UDC 821.111(73)(091)
DOI https://doi.org/10.26661/2414-1135-2026-103-2

Стаття поширюється на умовах ліцензії відкритого доступу CC BY 4.0

CONSTRUCTING FEMALE IDENTITY THROUGH BEAUTY AND RESILIENCE IN DANIELLE STEEL'S NOVEL *BEAUTIFUL*

Banias N. Yu.
Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor,
Associate Professor at the Philology Department
Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University
Koshut Square, 6, Berehove, Transcarpathian region, Ukraine
orcid.org/0000-0002-6974-0790
banyasz.natalia@kmf.org.ua

Banias V. V.
Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor,
Associate Professor at the Philology Department
Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University
Koshut Square, 6, Berehove, Transcarpathian region, Ukraine
orcid.org/0000-0001-6880-8805
banyasz.volodimir@kmf.org.ua

Lizak K. M.
Associate Professor at the Philology Department
Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University
Koshut Square, 6, Berehove, Transcarpathian region, Ukraine
orcid.org/0000-0002-7873-0535
lizak.katalin@kmf.org.ua

Key words: *Danielle Steel, Beautiful, female identity, beauty, resilience, feminism, gender studies, self-realization.*

The article examines the construction of female identity in Danielle Steel's novel *Beautiful*, focusing on the interconnected concepts of beauty, resilience, and self-realization. The study explores how the protagonist's personal journey challenges traditional gender stereotypes and demonstrates the transformative power of inner strength in overcoming social expectations and personal adversity. Through literary analysis, the article investigates the ways in which physical beauty functions both as a social construct and as a source of empowerment, while emphasizing that authentic identity is ultimately shaped by moral values, emotional maturity, perseverance, and the capacity for self-reflection.

The research applies feminist literary criticism, gender studies, and narrative analysis to examine the representation of women's experiences in contemporary popular fiction. It argues that Steel redefines conventional notions of femininity by portraying beauty not merely as an external attribute but as a multidimensional concept closely connected with dignity, compassion, courage, and psychological resilience. The protagonist's experiences reveal the complexity of negotiating personal aspirations, professional success, family relationships, and societal expectations. Rather than presenting beauty as an idealized or superficial quality, the novel illustrates how emotional endurance and personal integrity become the essential foundations of female identity.

The article further analyzes the role of beauty in shaping interpersonal relationships and self-perception, demonstrating that resilience enables the heroine to reconstruct her identity despite emotional challenges and external pressures. The findings suggest that Steel's narrative promotes an inclusive

understanding of womanhood based on autonomy, confidence, empathy, and continuous personal growth. The novel contributes to contemporary discussions of gender by questioning restrictive cultural standards and encouraging readers to recognize the value of inner transformation over external appearance.
The study concludes that Beautiful presents female identity as a dynamic and evolving process formed through the interaction of individual agency, emotional resilience, and social experience. Danielle Steel's work reinforces the importance of self-acceptance and resilience as central components of modern femininity, offering an optimistic vision of women's empowerment in contemporary literature.

КОНСТРУЮВАННЯ ЖІНОЧОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ ЧЕРЕЗ КРАСУ ТА СТІЙКІСТЬ У РОМАНІ ДАНІЕЛИ СТІЛ *ПРЕКРАСНА*

Баняс Н. Ю.
кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,
доцент кафедри філології
Закарпатський угорський університет імені Ференца Ракоці II
площа Кошута, 6, Берегове, Закарпатська область, Україна
orcid.org/0000-0002-6974-0790
banyasz.natalia@kmf.org.ua

Баняс В. В.
кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,
доцент кафедри філології
Закарпатський угорський університет імені Ференца Ракоці II
площа Кошута, 6, Берегове, Закарпатська область, Україна
orcid.org/0000-0001-6880-8805
banyasz.volodimir@kmf.org.ua

Лізак К. М.
доцент кафедри філології
Закарпатський угорський університет імені Ференца Ракоці II
площа Кошута, 6, Берегове, Закарпатська область, Україна
orcid.org/0000-0002-7873-0535
lizak.katalin@kmf.org.ua

Ключові слова: *Даніела Стіл, Прекрасна, жіноча ідентичність, краса, життєстійкість, фемінізм, самореалізація.*

У статті досліджується проблема конструювання жіночої ідентичності через категорії краси та життєстійкості у романі Даніели Стіл Прекрасна крізь призму категорій краси, життєстійкості та самореалізації. Основну увагу зосереджено на аналізі художніх засобів, за допомогою яких письменниця репрезентує процес становлення особистості героїні, її боротьбу із суспільними стереотипами, внутрішніми сумнівами та життєвими випробуваннями. У дослідженні розглядається краса не лише як зовнішня характеристика, а як багатовимірний соціокультурний феномен, що поєднує моральні цінності, емоційну зрілість, силу характеру та здатність до самопізнання. Застосування методів феміністичної літературної критики, гендерних студій і наратологічного аналізу дає змогу простежити особливості художнього моделювання жіночого досвіду в сучасній популярній літературі.
Доведено, що Даніела Стіл переосмислює традиційні уявлення про жіночність, демонструючи, що справжня краса формується насамперед

через внутрішню гармонію, людяність, співчуття, наполегливість і психологічну стійкість. Роман відображає складний процес поєднання професійної самореалізації, особистих прагнень, сімейних цінностей та соціальних очікувань, підкреслюючи важливість автономії особистості й свободи вибору. Особлива увага приділяється символічному значенню краси як чинника самосприйняття та міжособистісної взаємодії, а також ролі життєстійкості у подоланні кризових ситуацій і формуванні цілісної жіночої ідентичності. Зроблено висновок, що роман Прекрасна, пропонує сучасну модель жіночності, засновану на самосприйнятті, емоційній витривалості, моральній силі та безперервному особистісному розвитку. Твір актуалізує проблематику жіночого самоствердження й розширює сучасні уявлення про взаємозв'язок зовнішньої краси та внутрішньої стійкості.

Problem Statement. Contemporary women's fiction has increasingly moved beyond the traditional representation of female characters primarily through romantic relationships and family roles. Modern narratives often explore more complex processes of identity formation, including self-discovery, psychological recovery, and the negotiation of personal values within changing social contexts. Within this framework, the concepts of beauty and resilience have acquired new meanings: beauty is no longer limited to physical appearance, while resilience represents not only survival after hardship but also the ability to reconstruct one's identity.

Danielle Steel's novel *Beautiful* provides an insightful example of how contemporary popular fiction engages with these issues. Although Steel is one of the most widely read contemporary authors, her works have received comparatively limited attention in academic literary studies. Her fiction is frequently discussed within the framework of romance literature; however, many of her novels address broader cultural and psychological questions concerning identity, trauma, personal transformation, and social expectations. Therefore, Beautiful deserves scholarly consideration as a literary text that reflects current understandings of femininity and self-realization.

The central problem addressed in this study concerns the representation of beauty as a multidimensional concept connected with female identity construction. In Steel's novel, beauty functions not merely as an aesthetic characteristic but as a symbolic category related to self-perception, emotional development, and personal strength. The protagonist's journey demonstrates that authentic identity emerges through the ability to overcome challenges, redefine personal values, and achieve psychological independence.

Despite the popularity of Danielle Steel's fiction, the relationship between beauty, resilience, and female identity formation in Beautiful remains insufficiently explored. This research attempts to fill this gap by examining how the novel constructs female identity through the interaction of external perceptions, internal transformation, and the experience of overcoming adversity.

Aim of the Research. The aim of this article is to analyze the ways in which Danielle Steel's novel Beautiful constructs female identity through the interconnected concepts of beauty and resilience. The study seeks to demonstrate that beauty in the novel functions as a dynamic process of self-recognition and personal development rather than as a purely physical or socially determined quality.

To achieve this aim, the research focuses on the following objectives:

to examine the representation of beauty as a cultural and literary concept in the novel;

to analyze the protagonist's process of identity formation and transformation;

to explore the role of resilience in overcoming personal and social challenges;

to identify the narrative strategies used by Danielle Steel to portray female psychological development;

to determine the significance of the novel within the context of contemporary women's fiction.

Object and Subject of the Research. The object of the research is Danielle Steel's novel *Beautiful* as a representative text of contemporary women's fiction.

The subject of the research is the representation of female identity construction through the concepts of beauty, resilience, and personal transformation in the novel.

Theoretical Background. The theoretical framework of this study is based on contemporary approaches to gender, identity, and representation in literature. Feminist literary criticism, which was analyzed by Waugh, P., provides an essential foundation for examining the ways female characters negotiate personal identity within cultural and social frameworks [Waugh, 2006].

The concept of female identity has been widely discussed in feminist theory, particularly through the idea that identity is not fixed but socially and culturally constructed, by such famous scholars as Butler J., Bordo S. who focused on gender trouble [Butler, 2002; Bordo, 2009]. Herman J. L. and

McRobbie A. explored the aftermath of feminism [Herman, 2022; McRobbie, 2003] In this context, women's experiences, choices, and self-perceptions are shaped through interactions between individual agency and external expectations. Herman, D. analyzed problems and possibilities of narrative [Herman, 2002]. Such an approach is relevant to the analysis of *Beautiful*, where the protagonist's development involves both confrontation with social ideals and the creation of an independent sense of self.

Outline of the Main Material.

Beauty as a Cultural and Literary Construct

The concept of beauty has traditionally occupied a significant position in literary and cultural discourse. For centuries, beauty was frequently associated with physical attractiveness, social desirability, and external perfection, particularly in representations of female characters. Such interpretations often positioned women as objects of observation and evaluation rather than as active subjects capable of defining their own identities. However, contemporary literary studies increasingly approach beauty as a complex cultural construct shaped by social expectations, personal experience, and individual perception.

In Danielle Steel's *Beautiful*, the title itself establishes beauty as a central thematic category. However, the novel challenges a simplified understanding of beauty by presenting it as a concept that extends beyond physical appearance. Beauty becomes connected with emotional strength, dignity, and the ability to preserve one's identity despite difficult circumstances. Through the protagonist's experiences, Steel suggests that genuine beauty emerges from the relationship between external representation and internal transformation.

The novel reflects a broader tendency in contemporary women's fiction to reconsider traditional ideals of femininity. Rather than presenting beauty as a fixed quality possessed by an individual, the narrative presents it as something continuously constructed through personal choices, relationships, and experiences. This perspective corresponds with modern approaches to identity, which emphasize that the self is not a static entity but a dynamic process shaped by social interaction and personal development.

The symbolic meaning of beauty in *Beautiful* is therefore closely connected with the protagonist's search for authenticity. Her journey demonstrates that social recognition and external admiration cannot provide a complete sense of identity unless they are accompanied by inner confidence and self-acceptance. Beauty becomes meaningful only when it reflects an individual's personal values and psychological integrity.

Female Identity Construction in Danielle Steel's *Beautiful*

The construction of female identity represents one of the central concerns of Danielle Steel's novel. The protagonist's development is presented as a gradual movement from dependence on external perceptions toward a more independent understanding of selfhood. This process reflects a significant theme in contemporary women's narratives: the transition from socially imposed definitions of femininity to personally created identities.

At the beginning of the narrative, the protagonist's understanding of herself is influenced by the expectations of others. Being only twenty-two years old, Veronique Vincent, a protagonist of the novel, bravely steps into the business of modeling. Nevertheless, she never considered her job as a precious time of opportunities. She considered being a model in a way of ordinary profession which has neither insignificant differences between other important industries such as teaching: *"She never lacked for assignments, and had to juggle them all. She was part of an industry in which she was the commodity she was selling"* [Steel, 2022, p. 5]. Like many female characters in contemporary fiction, she encounters cultural assumptions regarding appearance, success, relationships, and personal value. However, it appeared horribly clear to the main character of the story that her life would never be calm and straightforward. Terrorist bomb attack in Brussels Zaventem Airport was a point in the life of Veronique where her past life abruptly vanished in a blink of an eye. Her thoroughly built world crashed in a second.

Steel's portrayal of female identity does not reject beauty or social recognition completely. Instead, the novel explores the possibility of redefining these concepts. The protagonist does not achieve empowerment by denying her femininity; rather, she develops a more complex understanding of femininity based on confidence, independence, and emotional maturity. *"…You have to find a way to live with it. That's true for the people who lost their limbs too. Some of them are remarkable in how they view it and are adjusting to it. It's the ones who are filled with hate or anger or self-pity who don't survive it, or not well"* [Steel, 2022, p. 214].

This aspect of the novel can be examined through feminist literary perspectives, which emphasize the importance of female agency and self-representation. The protagonist's transformation illustrates the movement from being defined by external expectations to becoming an active participant in shaping her own life narrative.

Identity formation in *Beautiful* is therefore represented as a process involving both vulnerability and strength. The protagonist's experiences reveal that personal identity develops through challenges,

reflection, and the ability to reinterpret difficult experiences as opportunities for growth.

Trauma, Resilience, and Self-Transformation

A significant dimension of identity construction in *Beautiful* is the relationship between trauma and resilience. Contemporary literary representations of trauma often move beyond portraying suffering as a final state and instead examine how individuals reconstruct meaning after painful experiences. In this context, resilience becomes an essential element of personal transformation.

In Steel's novel, difficulties experienced by the protagonist serve as catalysts for psychological development. The challenges she encounters disrupt previous assumptions about herself and the world around her, forcing her to reconsider her values and priorities. Rather than presenting hardship solely as destruction, the narrative emphasizes the possibility of renewal and personal growth. *"…she was determined to learn to live with her altered face, rather than comb the world looking for surgeons who made empty promises and couldn't do anything about it anyway"* [Steel, 2022, p. 113].

Resilience in Beautiful is represented as an active process. It involves emotional adaptation, self-reflection, and the gradual restoration of personal confidence. The protagonist's strength does not emerge from the absence of suffering but from the ability to confront and overcome it.

This interpretation corresponds with contemporary understandings of resilience as a multidimensional phenomenon. Psychological resilience includes not only endurance but also transformation, the capacity to create a renewed sense of identity after significant life changes. *"…Veronique Vincent] discovered in the end that life with all its beauty and tragedy and terror at times was worth living after all"* [Steel, 2022, p. 270] Within the novel, resilience becomes inseparable from beauty because both concepts represent forms of inner development.

The connection between beauty and resilience allows Steel to challenge conventional representations of female perfection. The protagonist becomes "beautiful" not because she remains untouched by difficulties, but because she develops authenticity and emotional strength through overcoming them.

Narrative Strategies and Character Development

Danielle Steel's narrative technique contributes significantly to the representation of female identity transformation. The author employs a character-centered narrative approach that focuses on emotional experiences, internal conflicts, and personal relationships. This allows readers to follow not only external events but also the protagonist's psychological development.

One of the important narrative strategies in *Beautiful* is the gradual revelation of the protagonist's inner world. Rather than presenting identity as an established characteristic, Steel portrays it as something evolving throughout the narrative. *"Life is beautiful, and nothing could change that, scars and all"* [Steel, 2022, p. 270].

The structure of the novel reflects a movement from uncertainty toward self-awareness.

Character development is achieved through contrasts between past and present experiences. The protagonist's transformation becomes visible through changes in perception, emotional responses, and personal choices. *"She was a free woman, heading for her future, and all the surprises it had in store for her. She intended to reach out and grab them. She wasn't the same woman she'd been a year before, and she could sense that she wouldn't be the same after the trip either. Everything was new to her, and every day was a gift"* [Steel, 2022, p. 228]. These contrasts highlight the importance of experience in shaping identity.

The narrative also relies on emotional engagement, which is a characteristic feature of contemporary popular fiction. However, emotional accessibility does not prevent the novel from addressing significant issues related to self-worth, social expectations, and personal autonomy. Through accessible storytelling, Steel explores questions that remain relevant within broader cultural discussions about women's identity.

The protagonist's development follows a movement from externally defined beauty toward internally established self-value. This narrative progression reinforces the novel's central message that identity is not discovered as a finished product but constructed through experience.

Beauty as an Ethical and Existential Category

The final stage of the protagonist's development demonstrates that beauty in Beautiful functions as an ethical and existential category. By the conclusion of the narrative, beauty is no longer associated primarily with appearance or social approval. Instead, it represents qualities such as authenticity, compassion, emotional resilience, and personal integrity.

This transformation of meaning reflects a broader cultural shift in representations of femininity. Contemporary women's fiction increasingly questions traditional standards that evaluate women primarily through external characteristics. Instead, it emphasizes individuality, agency, and the right to define personal identity.

Steel's novel contributes to this discussion by presenting beauty as inseparable from personal experience "*She no longer met anyone's standards for beauty"* [Steel, 2022, p. 149].

The protagonist's struggles become part of what defines her strength and individuality. Her identity is not constructed despite adversity but through the process of responding to adversity.

Thus, Beautiful offers a reinterpretation of the traditional beauty narrative. The novel does not reject the importance of beauty but expands its meaning, presenting it as a combination of appearance, character, emotional depth, and self-knowledge. Through this approach, Steel connects beauty with the broader human search for authenticity and meaning.

Conclusion. The analysis of Danielle Steel's *Beautiful* demonstrates that the concept of beauty functions as a complex narrative and symbolic category connected with the process of female identity construction. Rather than presenting beauty as a purely external characteristic determined by social standards, the novel reinterprets it as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes emotional maturity, personal integrity, resilience, and self-awareness.

The study has shown that the protagonist's identity develops through a gradual movement from externally imposed definitions of selfhood toward an autonomous understanding of personal value. The challenges experienced by the protagonist become essential elements of this transformation, allowing her to reconsider traditional assumptions about beauty, success, and femininity. Consequently, resilience emerges as a central mechanism of identity formation, enabling the protagonist to transform vulnerability into personal strength.

The research also demonstrates that *Beautiful* reflects important tendencies of contemporary women's fiction. Although Danielle Steel's novels are frequently classified as popular literature, this analysis reveals that her work engages with significant cultural and psychological questions concerning female agency, self-perception, and social expectations. The novel contributes to the ongoing redefinition of femininity by presenting a female character whose identity is not determined exclusively by relationships, appearance, or external recognition.

The narrative strategies employed by Steel support this interpretation. Through gradual character development, emotional narration, and attention to psychological experience, the author constructs a story of transformation in which beauty becomes inseparable from personal growth. The protagonist's journey suggests that authentic beauty is achieved through the integration of external identity and internal self-knowledge.

The analysis of female identity construction through beauty and resilience in Danielle Steel's Beautiful opens up promising directions for further research. It could employ an interdisciplinary perspective combining feminist literary criticism, gender studies, psychology, and cultural studies. Such an approach would allow researchers to examine female identity as a dynamic process shaped by individual experience and broader cultural discourses.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Butler, J. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. 256 p. URL: https://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/butler-gender_trouble.pdf
2. Bordo, S. Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. 361 p. URL: https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=yagwDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=uk&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
3. Herman, J. L. Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. New York: Basic Books, 2022. 336 p. URL: https://www.amazon.com/Trauma-Recovery-Aftermath-Violence-Political/dp/0465061710?asin=0465061710&revisionId=&format=4&depth=1
4. Herman, D. Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 304 p. URL: https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=6jAy0Yml51gC&printsec=frontcover&hl=uk&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
5. McRobbie, A. The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change. London: SAGE Publications, 2009. 192 p. URL: https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=vjWTlJKRK8cC&printsec=frontcover&hl=uk&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
6. Steel, D. Beautiful. New York: Dell Mass Market Edition. 2022. 352 p.
7. Waugh, P. Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 575 p. URL: https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=7LXMA_7Ko9YC&pg=PR7&hl=uk&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=1#v=onepage&q&f=false

REFERENCES

1. Bordo, S. (2003). Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body. Berkeley: University of California Press, 361 p. https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=yagwDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=uk&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
2. Butler, J. (2002). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York and London: Routledge, 256 p. https://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/butler-gender_trouble.pdf
3. Herman, J. L. (2022). Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. New York: Basic Books, 336 p. https://www.amazon.com/Trauma-Recovery-Aftermath-Violence-Political/dp/0465

061710?asin=0465061710&revisionId=&format=4&depth=1
4. Herman, D. ((2002) Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 304 p. https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=6jAy0Yml51gC&printsec=frontcover&hl=uk&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
5. McRobbie, A. (2009). The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change. London: SAGE Publications, 192 p. https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=vjWTlJKRK8cC&printsec=frontcover&hl=uk&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
6. Steel, D. (2022). Beautiful. New York: Dell Mass Market Edition. 352 p.
7. Waugh, P. (2006). Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 575 p. https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=7LXMA_7Ko9YC&pg=PR7&hl=uk&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=1#v=onepage&q&f=false

Дата першого надходження статті до видання: 19.07.2026
Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 21.08.2026
Дата публікації (оприлюднення) статті: 18.11.2026