of order and meaning in the face of death. This deliberate use of fragmentation is understood through the lens of poststructuralist literary theory<sup>1</sup>. As Jacques Derrida argues, language is inherently unstable and meaning is always deferred, never fully present (Derrida 278).

Bellatin's fragmented prose reflects this instability. He creates a sense of ambiguity that mirrors the experience of living in a world of decay and loss. Furthermore, the recurring motifs in *Beauty Salon* function as what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call "rhizomes," interconnected networks of meaning that resist linear interpretation (Deleuze and Guattari 21). These recurring images (fish, water, the beauty salon itself) create a sense of interconnectedness between seemingly disparate elements of the narrative. They blur the boundaries between the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual to reinforce the novel's overall thematic coherence.

The strategic use of repetition imagery amplifies the reader's sense of unease and disorientation. It effectively immerses them in the unsettling atmosphere of the Beauty Salon. This narrative technique mirrors the characters' internal fragmentation and the external decay surrounding them. The absence of a straightforward narrative structure further enhances this sense of disintegration and mirrors the collapse of order and meaning.

## 1.5 Conclusion

In *Beauty Salon*, Mario Bellatin employs the decaying body as a potent symbol to contest traditional ideals of beauty. He delves into the intricate interaction between the physical and the spiritual realms. Through the grotesque and the abject, he exposes the fragility of human existence and the confines of the material world. Yet, the novel also hints

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<sup>1</sup>Poststructuralist literary theory challenges the assumptions of structuralism by emphasizing the instability of meaning and the complexity of texts. It argues that language is not a transparent medium that conveys direct truths; instead, meaning is shaped by context, reader experience, and the interplay between various elements of a text.

the potential for spiritual transcendence, as the protagonist discovers meaning in his compassionate care for the dying. Ultimately, *Beauty Salon* stands as a profound reflection on the human spirit amidst decay.

Building upon this foundation, Chapter Two, "Deconstructing Beauty," further dissects the novel's challenge to aesthetic norms. This chapter begins by exploring how Bellatin inverts these conventions and presenting decay as alternative forms of beauty. The researcher considers the unconventional aspects of this redefinition and examines how it transgresses societal expectations. Through this exploration, the chapter aims to unpack the complex and often unsettling ways in which *Beauty Salon* reconsiders the beauty itself.

# **Chapter Two: Deconstructing Beauty**

## **Chapter Two: Deconstructing Beauty**

### 2.1 Introduction

### 2.2 Traditional Beauty Standards

### 2.3 Ugliness and Decay as Beauty

#### 2.3.1 The Unconventional

#### 2.3.2 Transgression

### 2.4 Conclusion

## **2.1 Introduction**

The present chapter delves into an examination of the widely accepted norms of beauty. It aims to dismantle traditional beauty standards by exploring alternative perspectives that embrace ugliness and decay. It investigates how the unconventional and transgressive is redefined as forms of beauty. It, thereby, broadens the understanding of aesthetic appeal. The chapter deals also with the historical and cultural foundations of traditional beauty standards, analyzing how these norms have been constructed and perpetuated over time. Following this, the chapter will pivot to explore the concept of ugliness and decay as potential sources of beauty. By examining these alternative aesthetics, this chapter seeks to challenge the limitations imposed by conventional standards and open up new avenues for aesthetic appreciation.

This chapter considers the power of transgression in redefining beauty, investigating how art and culture can challenge and subvert conventional notions. Such subversive acts often involve embracing elements traditionally deemed repulsive or undesirable, forcing a reevaluation of what is considered aesthetically pleasing. By examining works that deliberately defy norms, this chapter seeks to uncover the hidden beauty in the unexpected and the unconventional. Ultimately, this chapter argues for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of beauty that transcends traditional boundaries. This expanded perspective acknowledges the subjective nature of aesthetic appreciation and celebrates the multiplicity of forms that can evoke emotional and intellectual resonance.

## **2.2 Traditional Beauty Standards**

Traditional beauty standards are socially constructed ideals. They are not naturally occurring; they, rather, are created and maintained by society. These standards define what is considered beautiful or aesthetically pleasing within a particular culture and time period. The concept of social construction suggests that ideas about beauty are not universal or fixed but



are the product of cultural and historical processes (Bourdieu 12). The examination of traditional beauty standards reveals their potential to create social inequalities and exclusion. Accordingly, a number of physical traits are consistently valued over others, and it leads to the discrimination and marginalization of individuals who do not fit the prescribed mold. This affects various aspects of life, including social interactions, employment opportunities, and overall well-being. Challenging traditional beauty standards involves questioning their origins, and it promotes more diverse representations of beauty and fosters a culture that values individuality and self-acceptance. Embracing a broader understanding of beauty lead to a more equitable and empowering society for all individuals.

The media plays a significant role in reinforcing and disseminating these beauty standards. Through advertising, television, and film, specific images and representations of beauty are constantly presented to influence how individuals perceive themselves and others. Media portrayals often reflect dominant cultural values and perpetuate unrealistic ideals, which lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Wolf 23). Social institutions, such as fashion, art, and even healthcare, also contribute to shaping beauty standards. The fashion industry promotes specific body types and styles as desirable, while art often idealizes certain physical features. Furthermore, medical practices, such as cosmetic surgery, reinforce the idea that beauty can be achieved through altering one's appearance to meet established norms. These institutional forces collectively legitimize traditional beauty standards.

What is considered beautiful changes depending on the culture and time period, and beauty is created by society, not naturally occurring. For instance, beauty ideals in Western countries are very different from those in Eastern countries. Throughout history, ideas about beauty have changed along with social values. The media greatly impacts what people think is beautiful (Gill 35). Advertising, movies, and social media often show perfect images; they cause people to believe these standards. Constantly seeing these images harm how people feel

about themselves and their bodies. Those who don't fit these ideals may feel bad about themselves, worried, or sad. Traditional beauty standards often leave people out because of their race, age, body size, or abilities. This exclusion makes social inequalities worse and pushes aside those who don't meet the main ideal (Gill 48). Trying to achieve these standards can be impossible for many. They lead to unhealthy habits like dieting, surgery, or too much exercise. The beauty industry often sells products that promise to make people look better and reinforce the idea that beauty can be bought.

### **2.3 Ugliness and Decay as Beauty**

The idea of finding beauty in ugliness and decay opposes traditional views of what is considered aesthetically pleasing. Instead of focusing on perfection and conventional attractiveness, it seeks to appreciate the unique qualities found in things that are imperfect, unconventional, and temporary. This approach suggests that beauty can be discovered in unexpected places, challenging the limitations of traditional aesthetic norms (Sontag 200). By embracing ugliness and decay as potential sources of beauty, the one can expand his/her understanding of what is valuable and worthy of attention. Elements often dismissed as unattractive reveals hidden layers of meaning and complexity when viewed through a different lens. This perspective encourages a more inclusive approach to aesthetics, and it allows for the appreciation of a wider range of experiences and phenomena (Krauss 56).

The acceptance of decay as beauty acknowledges the temporary nature of existence. It is recognized that everything is subject to change and eventual disintegration. This perspective fosters a deeper appreciation for the present moment, as it highlights the ephemeral quality of life. It encourages people to look beyond the surface and discover the hidden beauty in the unconventional, imperfect, and transient aspects of the world. This expanded perspective enriches our lives and fosters a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of beauty in its many forms.

Beauty's imperfection promotes a more inclusive view of what is aesthetically pleasing. It acknowledges that beauty exists in many forms, even those that do not meet traditional standards. By recognizing beauty beyond the conventional, individuals open themselves to a wider range of aesthetic experiences (Berger 88). This change in perspective encourages scholars and writers to question our existing beliefs about beauty and examine the cultural stories and assumptions that shape views on what is considered beautiful. By challenging these deeply ingrained narratives, they can begin to deconstruct the limitations of conventional beauty standards (Bordo 139).

Embracing the beauty of imperfection allows for a more authentic and relatable aesthetic. It recognizes that flaws and imperfections are an inherent part of the human experience and can contribute to the unique character of an object or individual. This perspective celebrates individuality and encourages self-acceptance by valuing qualities that might otherwise be seen as undesirable. Emphasizing the beauty of imperfection enriches understandings of aesthetics and promotes a inclusive and accepting society. It challenges individuals to move beyond superficial judgments and appreciate the beauty that exists in all its diverse and unconventional forms. This shift in perspective fosters a deeper connection to the world.

The concept of finding beauty in ugliness and decay challenges traditional aesthetic norms, which typically value perfection and conventional attractiveness. Instead, this perspective seeks to appreciate the unique qualities found in things that are imperfect, unconventional, and temporary. This shift allows for an understanding of beauty that goes beyond surface-level appearances. Ugliness and decay embody creativity and authenticity that often serve as a counterpoint to the polished and idealized images presented by mainstream culture (Sontag 203). Another important aspect is transience. The fleeting nature of decay evokes a deeper understanding of beauty beyond being a physical attribute to a temporal

experience. This illuminates that beauty is also found in moments of change and deterioration (Krauss 59). This perspective highlights the idea that beauty is not static or permanent; it is, rather, something that is found in the process of transformation and change. By recognizing the beauty in ugliness and decay, writers challenge the preconceived notions about what is considered aesthetically pleasing.

### **2.3.1 The Unconventional**

The concept of the unconventional in beauty revolves around the celebration of individuality and uniqueness, which contrasts with traditional or mainstream beauty ideals. As Bordo (2003) explains, this approach embraces features that are typically considered atypical or outside the norm. These unique features include physical traits that deviate from the conventional standards of attractiveness, such as unusual facial structures, body types, or skin tones. The celebration of these traits highlights the idea that beauty is subjective and not confined to one specific image.

Beyond physical attributes, the unconventional in beauty also encompasses alternative fashion styles that challenge the status quo<sup>1</sup>. Krauss highlights how fashion can serve as a powerful medium for expressing non-traditional aesthetics (60). This involves embracing avant-garde styles, mixing various cultural influences and established trends. Instead of conforming to mainstream expectations, individuals who adopt unconventional fashion choices use clothing and accessories as a way to express their personal identity and challenge social norms. This turns fashion into an art form that reflects both rebellion and creativity.

Literature pushes boundaries of the unconventional in beauty. It often challenges established conventions, styles, and themes. Literature breaks away from traditional notions

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<sup>1</sup>The status quo refers to the existing state of affairs or the current situation. It represents the present conditions, customs, laws, and norms within a society, organization, or any defined context.

of beauty to explore more abstract or controversial concepts. Writers who engage in this type of work often seek to provoke thought and reflection, using beauty as a tool to question and redefine cultural and social standards. The result is a rich diverse interpretations of beauty that encourage new ways of seeing the world. The unconventional in beauty rejects the idea that beauty is a fixed or objective standard, embracing instead a fluid, inclusive definition that celebrates difference and innovation. By promoting alternative fashion, unique physical traits, and boundary-pushing art, the unconventional celebrates authenticity and encourages individuals to embrace their uniqueness. This shift away from traditional norms fosters a broader, more inclusive understanding of beauty that recognizes the value in diversity and self-expression.

The unconventional in beauty is deeply rooted in the celebration of individuality and self-expression. As Wolf argues, it encourages individuals to embrace their unique qualities, celebrating what makes them different from mainstream beauty ideals. Rather than adhering to societal pressures to conform to a specific image, the unconventional promotes self-acceptance and the understanding that beauty lies in authenticity. This approach challenges people to step away from standardized norms and express themselves in ways that reflect their true selves, fostering a sense of freedom and self-empowerment. Challenging beauty norms is at the heart of the unconventional. Sontag (1964) notes that the unconventional actively resists established beauty standards. They often promote a narrow, one-dimensional idea of attractiveness by highlighting non-traditional aesthetics. It opens up the conversation about what beauty can be and pushes for a more inclusive and diverse understanding. Rather than promoting a uniform ideal, it celebrates a wide range of appearances, encouraging individuals to find beauty in differences and to recognize that beauty does not conform to a single, rigid standard.

Writers provide key platforms for the unconventional to manifest. As Berger (1972) suggests, the unconventional often finds its expression in these areas, where they intentionally create works that subvert traditional ideas of beauty. In the world of literature, for example, writers showcase unusual combinations, unconventional themes, or non-traditional styles to challenge the readers' expectations. Similarly, novels that embrace the unconventional use distorted forms and unexpected juxtapositions to provoke thought and emotion. This creative freedom celebrates the unexpected and emphasizes the beauty in defying conventions.

The unconventional in beauty encourages a radical rethinking of aesthetic norms, focusing on the diverse and the individual. It fosters an environment where non-traditional beauty is not only accepted but celebrated. By rejecting conformity and promoting artistic and cultural experimentation, the unconventional makes space for new perspectives on beauty. It champions the idea that beauty is not a monolithic concept but something that thrives in diversity and personal expression, reshaping the cultural landscape to be more open and accepting of all forms of beauty.

### **2.3.2 Transgression**

Transgression in beauty involves intentionally breaking or subverting traditional beauty standards as a means of making a statement or challenging societal norms. This can include the use of unconventional makeup, fashion, or body modification that deviates from the conventional understanding of beauty. According to Grosz (1994), the traditional ideals of beauty have long been constructed to uphold dominant social, cultural, and gender hierarchies. By embracing transgressive beauty, individuals disrupt these constructs, challenging the expectations that beauty should conform to a narrow set of standards. This process of transgression, therefore, becomes not only a critique of beauty norms but also a tool for broader social transformation. Rather than simply being an aesthetic choice,

transgressive beauty represents a form of resistance to the oppressive forces that regulate how bodies should appear and behave (142).

One of the central functions of transgressive beauty is its ability to serve as social commentary, particularly in relation to issues like sexism, racism, and body shaming. As Bartky argues: beauty standards have been historically gendered, often constructed to keep women subjugated and bound by restrictive physical and behavioral expectations (19). Transgressive beauty resists this by providing an alternative narrative that challenges these expectations. For example, the use of body modification serves as a critique of the hyper-sexualized, often unattainable beauty ideals placed on women. Additionally, the embracing of non-traditional aesthetics highlights how race and class intersect with beauty norms, as seen in the reclamation of natural hair among Black women as a powerful act of resistance against Eurocentric beauty ideals (Hooks 92). In this way, transgressive beauty becomes a form of protest that critiques and challenges societal structures of power.

Transgressive beauty also functions as a provocative tool. It is designed to stimulate critical reflection on beauty standards. As Dyer points out, beauty norms are not neutral but are shaped by cultural, economic, and political forces that enforce particular ideologies. By subverting these norms, transgressive beauty forces audiences to confront their assumptions about beauty, aesthetics, and power. This act of provocation not only generates controversy but also encourages deeper discussions about the ways in which beauty is conceptualized and who gets to define it(14). In this sense, transgressive beauty serves as a vehicle for social change by forcing individuals to reconsider the aesthetic and ideological standards they have internalized.

Engaging in transgressive beauty can also be an empowering act for individuals, especially in a world where beauty standards often dictate worth and social acceptance.

According to McRobbie, the pressure to conform to conventional beauty ideals can lead to feelings of inadequacy and disempowerment, particularly among women who face intense scrutiny over their appearance (120). Transgressive beauty, however, offers a form of liberation, allowing individuals to reclaim their bodies and identities on their own terms. By embracing and celebrating non-traditional beauty, people challenge the idea that their worth is determined by conforming to societal expectations. This form of self-empowerment is closely tied to body positivity movements, where individuals assert ownership over their physical appearances and resist the cultural forces that seek to regulate how they should look. As such, transgressive beauty becomes not only an act of personal empowerment but also a collective challenge to the restrictive norms that govern beauty and body image in contemporary society (McRobbie 200).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has undertaken a critical deconstruction of beauty, revealing its complex and often contradictory nature. It began by examining traditional beauty standards, identifying how these norms are historically and culturally contingent, often reflecting power structures and societal expectations rather than inherent qualities. These standards, frequently perpetuated through media and cultural institutions, exert a significant influence on individual self-perception and social interactions. Moving beyond these conventional definitions, the chapter then explored the intriguing concept of ugliness and decay as alternative forms of beauty. By analyzing how the unconventional and the transgressive can hold aesthetic appeal, we challenged the notion of beauty as a fixed ideal. The embrace of imperfection, decay, or the grotesque suggests a rejection of superficiality and a deeper engagement with the raw, unfiltered aspects of existence. The exploration of ugliness as beauty highlights the subjective and contextual nature of aesthetic judgment. What is considered ugly in one context may be seen as beautiful in another, depending on cultural values, personal experiences, and artistic



intentions. This relativity underscores the idea that beauty is not an inherent property of objects or individuals, but rather a quality attributed to them through interpretation and evaluation.

This chapter has also demonstrated that beauty is not a static or universal concept but a dynamic and evolving construct. By deconstructing traditional norms and exploring alternative aesthetics, we have expanded the boundaries of what can be considered beautiful. This broadened understanding encourages a more inclusive and nuanced appreciation of the diverse forms of beauty that exist in the world around us, fostering a more critical and open-minded perspective on aesthetic values.

# **Chapter Three:**

## **The Ethics of Decay**

## Chapter Three: The Ethics of Decay

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Questioning Social Norms

3.3 Deconstructing the Stigma of Disease

3.4 The Beauty Salon as a Space of Transformation

3.5 Conclusion

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as a critical bridge between the theoretical framework established thus far and the specific textual analysis of Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon*. It builds upon the thesis. It delves into the complex contradictory values assigned to decline, disease, and transformation within a social context. It examines the way social norms shape perceptions of decay (particularly in relation to the human body and its associated stigmas) that echo the environment and characters depicted in Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon*. By questioning established frameworks, this chapter aims to expose the underlying biases that inform our judgments about health, beauty, and worth, issues Bellatin confronts in his narrative.

This exploration lies on the central paradox that is directly relevant to *Beauty Salon*. While modern society often pathologizes decay and actively seeks to combat it, decay is an inescapable and fundamentally necessary process for renewal and change. To unpack this paradox, the chapter investigates the social construction of disease by revealing the ways conditions become stigmatized while others are normalized and valorized in Bellatin's depiction of the terminal. This deconstruction is crucial for understanding the ethical implications of the ways individuals are treated and experience physical and mental decline.

The analysis focuses on the beauty salon as a unique site where these conflicting values intersect. Beauty salons are often perceived as spaces of superficial enhancement. In Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon*, it functions as transformative environments for individuals to grapple with their changing bodies and identities. By examining these practices and discourses within these spaces, this chapter explores individuals' negotiation of the pressures of social expectations surrounding appearance and aging. These spaces become sites of resistance against the stigma of decay. The chapter seeks to challenge readers to reconsider their own assumptions about what it means to be healthy, beautiful, and valuable in a society that often equates worth with an idealized image of perpetual youth and vitality.

### 3.2 Questioning Social Norms in Beauty Salon

Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* presents a moving vision of a society grappling with a mysterious epidemic. The narrative framework serves as a potent vehicle for questioning social norms surrounding health, beauty, and death. The novel's protagonist manages both a beauty salon and a hospice for the terminally ill. He embodies the blurring of boundaries between social ideals and the realities of decay. This purposeful combination challenges readers to confront their own preconceived notions about what constitutes a valuable meaningful existence. Through the salon's transformation from a space of aesthetic enhancement to a sanctuary for the dying, Bellatin subverts conventional expectations and forces a re-evaluation of social values.

Bellatin questions social norms through his portrayal of the epidemic itself. The disease, never explicitly named, strips its victims of their physical beauty and reduces them to states of grotesque decline. In a society obsessed with appearances, this epidemic becomes a metaphor for the rejection of mortality and the fear of physical imperfection. The narrator's decision to care for the afflicted bodies challenges the social impulse to exclude those who do not conform to idealized standards of health and beauty. This act of compassion becomes a form of rebellion against the prevailing norms that dictate who is worthy of care and attention. As the narrator states, "I had always felt a certain responsibility towards those who were different" (Bellatin 15). He highlights his conscious decision to defy social expectations.

Bellatin complicates the narrative further by setting the hospice within the beauty salon. The salon, traditionally a space for the pursuit of superficial beauty, becomes a place where individuals confront the realities of their decaying bodies. This juxtaposition highlights the absurdity of social expectations surrounding appearance and the futility of attempting to mask the inevitable process of decay. As the narrator observes the transformations of his clients, he

witnesses the disintegration of their physical forms; the process that forces the reader to confront the limitations of social norms that prioritize external appearances over inner worth. The narrator's description of the salon's clientele underscores this point: "They came seeking a temporary respite from their suffering, a fleeting illusion of beauty in the face of their impending demise" (Bellatin 28).

The novel's exploration of sexuality also serves to challenge social norms. As the epidemic progresses, the narrator engages in increasingly unconventional sexual encounters with the dying men. These encounters defy conventional notions of sexual attraction and pleasure. The narrator rejects the social taboo surrounding death and sexuality. He suggests that, there is room for connection and intimacy. As one character proclaims, "Even in this state, I still desire...I still feel" (Bellatin 45). He emphasizes the persistence of human needs and desires even in the face of death.

Bellatin's narrative structure reinforces his critique of social norms. The novel is fragmented and non-linear structure; it mirrors the disintegration of the bodies it describes. This fragmented structure challenges the reader to piece together the narrative and forces them to engage with the text and question their own assumptions. The lack of a clear resolution leaves the reader to grapple with the complex ethical questions raised by the novel. This is evident in the novel's abrupt ending, as it leaves the reader with a sense of uncertainty and unease.

The aesthetics of decay are central to Bellatin's questioning of social norms. The novel's vivid descriptions of decaying bodies challenge the reader's sense of disgust and revulsion. Bellatin subverts the social impulse to ignore the unpleasant aspects of human existence. This aesthetic strategy serves to disrupt conventional notions of beauty and ugliness and forces a re-evaluation of what constitutes the human experience. The narrator's detailed descriptions of

the dying men's bodies, such as "the skin peeling away like parchment" (Bellatin, 62), are deliberately confrontational.

Moreover, the narrator's detached tone amplifies the novel's critique of social norms. He expresses emotion and judgment to present the events of the novel with a detached objectivity. This lack of emotional engagement forces the reader to confront the events without the guidance of a moral compass. It challenges them to develop their own ethical framework for understanding the novel's unsettling themes. The narrator's detachment becomes a mirror, reflecting the reader's own reactions and biases; it leaves the reader to grapple with the unsettling implications of his actions.

Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* is a powerful critique of social norms. Through its unconventional setting, Bellatin challenges readers to confront their own preconceived notions about what constitutes a valuable existence. The novel's exploration of the aesthetics of decay serves to disrupt conventional notions of beauty and ugliness. It forces a re-evaluation of the human experience. Bellatin invites readers to embrace the grotesque and the taboo and question the very foundations of social values.

### **3.3 Deconstructing the Stigma of Disease**

In Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon*, the narrative weaves the themes of disease and decay into a commentary on social stigma. The novel offers deep exploration of various forms of illness perceptions. It highlights the social and cultural constructs that reinforce stigma. By presenting disease as a physical ailment and as a complex social phenomenon, Bellatin invites readers to question the prevailing attitudes that marginalize the ill and devalue their lives. This deconstruction of stigma is pivotal in understanding the social perceptions of individual identity.

Central to Bellatin's examination is the unnamed narrator who operates a beauty salon that doubles as a hospice for those suffering from a mysterious epidemic. This duality serves as a compelling metaphor for the fractured relationship society has with disease. The salon, a traditional space of transformation and beauty, becomes a site that challenges the stigma associated with illness. As the narrator reflects, "In this space, decay and beauty coexist" (Bellatin 23). It suggests a complex interplay between aesthetics and the realities of mortality. The novel advocates for a more understanding of humanity that transcends binary oppositions.

Bellatin accentuates the disconnection between social norms and the lived realities of those with diseases. Characters afflicted by the epidemic are often marginalized. The narrator confronts this by asserting, "I had always seen beauty in what others considered a defect" (Bellatin 35). This perspective invites the reader to reconsider notions of worth tied to physical appearance and health. The salon becomes a revolutionary space where social standards are subverted. It allows for a more humane recognition of the ill; Bellatin posits that beauty is not a static state. It is rather an evolving concept that encompasses all forms of existence, including decay.

The passage of time and the inevitability of decay serve as central themes in this deconstruction of stigma. The narrator observes that "death is not an end but a continuation" (Bellatin 47); He challenges the idea that illness culminates in loss of value or dignity. Decay is rather seen as a natural progression that holds intrinsic beauty. This philosophical stance invites the audience to engage with their discomfort regarding mortality of the lives of those with chronic diseases. Thus, Bellatin's narrative reframes illness as part of the human experience that deserves compassion rather than distance.

Moreover, the interpersonal interactions within the salon challenge stigmatizing attitudes. The interactions between the narrator and his clients illustrate the ways communal spaces foster empathy and solidarity. As clients share their stories, they reclaim their identities



from the shadows of social judgment. One poignant moment occurs when a character states, "In this space, we are all beautiful, irrespective of our flaws" (Bellatin, 59). This assertion fosters a sense of belonging and affirms the humanity of individuals often deemed undesirable. Bellatin effectively critiques the isolation that stigma produces by suggesting that community is a powerful antidote to social prejudices.

In the context of sexuality, Bellatin complicates the stigma of disease even further. The narrator's sexual encounters with dying men illustrate a rejection of conventional norms surrounding sexual attraction and desire. He states, "Desire does not disappear with decay; it transforms" (Bellatin 84). This claim disrupts the societal notion that illness renders individuals unattractive or undesirable. Instead, Bellatin portrays a vibrant sexuality that persists despite physical decline. He challenges readers to acknowledge the full spectrum of human experience that includes love, intimacy, and connection even amidst suffering.

The role of the beauty salon as a therapeutic space is crucial to this discussion. While salons are typically associated with superficial enhancements, in *Beauty Salon*, they serve as sites of healing and acceptance. The narrator's care for his clients transcends traditional beauty standards; instead, he focuses on their emotional and psychological well-being. He muses, "Here, we do not just polish the exterior; we nurture the soul" (Bellatin 98). This holistic approach emphasizes the importance of addressing both the physical ailments and the emotional ramifications of stigma and isolation.

Bellatin's narrative style contributes to the critical discourse on stigma. The narrator's objective observations allow readers to engage with discomforting realities without the veil of emotional bias. This narrative distance can evoke a reflective response; readers confront their own stigmas and biases as they witness the characters' experiences. As the narrator recounts, "I learned that indifference can be a form of compassion" (Bellatin 102). This paradox serves

as an invitation for the audience to confront their own complicity in perpetuating social stigma.

Beauty Salon serves as a powerful critique of the stigma surrounding disease. It urges readers to embrace a more inclusive and compassionate perspective. By deconstructing the barriers of shame and judgment associated with illness, Bellatin challenges social norms and redefines the notion of beauty. The narrative's rich imagery and reflections on mortality invite a deeper understanding of the human condition, where decay does not signify a loss of value but an opportunity for transformation and recognition.

Through the lens of decay and stigma in *Beauty Salon*, Bellatin creates a narrative that profoundly critiques social attitudes toward health and beauty. By representing illness as an intrinsic aspect of human existence, he dismantles the barriers that often isolate the ill. Bellatin advocates for empathy and solidarity and invites readers to reconsider their perceptions and assumptions about those affected by disease.

In *Beauty Salon*, Mario Bellatin offers a critique of social attitudes towards disease, particularly through the lens of stigma. The novel centers on a beauty salon that also serves as a hospice for those afflicted by a mysterious epidemic. It creates a unique setting where issues of decay, mortality, and social perceptions of health intertwine. Bellatin's narrative challenges the stigmatization of illness by presenting a space where the boundaries of beauty and decay are blurred and compel readers to confront their own biases regarding disease.

The narrator's role in this dual-purpose space serves as a critical mechanism for deconstructing stigma. The narrator embodies the juxtaposition of aesthetic ideals and the realities of illness. He reflects, "In this salon, beauty is not just skin deep; it is a matter of life and death" (Bellatin 37). This statement captures the essence of the narrative's critique, positioning beauty as a dynamic concept influenced by the immediacy of decay. The fusion of

life and death within the salon allows for a more nuanced appreciation of human fragility. It has thus urged readers to reconsider the social imperative to uphold rigid definitions of beauty.

Through his encounters with clients, the narrator confronts deeply ingrained social prejudices. The ailing individuals in the salon are often viewed through a lens of repulsion and fear, an attitude that the narrator actively seeks to disrupt. He notes, “We tend to turn our backs on decay, as if it were a personal affront” (Bellatin 45). This statement underscores how societal norms encourage the ostracization of those suffering from illness. It openly acknowledges these feelings. Bellatin allows for a critical examination of the emotional responses elicited by disease. He challenges the reader to empathize with those often relegated to the margins of society.

Bellatin also explores the social implications of decay and disease through his vivid descriptions of the physical manifestations of illness. The narrative is rife with grotesque imagery that defies conventional standards of beauty. For instance, the narrator describes his clients' bodies in visceral terms, recounting, “Their skin had become a tapestry of lesions, each telling a story of struggle” (Bellatin 56). This raw depiction humanizes individuals often reduced to their ailments. It counters the stigma that dehumanizes the sick. Bellatin invites readers to see beyond the surface and recognize the inherent dignity of those grappling with disease.

The aestheticization of decay in the salon also serves to question the social fixation on youth and physical perfection. Bellatin challenges the notion that beauty conforms to narrow standards by portraying the salon as a transformative space where clients can reclaim their identities. The narrator asserts, “Our bodies tell stories that are not always beautiful, yet they are profound” (Bellatin 68). This assertion encourages a paradigm shift in how beauty is perceived to suggest that authenticity rather than conformity to social standards and define

worth. By positioning decay as a narrative rich with meaning, Bellatin subverts the idea that illness diminishes a person's value or beauty.

Moreover, the theme of sexuality within the context of disease further complicates the stigma associated with illness. The narrator navigates intimate relationships with clients, blurring the lines between caregiving and desire. He reflects, "In their vulnerability, I found a beauty that society has taught me to suppress" (Bellatin 83). This intimate exploration of sexuality in the face of decay challenges the preconceived notions that illness negates desire or renders individuals unattractive. By asserting the continuity of eroticism even amidst suffering, Bellatin dismantles societal taboos that dictate how we view sexual relationships in the context of disease.

The communal aspect of the salon also plays a crucial role in subverting stigma. Within its walls, individuals suffering from illness find solidarity and acceptance, contrasting sharply with societal tendencies to isolate the sick. As the narrator observes, "Each conversation here is a pact against solitude" (Bellatin 92). This sense of community fosters a supportive environment that challenges the prevailing social narrative that views disease as a personal failure. Bellatin creates a space where vulnerability can be shared to emphasize the importance of connection in combating the stigma surrounding illness.

Bellatin's narrative structure which weaves together fragmented experiences and non-linear timelines mirrors the disorienting nature of living with disease. The complexity of the storyline compels readers to grapple with their own interpretations and reflect the chaotic and often confusing reality faced by those with chronic illness. As the narrator admits: "Understanding decay is like trying to grasp smoke; it slips through one's fingers." (Bellatin 104) This acknowledgment of the ineffable nature of illness reinforces the idea that stigma is compounded by a lack of understanding and communication, inviting readers to engage in deeper reflection.

Beauty Salon serves as a powerful indictment of the stigma surrounding disease. It urges a more compassionate and inclusive perspective. Through the intertwining of beauty and decay, Bellatin challenges the social impulse to ostracize the ill while celebrating the rich narratives embedded within the experience of decay. By deconstructing the stigma associated with disease, the novel advocates for a broader understanding of humanity that appreciates the complexities of life, health, and mortality.

Bellatin's exploration of decay within Beauty Salon offers a critical commentary on the stigma of disease. This exploration challenges social norms and invite a more appreciation of the human experience. By presenting illness as inherently tied to beauty and identity, Bellatin encourages readers to transcend their preconceived notions and embrace a more empathetic understanding of those affected by disease. Ultimately, Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* is not merely a narrative about illness; it is a meditation on resilience, dignity, and the transformative power of acceptance amidst decay.

### **3.5The Beauty Salon as a Space of Transformation**

In Mario Bellatin's Beauty Salon, the titular space operates as a multifaceted site of transformation, where notions of beauty, decay, and identity intersect. This space serves as a commercial establishment and as a hospice for the terminally ill. It creates a unique environment that challenges conventional perceptions of both beauty and mortality. Through its depiction of the salon, Bellatin critiques societal values surrounding aesthetics and emphasizes the potential for personal reinvention amid the realities of illness.

The beauty salon initially embodies the traditional role of enhancing physical appearance, yet it quickly evolves into a sanctuary for those confronting their mortality. The narrator observes, "The salon's mirrors reflect not just faces, but the very essence of transformation" (Bellatin 22). This statement articulates the salon's dual function as a place of

superficial beauty and profound existential reflection. The mirrors, traditionally symbolic of vanity, become agents of deeper introspection, prompting both clients and readers to reconsider their understanding of beauty in the context of decay and death.

The transformation that occurs within the salon is deeply tied to the characters' stories. Each client brings their narrative of struggle and acceptance, illustrating how personal histories entwine with the physicality of their decaying bodies. The narrator remarks, "In every haircut, there is a shedding of more than just hair; there is a release of the past" (Bellatin 35). This reflection emphasizes that the salon is a space of catharsis, where clients not only alter their external appearance but also engage in a process of emotional healing. By focusing on this transformative aspect, Bellatin underscores the idea that beauty can be a vehicle for confronting grief and loss.

Moreover, the salon operates as a communal space that fosters connections among individuals facing similar fates. The interactions between clients create an atmosphere of solidarity and support, highlighting the transformative power of shared experience. The narrator notes, "Here, we are not just clients; we are witnesses to each other's decay" (Bellatin 49). This acknowledgment of vulnerability redefines the traditional salon dynamic, where beauty becomes a collective experience intertwined with the acceptance of decay. By situating transformation within a communal context, Bellatin emphasizes the importance of relationships in the journey toward self-acceptance.

The aestheticization of decay in the salon further enhances its role as a transformative space. Instead of shunning the realities of illness, Bellatin embraces them, presenting decay as a legitimate form of beauty. The narrator reflects, "There is a unique beauty in the way bodies change, the way they tell their own stories through scars and imperfections" (Bellatin 62). This insight serves to dismantle the stigma surrounding aging and illness, fostering an appreciation for the narratives etched into the bodies of the clients. By reclaiming decay as a

source of beauty, the salon becomes a space for redefining standards and embracing the complexities of the human condition.

The role of the beauty salon as a transformative space also intersects with themes of identity. As clients undergo physical changes, there is a concurrent exploration of their identities beyond their disease. The transformation of one's outer appearance can lead to a reawakening of inner strength and self-awareness. The narrator states, "When the scissors cut through hair, they also cut through the silence surrounding death" (Bellatin 78). This metaphor highlights the salon's potential to liberate individuals from the constraints of societal expectations and to encourage them to engage with their authentic selves, despite the presence of illness.

Bellatin also emphasizes the fluidity of identity within the salon. The narrator reflects on the diverse backgrounds of his clients, remarking, "In this space, we become what we choose; we are not defined by our diseases" (Bellatin 85). This assertion reinforces the notion that the salon empowers individuals to transcend their circumstances and assert their identities in the face of adversity. The beauty salon, therefore, becomes a platform for empowerment, where personal agency can flourish, even amidst the suffering inherent in decay.

Conflict and tension also play a role in the salon's dynamic, as characters grapple with their mortality while seeking transformation. The emotional weight of illness often leads to poignant moments of sharing and vulnerability among clients. The narrator notes, "There are moments when the weight of decay is too much, yet we find strength in our shared tears" (Bellatin 94). Such moments illustrate the paradox of the salon as both a place of transformation and a reminder of the fragility of life. By acknowledging these tensions, Bellatin presents a realistic portrayal of the complexities involved in navigating identity, beauty, and decay.

The salon's transformative potential extends beyond the individual to implicate broader societal values regarding beauty and health. By intertwining care for the dying with aesthetic practices, Bellatin challenges the prevailing ideals that equate worth with youth and vitality. The narrator's assertion, "In this space, we reject the idea that beauty must be free from imperfection" (Bellatin 106), serves as a rallying cry for redefining societal norms. Bellatin encourages readers to recognize and embrace the beauty inherent in imperfection and decay, ultimately advocating for a more inclusive understanding of beauty that accommodates the realities of illness.

In conclusion, the beauty salon in Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* represents a dynamic space of transformation where beauty, decay, and identity intersect. Through its dual role as a site of aesthetic enhancement and a sanctuary for the dying, the salon challenges conventional perceptions of health and beauty while fostering a sense of community among individuals facing similar fates. Bellatin's exploration of transformation within this setting urges readers to reconsider societal values regarding disease, ultimately advocating for a redefinition of beauty that encompasses the complexities of the human experience. By engaging with the themes of decay and identity, *Beauty Salon* posits that transformation is not just possible but necessary, even—and especially—in the face of mortality.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

In *Beauty Salon*, Mario Bellatin constructs the beauty salon as a transformative space where the intersecting themes of decay, identity, and human connection unfold in profound ways. Throughout this chapter, the salon emerges not merely as a venue for aesthetic enhancement but as a sanctuary where individuals confront the realities of their mortality. The author challenges readers to reconsider their preconceived notions of beauty, showing that transformation can arise even in the face of decay and illness. By integrating the narratives of



clients within this unique environment, Bellatin emphasizes the importance of community and solidarity in navigating the complexities of human experience.

The salon functions as a site of liberation, allowing clients to redefine their identities beyond the limitations imposed by societal norms surrounding health and appearance. It provides an opportunity for catharsis, where the shedding of physical attributes serves as a metaphorical release of emotional burdens. This notion of transformation extends to the broader societal context, urging a reevaluation of aesthetic standards that often prioritize youth and perfection over authenticity and resilience. Bellatin invites readers to celebrate the beauty inherent in imperfection and to embrace the narratives etched into the bodies of those facing decay.

Ultimately, the chapter concludes by affirming the significance of the beauty salon as a microcosm of life itself—a place where beauty, decay, and transformation coexist. As the characters forge new identities within this space, Bellatin underscores the potential for personal and collective reinvention. By bridging the gap between aesthetics and mortality, Beauty Salon advocates for a more compassionate and inclusive understanding of beauty that honors the complexities of the human condition. In doing so, the salon not only becomes a space of transformation but also a testament to the enduring spirit of those who inhabit it, challenging societal stigmas and celebrating the resilience of life amidst decay.

# **General Conclusion**

## General Conclusion

Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* presents a compelling exploration of decay, challenging conventional notions of beauty, ethics, and the human condition. Through vivid and often disturbing imagery, Bellatin invites readers to confront the aesthetics of decay, finding beauty in the grotesque and meaning in the abject. This exploration is not merely an exercise in shock value, but a profound meditation on mortality, transformation, and the potential for transcendence. The concept of decay is central to understanding Bellatin's narrative and aesthetic vision in *Beauty Salon*. Decay manifests in various forms, from the physical deterioration of the body to the moral and social decay of a society ravaged by disease. The novel confronts readers with the harsh realities of mortality, challenging them to find beauty and meaning in the face of decline.

The grotesque and the abject serve as key elements in Bellatin's aesthetic of decay. The grotesque body, marked by deformities and disease, becomes a site of both repulsion and fascination. Simultaneously, the abject represents that which is cast off and rejected, challenges social norms and exposes the fragility of human existence. Through these representations, Bellatin compels us to confront the limits of our own bodies and the inevitability of death. In contrast to the corporeal decay, the novel also explores the spiritual dimension of human existence. Amidst the physical and moral decay, characters seek solace and meaning in spirituality. This juxtaposition highlights the tension between the material and the immaterial, suggesting that true beauty may lie beyond the realm of the physical.

Bellatin masterfully employs rhetoric of decay. He uses language and imagery to evoke a sense of decline and disintegration. His prose mirrors the decaying world he depicts, with fragmented sentences and unsettling descriptions that create a visceral reading experience. This rhetorical strategy enhances the novel's exploration of decay, immersing readers in its

unsettling atmosphere. *Beauty Salon* challenges traditional beauty standards by embracing ugliness and decay as aesthetic categories. The novel suggests that beauty is not limited to conventional notions of perfection and harmony, but can also be found in the unconventional and the transgressive. By celebrating the grotesque and the abject, Bellatin expands the boundaries of beauty, inviting us to appreciate the diversity and complexity of human existence.

The aesthetics of decay in *Beauty Salon* raise important ethical questions about social norms, disease, and the treatment of marginalized individuals. Bellatin challenges the stigma associated with illness and decay, portraying characters with compassion and empathy. Through his exploration of decay, he prompts readers to reconsider their attitudes towards death, disease, and the human body. The beauty salon itself serves as a symbolic space of transformation, where individuals confront their own mortality and seek solace in the face of decay. It is a place where conventional notions of beauty are challenged, and where the boundaries between life and death become blurred. Through this space, Bellatin suggests that decay is not merely an end, but also a process of transformation and renewal.

Through the aesthetics of decay, *Beauty Salon* ultimately invites us to reflect on the nature of existence. The novel challenges us to confront our own mortality, to question social norms, and to find beauty in the most unexpected places. By embracing decay, Bellatin suggests, we can gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world. Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon* is a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of the aesthetics of decay. Through its vivid imagery, unconventional characters, and challenging themes, the novel offers a unique perspective on beauty, ethics, and the human condition. By confronting the reality of decay, Bellatin compels us to reconsider our values and to find meaning in the face of mortality. Further research could explore the influence of Latin American literary traditions on Bellatin's work, particularly the use of magical realism and the grotesque.

Additionally, examining the reception of *Beauty Salon* in different cultural contexts could provide valuable insights into the novel's impact and significance.

The study of decay in literature and art offers fertile ground for future scholarly inquiry. By examining how different authors and artists represent decay, we can gain a deeper understanding of the human condition and the complex relationship between beauty, ethics, and mortality. *Beauty Salon* stands as a testament to the power of literature to challenge our perceptions and expand our understanding of the world. By embracing the aesthetics of decay, Bellatin has created a work of lasting significance that will continue to provoke and inspire readers for years to come.

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# **Appendice**

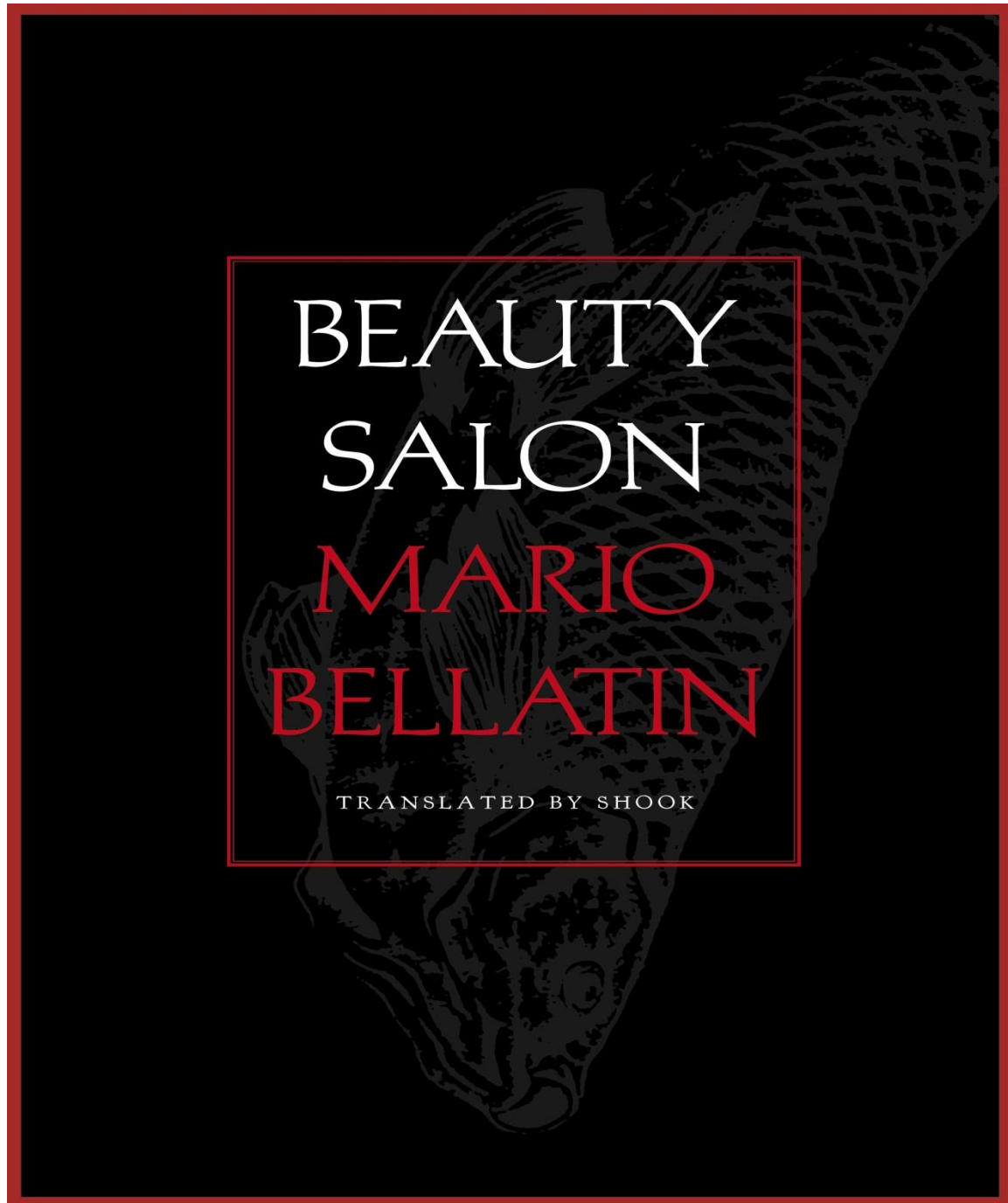
## **Appendix: A**

**The author: Mario Bellatin**



Appendix: B

The novel: Beauty Salon



# Glossary

## Glossary

**Abject:** That which is cast off or considered repulsive, often challenging social norms and boundaries. Drawing from theories of the abject, the thesis examines how "Beauty Salon" presents elements that are typically considered disgusting or taboo, such as disease and bodily waste, to challenge societal stigmas and explore the limits of human experience.

**Aestheticization:** The process of making something aesthetic or beautiful, often applied to subjects not typically considered beautiful. The thesis critically assesses Bellatin's aestheticization of decay, examining the ethical implications of turning disease and social marginalization into objects of artistic contemplation.

**Aesthetics:** A branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste. In this context, it refers to the specific artistic qualities and principles employed by Mario Bellatin, particularly his focus on decay, and how these elements shape the reader's experience and understanding of the work. The thesis examines how conventional aesthetics are challenged and redefined through the novella's portrayal of decay.

**Corporeal:** Relating to the body. The thesis focuses on the corporeal decay depicted in "Beauty Salon," analyzing how the disintegration of the body reflects broader themes of societal collapse and spiritual yearning.

**Decay:** The process of decomposition or decline. In "Beauty Salon," decay functions as both a physical reality and a symbolic representation of societal and moral deterioration. The thesis explores how Bellatin uses decay as a central motif to question conventional values and provoke a re-evaluation of beauty and mortality.

**Grotesque:** A style characterized by distorted or bizarre forms, often used to create a sense of unease or alienation. The grotesque in Bellatin's work involves the exaggerated depiction of bodily decay and the unsettling juxtaposition of beauty and horror. This thesis uses theories of the grotesque to analyze how Bellatin challenges traditional aesthetic norms and confronts readers with uncomfortable aspects of the human condition.

**Moral Decay:** The decline of ethical and moral standards within a society or individual.

Beyond physical decay, the thesis also considers the moral implications of the epidemic and societal collapse in Bellatin's novella, exploring how characters grapple with ethical dilemmas in a deteriorating world.

**Post-structuralism:** A theoretical approach that questions fixed meanings and structures, emphasizing the instability and fluidity of language and concepts. Post-structuralist theories inform the deconstruction of the novella's themes, particularly the re-evaluation of beauty and the destabilization of conventional understandings of the human condition.

**Subversion:** The act of undermining or overturning established systems or norms. Bellatin's work subverts traditional beauty standards by presenting ugliness and transgression as alternative aesthetic forms, challenging normative perceptions and prompting a re-evaluation of what is considered beautiful or acceptable.

**Transcendence:** The act of rising above or going beyond ordinary limits. The thesis explores how the characters in "Beauty Salon" seek transcendence amidst suffering and decay, juxtaposing the grotesque realities of bodily disintegration with the ethereal to expose humanity's search for meaning and spiritual fulfillment.

## ملخص

تستقصي هذه المذكرة جماليات الاضمحلال في رواية "صالون التجميل" لماريو بيّلاتين، وهي رواية تعيد صياغة الفهم التقليدي للجمال والحالة الإنسانية بشكل مختلف، وذلك في سياق انهيار اجتماعي ناتج عن وباء غريب. تتحدى هذه الدراسة النفور المتأصل من التدهور، وتبحث في الطرق التي يستخدم بها بيّلاتين الاضمحلال، سواء كان جسدياً أو أخلاقياً، كأداة جمالية وموضوعية مركزية. من خلال تحليل نصي دقيق، مستنير بنظريات القبح والمنبوذ، تقوم الأطروحة بتفكيك العرض المتناقض للاضمحلال في الرواية كمصدر للجمال والمعنى. يتقدم التحقيق عبر ثلاثة محاور تحليلية رئيسية: أولاً، استكشاف التفاعل بين الاضمحلال الجسدي والتوق الروحي، بحجة أن بيّلاتين يضع الحقائق الغروتيسكية للتفسخ الجسدي جنباً إلى جنب مع الأثري لكشف بحث الإنسانية عن التعالي وسط المعاناة؛ ثانياً، فحص نقدي لمعايير الجمال التقليدية للكشف عن كيف يصبح القبح والتجاوز أشكالاً جمالية بديلة تتحدى التصورات المعيارية؛ وثالثاً، تقييم أخلاقي لتجميل بيّلاتين للاضمحلال، للقول بأن الرواية تواجه وتزعزع الوصمة المرتبطة بالمرض والتهميش الاجتماعي. تجادل هذه الأطروحة بأن "صالون التجميل" يستخدم جماليات الاضمحلال ليس لمجرد قيمة الصدمة، بل كوسيلة عميقة لانتقاد القيم الاجتماعية، والتشكيك في حدود التقدير الجمالي، والحث على إعادة تقييم العلاقة الإنسانية مع الموت والتحول. من خلال تبني الاضمحلال، يصوغ بيّلاتين سرداً مقلّماً وأسراً يجبر القراء على مواجهة الحقائق غير المريحة للوجود وإعادة تصور إمكانات الجمال في مواجهة التحلل.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** منبوذ؛ جماليات؛ ماريو بيّلاتين؛ اضمحلال؛ غروتيسك