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Mean Girls in Young Adult Literature

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Introduction

Young Adult fiction is one of the fastest growing fields of modern publishing. From 2002 to 2012, the number of new YA book releases jumped from 4,700 to over 10,000 (Peterson). While YA novels span a variety of topics, one of the most popular genres features a “mean girl” character. Mean girls are presented as the character that everyone loves to hate. As easy as it is to read mean girls as snobby and spiteful, the characters are also strong leaders and generally intelligent. The fact that readers are conditioned to hate the mean girl stems from our current patriarchal culture. The mean girl uses traditionally male tactics to obtain power in a patriarchal culture that does not value her, and therefore that culture argues that she is worthy of hatred.

Reading is, of course, important in both the educational and social development of children. Through the stories that young readers encounter, they can learn about themselves and their place in the world. Young adult readers may especially find books helpful in navigating their own problems with friends, school, and growing up. Because young readers pick up important ideas in the books they read, young adult literature must be analyzed.

The mean girl character spans across a wide range of age groups, and accordingly I have selected a text for young readers, a text for “tweens,” and a text for teenagers. I chose books that I loved when I was growing up because I wanted to see how my perceptions of the novels I valued growing up changed in adulthood. In each book, I looked carefully at characters and the undertones of the messages that readers, including my younger self, take away from the story.

Judy Blume’s *Blubber* is representative of a mean girl novel for young readers, with a suggested age range of 8 through 11 years old. *Blubber* explores the story of a young girl who is bullied by her entire class because of her weight, as told through the eyes of a classmate who joins in on the aggression herself.

A popular novel series among middle school-aged children is Lisi Harrison's *The Clique.* Though the novel expands into a series after publication, I will focus only on the first book. Here, queen bee Massie is challenged by new girl Claire. While the two fight over friends, boys, and fashion choices, the narrative truly focuses on the insecurities felt by both characters.

Finally, for teenagers, is Cecily von Ziegesar's cult favorite *Gossip Girl.* Another novel that was expanded into a series, the book quickly became popular among high school readers and became a massively popular television show. Again, I will only focus on the first book, which follows Blair and Serena, two former best friends who vie for the top position of their school's social hierarchy.

Each novel's mean girl is her own unique character, but all share a few common traits. First, the mean girl has plenty of money at her disposal. This plays less of a role in younger novels, like *Blubber*, but even in that case every character is described as upper middle class and white. Having an endless flow of money often allows the mean girl to curate a perfectly styled appearance, through designer clothes and cosmetics. Regardless of the age group, the mean girl is rarely, if ever, picked on for her looks.

However, the mean girl does *care* about her appearance. The mean girl will often mention brand names to further solidify her superior style choices. She is also unafraid to rate her peers' outfits against her own. Though the parents are often inattentive, the characters often learn the most from brief encounters with mothers, who teach the girls how women dress and behave toward each other. The mothers are not teaching manners, but rather give advice about avoiding weight gain and gossip about their friends.

Mean girls pick up on patriarchal pressures to perform some kind of sexuality. These pressures can take on many forms, from dressing in a sexualized manner to actual sexual encounters. The mean girl is also generally heterosexual, as the societal pressures that the mean girls succumb to are generally heteronormative. Because the mean girl is upholding patriarchal values, it is necessary that the character find value in competing for male attention. Women who find men sexually attractive would be easier for men control than women who do not. Older audiences will see their mean girls become more promiscuous, and the protagonist of the novel will use the sexuality of the mean girl as a reason to judge her.

The mean girl in any YA novel displays some form of leadership ability. Mean girls are often surrounded by a posse of friends, but they ultimately hold the most power over their social circle and often the social life of the entire school. However, mean girls tend to be the trendsetters and the most in-tune with the thoughts and feelings of the people around them, talents that make them effective leaders.

Finally, by virtue of being “mean,” all mean girls are aggressive. Most mean girls are relationally aggressive, meaning they focus on hurting a character’s feelings and her social standing rather her physical body. This makes sense, because we are socialized to believe that boys solve their problems with fists while girls prefer to spread rumors. The aggression expressed by mean girls is often seen as negative because aggression is traditionally associated with men. The mean girls are not calm and demure because they demand power in a culture that tells them they do not deserve to have it.

Spreading rumors and telling other people’s secrets is a form of social, or indirect, aggression. The attacker does not confront the victim directly, but instead opts to hurt the victim’s reputation with other people. Most people have experienced this pain in real life, and it is necessary to address this kind of common problem in young adult novels. However, it should be noted that while the mean girls are the first to spread rumors, it is not uncommon for the protagonist to exhibit her own social aggression in return. The protagonist usurps being categorized as a mean girl herself because her motives are (allegedly) justified.

It is not enough to know that the mean girl exists. We, as readers and as people who exist inside a culture in which mean girls are incredibly popular, must seek to understand them. One feminist scholar notes that "the way women are represented in literature influences how they define themselves as subjects in their own lives" (Johnson). The characters we encounter, and especially the ones we enjoy or identify with, leave a mark on our individual understanding of the world. YA authors often use mean girls to subtly encourage patriarchal values in their actions and descriptions. Therefore, understanding the mean girl allows us to understand the roles that women grow into in Western patriarchal culture.

Blubber

Originally published in 1974, Judy Blume's *Blubber* tells the story of a fifth grade classroom controlled mainly by girls. Every student in the class is required to give an oral report on a mammal of their choice, and Linda, an unpopular and overweight student, chooses the whale. This sparks popular Wendy and her friends, Jill and Caroline, to make fun of Linda relentlessly throughout the novel. This book features mainly upper class white students, and with so little diversity, the victim of bullying is a volatile role that almost anyone in the classroom can be forced into. However, loner Linda takes the brunt of the abuse in this novel told from the point of view of Jill, one of her bullies.

Wendy is the leader of an entire classroom of bullies. She decides who is "out," and the rest of the students follow suit. Jill recalls that when Linda is first decreed "Blubber," Wendy makes the announcement via a note passed around the classroom: "*Blubber is a good name for her!* I smiled, not because I thought the note was funny, but because Wendy was watching me" (5). Despite being less interested in the note than in leaving school on time, Jill laughs along because she knows that it is what Wendy wants from her. Jill is aware that in the classroom setting, any student can easily become a scapegoat. The students have interactions with other kids on the school bus and in their neighborhoods, but for the most part, their social life exists within their classroom. Jill understands that not laughing at Wendy's joke can easily make her Wendy's next victim.

On Halloween, Jill and her classmates all dress up for a costume contest that is held at their school. Wendy chooses to be a queen for the day, with a large crown and cape, as a visual representation of the power that she holds over her classmates. Since she is the one who always chooses the next victim, she avoids ever being bullied herself. In her book *Odd Girl Out*, Rachel

Simmons explains some of the reasoning behind aggression in girls: “Children want three things out of life: connection, recognition, and power. Connection propels friendship and the need for recognition and power ignites competition and conflict” (Simmons 9). Essentially, children will become aggressive when they see an opportunity for control. Girls especially crave power because it is something they traditionally lack, considering their age and their gender both act as deterrents from power in Western culture. Wendy dresses as a queen because it allows her to feel as though she has “control, recognition, and power:” she controls the actions of her classmates, she is recognized as an important figure in her school, and she has the power to bully without being bullied.

Readers never find out what Linda’s costume is, as we are only told it includes a red cape. Linda refuses to tell her classmates what she was dressed as because it is her attempt to push away the popular girls’ hold on her. However, when Wendy is fed up with Linda’s refusal to talk, she orders the other girls to steal Linda’s costume. When the girls in the classroom graduate from verbal abuse to physical, Wendy keeps her hands clean but instead has Jill, Caroline, and their friends strip Linda of her costume and clothes. Jill gets caught up in the moment, and tells Linda: “Do whatever Queen Wendy says, Blubber” (40). The other students, though hesitant at first to be so mean to Linda, recognize that it is easier to survive in their small classroom society by obeying Wendy than it is to fight her. The only reason that Wendy has power is because the other students believe that she does, just like the only thing making her a queen is believing that she is on Halloween.

Whenever the aggression escalates from verbal and relational to physical, the girls act as a group against Linda. Simmons notes that this is common for young girls:

> A plurality creates a safe space for girls to be mean in a culture that refuses to allow girls individual acts of aggression, making alliance building a rare intersection of peer approval with aggression. Alliances create underground network in which girls can be in charge of their own social norms, deciding together when the use of aggression is deserved (Simmons 83-84).

The bullies, Jill, Caroline, Wendy, and their friends, are bonded in their attacks on Linda. Whenever the girls assault her, they create a shared experience that they perceive as positive because it makes them feel powerful over a classmate. The girls act as a group from the beginning, and it is possible that if only one girl had thought the nickname "Blubber" was funny, Linda would be spared the abuse. However, Wendy and her friends are such trend-setters that students in other classrooms make fun of Linda on the bus. To Jill and Wendy, Linda deserves to be bullied because she does not have a group of friends to defend her.

However, Jill does not have the excuse of simply being caught up in the moment and wanting to please the popular girl. From Linda's report, Jill learns that the person who strips blubber out of a whale is called a flenser. In a burst of last-minute inspiration, Jill decides to dress up as a flenser for Halloween. Jill spends time and effort on dressing up with the specific intent of harassing Linda. When Linda confronts Jill about her costume she says, "'Oh… a flenser. I'll bet you got that idea from my report,'" to which Jill replies, "'What makes you think so?'" (30). Jill intends to make Linda question her own sanity by pretending that her direct attack on Linda somehow also has nothing to do with Linda. Even with a costume meant especially to attack Linda, Jill manages to separate herself completely from her victim. Jill recognizes the fragility of her position at the top, and makes sure to distance herself as far as possible from Linda so that she does not become a victim herself.

While Wendy is the traditional mean girl among her classmates, Jill is also a bully. Even without Wendy's encouragement, she often makes rude remarks about her peers. When we first meet Jill, she introduces herself by saying, "My best friend, Tracy Wu, says I'm really tough on people. She says she wonders sometimes how I can like her" (1). Immediately, readers are aware that Jill is not concerned with being nice—even Jill's best friend worries about what she really thinks of her. This is an interesting approach, because the narrator, and therefore the reader, is immediately put in an offensive position. This allows readers to feel as though they are in the position to participate in the fictional gossip of the story. Like many young adult novelists, Blume relies on a first person narrator. This creates a narrative intimacy with the reader, meaning that the reader is intended to feel closest to the narrator, and that the narrator "feels" safe disclosing private information to the reader. In her work exploring the narration of young adult literature, Sara Day asserts that "the thoughts, knowledge, and emotions disclosed by the narrators of adolescent fiction frequently reflect the various personal bonds adolescents explore as part of their transition into adulthood" (Day 4). Young adult authors utilize narrative intimacy to make the reader feel as though the narrator is their friend. This also allows readers to feel as though they are part of the narrator's social circle, which here means that the reader will have limited empathy toward Jill's victims because the reader feels as though he or she is part of Jill's alliance.

In her class, Jill picks on multiple victims. She is annoyed with how frequently Donna talks about horses, and comments that it is no surprise that it is the animal she chose to do her report on. Jill thinks: "Most of the time Donna smells like a horse but I wouldn't tell her that because she might think it's a compliment" (3). This says a lot about Jill, who not only wants to make a snide comment to her classmate, but also wants that comment to hurt Donna's feelings.

Controlling a classmate's feelings by making her feel bad about herself is a way to gain power in the classroom, as well as favor among the popular girls. It is clear that Jill is eager to hurt her peers' feelings if it means she can feel good about herself.

When readers meet Linda, she is giving her report about the whale. Before the term "blubber" is even brought up, Jill is quick to make fun of her: "I took a piece of paper out of my desk to keep a record of how many times Linda said *And uh…* while she gave her report. So far I'd counted seven" (4). While Jill does not attack Linda's appearance until Wendy does, she instead goes after the way Linda speaks. It is clear that Linda is very insecure, and Jill immediately hones in on this weak point as a way to make fun of her. She does not gain any recognition from her peers for counting how often Linda says "And uh…;" this gesture is just for her own amusement.

Jill claims that, since her mother swears in the house, swearing is not as big of a deal for her as it is for other kids. Jill, therefore, is the only character to use the word "bitch." In one instance, she is frustrated when her teacher marks a question on her math homework as incorrect because she did not follow the right process, despite getting the right answer. Her teacher justifies her grade: "Because you're supposed to be learning how to think the problems through and you aren't thinking the right way" (36). Though it is difficult to believe that there is truly a right and wrong way of thinking, the teacher provides one of the few real lessons in this book: problems need to be thought through carefully. In the situation where all of her friends are bullying Linda, Jill feels as though she has the "right" answer—her friends think that she is funny and she is able to join the popular girls. However, in order to do this, she relentlessly bullies Linda. Jill needs to learn even though a situation seems positive, if all of her actions are wrong, so is her enjoyment of popularity.

In response to this wise advice, Jill immediately turns to her friends and claims: "'Mrs. Minish is such a bitch!'" (36). "Bitch" is a word that is uniquely important in books aimed at young women. A bitch is a woman who has control and who chooses to act upon that control. We, as Westerners, see this behavior as an attempt for a woman to be dominant, and therefore unfeminine and negative. Jill's teacher is attempting to get her to do her homework more carefully, but since Jill is annoyed with her, she becomes a bitch. This sets the stage that anyone who disagrees with Jill is entitled to her wrath-- one that many characters feel throughout this book.

Eventually, the girls have the idea to holding a fake trial in their classroom to decide whether Linda tattled on Jill and Tracy. Jill and Tracy vandalized Linda's neighbor's home on Halloween, and the neighbor confronted the girls' parents about the situation. Of course, because she is the scapegoat for the rest of the students, Jill and Tracy blame Linda. Linda objects to the trial in the first place, and further objects to having anything to do with Jill and Tracy getting in trouble, which frustrates Wendy because she can feel her control over her classmates slipping. When Wendy has Linda locked in a closet and refuses to allow her a "lawyer," Jill finally stands up to her. Jill reflects: "For the first time, I looked right into Wendy's eyes and I didn't like what I saw" (157). When faced with opposition, Wendy loses her composure, and the class is exposed to her raw anger. Jill realizes that following Wendy's orders often means hurting innocent people. Objecting to Wendy's will gives Jill her first opportunity to clearly see her actions. However, in order to keep her place on top, Wendy turns to a new victim and uses Linda to bully Jill instead. In the end, Wendy does not learn a lesson, nor does she lose her rank as the head of the social circle in the classroom. It is important, then, that readers see Jill as a bully, and, at times, unlikable, because there is something attractive about being mean. In a culture where girls are taught from a very young age that boys get to pull hair and girls get to demurely smile, it is exciting to be the person “pulling hair” for once. However, Jill’s actions are still within the context of traditional roles for girls. In her book, *Bullies and Mean Girls in Popular Culture*, Patrice Opplinger notes that much of the aggression shown by girls and women is relational, noting,“Because of social expectations that girls be ‘nice’ and not be physical or raise their voices, girls may use strategies that are more subtle and less visible to adults and peers” (Oppliger 19). This allows girls to be aggressive without being masculine, which is considered a negative quality for young women. While Jill does physically attack Linda at some points, much of the bullying is relational because it is invisible, harmful, and allowed within the social roles of patriarchal culture. Readers get to live vicariously through Jill, who in turn reminds us that there are consequences to our actions.

Though Blume does not blame Linda for her own victimhood as much as her characters do, readers are led to believe that Linda deserves abuse before they even read the novel. The blurb on the back of the book describing the plot reads: “There’s something about Linda that makes a lot of kids in her fifth-grade class want to see how far they can go-- but nobody, least of all Jill, expects the fun to end where it does.” The phrase “something about Linda” implies that it is Linda’s fault that the kids in her class gang up on her. Something in her character makes it irresistible for the other students. The blurb also specifically says that bullying Linda is fun for her classmates. Though this short paragraph makes it seem like Jill is a hesitant participant, she is completely convinced that Linda deserves to be bullied, and is eager to attack Linda herself.

In her analysis of bullies, Patrice Opplinger also notes that there are different types of bullies: “‘ring-leaders’ who initiate the bullying, ‘followers’ who join in, ‘reinforcers’ who watch and perhaps encourage the bully, ‘outsiders’ who are complicit and whose lack of action perhaps reinforces the bullying, and ‘defenders’ who help or get help from others such as a parent or teacher” (Oppliger 3). Wendy is the “ring-leader,” Jill and her friends are “reinforcers,” the adults in the novel are “outsiders,” but unfortunately for Linda, there are no defenders. Not even Blume comes to Linda’s defense, as she creates a narrative where the only consequence of bullying Linda is Jill learning a lesson about being nice to others. Wendy is still the most powerful girl in the classroom, and Linda remains friendless. Linda is emotionally and physically abused throughout the novel, but she is powerless in the end because she simply does not have the social strength of Wendy or Jill.

For most of the novel, the students are left without adult supervision. When there are adults around, they are incompetent as role models and often blind to the situation at hand. The lack of helpful adults is what drives this story and allows the bullying to become so intense. After the Halloween costume contest at school, Jill comments that the judges were stupid for not selecting her flenser costume for the “most creative” prize. The judges were all members of the P.T.A., including the aunt of Jill’s friend, Caroline. Jill apologizes for insulting the P.T.A., and Caroline replies: “That’s all right. She is dumb. My mother’s always saying so” (37). This moment was included for the purpose of humor, but it shows the adults in the book modeling bullying behavior for the children. If their mothers regularly degrade other women, the girls in the book (and in real life) are unlikely to see it as an issue. Here, readers learn that saying mean things about other women is not something one outgrows in elementary, middle, or even high school, but is instead a behavior they will participate in for the rest of their lives. We have mean girls, both in fiction and real life, because those with less power have a greater need to learn how to skillfully manipulate others. Even the adult women in these novels are powerless against the patriarchal culture, and therefore still bully each other as the only power they can maintain in modern patriarchal culture.

The teachers at Jill’s school are integral in the continuation of the students bullying Linda. Miss Rothbelle, the music teacher, is a bully herself. She asks the class a question and calls on several students looking for the correct answer. Linda, like the students before her, answers incorrectly, but instead of moving on to another student like she had done previously, she says: “‘That was not the correct answer. Weren’t you paying attention?’ She pulled a few strands of Linda’s hair”(59). This occurs shortly after the students start to physically bully Linda, and after the incident, the bullies’ actions only get worse. Miss Rothbelle openly humiliates and physically harms Linda in front of the class. In her position of authority as a teacher, she is implicitly giving her students permission to bully Linda by engaging in the bullying herself.

The other teachers are no better than Miss Rothbelle. One day, Wendy, Jill, and their friends hold Linda down and force her to eat what they claim is a chocolate-covered ant. Linda throws up and is sent home, and another teacher comes in to talk to Mrs. Minish, the students’ regular teacher, and the class about the incident, causing Wendy to make up a story about Linda stealing and devouring her chocolate. The other teacher is dubious of Wendy’s story, but Mrs. Minish dismisses him, claiming: “‘I knew there had to be an explanation’” (111). Instead of questioning her students about Wendy’s difficult-to-believe story, she accepts it as the truth, not only because it is easier but because it makes her look better as a teacher. She does not want to deal with the bullying issue, but she also does not want other teachers to know she has a bullying problem in her class in the first place. This further pushes the idea that women never grow out of the need to socially preserve themselves—in order for Mrs. Minish to seem like an effective teacher to her peers, she must intentionally ignore the faults of her classroom and therefore excuse the bullies.

Teachers, however, are not the only problem in *Blubber.* Parents, on many occasions, choose to ignore the wrongdoings of their children. Jill's mother is aware that Jill is a bully, but says nothing until the bullying comes back around to Jill. The mother tells Jill: "It's rough to be on the other side, isn't it?" (168). She is aware that her daughter has been causing trouble for quite some time, but simply ignores the problem. In this way, it is a good thing that Jill ends up becoming the victim, because there are no voices encouraging her to leave Linda alone. Jill's mother is also responding to the power structure within the school. She knows that Jill would more willingly listen to Wendy than to her own mother because Jill perceives Wendy to have more power. Because Jill's mother cannot be an active witness to the situation, she takes a passive role and waits for the situation to sort itself out.

In a book called *Blubber,* it is pretty obvious that the self-image of the characters will be called into question. This is not limited to the children, as Jill's mother "thinks it's very bad to get sun on her face. She's always saying that sun makes wrinkles and wrinkles make people look older and that someday I will know what she means" (23). Jill's mother is actively trying to fit within cultural ideals for the way a woman should look: beautiful, thin, and above all, young. When daughters watch mothers policing their own bodies, it can easily become a learned behavior for the child. Jill is underweight, and is therefore not bullied like Linda, but her image is called into question constantly throughout the novel. This statement also reminds readers that judging one's self image is not a problem that goes away with time, but in fact may be more prevalent as one ages.

Even as a fifth graders, the girls in Jill's school are concerned about the foods they are eating. Jill is a picky eater, and brings a peanut butter sandwich with her wherever she goes. Despite her pickiness, Jill's food choices are rarely a concern for her classmates: "'It's good you're so skinny,' Caroline told me. 'Peanut butter's fattening'" (72). If Jill looked like Linda, the girls in the classroom would be much more eager to police her eating habits. However, it is important to note that Caroline is already concerned with what is fattening at such a young age. Young readers who may not have been concerned with the fat content in their school lunch are now privy to the consequences of eating too much peanut butter.

Jill also subtly polices herself. She is not eager to try new foods, but she is acutely aware of the way eating certain foods makes her look. During a party, she is offered a fruit bowl, but does not eat it: "It looked pretty but I don't eat stuff like pineapple in public because the threads get caught in my teeth and make me very uncomfortable" (131). Jill does not have the vocabulary yet to fully understand why getting pineapple stuck in her teeth is bad, but she is old enough to pick up on the idea that she should be concerned about her appearance while eating, even when surrounded by other kids. Because Jill mentions specifically that she is only self-conscious in public, the reader understands that Jill does not care about the physical discomfort of eating pineapple, but rather the emotional discomfort that stems from embarrassment.

Of course, the student most affected by body image is Linda, who throughout the book is referred to as "Blubber." It is noted that she is not even the most overweight girl in school, but she happened to be the one to give a report about whales, and is therefore subjected to the wrath of the other girls. These girls have been judged on their appearances their entire lives, but are just now growing old enough to be conscious of it. The girls understand that judging appearances is a form of control, and therefore find it easy to control Linda. Unlike Jill, Linda's eating habits are constantly called to attention. For lunch one day, she brings a sandwich, an apple, and a package of Hostess cupcakes. The girls wait for Linda to unpack everything before attacking: "'You're going to turn into a real whale if you keep eating like that,' Wendy told her" (62). Linda's lunch is not different from those belonging to other students, but by virtue of being "Blubber," her lunch is worth making fun of. The girls in class humiliate her until Linda gives up trying to eat: "She stood up and headed for the trash basket but Wendy stopped her before she could throw anything away. 'You can't waste those *beautiful* cupcakes, Blubber!'" (63). The students then toss around each piece of Linda's lunch, destroying the sandwich, eating the cupcakes, and tossing the apple on the floor. When the lunch attendant notices, Linda takes the blame for the discarded apple. Linda attempts to appease Wendy, Jill, and their friends by throwing away her lunch because she feels the elimination of the food would mean that she does not want to "turn into a whale." Unfortunately, that is not enough, because the existence of food in Linda's presence is enough to turn the class against her.

Writing for young audiences is particularly difficult when dealing with eating habits and self-image because, while being concerned about the fat content of peanut butter may feel perfectly natural for a woman who has grown up bombarded by media urging her to be thin, young girls are not yet as exposed to cultural beauty expectations. In her analysis of issues of weight in young adult fiction, Dorothy Karlin notes: "These adult-authored books guide readers through a policing of their bodies, intervening between a girl and her appetites" (Karlin). Jill, Linda, and all of their classmates should feel comfortable eating the things they like. However, by noting which foods are high in fat or embarrassing to eat in public, Blume limits the diets of self-conscious readers who may be concerned about their own appearances. This novel makes no attempt to subvert the cultural desire to be thin, but instead creates a negative dialogue about, and therefore a poor relationship with, food.

Linda exhibits a negative relationship with food because for the second half of the novel, she focuses on dissociating herself from food and eating. After her classmates throw her food across the room, Linda brings saltines, two celery sticks, and a slice of cheese to lunch. She tells Wendy: “I’m going to lose ten pounds and then you won’t be able to call me that name anymore” (72). Linda is attempting to seize control over the situation at school by changing her physical appearance. Linda believes not only that she could be liked if it were not for her body, but that she could also be more powerful. After all, mean girls tend to be effortlessly thin, and in order for Linda to have the same levels of control, she must first physically fit the role. However, by asserting her need for control, Linda also shows Wendy just how much power she has over her, and the bullying gets worse. Most fifth graders do not have any reason to go on a diet, but it is a popular topic throughout the novel. Like many social cues obtained from encounters with their parents, the students turn to dieting as an adult solution to an issue that will haunt them throughout their lives.

In one scene, where all of the kids in the class are getting weighed at school, Blume provides a guide for readers to avoid looking like Linda. Jill weighs sixty-seven and a half pounds, though the nurse would prefer her to weigh seventy-two. Jill replies: “I guess I’m just lucky because I’m always eating” (93). Linda is shamed any time she attempts to eat, but Jill is allowed to eat freely because she is underweight. Jill’s freedom to live her life in a relatively uncomplicated way stems from the fact that her appearance is socially acceptable. Linda, on the other hand, is told: “oh my, ninety-one pounds… that’s too much for your height” (94). Linda’s height is never specified, but in a novel for a particularly impressionable “tween” age group, this is a harmful message to include. Readers from the ages of eight to twelve who may already be concerned about their bodies may compare their own weight to the weights listed in this scene for several characters. A reader aligning more with underweight Jill may consider themselves lucky, while a reader with a similar weight to Linda-- regardless of height or age-- may consider taking up Linda's minimalist diet.

In a study analyzing the relationships between media, peers, and self-esteem, researchers Dohnt and Tiggmann found that "heavier girls desired a thinner figure and in addition were also less satisfied with their appearance. For the peer influence variables, perceived peer desire for thinness was significantly correlated with girls' own desire for thinness and their self-esteem" (Dohnt 932). Girls are not inherently self-conscious about their weight, but rather learn to be ashamed of their bodies when friends and classmates force them to be. Girls tend to be social, and subsequently a girl's emotional health can be heavily dependent on what others think of her. This is important not only to Linda, but to readers as well. Considering the assumed closeness the narrator creates, the characters presented in the novel become a kind of peer group for the reader. Therefore, Blume's work is not only influenced by the patriarchal desire for women to be hyper vigilant about their bodies, it also encourages girls to participate in this behavior from a young age.

The novel does not end with a lesson about the cruelty of body-shaming. Despite Linda receiving the most abuse, readers are not led to sympathize with Linda as much as they are with Jill, who narrates the story. In the end, Linda is no longer called "Blubber," but still remains completely friendless. Without any indication that girls should only worry about taking care of their bodies, and not about what others think of them, the only lesson to be learned from Linda is that to avoid being bullied, girls must also avoid being fat.

Boys in *Blubber* are never subjected to any bullying. When Linda is first called "Blubber," Jill points out: "Ruthellen Stark and Elizabeth Ryan are about ten times fatter than Linda, but even they can't compare to Bruce" (5). Bruce is mentioned several times throughout the book, but is exempt from the shame that Linda experiences, simply because he is male. While it is not impossible for a boy to be harassed about his weight, in this book boys are allowed to bully without being bullied. This is, partially, due to the fact that boys are born with a certain amount of power that girls simply are not—boys are allowed and encouraged to become leaders, and therefore do not need to fight for autonomy the way that girls do.

After the weighing scene, Donna sings a song about Linda gaining so much weight that she will pop. The other students join in, but Bruce takes a special interest: "Bruce seems to enjoy jumping to Donna's rhyme best of all. It suits him more than Linda because he weighs over a hundred pounds and when he jumps his whole body shakes like Jell-O. He's the one who should go on a diet" (95). Jill's comments are not uncommon-- characters throughout the book think about Bruce's weight, but never say anything to him directly. Instead, they turn on Linda. This teaches female readers that they must be far more concerned about their appearance than their male peers because boys are inherently more valuable than girls.

The relationship between boys and girls is also important in the way that female students are bullied. The characters in this novel are too young to actually be attracted to each other, but they are old enough to understand that it is an experience they will soon encounter. Jill is not excited to go to a bar mitzvah for her father's friend's son, because, "His mother is always making jokes about how me and Warren will like each other a lot more when we grow up, which proves that Mrs. Winkler doesn't know anything" (69). Jill rejects the idea of being attracted to Warren, but Mrs. Winkler is eager to push the idea onto the children. In novels for older audiences, characters will learn to perform sexuality, but this is the age when children learn about attraction-- more specifically, they learn that girls and boys are supposed to fall in love with each other, as long as they stay within their social classes and boundaries.

In *Blubber,* Blume creates a narrative in which readers are expected to learn that bullying comes with consequences, and that being popular is not an excuse for engaging in aggressive behavior. However, the novel also encourages girls to be conscious about their appearance in a way that is unique to women. Though readers are given an engaging story, it is unfortunately one that upholds strong patriarchal opinions about the value of women being placed mainly in the way that they look.

The Clique

The Clique, released in 2004, is the first novel in what would soon become a popular series by Lisi Harrison. The story follows "the Pretty Committee": four best friends who are as fashionable as they are powerful in their elite private school in Westchester, New York. The characters attend an exclusive all-female middle school, Octavian Country Day (OCD). The school is as over-the-top as the girls who attend it, offering Evian water coolers over drinking fountains and a Starbucks so the rich girls can sip lattes before their yoga classes. Fashion is top priority at OCD, as it states in the student handbook: "*Fashion is a fine art and a true form of self expression… which is why OCD prides itself on being an anti-uniform private school. It is a given that all students will take matters of personal style and grooming very seriously"* (26). The girls who attend OCD are obsessive about their appearances, hence the nickname of the school. The students, despite their freedom of dress, often follow whatever trends *Teen Vogue* and the popular girls dictate. The school essentially trains the young students to think of themselves like adult women whose bodies are constantly judged and objectified.

The fictional school operates as a fantasy for readers, who wish for the bottomless bank accounts and ultimate freedom of being completely in control of one's own appearance. However, this independence is only acceptable if it fits within the patriarchal norms instilled on the students from the moment they open their handbooks. Rather than confronting traditional roles by giving each character a unique style, Harrison creates a strict fashion guidebook for readers, who are led to believe that to live in a world dictated by appearance is to be desirable.

Massie Block is the leader of the Pretty Committee, and is fully aware of the control she has over the student body at OCD. She is extremely knowledgeable about fashion, and hides her complex character behind an icy, well-coiffed facade. As important as fashion is to these girls, they can never outwardly worry about their appearance. Western culture simultaneously judges women based on their appearances while also insisting that women who obsess over their looks are vapid and unintelligent. In 2016, the beauty industry in the United States pulled in 62.46 billion dollars, up from 47.84 billion dollars just ten years prior (IBIS World). The amount of money women spend on cosmetics increases dramatically each year, while fashion magazines boast pages full of advice on achieving “the natural look.” A women is supposed to be effortlessly beautiful at all times while hiding the fact that it takes time, money, and work to adhere to Western beauty standards. Massie picks up on this phenomenon, and spends her time learning about the cosmetic and fashion industries without letting on that she actually puts forth effort to do this.

Massie’s friends consist of three other girls. Her best friend is Alicia Rivera, who is described as the prettiest girl in school. Like many betas in teen fiction, Alicia secretly pines for the top position in their clique, but is never successful in obtaining it. Dylan Marvil’s mother is the host of a popular morning talk show, and therefore provides the group with access to the best celebrity gossip. However, because her mother is constantly surrounded by perfect celebrities, Dylan is obsessed with her weight, and has the worst self-image of her friends. Finally, there is Kristen Gregory, who is as obsessed with grades as she is with fashion. Kristen is secretly on a scholarship to attend OCD after her father lost all of his money, but somehow manages to remain in designer clothes and makeup so that none of her friends notice.

Though the girls operate the Pretty Committee on a relatively equal plane with Massie at the top, they are all minutely aware that their place in the clique is always in danger. Kristen, Alicia, and Dylan are literally ranked, as Harrison makes a point to list the number that each member of the clique occupies on Massie’s speed dial: Alicia is 1, Dylan is 2, and Kristen is 3

(5). This is one of many subtle ways that Massie controls her friends, ranking and rating them at all possible opportunities so that they are eager to continue to please her.

Mean girls and their cliques do not exist in young adult novels without a social outcast to pick on. The outsider provides contrast to the mean girl, and is often easier for readers to identify themselves with, often being average-looking, middle class, and unpopular but not unlikeable. Claire is the outsider in *The Clique*, moving with her family from Florida to New York. The Lyons family stays in the Block family's guesthouse until they can find a place of their own, the two fathers being friends since college. Claire is coded as the sympathetic character of the novel simply because she is not part of the Pretty Committee. Claire quickly picks up on the hierarchy of her new surroundings and cannot decide whether she admires Massie or hates her.

Claire's only real friend throughout the story is Layne. The Pretty Committee dislikes Layne because she aggressively rejects the brands and designers that the other girls obsess over. Whenever Layne discusses anything she wears or owns, she always includes price: her fake rhinestone tattoo costing "like a buck twenty at the pharmacy," and her bag "fifty bucks. Can you believe?" (72, 76). The handbag also doubles as a stereo, which embarrasses Claire when Layne plays music during lunch. Layne is aware of the social conventions that should guide her outward appearance. However, by pushing so hard against them, she makes herself just as vulnerable to the patriarchal culture as the Pretty Committee, but in an opposite way. Whereas Massie and her friends look down on other girls for not wearing the "right" clothes, Layne looks down on Massie because she cares about high-end fashion. Therefore, Layne is judging and objectifying Massie's appearance to make herself feel superior. Layne internalizes the patriarchal belief that an interest in fashion automatically devalues a woman's worth.

However, simply because one character chooses not to participate in the world of fashion does not mean that the text is not filled with references to branded products. As the audiences for young adult novels grow older, the emphasis on commoditizing the interests of the characters grows increasingly intense. Readers are often bombarded with high-end brands, which they can subsequently recognize and feel as though they understand fashion trends as well as the characters. In her study of the commercialization of young adult novels, Naomi Johnson states: “Overall, feminists have a critique of commercialized messages as influencing girls and women to seek limited forms of agency through commoditized beauty rather than communal, political changes that challenge power balances” (Johnson 57-58). Layne is seen as down-to-earth because of her rejection of fashion, while Massie is seen as cool and interesting because of her swath of high-end clothing. It is simply disagreement over the importance of fashion that keeps these girls separated. While it is unknown if the two would ever be friends, emphasis on brands pulls the girls apart.

Like many mean girls, Massie and the Pretty Committee show their aggression socially. Indirect aggression is the most common among female teenage bullies, and Massie is an expert. Massie and her friends take it so far as to give each other “gossip points.” The more gossip points something is worth, the juicier the rumor. Creating a gossip point system makes indirect aggression into a game, removing the severity of it and instead replacing it with competition for who can tell the most devastating secret about someone else. Only the members of the Pretty Committee are safe from each other, because their own secrets are worth little to no gossip points (38). This furthers the divide between Massie’s clique and the rest of the student body, encouraging her friends to attack other girls while securing the perceived safety of their in-group.

Each night, Massie creates her “State of the Union,” a short list of what is “In” and what is “Out,” so that the entire school knows how to win Massie’s favor. After losing an earring in the hallway, Massie declares diamond earrings “out” (34). Subsequently, no girls wear diamond earrings without being bullied. By creating a clear list of what is “in” and “out,” or rather, what is “acceptable” or “unacceptable,” Massie is able to secure her power at school. The in-group is much more valuable and desirable because, especially in the fragile emotional time that is middle school, no one wants to be an outcast. Disobeying Massie creates outcasts, and the girls at OCD are willing to spend whatever money necessary to remain on Massie’s good side.

Aggression and general meanness are the only ways that Massie can truly keep control over her clique and her school. In his study of a actual middle school clique, sociologist Don Merten describes: “One's position in the clique was important, because it both symbolized one's popularity and was salient in protecting it. That is, hierarchical position was an essential factor for the successful use of meanness in the sense that a girl's effectiveness in being mean depended on her status in the clique” (Merten 187). Being mean is not only the way into the clique, but the only way to remain in the clique. Without creating her own social order, Massie would not have access to the power that she craves. Because Massie has placed herself at the top of the hierarchy and artfully uses relational aggression as a skill, Massie is able to remain relatively stable in her position as the most important girl in school.

Because the students at OCD are so focused on appearance, not only are characters’ outfits constantly judged, but also their bodies. Dylan, despite her residency in the Pretty Committee, is one of the most insecure characters in the novel. Dylan’s mother is the host of a popular talk show, *The Daily Grind.* Because her mother is always rubbing elbows with famous people, Dylan often proves the clique with the best celebrity gossip. However, Dylan’s mother also constantly bullies her daughter about her weight, often citing celebrity diets. When we first meet Dylan, readers learn she is starting “the Zone diet.” Massie retorts that “‘The smell alone will keep you from eating,” to the other girls’ agreement (39). As often as Dylan’s body is called into question, her methods of policing her body are also judged. Like Blume with *Blubber,* Harrison constantly reminds readers about the state of Dylan’s body, causing readers to become more conscious of their own bodies. This could lead confident girls to question their own appearance or unconfident girls to compare themselves to Dylan in the hopes that they will not look like her.

Dieting at such a young age is not abnormal in the United States. A 2006 psychological study of girls as young as 5 found that “by 6 years of age, a large number of girls desired a thinner ideal figure. Both peer and media influences emerged as significant predictors of body image and dieting awareness.” The researchers continue, revealing “In particular, girls who looked at magazines aimed at adult women had greater dissatisfaction with their appearance” (Dohnt). Young girls are susceptible to attacks on their self-esteem from parents, friends, siblings, and nearly every type of media they are exposed to, and the characters in *The Clique* are no exception. Dylan’s diets are influenced by her mother, endorsed by celebrities, and shamed by her friends. Dylan represents the feelings of many readers, but rather than reassuring girls that their focus should be on healthy bodies rather than thin bodies, Harrison creates a character whose only flaw is that she is overweight. It is significant that women’s magazines influence the self-worth of young girls, because the students of OCD are obsessed with adhering to fashion rules that adult women are encouraged to uphold. This implies that there is no escape for Dylan--as long as women are required to be effortlessly beautiful, and therefore thin, she must continue to diet.

Alicia, though her self-esteem suffers less than Dylan's, is also sometimes uncomfortable in her own body. Alicia develops large breasts at a young age, and Harrison makes it clear that this is not a blessing for the middle schooler. Alicia crosses her arms across her chest when she is nervous and is almost always covered up, even at a sleepover with her closest friends: "everyone changed into her pajamas, except for Alicia, who stayed in her T-shirt and bra" (103). The characters in this novel are old enough to understand that they should perform sexuality inside of a patriarchal culture, but Alicia's discomfort shows how cumbersome a task it really is. Even Claire, our heroine, immediately picks up on Alicia's insecurity and makes fun of her for it. After Alicia makes a fart noise with her mouth and blames it on Claire, Claire retorts: "'Actually, Alicia, I thought it was your boobs rubbing together,'" (104). While both characters are making fun of each other through the discussion of bodies, Claire's remark toward Alicia is far more cutting because of Alicia's discomfort with her newly changed body. Children do not learn to sexualize the body until their culture teaches them to. However, female bodies are often sexualized long before male bodies because of a patriarchal culture obsessed with objectification of women. Harrison includes Alicia's insecurity as a comfort for readers going through similar changes, and as a vulnerability in Alicia's otherwise stony persona. However, readers are taught that breasts, because they are seen in Western culture as sexual, are shameful.

Massie's first attack on Claire is also related to her body— specifically her *female* body, as Alicia and Kristen use paint to make it seem like Claire gets her period. The students of OCD throw tampons at Claire as she walks down the hall, as a way to both draw attention to, and shame her for, her menstruation. This is every middle school girl's nightmare, and Harrison does little work to reassure her readers, though the school nurse does assure Claire that "Getting your period is something to celebrate" (65). Compared to the pages of harassment that Claire faces, the reassurance falls flat. Alicia's breasts are shameful because they are sexualized, but Claire's (faked) menstruation is shameful because it is perceived as dirty. In a culture dictated by men, the inner workings of the female anatomy are often considered unnecessary to discuss. The students in the hallway of OCD who bully Claire act as a peer group for readers, who from Claire's experience learn that menstruation is embarrassing rather than simply a fact of life.

Harrison's attention to appearance is not always directly negative. For the characters in this novel, clothing and makeup are often sources of confidence. After the false period incident, Claire tries on fashionable clothes from the lost and found and "walked straight to the cafe, with her toes squished and her head held high" (66). Despite her embarrassment just minutes earlier, she was able to find confidence by fitting into the culture of her school that is dominated by fashion, despite her physical discomfort. Even Massie gains confidence from cosmetics: "She turned her back toward them and swiped some gloss across her lips. When she turned around again, she spoke with renewed self-confidence, almost like her battery had been recharged" (206). Makeup and clothes are a way for the characters in the novel to feel as though they are physically masking their flaws. While the wrong clothes are grounds for an attack by their peers, wearing fashionable clothing or keeping lip gloss handy acts as a sort of armor for these characters.

This is not an uncommon trend in young adult fiction. Often, readers are provided with pages full of outfit decisions, descriptions of makeup, and the latest tips from *Teen Vogue*. In comparison, romantic situations with boys last only a handful of lines. Johnson continues in her analysis of consumerism, and notes that "acts of consumption to prepare for romantic relationships are the primary focus of these novels rather than the relationships themselves" (Johnson 59). While boys are featured in the novel as a source of conflict, interaction with male characters is minimal. The only thing that truly matters to the characters is making sure that they present themselves in a way that is appealing to men. Therefore, while fashion and cosmetics act as a source of confidence for many characters, this confidence comes from a place of wanting to be visually pleasing for men, even in the absence of male characters.

Along with a string of biting insults throughout the novel, Claire's main act of destruction occurs through instant messaging. Claire carefully finds time when Massie is away from her home so that she can log on to Massie's computer and pretend to be her. She uses this to convince Alicia that Claire is her new best friend, tells Kristen that Massie hangs out with Layne and finds out that Kristen's family is not wealthy, and worst of all, picks on Dylan. Dylan tells Claire (as Massie) what she is planning to wear to the big auction, an event where the students and families of OCD raise money for scholarships by auctioning off expensive items. Claire (as Massie) suggests that perhaps Dylan's legs would not look good in a micro-mini skirt (153). Claire does feel bad at first, but goes forward with the plan anyway. Dylan is the only member of the Pretty Committee who is directly attacked on her self-esteem, which for Dylan is already very low. Dylan's dieting and compulsive weighing behavior becomes stronger, and she dresses to completely cover her body. Again, readers are exposed to the same body policing that they will encounter throughout their teen and adult lives. Dylan is the only character affected in the long term through her desire to hide herself, but Claire faces no repercussions in her insults toward Dylan because it is Dylan's body that is outside the Western standard of beauty.

Claire does feel remorse for what she says to Dylan: "Claire couldn't believe she had stooped so low. In a billion years she never thought she'd be the kind of person who would go out of their way to make someone feel bad about their weight. But then again, she'd never imagined she'd be in any of the situations she'd been in as of late" (153). Claire is claiming to be a victim of circumstance, which is meant to keep the reader from casting her off as a bully as they may do for Massie. However, Claire's victimhood creates more victims, and throws Dylan into a period of intense self-consciousness until it is revealed that Massie did not actually write the instant messages. Claire, therefore, takes on the role of mean girl because she is harming others as a way to obtain what she wants.

Massie's character is just as dynamic as Claire's, and she enjoys a moment of redemption after the Pretty Committee creates a makeup line that gives several girls an allergic reaction. Massie anonymously texts Claire that oatmeal can help ease the effects of the allergies. Layne always carries oatmeal, which Claire uses to save the day, and Massie refuses to take credit. Not only did Massie learn this tip from a *Teen Vogue*, implying that her time spent worrying about fashion could, in fact, be somewhat worthwhile, but she chooses to retain her mean girl reputation over being the hero to her classmates. If Massie is helpful to her classmates, she loses her power. Part of the power of being a mean girl is the exclusivity. If her peers knew that, at some level, she cares about them, Massie stands to lose everything she worked so hard for. Massie also helps Claire make friends, as the girls she helped save are thankful and invite her to spend time with them. Massie has a heart, but she is too strategic to let it be shown. All the good that Massie does is done covertly.

Despite the slew of insults that every character in this novel utilizes, Claire is the only one to use the word "bitch." Testing out the use of swear words makes sense for the characters based on middle schoolers, but this word is especially significant when discussing women and girls. Claire and Layne first bond over their discussion of the feminine culture that they feel left out of: "They hated the snobby factor of *Teen Vogue* and thought Drew Barrymore seemed like she'd be kinda bitchy" (76). Here, Layne are indulging in the common practice of separating themselves from other girls. Since, in a culture dominated by men, femininity is seen as a negative trait, Layne and Claire feel a sense of superiority when dividing themselves from Massie and her friends. Celebrities are similar to popular students at school. By using "bitch" to make something that is popular undesirable, Claire and Layne are making themselves more desirable.

Insulting a successful celebrity is one thing, but Claire is also prone to calling Massie the same thing. After Massie refuses to be seen with Claire on the first day of school, Claire tells her that "you're acting like a real *bitch!*'" (56). It is important to discuss the use of the word "bitch" at this level because frequent use at this age is part of what makes it so common for older audiences. Accusing Massie of being a bitch gives Claire a moment of power though the greater patriarchal culture that the girls are forced to participate in. If an adult woman takes control, she is a bitch. The fact that Massie is the only member of the Pretty Committee that is called a bitch sends the message that it is better to back away from leadership, rather than to risk a negative image to others by being in charge. One Times Union editor notes: "As little girls, most of us were raised to be 'nice,' encouraged to be 'good,' and praised for playing well with others. We all want to be liked and, we're taught, no one likes a girl who's bossy or boastful or, worst of all, a bitch" (Keedle). Modern women are encouraged to take on leadership roles, but to be the boss without crossing the line to bossy. Dominance is considered to be a male trait, and therefore women who break out of their traditionally feminine roles to take control over their situation are undesirable. This is part of why we are conditioned to hate the mean girl—she is a girl who defies tradition and fights for power.

Massie is always described with language that suggests politics or leadership. Massie's bedroom is even modeled after the presidential suite at the Mondrian in Los Angeles (3). Massie is perhaps so enthralling to both the other characters in the book and the readers because she demands respect. The first time that Claire shakes Massie's hand, "Massie met it with a grip so tight Claire giggles uncomfortably and contorted her body in an effort to get loose" (9). A firm handshake is often considered the mark of a good businessperson, and Massie immediately asserts her dominance with Claire. Claire is performing femininity by giggling, but Massie is far more confident and masculine, therefore a bitch.

When Claire is reading over the brochure for OCD, she notes that many graduates of the school grow up to be award-winning actors and successful politicians. She begins to worry, because "She had no idea what the secretary of state even *did* and prayed she wouldn't be in the same class as a future one because they'd have absolutely nothing to talk about" (26). Massie is a clear leader, and could be a politician someday, and Claire is as concerned with talking to her as she joked that she would be with a future secretary of state. Claire finds the thought of authority intimidating, but when faced with a person who *has* authority, is both in awe of and despises her. Massie has carved out a way to lead her clique, and therefore her student body, in a way that works for her and is more or less sustainable. Because of this, Massie is willing to leave other girls out of the "in" group, because it means that she will be able to continue her reign.

Massie is also outwardly confident, regardless of her inward insecurities. Claire describes her in the hallway: "Massie walked tall and with purpose. Her gaze was fixed, but she didn't seem to be looking at anything in particular" (33). Like any middle schooler, Massie often acts from a place of discomfort. She knows that she must behave in specific, powerful ways, so that she can maintain her position at school. However, relational aggression that Massie uses to gain control has a side effect of making Massie insecure. One author investigating the relationships between mean girls as they grow up finds: "Most experts agree that the aggressive Queen Bee is a victim in some ways, too, suffering from the same feelings of fear, anger, and lack of confidence she fosters in others" (Dellasega 14). Utilizing relational aggression against girls that she does not like teaches Massie that she can easily be pushed out of power. Girls often thrive off of their relationships with other girls, and because Massie fears being cut off from her friends and peers, her social aggression toward others acts as a reminder that her own relationships are fragile.

While Harrison presents characters that are both talented and flawed in their own unique ways, she cannot present a situation without underlying influences from our patriarchal culture. The patriarchal values that we all live with are not always explicitly visible to us, but are lying beneath the surface. It is impossible for Harrison, or any other author, to create a narrative for young women without patriarchal influence until our culture changes. Massie is a strong leader with her own passions, but is written as a vapid antagonist. Claire can be quite cruel to her classmates, but because she is introduced as an outsider to the Pretty Committee, she is presented as the protagonist. In reality, these roles are reversed, and both girls, as well as their friends, act out of insecurity as they attempt to navigate patriarchal influences.

Gossip Girl

The first novel of the *Gossip Girl* series opens with an epigraph by Oscar Wilde: “Scandal is gossip made tedious by morality” (1). Gossip is seen here to be necessary, though not necessarily moral. Gossip is a form of bonding, one that is traditionally seen as feminine. A scandal, however, forces people to take a firm stance on the issue at hand, and, more importantly someone must be punished. Wilde suggests pushing away from moral values and instead embracing the interpersonal value of gossip. With this quote, the opening of the book suggests an opening up of moral values.

Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl* tells the story of Blair Waldorf and Serena van der Woodsen, two popular and privileged girls from the Upper East Side of New York City. The novel is structured with two types of chapters: the regular narrative of the story, and the intermittent entries from GossipGirl.net, a fictional blog that circulates all of the best gossip New York teenagers have to offer. Prior to the opening of the novel, Serena left the City to attend an exclusive boarding school, allowing Blair to become the most popular girl in school. When Serena returns to Constance Billard School for Girls, she unsuccessfully tries to reclaim her old social circle. The narrative follows these girls and their friends as they navigate high school, wherein their entire social life is based in rumors and gossip.

The first page of the novel is an entry on GossipGirl.net. Each entry in GossipGirl.net has the same message at the top: “Disclaimer: All the real names of places, people, and events have been altered or abbreviated to protect the innocent. Namely, me” (3). Gossipers are innocent because gossip is a social service. Gossip Girl, the curator of the website, piggybacks on the notoriety of the other characters to find fame for themself.[1] In high school, gossip around school can often become top priority for teenagers because it builds up most of the social fabric that binds the students together. The existence of a gossip column affirms for readers that the rumors are just as important as they seem in the moment, and that gossip is a positive way to bond with others.

Beginning with a GossipGirl.net entry throws readers into the drama en medias res. This is an interesting tool for von Ziegesar because it allows her to divulge the backstories of her characters slowly throughout the novel instead of outlining it in the beginning like many other novels in the same genre. In the first entry, Gossip Girl writes: "I'm talking about those people who are *born into it*-- those of us who have everything anyone could possibly wish for and who take it all completely for granted" (3). Gossip Girl immediately creates an us-versus-them mentality, a hallmark of novels starring mean girls. However, instead of pitting two characters against each other, Gossip Girl bonds with readers, affirming biases they may have toward the popular girls at their own school. Gossip Girl creates a similar narrative intimacy to the one utilized in *Blubber*, allowing readers to feel as though they have access to exclusive information. By insisting that the characters of the novel are "born into it," popularity seems like a privilege, not something that can be achieved. The format of an online gossip column translates into tangible, familiar form for readers, especially those who may already be familiar with tabloids and women's magazines. This validates obsession with popularity, makes it seem important and worth the time of readers, both in the novel and in their real lives.

Celebrities tend to be a fitting comparison to popular girls because popular girls are equally capable of captivating those around them to enforce their own power. In Merten's study of middle school cliques, he states, "In fact, popular girls getting away with being mean was not so different from adult celebrities calling attention to their special status by being demanding, arbitrary, and inconsiderate. In both cases, the desire to be seen and treated as special is often transformed into power in the service of preserving that specialness or even forcing recognition of it" (Merten 189). Being popular is largely a matter of luck. However, once someone is perceived to be popular, they suddenly have an immense amount of power over their peers and can make demands, define trends, and ostracize people. The characters in *Gossip Girl* are already born to wealthy parents and are enrolled in expensive, high-quality education, making the "specialness" that the popular characters boast a benefit they receive by no talent or merit of their own.

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[1] Gossip Girl is often assumed to be female, but the gender of the website's author is called into question later in the series. Therefore, gender neutral pronouns will be used.

The first scene in which readers actually meet the characters takes place at a dinner party at the Waldorf home. The women in attendance, Blair's mother's friends, are gossiping about Mrs. Waldorf's new boyfriend, but stop themselves because:

> Gossip and idle chat were amusing, but not at the expense of an old friend's feelings. *Bullshit!* Blair would have said if she could have heard Mrs. Archibald's thoughts. *Hypocrite!* All of these people were terrible gossips. And if you're going to do it, why not enjoy it? (12).

This passage asserts that people do not grow out of gossip; the women's first instinct is to whisper about their lifelong friend, but correct themselves because of the social setting. For high school readers who are probably told that their obsession with rumors and gossip will end when they graduate, this moment preaches the opposite: gossip never ends. As with the other novels examined in this genre, the characters female adults model gossiping behavior for their children. As high-society women, the mothers already have a lot of financial control in the world.

However, they have very little autonomy themselves, and work through their lack of control by attacking their friends. The narrator, however, who shares a voice with Gossip Girl, does not take issue with this fact. Throughout the novel, it is assumed that gossip is beneficial, and part of what makes life interesting.

In fact, later in the novel, the narrator comments: "Oh, don't be a spoilsport. Gossip is sexy. Gossip is good. Not everybody does it, but everybody should!" (112). The novel's events should encourage readers to see gossip as a detriment to their relationships. However, there are consistent interludes in which the benefits of gossip are indoctrinated into readers. This line reads like a cute nursery rhyme-- something easily memorable that teaches readers that gossip will always exists, so you might as well enjoy it. While it is true that gossip will always exist among teenagers and adults alike, the idea that *contributing* to gossip is fun is not an ideal lesson for high schoolers whose lives are already largely dictated by rumors.

While gossip is often seen as a feminine activity, the male characters in this novel do not shy away from the action. Chuck Bass, a mutual friend of Serena and Blair, is eager to spread rumors after Serena's return: "And Chuck wasn't going to keep it a secret for long. It was way too juicy and way too useful" (28). Gossip is not just a feminine exercise in bonding; it as an art of manipulation. Chuck's whole character revolves around being manipulative, and since he is concerned with manipulating women, it makes sense that he quickly learns to verbally manipulate. However, the gossip he has about Serena is used to manipulate the boys of the Upper East Side. Blair's gossipy take-down of Serena may not have been as successful if the boys of Riverside Prep, the boy's school down the street from Constance Billard, had not participated in the gossip surrounding Serena. In this way, a tool that is traditionally considered feminine is only effective when implemented by a man.

One of the few adults that is never caught spreading rumors is the headmistress of Constance Billard. Despite her (verbal) stance on bullying, the headmistress is much more concerned about making sure that her students become respectable members of society than gossiping with her peers: “It was her job to put forth the cream of the crop-- send the girls off to the best colleges, the best marriages, the best lives-- and she was very good at what she did” (39). The headmistress’s hopes for her students still stem out of a desire to maintain the status quo. The headmistress understands that gossip is an unavoidable aspect of life, but she insists that the gossip about her own students from the outside world be positive. However, she is not looking for girls to break out of traditional patriarchal roles to be successful. After all, she still wants her students to marry well. She does not tolerate underachievers because the reputation of Constance Billard rests on the reputations of alumni.

Gossip is the only real weapon Blair has when Serena returns to the City. The beta taking on the role of the alpha is a common trope in YA novels about mean girls. The beta often struggles with the fact that she will never be as powerful as the alpha, just as Blair does as she grapples with her insecurity both with herself and her role as the most popular girl in school. This trope can be interpreted as an allegory for a woman’s place in a patriarchal society: regardless of what power she can garner, she is always at risk of being second best in a system built against her. For Blair, however, instead of being excited about the return of her best friend in the beginning of the novel, Blair is immediately concerned: “And Blair saw Serena, her best friend, the girl she would always love and hate. The girl she could never measure up to and had tried so hard to replace. The girl she’d wanted everyone to forget” (23). Blair is the queen of Constance Billard, but knows how fragile her position is. Of the two girls, Blair is much less confident,and this is clear as soon as Serena returns. Blair is incredibly sensitive, and her mean girl qualities and actions are simply a reflection of her insecurity. This is a common trope with mean girls, but von Ziegesar is unique in that Blair's frantic actions to keep her position in the social circle are apparent from the start, making her character feel less like a standard trope and more human.

The idea of ignoring feelings to save face is common in "chick lit." Blair and Serena come from two high-profile families, creating an even playing field for their quickly developing rivalry. One critic states, "It is important to remember that chick-lit novels in general are dramas of social class, not love stories" (Campbell 489). Campbell is not only speaking of romantic love, but of the love between friends. Every character in *Gossip Girl* comes from an upper class family that can afford exclusive private schools and expensive New York apartments. Because the characters are from the same economic class, their struggles over social class are cutthroat. No character has an automatic "win," and instead the female characters must fight over boys in order to see who can become the most powerful.

Blair believes that her power comes from the appearance of having control. She carefully chooses her words with everyone, but especially Serena: "She'd been about to say 'hard,' but 'hard' made her sound like a victim. Like she'd barely survived without Serena around. 'Different' was better" (35). Blair's reign results directly from words: her gossip is what allows her to come into power and keep that power even when Serena returns. Blair is conscious of the fact that allowing herself to be the victim would mean relinquishing her power. The relationship of Blair and Serena is positioned on an apex of being and seeming. Both girls are uncomfortable with Serena's return and have issues of their own to handle, but are so caught up in *seeming* like their lives are okay that they lose all communication.

Because most of the novel is focused on gossip, the relative silence between Serena and Blair is especially poignant. The two are not talking, partially because their relationship has become awkward with distance, and partially because sharing information about one's self gives others fodder for gossip. Sara Day, in her analysis of young adult literature, notes: "As young women navigate their relationships, they internalize not only the value of disclosure in establishing intimacy but also the pressure to learn and use discretion in their dealings with others. Indeed, adolescent womanhood is marked by a growing understanding of what should *not* be expressed or shared" (Day 8). Blair and Serena have both had a taste of power over their peers and each other. Neither girl is particularly interested in making herself completely vulnerable, because the more vulnerable the girl, the easier she is to control. Blair and Serena's relationship is precarious, but unlike the relationships between the popular girls in other novels, the two were actually good friends. However, since Blair is given a taste of the notoriety that she has always envied in Serena, their friendship cannot be mended without Blair giving up her position of power to Serena. In Western culture, the only way to maintain power is to avoid showing any sign of vulnerability. Serena and Blair pick up on this, and their pursuit for meaning in their lives through popularity outshines their need to reconcile their friendship.

In most YA novels, the book ends with the mean girl and the protagonist having a moment of reconciliation. This scene shows that ultimately, friendship can conquer all problems that may come between two friends. However, Serena and Blair's relationship is not addressed at the end, and the happy ending instead comes from Serena and Blair both having boyfriends: Blair returns to her on-again-off-again boyfriend, Nate, and Serena begins dating a new love interest, Dan. While their relationship is not as icy, there are no heart-to-hearts or apologies. Their relationship continues as von Ziegesar writes an entire series based on the girls, but they end their first novel without reconnecting. While the lesson is intended to be that spreading rumors about your friends is not often a problem that can be solved with a simple apology, and often scorned friends are not interested in apologizing right away von Ziegsar's instead shows readers that belonging to a powerful man is far more important. Ultimately, attachment to men accounts for a higher social currency than female friendships.

Unlike novels meant for younger audiences, Cecily von Ziegesar is able to tackle conceptions of sexuality directly. The characters, both male and female, in *Gossip Girl* are hyper aware of the expectations placed on them by the patriarchal culture they exist in. While the author uses her work to draw attention to these prescribed roles, many characters comply with the expectations that are placed on them.

Readers do not get very far into the novel before sex is brought up. At the dinner party, Blair's mother's boyfriend, Cyrus Rose, approaches Nate and asks about his relationship with Blair. He specifically wonders whether the two have had sex, and advises Nate: "'Don't listen to a word that girl says. Girls like surprises. They want you to keep things interesting'" (8). Cyrus is voyeuristic, and feels entitled to know every intimate detail about Nate and Blair's relationship. Blaire openly dislikes her mother's boyfriend, but is powerless to attack him on anything other than being tacky and unfashionable. Cyrus has authority, both in the sense that he is an adult and the fact that he is one of the few people Blair cannot get the upper hand over. Here, he attempts to take away Blair's agency in her relationship. Rather than supporting Blair's decision not to have sex, Cyrus assumes that Nate is not taking enough control.

While Blair rejects Cyrus's ideas about the traditional roles of men and women in relationships, she ends up modeling the same ideas for readers. Blair is seen shortly after Cyrus's comments fawning over her boyfriend:

> When he put the sweater on, it looked so good on him that Blair wanted to scream and rip all her clothes off. But it seemed unattractive to scream in the heat of the moment-- more femme fatale than girl-who-gets-boy-- so Blair kept quiet, trying to remain fragile and baby-birdlike in Nate's arms (9).

Blair faces a disconnect between what she wants and the way she wants to be viewed by others. Despite the fact that sex is a personal decision, Blair sees it within the scope of other people's perceptions of her, and chooses to follow what is expected of her. Also interesting is the fact that Blair, despite being one of the most powerful characters in this novel, chooses to make herself small and delicate in the presence of her boyfriend. Again, she is subscribing to the role that is placed on her by traditional Western views of women's behavior. Blair, like many of the other female characters in this novel, is only assertive when men are not around. In her analysis of *Gossip Girl,* Lori Bindig suggests "In terms of hypersexuality, *Gossip Girl's* objectification of women and naturalization and glamorization of porn culture present a narrow, stereotypical construction of femininity that sacrifices female agency for male pleasure" (Bindig 105). Blair makes no effort to push back against cultural expectations. Instead, she performs sexuality in a way that makes her appear tame and demure, but most importantly, controllable. Blair suppresses her own feelings and instead enables Nate to interpret Blair's behavior as whatever he would like to see in her the most.

Across the room, Serena is also called upon to properly perform sexuality. After her arrival at the dinner party, Cyrus hugs Serena in an inappropriate way. In response, "Serena giggled, but she didn't flinch. She'd spent a lot of time in Europe in the past two years, and she was used to being hugged by harmless, horny European gropers who found her completely irresistible. She was a full-on groper magnet" (17). This moment efficiently shows readers several key facts about Serena. On the surface, readers are intended to learn that Serena is an experienced traveller, and probably the only member of her friend group who has travelled across Europe. This brings Serena a level of perceived maturity that her peers lack in the microcosm that is their social situation. However, this scene also shows readers that the proper way to deal with unwanted male attention, especially by older men, is to simply smile and ignore the situation. This also insinuates that old men have the right to touch girls without their permission, because they allegedly do not mean anything by it. This is another situation in which the agency of a young woman is compromised at the hands of an older man. Serena exhibits compliance in the face of unwanted sexual advances, because a patriarchal culture insists that women's bodies ultimately belong to the men around them.

By claiming that "She was a full-on groper magnet," the narrator is confirming for the reader that Serena is simply asking to be groped. This is a dangerous message that teenage readers have heard often: if a girl is sexually assaulted, it is the victim's fault, not the assaulter's. This is a small moment in the introduction of Serena's character, but it says less about Serena than it does about the environment that she exists in. Neither Serena, nor any of the female characters, can escape unwanted sexual advances, but readers are shown that these uncomfortable and potentially dangerous situations should be handled gently by showing submissiveness. Readers see these characters as glamorous role models, and it is not outside the realm of possibility that they will recreate behaviors modeled by Blair and Serena, creating a hazardous mindset for young readers.

The female characters in *Gossip Girl* express traditional feminine sexuality in their everyday lives, even when there are no men around. The male gaze is ever-present in their lives, especially because they often perceive themselves as sexual objects for men. Commenting on the uniforms at Constance Billard, the narrator explains: "All of the seniors were wearing the same old navy blue wool skirts they'd been wearing since sixth grade. They'd grown so much their skirts were extremely short. The shorter the skirt, the cooler the girl" (45). None of the girls who attend Constance Billard lack the money to buy new uniforms every year. The students' desire for progressively shorter skirts as they age is one that may resonate with many young readers. Wearing shorter skirts is often a sign of growing up and asserting one's independent style. However, this calls attention to the question of *why* girls lust after short skirts-- they are an expression both of self and of sexuality. This expression of sexuality is not necessarily even a conscious one, but one that has been indoctrinated into girls through every form of media, including the *Gossip Girl* series. The idea that shorter skirts mean cooler girls perpetuates the importance performing sexuality within a socially acceptable context (here, a Catholic school uniform).

For the characters in the novel, one's appearance is highly valued. The sexualization of school uniforms shows two very different types of control: control over one's fashion choices, and the control that a male-dominated culture has on said fashion choices. In her analysis, Amy Patte claims "*Gossip Girl* instills us with a certain awareness of the power of self-display, which, with certain appropriate purchases and attitude, can place us on a track running parallel to that of the series characters" (Patte 167). Here, Patte suggests that because the characters pay so much attention to perfecting their look, readers may follow suit. Therefore, female characters following expectations for how men would most likely want them to dress can have a negative effect on readers who may choose to imitate this behavior.

Even the characters who claim to exist outside the realm of Blair and Serena still feel the pressures of femininity. Vanessa is a character who prides herself on being aggressively unpopular and unfeminine. However, when thinking about the boy she is interested in, she forgets her disconnect between herself and the other girls: "Vanessa hugged herself. Just thinking about Dan made her feel like she had to pee. Under that shaved head and that impossible black turtleneck, she was just a girl. Face it: we're all the same" (58). As often as the girls in *Gossip Girl* are pitted against each other, the narrator insists that girls are all the same. While this could potentially be a positive message reminding readers that girls do not need to push each other away, the narrator insists that girls are the same because they all want to chase boys. Boys are a constant problem for the female characters in this novel, but the author presents them as a necessary evil. Teenaged readers are newly interested in boys, but the narrator presents them as the primary interest of the characters.

Though the focus of the novel is on the female characters, sex is also explored through the boys within Blair and Serena's social circle. Though the focus of this chapter is only on the first book of the *Gossip Girl* series, it should be noted that Chuck becomes a fan favorite throughout the run of the book and TV series. Few, if any, of the men in *Gossip Girl* are examples of the type of men that young women should be encouraged to spend their time with, but Chuck is particularly questionable. Chuck is extremely wealthy, and firmly believes that he deserves anything he wants, including girls. The narrator recounts:

> Once, at a party in ninth grade, Chuck had hidden in a guest bedroom closet for two hours, waiting to crawl into bed with Kati Farkas, who was so drunk she kept throwing up in her sleep. Chuck didn't even mind. He just got in bed with her. He was completely unshakeable when it came to girls (14).

Chuck's flippancy toward consent and predatory qualities make Chuck dangerous, but he is instead characterized as "unshakeable." Chuck's behavior mirrors an animal stalking its prey.

While it is unclear what Chuck did after crawling into bed with Kati, the actions and experiences of his character throughout the novel imply that Chuck would likely follow through with any sexual intentions he has. While "unshakable" can mean that it is nearly impossible to get rid of Chuck (which is also seemingly true), the narrator uses it in a way that makes Chuck seem cool and confident. Since confidence is something that many teenagers lack, Chuck's confidence makes him seem mature and interesting, despite his negative intentions.

Later, Chuck finds Serena at a hotel bar after Blair abandons her. He invites her upstairs to his family's suite, where Chuck, Blair, Serena and their friends often party together. Serena is upset because Blair no longer wants to be her friend, but Chuck's intentions are not to comfort her. Serena asks:

> 'We don't have to do anything, okay? Let's just hang out on the couch and watch *Dirty Dancing*. You know, like girls.'
>
> Chuck crawled towards Serena on his hands and knees until he was looming over her and she was pinned beneath him. 'But I'm not a girl,' he said. He lowered his face to hers, and began to kiss her. His mouth tasted like peanuts (131).

Chuck is not interested in Serena as his friend, but as an object. This is to be expected, however, because it seems impossible for Chuck to look at a female character in a non-sexual way. Chuck's behaviors are normalized when he asserts that he is not a girl. This is an obvious fact, but implies that only girls are capable of spending time with friends platonically. His body language is a key factor in his statement: he looms over Serena and places himself in a physically dominant position. Chuck is insinuating that not only is he a man, and therefore sexual, but that *because* he is not a girl, the two are incapable of being nonsexual together. Instead, his maleness is dominant, and Serena should be willing to give Chuck what he wants. Her consent is less important to him than the fact that he is a man.

Chuck is not the only negative male role model in the book. Nate, Blair's boyfriend, is hardly an ideal suitor for any reader. However, the type of masculinity he performs is different than Chuck's. Nate lacks Chuck's confidence, and instead of always speaking his mind, Nate tends to keep to himself: "Poor Nate was always on the verge of saying how he really felt, but he didn't want to make a scene or say something he might regret later" (20). Men are not expected to be connected to their emotions. The key conflict between Nate, Serena, and Blair could have easily been solved if Nate simply admitted to Blair that he had feelings for Serena. Nate, however, is afraid to express his emotions because of the societal pressures he feels to keep to himself.

Despite masculinity stifling his self-expression, Nate is not a sympathetic character. Nate secretly has sex with Serena, though he never tells Blair. He knows this fact will hurt his relationship with Blair, and worries that it will hinder his chances of having sex with her. After Blair sends him a romantic email and tells him that she would like to lose her virginity to him, he thinks: "It was only Wednesday. Was it possible that Blair could remain ignorant about him and Serena until Friday, even though she was in school with Serena every day and they were best friends and told each other everything?" (77). Not only is Nate completely ignorant of the fact that Serena and Blair are no longer on speaking terms, Nate's only concern is whether he can have sex with Blair before she finds out his secret. Nate knows what he is doing is wrong, but prioritizes sex over his girlfriend's feelings.

When he does confess to Blair, the two break up: "Blair threw the quilt off her shoulders and stood up. 'I knew it!' she shouted. 'Who *hasn't* had sex with Serena? That nasty, slutty *bitch*!" (138). Blair unwraps herself, and through this comes out of her cocoon. She is finally able to stand up to her boyfriend and take control of the situation. However, Blair's response is important, because while she does end up breaking up with Nate, she blames Serena for their relationship's downfall. Though both Serena and Nate were participants, the sex was Serena's fault. Blair notices Nate's feelings for Serena all along, but when she learns that they are sexual, it becomes an issue. Readers see that having sex is an action that negatively affects the way that other people view you.

Nate's response to the situation, however, reveals how little he cares for Blair: "Nate grabbed his jeans, shirt, and shoes and headed for the front door. He could hardly wait for that burrito" (139). Like the rest of the male characters in this novel, Nate is completely callous toward Blair's feelings. While Blair is left to suffer with her hurt feelings for much of the rest of the narrative, Nate is unfazed and thinking about satisfying himself through food since he was unsatisfied with sex. Blair, in her quilt, was wrapped up like a burrito. Nate's ability to fill is desire with food is a testament to how little value he places on women. While we are introduced to Nate as a character who is not allowed to express his feelings, throughout his storyline readers learn that Nate simply does not *need* to be emotional, because he is a man who can navigate this drama unscathed.

Throughout the narrative, sex is presented as dangerous, most often because it ruins relationships. However, the frequency in which characters have sex implies that it is necessary for the teenagers in this novel to be sexually active in order to have significant others. Sara Day explains the difficult relationship of sex and love in young adult novels: "the more prevalent model of adolescent women's engagement with love and sex still tends to privilege traditional warnings against sexual behavior even as it emphasizes the importance of romance in young girls' lives" (Day 66). Girls are taught to be sexually attractive so that boys will want to date them, while simultaneously being told that sex is harmful to them. Despite most characters in *Gossip Girl* being sexually active, there is no mention of a female orgasm in any of the numerous mentions of sex. The women in this novel do not know their bodies, and see sex as a service to men in return for climbing the social ladder. This is a confusing message that women face in their daily lives, one that this novel is incapable of negotiating. Readers are confronted with one of the many contradictions upheld in the patriarchal culture: women must simultaneously be sexual objects for pleasure while somehow still avoiding sex.

Because of the artificiality of the world they live in, the female characters in *Gossip Girl* often relate their lives to books and movies. In the beginning of the novel, Blair's romantic side is immediately put on display when the narrator divulges that she secretly sewed a small gold heart into the sleeve of a cashmere sweater that she gives him as a gift, "so that Nate would always be wearing her heart on his sleeve. Blair liked to think of herself as a hopeless romantic in the style of old movie actresses like Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe" (8). The characters in the novel interpret their life like movie characters. Many of the issues in their lives are relatively inconsequential, but the characters augment their problems in order to make them more dramatic. The characters themselves feel more comfortable in a situation where they are fictionalized. There is not a lot of guidance available to these teenagers, the parents are mostly hands-off and are dealing with the same problems of gossip and relationships that their teenagers are facing. Like many teenagers, then, the characters look toward media, using classic examples of movie stars and film to make their problems seem not only more dramatic but more romantic. They are desperately seeking a happy ending and for things to fall into place. Their craving to replicate the artificial is part of what makes these characters human and relatable. Blair, like many teenagers, especially those reading fictional novels, is searching for an escape and an easily obtainable resolution.

The lives and problems of the characters within *Gossip Girl* are largely made up and based on rumor. It seems strange to talk about artificiality within a work of fiction, but for the young readers of novels like this one, the drama feels very real. Furthermore, it makes sense that a novel with “gossip” in the title addresses the alternate reality that a culture of rumors creates. While all of the characters face negative gossip about themselves, no one is quite as affected as Serena van der Woodsen.

After returning from boarding school to re-enroll at Constance Billard for her senior year, Serena’s identity is created entirely by the people around her. The first description that readers are given of Serena is that “She was the girl every boy wants and every girl wants to be” (17). From the instant that Serena enters the narrative, the readers have an idea of who they think she should be, most likely grappled from the popular girls they know in their own lives. This allows von Ziegesar to create an iconic character with minimal effort. Serena’s role throughout much of the story is to be an impossibly beautiful frame for characters to pin rumors to.

Serena is unusually passive when it comes to the lies being spread about her. Students at both Riverside Prep and Constance Billard decide that Serena was kicked out of boarding school for a drug addiction, a teen pregnancy, and having too much sex, but she chooses neither to defend herself nor strike back (44-45). Serena has spent her childhood and adolescence relying completely on what others believe her to be-- through her beauty, her social circle, and her family name-- and often seems to just be waiting for the tide to turn in her favor again.

Serena’s peers, despite her extended absence, are also still used to her being an important figure in the school. At the end of the school day, students at Constance Billard all rush to make it to their many after-school (college application building) activities, but, “Out of habit, they paused for half a second to say hello to Serena, because ever since they could remember, to be seen talking to Serena van der Woodsen was to be *seen*” (85). Despite the negative rumors about her, students still gravitate toward Serena. Serena is objectified just as much by her peers as she is by men who sexualize her, and she becomes less of a person and more of a designer accessory.

For much of the novel, Serena simply accepts this fate and tries to fall gracefully into her former role. However, Serena is back at Constance Billard not because of sex or drugs or anything worth gossiping about, but rather because her grades were falling and she opted to stay in Europe rather than attend the first week of classes at her school. Unfortunately, this makes Serena fall behind, and while all of her classmates are involved in college prep to smoothly glide from private school to the Ivy League, Serena has nothing to do. Serena is faced with being lonely for the first time: “Serena thought about entering the park at Eighty-ninth Street and sitting down for a while to kill time before the play rehearsal. But alone? What would she do, people-watch? She had always been one of those people everyone *else* watches. So she went home” (86). In this scene, Serena is actively recognizing herself as an object. As the popular girl, she is constantly under the scrutiny of others. Growing up this way, Serena is used to having her perceived personality made up of the traits that people choose to project on her. In this way, Serena is the ideal woman for modern patriarchal culture, because she does not know how to behave when she is *not* objectified. If she is not being watched, she begins to feel purposeless.

Serena needs people. She has always learned to build her personality based on what others see in her, but without attention she does not know who she is. Forced to come to terms with the rejection of her friends, “Serena hugged herself, warding off the strange feeling that had been stalking her since she’d come back to the city. For the first time in her entire life, she felt left out" (97). Serena became the important person that she used to be by leaving others out. Creating a dichotomy of popular and unpopular creates a hierarchy, upon which she could easily place herself on the top. Instead of the traditional trope of the mean girl secretly having a unique personality outside of popularity, Serena must *create* her own personality for the first time, without the outside influence of her friends and peers.

Even those that do not necessarily value Serena's popularity create versions of her in their heads, based on what they hope she will be. Dan is Serena's love interest in *Gossip Girl.* He is a moody poet who claims that the popular girls at Constance Billard mean nothing to him, despite being obsessed with Serena. While Dan does not believe in gossip, he is equally guilty in fantasizing about his personally curated idea of Serena. Some of his ideas are fairly romantic, believing: "She wouldn't care if she had to give up her trust fund and her great-grandmother's diamonds. Serena would be willing to live in squalor if it mean she could be with Dan" (50). Dan gives Serena more personality and morality than many of the characters in *Gossip Girl* actually have. He discusses living in a cheap boho apartment and discussing literature together (50). Serena is given the most personality through Dan than through any other character, despite him knowing the least about her. However, it is impossible for the reader to tell whether the personality that she develops after meeting Dan is actually her own, or if she simply becomes artistic because it is what her love interest wants from her. Serena is skilled in adapting herself to fit in different environments, and more specifically, with different men. While Serena may seem to come into her own with Dan, it is likely that Serena still does not know who she is.

Dan believes so deeply that Serena is secretly artistic and interesting that he is offended when Chuck and his friends talk about her supposed drug-fueled sexual encounters that rumors suggest she partook in. Later, when the two finally become a couple, Dan considers all of the rumors he heard about his new girlfriend: “No, Dan couldn’t imagine her doing any of the things Chuck had accused her of. The only thing he could imagine her doing was kissing him. But there was time for that later” (199). Dan’s romantic ideals of Serena turn judgmental as soon as sex is brought into the conversation. This returns us to the expectations of female sexuality that characters are faced with in this novel: Serena is allowed to be sexual, but not sexually active. Otherwise, she runs the risk of ruining Dan’s fantasy that she slid so easily into. Readers know that Serena has had sex, but it is unclear just how often or with how many partners. Despite the positive message that one should learn to build their own personality without a focus on popularity, Dan makes it clear that some aspects of a woman’s personality, like being sexual, are still unwanted.

However, even after Serena gains a personality, it remains only a superficial layer placed over her character. Serena grew up alongside Blair and her friends, girls who think that a teen charity ball for peregrine falcons is “‘as good a cause as any. We wanted something that wasn’t too heavy to start the season off’” (125). This privileged view of charity is one that Serena and her wealthy family have been surrounded by their entire lives. After the ball, GossipGirl.net reports: “*S* handing a black Kate Spade tote bag to a homeless man on the steps of the Met” (200). While this is intended to be a characterizing moment for Serena, it shows how much of a disconnect remains between her and the real world. Giving away her expensive party favor is ultimately an empty gesture compared to the fact that Serena could have easily helped the homeless man out with a meal or money. Creating this dissonance between the person Serena thinks she has become and the background she continues to carry with her shows that understanding one’s place in the world is an ongoing and complex process, one that cannot be accomplished simply by finding new friends.

Similar to the way that Serena's gift of a Kate Spade bag to a homeless person was made with the best intentions, *Gossip Girl* does its best to tell a captivating story about powerful teenagers living in New York City. However, despite the power that Blair and Serena have over their classmates, the two ultimately have little to no control over their sexuality and the way they are perceived by men and the male-dominated culture.

Conclusion

Growing up, I loved reading books about mean girls and cliques. The stories allowed me to live a thrilling life full of gossip without having to face any real repercussions. When I had my own troubles among my friends, it was easy to impose myself on the situations taking place in the novels. These were not books to analyze, not that I really knew how at the time that I was reading, but books to enjoy and ultimately learn from. This is why it felt important for me to return to the stories I loved and figure out what I *actually* had learned from them, not just coping mechanisms from dealing with real-life mean girls (who were, of course, ultimately less harmful and more complex than the ones in books).

At first, I intended to revisit *Blubber, The Clique,* and *Gossip Girl* because I do not believe they get enough credit as children's literature. I still believe that these books have more value than their pink loopy text and covers with pictures of shoes and shopping bags may leave one to believe. I also intended to defend the mean girl, as it has been a common theme throughout my academic writing to stick up for the antagonist of the story—not because I feel they did nothing wrong, but because I know that there is always a motive. I feel the same way about mean girls, but over the course of writing this thesis I have come to the conclusion that the motive for meanness is not simply the cruel and catty "nature" of girls, but instead is the invisible hands of a male-dominated culture that guide our thinking.

In the United States, we tend to dislike aggressive women unless they are a character in some form of media. We love dominant and independent women in movies, T.V., and chick lit, but only if we can satisfactorily call them "bitches," and as long as their antics stay in the realm of the imagination. When an aggressive woman tries to advance in the real world, she faces a completely different audience: crowds of people accusing her of being shrill, demanding, and cold.

The mean girls in teen novels are leaders. They often use less-than-moral strategies to obtain and keep their power, and they are able to hold this power over large bodies of students. They set trends, create cultural norms, and strategize their every move. Essentially, they act the way we expect men to behave. We are conditioned to hate the mean girl because the mean girl pushes against the patriarchal values we uphold in the U.S.

In reality, we saw witnessed this in the 2016 presidential election. Opponents and their supporters criticized Hilary Clinton, an extremely qualified and experienced stateswoman, because she was “cold,” “shrill,” or simply a “bitch.” Countless news reports and think pieces criticized her outfits, the way she wore her hair, and wondered idly why she felt the need to yell so much. In the end, she lost to a business owner, one who was far less educated, far less qualified, and far less prepared for the role, but was ultimately a man.

Of course the election of any public figure is complicated, and there are many issues that cause people to win and lose elections. However, it takes very little analysis of news cycles to see that through the election, Americans proved, among other things, that independence and control are only acceptable in women if that woman still adheres to patriarchal values, meaning she is pretty and young and cares what men think of her body. In this way, the woman only has the illusion of control, but is still within the lines of the culturally traditional role of women.

Novels that feature the mean girl tend to be progressive in some aspects. While the characters in these books tend to make themselves more appealing for boys, the boys tend to be minor background characters, and the main plotline focuses on the relationships between young women. For a demographic based in the tween through teen audiences, it makes sense that there is a desire for romance. Most of the readers themselves are interested in romantic partners to some degree, but are more concerned with the drama between their friends and classmates.

It is obvious but incredibly important to point out that all of these novels focus on the lives of girls. The characters are all young women, and the conflicts are of the type that most girls will encounter at some point in their social lives. It is essential for girls to feel represented in the literature they read—not as passive objects but as dynamic, interesting characters. The novels also all feature girls in leadership roles, which can be difficult for girls and even women to obtain in their own lives. Young readers especially use the stories they consume to understand themselves and their place in the world, and it is important that young women feel represented in a positive way.

However, as we have uncovered, the mean girl novel is not without its flaws. These novels often only feature white, upper- and middle-class girls, who are presented as traditionally beautiful. Few readers are able to fully identify with the readers, and the complete lack of characters of color throughout most of the novels shows a desperate need for diversity in the genre.

Though many of the narratives attempt to subvert the traditional roles of women, much of the narrative is shadowed in patriarchal beliefs. A culture that dislikes powerful women will make a character that turns readers against her power by making her materialistic and vain. Therefore, implying that the good girl always comes out on top (despite, as we have seen, rarely being good herself) means that the powerful woman is someone to avoid, and one who does not deserve to have control.

Mean girl novels, especially the ones examined here, represent a need for control among readers. Though a lot of progress has been made in the advancement of women in the United

States, there is still a far way to go. From a young age, girls feel and understand their vulnerability in their culture, which is perhaps why the mean girl is so popular. Sure, she can be rude, manipulative, and superficial, but at her very core she is powerful. The insecurity that all young girls feel at some point, combined with the power that girls pine for, creates an enticing character that readers (myself included) ultimately cannot get enough of.

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