ABSTRACT

Expanding on current scholarship exploring consumerism in popular Alloy works, this thesis analyzes discourses surrounding food choices and eating in *Gossip Girl* (2002), *The Insiders* (2004), and *The Clique* (2004) through a lens of taste and gender theory in an effort to elucidate how materialism has become a stand-in for traditional markers of literary character that model identity for young readers. *Distinguished Cuisines* illustrates how the performative consumption of food-as-status leads to a disintegration of character as characters’ senses of self are replaced by reiterated acts of superficial ingestion, ultimately raising particular questions concerning the place of “identity” in contemporary consumer society.
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INTRODUCTION

Conventional genre theory states that all literature produced for a young readership falls into the broad category of Bildungsroman (Nikolajeva ix). The idea that children’s and young adult works are novels of growth that educate or teach readers didactically is assumed to be universal, and this understanding has profoundly shaped the way scholars have approached and analyzed representations of character in youth texts. Such an approach has, for the most part, been merited. Adult-oriented works of literature often seek to disrupt reader expectations by playing with genre conventions. Young adult literature, on the other hand, has remained relatively static, following a formulaic pattern of character development wherein the protagonist confronts a problem or obstacle and is forced to overcome said obstacle, thereby growing into an independent subject who is better prepared to enter (and ultimately challenge) the often morally-questionable adult world.

The development of these young characters hinges, for the most part, on their ability to cultivate a stable interiority which is then used to combat external superficialities. And so readers meet A Little Princess’ Sarah Crewe, a rich girl whose qualities are tested after her father dies, forcing her into domestic servitude at her school. Over the course of the novel she confirms her moral fiber, using the powers of friendship and generosity to stand up to the school’s greedy principal, Miss Minchin. Sarah’s wealth is re-established at the end of the text, but there is no longer a question as to whether or not this compromises her character; because her inner qualities have been confirmed, her new wealth functions instead as an external recognition of her moral merit. Or, to use a more recent example, consider The Hunger Games’ Katniss Everdeen, whose resistance to the ostentatious customs of the Capitol, a futuristic, hyper-capitalistic community that values only external qualities, eventually results in a full-scale revolution that ultimately
brings freedom and justice to the people of Panem. Emphasis is placed on the protagonists’ moral compass in both cases; what matters in *A Little Princess* and *The Hunger Games* is what the characters accomplish, not what they physically possess. Indeed, youth fiction has always tended to vilify materialism and consumer culture, instead favouring (perhaps naively) a representation of the world as redeemable if momentarily corrupted by adult obsessions with money and “things.” Such an emphasis has remained a defining characteristic of young adult fiction, and as such, any break away from this trajectory is particularly striking. What I would like to suggest is that a shift has indeed taken place—not across the board, but in a particular subgenre that I have labeled high society youth fiction, an umbrella term meant to encompass contemporary young adult literature that privileges the wealthy and materialistic and encourages conformity.

Feminist scholar Naomi Wolf brought high society youth fiction to the public’s attention in 2006 when she published a short piece entitled “Wild Things” in *The New York Times*. Typified by the Alloy Entertainment series *Gossip Girl, The A-list* and *The Clique*, Wolf argues that, in contrast to "the great reads of adolescence [that] have classically been critiques of the corrupt or banal adult world," these novels encourage readers to embrace and embody a materialistic value system. Young adult novels have historically been known to challenge, not embody, the materialism of the adult world, primarily through the depiction of psychologized, subversive characters. The genre to which Wolf—and, subsequently, this thesis—refers, reverses this trajectory in the name of contemporary capitalism. As I will argue, the significance of consumption and status in present day consumer culture has increased to the point that it is now reflected in particular strands of young adult fiction. The Bildungsroman promoted idealized values of loyalty, inner worth, and childhood innocence; this new subgenre, on the other hand,
does away with idealism, instead presenting a kind of “bottom line” pseudo-realism of cynical reason that exemplifies our neo-liberal era.

Books like Gossip Girl and The Clique are driven by plots revolving around brand names and specific products in order to encourage young readers to purchase consumer goods that fit into a particular image. The authors of these high society texts and the companies funding their production are very much aware of the power of consumerism in contemporary society, and they take full advantage of their ability to market to status-hungry teenagers. The result is a disintegration of a number of the qualities that have traditionally defined young literary characters, namely growth, transformation, and psychology. What we are instead left with are superficial adolescent protagonists whose experiences do little more than provide young readers with a guidebook for proper adult consumption.

It is worth noting, too, that this shift away from the Bildungsroman model is not gender-specific. There is an assumption both within and outside academia that serialized teen romance fiction—as high society youth fiction is often categorized—is created for and consumed by a female audience, and for the most part this is true. When considering the numerous series attributed to Alloy Entertainment, one of the leading publishers of teen novels, it quickly becomes evident that both the focal characters and their adolescent concerns are almost exclusively constructed to entertain and, more importantly, to influence young women. Scholarship has zoned in on this female centricity, and most analyses focus on works produced for a female readership. Nonetheless, a male-targeted series, The Insiders, does exist, and many of the arguments surrounding the genre’s emphasis on materialism, gender expectations, and commodification can easily be extended to include it as well. Today’s youth culture is, in the words of bell hooks, “centered around consumption,” and young people, regardless of their
gender or sexual orientation, are influenced by the perceived notion that “one’s worth…is
determined by material things” (81). For young men, as for young women, gender expectations
are inextricably associated with consumer identity.

Given the anomalous nature of character in these texts, it is surprising that more scholars
have not commented on the shift. Numerous scholarly works examining literature produced by
Alloy Entertainment (the leading publisher of the subgenre) exist, but they tend to be limited in
scope, choosing to focus and expand upon the two major issues—sex and materialism—that
Wolf identifies in “Wild Things.” Joyce Litton (2007), Beth Younger (2009), and Elke Van
Damme (2011) explore representations of body image and female sexuality in Alloy novels and
television series, variously criticizing these works for their casual treatment of sexuality and
weight obsession, as well as their representation of unrealistic bodies. Amy Pattee (2006),
Wendy Glenn (2008), and Elizabeth Bullen (2009), on the other hand, examine how Alloy series
encourage conspicuous consumption and the formation of material identities through constant
references to brand names and luxury goods. Naomi R. Johnson combines these two approaches
by exploring the relationship between consumerism and representations of women, concluding
that the consumption of brand names and recognized product lines is linked to representations of

While these studies have proven fruitful and informative, they also place most of their
emphasis on the moral and/or social repercussions of the developing genre. There is validity to
exploring the implications of materialistic, sex-filled novels for adolescent readers. However, by
taking such an approach, current scholarship has inadvertently overlooked how representations
of materialism and character development (or lack thereof) in these texts raise questions about
“identity” as the defining characteristic of the human. Indeed, what makes these high society
novels so interesting is their blatant departure from traditional representations of literary characters as “round” or psychologized. What we see in these books are characters whose identities have been, or are in the process of being, evacuated by status-oriented consumption, ultimately making visible the corresponding trend in contemporary society of valuing material wealth and social prestige over achievements of any other kind to the point that any semblance of an inner self is abandoned entirely.

This thesis expands on current scholarship exploring consumerism in popular high society novels produced by Alloy Entertainment. Specifically, it analyses discourses surrounding food choices and eating in *The Clique* (2004), *Gossip Girl* (2002), and *The Insiders* (2004), in an effort to illustrate how materialism has become a stand-in for traditional markers of literary character that model identity for young readers. Numerous frameworks could help to elucidate this “disintegration of character,” but none seem as effective as a framework that emphasizes food and its relationship to consumption, as food is the one consumer good that we cannot effectively separate from our understanding of our subjective or interior selves. Indeed, as Counihan and Van Esterik emphasize, food is unlike other consumer goods insofar as its consumption blurs the distinction between inside/outside and subject/object (1). If food is a significant aspect of identity, then it follows that the foods one chooses to consume and the context within which one consumes them not only impacts public perceptions but also interior notions of self. An analysis of practices relating to food and food consumption in a number of high society novels will allow us to clearly map out this transformation from both a female and male perspective, as well as point to the broad implications of this shift both within and outside literature. The protagonists who populate these novels have had their identities evacuated by status-oriented consumption. They are characterized based on what they come to possess or
physically embody, not “who” they are inside. In effect, they represent a “thinning” of sorts of the existential perspective that we are what we do, or, indeed, that we “are” anything at all outside of our specific socio-cultural contexts.

Because of the inherent relationship between what we eat and who we are, a study that analyzes cuisine choices and consumptive practices within the context of contemporary consumer culture will allow us to look at characterization in high society youth fiction in a way that will illustrate the manner in which mass culture and rampant materialism are replacing psychologized expressions of character in both literature and society. Food is universal; everyone needs it to survive, and the varying ways that individuals engage with food speaks not only to their social position but also to their sense of self. Regrettably, few academics have analyzed how food functions in this way in literature. Recognized interdisciplinary food scholar Mervyn Nicholson (1987, 1991) has written on the subject of food as a medium of power both in literary texts and in society. Nicholson argues that by studying food's representation in literary texts we can better understand how individuals gain power and agency because "eating is the means of individual identity...To exist is an activity of daily transformation; one continually forms and transforms oneself, and the material means by which one performs this act of self-creation is food" (1987, 37). Nicholson also discusses cannibalism as a literary trope that functions as a metaphor for power relations that are captured by the phrase "eat or be eaten" (1991, 198). While characters in these texts are certainly not cannibals in a literal sense, metaphorically the application of the term to the power-hungry, consuming protagonists that dominate this particular brand of series fiction seems appropriate. The characters in many of Alloy Entertainment’s most popular series "feed" on one another in order to increase their own status or
authority. Similarly, they consume different cuisines in order to display their wealth and distinguished tastes, which translates into cultural and social power.

The relationship between food, power and identity has also been identified by academics in the subdiscipline of children's literature. Most of these studies focus on representations of eating or food in specific texts, such as Betty McDonald's *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* (Gainor 1992) or Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* (Pollard and Keeling, 2002). Numerous works by authors Maurice Sendak (Perrot, 1990; Keeling and Pollard, 1999) and C.S. Lewis (Vallone 2002) have also been examined. While these analyses may vary in focus and subject matter, they all identify the consumption of food as intrinsically linked to the formation of self. Katz (1980), Daniel (2006), and Keeling and Pollard (2009) are the only scholars to my knowledge that discuss representations of food and power in children's literature in a general way. Though Katz's article "Some Uses of Food in Children's Literature" is not particularly current, it is a valuable study that identifies a number of food-related themes that run through juvenile texts, including community, identity, civilization and empowerment. Daniel's *Voracious Children*, the first book to analyze representations of food in children's literature, builds on Katz by identifying and examining the complex relationship that exists between food and personal notions of self from a feminist standpoint. Daniel sees food as a cultural product that disrupts the inside/outside binary. As she explains, "the realities of the eating body mean that food passes from the outside to the inside and subsequently to the outside again...When we eat food (an object) it literally becomes part of us (a subject)" (6). This becomes especially interesting when considered in relation to the consumption of food-as-status, which illustrates quite clearly the replacement of an “inherent” depth or interiority with a surface identity through repeated acts of superficial ingestion.
While none of these studies focus on young adult literature specifically, both children's and young adult texts consider youth as the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood and so, as Nodelman (2008) argues, analyses of children's fiction can often be applied to adolescent fiction as well (5). This is certainly true in regard to discussions of identity construction, as both childhood and adolescence are periods of self-discovery and growth. The construction of characters in both children's and young adult novels generally reflect this reality, and are therefore driven by the burning questions "Who am I?" and "What defines me?" that propel the Bildungsroman narrative structure characteristic of both genres (Nikolajeva ix). Of course, as I will illustrate, the protagonists in high society young adult texts do not follow any defined transformative path; in fact, there is a marked *lack* of character growth, which ultimately emphasizes the impact consumerism has had on the way we view ourselves as individuals.

What is perhaps most interesting about this investigation is not that a shift has taken place, but rather what this break away from character development reveals about ideas surrounding identity in society more generally. As Deidre Lynch emphasizes in *The Economy of Character*, the very idea of literary character was introduced in eighteenth-century British literature in response to emerging mass consumerism as a way to compensate for the uncomfortable position materialism was occupying in people’s day-to-day lives. Given the acceleration of consumer culture from the eighteenth century to now, it is not surprising—and, arguably, even inevitable—that constructions of character have, at least in some literary genres, changed to reflect the insidious nature of contemporary capitalism and its impact on constructions of self.

Indeed, what Lynch is suggesting in *The Economy of Character* is that we as individuals are not innately “well-rounded” at all, but rather constructed to appear that way, much like the
characters that represent us in literary texts. The idea that we construct or perform our identities has been discussed at length by a number of scholars, most notably Judith Butler, whose view of performativity informs my approach to character analysis. As Butler explains, "within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (1994, xxi). Butler applies this concept to sex and gender in her seminal text *Gender Trouble*, arguing that "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (25). In other words, Butler argues that identities are illusions that are retroactively created through reiterated performative acts.

By its very nature performativity implies disempowerment. Because there is no independently-minded subject, or, as Butler argues, "no 'I' who stands behind discourse and executes its volition or will through discourse," there is no "real" human agency (1994, 171). This does not mean that agency does not exist but, rather, that it can only be executed within the societal constructions and expectations that restrict it. Because identities are formed within these limitations—limitations that are, for Butler, controlled by heterosexual hegemony and the norms this construct assumes—they cannot exist or operate outside of them. Butler discusses performativity and agency in relation to gender and sexuality specifically, but it is a useful concept for analyzing all aspects of character. I will use Butler's theory of performativity and, in addition, her discussion of power in relation to performative acts to execute an analysis of the disintegration of literary character in a number of popular high society youth texts. The choices characters make in these novels in relation to food and the way these choices are enacted or performed is heavily influenced by societal constructions that dictate how both women and men as well as members of the upper class are supposed to look and behave. It is through the repeated
performance of socially-regulated, status-driven consumptive acts that these characters' identities come to be replaced or, arguably, evacuated.

Indeed, because status and wealth are the primary concerns in the materialistic quasi-teen romance novels under investigation, the actions of the privileged adolescent protagonists are almost always driven by the desire to maintain a public persona of affluence and sophistication. The clothes they choose to wear, the cars they choose to drive, and the foods they choose to consume are all selected based on their understanding of the cultural politics of taste. The study of taste as a cultural phenomenon was in many ways ignited by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who, in his groundbreaking study of the nature of social positioning *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, argues that it is primarily personal tastes and cultural possession that distinguish groups of people, thereby creating class schisms and inequalities. As he explains in the introduction, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (6). Wealthy individuals in high society novels use their personal tastes for food to distinguish themselves from those they deem to be below them, as food is continually mentioned, either as a means of establishing an individual’s distinguished tastes or as a way to indicate that a character lacks the cultural capital to understand “proper” taste.

It is this representation of food-as-status that is the key to properly understanding how literary character is deconstructed in these texts. Food is an understudied and seemingly banal cultural product, and yet its striking dominance in high society youth fiction suggests that its inclusion is not merely incidental. Food operates as a gendered status symbol like other material goods, however its nature as an object that physically enters and becomes the consumer upon consumption causes it to have a profound impact not only on public image but also interior
constructions of self. By conducting a close textual analysis of *Gossip Girl, The Insiders*, and *The Clique*, I will illustrate how varying representations of food consumption coupled with discourses surrounding image and "fitting in" leads to the creation of empty characters with surface ambitions, whose presence in adolescent literature points to a marked shift in the way both teenagers and adults think about constructions of identity. An in-depth critical reading is the only way to identify patterns in the consumptive practices of the protagonists, which is necessary in order to analyze character through a performative lens. Performativity implies repetition. In this view selfhood is created through reiteration, which means that in order to analyze how food consumption intersects with identity formation in high society youth fiction I must be able to trace the repeated use of food-as-status in the texts. Ultimately, such an examination will allow me to not only illustrate how the construction of identities through reiterated performative acts of distinction challenges the development/growth narrative style characteristic of young adult fiction, but also to uncover the cultural assumptions and social conditions that inform this shift.

In order to demonstrate the process of interior disintegration, this thesis begins with an analysis of character in Lisi Harrison’s 2004 novel *The Clique*. While all the books I examine are populated with adolescent characters constructed within and for a mass consumerist society that actively eschews interior growth in favour of purely external identities, *The Clique* is unique in that it is the only high society Alloy text to explicitly depict this shift. The protagonists in both *Gossip Girl* and *The Insiders* are, from their introduction, fully submerged in the adult, consumerist world. While some characters are better able to navigate this world via the embodiment of its ever-changing and impossibly high standards, they all understand that these standards exist, and realize that they are expected to participate in socially-sanctioned consumer practices if they want to be accepted by their peer group as well as society at large. *The Clique,*
on the other hand, focuses on a protagonist who is—at least at the beginning—blithely unaware of these expectations. Using an expanded history of literary character as a framework, chapter one examines discourses surrounding both exclusive and "low-class" cuisines in *The Clique* in order to elucidate how food functions as both a class indicator and tool for power in the novel. Specifically, I will consider how outsider Claire navigates the social hierarchy to become an "it girl" by adopting the consumptive practices of the wealthier, established female characters. As Claire transforms herself into an insider, her cuisine choices change to reflect her new class identity. In the process, however, Claire's consumption of food-as-status leads to a disintegration of character as psychology is replaced with superficial ingestion.

Chapter two moves backwards chronologically to examine Cecily von Ziegesar’s 2002 novel *Gossip Girl*, the opening entry in Alloy Entertainment’s first—and most successful—high society series, with the intention of demonstrating the magnitude of the shift away from the Bildungsroman as it applies to young women, both as characters and readers. Relying on feminist criticism relating to the media, gender expectations, and representations of femininity, I deconstruct instances of food consumption in order to illustrate the friction that develops in the lives of high society girls between consuming food to project an image of sophistication and rejecting or expelling food to maintain an image of sexual desirability (a development that is hinted at, but never fully realized, in *The Clique*). Throughout *Gossip Girl* numerous female high school characters are shown to have an uncomfortable, often irreconcilable relationship with food. They purchase or consume certain foods in order to display their understanding of culture and taste, thereby increasing their social power and influence. At the same time, however, they adopt unhealthy and disempowering eating habits ranging from borderline anorexia to full-blown bulimia in an attempt to embody unrealistic beauty ideals.
That almost no time is dedicated to interior development, with von Ziegesar choosing instead to characterize the protagonists based on their possessions, social power, and physical appearance, speaks again to an acknowledgement—whether conscious on the part of the author or not—of the declining significance of building and performing one’s constructed inner self. Indeed, there is a marked absence of character growth or transformation in *Gossip Girl*. The female protagonists *do* traverse the social hierarchy, and they *are* shown to adapt their consumptive practices to meet heteronormative social expectations in order to accomplish this, but these changes are superficial and do not in any way resemble the growth-oriented transformations that have traditionally characterized adolescent fiction. In *Gossip Girl*, as in other female-oriented high society texts, women are taught to conform to the taxing standards of contemporary femininity, and their eating practices reflect this. It is through this consumptive process that they receive the external validation that allows them to confirm their self-worth; because inner qualities do not contribute to this external image, they are deemed unimportant. The result is a novel that foregrounds the surface-centric nature of consumer culture while encouraging young female readers to embrace this superficiality.

Chapter three examines the impact of the disintegration of character from a male perspective by analyzing representations of food, women, and masculinity in J. Minter’s 2004 novel *The Insiders*, the first text in Alloy Entertainment’s sole male-oriented series of the same name. By considering the implicit and explicit relationship the novel develops between power and the consumption of food and women as elements of male character, I demonstrate how the objectification of women in the text is linked to discourses surrounding food and hegemonic masculinity. Food is, of course, gendered, and there is an inextricable link developed in the novel between gendered foods—meat, carbohydrates, and beer—and desirable women. The five male
protagonists strive throughout the novel to meet social expectations for proper masculinity by consuming these "manly" goods. More often than not the "goods" are young women, who are characterized in a way that is analogous to discourses surrounding food and eating. In effect the young women in the novel function as little more than sexual objects for male consumption, while the male adolescent protagonists are transformed into empty consumers with shallow ambitions revolving entirely around sexual and material conquests.

Through such an examination I further illustrate the gradual deconstruction of traditional notions of “character” in favour of material identities in high society youth fiction, underscoring that the effects of the shift away from an idealized childhood values to a more realistic representation of the demands placed on youth to “successfully” participate in mass consumerism is not gender specific. While consumptive standards for men and women are different, both young men and young women are expected to learn social codes for proper consumption and, subsequently, to adopt these practices. The “insider” boys are not heroic, loyal, ethical, or brave, as, for instance, Huckleberry Finn or Harry Potter prove to be. Nor are they anti-heroes, as heroism isn’t even under consideration. Instead they are uninhibited consumers, whose only real ambition is to become more versed in the ins and outs of externalized contemporary capitalist masculinity. As in *The Clique* and *Gossip Girl*, *The Insiders* shows us that the trend in young adult literature towards abandoning the façade of youthful innocence and innate selfhood points to a shift, or perhaps acknowledgement, within society of the new standards of self-worth, forcing us to once again come face-to-face with the same uncomfortable reality Lynch identifies eighteenth-century readers encountering then—that is, the reality that “identity” is *not* the marker of humanity at all, but rather a [seemingly abandoned] coping mechanism for dealing with our growing dependence on external images and material “things.”
CHAPTER ONE

The Art of Fitting In: Character, Class and the Cultural Politics of Taste in *The Clique*

When I grow up, I wanna be famous, I wanna be a star, I wanna be in movies. When I grow up, I wanna see the world, drive nice cars, I wanna have groupies.


The clearest way to illustrate the deconstruction of character in high society youth fiction is to begin with a text that shows a character in the process of disintegration. This is not an easy task—for the most part, high society texts depict protagonists who from the outset have already abandoned any pretense to interior cultivation. The exception is *The Clique*, Lisi Harrison’s 2004 novel. *The Clique* is the first in a series of books by Alloy Entertainment that chronicles the experiences of a group of upper-class twelve and thirteen-year-old girls whose lives revolve around shopping, impressing boys, and fitting in. That the series focuses on preteens rather than older, “more experienced” high school students (as most popular high society series do) helps to explain the fact that the reader gets to watch the central character transform as she does. These girls are just entering adolescence, and have therefore had little time to interpret and adjust to the cultural atmosphere of capitalist adulthood. Because of this, the first novel in the series provides us with a unique opportunity to map out the shift away from a Bildungsroman-style “round” character to a “flat” protagonist who ends up solely concerned with popularity and the maintenance of a tasteful, socially aware surface image.

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1 The terms “round” and “flat,” which are used to distinguish between realistic or otherwise developed/dynamic characters and those who are two-dimensional and static, were first used in this context by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). While distinguishing between the two types of character, he argues that “it is only round people who are fit to perform tragically for any length of time and can move us to any feelings except humour and appropriateness,” which seems fitting given this thesis’ focus on novels with flat characters whose sole purpose seems to be to teach young people appropriate consumer behavior (111).
The protagonist is Claire Lyons, an average preteen girl who moves from Florida to Westchester, New York to live with the wealthy Block family while her parents search for a new home. Claire is young, to be sure, but she is also decidedly middle-class, an important factor that helps to explain her initial ignorance. The novel traces Claire’s experiences as she gradually adjusts to the social demands of her new life. In turn, the novel documents the shift in her consumptive practices, which slowly change to mirror those of the members of the Clique, a group of popular rich girls whose “ruler” is Massie, the Block family’s unwelcoming only child. The members of the Clique possess superior knowledge of what food scholars Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann have termed the "gourmet foodscape" as a result of their privileged position, while Claire initially has no understanding of the cultural politics of taste. Over time, by studying the actions of the Clique girls, Claire comes to understand what she must change about herself if she wants to fit in. She decides that she does want to be popular, and, in turn, shifts her consumer behavior. Of particular note is the shift in her eating habits, which begin to reflect the upper-class mentality that food, like all consumer goods, must be consumed with care and with special attention to taste and image.

An analysis of character and consumption in *The Clique* requires a brief overview of the history of literary character as it relates materialism and identity. Despite Sholes and Kellogg’s claim that “characters are the primary vehicles for revealing meaning in narrative,” scholarship on literary character (save from a narratological approach) is relatively sparse (1). One explanation for this lack of academic attention is provided by Nikolajeva, who explains that, because “the issue of characters seems to be so self-evident, few studies…have paid any attention to it” (vii). Springer’s *A Rhetoric of Literary Character: Some Women of Henry James* is one of the earliest works to focus specifically on characterization in fiction. The condemnatory
approach Springer takes to Henry James’ “insensitive” representation of women causes the work to read like a polemical rant, which speaks to a tendency within studies of character theory towards evaluating protagonists based on how well they reflect societal perceptions of what real individuals, typified by their “innate” psychology, are supposedly like.

This sentiment is echoed by others including Elizabeth Fowler, who argues in *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* that the function of “character” in literature is to “express…the human figure in its social form.” Literary characters are, for Fowler, representations of “dominant model[s] of person[s]” that are established and subsequently made meaningful through repeated social practice (28). In other words, literary characters are inherently mimetic, and authors who create characters do so under the assumption that readers will recognize what or whom a character is meant to represent given the social context. I do not seek to debate the claim that fictional persons are intended to resemble “real” persons; this is, indeed, one of the primary functions of the novel as it has come to be understood. Fiction presents constructed individuals who, by their very nature, in one way or another reference individuals outside of their fictional worlds. What I do want to consider, rather than debating whether or not any given character comes close to resembling a “real” person, is why, as John Frow asks in his work *Character and Person*, do we seek to endow these characters with realistic qualities? Why do we relate to them? What is their purpose for us as readers? (Frow 1).

An answer to this question is provided by Lynch in *The Economy of Character*, where, as I emphasized in my introduction, she convincingly illustrates that the apparent loss of identity to materialism is not a new phenomenon and can be traced back to eighteenth-century Britain, the period in which the concept of a "well-rounded" literary character was introduced. Lynch’s
central argument is that psychologized literary characters arose in the wake of emergent mass consumerism as a way to compensate for the uncomfortable and increasingly dominant position materialism was occupying in “real” people’s lives (169). While Lynch’s work is not contemporary in focus, her discussion of the constructed division between subject and object helps explain what is going on with the formation of character in *The Clique* and other high society texts. Lynch continually emphasizes that the "rounded" nature of "real" people that eighteenth-century texts attempt to replicate is in and of itself a construction. In this view, we are just as susceptible to losing ourselves to corruption and materialism as the characters in literary texts. Early literary characters were (and, for the most part, continue to be) constructed by narratives of inner growth in order to provide models for defining the self in opposition to the materialism that has become a necessary and dominant aspect of everyday life. Given the acceleration of consumer culture from the eighteenth century to present day, it is not surprising that constructions of character have, at least in some literary genres, changed to reflect this acceleration.

That young adult literature would be particularly susceptible to this shift makes sense; consumption is, after all, a central way that young people today shape their identities. In *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*, Alissa Quart argues that the intensifying commercialization of adolescents in contemporary society has resulted in the development of a distinct relationship between brands and personal identity in youth culture. Product awareness makes teenagers (and adults) feel powerful and in-the-know; this feeling of superiority, however, invariably leads to anxiety over the maintenance of social status, which in turn encourages increased consumption in order to re-affirm said status. The significance of brands and "exclusive" cultural products in teenagers’ lives in recent years has become increasingly
dominant. Daniel T. Cook and Susan B. Kaiser maintain that this is due in part to an intensified focus in marketing campaigns on adolescents as a distinct consumer group. This is evidenced, for instance, in the blatant product placements that intersperse the narratives in many of Alloy Entertainment's most popular texts, *The Clique* included. The adolescent reliance on material "things" has accelerated to the point that teens can no longer form a distinct sense of self separate from their identities as consumers, for, as Quart remarks, "brands have infiltrated preteens and adolescents' inner lives" (4).

While most studies of consumerism and "brand power" focus on the status and power associated with the consumption of "obvious" material goods like clothing and cars, food is branded and used in a similar way, a fact that has been recently acknowledged by Johnston and Baumann, who explore how food functions as a class indicator at length in their book *Foodies*. Johnston and Baumann argue that "food operates as a source of status and distinction for economic and cultural elites, indirectly maintaining and reproducing social inequality" (xv). This is certainly true; however, what makes an analysis of food particularly interesting is its nature as an object that physically *enters* and *becomes* the consumer upon consumption, as this has a profound impact not only on public image but also interior constructions of self. As numerous academics have suggested, the oft-quoted phrase "you are what you eat" is in fact quite accurate, both in physiological and psychological terms. When food consumption occurs exclusively as an act of status rather than for purposes relating to sustenance or enjoyment, interior substance is replaced as well. This deconstruction of character through the devaluation of individuality is exemplified in *The Clique*. Claire does transform in the novel, but not in the Bildungsroman style typical of youth fiction. Rather, what Claire undergoes can be considered a deconstruction, from a rounded, unique character into an empty consumer whose evacuation of self is clearly
illustrated through her cuisine choices, which gradually shift to mirror the materialistic tastes of Massie and her friends.

That the text will trace the disintegration of character—or, to put it another way, the materialistic development—of Claire is obvious even before one opens The Clique. Indeed, the back cover provides an introduction to the Clique girls and Claire, emphasizing how hard Claire will have to work to become an “it girl.” As explained, Claire, “the new girl from Florida in Keds and two-year-old Gap overalls, is clearly not Clique material.” It goes on to describe Claire’s future as “looking worse than a bad Prada knockoff. But with a little luck and a lot of scheming, Claire might just come up smelling like Chanel No. 19.” Not only does this brief introduction establish the tension between Claire and the Clique girls that will propel the novel forward, it also foreshadows what this will mean for her. That is, it suggests that Claire will learn to adjust—that she, too, has a chance at becoming an “it girl” if she can learn to read the consumer codes of upper-classdom, ultimately coming up “smelling like Chanel.”

The novel opens with a conversation between Massie Block and her parents, Kendra and William, in the Block Estate kitchen, an introduction for the reader to the upper-class lifestyle (and in particular, the consumptive habits) Claire will be expected to adopt if she wants to move up the social hierarchy. That food is more about image and status than sustenance is emphasized a number of times in these first few pages. For instance, though this opening section is set in a kitchen, no one actually eats anything. William drinks tea, but neither of the women touch any food or drink, a restrictive trend that continues as the novel progresses. That food is for displaying before it is for eating is further underscored when Massie goes up to her blindingly white room. As the narrator explains, the design for the room was inspired by a stay she had in the presidential suite at the Mondrian in Los Angeles. The room itself was crisp and blank—
much like Massie’s—save a “decorative green apple” positioned in the middle of a coffee table (3). Food, in this case, is literally only for purposes relating to exhibition. The apple is simultaneously emphasized and isolated, bringing to mind images of temptation as well as restriction. That Massie was so drawn to this organizational scheme speaks to both her view of food, a necessary evil, and status, a critical aspect of one’s image maintained through awareness of current trends. Kendra’s decision to host a brunch for the Lyon’s arrival also confirms the significance of class and taste in the Block world. Brunch is a leisurely meal for the wealthy or those who aspire to be. By inviting the Lyons to brunch, the Blocks are able to display their free time and their understanding of the cultural politics of taste, both of which signify that they are socially and economically powerful.

There are numerous other indicators in the first chapter not related to food that further illustrate the upper-class lifestyle that Massie and the Clique girls are accustomed to and, specifically, its emphasis on maintaining a materialistically-informed, tasteful image. Brand names pop up almost as frequently as pronouns, from references to Massie’s “Calvin sheets,” “flat-screen Mac,” and “iPad,” to her dog’s fascination with the “taste” of her “Chanel No. 19” (4). There is a marked obsession among the Clique girls with appearing affluent, with a particular emphasis on appearance. Massie, for example, when explaining that she has to cancel plans with her friends in order to attend her mother’s brunch, is harangued by Clique member Dylan, who asks, “Who’s going to tell me if I look fat when I try stuff on?” Alicia, the “beautiful” one, responds, “The mirror” (6). These girls are undoubtedly focused on how they look, both physically—being thin, desirable, etc.—and culturally, especially in terms of their ability to prove that they are distinguished via the purchase and display of the latest fashions and brands.
The first chapter, then, introduces the reader to the Blocks, but it also provides a contrast for the presentation of Claire, whose middle-class upbringing is quickly shown to have not prepared her for her new life in New York. The reader meets Claire at the beginning of chapter two, with William Block exclaiming, “Claire! What a knockout you’ve become,” again underscoring the novel’s heavy emphasis on image and appearance (7). Almost immediately afterwards, Claire is introduced to Massie, who is quick to evaluate Claire socially and economically, deciding that she fails to meet the mark. As the narrator explains, Massie's initial impression of Claire, who walks in dressed in "a pair of overalls" with "white Keds," is, the narrator tells us, that "she looked like one of the cast members on Barney and Friends" (8). Massie openly ridicules Claire for her supposed classlessness, suggesting snidely that Claire’s bracelets look like they were made by kindergarteners and that her camera “pretty much suck[s]” (12). She also mocks Claire for pronouncing Westchester “West Chester,” a dig that simultaneously illustrates Claire’s lower class status while emphasizing Massie’s affluence.

Massie's unfavourable opinion of Claire is further reinforced after Massie notices that "her mother's diamond rings were turned around, which Massie knew meant that the Lyonses didn't have a lot of money" (9). Massie, unsurprisingly, equates money with worth, with the narrator noting that Massie says “‘poor’ the same way her mother said ‘fat’” (15). Because Claire is from a family that is struggling financially, Massie automatically assumes that Claire is of little worth. Claire, for her part, is at least at first characterized as humble and unashamed of her family’s economic situation. The upper class world within which Claire is thrust is overwhelming, to be sure. Not only does Massie's family have a guesthouse large enough for Claire, her brother, and her parents to stay in, the Blocks' also have a "live in housekeeper," a swimming pool, and two tennis courts (1, 11). Nonetheless, Claire tries to be “kind and
understanding” with Massie in an active effort to obtain her friendship (11). She continually brushes off Massie’s rude comments, indicating excitement at the prospect of meeting the other Clique girls (13).

Part of the desire to befriend Massie obviously has to do with the fact that Claire is in a new town and has been provided with a convenient opportunity to get to know someone, but Claire is also drawn to the ostentatious and relatively adult upper class lifestyle that Massie and her friends enjoy. Claire, the narrator notes, attempts to appear calm and collected as Massie shows her around the Block estate, but in reality she is awestruck, having "never been in a private house [that] big before” (11). Claire wants the wealth—the glory—that Massie takes for granted. She also realizes that she does not fit in, with Massie making Claire’s exclusion from the group known early on, and so, in a determined effort to try to get Massie and the rest of the Clique girls to accept her, she gradually begins hiding and/or changing her supposedly "distasteful" and "childish" persona. The Clique girls are, after all, much more “adult” in their demeanor than Claire. They want to grow up, quickly, because their understanding of sophistication is tied into dressing a desirable, womanly body, like they see in advertisements in the fashion magazines they read. Massie, for instance, is shown to be very excited about her “newly sprouted A-cups,” asking her horse, Brownie, “did I tell you I’ll be entering the seventh grade as a bra wearer?...There’s one thing Claire can’t join in on” (17).

The text, then, ultimately focuses on Claire’s class education, using the “sophisticated” Clique girls as a foil to illustrate Claire’s “improvements” and growing understanding of upper-classdom and its reliance on image, taste and capitalist display. In certain instances, Claire is quick to catch on. For example, as she gets ready for her first day at her new school, a private institution called Octavian Country Day School, Claire throws away her "Powerpuff Girls lunch
box," because she recognizes that these girls act "grown up" and "knew they'd think The Powerpuff girls were K through sixth, not seventh" (31). In other scenarios, though—and, in particular, those related to food consumption—it takes her longer to recognize the standards of taste demanded by upper-class society. Consider, for instance, Claire’s introduction to the Clique girls, which takes place during her first ride to school in Massie's parents' chauffeured silver Range Rover. The car itself is an emblem of sophistication, fully stocked with distinguished, low-calorie snacks and beverages including "diet soda, Pellegrino, Glaceau Vitamin Water, and fresh seasonal berries" (32). Claire recognizes the ride is a perfect opportunity to make a better impression with Massie. As the narrator notes, “she knew she had about twenty minutes of alone time in the car with Massie and she wanted everything to be perfect.” She preps herself before walking to the car, “puff[ing] her bangs and swiping “grape-scented gloss…across her lips” (32).

One by one the Clique girls are picked up on the way to the school, leaving Claire with very little alone time with Massie. Nonetheless, she adjusts to the unfamiliar crowd who all but ignore her presence, and who force her to ride in the back seat usually reserved for “transporting cargo or pets,” a seating arrangement that again emphasizes her lower-class status (34). Claire tries to get their attention by unzipping her backpack, taking out "a bag stuffed with gummy worms and sours," and offering some to the group (36). She is immediately ostracized for making such a juvenile and undistinguished cuisine choice, with Massie remarking, "I stopped eating those around the same time I stopped breastfeeding," and Alicia echoing with, "Yeah, and I never started" (37). Claire's response is to drop the candies back into her backpack, only daring to sneakily grab one through a small hole when "she [is] sure no one [is] looking" (42). She also tries to covertly eat some potato chips, but Massie notices the smell and is disgusted by Claire’s cuisine choice, a choice clearly made “with no regard to the early hour or high fat content” (45).
Despite her efforts to be friendly, then, Claire still ends up being excluded from the group because her consumptive practices reflect a middle class mentality that has not yet been infiltrated by upper-class feminine ideals which emphasize the importance of weight control, a subject discussed in more detail in chapter two.

Conversely, Alicia and Massie voice their approval of the "Zone lunch" Dylan has packed, despite agreeing that it "smells like airport food," because it is trendy and fashionable and motivated by the status-driven and, given that none of these girls are overweight, relatively superficial goal of "los[ing] fifteen pounds" (39). Like many of the other material goods in these girls' lives, the various foods they eat are dictated by an "in/out" system that is exemplified by the short notes Massie leaves herself throughout the text. In one column she writes what is "in," for example "riding" and "red cherries." In the other column she writes what is "out," which is, at least in this instance, "hiding" and "Red Bull" (84). It is through a similar judgment system that the members of the Clique make all their consumptive decisions. Dylan's diet, then, as part of a new trend, is deemed appropriate and well suited to her "popular,” high status social position despite its unappealing odor.

This dichotomy between Claire's "low class" or unsophisticated cuisine choices and the distinguished preferences of the Clique girls is established a number of times in the first half of the text. The narrator notes that the Clique, for instance, frequently meets at the Starbucks kiosk in the school in-between classes for chai lattes (52). As we will see in both Gossip Girl and The Insiders at a higher frequency—due, in part, to those novels older protagonists who have more freedom to go out unchaperoned—one of the primary ways that affluent individuals display their wealth is by going to high-end cafes, restaurants, and clubs and purchasing gourmet and/or expensive goods. Because the Clique girls are young and do not, for instance, have driver’s
licenses, they have less of an opportunity to display their wealth this way, but they do seem to
take every chance they do have to show others around them that they have both financial power
and cultural taste via the consumption of sophisticated foods or drinks. Thus, they get “venti”
lattes every day at school in order to show the other girls at school that they understand the
“gourmet foodscape” as much as it is available to them in their cafeteria.

Claire does not know how to evaluate her cuisine choices in the same way, however, a
fact that is made obvious during their lunch hour at school. The narrator explains that, while
standing in the cafeteria line, Claire "tried to see what Massie was eating but couldn't get a good
look," which underscores that Claire is beginning to understand that she can improve her public
image and become a member of the group if she conforms to their standards of taste (69). She
ends up picking a "Toblerone bar," but immediately realizes it was the wrong choice when the
checkout lady tells her it is "refreshing" to see "a girl around here who actually eats chocolate."
Looking around, she notices that “no one ate junk food.” She admits a desire to buy one of the
“bottles of Glaceau” that she sees “on every table,” but fears she will embarrass herself by not
knowing “how to pronounce it” (69). Claire wants to mirror the Clique girls and work her way
up the social ladder, but she still lacks the cultural capital to execute such a move.

Contrast this with the choices the Clique girls make for their lunch-time sustenance.
Dylan chose a "pale grilled chicken breast," Alicia "bit off the corners of several mustard packets
and squirted them onto her vegetable burger (no bun) and Kristen dipped a banana into a
styrofoam cup of fro yo" (67). Each of the Clique girls chooses a weight-conscious meal, which
again emphasizes that these girls' primary concern is public image; appearances are what matter
throughout the text, leading inner cultivation to be sacrificed for the acquisition of status and
external, material "things." It is Claire's inability to recognize the markers of this lifestyle that, at
least at first, hinders her acceptance into the group. Claire sees the array of “healthy”—i.e. low-calorie—food choices as she moves through the line with her orange lunch tray, passing by “sushi platters, tofu steaks, crudités, and a colourful “design your own salad” section,” but they do not appeal to her. What is significant about this is that Claire fails to see that “appeal” matters very little. One gets the impression that the Clique girls do not really enjoy the foods they eat; for them, eating occurs for two reasons. First, they reluctantly accept the fact that they need food to survive, and so eat because it is an unfortunate physiological necessity. In order to combat the supposedly negative effects of eating as it relates to body shape and weight gain, they choose the least offending foods they can, making adjustments such as removing a bun or choosing frozen yogurt over ice cream with little care for the impact this may have on overall flavour. Second, they eat to display their economic and cultural capital. That they choose low-calorie foods and brand-name beverages speaks to the girls’ upper-class upbringing which demands that they show off their wealth and distinction at every opportunity. Eating becomes a performative act wherein food functions solely as a vehicle for fostering a particular image, an image that is acutely influenced by taste politics and the competitive idealism of the individualistic consumer environment that is neoliberal society.

While Claire at first struggles to adjust to the restrictive and careful guidelines of being a popular girl at a private school, she gradually learns to shift her consumptive practices to better match those of the young girls she idolizes. Such a shift reflects both her growing awareness of the cultural politics of taste as well as, arguably, her loss of selfhood. Consider, for instance, how Claire consciously changes her appearance throughout the novel. When we meet Claire she is characterized as looking childish and unfashionable, wearing a thrown-together outfit of out-dated pieces that signifies her lower-class status. Midway through the text, on the other hand, the
reader gets a new appraisal of Claire, one that clearly illustrates an increasing ability to actualize her newly acquired cultural consciousness. She is described as wearing "dark denim flair jeans...long enough to cover ninety percent of [her] Keds," and a "white T-shirt with baby blue rhinestones around the neck," which, the narrator notes, was the "closest thing she had to something Massie would wear" (110). Her favourite shoes, an article of clothing she was once proud to own, are now notably hidden by trendy jeans more akin to Massie's status-oriented wardrobe than her own.

The change in Claire's appearance culminates in the removal of the bracelets she received from her friends when she left Florida, which, while once serving to calm her down, were now only a reminder of the old, childish, less popular version of herself (157). This is an important moment in the text that marks Claire's commitment to her new material self; the cutting of the bracelets, then, is a symbolic act that functions as a metaphor for Claire's active removal of selfhood. By the end of *The Clique*, with her new commitment to the idea that “clothes [are] like milk or cheese, with a “best before” date and a shelf life,” Claire is not only able to confidently shop for designer goods including “Marc by Marc Jacobs kitten heels,” a “BCBG beaded clutch” and a “Swiss-dot silk DKNY dress,” but also to confirm and display her keen sense of taste when the outfit is later auctioned off for charity for over six hundred dollars (94, 169, 211). In a physical/surface sense—remembering that surface is all that counts for the upper-class individuals depicted in the text—Claire is virtually indistinguishable from the other Clique girls by the novel’s close, as popular, vain, and externally beautiful as she needs to be to keep her spot as one of the most envied pupils at Octavian Country Day School.

Of course, part of her new image extends beyond the clothing she wears and the way she styles her hair. Indeed, Claire’s eating habits also initially miss the mark, so she begins to rework
them as well in order to better meet the narrow expectations of upper-class society, which require women to eat as little food as possible at the highest possible price point. While all the self-motivated changes Claire undergoes have an impact on her sense of identity and her public image, it is food behavior shifts that are most significant in relation to conversations surrounding character formation, as it is reiterated acts of superficial ingestion that ultimately make clear Claire’s active removal of selfhood via the consumption of food-as-status. Comfort foods like candy or chocolate—items she initially associates with family, childhood, and, more generally, enjoyment—become private, shameful indulgences. Foods that are branded as sophisticated, expensive, or otherwise distinguished, on the other hand, are eaten frequently and in such a manner as to continually display her ability to read the “gourmet foodscape.” When we first meet Claire she seems to genuinely enjoy food, but over time she comes to understand that this enjoyment will not provide her with the physique and overall reputation she desires, and so begins to see food as functioning in a completely different way. Ultimately, food begins to function for Claire as it does for the other women in the novel, as a necessary evil whose only saving grace has to do with demonstrating affluence and cultural capital.

Consider, for instance, the fact that Claire starts skipping meals, as is evidenced by Claire's mother's concern over her not "touch[ing] her dinner," which is something that both Massie and Dylan also do (180). She also stops publicly consuming anything that is not exclusive or fashionable. She is shown to eat both ice cream and gummy worms following the critique of her eating habits in the Range Rover, but in both cases the consumption occurs in secret. In public, Claire is careful to do the "right" things and eat distinguished foods in order to impress her peers and project an image of sophistication. At the benefit auction she attends near the text's conclusion, for example, Claire eats a number of the gourmet dishes being served in the
event's "five-star food court" because participating in such an event and having the privilege to consume the distinguished courses being served carries with it a certain cultural cachet, but only eats her candies when she is hiding in the bushes during her father's speech because she knows from experience that they will only serve to hurt her image (197).

Ultimately, her new, status-obsessed persona has the desired effect. By the end of the novel Claire has become a member of the group, worthy of a spot in Massie's "in" column; in fact, she even, if briefly, usurps Massie's position as leader by deceiving the others into thinking Massie is jealous of her (219). Girls she once "fantasize[d]" about being friends with begin inviting her to parties with celebrities, taking her out shopping for designer clothes, and giving her presents (70, 147). The cost, however, is that she is forced to change everything about herself, from the way she talks and treats other people to the things she wears and eats. Claire even understands that she is sacrificing her selfhood in order to be popular, realizing that her new "friends" like her for superficial reasons, but, as the narrator notes, she "[doesn't] care" (168).

Save a short episode wherein Claire is once again excluded following the Clique's discovery of Claire's manipulative entry into the group, she is at the end of the text an "insider" whose overwhelming concern over committing "social suicide" completely restricts her behavior (212). While she is still unsure how she feels about Massie at the novel's close, the narrator implies that in the following books in the series Claire and Massie will at least pretend to be friends, as they both agree that it is better to be "a person with tons of friends who secretly don't like you" than a "friendless loser" (99).

What is perhaps most interesting about this trajectory towards superficiality and self-erasure is that, for a few scattered—though significant and defining—moments in the text, it does appear that the novel will shift towards a traditional Bildungsroman, wherein Claire,
realizing that the Clique girls are mean and vapid, will choose to turn towards the narrative of self-improvement that has traditionally characterized young adult literature. Such a plotline would see Claire, in her moment of crisis, stand up to social pressures by strengthening her relationship with Layne, a middle-class girl who offers Claire a chance at true, meaningful friendship, while simultaneously rejecting the exploitive upper-class of the Clique girls, who use their status and wealth to make others feel unworthy or otherwise disenfranchised. Befriending Layne provides Claire with a judgment-free, easy alternative to battling for a spot as an insider, and she actually spends a fair bit of time with Layne throughout the text. Nonetheless, at no point does Claire ever fully commit to the friendship. Each time the narrative hints towards a moment of realization on Claire’s part that she is abandoning everything she previously stood for, we see her guiltily accept, rather than change, the situation. Layne will never offer her the glamorous life that the Clique girls—and upper-class society more generally—could, and so she focuses her energy on cultivating that aspect of her life, emotionally dismal as the prospects may be.

Claire actually meets Layne on her first day of school, spotting her in the cafeteria as she is perusing her seating choices. Claire notices that they have the same camera and therefore share an interest in photography as well as, likely, an economics class. The narrator notes that Claire would prefer a seat at Massie’s table, which she believes would “guarantee her a promising future at OCD,” but that, because she realizes this invitation is not going to come, she decides to make the best of her situation by approaching Layne’s table, which, while perhaps not “a good move, politically,” might at least offer her a chance to have “a little fun” (70-71). While Layne is more accepting and friendly than the Clique girls, she is also significantly less popular. Because Claire’s goal is, ultimately, to become an “it girl,” she is never appreciative of her friendship with Layne, using her merely to fill the time while she waits for a chance to move beyond her
into Clique-status. The opportunity to make a genuine friend who appreciates and relates to Claire’s “inner” qualities, then, is sacrificed for superficial goals. While a traditional Bildungsroman would show Claire embracing her friendship with Layne, with whom she could cultivate an interiority founded on principles of morality and personal betterment, the novel consistently moves away from this narrative arc, instead functioning as a kind of guide for young readers for how to be successful consumers in contemporary society.

Consider, for instance, how Claire is shown to treat Layne during their cafeteria exchange. Layne, for her part, is enthusiastic about meeting Claire, and, it is worth noting, non-judgmental when it comes to food and consumption in general. Layne is quick to offer Claire some of the “protein enriched” oatmeal she brings from home to which she claims she is “addicted,” for instance (77). Claire rejects the oatmeal, as the “thought of sharing goopy oatmeal from a stranger’s thermos made her want to dry-heave,” a rejection which indicates that Claire is perhaps already more culturally aware than Layne (77). Claire seems to think so, at least, “only half pay[ing] attention to her conversation with Layne” while keeping “her eyes fixed on Massie” (75). It is not until after Massie leaves the cafeteria that Claire begins to really engage with Layne. They end up making plans to hang out Friday night, but again, in order to emphasize for the reader that Claire is only talking to Layne because there is no one else around, she tells Layne she will have to ask her mom first, so as to give herself a reason to cancel the plans if she changes her mind (77). Ultimately, Claire sees her first day at school as relatively unsuccessful. She did make a friend, but she is disappointed to have not been “invited to sit at an A-list table,” and she vows to continue to work towards that goal (77). She wants to move up the hierarchy and is willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen—befriending someone on a lower rung is merely a matter of convenience.
That Layne is only a fallback for Claire is reinforced when Claire gets home from school and is informed by Kendra, Massie’s mom, that Massie and her friends have a weekly sleepover on Friday nights and that Claire is invited to attend. Claire briefly considers declining the invitation, imagining that her friends back home would tell her that Massie and her friends are “snob[s]” and that she should spend time with Layne instead, but she squashes her guilt and calls Layne to cancel, lying that she has to babysit her brother (90). Unsurprisingly, Claire is excluded and teased by Massie and her friends during the sleepover, prompting Claire to once again turn towards Layne for companionship. This cycle continues throughout the novel, with Claire moving back and forth between half-hearted friendship with Layne and tenuous popularity with the Clique girls. In the end, Claire chooses not to turn to traditional values of development during her moments of moral crisis. Indeed, while it is shown that Claire could have a fulfilling relationship with Layne, one that would leave her “identity” relatively intact, she believes that a friendship with Massie, regardless of the implications, will mean something "bigger" and better (207). She remains friends with Layne, but is no more committed to the relationship at the end than she was at the beginning. Claire’s primary goal remains the same: she wants to be popular, wealthy, and desirable. Claire’s transformation towards an entirely surface individuality, then, if briefly interrupted by her friendship with Layne, is ultimately successful by the novel’s close.

Considering that the narrative does not embrace the Bildungsroman model of character—indeed, it actively breaks away from it, reading as more of an anti-Bildungsroman than anything else—it is interesting that the possibility of a shift towards interior development is presented at all. While one could argue that the episodes with Layne represent consciously-placed “lessons” on behalf of Harrison for how not to act if one wants to be a tasteful consumer, I tend to view the unfolding of the narrative and its representation of character as unintentionally reflecting a
similar tension present in consumer society. That is, it is not that Harrison planned to deconstruct Claire; rather, she simply chose the most logical approach in terms of presenting young readers with a model for image based on realism (real-life consumer expectations and the growing importance of “things” as markers of identity) rather than the traditional, idealized notion of accomplishment that is becoming an increasingly insignificant way to measure success. Because the coming-of-age form has become such an integral part of youth fiction, it is difficult to break away from completely, and so see what we might refer to as “snippets” of the life Claire would have led if the same categories were being used to evaluate worth.

Claire, then, is not a typical adolescent character. Unlike the great female heroines of classic young adult literature like Brontë's Jane Eyre or Blume's Margaret Simon, Claire does not challenge or question the corrupt adult world with which she engages; rather, she does everything in her power to immerse herself within it. When we are first introduced to Claire, she is characterized as a down-to-earth, insecure preteen who is confident, funny, and relatable. By the time the first installment of the series closes, she has rejected any semblance of her former self in favour of a branded, materialistic identity, as she believes this will allow her to attain the status and social power she craves. While Claire modifies all of her consumptive practices, the changes she makes to her eating habits are particularly noteworthy, as Claire's shifting view of food-as-sustenance to food-as-status draws attention to not only her changing exterior image but also the active evacuation of her inner self.

Because literary texts tend to reflect the societies within which they are written, the apparent replacement of psychologized expressions of character with materialism in popular "high society" youth fiction raises particular questions concerning the place of "identity" in contemporary consumerist society. What the deconstruction of character in The Clique seems to
suggest is that the "inside" of human beings--their thoughts, their feelings, in a word, their "identities"--are no longer a priority. In a world where individuals construct their sense of self around physical possessions and surface attributes, self-worth becomes a measurable quality that is contingent on what you have, not "who" you are. Perhaps, then, what this examination ultimately reveals is that the commonplace view of identity as the marker of humanity is our own creation. That the construction of "well-rounded" protagonists has started to disintegrate in certain literary genres certainly seems to speak to this fact. The following two chapters explore this idea further, in first a female- and then a male-centered high society text (Gossip Girl and The Insiders respectively) in order to illustrate both the pervasiveness of the shift away from the Bildungsroman as well as analyze how and why gendered consumption contributes to this shift.
CHAPTER TWO
Contradictory Consumption: Distinction, Desirability and the Deconstruction of Self in *Gossip Girl*

I wanna be able to eat spaghetti bolognaise, and not feel bad about it for days and days and days. In the magazines they talk about weight loss, if I buy those jeans I can look like Kate Moss.

- Lily Allen, “Everything’s Just Wonderful”

Many women have what could be characterized as a precarious relationship with food. This is not new information, and it shouldn’t be surprising; as reported by *The Guardian*’s Eva Wiseman, ninety percent of women feel “body-image anxiety” at some point in their lives, and more often than not this anxiety complicates their view of food and its nourishing qualities (“Uncomfortable in Our Skin”). This is also not a new topic for young adult literature. Beth Younger explains in *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* that young adult literature produced for women generally, and young adult series fiction specifically, tends “to reinforce this preoccupation [with weight and bodies], and the frequency with which authors have young and female characters perform physical self-assessment does more than just reflect a culture obsessed with female beauty.” Indeed—and importantly for my purposes—the overriding focus on physicality in young adult “chick lit” reinforces, as Younger demonstrates, “the importance of beauty as a vital attribute linked to future success in life” (113).

To describe this phenomenon, Younger uses the term “lookism,” which is essentially an updated version of Laura Mulvey’s formulation of the “male gaze.” In her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory to posit that visual arts—and in particular film—depict the world from a heterosexual, masculine point of view. Put
simply, she argues that men look and women, as sexual objects, are looked upon. Extending this into the realm of young adult literature, Younger argues that contemporary “chick lit” is profoundly influenced by “lookism,” as evidenced in the way that it presents female characters as female bodies (sexual objects) to be analyzed, regardless of the looker’s gender (Younger 113). The prevalence of “lookism” in Western consumer culture is not lost on young women breaking into adulthood. Mary Pipher quite succinctly states that “beauty is the defining characteristic for American women. It’s the necessary and often sufficient condition for social success” (183). As Younger emphasizes, young women in contemporary society realize that they will be “judged based on how they look, not who they are,” and this profoundly influences their consumptive decisions (113).

Because women are arguably evaluated first and foremost on the size and shape of their bodies, their eating choices are especially impacted by the understanding that a woman’s worth is determined by her physicality. While the connection between food and weight gain is not new information, the obsession with and accessibility of information relating to calories and fat content—a quick walk through an average North American grocery store, with shelves filled with “low fat” and “zero calorie” items quickly illustrates this—has encouraged many young women to develop an unhealthy, conflicting relationship with food. What is particularly striking about this is that these ideas are increasingly manifesting themselves in popular literature produced for a young female readership. Particularly in high society fiction, successful or powerful female characters all but completely lack internal characterization. Instead, what we encounter are detailed physical descriptions—descriptions that are frequently linked to other consumptive decisions, including, significantly, food intake.
This chapter examines representations of food, eating, and image in Cecily von Ziegesar's 2002 novel *Gossip Girl*. The novel was Alloy's first major success in the burgeoning genre of high society fiction. It was wildly popular with young readers, leading to the production of thirteen more primary novels, a follow-up series, a spin-off series, a manga, and a six-season *CW* television show. Again, as in *The Clique*, we see a departure from traditional representations of literary characters as psychologized, though the departure is arguably intensified in *Gossip Girl*. Indeed, whereas *The Clique* presents a character who moves from “roundness” to superficiality, the older young women who populate the *Gossip Girl* world have seemingly undergone this transformation and are, for the most part, already relying almost exclusively on external measures for their identity formation. *Gossip Girl*, then, despite also focusing on female protagonists, offers us a new way to analyze the implications of the shift away from the Bildungsroman. Looking at eating and taste culture in *Gossip Girl* allows us to further consider this restructuring and what it offers a contemporary young reader.

An analysis of the representation of food—the one consumer good that we cannot effectively separate from our subjective or interior self—as an object of superficial consumption in *Gossip Girl* will allow us to continue to map out the underlying argument of this thesis—namely, that the Bildungsroman is becoming less important as a narrative structure in young adult literature because societal interpretations of concepts like “identity” have changed in significant and interesting ways because of the growing importance of capitalist display. These are protagonists whose identities have been, or are in the process of being, evacuated by status-oriented consumption. They are characterized based on what they come to possess or physically embody, not "who" they are inside. Ultimately, the all-encompassing nature of materialism in *Gossip Girl* and the other texts I analyze makes visible a corresponding trend in contemporary
society towards valuing material wealth, surface attributes, and social prestige over achievements of any other kind to the point that selfhood is sacrificed entirely.

In *Gossip Girl* specifically, I am interested in exploring the varying and often competing ways that food is superficially consumed by the young female protagonists. There is a marked friction that develops in the text between consuming food to project an image of sophistication and rejecting or expelling food to maintain an image of sexual desirability. Throughout the text numerous female characters are shown to have an uncomfortable, often irreconcilable relationship with food. They purchase or consume certain foods in order to display their understanding of the cultural politics of taste, thereby increasing their social power and influence. At the same time, however, they adopt unhealthy and disempowering eating habits ranging from borderline anorexia to full-blown bulimia in an attempt to embody unrealistic beauty ideals. In both cases their ingestive practices are motivated by a pressing concern over maintaining a conforming image of sophistication and thinness. As the narrator makes clear early on the adolescents depicted in *Gossip Girl* live their lives around the dictum that "as long as you [keep] up appearances, you [are] all right" (6). As a result, there is a marked absence of character growth or transformation in *Gossip Girl*. The female protagonists do traverse the social hierarchy, and they are shown to adapt their consumptive practices to meet heteronormative social expectations in order to accomplish this, but these changes are superficial and do not in any way resemble the growth-oriented transformations that have traditionally characterized adolescent fiction.

Before examining the intersection between food, image, and identity formation in *Gossip Girl*, it is first necessary to situate my argument by briefly summarizing existing scholarship exploring how mass consumerism—and, in particular, media outlets and marketing campaigns—
This essay analyzes the formation of gendered identities under the assumption that gender is a construct that is continually performed. As Judith Butler argues in her seminal text *Gender Trouble*, "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity that it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (25). By this Butler means that identities are illusions or constructions that are retroactively created through reiterated performative acts. In this view, it is the very act of performing gender that constitutes who we are. Because identities are formed within constructed limitations—limitations that are, for Butler, controlled by heterosexual hegemony and the gender norms this construct assumes—they cannot exist or operate outside of them.

Kerry Mallan extends Butler's concept of gender performativity into the realm of children's literature in her book *Gender Dilemmas in Children's Fiction*, where she, among other things, examines what she identifies as "the beauty dilemma" in youth fiction (59). This dilemma, identified by numerous academics as the primary reason for young women's anxieties over the body, centers on beauty as an idealistic construct that can never be fully realized. As Francette Pacteau argues in *The Symptom of Beauty* (1994), "no woman escapes 'beauty.' Unavoidably, from her earliest years, beauty will be either attributed or denied to her. If she does not have it, she may hope to gain it; if she possesses it, she will certainly lose it" (14). The gendered identities of female characters in *Gossip Girl* are constructed around this dilemma, with female characters being habitually evaluated based on their physical appearance and, more specifically, their slenderness. Hesse-Biber argues that this Western obsession with small body size is part of a "cult of thinness" that impacts young girls and women from all socio-economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds. In *Gossip Girl*, as in the media and Western society, "desirable"
women are slim, attractive, and heterosexual, and it is these qualities that first and foremost determine the female protagonists’ sexual desirability.

The problem with these representations is that they give women unreasonable expectations for how they should look. The unrealistic female bodies put forth as ideal and perpetuated by the media in capitalist society lead women, both young and old, to take extreme actions ranging from plastic surgery to starvation to attempt to embody this ideal. One of the first studies to explore heightened anxieties surrounding the teenage female body, Brumberg's *The Body Project* (1997), emphasizes that in contemporary society girls "make the body their central project" (xxv). Brumberg argues that, while visual representations alone do not necessarily lead teenagers to adopt unhealthy eating practices such as anorexia or bulimia, "these pathologies thrive in an environment in which so many "normal" people work so hard (and spend so much money) in pursuit of the perfect body" (124). The argument that young women tend to develop eating disorders as a result of social pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards is echoed in numerous works including Sarah Grogan's *Body Image* (2002), Carole M. Counihan's *The Anthropology of Food and Body* (1999), Vickie Rutledge Shields and Dawn Heinecken's *Measuring Up* (2002) and Maggie Wykes' *The Media and Body Image* (2004).

The act of eating, then, has been theorized, if indirectly, as central to the way that female adolescents think about both their bodies and their identities as women. Though it is necessary for survival, food is consistently associated with weight gain in society, with dieting and exercise becoming increasingly central to contemporary discourses surrounding health and the body. These discourses coupled with media representations of thinness as a central aspect of femininity encourage young women to foster a negative self-image, which has in recent years contributed to an alarming increase in eating disorders among adolescent women (*Wykes* 13). What is
interesting about this dynamic in regard to Alloy literature in general and *Gossip Girl* specifically is that the female protagonists who are shown to adopt dangerous eating habits in an attempt to embody unrealistic beauty ideals are simultaneously forced to regularly consume exclusive or otherwise tasteful foods as part of their powerful, "high-status" lifestyles.

Indeed, while the consumption of exclusive material goods such as expensive cars or brand name clothing in "high society" youth fiction is shown to have an exclusively positive effect on the status and desirability of the female protagonists who consume them, as Johnson suggests in "Consuming Desires," the way food consumption operates in relation to status and identity is more complex. Food studies scholars Josée Johnston and Shyón Baumann argue that "food operates as a source of status and distinction for economic and cultural elites, indirectly maintaining and reproducing social inequality" (xv). This is certainly true, and yet, as an object that physically *enters* and *becomes* the consumer upon consumption, food also affects our physical bodies as well as interior constructions of self. As Carolyn Daniel argues in *Voracious Children*, "the realities of the eating body mean that food passes from the outside to the inside and subsequently to the outside again, distorting notions of what is properly inside/self and outside/other. When we eat food...it literally becomes a part of us" (6). For Daniel, as for the few other scholars who have written on the subject of food and children's literature, including Mervyn Nicholson and Kara K. Keeling, food is a key component of identity formation. That individuals cannot separate food from self like other material possessions is an area of personal contention for the wealthy adolescent girls represented in these texts because the expectations of their social class conflict with the requirements of their gendered identities.

This tension between distinction and desirability is particularly evident in *Gossip Girl*, Alloy's most successful novel to date. The book centers on a group of privileged teenage girls
who attend the Constance Billard School for Girls in New York City's Upper East Side. The primary protagonists are Blair Waldorf and Serena van der Woodsen, on-again-off-again best friends whose day-to-day activities range from shopping to having sex, partying, and competing with each other. As is consistently emphasized throughout the text, one of the requirements of being a wealthy socialite is attending the various brunches, dinners, and parties that are constantly held, because these food-centered events function to underscore their status as members of an exclusive leisure class. The teens in the text do not eat at expensive restaurants and attend over-the-top dinner parties where they serve gourmet appetizers because they appreciate or are passionate about the foods they get to consume. Rather, they participate in the consumption of various “high-end” or otherwise exclusive cuisines because the act of consuming or even purchasing food is a means of displaying social prestige and cultural power. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects...distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make" (6). The protagonists’ knowledge of, and ability to work within, what Johnston and Baumann have termed the “gourmet foodscape,” showcases the fact that they possess an informed sense of taste and distinction. Making distinguished cuisine choices, then, is an important aspect of these characters' performed class identities.

A quick perusal of the chapter titles, which range from "like most juicy stories, it started at a party" to "a power lunch" and "sunday brunch," establishes and underscores Gossip Girl's preoccupation with food and food-centered affairs. The first event to take place, one of Blair's mother's "famous" dinner parties, functions as a good starting point for discussing how food operates as an object of status and material display throughout the text (7). Indeed, the entire party is a means of displaying the recent successes of the Waldorf family. Not only does Blair's mother Eleanor throw the party as a way to show off her "expensively redecorated" penthouse
suite, which is, it is noted, filled with "antiques and artwork that would have impressed anyone who knew anything about art," she also uses it to flaunt her new, decidedly-straight boyfriend Cyrus Rose as well as her thinner physique after recently losing twenty pounds (11). Having lost considerable face following her "infamous divorce" which involved her husband leaving her for another man, rebuilding her image of wealth, respectability and desirability is to her of the utmost importance.

The exclusive cuisines prepared for the party serve to reinforce the constructed image of success and sophistication that the Waldorfs are attempting to present. From descriptions of fine vintage scotch to cod-and-caper spring rolls, French butter, Cote du Rhone wine, duck with acorn squash soufflé and wilted chard [with] lingonberry sauce, there is considerable time spent developing Blair's family's distinguished and expensive cuisine choices, which functions to reinforce that the Waldorfs and their guests are sophisticated and culturally knowledgeable members of the upper class (5, 12, 32, 33). Moreover, it is emphasized that Mrs. Waldorf does not prepare or serve any of the dishes for her parties herself, but instead has hired help to complete these tasks of traditional female domesticity for her (7). This is noteworthy as it again draws attention to the Waldorf’s leisurely position. The wealthy characters represented in this novel and in attendance at this dinner party are privy to a very exclusive lifestyle—one that does not require them to cook, clean, or perform any of daily chores that characterize the lives of the working and middle classes. This is not about food as sustenance, or even about food and physical enjoyment. Yes, these characters eat because their bodies require it, but ultimately the Waldorf dinner and other similar food-centered events are best understood as rehearsed performances in which food as an object of elitist material consumption plays the lead role.
The fact that the adolescents in *Gossip Girl* are constantly eating out further underscores their class position. The average teenager cannot afford to go out for dinner on a regular basis. Serena, Blair, and their friends, on the other hand, spend money on food and drinks at cafes, restaurants and bars without a second thought almost every day. For instance, Blair, Isabel and Kati go to 3 Guys Coffee Shop daily, a habit that is repeatedly criticized by the aptly named Gossip Girl who narrates the small rumor-filled blog posts that periodically punctuate the narrative (38, 40, 82). Nate and the other boys from St. Jude's are said to eat at a "little pizza joint on the corner of Eightieth and Madison" (64). Even Jenny, who resides in the West End and, though wealthy, was raised in a less ostentatious cultural climate, regularly stops "at a little gourmet deli on Broadway" on her way to school (64,69). In the evening the members of the affluent "in crowd" frequent various bars and clubs, including the "swanky" Star Lounge in the Tribeca Star Hotel that Serena and Blair meet at midway through the novel, where they are shown to effortlessly order and consume alcoholic beverages despite being underage because, as the narrator explains, the girls intimidate the waitress, who "would rather lose her job than hassle Serena van der Woodsen for being underage" (118, 120). That the waitress would be afraid to challenge two young teenage girls underscores Serena and Blair's social power and influence, which stems from their ability to "act the part" of distinguished, upper-class socialites.

The Sunday brunch that the girls attend near the end of the novel typifies the representation of food-as-status. Like the Waldorf dinner that opens the text, the brunch allows the wealthy protagonists to display their cultural and social superiority through the consumption of a variety of gourmet dishes. The brunch is introduced as an elitist affair thrown for "freshly-scrubbed Upper-East-Siders" (152). As the narrator explains, "[I]ate Sunday morning the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art were crawling with people. Tourists, mostly...Inside, brunch
was being served in the Egyptian wing for all the museum's board members and their families" (152). The meal itself, consisting of pumpernickel bagels, salmon-and-leek omelets, crème brulée, Bloody Marys, Seven-and-Sevens, coffee and whiskey, is distinguished and extravagant and speaks to a certain cultured, sophisticated life-style (153, 154, 159). Those in attendance, including "Eleanor Waldorf, Cyrus Rose, the van der Woodsens, the Basses, the Archibalds, and their children," use the brunch as a way to negotiate their positions within their social group (152). Cyrus Rose, for instance, draws attention to Serena's recent risqué photo shoot with the Remi brothers by asking if anyone has seen "the Styles section of the Times today," which simultaneously embarrasses the van der Woodsens and raises the respectability of the Waldorf's (154). While it is "part of their social code not to dwell on things that embarrass...them," veiled insults and catty gossip characterizes most of the table-talk at events like the brunch because the entire purpose of these food-focused affairs is to provide the protagonists a way to flaunt and compare their wealth and sophisticated tastes (154).

It is clear, then, that the frequent references to food and eating in the text function to do more than illustrate the dietary preferences of the characters. The female adolescents represented in Gossip Girl are part of a powerful and exclusive social class, and their status-related ingestive practices serve to reinforce their privileged position. As characters they are primarily distinguished by their understanding of and ability to spend money on material things, and, in particular, exclusive material things. This extends to their consumption of food, which tends towards the expensive and is regularly transformed into a performative act of social display rather than a necessary act of sustenance. And so there is Serena in the cafeteria at her school, wishing for one of the toasted ham-and-cheese sandwiches she used to get at the Gare du Nord in Paris (60). Or later, at The Star Lounge, where she casually smokes her "Gauloises" from France
While food consumption is perhaps less overtly ostentatious than, for instance, driving around in a brand new Porsche, the effect is essentially the same. That so much attention is paid to the oft-regarded mundane act of eating emphasizes how critical food is to the maintenance of the protagonists performed class identities.

At the same time that food is consumed as an object of status by the female protagonists in the text, it is also rejected, expelled, or otherwise critiqued by them because of the ostensibly "negative" effect it has on the body. Indeed, class is only one component of these girls' performed selves; in *Gossip Girl*, maintaining an image of sexual desirability in accordance with idealized constructions of femininity is shown to be equally important. As the numerous discussions surrounding weight and body image in the novel make clear, it is not enough to be wealthy and sophisticated in the highly-competitive, appearance-obsessed world *Gossip Girl* constructs; to garner power and influence as a woman one must also embody heteronormative social standards of beauty that extol fashionably feminine women with thin figures. When food consumption is considered in this context, it becomes clear that women are expected to participate in contradictory ingestive practices in order to maintain two separate but equally significant aspects of their performed identities. On the one hand, they must attend food-centered social functions and consume gourmet or otherwise tasteful cuisines in order to affirm their status as members of a privileged and exclusive social group. On the other, they are expected to continually sustain a desirable and idealized physique, which forces them to regulate and limit what they eat in the hope that they will someday embody a standard that, as an ideal, does not actually exist in reality.

That the social power and influence of women in the text is tied to their physical appearance, and, in particular, their slenderness, is established early on. At the dinner party that
opens the novel the narrator explains that "Blair's mother was wearing the fitted, graphite-beaded cashmere dress that Blair had helped her pick out from Armani...A year ago she wouldn't have fit into the dress, but she had lost twenty pounds since she met Cyrus. She looked fantastic. Everyone thought so" (11). This is the first reaction Blair's mother gets from all the party guests, including Serena, who, upon seeing Mrs. Waldorf, immediately exclaims, "Look how skinny you are!" (17). Her new-and-improved body is even shown to make the other adult women at the party act petty and jealous, as they admit that she has lost weight, but then go on to accuse her of getting a "chin tuck" (11). Women in the novel are excessively competitive when it comes to looks because they understand that the influence they have within their class is directly tied to their physical appearance and their ability to be "alluring." Female characters in the novel who gain weight, or whose ingestive practices are not considered conducive to weight loss, are ridiculed and ostracized. For example, after Blair's friends/followers Isabel and Kati are shown to yet again stop for fries and hot cocoa at the 3 Guys Coffee Shop, Gossip Girl snidely comments that perhaps the reason they returned the "dresses they bought at Bendal's the other day" was because "they [are] getting too fat" (82). This "fat shaming" occurs frequently and functions to differentiate the popular female characters from those who are less comely and, therefore, less powerful and influential.

The most powerful female protagonist is arguably Serena. She is characterized as the paradigm of beauty in the novel, and is the primary female character against which all other young women judge themselves. She is beautiful, blonde, slender, and described as having "the kind of smile you might try to imitate...[t]he magnetic, delicious, 'you can't stop looking at me, can you?' smile supermodels spend years perfecting" (16). She is literally depicted as a goddess, whose beauty it is said makes "Venus loo[k] like a lumpy pile of marble," and she is shown to
have the ability to disarm nearly every man she encounters with her good-looks and confident demeanor (27). Both Jenny and Blair are repeatedly shown to envy Serena, the social power she holds, and her idealized physique. In both cases, their desire to look and be more like her has a marked impact on their eating practices.

Jenny is not a part of Serena and Blair's elitist social circle, and, at least at the beginning of the novel, she is said to prefer this because she is shy and self-conscious and likes to be "invisible" (42). Upon seeing that Serena—whom Jenny thinks is "beautiful" and "absolutely the coolest girl in the entire world"—has returned to Constance Billard, however, Jenny changes her mind and instead starts making a determined effort to get noticed and gain entry into her idol's clique (44). Because Jenny thinks that the biggest problem or barrier to this is her "unbalanced" appearance, she starts skipping meals and restricting her diet. Jenny is not overweight, but she is self-conscious about her "34 D" breasts, which, the narrator says, are disproportionate to her tiny, short body (42). As the narrator explains, "[e]ver since she'd gotten her period last spring, she'd been eating less and less" in order to counteract her chest-oriented weight gain (68). Her breakfast routine, for instance, now consists of only half of a grapefruit and a cup of peppermint tea (68). She stops to get a "toasted, buttered, chocolate-chip scone" on her way to school at the very beginning of the novel, but shortly thereafter she is said to cut out that "indulgence" as well (68, 113).

The impact idealized representations of beauty and femininity have on Jenny's eating practices is made especially clear during the lunch hour at Constance Billard that occurs midway through the text. Because she had only eaten "a banana and an orange for dinner the night before" and then skipped breakfast in the morning, Jenny is extremely hungry when lunch starts (113). She grabs "two grilled cheese sandwiches and two coffee yogurts" and goes off to sit by
herself to eat her "feast" (113). As she sits down to eat, she is approached by Serena, who saw Jenny sign up to help with her movie and wants to thank her. Jenny is, the narrator explains, immediately embarrassed that she grabbed two calorie-laden sandwiches and is afraid that Serena will think she is a "disgusting pig" (114). She does not even end up eating them, but instead stands their speechless, "taking mental notes on how to act as mysterious, poised, and cool as Serena was acting at that very moment," while Serena eats her own lunch (115). Jenny wants desperately to impress Serena, and, as the quotation suggests, she even tries to emulate her. Everything about this moment in the text, from Jenny skipping meals and stressing out over making an undistinguished cuisine choice, to her attempt at mimicking Serena, is shaped by her desire to appear a certain way--a way that she has been taught to believe is "proper" and expected for a woman--because she understands that, in order to move up the social hierarchy, she must not only act the part but also look it.

This plays out in a more extreme manner with Blair, whose obsession with status and popularity leads her to develop a very serious eating disorder. Like Jenny, Blair is envious of Serena's natural beauty and superior social position. As the narrator explains, the girls' friendship has always, at least in Blair's mind, followed a similar trajectory, "with Blair playing the smaller, fatter, mousier, less witty best friend of the blond über-girl, Serena van der Woodsen" (22). Blair's insecurities stem primarily from the subordinate relationship she has with Serena, "[t]he girl she could never measure up to and had tried so hard to replace" (23). Blair is popular, but she is not as popular as Serena, and she does not produce the same awestruck reactions from her social group. She is blithely aware of this fact, and it bothers her to the point of physical and mental exhaustion. To cope with these pressures, and to counterbalance her materialistic ingestion, Blair engages in self-induced vomiting.
Blair's bulimic tendencies are addressed a number of times in the text. In each case, she is shown to binge and purge at a socially exclusive, food-centered event. This makes sense for two reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, she has to eat the gourmet dishes served at these affairs in order to display her awareness of taste and distinction and affirm her position as a member of the upper class. This consumption encourages feelings of guilt and worthlessness that lead her to expel the foods she consumes. At the same time, these events center more on appearances than they do on food. Blair feels incredibly pressured in these environments to project a particular image, especially when Serena is around, and her reaction to this pressure is to stress eat.

For example, while Serena and Blair talk over dinner at Blair's mother's party, Blair is shown to eat in excess after Serena unintentionally says something that makes Blair feel inadequate. When Serena asks if Blair is still with her boyfriend Nate, who Blair thinks favours Serena, the narrator explains that "Blair gulped her wine...reached for the butter, [and] slapp[ed] a great big wad on her roll," before eventually replying in the affirmative. Following this she "heaped her plate high with food and attacked it as if she hadn't eaten in weeks" until "her stomach rebelled, and she shot up suddenly, scraping her chair back and running down the hall to her...bathroom" (33). Once there, the narrator depicts her in a position she had been in before "many times": "kneeled over the toilet [sticking] her middle finger as far down as her throat as it would go" (34). This happens again at the brunch at the end of the text, where Blair is shown to throw up the two servings of crème brulée she eats in response to seeing Serena and Nate together following the discovery of their sexual affair (159). In each case Blair's bulimia is directly linked to insecurities surrounding her appearance and status in relation to Serena, her best friend and main competition.
It is worth noting that at no point is Blair's bulimia acknowledged to be a dangerous disease that could kill her. Rather, like all the teenage problems in the text that go unanswered or unresolved, her bulimia is presented as another piece of juicy gossip. Neither Serena nor Nate, both of whom are aware of Blair's disease, do anything to prevent it; they even go out of their way to not discuss it with her. In addition to the characters' blatant disregard for Blair's well-being, however, it is the way that these sections of the text are written that is the most telling. The narrative point-of-view reads like a judgmental teenager looking in, and, because of this, Blair's bulimic episodes are characterized as humorous but acceptable, rather than serious or problematic. At the Kiss on the Lips fundraiser that closes the text Blair is shown to once again excuse herself to throw up in the bathroom. The entire incident is written like a comedy segment for a sitcom. Blair waits in line for the bathroom, her hand pressed over her mouth holding in vomit—making Nate "giggle" in the process—while Rebecca Agnelli from the "Central Park Save the Peregrine Falcon Foundation" tries to thank her for organizing the event (179). She searches desperately for someone to distract Rebecca so she can relieve herself, eventually spotting a very "stoned" Nate who opens with the line "My mother is a big fan of those falcons," allowing Blair to "keep the puke from seeping out of the sides of her mouth" long enough to get to a stall (180-181).

In many ways it is ironic that Blair is so concerned about rising to the same level as Serena, because Serena is shown to feel the same way that Blair does. Indeed, despite the fact that she is described as embodying all of the qualities of the "ideal woman" in addition to being idolized by both Jenny and Blair, Serena also obsesses over maintaining her appearance and popularity. Again, this is clearly illustrated through an examination of her cuisine choices. She has, for instance, been on a lunch plan with Blair called the "diet plate" since she started high
school that consists of tea with lemon and sugar, a plate of lettuce with bleu cheese dressing and a lemon yogurt (60). She also skips meals, and is shown to repeatedly drink on an empty stomach (120, 136). Like Jenny and Blair, Serena wants above all else to fit in. She is shunned by her friends, none of whom make any real effort to spend time with her when she returns, and as a result feels "ugly and awkward" (163). Her only real ambition is to be popular and attract attention, and her mood is directly linked to how much praise she receives. After the Remi Brothers photo shoot, for instance, she is shown to be incredibly confident, and feels as if she could "keep up with the likes of Christina Aguilera and Joaquin Phoenix" (90). After finding out that she was not invited to Blair's party, on the other hand, she is described as feeling "ugly" and like a "shadow of her former self" (163). The earlier quotation from Francette Pacteau, then, rings true: no woman can escape beauty. Even Serena, who is beauty encompassed in a literary character, is clearly influenced by discourses surrounding idealized femininity and social power; indeed, they are shown to dictate nearly every decision she makes in her life, from the clothing she wears to the foods she consumes. As a character who falls from grace she has the potential to be transformative, but, like Jenny and Blair, her actions end up serving only to build and subsequently reinforce her superficial identity.

Because so much time is spent constructing the surface of the female protagonists, very little attention ends up being paid to the development of interiority. As a result, these girls are not just outwardly superficial but inwardly as well. Indeed, what makes Gossip Girl so interesting as cultural product is its blatant departure from conventional representations of character as psychologized. Neither Jenny, Blair, nor Serena even comes close to resembling a traditionally "well-rounded" female heroine. Unlike the great women of classic young adult literature like Bronte's Jane Eyre or Blume's Margaret Simon, these girls do not challenge or question the
materialistic, corrupt adult world with which they engage; rather, they do everything in their power to immerse themselves within it, as their status-oriented and contradictory eating habits make clear. While it is not necessarily uncharacteristic for youth fiction to deal with body image and self-esteem issues, especially when it is written for a female readership, the way these anxieties are presented deviates markedly from traditional approaches to character and identity construction in female Bildungsromans. The text does not encourage a reinterpretation of restrictive, heteronormative definitions of femininity as, for instance, a novel like Jane Eyre does. Rather, representations of character in Gossip Girl illustrate that the only way for women to gain power is to simultaneously maintain two separate, and occasionally competing, superficial identities. As a result, the female characters, whose entire lives are dedicated towards constructing a particular outward appearance, are depicted as lacking depth and interiority, thereby challenging the development/growth narrative style characteristic of young adult fiction.

As Maria Nikolajeva explains in The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature, conventional genre definitions argue that, as texts representing individuals in a transitory stage in life, all children's and young adult novels can be classified as Bildungsroman or coming-of-age literature (ix). In her view it is depth and dynamism that makes young, developing protagonists stand out against the static stock characters that surround them (129). Nikolajeva argues that "classic" children's texts are memorable because they have "unique and nonrepeatable characters" who are "well-rounded," meaning they have "multiple personality traits" that embody the "complexity" of "real people" (129). While she is certainly not wrong in identifying "roundness" as a key factor in the likeability and success of a number of classic children's characters, I think she makes a critical oversight when she discusses depth or "roundness" as an innate quality of human beings.
In *The Economy of Character* Deidre Lynch explains that the very idea of a "well-rounded" literary character arose in eighteenth century Britain in the wake of mass consumerism as a way to compensate for the uncomfortable and increasingly dominant position materialism was occupying in "real" people's lives (169). In reference to female protagonists specifically, Lynch argues that eighteenth-century authors constructed their characters' "inner life" by staging the narrative so that "the heroine's subjectivity shares the limelight with the objects of her consumption," but is still kept decidedly separate from them (170). While Lynch's work is not contemporary in focus, her discussion of the constructed division between subject and object helps explain what is going on with formation of character in *Gossip Girl*. Lynch continually emphasizes that the "rounded" nature of "real" people that eighteenth-century texts attempt to replicate is in and of itself a construction. In this view, we are just as susceptible to losing ourselves to corruption and materialism as the characters that represent us in literary texts. Early literary characters were (and, for the most part, continue to be) constructed around inner growth in order to provide models for society for how to deal with and define themselves against materialism, which had increasingly become a necessary and dominant aspect of everyday life. Given the acceleration of consumer culture from the eighteenth century to present day, it is not surprisingly that constructions of character have, at least in some literary genres, changed to reflect the all-encompassing nature of consumerism in contemporary society.

The formation of character in *Gossip Girl* is a case in point. The female protagonists are exclusively characterized based on their public image and exterior attributes, which means that everything they do throughout the text is intended to contribute to the construction of outer, not inner, self. This clearly extends to their ingestive practices as well, which are entirely motivated by superficial concerns surrounding status, appearance, and social power. Representations of
food—an inherently penetrative and identity shaping cultural product—then, become a
convenient metaphor for the replacement of substance (food-as-sustenance) with materialism
(food-as-status). In this view, Blair's bulimic episodes are metaphorical acts of self-evacuation;
as she expels her meals, she also expels the parts of herself that do not conform to the
expectations of femininity perpetuated in contemporary consumer culture. Rather than provide
the reader with a guide for how to reject materialism and maintain a subjective self, *Gossip Girl*
encourages readers to embrace their consumerist identities to the point that they replace all other
aspects of self:

Consider, for example, the photograph of Serena's belly button that is said to adorn
numerous billboards and signs all over New York City following her photo shoot with the Remi
Brothers. Her belly button—the part of her that is her initial connection to the world and a literal
mark of her creation—is transformed into a superficial, sexualized object that is nothing *but*
surface. Indeed, it is literally turned into a two-dimension picture intended for public
consumption. Serena is, unsurprisingly, nothing but happy about this objectification. She is more
than willing to be consumed and sacrifice her sense of self for superficial gain, because, after all,
all anyone "in New York wants [is] to be famous" (90). Also predictably, her power and social
influence are shown to increase as a direct result of the photo shoot. As the narrator explains,
part of the reason the waitress serves the girls at the Star Lounge is because she recognizes
Serena from the photo and likes the idea of being "pals" with someone so beautiful and
celebrated (120). As this and many other moments in the text make clear, embracing and
internalizing the materialistic and relatively restrictive nature of the outside world is the primary
way that women come to be empowered and recognized. This is certainly the message the book
promotes, which makes sense given that *Gossip Girl* and other copycat "high society" texts are
produced and distributed by Alloy Entertainment, a company whose sole purpose is to sell products (young adult novels, television shows, and films) to adolescent consumers. What better way is there to do this than to create characters who are built around, and shown to directly benefit from, consumption.

This emphasis on promoting materialistic consumption helps to explain why literary character in *Gossip Girl* deviates so far from traditional representations of protagonists as "round" or psychologized. The pervasiveness of materialism in the text is made especially clear through an examination of representations of food and eating habits. The female protagonists are, through their cuisine choices, shown to obsess over appearance and public image to the point that every other aspect of their lives, including their inner self, is sacrificed. In fact, no real effort is made to characterize who they are inside at all, because, as the privileging of status over substance in the text suggests, this does not matter or impact their social position whatsoever. To move forward in the *Gossip Girl* world is to consume and conform; there is no alternative. This is what makes the consumption of food in the text so interesting; these young women are expected to simultaneously consume food in order to conform to a particular class image and reject or limit food in order to conform to a particular gendered body image. As a model for identity for adolescent readers, *Gossip Girl* ends up encouraging girls to adopt unhealthy and superficial consumptive practices, because they are shown that this is the only way to succeed as a woman.

It is worth emphasizing that *Gossip Girl* was not written as a critique of materialism. The entire purpose of the text is to encourage consumerism, not challenge or question it. I believe that this novel and others like it are best understood as unconscious reflections of our status-oriented society. If read this way, representations of self, and in particular, inner self, in *Gossip Girl*
reveal that the place of identity in society has gradually shifted in order to make room for the increasingly significant place materialism now occupies. Indeed, the overriding concern with appearance and status in the text seems to suggest that the "inside" of human beings—their thoughts, their feelings, and, in a word, their "identities"—are no longer a priority. In a world where individuals construct their sense of self around physical possessions and surface attributes, self-worth becomes a measurable quality that is contingent on what you possess, not "who" you are inside. Ultimately, then, *Gossip Girl* and other "high society" young adult novels are worthy of scholarly attention, not because they are literary masterpieces but because they are cultural products that help us to see the impact materialism has had on our collective understanding of identity and self-worth in contemporary capitalist society.
CHAPTER THREE

Burgers, Babes, Beer: Constructing Masculinity through Consumption in J. Minter’s The Insiders

I’m no woman, I’m no woman, I am a man

- Pavement, “False Skorpion”

The Insiders novels have received little scholarly attention as compared to Alloy’s other series. This oversight is particularly interesting, considering that The Insiders is something of an anomaly in a primarily female-dominated genre. This is not to say that it is surprising to see consumer-oriented “high society” texts produced for young men. Today’s youth culture is, in the words of bell hooks, “centered around consumption,” and young people, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, are influenced by the perceived notion that “one’s worth is…determined by material things” (81). For young men, as for young women, gender expectations are inextricably associated with consumer identity. Many contemporary young adult novels that are directed towards a male readership can be identified as primarily concerned with masculine identity and material consumption, and J. Minter’s 2004 novel The Insiders is no exception. Scholarship has tended to group The Insiders in with other Alloy texts (see Glenn 2008), and this approach has worked to a point. Yet because the nature of the consumption is in many ways quite different from that which is presented in the female-centered series, a separate examination of the relationship between consumerism through the lens of contemporary masculinity is arguably warranted if not necessary to fully understand the ways in which contemporary consumer culture has infiltrated and subsequently shaped not only young people’s lives and identities, but the literature within which those lives and identities are represented.
Indeed, while both the female protagonists in *Gossip Girl* and the male protagonists in *The Insiders* live elitist lives dedicated to embodying the unrealistic gender ideals propagated by consumer society, the ways in which they do so are strikingly different. As illustrated through the examination of consumption and eating practices in *Gossip Girl*, women in “high society” young adult fiction are expected to maintain a balance between desirability—which involves conforming to commercialized Western standards of feminine beauty (i.e. thinness)—and distinction, which involves consuming exclusive products and foodstuffs in order to reinforce a particular, elitist social image. The male protagonists in *The Insiders*, on the other hand, are less obsessed with thinness and, to a certain degree, consuming distinguished cuisines, because the standards of heteronormative masculinity do not require them to be. Rather, the male protagonists in the novel seek to be all-consuming in an effort to affirm their power and influence. The elitist world that the insider boys attempt to navigate is structured around the norms of Western hegemonic masculinity, which projects an image of the so-called perfect man as desirable, physically aggressive, powerful and, significantly in our consumer-oriented culture, wealthy. Among other things—including having the financial power to purchase expensive, luxury goods as well as limitless food and drinks—this involves the ability to acquire and consume beautiful women, as these women, through their own desirability, enhance the status of the men consuming them.

In this essay I seek to analyze discourses surrounding food and the consumption of women in *The Insiders* in an attempt to illustrate the ways in which contemporary consumer culture fuels the construction of materialist identities in adolescent males by encouraging them to subscribe to socially-constructed norms of masculinity via the consumption of “manly” goods.
In “Insider Story,” the single scholarly work to deal with The Insiders independently, Elizabeth Bullen partially begins this examination. Bullen explores how product placement and consumptive patterns function to encourage class distinctions and status-oriented adolescents, but she does so by concentrating on brands and non-edible products (i.e. exterior consumption) without considering how food and the consumption of women (as quasi-food) informs this discussion (504). Ultimately, this focus has left the interior makeup of the characters a largely neglected topic. By tracing the male characters’ status-driven consumptive acts, which range from eating meat to drinking alcohol and sleeping with various women, I hope to help fill this gap by elucidating how notions of identity and personal growth, qualities traditionally valued in young adult literature, are systematically sacrificed for materialistic gains on the part of the protagonists in an effort to embody the idealistic version of masculinity that consumerist society encourages, and, seemingly, demands. In particular, I will look at how the objectification of women in the text is linked to discourses surrounding manly foodstuffs and hegemonic masculinity. The five male protagonists strive throughout the novel to meet social expectations for "proper" masculinity by consuming various "manly" goods. More often than not these "goods" are young women, who are frequently discussed in a way that is analogous to discourses surrounding food and eating. In effect the young women in the novel end up functioning as little more than consumption objects, while the male adolescent protagonists are, through the reiterated consumptive acts of meat eating and female conquest, revealed to be empty, superficial consumers whose entire existences are shaped by the desire to conform to commercialized expectations for “appropriate” masculine behavior.

While masculinity is a slippery term best referred to in pluralities than as a singular category of maleness, it is possible to discuss dominant standards of masculinity in particular
“Hegemonic masculinity” is a term introduced by leading men’s studies scholar Raewyn Connell to describe the prevailing mode of masculinity in Western culture which, he argues, “embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). It is the essentialist version of masculinity that young men, often from very young ages, are institutionally conditioned to see as the social norm—the natural, acceptable state of manhood. Of course, as a number of theorists have identified, all gender definitions are social constructed; there is no “natural” masculinity (Butler 1990, 1993; Bourdieu 1998; Shefer et. al 2007).

Nonetheless, media representations of acceptable male behavior continually construct masculine hegemony as the proper model for men, young and old, to aspire to. “Real” men—i.e. men who embody the qualities associated with masculine hegemony—are strong, aggressive, wealthy, and heterosexual, and they are expected to exert power and influence over those around them (in particular women, but also other men) as a means of establishing their masculine identity. Hegemonic masculinity encourages a view of manhood centered on control and domination, and as such it functions as a sort of guide for how men can guarantee themselves a place at the top of the social order. As Pierre Bourdieu theorizes, this type of masculine domination has been naturalized through discourses surrounding the body, making it a part of our collective unconscious. For Bourdieu, the production of the body as a “sexually defined reality…constructs the difference between the biological sexes in conformity with the principles of a mythic vision of the world rooted in the arbitrary relationship of domination of men over women” (11). Very few men actually meet normative standards of hegemonic masculinity, but men as a social
category benefit from its authority because its enforcement ensures the continual subordination of women and, thus, the continual dominance of men (Connell 79).

Over time the expectations of hegemonic masculinity have changed, developed, and been challenged, leading a number of scholars to identify a “crisis of masculinity” in contemporary society—a crisis that is thought to have been sparked by economic and commercial forces introduced in the 1980s (Kimmel 1998, 2008; Bordo 1993; Faludi 1999; Beynon 2002). Female shoppers made up the majority of the consumer demographic before this period, as twentieth-century industrial men judged masculinity by the ability of a man to save and invest in production. The twenty-first-century man, on the other hand, is not only allowed but expected to shop, as contemporary images of masculinity, in the words of Wesley Buerkle, “emphasize consumption and gratification as their own rewards” (“Masters” 9). The problem is that it is nearly impossible to keep up with changing expectations of masculine consumption, which are now shaped just as much by how men look as what they do. With the introduction and growing acceptance of the metrosexual man—a so-called effeminate version of masculinity that functions as a challenge to the hegemonic model—the situation has become even more complex (Ervin 58).

One of the most common responses young men have to increased anxieties surrounding definitions of manhood is to aggressively assert one’s heterosexuality. Michael Kimmel argues in both Manhood in America (1998) and Guyland (2008) that masculinity is essentially a homosocial experience in which men perform for and judge one another. Specifically, he sees the demonstration of heterosexuality as “the single cardinal rule of manhood, the one from which all other characteristics—wealth, power, status, strength, physicality—are derived” (Guyland 613). While I do not necessarily agree that masculinity is performed exclusively for men, Kimmel’s
suggestion that manhood is primarily judged on the basis of heterosexuality (or, to put it another way, the ability to prove that one is not homosexual) is convincing, and his conclusions are echoed in other recent works exploring the state of adolescent masculinity in consumer culture. For instance, in her exploration of responses to masculine anxieties in high school, Pascoe argues that the primary way “boys lay claim to masculine identities [is] by lobbying homophobic epithets at one another” (5).

Accusing male peers of homosexuality is certainly a significant, blatant way that young men showcase their own bravado and understanding of the masculine code. Another important, though perhaps less immediately obvious way they reinforce their masculine identity in the anxiety-ridden world of consumerist “Guyland,” to use Kimmel’s idiom for the liminal space between boyhood and manhood, is through masculinized eating practices. Indeed, standards for acceptable male consumption permeate all aspects of life, including food choices. Food is, after all, a gendered commodity. As Carole M. Counihan articulates, food allows men and women the ability to differentiate themselves as well as connect with one another: “by claiming different roles in regard to food and distinct attributes through identification with specific foods, men and women define their masculinity and femininity, their similarity and difference” (1998: 7). Definitions of masculine food consumption tend to reinforce the patriarchal notion of man as the superior sex. There is incredible power inherent in the ability to produce, procure, provide and consume food. While both men and women are involved in this process, the traditional distribution of labour saw men as hunters (i.e. securers of meat) and women as gathers (i.e. securers of plants). Because meat was more valued as an economic commodity, men have historically held a position of power over women, who were forced to depend on men to provide the cornerstone of a so-called healthy diet; if enough meat was not available, women simple went
without (Adams 27, 34). While increased access to food in the West has made women less dependent on men in this regard—and especially so in the upper-classes, where women and men often eat meals of similar quality, if not composition—meat nonetheless continues to function as an embodiment of patriarchy for a number of reasons.

For one, the view of meat as central to strength and virility has not diminished. As Buerkle explains, the cultural association between men, meat and power developed from the belief that meat has intrinsic strengthening qualities not found in other foods, which has functioned to “solidify underlying notions that men naturally hold strength and power, while women merely stand by watching” (“Metrosexuality” 255). This sentiment is echoed by Adams, who in her discussion of meat as a semiotic symbol of male dominance convincingly illustrates how discursive patterns surrounding conversations of meat (active) and vegetables (passive) reinforce stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity (36). Indeed, meat has come to represent the epitome of active masculine consumption. Fruits and vegetables are typically considered feminine cuisine choices, and men who choose to eschew meat-eating in favour of a vegetarian lifestyle—thereby challenging the codes of hegemonic masculinity—are often criticized for being weak or effeminate (Sobal 138-9). Meat, a relatively expensive good even in contemporary times, is also linked to capital and status, and many men seek to display their wealth and social power by eating meat (Bourdieu 1984; Sobal 2006). Part of the power associated with masculinity and meat eating also has to do with the fact that men can and do eat unrestrictedly, while women are expected to exercise self-control. Because meat has a higher caloric count than most fruits and vegetables, idealized representations of female consumption depict women eating salads and other low-calorie foodstuffs, while “manly men” gorge
themselves on (red) meat, pasta, potatoes—anything that might contribute to their image of dominant—and dominating—masculinity.

Ultimately, then, male eating practices have been theorized as being centered on discourses of power, strength, control and domination. While men do not (often) eat women in the literal sense, it is possible and I believe useful to extend the discussion of dominance and masculinized eating into the realm of female objectification as well. Consuming women is, after all, intrinsic to the fulfillment of the hegemonic masculine ideal. Women are depicted as objects of desire in society, and by “conquering” a supposedly attractive woman—or, indeed, even showcasing her in public—a man confirms his heterosexuality, which is arguably the most critical requirement of contemporary masculine hegemony (Ferguson 91). In the same way that meat consumption symbolically represents masculine authority over the body of an animal, so too does the consumption of women signify dominance and empowerment. Adams (1990) argues that there is a strong link between the consumption of meat and the subordination of women and animals. According to Adams, both animals and women are put through a cycle of objectification, fragmentation and consumption by men who seek to view them as objects of entitlement, which effectively fulfills the “oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity” of the consumed while simultaneously contributing to the power of the consumer (47). As Mervyn Nicholson echoes, “to survive is to consume, while to be consumed is to be disempowered…if you are weak, you are edible; if you are edible, you are weak” (1987: 39). For society’s consumerist men who feel that their masculinity is being threatened, these objectifying consumptive acts prove to be a simple—if not fool-proof—way to exercise the level of control and influence necessary to be a viable participant in the unstable but persistent world of masculine hegemony.
This “crisis of masculinity” and the repeated masculinized consumption it perpetuates are at the forefront of J. Minter’s *The Insiders*. The lives of the novel’s male protagonists—all of whom have seemingly limitless access to financial resources as a result of their privileged position—revolve around consumption. The “Insiders” (an elitist label that the text’s narrator, Jonathan, secretly values) are mass consumers, and while none of the boys fully meet the impossible standards of hegemonic masculinity, it is clearly evident that their consumptive practices are regulated and judged against expectations for upper-class maleness that posit ‘real’ men as not only heterosexual and aggressive but also socially-connected and wealthy (Minter 9).

Though the novel opens with an individualized description of each of the five teenage protagonists (Jonathan, Mickey, David, Arno, and Patch), the group is actually fairly homogenous. They are all wealthy, attractive, heterosexual young men growing up in an extremely exclusive section of Manhattan, and, because of the power and influence inherent to this elitist lifestyle, they can all be said to embody certain aspects of the masculine ideal. At the same time, however, most of them also exhibit qualities that are incongruous with masculine hegemony, leading their male peers to harshly criticize them for their inability to “man up.” Jonathan, for instance, is chastised for caring too much about clothing and fashion to the point that those around him start to question his sexuality (Minter 85-6, 247, 271). David, though good at sports, is also overly emotional, and following his televised emotional breakdown at a professional sports arena he is relentlessly bullied at school (107, 116). Arno, who Jonathan initially describes as confident, sharp, and “better looking than everybody else,” falls hopelessly in love with Jonathan’s lower-class cousin Kelli, whose refusal to return Arno’s affection causes him to have an emotional breakdown for which he is rebuked as well (138, 207).
Indeed, it is arguably Kelli who highlights/ignites all of the protagonists’ masculine shortcomings when she arrives at the beginning of the novel for a visit from St. Louis. Kelli quickly reveals herself (in contrast to the novel’s other female characters) to be aggressive, confident, brazen and sexually/socially dominant—in short, she is a female version of the hegemonic male. What Kelli’s masculine behaviour does, to borrow from Slavoj Žižek’s theory of the “symptom,” is draw attention to the false universalism of masculinity; she proves through her very existence—serving, in this case, as a “symptom” of the ideological gendered representational order that posits men and women as separate, essentialistic beings—that hegemonic masculinity is merely a construction, and an unstable one at that (Žižek 21). Kelli’s presence disrupts not only the protagonists’ individual male identities but also the concept of masculinity as a whole, which by definition presupposes an intrinsic relationship with the male sex at the exclusion of women.

One way that the young men in the text consciously deal with Kelli and anxieties surrounding the state of their manhood is by demeaning and demonizing her; by establishing that Kelli is an anomaly (i.e. an improper woman) who is different because of her lower-class social standing, they are able to rationalize the fact that in many cases she “outmans” them. There are numerous instances in the text where Kelli is named by Jonathan as the cause of the groups’ collective problems (188-9, 240). Despite their reluctance to admit it, however, the boys’ masculine crisis has much more to do with the challenges they face trying to enter a consumerist adult male world that is fractured and constantly in flux than it does the presence of a “hungry” girl “from St. Louis” (Minter 17). Unsurprisingly, then, it takes more than rejecting Kelli to subdue their anxieties, as she is not the cause but rather a symptom of this crisis.
The cause, as I have suggested, is the inconsistent nature of the hegemonic ideal, which, at least from an upper-class perspective (but arguably in the middle and lower classes as well) requires men to display their material wealth and successes by participating in all masculinized arenas of capitalist society. While this means worrying about the manliness of your car, clothing, hairstyle, etc.—to a point, of course, as too much concern projects an image of effeminacy, as we see with Jonathan’s mocked fashion obsession—it also involves a consideration of other consumable goods such as foodstuffs, which are no less gendered or judged than other products. Consider, for instance, Mickey’s reaction after he takes a gulp of Jonathan’s drink without looking. Mickey, whose request to know what the “hell” he just drank is answered with “club soda with a splash of cranberry,” is obviously disgusted, and he lets Jonathan know he disapproves of his choice with an exasperated, masculine response: “Jesus Christ…I’m getting a beer” (86). Jonathan’s cocktail, with its fruity base, is a stereotypically feminine drink, whereas Mickey’s decision to order a “Stella” speaks to his understanding of the gendered politics of alcohol consumption, which promote beer and amber-coloured liquor as masculine beverages (Minter 86; Strate 78). Mickey’s drink choice also, in many ways, embodies nearly every other aspect of upper-class hegemonic masculine consumption. Stella is not only expensive and European—underscoring Mickey’s wealth and sense of taste—it also has a female name. By choosing to drink Stella, Mickey is able to display his economic and cultural capital as well as his inclination for heterosexual domination. Comparatively, Jonathan’s purchase is effeminate, and consequently he is shamed by Mickey who, at least in this situation, is the alpha male.

This male-on-male judgment, of course, is not limited to drink choice; all of the protagonists’ consumptive practices are judged through a similar process, and, in an attempt to avoid ridicule and accusations of homosexuality, their cuisine choices tend to be fairly uniform.
Save Jonathan’s momentary cocktail indiscretion, the Insider boys consistently consume large quantities of stereotypically masculine foods while consciously avoiding association with “feminine” foods in a consistent cycle of masculine assertion motivated entirely by anxieties over the maintenance of a malleable but particular, socially-constructed image of masculinity that promotes an image of the “real” man as powerful and aggressive. All of the boys, for instance, regularly go for “after-school burgers” at the “Corner Bistro and Bar”; Jonathan explains that this has been a routine of theirs since the sixth grade (67). The boys have such good rapport with the establishment that the waitresses know their orders by heart and illegally sell them beer (68). This repeated trip functions to reinforce that they have wealth and social power—the average teenage boy could not afford to eat out and purchase alcohol as often as they do—but it also highlights that they actively follow social guidelines for heteronormative behaviour. The waitresses do not need to ask what they will order because they always get the manliest thing they can—a beef burger. Over the course of the meal the boys spend their time asserting their heterosexuality by objectifying and comparing the women they know (67-8).

These kinds of outings, where meat and women become entangled in a bed of power-hungry consumerism, are a frequent occurrence for the Insider boys, as they use food and women to assert and subsequently reassert their masculine identities whenever they are challenged. A particularly telling example occurs near the end of the text when Arno, realizing that Kelli has “stolen his cool,” decides he needs to “man up” and so pursues a young Latina server, Mariela, who is working at his mother’s party (224-5). The scenario plays out as follows: Arno enters the kitchen to get something to eat, hoping that he can get to some prosciutto and make a “ham sandwich” before it gets wrapped around the figs (note that a masculine cuisine choice takes precedence over a distinguished one). As Arno begins to assemble his sandwich, he is distracted
by “some medallions of veal” and moves towards them. He is promptly chastised by Mariela for approaching the veal slices, who explains that they are “for the guests” (225). Without skipping a beat, Arno responds that the guests are his and that, if she liked, she could follow him upstairs. She accepts and Arno, “grabb[ing] the girl and a chunk of beef tenderloin,” takes her to his bed (226).

Considering that immediately prior to this sexual conquest Arno had come to realization that he was acting against the masculine ideal, his consumptive urges are clearly shaped by his conditioned understanding of what it means to be a man. He is drawn towards the most masculine food choice available to him at the time, from prosciutto to veal to beef to a woman. His approach is aggressive and hands-on; not only does he pursue Mariela, he “grab[s]” her (226). It is also significant that as he goes to grasp Mariela his attention is divided between her and the meat. Lance Strate argues in “Beer Commercials: A Manual on Masculinity” that this emotional detachment is a key component of the contemporary image of masculinity. As Strate explains, the “myth of masculinity” proposes that a “man who loses control of his emotions in a relationship is a man who loses his independence, and, ultimately, his masculinity; dividing attention is one way to demonstrate self-control” (89). Arno’s conquest, then, functions to reaffirm his masculine image not simply because of the conquest itself but also because of the manner in which he pursues it. Like an earlier description of Arno, which shows him flirting with David’s girlfriend Amanda—he even, at one point, bites her finger, again underscoring the masculine connection between food, women and domination—while simultaneously drinking from his “bottle of Grolsch,” he is able to confirm that he is “back” by having unsentimental intercourse actively driven by a masculine desire to dominate, not love; love is, after all, considered by the Insiders to be an irrational, feminine reaction to sex (24, 227).
One of the most convincing ways a young man can illustrate that he is not an emotional lover is to have multiple, short-term female partners who function solely to enhance a particular, dominating masculine image—an image that relies heavily on the commodification and consumption of desirable women as a means of confirming heterosexuality and social power. Unsurprisingly, this involves de-personifying the woman in question, as it is only by translating her into an object that she can properly be consumed. Consumption is, as Adams explains, “the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity,” and women, through objectification in mass media and the like, are viewed (objectified) and subsequently fragmented (“severed from…ontological meaning”), thereby allowing individual women to be consumed as representations of idealized womanliness rather than as a “subject[s] of importance in [themselves]” (47). As Anthony Ferguson notes, this is sometimes accomplished in advertisements by subtly linking food and sex, which is meant to trigger the “hunger of desire” in men (91). This is why the Insider clique feels so uncomfortable around what Jonathan describes as Kelli’s “hungry” body; she seeks to consume them—to objectify them—when according to stereotypical gender expectations they should be the ones consuming her (Minter 15). In effect she robs them of their masculine power, and only by conquering Kelli (as both David and Arno do near the end of the text) are they able to reassert control (202, 263).

Being in charge sexually is critical for the Insiders because their primary motivation for consuming women is to project an image of dominating, powerful masculinity; for this reason, the sexual relationships they engage in have surprisingly little to do with sexual desire and more to do with image and control. This is not to say that female desirability is not important. To the contrary, it is the single most significant quality upon which women are judged and subsequently sought after in the novel. To paraphrase Kerry Mallan, it is not simply women but beautiful
women that are to be acquired, because of the association in society between aesthetic value and consumer prestige (63). In the same way that a rusty old car is less sought after than a brand new convertible, so too are women judged by their ability to satisfy the external requirements of commercialized femininity. The Insiders choose the women they will consume almost exclusively based on their physical appearance because consuming a beautiful woman speaks to the influence and prestige of the man consuming her; each commercially-attractive woman conquered is another trophy with which to assert one’s heterosexual masculine identity.

Considering Sigmund Freud’s argument that “the sexual aim consists in the incorporation of the object,” it is critical that the male protagonists in The Insiders only incorporate women who will feed their masculine image, for consuming an undesirable or “inappropriate” woman would only detract from their carefully-crafted material identities (57).

The importance the Insiders place on their collective ability to consume desirable women is established early on in the novel. Jonathan notes in the prologue that ever since he and his friends were young they had been “fooling around with girls…[calling it] ‘Seven Minutes in Heaven.’ Now we’re sixteen and we don’t call it anything in particular, but we sure do a lot of it” (9). The fact that Jonathan finds it necessary to assert this is noteworthy, as it confirms the group’s preoccupation with maintaining an image of heterosexuality and masculine hegemony. This is the first reference made to women, and it sets the tone for the representation of female characters for the rest of the novel. In effect, women are shown early on to function exclusively as consumption objects. Female characters in the novel represent various stereotypes—or perhaps it would be more appropriate to call them “brands”—of women, whose sole purpose in the narrative is to provide the male characters with a means to exercise their masculine prowess via abundant sexual consumption.
Quality is important, but so is quantity. Masculine relationships in *The Insiders* are centered on domination, not commitment, and when they do drift into something that could be construed as love (i.e. staying with one woman for too long, or rejecting the advances of another woman because of loyalty to another) the protagonists are chastised in a manner not unlike the reproach they receive for consuming feminine foods. Of course, this is because in many ways staying with one woman signifies the same thing that eating a feminized foodstuff does—in short, it suggests that the male consumer does not understand the codes of commercialized masculine hegemony, which require men to consume women as objects, not acknowledge them as persons. To love a woman is to open oneself up emotionally and, presumably, to treat her as one’s equal. Relationship equality is the antithesis to masculine hegemony, which requires female subordination and objectification. The easiest way to avoid ridicule and remain in control, then, is to consume as many different women as possible without treating them as anything more than sexual conquests and/or trophies.

The objectification process necessary to deconstruct women into consumption objects is started in the narrative structure itself, which positions female characters exclusively as passive props for masculine interaction. At no point in the novel do two female characters interact for any significant period of time. To give women independent voices and large chunks of text would be to personify and empower them and this is, I would argue, the opposite of what the text is encouraging young men to do. The Insiders constructs a masculine world that hinges on men’s ability to disempower, deconstruct and subsequently dominate women, and silencing them is an effective (and historically-grounded) way to accomplish this.

Female characters are further objectified by both Jonathan and the third-person narrator as they are individually introduced to the reader. In every case women are characterized by their
physical appearance and overall aesthetic appeal before any interior qualities they may possess are acknowledged (if they are at all). This is hardly surprising, given that women are consumed by the Insiders exclusively for purposes relating to status and image and considering the significance of female beauty to this equation. The first girl the reader is introduced to is Kelli, Jonathan’s outsider cousin from St. Louis. Jonathan describes her as “good-looking, in a bleach-haired, Brittany Murphy sort of way,” further qualifying this statement by suggesting that she gives off an air of sexual promiscuity (13). He continues to characterize her for the reader, always placing emphasis on her physicality: “Her eyes were green and sort of angled in toward her nose. Cat eyes. She was tall, too. So yes, she was sexy, but in a cheerleader-gone-bad kind of way” (14). A similar approach is used to introduce Amanda (a “short girl with…a killer body”), Flan (who is “built like a Sport’s Illustrated swimsuit model”) and Liza (a “cool girl” whose “all-black ensemble” makes men “gawk”), the other primary female characters (23; 40; 37, 94).

Such descriptions make clear that the young women with whom the male protagonists associate are all, in varying ways, representative of an idealized version of femininity; they are valued based on their ability to embody what one might call a supermodel aesthetic. Young men are systematically trained by Western media to be excited by this, so it is understandable that this is what the Insider boys first look for in a female sexual partner. Because they are thin and attractive, these young women are deemed worthy of consumption. That the male protagonists notice this about the women they interact with before any other aspect of their being speaks to the materialistic nature of the Insiders’ identities; emotional well-being, personal growth, love—none of these things contribute to a hegemonic masculine image, and so none of them are valued or sought after in “romantic” relationships.
What I would like to suggest is that the women in the text are constructed to be consumption objects to be treated synonymously with other food-related consumer goods. Like the meat and beer the Insiders consume, women are primarily there to build and subsequently confirm a dominating heterosexual, masculine identity via the performative act of incorporation. Too “sweet” a girl is just as threatening to this image as is a cranberry cocktail. And so Jonathan ultimately turns down the advances of Flan, Patch’s younger sister for whom he genuinely has feelings, because her innocence, youth and overall kind demeanor make her an inappropriate “cuisine” choice. Even her name, Flan (which refers to a fruit-filled glazed pastry), suggests a child-like sweetness. To conquer Flan, who shows herself to be both willing and sincere, would not be a sufficient challenge nor would it be emotionless. If there is no hunt—no domination—there is no masculine reinforcement. For the brief period that Flan is considered a forbidden fruit she excites Jonathan, but once word gets out about their secret relationship and her role as a viable sexual conquest diminishes, he loses interest.

Or perhaps it is not that he loses interest, but rather than he decides to walk away from the relationship because he realizes that being with Flan only serves to draw attention to his own masculine shortcomings. From the very beginning it is not only Flan, but their relationship generally, that is characterized as child-like and innocent. On one of their first dates, for instance, they go out for ice cream. Jonathan notices how “cute” she looks and comments on the fact that he knows her favourite flavour. They kiss a few times, but nothing more happens (70-1). Compared with Arno’s numerous conquests, which are sexier but also more aggressive, it is implied that Jonathan is too innocent to enter into masculine adulthood. He cannot be with Flan because she is too willing, too nice, and too openly interested. Consuming her would only serve
to harm Jonathan’s already questionable masculine identity, and so, out of fear—out of fear of
judgment—he states that he imagines everyone “laughing at him”—he rejects her (153).

The notion of “the hunt” is arguably the key factor in the Insiders’ sexual scenarios. The
word itself connotes control and domination. To hunt and subsequently consume something is to
show off one’s manly capabilities; hunting is, after all, a traditional, well-established way to
display masculine bravado through its association with both violence and meat acquisition.

Mickey’s monogamous relationship with Philippa, then, is characterized as masculine and
aggressive because Mickey is forced to constantly work to see her after her father forbids their
relationship (129, 157, 171). Mickey’s being with Philippa is an act of rebellion as well as an act
of dominance over another man’s “possession.” Jonathan, too, having switched his focus from
the innocent Flan to the exoticized, hard-to-get Fernanda, makes the conscious choice to pursue a
woman whose consumed body will signify a successful slaughter in a way that Flan, as easy
prey, cannot. The ultimate “catch,” to continue the hunting metaphor, is Kelli, as her seemingly
untamable body offers the most prestigious prize. While both David and Arno are able to
consume her individually, it is the Insiders’ collective action against Kelli during their final
brunch together at the end of the text that is arguably the most telling.

Upon arriving Kelli is immediately distracted by a “table populated by several male
actors” and leaves, allowing the young protagonists a moment to discuss various tactics for
getting rid of her (273). Deciding that best option is to “get [Kelli] out of town” as quickly as
possible, and seeing that she has climbed onto the actors’ table and started “roaring like a big
cat,” they approach her, “each [taking] one of [her] limbs,” and drag her out of the establishment
(275-6). From there they toss her into the back of their chauffeured Escalade and send it en route
to the airport after Jonathan explains to Ezra, the driver, that their hands-on approach was
necessary for Kelli had “got blown away by the city” and “wouldn’t stop” (276). Kelli, literally characterized as a “growl[ing],” uncontrollable animal, is restrained and effectively dominated by the protagonists in this passage (276). Picking Kelli up and throwing her around is a symbolic as well as real gesture of masculine domination; it illustrates that they have found a way to physically control her body with violence force, but it also suggests that the male protagonists have put Kelli back into her “proper,” subordinated place in the gender hierarchy. Indeed, the novel closes on an optimistic note that seems to suggest that the Insider boys, having asserted control over Kelli and dealt their masculine crisis, can now be confident in their collective ability to grow into “real” men.

Despite this appearance, however, I would argue that the male adolescent protagonists are at the end of the novel in virtually the same position as at the start. Because the nature of masculine consumption in contemporary culture requires men to consume as much “manly” stuff as possible in order to constantly reaffirm their masculine identities, the Insiders end up trapped in a performative cycle of excessive masculinized consumption that will never—cannot ever—be satisfied. The boys do not so much deal and come to terms with the unstable nature of masculine hegemony to which Kelli-as-symptom points as they do ignore it. The anxious void the malleable nature of the masculine ideal creates is still there—and it will continue to be. The difference is that, with Kelli gone, they are no longer forced to constantly acknowledge their so-called masculine shortcomings or the consumptive cycle these inevitable inadequacies encourage. Regardless of whether they choose to be consciously aware of their masculine performances or not, the Insiders construct themselves through a process of material consumption that systematically removes the need for a consideration of things like personal growth or identity. They are not judged based on "who they are” but rather what they have, and
as such virtually no time is spend cultivating their interior landscapes. They are adolescent protagonists without an internal transformative arc—they start out as power-hungry, superficial consumers and, by the end of the first novel, are still firmly characterized as such.

All aspects of the Insiders lives are dictated by narrow social standards for appropriate masculine behaviour, but it is arguably their food-related consumptive practices that are the most revealing as they draw attention to the internal structure of the characters in a way that other consumer products like clothing and cars do not. Indeed, food is a particularly fascinating consumable good as its impact on the internal composition of human beings is biologically undeniable; the foods an individual chooses to consume literally change the interior makeup of the consumer. While women are not consumed in quite the same way as other foodstuffs—they are obviously not physically incorporated into the bodies of their male conquerors save in instances of cannibalism—symbolically the effect is similar. In both cases the Insiders use food and women for purposes relating to status and superficial masculine reinforcement rather than sustenance (in the case of food) or enjoyment/emotional well-being (in the case of women). Ultimately, what this repeated consumption of food and women as objects of status does is fashion young men who are entirely commercialized both inside and out; they want above all else to conform to social expectations of manliness, regardless of the halting impact this has on their personal and emotional development. The Insiders endlessly consume to fill a void that is, ironically, enlarged and fueled by their repeated, image-obsessed consumption; indeed, though they are constantly trying to fill themselves up with masculine goods in order to feel like “complete” men, in effect the only real result is evacuation of self.

Of course, this trend is not limited to the Alloy-constructed world in which the Insiders live, the male sex, or even literature in general. Part of what makes literary studies so interesting
from a cultural perspective is its reflectiveness; popular books are popular because readers are able to identify with the content, which in one way or another comments on the society in which they live. Though I would argue that Alloy and the authors associated with the company are not consciously creating texts that reflect social problems and anxieties, the novels are still a mirror upon which such things are made clear. One thing made especially clear in *The Insiders* but also in other Alloy works is that there is a marked tendency in capitalist society towards conflating self-worth with material things to the point that traditional markers of character—i.e. psychology or identity—are made irrelevant. While this could simply reinforce the idea that materialism is slowly replacing and/or evacuating inner selfdom, perhaps materialism and its impact on identity construction is better viewed, like Kelli, as a symptom—in this case, a symptom that points to the constructed nature of human psychology. Like gender distinctions, identity has traditionally been understood to be essential. We think of our identities as a reflection of our innate being; they are what makes us unique in a world that is becoming increasingly uniform due to neoliberalism and the global capitalist market. Representations of identity in Alloy texts seem to suggest a different interpretation, however, which is that our entire concept of identity is merely a construct that we employ to help us come to terms with the dominant position materialism occupies in our lives. Irrespective of the fact that many individuals take a decidedly anti-consumerist stance, we are all consumers, and our growing participation in and reliance on a capitalist societal structure is difficult to come to terms. Works like *The Clique, Gossip Girl*, and *The Insiders* certainly reflect this anxiety, if they do little to remedy it.
CONCLUSION

While I tend not to participate in sports culture as a general principle, I do enjoy watching the yearly round of commercials that air during the Super Bowl. This year, perhaps because I was in the process of planning the conclusion to this thesis, and perhaps because of my own personal battles with food and my acute sensitivity to all things gendered in the media, I was struck by a particular advertisement by Budweiser Beer starring renowned British actress Helen Mirren. In the opening shot, a neatly dressed server brings Mirren, who is seated in a booth in a dimly-lit restaurant, her meal. In front of her he places a bottle of Budweiser, a loaded double-patty burger, and a large pile of fries. Looking directly into the camera and speaking in her signature dry voice, Mirren goes on to explain the consequences of drinking and driving. The advertisement is funny despite its serious subject matter, an approach that seems to me particularly effective. After carefully wiping the corner of her mouth with her neatly folded napkin, Mirren begins chastising her audience, arguing that if you choose to drink and drive, you are a “short-sighted, utterly useless, oxygen-wasting human form of pollution, a Darwin award deserving, selfish coward.” The commercial ends with Mirren giving her viewers the benefit of the doubt, picking up her beer, and uttering “cheers.”

The advertisement itself is, first of all, an interesting mix of cultural and class stereotypes of food and consumption. Mirren, as she explains, is a “notoriously frank and insensitive British lady,” and she does a convincing job embodying North American ideas of European taste culture and classiness—she is thin and proper, she wipes her mouth daintily with a fabric napkin, and she uses sophisticated language and a calm voice to criticize the irrationality of drunk driving. Her meal, on the other hand, is anything but tasteful or classy, at least judged against the standards of the upper-class foodscape. It is, however, the epitome of a masculine, North
American dinner, with its heavy emphasis on red meat and carbohydrates. Budweiser is arguably the quintessential middle-American beer. While it is not a distinguished cuisine choice, then, it is likely a meal that its target audience, adult males, would associate with masculine bravado.

The tension between these two class standards—and consequently these two taste cultures—is obvious, and this is why the commercial is so effective. The consumer group that would purchase a beer with a burger and fries is likely not the same consumer group that would fall into the economic class Mirren and other wealthy Europeans embody. This functions to, among other things, elevate the status of Budweiser (by drawing a connection between the beer and European values) while carefully avoiding isolating Budweiser’s primary customer base.

Efforts to make traditionally low-class food choices appear more sophisticated are commonly employed in marketing campaigns. Consider, for instance, the attempt made by McDonald’s restaurant in recent years to re-brand itself as a lounge/café with pseudo-upscale booths and lighting, flat-screen televisions, and an array of health-conscious menu items. Companies primarily do this because it allows them to charge more money for products, but they also do it because it helps draw in a new, wealthier customer base by breaking down the association between its product and tastelessness/cheapness. It also helps to keep current customers who might otherwise be tempted to switch to a “classier” food or drink choice.

Why I found the Budweiser commercial particularly striking, however, is not because of its humour or its clever use of class and Western/Euro stereotypes, but because of the (possibly unintentional) way that the commercial depicts food as a gendered, status object. Indeed, the representation of food in the commercial harkens back to a number of points made in this thesis, and so functions as a useful vehicle for re-affirming my central argument: namely, that the consumption of food as an object of status rather than an object of sustenance allows us to
analyze the way in which the Bildungsroman narrative model is becoming all but obsolete in particularly materialistic strands of young adult fiction. Ultimately, I argue that this mirrors a similar trend in contemporary society for favouring external markers of success (wealth/taste) rather than internal markers (selfhood/identity).

Consider for instance the way Mirren interacts with the food placed at her table. No effort is made by the commercial executives to suggest to the viewer that Mirren actually intends to eat the burger and fries. Indeed, she never touches it, which indicates that Mirren’s meal is for display purposes only—the entire interaction is staged for a particular reason, one not relating to the consumption of food at all. Of course, given that it is a commercial and that most of the foodstuffs we see on television are carefully crafted to look like food without actually being edible, it’s probable if not a guarantee that the food itself is fake. Much like Massie’s exhibitive green apple in *The Clique*, Mirren’s meal functions to characterize her in a specific way for specific ends relating to class and status. If we extend the treatment of food in the Budweiser advertisement to comment on representations of food and female bodies in young adult fiction but also society more generally, however, there are a couple observations we can make.

As discussed at length throughout this thesis, there is intense pressure placed on young women to look a certain way, and this profoundly influences their consumptive decisions. As we saw in both *The Clique* and *Gossip Girl*, women spend an inordinate amount of time focused on their physical appearance—the shape and size of their body as well as the way they dress that body—because they understand that this is primarily how their value is determined in neoliberal consumer culture. Regarding food consumption specifically, as young women move into adulthood they become more and more conscious of the fact that they are expected to be mindful—if not obsessed—with what they put into their bodies. Eating healthy is good, to be
sure, the obsessive-compulsive anxiety caused by having to calorie count and label read is arguably not. If we consider Blaire Waldorf’s relationship with consumption, for example, we see that she is expected to consume sophisticated foods as an active participant in upper-class society because it allows her to demonstrate her cultural capital. She is also, however, expected to maintain an idealized feminine figure, a tension that leads her to develop an eating disorder. In both cases the consideration is of Blaire’s external image. Her identity, her inner self, does not matter, and so is not developed. Similarly, Mirren purchases the meal, thereby displaying a degree of economic capital (though again represented in a humorous context given her incongruous cuisine choice) without giving any indication that she actually plans to eat what is in front of her.

As a woman who has suffered from bulimia for the better part of three years, the anorexic undertones in this commercial are, for me, very strong. At the end of the advertisement, the biggest message I took away was that a proper lady would obviously not consume such a high-calorie, low-class meal; clearly, it is there for her male audience, a tool for tantalizing the “innate” desire of real men for red meat and beer, which can and often does supersede the need to make distinguished cuisine choices. While likely not the intention of the advertisement, there is nonetheless an implication that there are certain meals that are not acceptable for women to consume that are acceptable for men because of the powerful relationship between gender and (food) consumption. And, indeed, intention hardly matters. Like the novels examined in this thesis, the commercial is reflecting (consciously or unconsciously) a reality that exists outside of the fictive media world. Surface is the new capitalist reality, and it is everywhere evident to me, not just in novels or on the television, but in magazines, on blogs, on posters, on billboards, in
the free pamphlets at my dentist’s office—it is all around, in nearly every consumable thing I interact with on a daily basis.

Capitalism relies on external display. Considering our growing dependence on capitalism as a way to organize people and society generally, it is unsurprising that the media we consume increasingly reflects this. Perhaps this means we are finally beginning to accept what Lynch argues in *The Economy of Character*—that the entire concept of an innate identity or selfhood is a human construction used to help us justify our increasing participation in and reliance on capitalism and surface measures for success. Perhaps it simply means that we have less time to focus on internal cultivation because our high-speed, plugged-in existence demands a higher degree of attention if one wants to stay informed regarding current tastes and trends. Either way, that this collective, if unconscious, understanding has trickled down into media created for and consumed by young people—the historical stronghold of idealistic moral values—speaks to the insidious nature of capitalism and our current inability to separate our economic, external selves from whatever internal self we believe we intrinsically have.

The high-society adolescent texts analyzed in this thesis are essentially ideological training guides for young girls (and sometimes boys), yes, but the things happening in these texts—the devaluing of internal markers of identity and success, the emphasis on hyper-capitalism, the move towards a fully superficial, external self—are actually being applied in the real world, something the Budweiser commercial but countless other media examples point to as well. Books like *The Clique, Gossip Girl,* and *The Insiders* do teach young people how to participate “successfully” in contemporary society. The question is, are these texts produced with the *intention* of creating socially and economically conscious consumers focused only on status and image, or is the shift away from the Bildungsroman model merely an unconscious reflection
of something already going on outside of the world of the text. I am inclined to think the latter, and I would not be surprised if the move away from the traditional coming-of-age narrative continued in the future, breaking into other young adult subgenres as well. It is a trend worth revisiting.
Works Cited


