

Multiple Ways of Playing Serena and Blair: How *Gossip Girl* Revises the Role of Nancy
Drew for a New Generation of Desiring-Machines

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies on Cecily von Ziegesar's series *Gossip Girl* fail to explain the functionality of the series for the actual readers. Therefore, a discussion of the relationship between reader and text is necessary. By explaining from a literary perspective how reader and text interact, we can better understand why teen girls want to read the series and the exchanges that occur between the books and the readers. An exploration of how *Gossip Girl* relates to its series predecessors, like *Nancy Drew*, demonstrates how the popularity of *Gossip Girl* is not unique, but rather fits in with the established series pattern while receiving the same harsh criticism. As a result of analyzing the "bad" reputation *Gossip Girl* has earned, we can explicate how the series is currently seen to operate for the reader, questions left open when simply looking at series books historically. This exploration of the books as carriers of ideology examines how and if readers are invited to participate in a relationship with the text.

However, simple reader-response theories only replicate a static relationship between reader and text. By also using a Deleuzo-Guattarian approach to the series, an understanding of how *Gossip Girl* acts as an "apparatus of capture" built on social conditions while still allowing the reader minimal agency for the channeling of energy/desiring flows can be found. These approaches work in conjunction in order to address the engagement readers experience with the *Gossip Girl* texts, which, in turn, help elucidate the phenomenon associated with von Ziegesar's books.

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Introduction: The Infamous *Gossip Girl* Series

Cecily von Ziegesar's *New York Times* bestselling series *Gossip Girl* continues to draw attention as adolescent girls devour all twelve books in the *Gossip Girl* series and the spin-off *It Girl* and *The Carlyles* books. As of April 2007, 4.5 million copies of the series were in print (Maughan 21), and on May 8, 2005, book seven in the *Gossip Girl* series *Nobody Does it Better* appeared on the *New York Times* children's best-seller list (Nussbaum, par. 3), attesting to the success of 17th Street Productions' marketing research and production (Pattee 155). Naugle argues in her thesis "Nobody Does It Better: How Cecily von Ziegesar's Controversial Novel Series 'Gossip Girl' Spawned the Popularity of Teen Chick Lit," "Statistics alone are evidence that the series is culturally significant to the Millennials, (the preferred title given to the generation of individuals born between 1982 and 2000, as endorsed by generational sociologists and authors, Neil Howe and William Strauss)" (5).

However, because of the overtly sexual content, over-the-top consumerism, and apparent lack of moral values, considerable criticism by adults also marks this series. In 2006, the series was ranked # 2 on the American Library Association's list of most challenged books of the year. Linda Shrieves, while discussing the controversy over the popular books in *The Standard Times*, cites psychiatrist Susan Linn's concern that the *Gossip Girl* series is one more place readers are exposed to casual attitudes towards sex (B1). Marjory Allen in her book *What Are Little Girls Made Of? : A Guide to Female Role Models in Children's Books* explains, "Many factors influence children as they grow and develop, especially the books they read and have read to them. These stories influence the way they see the world and one another" (3). The controversy surrounding von Ziegesar's books springs from the idea that literary characters act as role models for readers, and parents and many literary organizations don't see the characters in the *Gossip Girl* series as examples to emulate.

Despite negative criticism and worry that von Ziegesar's characters might act as exemplars for adolescent female readers, proponents of the books say that they are happy that many hesitant readers are reading at all. One parent of an adolescent reader of the

Gossip Girl books explained that after her daughter began to read the series, “The once reluctant reader is now curling up with books—not just the *Gossip Girl* series but a wide variety of fare” (Shrieves B1). Maddy Zollo, an 18-year old reader of the books, addresses concerns over the idea that the series’ characters could act as role models, saying the books are “so ‘over the top’ that it’s hard to take [the characters’] exploits seriously” (B1). Editorial director for Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, the publisher of the *Gossip Girl* series, Cindy Eagan contends that readers might be drawn to the books because of the serious issues discussed. She explains, “‘Cecily is being responsible and honest in these books because she is writing about what she saw all around her in that environment’” (Maughan 21).

The controversial series in question concerns the world of New York City’s Upper East Side teenage “chosen ones.” Each novel in the series covers a short span of time, usually less than a month, and chapters switch character focus throughout, but mainly demonstrate the social conflicts of Blair Waldorf and Serena van der Woodsen. The narrative point-of-view is mostly from an omniscient third-person perspective, although the first-person perspective of gossip blogger Gossip Girl interjects to provide summary, commentary, and intrigue in the format of her website, gossipgirl.net. Gossip Girl’s sarcastic comments are also included intermittently throughout the main text and seem to frame her as the narrator, although discrepancies remain between what the omniscient narrator reports throughout the chapters and what is reported on the blog, bringing into question the true identity of the narrator. For instance, in the opening pages of the *Gossip Girl* prequel, *It Had to be You*, Gossip Girl says in her blog:

An epic such as this requires an observant, quick-witted scribe. That would be me, since I was at the scene of every crime, and I happen to have an impeccable eye for the most outrageous details. So sit back while I unravel the past and reveal everyone’s secrets, because I know everything, and what I don’t know I’ll invent elaborately. (von Ziegesar, *It Had to be You* 2)

However, what the reader has already been informed of and what Gossip Girl later reports in her blog don’t always match up. For example, in the prequel, the reader has known from the beginning of the development of Vanessa’s creative literary magazine

Rancor that Dan Humphrey is the anonymous poet featured. However, late in the text, Gossip Girl writes in her blog about the “Anonymous” poet, “Best of all they are written by a girl, *about* a girl” (297).

Despite the discrepancies in narration, part of the novels’ appeal is the immediacy of the action of the text. The first novel of the series starts in the middle of the action as Serena returns mysteriously from boarding school. Naugle explains that this format of providing little back story but revealing straightforwardly the characters’ motivations and thoughts makes the novels and characters “at once mysterious and transparent” (33).

The *Gossip Girl* series utilizes characteristics of many previously established young adult literary genres. For one, von Ziegesar’s novels fit the general qualities of novels of adolescence. White explains, “The typical pattern of the novel of adolescence is said to be estrangement from the social environment, conflict with parents, disillusionment in love, departure from home, and encounters with different people and ideas” (3). The novel of adolescence differs from a Bildungsroman and the initiation story because the protagonist is younger and more sheltered; therefore, he or she does not really question society or leave in pursuit of personal growth, and thus fails “to gain knowledge or undergo the change of character” most often depicted in the previously mentioned novel plot conventions (13). Novels of adolescence, including the *Gossip Girl* books, stress conflict because, as White describes, “Many adolescent protagonists [like many of their readers] clash with society over their reluctance to undergo a lengthy period of low status wherein they are separated from children and adults and denied the privileges of either” (14).

Similarly, this plot conflict is reminiscent of the problem novel genre developed in the 1960s. Decisions about and references to drugs, alcohol, sex, parental problems, and difficulties with friends and reputations make up the main conflicts of the text. However, while problem novels toil over these decisions and dilemmas, the *Gossip Girl* series always seems to provide fairly quick solutions associated with blasé attitudes, which spawn much of the criticism by adults.

Perhaps, though, the series seems most reminiscent of the chick lit genre. Smith defines the chick lit genre as one that “consists of heroine-centered narratives that focus on the trials and tribulations of their individual protagonists” (2). Naugle agrees that

Gossip Girl is quite reminiscent of the chick lit genre and contends that von Ziegesar's original series actually established the genre of teen chick lit, which embodies many other characteristics of the adult version of the genre but focuses on teen protagonists and their conflicts rather than adult women.

Regardless of its categorization, the *Gossip Girl* series with its condemnation by many adults and popularity with teen readers begs further investigation simply because this is what many teens are reading. Scholars have already noted the importance of *Gossip Girl* through their attention to the series: the trend in popularity has been noted, the content analyzed for its commercial appeal and consumerist themes, and the teen chick lit genre has arguably been developed from it (Waters; Pattee; Naugle). However, these studies, although clearly helpful in understanding the *Gossip Girl* phenomenon, fail to explain the functionality of the series for the actual readers. Therefore, a discussion of the relationship between reader and text is necessary. By explaining from a literary perspective how reader and text interact, we can better understand why teen girls want to read the series and the exchanges that occur between the books and the readers. To discern this, I will explore the extent that these books act as carriers of ideology, providing a means of socialization for readers, and the degree to which readers are invited into a participatory and empowered relationship with the text.

To begin this study, in section one, "Historical Perspectives: The Red Carpet Path of Series Books Leads to *Gossip Girl* Vogue," I will examine how the *Gossip Girl* books function relative to their historical series predecessors. By comparing *Gossip Girl* with *The Nancy Drew Mysteries*, specifically, I will demonstrate how series elements, such as "celebrity" protagonists starring in quick-paced texts, inevitably lead certain series to become fashionable with readers. This historical perspective will shed light on how series books over time have continued to function for readers and demonstrate how the *Gossip Girl* phenomenon is not extraordinary. Section two, "Not Your Average Nancy Drew: The "Bad" Reputation of the *Gossip Girl* Series," will comment on the ideologies and cultural content that separate *Gossip Girl* from its predecessors like Nancy Drew. The inclusion of sex, drug use, and consumerism coupled with blasé attitudes demonstrates a shift in series books' content, which has given rise to criticism by reader-response theorists and parents alike. Never would Nancy Drew engage in smoking marijuana,

drinking cocktails while underage, or having sex in dressing rooms! This section illuminates how *Gossip Girl* is perceived to function, and, if reading-response critics are correct, what this could mean for the reader.

Although consideration of these critiques is important in understanding the series and how critics see the series working, we are left with limited answers about why teen girls continue to participate in the text-reader exchange with the books. Therefore, by looking through a Deleuzo-Guattarian lens in section three, “The World of *Gossip Girl*: An Apparatus of Capture,” I will explore how *Gossip Girl* acts as an “Apparatus of Capture” built on social conditions while still allowing the reader minimal agency for the channeling of energy/desiring flows. In the end, this explanation will offer an understanding of the participatory interactions readers engage in with the texts and how these relationships can be empowering. These sections will work in conjunction in order to address the engagement readers experience with the *Gossip Girl* texts, which, in turn, will help elucidate the phenomenon associated with von Ziegesar’s books.

Part 1-Historical Perspectives: The Red Carpet Path of Series Books Leads to *Gossip Girl* Vogue

To begin to understand the functionality of the *Gossip Girl* series for readers, an overview of the development of series books and *Gossip Girl*’s relation to these books is necessary. By understanding how von Ziegesar’s books fit, in many ways, into the established pattern, we can begin to see that historically speaking the popularity of this series is not unique. Instead, *Gossip Girl* builds on a familiar pattern with which readers have previously connected. Therefore, through this historical perspective, it becomes evident that the functionality of *Gossip Girl* is in large part the same as the story of the series book. For one, like the series pattern, criticism of this contemporary series is not exclusive to the modern texts.

Series books, like the books about Nancy Drew, The Bobbsey Twins, *Sweet Valley High*, and, more recently, *Gossip Girl*, have long been associated with words like “vulgar,” “pernicious,” “trashy” and “injurious” (Soderbergh 866). Lucy Kinloch even went so far as to deem series books, also known as formula fiction, a ““menace to good reading”” (Bierbaum 94). Historically, educators and librarians did not like series books,

which Hallowell defines as ““books written in sequence about a central character and by one person, or at least under one person’s signature”” (Bierbaum 101n), because they believed the texts, which flooded the market, consisted of poor quality prose and sensationalism (Soderbergh 865). Despite this negative criticism, *The Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* is one such series that blossomed from the development of formula fiction for girls and which continues to show great longevity as new books in the series continue to be penned, now under the title of *The Nancy Drew Files*.

Nancy Drew, who first hit the market in 1930, is not alone in her popularity with formula fiction readers today. More recently, in 2002, Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl* series hit bookstore shelves. Interestingly, these series, which seem remarkably different from each other at first glance, especially relating to plot, show striking similarities as well. However, while Inness suggests that the formulaic plots are what bind series books together through time, in the case of *Nancy Drew* and *Gossip Girl*, it is something else entirely. In essence, despite their differences, the similarities between *The Nancy Drew Mysteries* and the *Gossip Girl* series help to illuminate how series books continue to function for the reader despite continued criticism by adults.

Peter Soderbergh explains in his essay “The Stratemeyer Strain: Education and the Juvenile Series Book, 1900-1973” that experts since the 1890s believed that a child’s character was a result, in part, of what he read. He writes,

[Character] was a complex issue, but no true expert on boyhood or girlhood doubted that what a child read was a vital key to what he became. ‘That the influence of reading on character is one of the most powerful is granted by every high-minded person. . . ,’ the editor of *Journeys Through Bookland* stated in 1909. ‘We are what we read.’ (864)

With this belief in mind, reading experts thought this “poisonous” reading material could be blamed for children’s immoral acts, and, therefore, if children were not given access to these “vulgar” series, character would be the better for it (Bierbaum 95).

However, child readers since the dawn of the series book have disagreed, as evidenced by the high number of sales for books like those produced by the Stratemeyer Syndicate, the creator of popular series like Nancy Drew, The Bobbsey Twins, The Hardy Boys, and many others. Jennifer Armstrong, a former ghost writer for the *Sweet*

Valley High Series, notes that mass-market series books have to meet sales, or the books are dropped, and to do this, the series need to obey the “rules of the marketplace,” meaning kids have to want to read them (52). Although “[i]n 1965, Ruth Viguers condemned series books as ‘merely commercial ventures [whose] easy availability has, in fact, done harm in keeping children from discovering books that have lasting values,’” Jane Hannigan points out that the popularity of early series books, perhaps, comes from the fact that nothing else specifically written with a child’s reading tastes and desires in mind was available. In other words, Hannigan posits that “books that have lasting values” weren’t tempting enough to children to inspire mass market sales, although this is clearly debatable (Deane 19, 9).

Despite harsh criticism by many adults, the series book has endured and morphed to continuously attract young readers to its pages, as well as critics who hope to explain the draw of this often discredited fiction. C.S. Ross observes that the continued publication and reading of formula fiction creates a “site where the lines of division between expert reader and pleasure reader are clearly drawn and can be readily investigated” (204). The investigation of series fiction and the critique of its reception by adults and children establish that series books, although often seeming like an overnight sensation because of publishers like the Stratemeyer Syndicate, were a natural progression in children’s literature with many historical precedents.

Children’s series books began with precursors like Jacob Abbott’s *Rollo* series in 1835 about a boy who went on adventures through Europe accompanied by adults who gave many preachy lectures (Inness 3). The original ten-volume set “served as a model for readers and also taught them practical skills” (Pflieger, par. 1). In volume two, *Rollo Learns to Read*, a “Notice to Parents” reads,

Parents find it very difficult to *employ* little children. "Mother, what shall I do?" and sometimes even, "Mother, what shall I do after I have done this?" are heard so often that they sometimes exhaust even maternal patience. These little volumes will, we hope, in some cases, provide an answer to the questions. The writer has endeavored to make them such that children would take an interest in reading them to themselves, and to

their younger brothers and sisters, and in repeating them to one another.
(Pflieger)

The intention of the books was to entertain and to serve as a primer for developing readers, although the overt didacticism is clear when Rollo's father instructs, "'But no matter if you are tired of it. It is your duty to learn to read and you must do it, if it is hard'" (Pflieger). Along with Jacob Abbott, William Taylor Adams, Horatio Alger, and others wrote series primarily aimed at male readers. Male readership continued to dominate fiction for children in the second half of the nineteenth century as suggested by dime novels, which showed few depictions of girls (Inness 3). However, these dime novels, early series books, along with magazines like *St. Nicholas: A Magazine for Boys and Girls*, indicate a shift towards creating texts for an intended child reader.

In 1868, Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* was published and, as Beverly Clark explains, was the first to be marketed specifically to girls during a time when gender-segregated texts were beginning to be produced (105). However, even before *Little Women*, Martha Finley's Elsie Dinsmore books showed the "tame" adventures of a young lady beginning in 1867 and continuing until 1909, although this depiction of the "good good girl" was not a natural role model for modern female adolescent protagonists because of her blind faith in authority rather than a questioning of gender stereotypes (White 27). Nonetheless, the success of these books showed the potential of marketing toward girl consumers (Inness 4). These beginnings of series fiction, in general, and series fiction specifically for girls continued to flourish into the twentieth century. Sherrie Inness writes, "'The early years of the twentieth century saw . . . serial novels written for and about adolescent girls. From 1900 to 1917, literally dozens of new series emerged to chronicle the adventures of teenage heroines at school, at play, at work, and in what was invariably called "The Great Outdoors"' (5).

With the establishment of the series-formula-fiction-for-girls genre, clear characteristics of series books became obvious. For one, differences between series books and books in a series arose. Inness explains,

Series books are more apt to take place in a timeless world where the characters never grow older or only grow older in the most gradual fashion (think of Nancy Drew); in books in a series, the characters generally age

as real people do. The plots of series books are likely to be more formulaic than those of books in a series. In series books, characters are typically less fully developed, less rounded, than characters in books in series. (2)

Series books for girls usually center around a teenage girl, who, alone or with her friends, has a succession of adventures throughout the novel. This protagonist is “often superior to any girl in real life, whether that be stronger, more beautiful, or more intelligent” (3). No matter the challenging and dangerous circumstances the protagonist encounters, the heroine triumphs, as she is considered “tough as Teflon” (3), a description all-together timely with the mass marketing of Teflon in 1945.

The world in which this tough character exists, besides being timeless, should be full of intrigue, yet still seem recognizable to the reader (3). Each novel should be complete in itself and not rely on other novels in the series to supply background information (Deane 4). Brief descriptions of characters, setting, and relevant previous events appear in each book. The main market for the novels is children, so series books usually are relatively inexpensive. In addition, because the audience consists of only children and these books are not meant to be read by adults, the novels provide little or no “opportunity for adult supervision” (5). Inness explains, books of this ilk “[show] no sign of abating. The names of the heroines change; they drive different cars and pursue different adventures, but the plots are essentially formulaic. The leading character (with or without her pals) is remarkably capable, gorgeous, and far more intelligent than any adult” (1). In fact, series books not only show no signs of disappearing, they consistently are best-sellers in the children’s literature market (Deane 10). Paul Deane explains that even though librarians and adults continually devalue series book, they are read more often than the much fêted Newbery and Caldecott Award winners (27).

One such often-read series favorite was *The Nancy Drew Mysteries*, written under the penname Carolyn Keene. Along with other mystery series written in the 1930s, like the *Judy Bolton Series*, *Nancy Drew* was a commercial success. However, while Judy Bolton faded away from the spotlight in the 1960s, Nancy Drew continues to appear in new books, demonstrating that fans are still in love with this female detective. Sally Parry, in her article “The Secret of the Feminist Heroine: The Search for Values in Nancy

Drew and Judy Bolton,” explains that Nancy and Judy are able to succeed in their mystery cases because they see what other characters fail to see, even compared to male authority figures, providing a strong female role model for girls (145). As in other series books, Nancy alone, and sometimes with friends as unhelpful sidekicks, works through a sequence of adventures to come out on top. She doesn’t age, except for the fact that in later books her age was changed from sixteen to eighteen so that she was able to continue to drive her blue roadster in all states.

Deborah Siegel suggests that part of Nancy’s appeal during the time of economic hardship when the series was first published was its ostensible timelessness and sense of separation from the child reader, a characteristic of many series books. She quotes Arthur Pragal from his book *Rascal at Large or the Clui in the Old Nostalgia*:

‘[t]he books have an odd, timeless quality. . . .Like the land of Oz, Nancy Drew Country is in another time dimension, untouched by the outside world. The Depression came and went, followed by three wars, but they were passed unnoticed in Midwestern, suburban River Heights, where Nancy and her chums and their well-to-do country-clubbing parents live. Teen-agers all have new cars there. They buy unlimited pretty clothes, and they summer at fashionable resorts. They give lovely parties. . . . There was always plenty of gasoline for [Nancy’s] convertible. Hungry kids, shattered by the announcement of bubblegum rationing, drowned their sorrows in Nancy’s world. (76)’ (163)

While Judy Bolton is just an “ordinary young woman in a male-dominated society,” Nancy Drew is extraordinary (Parry 148). Her sense of timelessness, her independence, her freedom from social restraints (Nancy is never in school; if her car breaks down, there is always another to replace it; her father never forbids her to do anything and, instead, encourages her to travel for her detective work) place her in a world separate from mere mortals.

Siegel argues that the success of Nancy Drew stems from the “allure of the fantasy such readily available fiction promised” and the “escapist pleasures” the series offers (164). The *Gossip Girl* series functions much in the same way. While Nancy “feels she can go beyond the rules for ordinary people” (Parry 152), Blair and Serena in

Gossip Girl function in a world far from average because of the stardom money and prestige create for them. On the opening page of the first in the series, blogger Gossip Girl writes, addressing the reader, “Ever wonder what the lives of the chosen ones are really like?” (von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* 3). She then goes on to paint a picture of the exceptional world of New York’s Upper East Side, a world separate from the culture of the reader of the series:

Welcome to New York’s Upper East Side, where my friends and I live and go to school and play and sleep—sometimes with each other. We all live in huge apartments with our own bedrooms and bathrooms and phone lines. We have unlimited access to money and booze and whatever else we want, and our parents are rarely home, so we have tons of privacy. We’re smart, we’ve inherited classic good looks, we wear fantastic clothes, and we know how to party. (3)

If one were to remove the references to alcohol and sex, the above passage would seem fitting not only for Blair and Serena but Nancy Drew as well in regards to content, although the arrogant voice only fits *Gossip Girl*.

Lee Zacharias in “Nancy Drew, Ballbuster” writes, “[Nancy Drew’s] superiority is never overlooked; the newspapers accord her extensive coverage, and even the White House honors her with a luncheon” (1033-34). As with Nancy Drew, continuous updates about the “famous” Serena and Blair and events of the novels show how adults, celebrities, and publications make sure the girls are never overlooked. For instance, in book one, Serena is recognized by the *New York Times* Sunday Styles Section photographer while she is attending an art show. While being photographed with the artists, who upon first sight thought Serena “stunning,” Serena lands herself an exclusive photography shoot with the artists who plan to post her picture on all Transit Authority vehicles (von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* 90-91). Nancy Drew, Blair Waldorf, and Serena van der Woodsen are stars, celebrities of their own time periods.

Zacharias argues, “Nancy succeeds . . . because the reader wants to identify with her; she is an ever-contemporary projection and fulfillment of the reader. She is everything the reader is not and wishes to be” (1028). Blair and Serena fulfill the reader’s wish in the same way; Matt Freeman writes about *Gossip Girl* in *Reading Today*,

“the series becomes a glamorous fantasy, for most of us, about life among the mega-rich and mega-indulgent” (22). Readers want to project themselves into a world where they have the chance, for even just a few minutes, to feel what it is like to be Nancy Drew, Blair, or Serena and the power and fame these status positions hold. For one, these personalities come with handsome boys who hang on every word. Nancy has Ned Nickerson, a college student who at 6’2” embodies the all-around handsome athlete. In *Gossip Girl*, male characters like Nate Archibald and Chuck Bass flatter the female protagonists with attention. Nate is introduced as “one of those boys you look at and while you’re looking at them, you know they’re thinking *that girl can’t take her eyes off of me I’m so hot*” (von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* 8). His physical looks include “dark, sparkling green” eyes “with wavy brown hair streaked with golden blond from his summer on the ocean” (10). Chuck Bass is “handsome, after-shave commercial handsome” (13). By entering the lives of the beautiful protagonists, readers can share their handsome boyfriends, their prestigious lives, and their adventures, all without leaving home.

In addition to the series functioning as a means of wish-fulfillment, the books also act as a practical stepping stone for reluctant and struggling readers. Cadogan and Craig suggest in their book *You're a Brick, Angela!: A New Look at Girls' Fiction from 1839 to 1975* that the prose and style of series books like *Nancy Drew* and, implicitly, *Gossip Girl*, although they don't specifically address this contemporary series, allow readers to quickly engage with the text. They write, “The fast-moving styles of the Nancy Drew books obviously will appeal to readers who demand continuous sensation” (305). Readers easily devour short sentences, short paragraphs, and dialogue that advance the story (Deane 51-52). The conventional narrative style also allows readers who may already strain at basic comprehension to participate in the story world without battling confusing narration (65). Continuing series readers, as well, can feel comfortable with familiar characters even as brief descriptions of the characters are provided in each book (52). The fast pace continues to hook readers into reading the subsequent novel, as endings of the novels don't end in cliffhangers, but rather act as a preview for the upcoming text (53).

A sample from *Gossip Girl*'s first chapter indicates these writing techniques. Description is kept to a minimum, and even when it is used to provide concrete descriptions of the characters, it is relatively brief. Blair, the first main character the reader is introduced to, is described physically in four sentences; her character is left for the reader to discern through dialog and brief appositives interspersed throughout the action. The longest paragraph in chapter one consists of twelve lines. In addition to brevity, dialog moves the pace of the first chapter along quickly. From the start, the reader is engulfed by the *Gossip Girl* world: conflict is evident between Blair and her mother's boyfriend, Cyrus Rose; Blair debates and decides whether she is ready for sexual intercourse with her boyfriend Nate; and the reader is introduced to the important families of "Manhattan's Elite," all within five pages. Cadogan and Craig confirm that similar stylistic moves are evident in *Nancy Drew*, as well: "Description of any kind . . . is kept to a minimum; the stories are incessantly on the move, and the author's sentences are of the shortest possible length" (305). However, despite this fast pace, techniques such as repeating key ideas keep even readers who have trouble comprehending from falling behind. In *Gossip Girl*, once Serena van der Woodsen's character is introduced and described as having "dark, almost navy blue eyes," the reader is reminded of this detail twice more in the next nine pages (von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* 16-25).

In addition to straightforward writing style, both *Nancy Drew* and *Gossip Girl* move beyond obvious word choice to push the reader to use contextual evidence, which increases reading ability. Anne Scott MacLeod says of Nancy's diction, "The rigorously genteel diction is vintage Stratemeyer" (32). Nancy pushes young readers to move beyond colloquial slang into the language of adults. *Gossip Girl*, too, keeps adult-nuanced language in mind. Janet Malcolm explains, "[Von Ziegesar's] designated reader is an adolescent girl, but the reader she seems to have firmly in mind as she writes is a literate, even literary, adult" (116). This is evidenced from the beginning of the series when von Ziegesar uses a quote by Oscar Wilde as an epigraph, a reference many young readers might not fully comprehend. Despite these references and diction, the series book remains easily comprehended by adolescent readers without help from adults because the adult nuances are unnecessary in order to comprehend the plot or the characters.

Besides the clear appeal for reader role-play and the ease of reading, *Gossip Girl* and *The Nancy Drew Mysteries* tackle intriguing topics that end satisfyingly. Zacharias points out, “The Nancy stories tell us life is a mystery which can be solved” (1027). Although *Gossip Girl* is a sort of mystery in itself (Who is Gossip Girl exactly?), it doesn’t necessarily present life as a mystery to be solved as *Nancy Drew* does. Nonetheless, the endings tie the novel together for the reader and conclude on a positive note. For example, book one ends with “But now the brilliant lights and loud noises and steam rising from the grates at the corners gave her hope. In the darkness of the taxi, she reached for Dan’s hand at the same time he reached for hers./ She couldn’t wait to see what happened next”(von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* 199). All is left right in Serena’s world, and as when a mystery is solved in *The Nancy Drew* stories, all is left right for the reader. Endings like these reassure the reader that there is order in chaos and that life has a pattern (Zacharias 1027).

Despite the positive appeal that series fiction offers for readers, *The Nancy Drew Mysteries* and *Gossip Girl* series also depict negative traits, which critics have noted. Vandergrift in *Mosaics of Meaning: Enhancing the Intellectual Life of Young Adults through Story* writes that fiction has “an impact on the moral lives of young people” because it helps readers find their moral voices (159), and this idea scares adults who disagree with the messages found in series fiction. Naomi Wolf writes regarding *Gossip Girl*, “Carol Gilligan’s question about whether girls can have a ‘different voice’ has been answered—in a scary way,” and “The problem [with series like *Gossip Girl*] is a value system in which meanness rules, parents check out, conformity is everything and stressed-out adult values are presumed meaningful to teenagers.” What readers have loved about the *Gossip Girl* series, for one, is the independence of the characters. Parents never get in the way of desires, even if those desires do center around conformity and meanness. In *Nancy Drew*, adults, too, are markedly absent; Parry writes, “[Nancy Drew] operates best independently, has the freedom and money to do as she pleases, and outside of a telephone call or two home, seems to live for solving mysteries rather than participating in family life. She is more interested in the public sphere rather than the private or domestic one. . .” (148). While Nancy is not mean, promiscuous, or involved with drugs like many of the characters of *Gossip Girl*, Nancy, like Blair and Serena from

Gossip Girl, represents a world where adult help is not considered. Often, when adults enter the scene, they are portrayed as bumbling and a nuisance. This, in turn, suggests an underlying ideology that readers, too, may not be able to rely on adults in their own lives.

In addition to a lack of parental guidance, both series also portray increased vanity and classist ideals. Nancy Drew knows that she is the best detective even compared to professionals, her friends, and any others that try to help her along the way. She also knows that she exists in the upper echelon of society as made evident by the fact that most of her cases reward the upper middle-class, which Nancy always sides with, while crooks often are of a lower-class status (Parry 152). Blair and Serena are no different from Nancy in this regard. They, too, know they are beautiful and powerful.

Besides exhibiting conceit, Blair and Serena have confidence in their station in life. They, like Nancy, have maids, chefs, and valets to serve them. In *Gossip Girl*, those who are employed by the main characters are named “Esther” and “Myrtle,” names not nearly as elegant as Serena van der Woodsen or Blair Waldorf. Esther is described as a “sloppy Irish maid” who is clumsy at best. These characters don’t gracefully float through New York like their younger employers. Besides the overt lower-class characterization in *Gossip Girl*, the over-the-top consuming of expensive clothes, bags, dinners, and drinks clearly marks that these girls are the elite and indicates that success comes from having wealth. Likewise, Nancy Drew also maintains a classist ideology, although it is not nearly of such conspicuous consumption. Unlike her counterpart Judy Bolten, who helps those from the lower and middle classes, Nancy most often helps those from a “good” family and upholds a “value system in which money plays a pivotal role” (Parry 146). In addition, the mysteries that Nancy solves do not emphasize human relations but rather restore material possessions to the proper owners, usually those of the upper-middle class, from the lower-class thieves who wrongfully stole them. In other words, Nancy acts to uphold the ideological status quo (145). Although critics often condemn these series books for these reasons, the books remain popular with child and adolescent readers.

While *Gossip Girl* and *The Nancy Drew Mysteries* clearly share characteristics of many girls’ series books, and even appeal to readers in many of the same ways, clear distinctions remain between the series, as well. For one, the *Gossip Girl* characters age

linking them to characteristics of both series books and books in a series. However, because the entire series covers such a short time span and minimal character evolution takes place in each individual book, each book remains episodic like those of *Nancy Drew*, although the characters of *Gossip Girl* become more rounded for the reader as the series continues. Perhaps most importantly, though, Nancy Drew, although a product of her time who holds many racist and classist notions, is a wholesome character. Bierbaum describes her as “imbued with kindness” (96), while MacLeod iterates that Nancy would never be portrayed as unladylike or involved in risqué situations, such as being propositioned by a gangster (a la Dorothy Dixon) (38). Von Ziegesar, on the other hand, shows her characters’ struggles with morality and often being reduced to very unladylike behavior. Malcolm indicates that von Ziegesar has “equipped [Blair] with an excess of the most unattractive but also perhaps the most necessary impulses of human nature,” and although Blair seems to be wicked, she “never harms anyone but herself” (116).

Part of the reason for these distinctions between the two series is that between the beginning of *Nancy Drew*’s publication and *Gossip Girl*’s creation, a cultural revolution in children’s literature took place. MacLeod explains that the girls’ novel post-World War II differed greatly from its predecessors, when Nancy Drew was originally published. For one, adolescents and teenagers became a whole new market for publishers (MacLeod 51). The focus on uncertainty and individual social problems linked teenagers as a group, so fiction focused on these social tribulations (52-53). While Nancy Drew appears never to be concerned with her place in the social hierarchy (she has no qualms about cancelling dates with Ned because she doesn’t fear her position as his best girl will be upset), minor characters in *Gossip Girl* like Jenny Humphrey and, even main character Blair Waldorf struggle to attain and maintain being a queen bee. Perhaps, Nancy Drew feels similarly, but the reader never knows since Nancy’s inner thoughts are not the focus of the series, while modern series novels employ and even emphasize the private feelings of their female protagonists (White 42).

Adolescent fiction from 1945-1965 rarely depicted the darker side of adolescent problems, but this changed in the 1960s when the problem novel genre was introduced. Speaking frankly about family problems, drug use, abuse, and other teen issues became a normal theme of fiction for this age group. Vandergrift explains, “the literature produced

in the last half of the twentieth century, aimed at young adults, differs markedly from the juvenile literature of the last century. This contemporary literature treats contemporary problems in ways that reflect the concerns of young adults, as they struggle to become adults in a complex, technological society” (159). While *Nancy Drew* does not approach discussion of these problems, *Gossip Girl* is not afraid to incorporate these topics into the text.

However, this explanation of the developments of adolescent fiction is only half of the story. Where problem novels of the 1960s and beyond often dealt with these dark topics, there was a clear message that sex, drugs, alcohol, and the like should be avoided or consequences would ensue. Von Ziegesar’s books don’t show this side of the issues. Von Ziegesar defends this move to keep preaching out of her books and/or to avoid making a moral statement. Von Ziegesar explains:

I always resented books that tried to teach a lesson, where characters are too good: They don’t swear, they tell their mothers everything. I mean, of course I want to be a responsible mother who says, ‘Oh, there are terrible repercussions if you have sex, do drugs, and have an eating disorder!’ But the truth is, my friends and I dabbled in all of those things. And we all went to good colleges and grew up fine. And that’s the honest thing to say. (qtd. in Nussbaum)

Questioning the inclusion of controversial topics is important in understanding the continually changing appeal of series books. Originally written to entertain and teach, like the *Rollo* series, they morphed into books that children craved and many adults hated. However, the series book has endured and continues to transform. Examining *The Nancy Drew Mysteries* in comparison with *Gossip Girl* can help to elucidate the reason for series books’ continued popularity. However, *Gossip Girl* differs from *Nancy Drew*’s relatively simple star qualities by introducing controversial issues such as sex, drug use, and general catty gossip to the pages. Because children’s and adolescent literature is often thought to be a compilation of the authors’ experiences, observations, and the perceptions of what adolescents are thought to need and want in literature at the time of publication, literature has the ability to reflect the culture that produces it. Similarities between *Gossip Girl* and *Nancy Drew* begin to explain the present *Gossip Girl* vogue in

relation to the continued function of series fiction, yet the differences between the series create questions about what mass-marketing authority figures now believe adolescents need and desire. If sex, drugs, brand names, and gossip are needed to make a series a best-seller, what does this say about the actual requirements and wishes of adolescent culture today or adults' perceptions of this culture? In the interaction between reader and text, how is culture reflected at the reader and how do the implicit ideologies of the text affect the reader?

Part II- Not Your Average Nancy Drew: The “Bad” Reputation of the *Gossip Girl* Series

Clearly, as demonstrated in Part I, the *Gossip Girl* series builds on previously established genre qualities such as those associated with series fiction, chick lit, the problem novel, and the novel of adolescence. However, by exploring the critiques of the series associated with the implicit ideologies represented, we can explicate how the series is currently perceived to function for the reader, questions left open when simply looking at series books historically. Although Serena van der Woodsen and Blair Waldorf might indeed share qualities with the likes of Nancy Drew, Serena and Blair's actions, language, and personalities seem more reminiscent of pop stars featured in contemporary gossip magazines like *Us Weekly* and *People*, and rightly so, as both Serena and Blair appear on *Gossip Girl*'s blog. The *Gossip Girl* characters are infamous for their supposed “bad” behavior and old-money reputations rather than their inherent skills at solving mysteries.

However, Blair and Serena do not shy away from these scandals, even when unfounded, as one would anticipate in the typical novel of adolescence, which often works to impart a moral and social message in the end; instead, the *Gossip Girl* characters embrace their bad girl identities. Naugle explains of teen chick lit, which she contends began with the *Gossip Girl* series:

Far from being morally instructive, teen chick lit novels portray reality as teens experience it, rather than how parents portray it to serve as a cautionary lecture to their children. In the world of teen chick lit, characters use obscenities as adjectives, get high before class, drink

excessively at weekend parties, and have sex with their boyfriends (or random one night stands), all while maintaining a good GPA. (18)

She further justifies this depiction, writing, “the characters’ vices, and more importantly, the way the characters embrace their vices, reflect the everyday concerns of a new generation, one whose self-proclaimed ‘specialness’ outweighs the pressure to apologize for imperfection (Howe and Strauss 2000)” (41). This representation has led to concerns about the appropriateness of the texts for adolescents because of the identification many adults and theorists claim readers, especially teen readers, make with characters in the novels.

Georges Poulet, while explaining how words colonize the mind when engaging in the act of reading, writes in “Phenomenology of Reading,” “[T]he extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer outside or inside” (54). He further explains this phenomenon as “astonishing” as the reader becomes a subject to the author’s thoughts. He explains that while reading “I am thinking the thoughts of another” (55). Although Poulet’s work seems somewhat outdated within postmodernism because of the representation of the reader as being completely controlled by the author’s text, his theories suggest the power literature and language have over the reader. Kay Vandergrift, using Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theories in her book *Mosaics of Meaning: Enhancing the Intellectual Life of Young Adults Through Story*, supports Poulet’s idea regarding the melding of consciousness with a consumed text: “Wolfgang Iser explains that through reading, the reader’s experience is transformed because reading has the same structure as experience (107)” (160).

If the barriers between text and reader dissolve during the act of reading, and readers in fact experience the actions of the text mentally, almost as if they themselves were engaged in the plot, then the questionable subject matter of the *Gossip Girl* series becomes even more controversial. For instance, in the first book of the series, *Gossip Girl: A Novel*, Serena, after returning from boarding school, “could hardly wait for life to return to the way that it used to be” (von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* 18). Her life with her friend Blair consisted of smoking, having “cocktails at the Star Lounge in the Tribeca Star Hotel again, which always turned into sleepover parties because they would get too

drunk to get home,” “wearing vintage lingerie and drinking gin and lime juice,” cheating on tests, and acting like crazy old ladies. They would also “pee in the downstairs entrances of their classmates’ brownstones and then ring the doorbells and run away” and abandon Blair’s younger brother on the Lower East Side to fend for himself and find a way home (18). If readers indeed truly experience the text and become a subject of the text, as Iser and Poulet intimate, then teen readers have now mentally engaged in underage drinking, smoking, cheating, defilement of personal property, and child endangerment, and this is only in a single page.

However, this above view seems overly simplistic, giving teen readers no resistance to texts and no degree of freedom to bring their own experiences to the thought processes of reading. Although readers make connections with the characters in books, it isn’t simply in a manner of pure subjugation. Brown and St. Clair, in their study on “empowered girls” in young adult literature, cite Robert Probst:

As Robert Probst has noted, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the stories they hear and read. The preoccupation with self that is characteristic of adolescents makes them particularly receptive to fiction. They tend to identify strongly with a story’s characters, share their dilemmas, and participate in the choices that the characters make, keenly aware of the values that their actions imply. (9)

The problem with the *Gossip Girl* novels from this view then is that readers identify with the risqué behaviors of the characters but may fail to see the problematic nature of many of these actions and the values this type of conduct might promote because the characters themselves fail to see many realistic consequences.

Furthermore, Allen acknowledges the increased sway media representations have over children and adolescents when she writes, “Sociological studies indicate that although parents are responsible for the socialization of children, the influence of peers and mass media has assumed a much larger role in a child’s social identity in the last few decades” (3). In other words, literature serves as a mechanism of socialization, and, therefore, normalization. Through literacy, readers are ingesting certain ideologies of dominant culture, and criticism of the *Gossip Girl* series has been marked by concern

over the unsuitable material presented for teens that lends itself to replicating ideologies that are seen as inappropriate.

However, others defend the series, intimating that it isn't only texts that shape culture but culture that influences the content of texts, and, therefore, the content, although perhaps seen as improper for teens, may actually be authentic. Many view teen chick lit, and specifically *Gossip Girl*, as reaching popularity because it portrays the reality of teens. Naugle explains, "What makes the *Gossip Girl* novels (and teen chick lit novels in general) so appealing to readers is the identification they elicit. The familiarity of language and technology creates novels that teens believe reflects *their* lives, not the lives of the author or, worse yet, their parents" (26). Bean and Moni further articulate that the reason for this connection stems from the idea that "[a]dolescent readers view characters in young adult novels as living and wrestling with real problems close to their own life experiences as teens (Bean and Rigoni, 2001)" (638). Freeman agrees, saying everyone "can relate to the characters' ever-shifting patterns of friendship and flirtation, lust and love" (22).

Because the texts may serve as a means of socialization, other criticism for the series dwells on the idea of the consumerism perpetuated by the text, which also helps to subjectify the readers not only as a purchaser of the novels themselves, but as continuing the accumulation of products in order to emulate the power found by the characters through consumption. Amy Pattee, in discussing the commodities described in literature and literature as a commodity itself writes, "The content of the series mirrors this concern [concern over selling products], as the details of the lives of the characters—and the characterization itself—are described in terms of commercial consumption" (155). As the series progresses, name brands appear more and more in the text, including high end brands of jeans, lip gloss, lingerie, and designer dresses.

Research conducted on other types of texts marketed towards teens, such as teen magazines, found girls are often designated in the roles of consumers (Finders), which then uphold female stereotypes. Rarely are girls cast as producers of culture. Mary Celeste Kearney explains that the association between females and consumerism that "has served to further reinforce the notion of production as masculine and male activity also informs the lack of girls' representations as cultural producers" (291). This

stereotype perpetuates Paul Willis's idea of girls as objects to be consumed by men (Kearney 287), which further affects and normalizes the behaviors of young readers. Not only may they participate in risky behavior, they will also form their identities around what they purchase. Bean and Moni explain that in a culture that promotes consumerism, through all types of media, identity "is constructed through consumption of goods, with selfhood vested in things" (640). Although this may be true of the general culture, the *Gossip Girl* novels add a classist ideal that leaves the average reader at a disadvantage, since many do not have access to the name brands presented in the text. Therefore, as the readers strive for identification, they will always fall short.

This is particularly concerning since adolescents, and adolescent girls especially, already exist in a subjugated role simply by being female teens, and further discouragement in identity formation could be detrimental to the self. As White points out, the idea of adolescence did not exist before the seventeenth century, when priests, moralists, and pedagogues increased the restrictions on education making the powerlessness of childhood longer (6). Joseph Kett traced the appearance of adolescence as we view it now to around the turn of the twentieth century when economic conditions did not rely on child-labor and thus increased a period of education (White 7). Adolescence as a social-psychological stage was actually established through G. Stanley Hall's "conception of behavior imposed on youth" in his book *Adolescence: Its Psychology, and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* published in 1904 (9). As Kett explains of Hall and other psychologists, they "used biology and psychology . . . to justify the promotion among young people of norms of behavior" (White 10). The normalization process imposed by adults tends to force teens to remain separated from the privileges afforded adults for a longer amount of time.

Adolescents then remain in the role of consuming material produced by adults rather than in a place of production for an extended amount of time. Pattee, paraphrasing Peter Hunt, writes,

Young adult novels, written by adults for young people, are anthropological statements that reflect not only the conditions of their making but also authorial and social views of adolescence and the

adolescent experience. The fictionalizations may be derived in part from authorial experience as well as from the author's current observations of youth culture. (154)

Readers of teen chick lit are consuming what authors believe is relevant to their lives, such as the so called scandal of *Gossip Girl* that readers identify with. However, because of the continually nominalized role of females in a male dominated society, White argues that the inferior position of adolescence is not temporary for girls; instead, they will always remain in a subjectified position (19). As psychologist Mary Pipher explains, "Simone de Beauvoir believed adolescence is when girls realize that men have the power and that their only power comes from consenting to become adored objects. They do not suffer from the penis envy Freud postulated, but from power envy" (21). When viewed this way, adolescence for girls, when identity formation is critical, is a time of continued power limitations which give way to reliance on adult-media-produced messages in the creation of the self.

Theresa Rogers demonstrates in her article "Literary Theory and Children's Literature: Interpreting Ourselves and Our Worlds" that literacy is a cultural practice. She writes: "The ideas that literature and ways of reading both represent and produce social, cultural, and institutional practices and meanings (Poovey, 1992), and that the teaching of reading is a normative, political practice. . . , have taken on increasing importance. . ." (141). Reading is a method of cultural indoctrination, which normalizes and perpetuates for child and adolescent audiences certain characteristics within society. If the *Gossip Girl* texts are indeed normalizing readers to engage in risky behaviors or anti-social behavior, because the author views adolescence as a time of conflict between the adult-world and those not yet admitted to that place of power, the novels are more than just "saucy fun with a sweet center" (Freeman 22). Rather, the series is reinforcing female stereotypes by continually placing readers and the characters in the role of consumers. As the readers consume the texts, they also consume and perhaps, according to Iser and Poulet, engage in the risky behaviors themselves, at least imaginatively.

The problem with viewing the *Gossip Girl* series as what Peter Hollindale describes as "quiescent and unconscious ideology" (Nodelman and Reimer 152), although this is the way that many have clearly viewed it, is that the end result is static.

This view continues to perpetuate female adolescent readers in the role of passive consumers, a subject position Michel de Certeau has already shown to be untrue. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau “bring[s] to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term ‘consumers’” (xi). In fact, those historically viewed as simply consumers or non-producers actually are not at all passive but instead work to fulfill their needs using what producers offer.

Besides creating a static view of the novels and the readers, this vein of condemnation for the series creates a simplistic view of how the series may actually function for adolescent readers because it presents readers as empty vessels without the ability for critical engagement or means for production. Instead, we need to look at the series for what it really is— in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, “an apparatus of capture” playing with the desires of those who were formerly thought to only consume its ideologies. By opening up the texts and looking at them in terms of a multiplicity of flows instead of in a binary way as the aforementioned criticism demonstrates, we can begin to understand how the books function psycho-socially for the readers by channeling desiring-production and how the characters in the books play with socially constructed libidinal flows. Part III moves beyond a simple imposed functionality of text to theorize about how teens may actually use the texts.

Part III- The World of *Gossip Girl*: An Apparatus of Capture

Overview of Deleuze and Guattari’s Theories

In order to move away from viewing the *Gossip Girl* series as a static replication of culture or simple carrier of ideology, as the previous section explores, and move towards viewing it as what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would term an “apparatus of capture” that one can actually play with and in, a background of their theory is necessary. Like Certeau, Deleuze and Guattari move away from viewing the subject as simply static, although both theoretical camps would agree that much of what is produced under social restrictions may be subconscious.

Deleuze and Guattari’s famous work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* works to critique classic Freudianism and the social and biological

theories of identity formation arising out of the nineteenth century. Instead, they offer a mode of viewing libidinal desire as productive. Deleuze and Guattari began questioning the constructs of identity, thus the subject, when they reconstructed Lacan's views of Freud's theories of the unconscious. Instead of giving in to the inevitable mechanical view of the subject as determined by the historical, they look at the inclusive partials, the ever-moving socially constructed flows, that are ever changing as machinic actions that create the "individual."

They claim that the main process that acts upon the body is desire. Desire is productively captured and channeled as an investment in social machinics. This view is an attempt to deny the historical construct of the Oedipal identity, where desire arises from lack, by removing desire from the realm of pleasure and putting it instead as a reaction to the social. Because the individual *per se* does not exist, the subject is created by the ongoing processes captured to make up what we call the human being. Below the level of social construction, what remains when the social subjectification which is transposed is taken away, is an occupation of intensities. Because there is only the social, the body is made of flows, like the firing energy of the synapses, which really constitute many voices always moving. In this way, the self is a subject to the polyvocal social, but some degree of freedom remains, still socially constructed, however, in how desire is directed.

The self is a desiring-machine which wants to use these energy flows in some way. Although the social creates a subject position, there remain zones of agency that work despite and within the overcoded apparatuses of capture. The overcoding of social state systems "[gives] rise to new flows that escape from it" and "[free] a large quantity of decoded flows that escape" from the "State" formula (Deleuze and Guattari 449, 448). Through the evolution of the State and its apparatuses of capture, the decoded flows can "[overturn] preceding apparatuses" (452). What results is an opening of the collective assemblages of enunciation, the discourses that are socially created. In this openness, there is room for play as the body acts out the subject position but also uses it to release the internal flows and revise State apparatuses of capture.

In reaction to those like Poulet who claimed texts create both subjects and objects, Deleuze and Guattari, instead, describe books as assemblages, like the body, that are

made of multiple machinic attributes: “[A]ssemblages have elements (or multiplicities) of several kinds: human, social, and technical machines,” to name a few, and are “fundamentally libidinal and unconscious” (36). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write, “Literature is an assemblage. It has nothing to do with ideology” (4). They claim, “There are only multiplicities of multiplicities forming a single assemblage, operating in the same assemblage; packs in masses and masses in packs” (34). Instead, the world, reader, and book work in an “aparallel evolution” (11)—one is not the reflection of the other, but rather they constitute a rhizomatic relationship of interconnected multiplicities.

Once the text and reader are shown to work in conjunction, the text serves as an “apparatus of capture,” inducing desiring production in multiple trajectories for the reader. The text promotes an opening of the reader-machinics, as the former “subject” reader is now both constructed from his desiring-production and the possibility for creating overcoded characteristics of the assemblage or new ways of releasing desire. In these ways, the act of reading is no longer a stationary act of consumption by an empty subject, as Poulet suggested. Instead, readers of the *Gossip Girl* series are involved in a relationship of cathexis, where they make an “investment of emotional and mental energy” (“cathexis”) in the novels, because of the novels’ position as an apparatus of capture which channels their desiring-production, while still allowing partials to function below the threshold of complete capture. Both being captured and overcoding allow for the release of productive libidinal energy, which then constitutes a rhizomatic reading relationship. Clearly, seeing the *Gossip Girl* series as a means for allowing the reader some agency differs from how Part I and Part II of this paper address the functionality of the texts. Historical views and quiescent ideology suggest how elements of the texts are imparted on the reader, while a Deleuzo-Guattarian view suggests how the reader might work with, because of, or against the text.

How Gossip Girl Captures the Reader

The *Gossip Girl* series has clearly shown great popularity with adolescent readers as books continue to fly off the shelves. The *Gossip Girl* phenomenon has even spawned a *Gossip Girl* TV series on the CW, a station aimed at teen viewers, “Gossip Girl”

fashion (“TV’s ‘Gossip Girl’), countless blogs about the series (Belmont, Gossip Girl in GGWTK), and even a study linking teen pregnancy with viewing the TV show (Masters). The popularity of the texts suggests the books must meet the needs of readers in some way. Along with the popularity of the books, readers testify to the series’ addicting qualities. One reader of the *Gossip Girl* novels describes the series, in limited text speak, as “very popular and I can see why once u enter u cant extract yourself” (Brintbrunette). Erica Belmont, on her blog, writes, “One has to understand that these books are just like gossip themselves. Once you start, you can’t stop” (par. 8).

Part of the books’ popularity develops from the identifications teen readers make with the teens in the novels, as suggested in the previous sections. However, this affiliation moves beyond recognizing similar traits or circumstances. Marjorie Allen referencing feminist theorist Judy Mann explains, “imagination helps many girls through various forms of adversity as they grow up. One common fantasy of girlhood is to be descended from royal blood, which, when revealed, will allow a little girl to reign supreme ‘over her father and other grown men’” (100). Blair Waldorf and Serena van der Woodsen are the American equivalent of royalty. They remain in the public eye, have access to anything money can buy, and seem removed from the rules that govern the average person. This idea of royalty gives Serena and Blair power, what Mann suggests girls crave over the patriarchal state.

The books then serve as a tool for imagination and role play. *Gossip Girl* functions as an apparatus of capture, both functioning within socially constructed constraints and allowing for desire to be released despite these social mechanisms. Therefore, as adolescents role play, they, too, have a chance to react to the social codes reflected in the texts through their own culturally-constructed means. The reader is simultaneously a subject to the social and critically aware of how to play with the social for her own needs. According to Christian-Smith, “through literacy, young women construct and reconstruct their desires and gender subjectivities, as well as their awareness of social differences and power relations” (MacLeod 71-72). While the novels work to overcode the patriarchal system, readers are able to create their own subject positions that perhaps break the boundaries of their actual circumstances. In Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, the novels provide channels for the reader’s libidinal flows which are

socially channeled to crave power. An adolescent girl might not have the actual power to attract public attention, but through role playing as Serena or Blair she can.

The reader is not alone in this role playing; Blair Waldorf in the novel openly demonstrates the power of imagination over creating new social conditions, albeit they are frequently self-deceptive fantasies that act to temporarily meet the demands of her desires. From the beginning of book one in the series, Blair makes it evident that she releases her libidinal flows through imagining new social constructs. For instance, Blair is described as liking to “think of herself as a hopeless romantic in the style of old movie actresses like Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe. She was always coming up with plot devices for the movie she was starring in at the moment, the movie of her life” (von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* 8-9). Blair is aware of herself as a subject of social circumstances; however, she chooses new ways of viewing her position in life as she imagines new plots evident to an imaginary movie camera, her zone of agency. For example, when her boyfriend Nate Archibald comes over and falls asleep after drinking a half-flask of brandy, “Blair lay down next to him and imagined that she and Nate were starring in a movie in which they were married and he had a drinking problem, but she would stand by him always and love him forever, even if he occasionally wet the bed” (9).

Blair is keenly aware of the “mechanosphere” (Deleuze and Guattari 514), the world in which she is a machine, so she imagines scenarios where her actions would be appropriate so as to harness/release her emotions. She is an ever-aware actor. The world of film has created a code, which Blair feels best to enact. She is a machine whose energies have been channeled towards being the starlet.

While Blair reiterates the social constructions of female behavior, even at times the undesirable female experience, the *Gossip Girl* novels further support the social discourses which have created what the female adolescent experience consists of. Although Deleuze and Guattari view literature as anti-ideology, they do see it as an assemblage, a collection of social reactions to other social reactions because an ideal does not exist. In turn, as the books support this type of capture, readers are able to meet the demands and socio-psychological needs that arise from living within this discourse in a rhizomatic-type relationship with the series. Pipher explains, “Teenage girls have what one psychologist called the ‘imaginary audience syndrome.’ They think they are being

watched by others who are preoccupied with the smallest details of their lives” (60). By playing with the characters’ social prowess and feeling like they, too, may be under Gossip Girl-scrutiny, readers are able to reaffirm the machinic impulses which colonize them, thus making them feel justified in imagining being watched. This affirmation fosters the novels’ role as an apparatus of capture, an overcoded form that continues established social assemblages.

Even as the reader feels like identification is possible, continual overcoding occurs which emphasizes the novels’ status as apparatuses of capture. The narration style particularly “captures” the reader and shapes the reader’s thoughts and actions, creating cathexis in what the novels promote: fashion and attention to appearance, capitalism and consumerism, class hierarchies, and lack of reliance on personal analysis.

For one, appearance is of the utmost importance in the novels. The characters’ appearances are reinforced with the same tag descriptions often, reminiscent of the style of Charles Dickens. Serena is always described as having navy blue eyes. Blair, until she cuts her hair, always is associated with brown hair down to the middle of her back, and even after she chops it all off, is still associated with her hair. Jenny Humphrey is always referenced by her large breast size, Nate with his sparkling green eyes, and Vanessa with her shaved head. Naugle claims that the world of gossip makes it hard for readers to judge the characters’ actions or words, so the narrator must explicitly explain the characters’ appearance, characteristics, traits, and motivations (30-31). However, overtly adding these descriptions over and over again entices the reader to concentrate more on appearance rather than the characters’ actions because these are the elements being reinforced.

Sometimes Blair makes good decisions (like waiting to make her first sexual experience special); sometimes she makes bad decisions (like getting romantically involved with a Yale alumnus who is conducting her interview), but that seems to be of lesser importance at times, compared to the state of her hair, which always looks great, because Blair’s appearance is what remains consistently referenced book after book, while her actions of the past seem of lesser consequence throughout the series. Blair may make bad decisions, be temporarily emotionally distraught over them, yet she will remain glamorous. Although clearly Serena and Blair are not characterized as having a perfect

life (the plot of each novel has to be driven by some type of conflict), they remain as idolized beauties within the text, which is appealing to teen readers who come to identify with the characters. Therefore, as the reader is captured by the text, the code that is being colonized is that life may be tough, but one should remain entranced with how one looks.

Similarly, the book extends its overcoding on the reading machines, the teen readers, involving evaluating the value systems presented. The reader has little time while physically reading to question or analyze the characters' actions because a first-person narrator (perhaps Gossip Girl herself) continually chimes in, offering her opinion to the reader. For example, while at an art gallery Serena is discovered by twin photographers, the Remi brothers, who then want to take her picture. After the narrator describes the Remi brothers as "absolutely gorgeous," the narrator enters evaluating Serena's situation with "Lucky girl" (von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* 89). Later, when Blair convinces ninth-grader Jenny Humphrey to use her calligraphy talent in writing out 316 party invitations in one night, Blair tells Jenny, "'Sure, you can make yourself an invitation. Make one for one of your friends, too.'" Again, the narrator intercedes with a comment: "How generous" (94). This pattern happens throughout the text, preventing the reader from having her own initial reaction. Instead, she is left with what the narrator thinks about any given situation, which, in turn, will influence how the reader evaluates the scenarios presented in the text. In order to disagree with Gossip Girl's summations and beliefs, the reader has to take an active stance against the premise of the novels. This reading experience demonstrates how the self can both be a subject to the social and still be able to exploit the social for one's own desires; the more literate one is of the social assemblages and machinings, the more options one has to release desiring flows.

Like the ever-present physical descriptions, the narrator's interjections create an overcoding: Appearance is important; believe what the narrator says. In this way, the novels' function as apparatuses of capture remain consistent. There is one way of thinking represented in the *Gossip Girl* novels. Naugle explains these types of descriptions, through the example of Dan Humphrey and his less-than-fashionable rented tux; she writes, "In a few sentences, the reader comprehends how the other characters view him and how they (as readers) should view him and others like him" (52). The

reader is not only observing the world of the characters but is also participating in their way of thinking as she reads, even if it is temporary. This creates a rhizomatic relationship while reading. The reader is simultaneously taking on the views of the *Gossip Girl* world while still engaging in her own motive for reading, the release of desire. This creates a multiplicity of aspects while reading. In other words, the reader is captured by *Gossip Girl* beliefs and continues to read connecting these views with her own desire while simultaneously overcoding the text to continue to meet her own purposes. All in all, play is occurring, capturing and resisting at the same time.

Besides the narration creating instances of capture, the narrator also embodies Deleuze and Guattari's idea of multiplicity and polyvocalism. As I have previously suggested, the actual character of Gossip Girl is the blogger, and, perhaps, she is the narrator as well. However, inconsistencies remain regarding what Gossip Girl knows. For instance, if she is indeed the third-person omniscient narrator reporting on the characters' actions, then she should not be at all confused about what to report on her gossip blog, although clearly false reports are made. Even her all-knowing blogger representation suggests that she is watching many places/people at once and that nothing can escape her; however, she refers to herself as a single being. Even so, nobody actually knows who Gossip Girl is even though she often details where she will be and what she will be wearing. This corresponds to Pipher's theory about adolescent girls as fragmented, "split into mysterious contradictions" (20). She describes these two selves as "one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted" (38). Nobody knows who Gossip Girl is, so her representation of herself as "one of the chosen ones" can be completely false, put on because that is what the public wants her to be.

Like the multiplicity represented by Gossip Girl, Blair Waldorf also can create many versions of herself. In the opening scenes of book one,

She is wearing her new black ballet flats. Very bow-tie preppy, which she could get away with because she could change her mind in an instant and put on her trashy, pointed, knee-high boots and that sexy metallic skirt her mother hated. Poof—rock star sex kitten. Meow. (von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* 5)

She, too, transforms her appearance and mental state according to her moods. Of all the characters, Blair transforms the most. However, Blair and Serena combined represent a different type of multiplicity. They are best friends, but completely different. Serena is as uninhibited as Blair is tame. They are each half of what an adolescent girl wants to be, both a contradiction to the other's personality. Serena abandons the social milieu by abandoning her admission to Yale to instead become a movie star; Blair, however, embraces Yale like a good girl and goes on to get her degree. Both are on the same path provided by the upper class, but Blair embraces education and the socially accepted route, while Serena follows her libidinal impulses at the drop of a dime. The fragmentation helps readers to act out both social desires; they can both follow the social conventions or break them to create new coding.

What makes the *Gossip Girl* series attract so much criticism are the social taboos it seems to break as a book written for adolescents. Sex, drug use, over-the-top consumerism, and lack of adult authority lead to no serious consequences. Sure, Nate Archibald is forced to do manual labor on his lacrosse coach's house after stealing his Viagra, but even when he abandons his punishment, it works out in the end of the current last novel in the series, *Don't You Forget about Me*. He is able to do what he always wanted, sail around the world and forgo real-world responsibility a little longer. He is exemplifying the many flows that the self as a machine can utilize in order to meet the demands of desire. The series is clearly depicting its characters as desiring machines reacting to social constraints as their energy impulses escape any way they physically can—talking about one another, having, thinking, and talking about sex, swearing, using drugs, drinking, role playing, and consuming. In this way, not only are *Gossip Girl's* characters releasing these desiring impulses, but the books themselves seem to be a representation of the author and/or the culture's machinic reaction to desires.

Furthermore, the act of using taboo subjects helps accentuate that discourses themselves aren't inherently good or bad, but rather reflect the social aspects of a culture. For instance, gossip, although often classified as negative, idle conversation in today's Euro-American society, is in actuality a productive form of discourse. Rysman claims that before the nineteenth century, "gossip" was "a positive term applied to both sexes" referencing the relationship encompassed by a god-parent (176). Only in the nineteenth

century is the term relegated to female talk and linked with a negative connotation (178). Socially, gossip is a traded “commodity” that works productively to create boundaries, help understand social norms, and “allow the individual to evaluate his own achievements” (Rosnow 158; Suls 164-165). Therefore, *Gossip Girl* is not encouraging a “negative” behavior, necessarily. Instead, it is allowing the reader to participate in the social commodity exchange in the *Gossip Girl* world to productively assess her own position in reality. More so, while reading the text and making these comparisons to social norms and creating boundaries between the characters and herself, the reader will not be reproached for participating in a behavior that is now condemnable.

Other examples of the evolution of the codes that the *Gossip Girl* apparatus of capture seems to be re-writing are conventions of romance. In Christian-Smith’s study of romance novels “Gender, Popular Culture, and Curriculum: Adolescent Romance Novels as Gender Text,” she identifies three types of codes represented in romance novels from 1942-1982. These codes include “The Code of Romance,” “The Code of Sexuality,” and “The Code of Beautification.” She also provides characteristics for each code. *The Gossip Girl* series does not indeed meet all the qualities of these codes, although much of the plot line of the novel centers around romance. For instance, under “The Code of Romance,” *Gossip Girl* does not “privilege nongenital sexual expressions,” keep romance as merely a heterosexual practice, or represent it as a personal, private experience as earlier romance novels dictated (Christian-Smith 372). Instead, an “[overturning] of preceding apparatuses” (Deleuze and Guattari 452) seems to be occurring.

All in all, Deleuze and Guattari view the main machinic impulse at work to be socially constructed desire. The *Gossip Girl* series functions within these social strata as an apparatus of capture, as it both represents authorial and cultural overcoding of social practices and desire while capturing readers within its texts. By presenting bad behavior that readers can play with and/or recognize, social constructs are reinforced. However, the series also seems to meet the demands of the teen desiring-machines who read it by allowing some generally acceptable releases of libidinal energy. While remaining in the subjugated role of adolescence, readers are able to play with elements of power through the imagined worlds represented by the celebrity characters who have few parents or

other adults that control their behaviors. At the same time that they see roles they do not occupy in reality, the readers, too, see similarities between the fragmented selves of the characters and their own socio-psychologically created identities. By looking at the *Gossip Girl* series in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's theories, we can see that although the reader remains a subject to the social, because everything is social, she also is participating in a critical freedom to use social mechanisms, as in books, to meet her own desiring-production needs.

Conclusion: What *Gossip Girl* Tells Us about Today's Teen Readers

By viewing the *Gossip Girl* series in comparison to its genre predecessors in Part I, through the negative criticism it has elicited due to its perceived ability to colonize the minds of the reader in Part II, and through the lens of its socially constructed nature based on libidinal desires in the previous section, the function of this assembly of literature can be deduced. Likewise, a comparison of perceptions of what some adults believe adolescents require and what teens actually desire as represented by the series' popularity can be conducted.

First, the obvious inclusion of material such as sex, drug use, cursing, and consumerism marks a shift in series fiction. While readers still want to see their female protagonists in celebrity-like roles and without parental involvement, this is not enough to meet the machinic desires implanted by today's society. Including these risqué behaviors allows for the release of other channeled libidinal desires beyond the socially constructed wanting to be famous. By continually purchasing and reading the *Gossip Girl* novels, they are making an emotional and mental investment in fashion, capitalism and consumerism, class and social hierarchies, gossip, and risky behaviors such as sexual exploitation and drug use. Because the series is an assemblage of social practices, the series, despite what some criticism may accuse, is not a complete shift from current cultural ideas. Not all teens may be engaging in this behavior, but the behavior is clearly not an impossible leap from what can and does occur. Although adults have condemned the series because of the perceived rebellion into dangerous behavior, the biggest difference between the series and reality is that teen characters are given a position of power within the books, a position that teens are not often given in their actual lives. All

around, female adolescents are exposed to all that the series is being condemned for through other media representations. In fact, the series is not disturbing the status quo but is rather holding a mirror to many of the activities some teens engage in. Teens who have developed within this social system are not surprised by what appears in the texts but rather identify it with the culture that encompasses them and has created them. Those who read *Gossip Girl* are familiar with its thematic elements before even opening the pages because of other media depictions such as *Laguna Beach*, *The Hills*, *Mean Girls*, and many others. This is even more apparent since the origination of the *Gossip Girl* series arose from keen market analysis by Alloy, Inc and its associate 17th Street Productions (Pattee).

For instance, raised in a society that enlists gossip as a function of social control and reinforcement of group membership as well as maintenance of social status (Guendouzi 33), female adolescents not only do not object to its appearances in texts, but understand its role in society as a means of meeting machinic social impulses. Similarly, since teens have been exposed to sex on television, in the news, and almost everywhere else, the texts would seem unrealistic if these subjects were excluded in a text written for teens.

Besides development from today's culture, *Gossip Girl* also may reinforce the experiences that many teens navigate. For example, Rosalind Wiseman documents in her book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* the struggles adolescent girls face by going to school. This is actually not a far cry from the world of Serena and Blair, although perhaps the average teen does not have the privileges and powers that the *Gossip Girl* characters can use. Like the consumerism in the text, gossip is a commodity in itself and adolescent girls are used to dealing with its commerce. Wiseman quotes Jane, a sixteen year old: "Gossip is like money. We exchange it, sell it, and lend it out. It's what we have of value" (121). At least when presented in a fictional work like *Gossip Girl*, adolescent girls can see it for what it is, a ploy for power and prestige, which perhaps makes it more palatable when it occurs in real life.

Furthermore, *Gossip Girl* also helps to meet the desires of adolescent readers who are struggling as desiring-machines to control socially constructed libidinal flows in socially acceptable ways. Through reading, teens are able to role-play and satiate their

social desires. For one, they can feel satisfied that their perceived “imagined audience syndrome,” as Pipher suggests, is a reality in the text, and, therefore, their feelings of being on stage are reinforced. Second, they can participate in the characters’ struggles and triumphs as they role-play and sate their fragmented identities. In addition, because the books are fiction, and the characters have access to money and independence, adolescent girls can play with the fantasy of having power themselves, something they crave from their subjugated position as female and as adolescents. Their internal struggles to harness the desire to practice rebellious behaviors are, moreover, released through the act of reading about characters who do “bad” things.

Although these functions of the *Gossip Girl* series seem to positively meet the desires of teens, there are downfalls to reinforcing some of these impulses. One major concern arises from the idea that readers willingly can engage in the passive nature of the texts. Through the narrator’s imposing voice and character descriptions that block out thorough analysis of the characters’ actions, readers of the novels seem to continue a subjugated role as the narrator’s voice interacts with their own thoughts in a heavy-handed manner. Although, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the social is inescapable because the body is a social construction, allowing the texts to overcode the reader with fewer instances for agency compared to the investment made leaves many discourses closed. Readers, while at least engaged in reading the texts, have few chances for opening the assemblage of the novels because of the texts’ ability to fully capture, as in the voice of the narrator. It is only if readers actively seek other avenues based on the series, such as blogging, that they can enter into a position of production. This, too, does not inherently suggest they are resisting the subject position they may be induced to occupy; rather a high degree of critical resistance would be necessary to engage with a rhizomatic relationship alongside *Gossip Girl*’s voice.

Overall, clearly the popularity of the series demonstrates that the series functions in many ways to meet the machinic desires of teen readers. Those producing the texts are reinforcing the social systems that gave rise to the texts and seem to be fully engrossed in perpetuating teens’ investment in social ideals that at times seem risqué although ever present in today’s society. All in all, although the *Gossip Girl* books seem scandalous, they are a reflection of the society that produces, promotes, and buys them because,

according to Deleuze and Guattari, everything is social. In fact, *Gossip Girl* is only one more apparatus of capture that allows for the release of socially (re)constructed libidinal desires. This relationship, as seen through the exploration of *Gossip Girl*'s function, demonstrates the overarching interactions readers have with many texts. Readers are empowered through reading to participate in the exchange of cultural ideologies and use these cultural ideologies, if they are able to gain critical awareness of them, to meet their own needs and desires.

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