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Beautiful, the in Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) (1856–1935)

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In *Beauty and Ugliness*, Vernon Lee argued that throughout human history art has been employed as a “manifestation of the divine,” and so “the contemplation of beauty was one of the moral needs of the human creature.” Details and “comparison and elimination” of categories decide what is beautiful. And so, it is the work of art itself which reveals what beauty means. In *Belcaro*, Lee claimed, “Beauty, in itself, is neither morally good nor morally bad: it is aesthetically good [...] Beauty is pure, complete, egotistic: it has no other value than its being beautiful.” But, in later texts she argued that Beauty has moral worth and is not an end in itself but a means to a richer life and “at the same time” a “more peaceful” life. As she defined it in *Laurus Nobilis*, in its essential character, “beauty is not some ‘thing’ but a relation between ourselves and certain objects.” In *Art and Life* Lee argued that new forms are continually born and in their turn continually giving birth to that marriage between the beautiful thing outside and the beautiful soul within. This means, “delight in beautiful things and thoughts” requires the exercise of “opening the soul.” So, to fully appreciate aesthetic beauty, one must prepare the self in a process that engages the mind, body, emotion, and human feeling. True aesthetic activity teaches us that the enjoyment of beautiful things, heightened by sharing, increases empathy. Beauty is a relationship with the universe as well as with us, for the forces of nature reside in aesthetic phenomenon; they are embodied in beauty, and beauty exists as a “cosmic power of the universe.” With Diotima, Lee agreed that man should live in the contemplation of beauty, beauty being abstract as form and pragmatic in promoting freedom, peace, and empathy.

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