

# **“The girl she would always love and hate”: Female Jealousy, Desire, and Power in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* and *Gossip Girl***

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*WRITER’S COMMENT: Any woman who grew up with today’s overwhelming presence of colorful commercials and glossy magazine covers knows what society expects of them: women must be beautiful, thin, and desirable. Of course, this message becomes most apparent to women in their adolescent years when their appearance certainly varies from these images of “ideal” beauty. While visual images play a large role in developing a sense of society’s views on beauty, Adolescent Literature can also form these expectations. When reading two novels for ENL 183 – Adolescent Literature, I was surprised by the similarities in two books set decades apart: Judy Blume’s *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* and Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl*. While the similar images of “ideal” beauty surprised me, I was even more interested in the increasing lack of a voice challenging these ideals in the more recent text. Intrigued by this disturbing acceptance and even enforcement of “ideal” beauty, I chose to write a research paper exploring the ways body image has remained the same for young women in these two texts, and also the alarming way body image has changed in a society that is constantly bombarded with images and texts demonstrating “ideal” beauty.*

*INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: It is relatively rare, I presume, for a student to distinguish herself in a class of 140 based only on the merits of her written work, but this is precisely what Kaileigh Snyder did in my course on Adolescent Literature, English 183, this past Fall quarter. I remember taking note of her name after reading one of our short reading responses, which the students took to calling “Howlers,” in homage to the Harry Potter series. Throughout the quarter, she engaged with the texts in a way that was deeply attuned to the complexities of the genre of Young Adult fiction and the historical and social considerations that have changed it over time. Her final paper, published here, addresses the way that adolescent girls are conditioned by society to have a love/hate relationship with their bodies. Snyder’s work exemplifies the importance of a course such as Adolescent Literature, which illustrates the need for careful consideration of the way popular literature both challenges and undergirds social mores.*

—Sarah Lauro, Department of English

In Cecily von Ziegesars's *Gossip Girl*, Blair Waldorf experiences conflicted feelings for Serena van der Woodsen, who is "her best friend, the girl she would always love and hate. The girl she could never measure up to...The girl she'd wanted everyone to forget" (23). Blair feels both "love and hate" (23) towards Serena because she admires her beauty, her confidence, and her natural "coolness" (17), yet she also realizes it is something she may never be able to achieve. As a result, Blair attempts to tarnish Serena's confidence and challenge her natural place in the spotlight. Similarly, in Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, the eponymous character and her friends meet after school to discuss boys and share gossip. This gossip frequently slanders Laura Danker, a girl in their class who closely fits the girls' image of "ideal" feminine beauty. While the desire to attract male attention partly motivates the jealous girls in both *Gossip Girl* and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, the young women in both novels are primarily interested in competing with other female peers and asserting their own power. In response to their jealousy, they react with false disgust and perpetuate rumors to injure the character they envy in an effort to hide their own feelings of insecurity. As a result, the "ideal" female body in both of these novels becomes a highly conflicting image and ultimately serves as a symbol of both power and desire.

In Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, Laura Danker seems to have an "ideal" body type, and Margaret's group of friends both desire Laura's body and frequently ridicule it. The "ideal" female body in this novel is developed, like the "naked girl in the middle" (71-72) of Margaret's father's *Playboy* magazine with "huge" (72) breasts that are nearly "out of proportion" (72). A classmate named Laura Danker seems to fit this image, and when Margaret first sees Laura, Blume writes, "There was this girl, who I thought *was* the teacher, but she turned out to be a kid in our class. She was very tall...with eyes shaped like a cat's. You could see the outline of her bra through her blouse and you could also tell from the front that it wasn't the smallest size" (25). Margaret is not the only character who observes and thinks about the female body, since her group of friends meets often after school for their club, "The Pre-Teen Sensations," to talk about boys and female bodies. Strangely, the girls frequently insult the very traits that they desire. After they look at a model in *Playboy* and laugh at what Laura Danker might look like at eighteen, with even larger breasts, the "meeting ended with fifty rounds of

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‘*We must – we must – we must increase our bust!*’ (72). Nancy also believes “When you grow...you’ll want everybody to see you. Like those girls in *Playboy*” (71). Yet despite confessing their desire to have large breasts for “everybody to see” (71), the girls berate Laura for wearing a form-fitting sweater and even spread a rumor in their small group claiming that their teacher noticed her revealing outfit: “Laura Danker wore a sweater to school for the first time. Mr. Benedict’s eyes almost popped out of his head. Actually, I didn’t notice Mr. Benedict’s eyes, but Nancy told me” (62). After she recalls Laura’s fitted sweater, Margaret laments, “Even if I stuffed my bra with socks I still wouldn’t look like Laura Danker” (62). Margaret then quickly shifts her thoughts to a rumor of Laura Danker going “behind the A&P with Evan and Moose” (62). Since Margaret is attracted to Moose, her tendency to shift quickly to this rumor directly demonstrates how her disgust actually forms from her jealousy and desire to look like Laura Danker to attract boys like Moose.

The girls in the “Pre-Teen Sensations” especially desire the onset of their periods, and seem envious of peers who have already experienced menstruation. The group prepares diligently with supplies and agrees, “the first one to get her period had to tell the others all about it. Especially how it feels” (33). This also plays into the girls’ jealousy of Laura Danker, since they claim, “she’s been wearing a bra since fourth grade and I’ll bet she gets her period” (30). Yet instead of including Laura and discovering what it actually felt like to be more mature and developed, the girls instead decide to wait for their own development and to ridicule and gossip about Laura Danker in the meantime. Overall, the “ideal” female body is sexually mature, and because all of the girls in the “Pre-Teen Sensations” are eager for their menstrual cycles, Laura Danker seems to have the “ideal” female body in both shape and maturity, and she ultimately represents what the girls most desire. Yet the “Pre-Teen Sensations” downplay their admiration for Laura Danker’s “ideal” image through vicious and insipid rumors, while simultaneously attempting to become the ideal that they mock.

While the other girls, particularly Nancy, spread rumors about Laura Danker’s body and sexuality, Margaret is the first to realize that their envy and disgust for Laura is actually misplaced desire to be her, and she begins to question the view that she and the other girls have of “ideal” beauty. After Margaret confronts Laura with the vicious rumors the “Pre-Teen Sensations” have been circulating, Laura denies the

rumors, becomes very angry, and then runs out of the library. Margaret pursues her, apologizes for believing the false rumors, and even confesses to Laura, “If you want to know the truth... well, I wish I looked more like you than like me” (117). After this confession, Laura replies, “I’d gladly trade places with you” (117). Because of this exchange between the two girls, Margaret begins to question the “ideal” of feminine beauty and subsequently loses the desire to gossip about Laura and ridicule the image she formerly desired.

This same envy and desire disguised as disgust is especially prevalent in Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl*, as Serena van der Woodsen is also both incredibly idealized and subsequently also slandered. When von Ziegesar first introduces Serena, she describes her beauty as “magnetic, delicious” (16) and “gifted with the kind of coolness that you can’t acquire by buying the right handbag or the right pair of jeans. She was the girl every boy wants and every girl wants to be” (17). Although she is Serena’s best friend, Blair Waldorf also realizes that when her “magnetic, delicious” (16) friend was gone “it soon became apparent how much easier it was to shine... Suddenly *Blair* was the prettiest, the smartest, the hippest, most happening girl in the room. She became the one everyone looked to. So Blair stopped missing Serena so much” (21-22). As a result, when Serena returns, Blair refuses to give up the place in the spotlight that she claimed in her absence. To maintain her newfound reputation, Blair and her friends begin to spread or encourage rumors about Serena. Like the girls in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, the girls in *Gossip Girl* perpetuate rumors that frequently attack Serena’s sexuality. On her first day back at school, Serena arrives looking slightly disheveled, sporting messy hair and an unstylish new school uniform. Yet as she observes Serena, Blair thinks, “That was one of the things that always infuriated her about Serena. She looked good in anything” (45). As the girls recognize that Serena still looks beautiful, they quickly react with gossip, and one of Blair’s friends remarks, “Maybe she’s just tired... I heard she got kicked out for sleeping with every boy on campus. There were notches in the wall above her bed” (46). While Serena is an “idol” (47) to many of the girls, her “ideal” beauty also frightens them because it diminishes their own beauty in contrast. Like the “Pre-Teen Sensations” of *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, the vicious and privileged girls of Constance Billard School also abuse this image, likely because they worry that they will never be able to achieve it. Although these two

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novels are set many years apart, with *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* originally published in 1970, and *Gossip Girl* published in 2002, these two novels demonstrate the continuing struggle adolescent women face over idealized feminine beauty.

While the “ideal” female body is frequently ridiculed and subject to malicious gossip, it is also a symbol of power in both of the novels. In Blume’s novel, Nancy seems to be the leader of the “Pre-Teen Sensations” from the first time Margaret meets her. The girls are playing outside and Nancy proclaims, “Follow the leader!” (11), and Margaret thinks, “I guessed Nancy was the leader” (11). Throughout much of the novel, Nancy attempts to hold this position in the group and frequently critiques the other girls’ bodies to assert the superiority of her own body and her power. In Beth Younger’s article, “Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature,” she explores the presence and meaning of the “ideal” female body in adolescent literature. As she addresses body image and the depiction of the “ideal” adolescent female body in various Young Adult texts, Younger writes,

Young Adult fiction encourages young women’s self-surveillance of their bodies....Weight appears to function in the same way that white often serves as a default for race; that is, when the race of a character is not specifically delineated, white is assumed. In these Young Adult literature texts, an unacknowledged weightism functions similarly. (47)

Similarly, in both *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* and *Gossip Girl*, thinness is “ideal” and even assumed unless otherwise mentioned. Although the girls in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* mostly envy Laura Danker because of her large breasts, they also hold thinness as an ideal. Being thin or more “ideal” is a means of asserting power, and Younger also states, “Thus, confident, assertive, and responsible, thin characters in Young Adult fiction do more than simply display themselves as models of appropriate body type; they also perform body assessments on themselves” (48-49). In fact, Nancy not only assesses her own body, but also the bodies of the other members of the “Pre-Teen Sensations.” Blume particularly depicts thinness as a desirable trait that Nancy assesses when she writes, “We sat around on the porch and Nancy brought us cokes and cookies. When Gretchen helped herself to six Oreos at once Nancy asked her how much weight she’d gained over the summer.

Gretchen put back four cookies and said, ‘Not much’ (30). By reminding Gretchen about her struggle with her weight, Nancy asserts her power over Gretchen, and shames her for not being as “ideal” as Nancy is.

Nancy not only establishes her authority over Gretchen because of her weight, she also critiques other undesirable traits on the other girls and stresses her own superiority in development. Nancy mocks Margaret for being “still flat” (6) and quickly adds, “‘I’m growing already,’ Nancy said, sticking her chest way out. ‘In a few years I’m going to look like one of those girls in *Playboy*’” (6). After Nancy’s confident remark, Margaret feels somewhat defeated and confesses, “I was beginning to feel like some kind of underdeveloped little kid” (7). Overall, Nancy holds her power over the other girls in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* by frequently reminding them that her body is more “ideal” and making them feel insignificant and lacking in contrast.

While thinness as an ideal is mentioned briefly in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, the girls of *Gossip Girl* seem to think about weight much more often. Blair Waldorf seems to be the leader of her small group and fits Beth Younger’s claim that “thin characters appear responsible and powerful” (46). Blair participates in advanced classes, volunteers, and plans very large, organized events. Overall, Blair is very organized and controlled, and this element of her personality extends to her weight, as she often binges and purges in an attempt to control her own body. Younger’s article also explains, “it is the thin and sleek figure that allows young women to attain a sense of power and control of their own destinies” (51). Blair’s bingeing and purging seems especially triggered by Serena’s presence, as Blair feels the growing need to be more beautiful and powerful than her stunning friend. When Serena first returns, von Ziegesar writes, “[Blair] had forgotten how pretty Serena’s hair was. How perfect her skin was. How long and thin her legs were. What Nate’s eyes looked like when he looked at her – like he never wanted to blink. He never looked at Blair that way” (21). It is also during Serena’s first visit that we learn about Blair’s eating disorder. Serena immediately seems to reclaim her place in the spotlight, and “had the table’s attention” (34) at dinner. As Serena captivates the other guests, Blair quickly binges on the array of food, “tuning out Serena’s voice as she spooned it into her mouth” (34). Quickly after, “her stomach rebelled, and she shot up suddenly... running down the hall to her bedroom, straight into its adjoining bathroom....Blair kneeled over the toilet and stuck her middle finger as

far down her throat as it would go. Her eyes began to tear and then her stomach convulsed" (34). Blair realizes her actions are "disgusting and horrible, and she knew she shouldn't do it, but at least she'd feel better when it was over" (35). When Blair has to share a table at brunch with Serena and her family, this again triggers her bingeing and purging. After she learns about Nate's fling with Serena, the brunch still stirs her feelings for Nate, and she thinks, "Sexy Nate. Her Nate. God, she wanted him" (160). However, Blair "had her pride" (160), and she "clacked away in her heels to stick her finger down her throat in the ladies' room" (160) in an effort to maintain control over herself.

While Blair feels that bingeing and purging gives her power, she is actually making herself weaker and exhibiting lack of control and loss of power. Younger writes, "For many young women controlling food intake provides a sense of power, but that sense of power is false, since deliberately reducing one's body size usually diminishes physical strength" (51). This is especially true as Blair nearly loses control at the Peregrine Falcon fundraiser. As she runs to the restroom to vomit, a woman stops her from the "Central Park Save the Peregrine Falcon Foundation" (180), and Blair realizes that she might lose control of her body in front of the prestigious woman: "She couldn't hold on any longer. Her eyes darted around the crowded room, desperately seeking help" (180). In this instance, Blair loses her power and control and instead needs Nate to come and rescue her from the potentially disastrous social situation, and allow her to escape to the restroom.

Blair is not the only character who feels the need to assert her thinness (and subsequently her power) as "Gossip Girl," the nameless and often omniscient entity that reports gossip on the novel's adolescents, also frequently assesses her own body and the bodies of other young women. On her gossip blog, "Gossip Girl" chides two girls for eating fast food and notes, "I and K are going to have a little trouble fitting into those cute dresses they picked up at Bendel's" (38). Later she triumphantly notices that the girls had to return their dresses and snidely says, "oh dear, are they getting too fat?...Too bad it's not a toga party" (82). In contrast, "Gossip Girl" establishes her own thinness when she claims, "I had a great time at *Kiss on the Lips*. I must have lost fifteen pounds dancing – not that I needed to. Needless to say, I'm feeling good" (198). Overall, Blair Waldorf and "Gossip Girl" desire control and power, which they believe they can achieve by maintaining a thin, "ideal" body. This lack of

change in Blair's thoughts and behavior, and additional support of this view from the narrator, shows an unchanging view of "ideal" feminine beauty in *Gossip Girl*. This ultimately differs from Margaret's changing ideal in *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, as Margaret comes to realize that "ideal" beauty is not the same for every young woman.

Throughout Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl* and Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* the female characters in the novel frequently feel jealousy and insecurity about their own bodies and beauty, and disguise their desire to be like their more "ideal" peers by perpetuating rumors about the girl they envy. While the two novels share many similarities in exemplifying the pressure adolescent women face to fit idealized images of beauty, these two novels diverge when examining change in characters throughout the novel. While her discussion with Laura Danker changes Margaret's view of beauty and her behavior towards Laura, Blair Waldorf never changes her need for social influence, her jealousy of Serena, and her desire for control over her body. Even "Gossip Girl," the author of the incredibly influential social website, includes assertions of her own thinness and frequently comments on the flaws of other girls, particularly when it relates to their weight. Published more recently in 2002, *Gossip Girl* reveals the overwhelming pressure that young women face in today's society to fit an "ideal" image of beauty and thinness. Unlike Margaret's healthy and maturing view of appearance, the girls of *Gossip Girl* have a disturbingly static view of beauty, and Blair still seeks today's "ideal" image in a way that seems powerful but in reality weakens her body in her quest to become like Serena, "the girl every boy wants and every girl wants to be" (17).

### **Works Cited**

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