

Extended Essay

Code: **hmb426**

Research question:

In what ways does the show Gossip Girl portray traditions in New York's elite class?

November 2019

Word count: 3918

Table of Contents

Introduction:

Chapter 1: New York's elite class and the relevance of traditions.

Chapter 2: How traditions play a role in the American family and with this how is it pursued with wealth.

Conclusion:

Bibliography:

Introduction:

In this extended essay, I will analyze how the behavior of people that are part of an elite class, especially in a city like New York, known for having every kind of social class possible, from homeless people to extremely rich and wealthy people. In this case, I will explain how the elite class carries family traditions and furthermore, how their social and economic state influences their family development and their kid's emotional growth when it comes to talking about specific things such as in traditions.

The artifact that I will be using is the worldwide famous series *Gossip Girl*, that at first, it was a series of books published in April 2002 and stopped in the month of May 2007, and after all the success it had, the author, Cecily Von Ziegesar sold the legal right to the books to Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage to take the series to a young adult show in The CW network for six seasons from September 19, 2007, to December 17, 2012. *Gossip Girl* was a big hit between those years and to this day teenagers are still watching the series.

To summarize the story plot, *Gossip Girl* is about the scandalous life's of a group of teenagers and their families living their best life in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, but when it comes to it, it shows the struggles of being part of the elite class and the social pressure that comes with it. They are often facing situations that involve their families, friends, relationships or their own future that show a different side of what may be everyone thinks "having money" is and that it can be very miserable or lonely when it seems like they have a perfect life, proving the viewers wrong or maybe opening their minds up to see a different perspective on this social class.

Moreover, it all starts when Serena Van der Woodsen comes back to New York from boarding school and that's where she's first spotted from *Gossip Girl*, which is a gossip blog about what is going on in the schools Constance Billiard for the girls and its sister school, St. Jude's for the boys. *Gossip Girl* is an anonymous person exposing rumors about the students and their families, but they are used to it and they don't find out who it is at the end. Another main character is Blair Waldorf, Serena's best friend she is a very focused girl on status, wealth and academic achievement who wants perfection in every aspect of her life but learns that it is

not always possible even though she manages to make the best out of every situation. This is a very interesting character because of her ideas and how besides her being such a spoiled girl she is very mature and always finds a way to cope with different everyday situations. And with that, I will evidence my research with studies that support what I am trying to prove which is how are traditions influenced by New York's elite in this case.

I am analyzing this in order for me to get a wider perspective into what society thinks and why social classes are such a determining factor when it comes to family or traditions and holidays. With this meaning that they probably are very influenced by the number of cultures that they hold in just one country or maybe just the fact that with them being a first world country they have such high standards that sort of limit situations. I will also carry an open-mindedness through my process and that will let me see things from different perspectives other than mine. When talking about the holidays, it is a word that has a different meaning to the British culture than to the American culture. In the American culture it means a festivity versus in the British culture, it means a short vacation.

The present study is a work prepared in the subject of English B, category 2 (culture and society). Throughout the study of a series inside the English speaking language and American culture. Going further with studies and how the artifact can help show the reader the situations that I will show in this essay. The importance of this research is to see how the American culture is influenced by holidays and with that their behavior in this kind of situation.

I will divide the upcoming investigation and analysis into two chapters in order to explore the research question: The first one is going to be about the influence of New York's elite in holidays, and in the second chapter I will be talking about the resemblance with Gossip Girl's behavior in holidays and everyday life.

Chapter 1: New York's elite class and the relevance of traditions

In 1902, the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto was the one who invented the word “elite” that comes from the Latin. “*eligere*” which means to select, because of a theory that he developed when he turned his hand into sociology, called “circulation of elites”. There are a lot of predominant features in New York's elite class that are generalized most of the time by society, referring to them as very abysmal and selfish people, just because of their economic status, even though it can often be like that because of how they are influenced by money, society and their own culture, it makes it a clear example of how people get bias by that fact. This often influenced by of course, the amount of money that people that have this status have, and it is often money that has been passed down because of family businesses or money that has been worked by a very important person. When talking about elite, another aspect of it are the different social classes that exist according to Boundless sociology there are classes such as upper, upper middle, middle, working, under, working poor. But the ones that stand the most are upper, middle and poor with this meaning that there is a social structure that creates that resemblance.

The fact that money changes people is true because of the social pressure that exists when someone is managing such an important decision when it comes to investing it or not because of how it is a tool that can do either good and bad things and it is a social responsibility. This is why it is often judged by the lower classes maybe because they feel some sort of envy of the economic power that they have or their luxurious way of living, and of course, they are a role model to a lot of people that aspire to work and grow to be as successful as them. So, they are basically famous people since they are treated like one, they even get invited to important events just because of their name or their spot in society.

It is truly alarming how many cases of corruption exist and to this day are still happening with its numbers getting bigger every time. This is shown in a corruption index by Trading Economics in the US, where they also point out how this is. shown in an executive side of things which gives it another perspective since most of the time this is mostly heard of in a political way, but this proves how bad corruption can be and that usually, it is in places such as big brands or companies where their success mostly comes from corruption or money laundering. Just like in the show Gossip Girl, the students go to schools that are so expensive that it makes it almost impossible for a student from an upper-middle-class to get in, and where

the only expectation are scholarships. This leads to meaning that the students that attend this schools come from wealthy families that most probably are owners of big enterprises or businesses where money, of course, is the main priority because of a way of living that they are used to or just because America has given the idea that every US citizen is “living the American dream” as it is, is a society that is built in the idea that money buys happiness and that it is so industrialized in a way that makes it so that the more you own or have the better you are.

Another example of how this situation is portrayed is with Disney because they are focused on the Americanized idea of selling happiness with their very expensive parks and attractions with the saying “where all dreams come true” this, of course, is part of their good marketing and selling strategies that are a success to their branding. This is just an example of how money means happiness to American society with one company, but it is shown in many brands of the industry that rich people mean a lot. This is seen a lot in the woman’s behavior in Gossip Girl, how they see shopping as a therapy to healing whatever bad feeling they have going on and without any worries of an spending limit. This is part of the reason why they are always very well dressed by designers and it is a very dominant feature of the show and it has been a reason why the show is also famous for showing very unique couture pieces.

A study about the physiology of social class in the Wiley online library by Anthony S. R. Manstead mentioned that , *“social class differences in identity, cognition, feelings, and behavior make it less likely that working-class individuals can benefit from educational and occupational opportunities to improve their material circumstances”* this is often seen in Jenny’s behavior since she goes into what is called an “emo phase” where she becomes very rebellious and it shows off her insecurity about being part of a high social class but not having the same economic scope as her friends do or as everyone around her which is what makes her feel like she wants to show off or call for attention so that she could feel just as appreciated or noticed like everyone else. The emo trend was a big thing in the United States in between the early 2000s and it was a very popular and famous way for teenagers to express themselves in that culture.

Rufus, who is Dan and Jenny Humphreys father is known for being a pretty calm person and a single dad who does everything for his kids but at the same time has a hard time raising both of them because of where they are located in New York’s elite, trying to cope with his

children not fitting into what the spectrum of social class might be for them. He often faces a lot of economic pressure because he makes a living out of being an artist which is his job where he has to make enough money to maintain two children in very expensive schools, despite them having scholarships. He falls in love with Serena's mother and that immediately becomes another life-changing moment for him because of Lily Vanderwoodsen being a big representative in an executive, social and economic way, it is to be considered how much of Rufus's life had to change and how they were two totally different people that in order to be together had to first break a social stigma that meant that they would both have to change a lot their way of living, with Rufus having to adapt to money and being a social figure of some sort and Lily getting to know other reality where she learns more about the concept of family and she changes.⁶

A very influential person in Gossip Girl is Chuck Bass who grew in money all of his life with a dead mother and an absent and cold father, he had to basically raise himself up. He is a clear example that money cannot buy happiness because of the number of depressive episodes he has because of the lack of absence from his family. He grows up becoming a very superficial man who oftentimes could seem a bit rude but when it came to his friends, he really could show that he was a sensible person, because of the fact that he did so much for his friends because they are the ones that he considers family. So, when Nate calls him to tell him about his father's arrest, even though they were not talking to each other Nate knew that he would be there for him. A study by Ph. D Suniya S. Luthar showed that kids of rich people indeed, even though they could have everything, they turn out as very ungrateful and show very serious levels of maladjustment as teens, displaying issues that tend to get worse as they get older. With this, they grow up as bad people and despite the expectations or different case scenarios, this is all caused by the parents or the social obsession with money, so much that they do not what is truly important in this case, family.

Chapter 2: How traditions play a role in the American family and with this how is it pursued with wealth.

Holidays in the American culture play a huge role in their social development, because of how they are managed like such a big thing, and how people and companies treat it. Companies in the American culture tend to take advantage of every holiday there is, in a way where they sell these festivities. All of this of course, has a big impact on people too because of the way that they see festivities, it goes from a very sentimental way (which is how they started) to a situation where consumerism leads and that gets to the population's mindset that makes it so that is all about, who has the best Christmas decorations, the finest gourmet thanksgiving dinner, the best fireworks for independence day and so on.

A study by Scientific American showed that family traditions boost happiness because of how family traditions make it more enjoyable according to the research because of the way that it always resembles loving and caring moments for a family because of the way it always portrays a quality moment and good memories for a child and that is what stands in their memories when they grow up and that is basically what makes traditions a legacy that is valued and carried through generations. The study also shows how comforting this is for families that cannot have everything or have issues, such as divorced parents or a parent who has passed away or maybe just families that go through economic difficulties. With all of that, it means that just a simple act that shows how families can get together and share a good moment and it makes it so that they forget all the bad stuff and have a good moment.

The meaning of holidays to the American culture can tend to be slightly different than in the rest of the world, of course, tradition exists everywhere but the United States culture and their tendency of marketing everything has made traditions become a business more than an experience. Traditions emerged since the United States declared their independence from the British crown the 4th of July of 1776 and as they progressed as a country and became who they are nowadays, Americans have adopted a lot of traditions such as Independence Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, with them being the most representative. What all these holidays have in common is that you can all buy them in a store, and if you enter a Walmart, on the 3rd of July you will see nothing but flags of the United States everywhere in tee shirts, towels, cups and so on. This way, every industry has taken part in this and they make

a lot of “holiday specials” and in this case the show *Gossip Girl*, always showed a Thanksgiving special every season that it lasted, these are really key to what the season is about because it is a show that goes around family, which is one of the main focuses of the series and every family has some sort of trouble that day. This resembles a lot to it in real-life, where it is a holiday that is meant to be spent with family and show what you are grateful for.

A lot of things are expected in Thanksgiving day since there is always a “perfect picture” that shows how it is supposed to be, a big family, a turkey, a big dinner and happiness all around that make it so that there is a lot of expectancy on the perfect thanksgiving, *Gossip Girl* shows this in the episode “ The magnificent Archibald’s”, one of their thanksgiving specials and they show that no matter where, what or with who you spend it with doesn’t matter as long as you celebrate what it is about, being grateful. The show shows an important message here because they prove young people, especially teenagers that family matters and no matter where you belong in society. Everybody can have issues but at the end of the day, everything is going to be fine.

Blair Waldorf is a clear example of how everything does not go as planned and she has to learn that it is okay, and it could be all worth it in the end. She was raised with a lot of traditions, in a household where she was really loved, one of those traditions was baking a pie with his father the day of thanksgiving, on that year, her father told her he was not going to be able to make it to the dinner nor the cooking. This was a very big disappointment for Blair since she really likes traditions and everything that comes with it, she makes a really big deal out of it because of the importance that tradition has on her. A study by a Professor of History and environmental studies from the University of Oregon showed that in 1620 the Pilgrims colonized New England showed that immigration was key to the beginning of this tradition since it meant that they were grateful for where they were in life. This is proof that thanksgiving is about spending just being grateful for what you have, something that Blair wasn’t capable of seeing because she had in mind the Americanized and industrialized way of celebrating it even though in the end she just wanted to spend enough time with her family.

In the end, Blair's father shows as a surprise for Blair with his new partner and Blair's mom is engaged to a man that she does not really like. The appearance of Blair’s father makes all the bad go away even when everything did not go as planned, he still made her pie, which fulfilled her and showed her that she had to be happy for what her family was in the moment

with her parents being divorced and with new couples. She was happy because she realized they all love her, and she saw the true meaning of a tradition. At the same time she had to accept what her new family was like, something she was not used to and something that happens in society too where this new era is showing that families come in different sizes, shapes, and colors with this meaning that she had to see what was truly important for her and it was the intention that her parents had with her. This can also be seen in the Van Der Woodsen and Humphrey family that end up spending thanksgiving together after canceling a huge planned dinner where everything was ready, but after realizing that they didn't belong thereafter a series of situations that are due to Lily's husband being a bad person. The Van Der woodsens decide what thanksgiving means to them and spend it at the Humphrey's household where they share as friends and family the true meaning of thanksgiving.

Often times the elite class host a lot of dinners or parties in benefit of a cause but that is another way of showing status, it is most likely that they do this just for having a spot and looking good for the rest. This is another Americanized thing that takes traditions to another level, where it's no longer about not feeling something, but it is about trying to be something. As an example, Lily Vanderwoodsens was always looking forward to all these charity events or even making them herself, that, with all the holiday dinners. She later realizes what is the true meaning of all the things she does and that it is oftentimes an idea made by a society that there is a protocol that has to be accomplished but it doesn't.

Depression is known for coming within the holidays by a lot of studies, a study in Forbes Magazine by the Psychologist Anita Saenz, showed that in fact, the holidays bring depression because it can remind people a lot of things, maybe the memory of a family member or just the fact that they can be alone. This is seen in Nate's family where his father is not going to be with him during the holidays, which is about spending time with family and friends. Also, Chuck, how he seems to be mature but when he wants to spend time with his father, he cannot, with that making him think that he does not have a family that loves him. All of these facts are influenced also by how the American society can link a lot of things with money and it is not for the best oftentimes.

Conclusion.-

To conclude, traditions affect all different social classes in different ways, with all of them being very specific and having different difficulties, for example, a poor family in a holiday can lack of a roof, can lack of food but most likely they would have the love and affection of a family. Whether in a high-class family, their problem could be that they have almost absolutely everything that it takes to have a perfect holiday, but they lack love or even the presence of family members. In terms of the behavior, it is easily shown how it affects someone in the show portrayed as an artifact, depending on the person or the family, they all suffered some sort of anomalies but that is the importance of it, to show that not every family is perfect and to show what truly matters.

Not only in the mentioned episode, but in each show of Gossip Girl these sort of social situations are portrayed and while it is interesting to watch it also gives the viewer conscience about what the other side of the coin looks like and to some point, makes them appreciate what they have or makes them know that not all lives are perfect. In this case New York's elite class, a city with the influence of thousands of cultures that still manage to maintain their own style of doing things as the years go by.

As mentioned, holidays and traditions show another side of what people thought they knew about "rich people". It is a different side of vulnerability and being able to see that well represented helps the viewer understand everything. In conclusion, the show Gossip Girl represents very well the social anomalies that go within being part of an elite class that is full of the pressure of all sorts and also how holidays work in different social classes with different situations, and how it's culture influences their everyday life in a radical way.

Bibliography:

- S. R. Manstead, A. M. A. (2018, 28 feb). The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thought, feelings, and behaviour.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12251>
- Alice G. Walton, A. W. (2015, 6 feb). Why The Super-Successful Get Depressed.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2015/01/26/why-the-super-successful-get-depressed/>
- Matthew Dennis, M. D. (2015, 25 nov). How Thanksgiving tells a story of America's pluralism. de <http://theconversation.com/how-thanksgiving-tells-a-story-of-americas-pluralism-50954>
- Luthar, S. L. S. (s.f.). The Problem with Rich Kids.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201311/the-problem-rich-kids>
- Sanz, A. S. (2017, 13 dic). Why Does Depression Tend To Increase During The Holidays? <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2017/12/13/why-does-depression-tend-to-increase-during-the-holidays/>
- United States corruption index.
<https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/corruption-index>