

**THE SINGLE GIRL IN THE CITY:
SEX AND URBAN LIFE IN AMERICAN TV SHOWS**

**LA FILLE CÉLIBATAIRE DANS LA VILLE : LA VIE SEXUELLE ET
URBAINE DANS LES SÉRIES TÉLÉVISÉES AMÉRICAINES**

**FATA SINGURĂ DE LA ORAȘ: VIAȚA SEXUALĂ ȘI URBANĂ ÎN
SERIALELE DE TELEVIZIUNE AMERICANE**

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Abstract

The paper analyses the construction of gender roles in TV shows by presenting the social conflict embodied in outsiders who both struggle and hesitate to become part of the elite. U.S. television show "Gossip Girl" is based on the series of young-adult novels by Cecily von Ziegesar: closely examining the lives of students at an elite Manhattan private school, the show has gradually turned into "Sex and the City" for teenagers. Although the target audiences are completely different, the two shows have much in common: "Sex and the City" follows four fashionable and charismatic characters on their continuum of sexual conquests and relationship disillusionment, while "Gossip Girl" deals with teenage rebellion in the lives of privileged youngsters who are living life as equally to the full as their older counterparts in "Sex and the City". The paper will focus on prominent role of gender representations in "Gossip Girl" and "Sex and the City".

Rezumat

Lucrarea analizează construcția rolurilor de gen prin prezentarea conflictului social reprezentat de inadaptații care se luptă, însă cu ezitări, să devină parte din elită. Serialul de televiziune american „Gossip Girl” ecranizează seria de romane pentru tineret de Cecily von Ziegesar: examinând îndeaproape viețile elevilor de la o elitistă școală privată din Manhattan, serialul s-a transformat treptat într-un fel de „Totul despre sex” pentru adolescenți. Deși publicul țintă este unul complet diferit, cele două seriale au multe în comun: „Totul despre sex” urmărește patru personaje mondene și carismatice într-un proces continuu de cuceriri sexuale și dezamăgiri amoroase, în timp ce „Gossip Girl” are în prim-plan rebeliunea adolescentină în viețile unor tineri privilegiați care trăiesc viața la maxim, la fel ca omoloagele lor mai în vârstă din „Totul despre sex”. Lucrarea se va axa pe rolul proeminent al reprezentărilor de gen în „Gossip Girl” și „Totul despre sex”.

Key words: TV shows, gender, representations, technology.

Cuvinte cheie: seriale de televiziune, gen, reprezentări, tehnologie.

Singledom and Stereotypes

The single girl is an important figure in American cultural history, having appeared for the first time in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and reemerging in the postfeminist TV shows in the

last decade of the twentieth century. Theodore Dreiser's novel introduces a young woman who is on her own in the big city which she conquers, owing to the fact that she is guided by self-interest, emotionally blank, fond of material things and willing to be a kept woman. As the postfeminist woman came into the focus, the single girl has been portrayed either as frantic and fragile Ally McBeal, or as frisky thirtysomethings in "Sex and the City". While Dreiser was accused of failing to place any moral judgment on Carrie's lifestyle, the authors of the series are criticised for casting the four women as overly sexual, which clearly shows that female singledome has always been associated with sexual independence and the freedom to choose. Despite some diverging details, some similarities can be found between Dreiser's heroine and her namesake Carrie Bradshaw from the hit TV show "Sex and the City": both women are willing to explore the opportunities the city affords and turn out to be skeptical about the idea that married life can prove satisfactory.

U.S. television show "Gossip Girl" is based on the series of young-adult novels by Cecily von Ziegesar: closely examining the lives of students at an elite Manhattan private school, the show has gradually turned into "Sex and the City" for teenagers. Although the target audiences are completely different, the two shows have much in common: "Sex and the City" follows four fashionable and charismatic characters in their thirties on their continuum of sexual conquests and relationship disillusionment, whereas "Gossip Girl" deals with teenage rebellion in the lives of privileged youngsters who are living life as equally to the full as their older counterparts in "Sex and the City".

"Ally McBeal" was a success at approximately the same time "Sex and the City" was on the air, because it undermined the stereotype of a female attorney confronting the law and brought to the audience what has often been labeled as "a postfeminist role model" and "the icon of 90's feminism". Ally is presented as a modern career woman who can both enjoy the gains of feminism and the traditions of femininity but, owing to her flawed character, never actually does. Some views of the title characters were even inclined to take Ally as a depressing reminder of how much work the women's movement still has to do. The main character, superbly played by Calista Flockhart, is an intelligent lawyer who excels in the courtroom but her private life is a shambles. Her unsuccessful search for perfection makes her insecure and vulnerable, and increasingly neurotic and picky as the story of her romantic quest goes on. Ally's belief that her real life begins when she is married with children made her close to the thirty something female America, but her faltering both to escape the traditional gender roles and to reproduce them made the identification difficult. Her yearning for domestic felicity would seem utterly non-feminist if she were not constantly undermining her own efforts to achieve it.

However, this female melancholic can also be seen as a warning or even a threat. In her article *A Role Model We Can Live Without*, Kathleen J. Wu asks: "Does the main character have to be such a rotten role model for women, women lawyers and the little girls who aspire to be them?". Herself an accomplished lawyer, Wu fears that McBeal might become an endearing symbol of the single professional woman. The huge impact of the show may result, according to her, in the burgeoning of the ditzy and fragile job-applicants who complain over their personal life and throw tantrums. The fear might be exaggerated, but the knowledge that television offers opposing clichés with nothing in between rationalizes it to an extent. Kathleen Wu points out that we are offered either "bubble-heads" such as McBeal, which prattle about men during their office hours, or "stone-faced" creatures who live solely for their jobs, like Dana Scully from "The X-files".

The issue of the stereotypes is further complicated by the fact that women's sexuality in the series is presented in an ambiguous and confusing manner. The women are objectified to a great extent, their sexuality colliding with their professional accomplishment. For instance, Ally's roommate and best friend district attorney Renee is portrayed as a sexually aggressive "spider woman" in contrast to whom the quirky heroine appears to be a dutiful daughter of patriarchy. Renee is hypersexual on the verge of lascivious, wearing low cut suits, exposing her big breasts and flirting aggressively. On the other hand, Ally is thin and childlike, with nonexistent breasts and curves, using subtler ways both to attract men and win her cases. She is prone to such

emotional outbursts, impulsive actions and erratic behaviour that Jennifer Pozner dismisses her as a “shallow” and “bratty” person with “high-school dating anxieties” The physical appearances even affect their relationship: the ample-breasted Renee is a mother figure to the fragile and insecure Ally, supporting her in her numerous crises and trying to bring her back to earth.

Ally's romantic relationships are accordingly immature. Desperately trying to overcome the obsession with her now happily married old flame Billy, she goes through a series of disastrous commitments. Her attempt to date two men at the same time ends in a didactic plot device: the beaux turn out to be the father and the son. A seemingly soothing online affair almost ends in court, since Ally's Internet date who sounded so mature turns out to be under age. Ally's troublesome flights from the repulsive singledom into the stormy affairs serve to confirm the postfeminist issue in a comical way: being single brings tranquillity.

Ally's unhappiness and loneliness is both an outcome of her mental condition and a self-imposed attitude. She loves being weak and unhappy, and her singledom thus turns into a perfect excuse for a masochism of an exceedingly exhibitionistic kind. Regretfully, Ally's feminism is more sheer narcissism than a life orientation, and her singledom more a curse or a character flaw than the matter of choice. While fragile and immature, Ally is best being on her own: her staying single in the end of the show proves the point.

The Politics of Singledom in „Sex and the City“

Writing as a profession and a road less travelled to maturity becomes the focal point of one of the most popular TV shows in the States. The six-year run of the television series "Sex and the City" (from 1998 to 2004) induced a wide discussion on gender, femininity and social role models. The TV show that tackled issues such as sexuality, promiscuity and new feminist singledom boldly inverts the conventions of the so called film narrative. The ironic perspective dominates both the plot and the ways characters react to one another, resulting in two effects: in paying tribute to Woody Allen as the post-sexual-revolution romance chronicler, but also adding to his male and predominantly *schlemiel* perspective a more explicitly female point of view. The neurotic, erratic, insecure and reflective writer-protagonist who talks back to the camera came to be Woody Allen's contribution to the development of contemporary romantic comedy, even though this innovative practice turned out to be rather bland and boring with the proliferation of the so called chick flicks and the Bridget-Jones-like characters of young women.

Yet Carrie Bradshaw is an aspiring writer who is particularly good at observation of social manners, but also a former party girl doomed to take Manhattan. She is closer to Allen's *schlemiels* than to twentysomething women on the verge of a nervous breakdown of "My Best Friend's Wedding", "27 Dresses" or similar chick flicks designed to appeal to a female target audience. Allen's most noted films address the struggles of well-to-do urbanites in an irrevocably changed dating landscape; the plots regularly deal with insecure intellectuals who fight their impractical and introspective routines, usually at the moment when they are in danger of losing someone dear.

"Sex and the City"'s formulaic structure begins with the main heroine's quest for inspiration. Each episode focuses on Carrie's thoughts and experiences connected to the topic she intends to explore in her weekly column. She observes the Manhattanites and their way of life: endless cocktail parties and six-figure salaries. The series uses a narrative structure unique to television comedy, with the intention to portray several complex issues faced by single women in their thirties. While the show is primarily focused on the lives of single women, throughout the series each character has been portrayed in a variety of relationship states, including committed relationships, living together, marriage, and divorce. Like many domestic comedies of our time, "Sex and the City" has incorporated qualities of the serial or soap opera that make for what many researchers have studied as pleasure in melodrama (Fiske, 1990).

“Sex and the City” demonstrates that a simple role reversal is enough for a particular “groundbreaking” representation of sex and sexuality. Women are presented as being sensitive and multidimensional, whereas men are objectified and rarely referred to by their real names. Still, such

a “reversed” attitude (which relies heavily upon the literary tradition of stock characters) gives way to the romantic quest for Mr Right yet again.

In her text „What’s the Harm in Believing?“ Joanna di Mattia suggests that the show repositions hegemonic masculinity and its heroes. As living examples of the depoliticisation of the feminist movement, Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha stand for the new female empowerment and the new politics of singledom, charting a redefinition of the modern woman who chooses to remain unmarried. By the series finale, all four have wound up in partnerships, and the fact raises questions about the ideologies running underwater: Ally’s pursuit of marital bliss turns out to be unsuccessful, whereas the self-reliant foursome apparently renounce their singledom for the sake of romantic bonding.

The single girl in “Sex and the City” is offered two competing archetypes of masculinity: a romantic seducer in the tradition of the cruel Heathcliff or the saucy Rhett Butler, or a strong and sensitive “rescuer” in the manner of Edgar Linton or Casper Goodwood from Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*. Carrie Bradshaw is a modern Catherine Earnshaw, less violent and more sardonic, who passionately seeks to unite sexual excitement with loyalty, and her fantasies are projected upon Big and Aidan. Big is a Wall Street tycoon of social status and sexual prowess – both a “big love” and a “big trouble” for Carrie - while Aidan is strong and solid as the wood from which he makes furniture and just as reliable and down-to-earth as James’s stubborn suitor. His rescue mission is to save Carrie from the devastating effects of romancing an emotionally impenetrable phallic hero.

“Sex and the City” is unique in portraying women who discuss and act toward men the way many men have long treated women. Although sexual behavior is a theme often discussed, the show is essentially about the loneliness in searching for intimacy, romance, and viable relationships. It fully belongs to the feminism’s “third wave” – that is, to the postfeminist generation that has never lived in a world without the women’s movement and justly claims feminism as its birthright. Postfeminism is focused on individualism, since the collectivity has already managed to fulfill the political goals and demands. It is aware of marriage’s sordid social and economic history and there is no pressure to rush into tying the knot, since singlehood stops being equivalent to spinsterhood, a humiliating and dismal social and economical status. Marriage can even be repulsive, as seen in “Change of a Dress” (4:15), the episode in which Carrie reacts with nausea, panic attack and rash to the engagement ring, the wedding dress and the idea of marriage in general. The language and the pageantry of the wedding will be used in the fifth episode of the fifth season, “Plus One is the Loneliest Number”, where the release of Carrie’s book is described as the milestone event of her life.

Many aspects of the characters’ lives in „Sex and the City“ are out of the picture: the viewer learns virtually nothing of their pre-Manhattan existences. The biological families are rarely mentioned or seen, since they are replaced by “the family of friends” and made obliterate by the strong focus upon female solidarity. Whereas in “Ally McBeal” everything happens either in the office or in the courtroom, the fabulous four of the HBO’s hit are rarely seen working. The setting of the series is classically picaresque, since the movement is favoured over fixity and public space to domesticity. Carrie and her friends seem to live exciting lives of constant hanging-out as a priceless perk of singledom. Still, they never take their status for granted. A great number of episodes address the pros and cons of single life, the institution of marriage and the romantic commitments in general. Although embracing their status, they search to settle, some of them winding up with partners inferior to themselves: marrying the loyal bartender or converting for the sake of the devoted Jewish husband is presented as a better solution than Ally McBeal’s moving out of the city with her daughter. Whereas the lonesome Bostonian remains partnerless, simply trading her status of a single girl for the position of single mother, the four New Yorkers live to learn about the value of commitment.

The Beautiful and The Damned: „Gossip Girl“

The "Gossip Girl" series follows the lives of a Manhattan "brat pack", the students at an elite Manhattan private school. Based on a best-selling series of novels for teen-age girls by Cecily von Ziegesar which are centered on the juicy extracurricular doings and desires of the most privileged kids on the Upper East Side, the show has been likened by critics to "Sex and the City" for teenagers because of its salacious story lines and trend-setting fashion. This world of "the beautiful and the damned" is packed with wickedness, uncontrollable fluctuation of money, carnal desire and power, open only to the few, but of great interest to the many.

In her books von Ziegesar created five main characters: there is a bad girl gone good Serena van der Woodsen (a variation on Fitzgerald's beautiful but fickle Daisy Buchanan), a clever, conniving Blair Waldorf with the obsessive need to control others (invoking comparison to Jane Austen's Emma), a pretty and feeble-minded Nate Archibald (who could be likened to Bronte's Edgar Linton), overtly ambitious and sex obsessed Chuck Bass (an antiromantic, Heathcliff-like hero), and lonely and sensitive Brooklyn boy Dan Humphrey. The characters in the novels and the show attend Constance Billard School for Girls and Saint Jude's School for Boys, both being wealthy, private brother-sister high schools in New York City. Despite, or maybe due to, their wealthy backgrounds that allow them everything from big spending to sexual misconduct, they all have secrets and dark obsessions they are eager to conceal. However, all the secrets are ultimately revealed through Gossip Girl, the blog which exposes the characters on regular basis, with an inexplicable insight into their private lives. The blog is turned into a dark force of technology that also serves as a sort of parental control boys and girls miss in their respective families.

"Gossip Girl" does have some similar features to "Sex and the City": the latter follows four women "eager to explore the opportunities the city affords", all of them ultimately skeptical that the domestic life can satisfy their every need (Akass 2004: 84), while "Gossip Girl" deals with the lives of privileged teenagers who are living life as equally to the full as their older counterparts. Both TV shows resurrect a historical and social type of the single girl, one around which heated political and cultural debates about women's place in society have often centered (Akass 2004: 84). The central female character in "Gossip Girl", Serena, is revealed to have had a scandalous past that continues to haunt her, and she is known for her many on-again, off-again relationships with countless male characters. Serena's best friend Blair have a tumultuous, devastating sexual relationship with Serena's step brother Chuck Bass: the constant conflict between the passion and the freedom they seek in their love affair on the one hand and the socially structured conventionality of the world they live in on the other bears a close resemblance to the tone and the setting of *Wuthering Heights*, a novel centered on unconditional love between savage and demonic Heathcliff and Catherine who is wild and untamed, but yearning for social status and domesticity.

The two shows are set among the lifestyles of Manhattan elite that their target audiences can only dream of: the unattainable world of the rich is made more mysterious and more attractive through random records of both fully analyzed Carrie Bradshaw and the unknown Gossip Girl. The only attempt "Gossip Girl" has made to explore class differences is through the inclusion of a family who lives in Brooklyn instead of the posh Upper East Side. Dan Humphrey's family, however, seems to be only "less wealthy", as they still belong to the upper-middle class. The family's two high school students attend a private school and live in a spacious loft in Brooklyn with their father, an ex rock star who started running an art gallery, so they are not exactly textbook paupers. Needless to say, the show significantly misrepresents the nature of class boundaries and distorts what poverty actually is. This is compounded by the fact that the "rich" youth on the show regularly mock the economic status of these private school kids and their former rock-star dad. Later in the series the father of this family actually marries a wealthy woman, and thus the class rift the show once purported to have is effaced.

Each episode of "Gossip Girl" begins with a blog page of the Gossip Girl who narrates the plot, provides information and comments, pictures and judgments which make the lives of the characters open to public eye and comments. "Gossip Girl" is, just like "Sex and the City", narrated in a format which seemingly has been inspired by several TV series of recent years: the controlling

and omniscient voice of an invisible but omnipresent person seems to be a convention that helps much with plot inconsistencies, but also adds to mystery and suspense. But while the narrator of "Desperate Housewives," who tells us of the life in Fairview, has been dead for a long time, the character in "Gossip Girl," who supplies the viewer with an omniscient point of view, remains unknown. The voiceover narration comes from the mysterious Gossip Girl who could be a journalist investigating the world of the rich and the damned, an informed insider or a sinister force who carries out some kind of vendetta. She is a presence, an omniscient stand-in for our voyeuristic selves who chronicles online the activities of the half-dozen main characters. The conspiratorial, knowing tone of the narrator is supported by technology, since text messages, photos taken with the cell phone and other electronic data contribute a lot to the degree of Gossip Girl's involvement in the plot; but this hidden medium that rules lives on the Upper East Side still depends a lot on the data that characters supply her for their own, ulterior motives. Gossip Girl is thus a crossover between an amateur spy and an aspiring writer, allowing sometimes her narration to slip into the social commentary similar to the one employed in Martin Scorsese's "Age of Innocence".

Being nobody's friend, Gossip Girl seems to be everybody's ally, as text and picture messages are sent to her by friends and enemies alike. Her identity has been shrouded in mystery for the past five seasons of the show, and there have been sporadic guesses according to which, for instance, Gossip Girl might be self-destructive and vindictive Serena's former friend Georgina Sparks, a socialite who executed one vendetta after another against the show's principle cast. The Gossip Girl's stalkerazzi lens, as well as her whereabouts and identity, remained unknown until the show's finale, when we learned the implausible truth: the young aspiring writer, a Brooklynite, has been registering the happenings all along, and producing sentences tinged with irony and pity.

Singledom and Technology

The use of technology on „Gossip Girl“ is prominent, but goes almost unnoticed by the viewers: as they follow the story line which repeats classic twists and turns of the soap opera plots, they tend to forget that the show is based on the blog. The technological format of communication becomes even less important than the fact that Carrie of "Sex and the City" is a digital immigrant, to whom new practice of interaction is totally foreign, although she regularly uses her lap top to jot down her observations.

Gossip Girl is the authorial voice that makes up for the inconsistencies of the plot, she fills in the gaps and lapses by writing the posts about relationships between the characters, scandals between students and teachers, or the outsiders and newcomers that threaten to change the routine of the Upper East Side. The main use of communication in the show is through text and picture messages, yet the constantly changing plot masks the use of technology. Contrary to the stereotypes that we assume that men are technology savvy, with the power to control machines, both male and female characters equally fear Gossip Girl. This stalkerazzi technique adds to the generally weak plot, that abounds in illogical resolutions, sudden changes of heart and inexplicable alterations in characters, who go from angelic to demonic in no time. What is well known to the socialites is that if Gossip Girl assumes something, there is a good chance that the rest of the society will assume it too. Thus the effaced commentator of the life on the Upper East Side might also be a moral touchstone and the indifferent judge of personal moral values.

While blogging is generally assumed to be an anti-social activity for young nerds, "Gossip Girl" has made it trendy: instead of advertising online networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter, the authors of the series wisely use blogging as the way to remain anonymous and still spread inside information on what the characters are doing. Primarily focused on the lives of young men and women in the most privileged part of Manhattan, and showing how their lives are exposed to the public eye to the fullest, "Gossip Girl" seriously misuses technology. However, blogging is also used to show what a great part of their life actually revolves around intrigues and plots, which aim at exerting and inducing more power over their rivals or outsiders.

Carol Platt Liebau, a cultural commentator who has written about a sex-obsessed culture damaging young girls, accused the show of depicting high school girls as gossipy sex objects, as American girls of today are "forced to navigate a minefield more challenging, and pressure-filled than ever before when it comes to one vital topic: sex" (Platt Liebau 2007: 10). Being sexy has become "the ultimate accolade" (Platt Liebau 2007: 14) and the pervasiveness of sex in today's culture has left a considerable imprint on young people, leaving their parents unable to react in the proper way against what Liebau calls "the decline of decency." The parents of Chuck, Blair, Serena or Nate are either distant, indifferent or estranged. The only exception is Rufus, Dan's father, a former rock musician who runs an art gallery in Brooklyn. Serena, Blair, and other girls in the show are also reading Tolstoy, Jane Austen and F. S. Fitzgerald, playing sports, tutoring grade-schoolers, writing plays, and raising money for good causes. Despite its weak spots and unconvincing twists and turns, some viewers see "Gossip Girl" as a strategy of over-the-top escapism, a nice break from dreary everyday life, and also a kind of guide through the trials of high school and bad parenting.

New York City is a character in "Gossip Girl", but not in the same romantic way it was in "Sex and the City". The city is a scene of decadence for rich young adults who practice casual sex and underage drinking. As opposed to Brooklyn, the Upper East Side is shown as a place of reckless social ambition where social hierarchy seems to be as important as in any 19th century novel. Unlike her forerunner Becky Sharp who ruthlessly elbowed her way into wealthy aristocratic society, Blair Waldorf already has all the money and position anyone could want. However—and, again, unlike her prototypes—Blair never harms anyone but herself. She is portrayed as a dark, brunette queen, but with vulnerabilities that keep her from being a total villain.

The gender-explained categories of subject and object are discourse and context bound constructs, rather than biological, and are in connection with relations of power signification (Topalov 2009: 194). Gender and gaze are connected in many subtle ways in both the "Sex and the City" and "Gossip Girl." The characters from "Gossip Girl" are not eager to explore the opportunities the city affords, since they feel at home there, neither do they automatically reject the domestic and married life. The age difference changes everything, and the teenage characters from "Gossip Girl" are not focused on settling down as the thirtysomething women from "Sex and the City." The issue of the stereotypes is further complicated by the fact that women's sexuality in the series is presented in an ambiguous and confusing manner. The women are objectified to a great extent, their sexuality colliding with their professional accomplishment. There are no "groundbreaking" representations of sex and sexuality. "Gossip Girl" explores the unnavigability of friendship, the joy and disappointments of dating, but the ruling passion is power. Sex is used as a weapon, and mutual contempt regularly serves as aphrodisiac.

"Gossip Girl" goes further than most shows in depicting the excesses of the rich and underage, but most of all it represents the next evolutionary stage of girl power television after "Sex and the City." It becomes the amalgam of many genres: borrowing the rituals and cliches of the soap opera, it provides a new media and technology context for the social chronicles about the beautiful and the damned Upper East Siders.

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