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## **1 Introduction**

Beauty is a topic, which is, always has been and probably always will be of considerable importance to all mankind. In one way or another, it affects and intrigues people of all ages and classes. To a certain degree, beauty is considered a highly subjective concept. For example, people belonging to different types of societies and coming from different backgrounds have a distinct understanding of 'beauty' and the 'ideal' and deal with it in varying ways, paying more or less attention to it. Also, every single person has their 'own' specific idea or vision of beauty and not all people strive to embody this ideal or to find it in others. In addition, one's concept of beauty normally changes over time and some age groups are more prone to prioritize beauty over other characteristics of people or aspects of life. Still, one of these many different existing concepts of ideal beauty, largely depending on the time era and society one lives in, and one's age, is inherent in all humans and it affects not only their thoughts, but to a large extent also their actions. Who, for some reason, cannot follow the contemporary beauty ideal and does not make any effort in order to conform to certain norms and standards almost automatically occupies a lower position in society and is often judged by others.

Besides physical aspects of outward appearance, there are, however, also certain manners, attitudes and behaviors which people who conform to a certain beauty ideal are expected to perform. This suggests that beauty, eventually, is at least partly considered to be also what is on the inside. However, as this paper will show, there are strictly standardized and normalized rules for behavioral structures, as there are for physical appearance, in order to be considered beautiful. These standards for external and internal beauty are fixed for each society, knowingly or unknowingly reinforced by its members, often generated with economic interests in mind and can change rapidly over time.

The question arises how such norms and standards are formed in people's minds and why they persist. Various attempts have been made in the past in order to explain this argument. Most of them especially highlight, besides other factors such as the influence of relatives and peers, the media as cause for the emergence of stereotypes of the ideal beauty in modern times.

Norms and standards are typically a sociocultural product, which is formed by those in power. According to its stability and appeal to the audience, it is then further reproduced and, therefore, solidified in people's heads.

The aim of this thesis is to briefly explain the formation of stereotypes considering factors such as gender roles, psychology and normalization. Further it will be shown how naturally these stereotypes are implanted in contemporary literature, both directly and indirectly, without the reader even noticing it.

As the focus lies on the stereotype's occurrence in Young Adult Literature, finally some approaches to contemporary literature in a school setting will be considered in order to prevent the uncritical reproduction of concepts and rather enable students to identify them and build their own opinions and beliefs instead of plainly accepting what is presented to them.



## 2 Methodology

In the following chapters, the focus will be on the notion of beauty and its effects on society and especially on teenagers.

Firstly, historical, medial, gender-specific and psychological factors will be taken in consideration to summarize background information and give a short review of the most important factors contributing to the creation of a beauty ideal and its distribution and normalization. The emphasis lies on the medial influences and its regulating functions within society, as this is of great importance for the analytical part of this thesis.

Then, this theoretical framework will be used to analyze inherent messages of beauty ideals and stereotyped body images in two young adult novels, chosen from the contemporary canon of literature typically used in the American classroom and popular among teenagers for leisure reading. The explicit, as well as the underlying messages and notions about beauty and attractiveness will be carefully studied with respect to common stereotypes and their influence on teenagers and young adults.

The first book which will be analyzed is *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, a series of five novels, which were written by Ann Brashares and published between 2001 and 2011. Due to the restricted length of this paper, only the first novel of the series will be analyzed in great detail. The second one will be briefly addressed and the three remaining novels will be omitted in this analysis. The first two novels were also made into a movie in the years 2005 and 2008, but these, too, will not be dealt with.

The second book in this analysis will be the *Princess Diaries*, a series of epistolary novels written by Meg Cabot for teenagers and released between 2000 and 2015. In this paper only the first novel of the series will be analyzed. Also for this series, there

are popular movie adaptations published in 2001 and 2004 by Walt Disney Pictures starring famous actors like Anne Hathaway.

In the third and last part, the emphasis will be on the classroom and how to implement books with critical or stereotypical content into the classroom in a meaningful and reasonable way. Methods and approaches, which actually allow teachers and students to profit from debunking these underlying messages, will be introduced briefly.

### **3 Theoretical framework**

#### **3.1 Historical development**

Physical features, nowadays, are seen mostly as indicators of a person's beauty and his or her fitting into socially fixed images of the ideal appearance. In history, however, physical features, weight and body shape have served most importantly as indicators for a person's social position, gender and race. Beauty has been, even though always of great interest especially to women, secondary.

Still, beauty and appearance have been of concern to people of all eras. However, not everyone had the chance to actively participate in the pursuit of the ideal body. In the past only very wealthy people could afford to follow ever-changing fashion trends or to undertake experiments in the sake of embellishing their bodies (Liggett 173). Still, with the hope of achieving greater beauty, especially women have always done everything within their power to reach these goals (Liggett 174). This explains the early emergence of beautification practices, which women nowadays, and apparently always, have practiced in order to reach a certain ideal.

Helena Rubinstein once said: "There are no ugly women, only lazy ones" (Riordan iii) and clearly wanted to promote the idea that every woman has the potential to be beautiful if she only invested time, money and energy in it. This is a clever strategy, which has been used by the media, and especially advertising, for a long time in order to draw benefits from it.

Depending on the current beauty standards within a given society and era, mankind continually has aimed at reaching a certain 'ideal' visual appearance and has worked on their bodies and faces according to the possibilities given at the time. Even if it seems that nowadays artificial bodily and facial transformations have reached their peak, interventions on behalf of beautifications have a long tradition and are as old as

humankind. The methods used to achieve the goal of fitting into a given ideal sometimes even bordered on torture (Liggett 12). For example, in the past, women poisoned their skin with certain metals, ruined and mutilated their bodies and sometimes even died in the name of beauty (Liggett 12). First records of plastic surgery for beautification purposes date back to the year 600 BCE (Beggan 92).

Nowadays, it seems much easier to have access to various methods of changing one's facial and bodily features. Indeed, a growing number of women and men are considering or actually undertaking interventions within the area of plastic surgery, which offers the possibility to transform almost every body part according to the patients' wishes, as surgical interventions with the scope of embellishing the body are getting increasingly popular (Liggett 38). In the USA, only in the year 2005, over 10 million cosmetic procedures have been performed, almost all of which were undergone exclusively by women and for beautification reasons (Beggan 92). This number has been growing ever since and peaked at over 18 million cosmetic procedures in the year 2019, with almost 17 billion dollars spent on them, 92% procedures having been performed on women and 223 thousand performed on teenage girls between the ages 13 and 19, who most commonly underwent nose or ear enhancement, Botulinum injections, liposuction, laser hair removal and skin resurfacing, as well as breast augmentation and breast reduction in males (ASPS).

What is often disregarded in the hope of becoming more attractive or regaining youth, are the risks these implicate. Common damages comprise strange facial expressions, impaired nerves or numbness (Liggett 125).

Beauty standards have changed significantly over time and are likely to change at least to a certain degree even during a person's lifetime. For example, during the average waist circumference of women over 20 nowadays is 98.4cm and for teenage girls between 13 and 19 years it is between 78.5cm and 88.0cm according to age (Fryar,

Carroll and Gu). During the era of Napoleon's reign, a waist circumference of 33 centimeters was seen as perfect and desirable (Liggett 51). Dior required for his models to have not more than 43 centimeters of waist circumference (Liggett 52). Over time these strict conventions faded and others have come up instead, which after ups and downs in the number determining the 'golden mean' led to the contemporary ideal. Women featuring the perfect body measurements from the 1970s nowadays would be perceived as unfit, soft and shapeless (Bordo 187). By the end of the 1950s many different body shapes have gone in and out of fashion, like fuller or flatter chests or narrow waists (Liggett 52). Nowadays, there are still quite rigid limits of which body measurements fit into our ideal of beauty and which don't, even though there is a trend towards inclusiveness, which, however, remains very superficial and seems more to be more of a fad itself.

Not only the body shape, but also the choice of clothing was and is commonly used as an indicator of prosperity, aristocracy and taste. For example, pompous ruff collars were used to display a person's status (Liggett 54). However, also fashion trends changed over time. What at one specific time is seen not acceptable can be fashionable only a short period after. Additionally, fashion can also convey statements and the spirit of an era or period. For example, the miniskirt, which was a popular piece of clothing in the sixties of the last century mirrored the liberal spirit of the time and marked a turning point regarding moral conceptions, away from the Victorian conservative mindset (Liggett 43). The jeans, a classic piece of clothing, which existed for almost 50 years as work clothing, became fashionable in the seventies and the demands of fashion created new health issues for its wearers, such as constricting the arteries and vessels (Liggett 45f).

What is also worth mentioning is the duality already formed in ancient times, which influenced the formation of beauty standards over time. In ancient Greece,

Aristotle stated the superiority of men over women, who were seen as a deviation of men, who were defined through their imperfections and a passive role, whereas men were defined over their perfect mind and active role (Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Quinn 210). This could have led to women trying to compensate for their imperfect mind by striving for an impeccable aesthetic appearance, trying to complement their male partners, who are usually more defined by power and success. This type of dualism, even though often more covert than in ancient times, can be observed extensively in modern relationships.

### **3.1.1 Slenderness**

One type of the ideal body shape, which came and went frequently over time, is slenderness. As stated above, conceptions of the ideal body shape and weight can change drastically over short periods of time, but there has always been a specific ideal people aimed at, even if not all of them had the possibility to pursue it.

Over time the construct of exclusivity with regard to body maintenance slowly faded and pursuing a certain beauty ideal became more and more possible for all people. In the nineteenth century a growing number of people started to engage in body management in order to attain the ideal body shape and weight and fasting changed from being a mindful and spiritual activity to an almost merely physical one. The asserted rival was no longer the inner self, but the bodily fat, which people sought to dominate. Weight became increasingly important and especially women fixated on the numbers on the scale, which gave rise to various new inventions and practices, for instance pills, surgery or newly designed workouts and nutrition programs. (Bordo 185)

As slenderness became more and more important, it brought about not only physical damage, but also psychological problems (Liggett 12). Especially in western

cultures and particularly for women, fat has almost always been a declared enemy (Liggett 14).

This phenomenon of striving for slenderness was partly caused by the gained importance of the clothing industry. Bigger women have fewer choices with regard to clothing, a fact that gets evident by taking a close look at famous fashion brands like Calving Klein or Abercrombie & Fitch, which refuse to offer clothes for bigger people, who do not match the body ideal these brands choose to represent (Liggett 14). For example, Abercrombie & Fitch's former CEO Mike Jeffries publicly stated that "in every school there are the cool and popular kids, and then there are the not-so-cool kids [...] We go after the attractive all-American kid with a great attitude and a lot of friends. A lot of people don't belong [in our clothes], and they can't belong" (Sean).

However, the wish to be thin is not only a current trend, but has been of great importance for a long time. The first woman, who was reportedly obsessed with reducing her weight, was Isabeau, a French queen who lived in the fourteenth century (Liggett 21).

Slenderness, however, is not a goal that all people, societies and cultures living nowadays share. Even if evolutionary changes influence the way people perceive beauty, social constructionists agree that social behavior is the main source from which people derive their understanding of beauty (Beggan 91). This means that there are significant differences between several cultures even within the same time period. For example, in countries which are dominated by famines and poverty rounder body shapes demonstrate the wealth of a person and, therefore, curves and higher body fat levels are cherished and pursued (Liggett 21). This goes as far as fattening young girls for weeks in order to increase their chances to find a husband (Liggett 21).

In Western countries, however, Women have commonly been willing to risk their health and accept suffering in the sake of beauty and especially slenderness in

many different eras. Even babies, for example in ancient Greece, were wrapped in special fabrics in order to keep them slender and tall, even if this meant that they were not able to move their arms (Liggett 48). Women wore tight bodices and corsets, which minimized their mobility and caused severe dangers to their skeleton, their organs and their skin, in order to achieve a slimmer waist (Liggett 48ff). John Locke (1824) summarized that the consequences of this fashion as comprising “[n]arrow breasts, short and stinking breath, ill lungs, and crookedness” (14).

This striving for slenderness and beauty goes as far as even risking diseases. |Women accepted the threat of illnesses such as pneumonia in the name of fashion, for example by wetting their dresses to make them look more interesting; and voluntarily increased the risk of incidents like ignitions caused by the structure of their crinolines (Liggett 51f).

Dieting, which means deliberately renouncing certain food in order to maximize one’s aesthetic appeal, or simply eating healthy is a phenomenon, which in the Western sphere arose in the late Victorian times (Walden 334). Some cultures, however, had adopted this behavior before that time, like the Aristocratic Greeks, whose focus was more on inner qualities, such as self-mastery and moderating desires (Foucault 64ff). The medieval Christians pursued yet another goal by regulating their food consumption, which served spiritual purposes and the symbolic control over oneself (Walker Bynum 208). These practices of dieting or asceticism were, therefore, accessible only for a small amount of people, namely the aristocratic, wealthy or highly religious ones (Bordo 185).

Using surgical interventions in the sake of weight reduction is a modern phenomenon, which originated from the United States (Liggett 26) and especially women who have the financial means tend to be willing to do everything for their goal body. (Liggett 26-28)



Nowadays it seems that more than ever people fear weight gain and fighting fat has many consequences not only on the body, but also on the persons' mental health and can dominate their whole lives.

### **3.1.2 Beautification**

Cosmetics were not used exclusively in the Western world and not just in recent times. Mankind has an inherent drive for personal embellishment and especially for using colors in this regard. Even if cosmetics often brought serious health risks and high financial strains with them, a remarkably high number of people happily ignored these factors in exchange for the chance to increase their beauty. People from all over the world have been using dubious products for many thousands of years and along with lotions and creams, they used many other substances and did not even spare blood, excreta, body parts of various animals, plumbum or quicksilver. (Liggett 64)

Especially the lips were often used for embellishment practices, as they are very suitable for highlighting femininity by making them seem bigger and fuller (Liggett 99).

Most scientists seem to agree when it comes to answering the question why women started to and still do apply cosmetics to their faces and bodies. They mainly see the explanation in the sexual drives inherent in humankind. For example, Shlain argues that women choose to use make-up and other types of cosmetics in order to maximize their sexual attractiveness (352). Adams-Miller adds that "often the forms of adornment used reflect the perceived tastes of the partner, potential partner, or even the social group from which an individual wishes to acquire a partner" (486).

However, achieving greater sexual attractiveness is certainly not the only goal related to beautification procedures. Women as well as men, because of their social nature, try to maximize their aesthetic potential in order to attire other people's

attention, not necessarily in a sexual way, but rather in order to influence others, to impress them and simply to facilitate communication (Liggett 172).

People not only show great willingness to spend large amounts of time and money in the name of beauty, but they also accept pain, suffering and hazard the consequences, which often are diseases and could even lead to death. Drugs, like amphetamines or anabolic agents are consumed in order to achieve the perfect tan, to gain more muscle or to lose weight (Liggett 22, 25).

Skin color has always been used as an important indicator for beauty. The racial factor has a great importance in determining beauty standards and especially in the Western World BIPOC are usually seen as inferior to the white standard beauty image. However, skin color does not only reveal racial differences, but also social differences, which give some indication of a person's lifestyle or economic vitality. An example for this is the aristocratic paleness, which demonstrated that pale people did not have to engage in manual labor (Liggett 65). In order to achieve this aristocratic look, many women deliberately threw up or applied toxic substances like arsenic, which resulted in the death of a great number of men, who were in contact with these women (Liggett 66). Nowadays, tanned skin is what most women in western cultures desire and many of them risk diseases such as cancer in order to achieve this beautification goal (Liggett 72).

With increasing age, the physical appearance of living beings tends to change in a negative way. However, this does not affect men and women equally, as men typically favor younger women, while women favor elder men (Beggan 91). This means that, as a rule, there is more pressure on women to keep up a youthful appearance than there is on men. In order to counteract these natural developments, remedies like cosmetics and surgical interventions have been introduced and are constantly modernized. In the

facial area, especially the eyes are affected by the aging process and therefore frequently rejuvenated surgically (Liggett 92).

Fashionable haircuts and hairdos also change in a rather rapid way. By cutting, coloring or styling hair a certain way, one cannot only express whether or not one is following a specific trend or fad, but also notably change one's appearance, highlight one's affiliation to a certain generation, social group or movement, or signify defiance or conformity (Liggett 131). Traditionally, blonde long hair has always been perceived as beautiful and desirable, which can even be noted in ancient folk and fairy stories, which commonly feature blonde women as good characters, and dark-haired women as witches; and in all kinds of ancient literature ranging from Homer to Shakespeare (Liggett 133).

### **3.1.3 Gendered beauty**

It becomes evident that there are different social rules for appearance according to gender. While most of the above-described norms apply only for women, like strict limits of waist circumferences or proportions, a far more restricted number of rules and recommendations are given for masculine beauty.

Nowadays, differences between men and women lie predominantly in the goals they pursue. While men strive for more muscles when they engage in bodybuilding and training routines, women normally do it in the sake of losing weight and attaining a slender body (Liggett 24).

### **3.1.4 Power and control**

Body management and its hegemonic representation also have a normalizing function. By presenting the ideal body as slender and firm, societies can make sure the "normal" citizen, who conforms to the demands of his or her community and culture, besides adhering to common rules and norms, simultaneously is equipped with favored

character traits. This includes attributes such as self-discipline or appropriate command over one's desires and drives. Softer parts of the body are therefore seen as humans' enemy as they indicate uninhibited desire and excessive craving. The body is constructed as an assailant unfamiliar to the real self. (Bordo 186ff)

Bordo cites an article by Dalma Heyn from the magazine *Mademoiselle*, in which a girl vividly illustrates this common and naturalized conception of body image:

“Sometimes my body looks so bloated, I don't want to get dressed. I like the way it looks for exactly two days each month: usually, the eighth and ninth days after my period. Every other day, my breasts, my stomach – they're just awful lumps, bumps, bulges. My body can turn on me at any moment; it is an out-of-control mass of flesh” (189)

What is desired is a body that is completely under control. Motions and emotions from within should not be able to leave the body by way of its boundaries. This conception is also evident in the two contemporary female body ideals, which are either very slim or highly athletic, but have a common opponent, namely fat. (Bordo 191)

### **3.1.5 Present situation**

Aristotle's view, as stated above, still has importance nowadays, as Western societies typically set forth his tradition of duality between body and mind, where men are associated with the mind, and women with the body. This makes women dependent on their looks instead of their intelligence or character, which puts pressure on them to achieve high standards of physical attractiveness (Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Quinn 210).

In contemporary society more than ever the focus lies on visual appearances. Striving for perfect looks and bodies often leads people to exaggerate and perfectionism frequently rules their lives (Liggett 22).

With the face being the most visible body part, it is also the part that is modified and embellished the most. Nowadays beauty standards, which are constantly changing and which a large number of women (and men) are try to reach are defined as the following:

“Comparatively large eyes, high cheekbones, and a small nose and chin are associated with beauty in women, together with a large degree of symmetry in facial features, which is also a desirable quality in men” (Beggan 91)

These very broad and general preferences carry two important pieces of information with regard to the evolutionary theory. Firstly, the preference of high cheekbones indicates that men are seeking women, who are mature enough to bear a child, as high cheekbones evolve with maturity; and secondly, the preference for large eyes are an indicator for men’s desire for youth in women, as they are associated with children and babies (Beggan 91).

Nowadays, men typically prefer women with a body shaped like an hourglass, which means that the hips and breasts are fuller, while the waist is smaller; and the women should be shorter than them (Beggan 91f).

Personal prosperity, nowadays, is still displayed through fashion, and even if designer clothes have become accessible for almost every social class, many women still use jewelry to indicate their position on the social ladder (Liggett 173ff)

People also, either subconsciously or semiconsciously, seem to be convinced of the fact that certain physical features reveal information on the character of the person displaying that very trait. An example for this would be large ears, which, according to Aristotle, were an indicator for people who tend to spread gossip (Liggett 117). Also, blonde hair in women is commonly associated with being not brilliant, and small breasts with being prude.

### **3.2 The medial production of stereotypes**

The mass media reaches a broad variety of people of all ages. Being distributed in many different languages and being produced to reach different people with various interests and diverse predilections, basically everyone is confronted with some type of media on

a daily basis. Ranging from TV commercials and movies to crime novels and newspapers, one is basically surrounded by media and most people enjoy engaging with it.

According to Brown, the media is not just a means for personal entertainment, but it also affects the way people think and form their opinions and beliefs (311). Applying this to a large audience makes the media's high importance and influence apparent as they can form public opinion, which in turn can be used to control society by those who are in power (Brown 312).

The transmitted norms are highly important because they are shared behavioral rules within a certain social group, which can be altered more or less easily according to their stability (Young) and, therefore, are highly diagnostic for the description of a certain group or society.

Even though one might not believe the content in the media, it still leads people's thoughts in a specific direction and gives them material to think about (Brown 312). More importantly, however, the media also have a norm-setting function, which means that they reinforce the shared social norms and stabilize certain opinions in a society, which excludes those who do not conform to those common norms (Brown 313). In order to reach a large audience, the media often use stereotypes and repeat certain standardized social norms, which, through this practice, are then further reproduced and reinforced (Kirby and al 165).

When it comes to beauty, the media create a narrow stereotypical and normalizing ideal, which creates expectations especially towards women to reach certain standards, if needed with the help of various practices and products, like fitness, cosmetics or clothing (Beausoleil 34). The media puts a lot of pressure on its audience to reach the goals it sets for them like "perfection, youth, beauty, femininity and masculinity" (Harris-Moore 25).

Hegemony is also a crucial concept for the explanation of the emergence and continuity of stereotypes. It describes “the power or dominance that one social group holds over others” (Lull 33). While in former times economic factors were decisive over a person’s social position, nowadays ideological factors are crucial as well. Gramsci’s ideological hegemony states that the mass media are tools for the high social classes to

“perpetuate their power, wealth, and status by popularizing their own philosophy, culture and morality, which in the end seems to become part of the natural order of things; it becomes common sense” (Boggs 39).

Producers of mass media, therefore, have the power to shape the ideas of a whole society. However, hegemony and its ideological content are not stable and have to be cultivated in order to last (Lull 35).

Ideologies of class, race, sexuality and gender present in media reinforce social relations and reproduce and normalize structures of oppression, racism, bias and sexism and ageism in society. Certain groups of people or classes are subordinated to the ones that conform to the mainstream culture’s standards and norms (Kellner 8).

Mass media’s representations and ideologies also typically support capitalist profits and, therefore, aim at transmitting specific messages (Kellner 11). It is suggested how people, by means of a certain food intake, dieting and undergoing surgeries, in other words through consumption, should strive for the perfect beauty ideal. However, there is also a cultural paradox when it comes to food, as the capitalist market wants to increase its profit while promoting a lean body ideal (Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Quinn 213). This is certainly a paradox worth mentioning, as the constant pressure to fulfil certain standards can lead to mental and physical illnesses, like eating disorders and a lot of people are prone to fall back to binge eating after a period of strict dieting, which, therefore, does promote the consumption of expensive dietary products, as well as common goods like junk food products.

### **3.2.1 Medial representations of beauty and body images**

Medial content can and often does include expectations about how people should behave or look like and this content can be compelling and influential. Often, the media convey images of the perfect or ideal female or male body, and those images can have a strong effect on their audience. (Fernandez and Pritchard 321)

The media often contribute to the distribution and reinforcement of the patriarchal stereotype when it comes to women, who typically are presented as passive and have to please their male counterparts. This, further, reinforces ‘the beauty myth’ in our society, which suggests that women should strive for a common beauty ideal. (Kirby and al 165)

Slenderness is promoted as the ideal everywhere nowadays. Starting with ads on cardboards, in magazines or in TV, up to figures in novels, one finds almost exclusively slender people. In contrast to these fictitious constructions, in the real world many more body shapes and sizes are present and there is a by far much bigger percentage of overweight people than presented by the media. Slenderness is a construct used by the media to produce associations with beauty, sex, success, happiness and love (Liggett 14). As one can see by looking at the statistical data presented before, the average waist circumference of American women above 20 is 98,4 cm and, therefore, way above the common ‘90 – 60 – 90’ ideal proportions, in which 60 indicates the ideal female waist circumference.

Further, famous actors and models, who act as role models and inspiration, often seem to be superior to common women as they seemingly do not have the primitive need of food consumption (Liggett 14), which often restrains women from achieving their goals to lose weight and fit into a certain bodily ideal.



### **3.2.2 Representations of stereotypes in YAL**

Nowadays, especially women, and among them also adolescent girls have to deal with great pressure to fit into social norms and often they lose their own self by trying to assimilate with socially acceptable standards. Typically, these acceptable standards are defined by the media through certain rules for external appearance. Especially YA literature strongly promotes stereotypical models that influence teenagers and create gender bias and stereotypes in their heads (Peterson 1). This could be explained by the simplicity, superficiality and lack of depth of a big part of YA literature, or by the fact that YA literature tries to depict the world of adolescents in an authentic way, which often includes the reproduction of stereotypes and striving for aesthetic perfection. Maybe this kind of literature is especially pleasing to young adults as they are able to relate to its characters more easily or maybe the escape into a world, where the main character ‘gets it all’, and is able to fit into standardized norms in the end, gives them ‘hope’ to eventually be able to fit in and reach high ideals of beauty and perfection themselves.

Mem Fox once stated that “[e]verything we read [...] constructs us, makes us who we are, by representing our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men” (Fox, *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning and Living* 152) in order to stress the great impact literature has on its readers.

Female stereotyping in literature, and also YA literature, was heavily used in the past. According to Peterson, however, a contemporary trend towards the representation of women and girls in Young Adult Literature in a more profound way with various positive character traits and focus on their inner strength, which abandons classical stereotyping, can be noticed in many genres (2f). For example, Kies argues that in recent YA horror stories females are portrayed as strong characters, who are able to escape because of their intelligence (202). Similar to Peterson, many other

scholars consider the new developments in YA literature, which seem to lead teenagers away from classical stereotypes towards a literature free from stereotyping, as highly positive and praise the “attempt to recreate the worlds in which they live, making their societies more egalitarian, more progressive, and, ultimately, more free” (Day, Green Barteet and Montz 3). Also Mikota suggests in her theoretical work on the development of YA literature “Geschichte der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur: Eine kurze Einführung” a trend towards a new openness considering gender issues in YA fiction since the 70s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (138).

However, there are still other opinions. Litton (Dreams), for instance, critically evaluates newer YA novels and argues that with a few exceptions they usually demonstrate the same quantity of stereotypes as older ones as many stereotypes as the older ones did (46). Even Peterson states that there are still genres, like romance or suspense, which rely heavily on the use of stereotypes (2f).

### **3.3 Gender considerations**

Gender roles are standardized and largely accepted norms and standards shared by a specific culture and are different for each sex. There are significant differences between gender roles of distinct eras or cultures. (Brannon)

When reflecting on mass media content it becomes clear that the gender roles conveyed by the current hegemony are male dominance and female subordination. Especially in the past, women have often been depicted as objects for pleasure and simple housewives whose lives only consisted in cooking, cleaning, raising children and entertaining their husbands. But even nowadays, traditional stereotypes seem to be still partly intact as one of women’s main tasks appears to be pleasing men on a physical level.

Women are often pigeonholed because of their physical features. Given the fact that their natural bodily features underline the stereotypical representation of women

and their traditional duties, like child bearing, it seems only normal that many women seek liberation from these associations by disposing of female markers, such as round hips, thighs or big breasts (Liggett 32). Rejecting these feminine traits means losing body fat and, therefore, dieting or exercising.

When it comes to the common beauty ideal, there is a remarkable difference between women and men. What might be seen as beautiful in women could easily be seen as unsightly in men and vice versa, as conventions are highly gendered (Beggan 91). Studies also revealed that there are remarkable differences between what women think are their most prominent and important features, and what men perceive as such. Generally, women pay more attention to the appearance of their skin, while men see the hair and facial contours as crucial; and while women often would do anything to achieve an extremely slender silhouette, men often do not consider it to be as attractive as females might think (Liggett 171)

Body image designates on the one hand how one evaluates one's body, and on the other hand what one invests in order to improve his or her appearance according to their possibilities and limits. There is a tiny number of people who are completely content with their body shape and appearance and most people strive for ideals presented in the media. The extremely restricted definition mass media spreads presents men as lean, but muscled and toned, and women as slim and tall, and normalizes an ideal which for most people is almost impossible to reach. These unrealistic standards further cause physical and psychological problems, for instance they evoke feelings like worthlessness, anxiety, insecurity or depression and foster unhealthy practices, such as the intake of medicines, over-exercising or strict dieting. (Fahs 104)

Peterson highlights that young girls often have to deal with a high pressure to identify with certain roles, which are not in concordance with their own personality

(1f). This trend is among other factors due to “the ubiquitous stereotype of a female victim as a damsel-in-distress, passive and waiting for a prince to rescue her, [which] has its roots in the centuries-old folk tales that dominated early oral traditions” (Overstreet 43), and continues to persist in all types of contemporary literature.

In literature women are typically presented in a highly gendered way with their potential attractiveness as their only possibility to reach success (Motes 39). This quest for physical perfection, however, does not apply only to female figures, but also to their male counterparts, whose external appearance usually is presented as the most important criteria and prioritized over character traits, such as thoughtfulness, kindness or honesty (Jacobs 21). Jacobs also states that not only do representations of gender roles shape the way in which women view themselves and their bodies, but also the way that men perceive the female roles in society (20).

For boys, too, there are recurrent gender roles that are present in the media and in people’s minds. To a certain extent these roles are even dangerous as they are related to a higher rate of violence and sexual risks among men (Santana 575). Fox suggests that maybe “children’s literature [could] be partly to blame for trapping males in a frightful emotional prison and demanding intolerable social expectations of them” (Men who weep 85), and a high number of other scholars concerned with this topic confirm this suggestion with their findings (see Hayn & Kaplan; Bean, Dunkerly-Bean & Harper).

### **3.4 Psychological considerations**

The notion of beauty is a very complex topic. The ancient Greeks were of the opinion that humankind would perceive beauty intuitively and that beauty would lie in normative proportions. Others gave more importance to a perfect harmony or symmetry and still others saw the key in the imperfections. (Liggett 166)

Psychologically speaking, the ideal of beauty is a highly complicated construct and does not always follow rules or schemes of perception. It does not only vary from person to person, but also, and more importantly between different social groups and cultures. For example, native Australians have a different notion of the perfect nose, which should be flat and babies are even squeezed to the ground with their faces down in order to obtain the perfect nose (Liggett 116). This means that many notions of beauty are not inherent in people's minds, but rather learned through interaction with one's society and the family (Liggett 166).

In order to be perceived as beautiful by one's fellows, one also has to pay considerable attention to the preferred character traits, values and manners (Liggett 166). There are many factors that contribute to a person's complete 'image', and being physically beautiful is not enough to be perceived as such by others. For example, a very attractive woman who speaks in a rude and offensive way, has no manners and dresses unconventionally, will likely not be the beauty ideal people would idolize.

As stated above, outward appearance is more important for women, while for men, there are other predicates, such as prosperity, which increase their attractiveness remarkably (Beggan 91).

A common saying goes that 'beauty lies in the eye of the beholder'. This means that even though beauty standards and norms do exist, there is at least some margin left that causes people idolizing and admiring different persons. The majority of those admired persons still conform to standard beauty norms, however, there is a personal factor involved when it comes to aesthetics. David Hume argues that

"individuals commit the "error" of taking beauty as a quality in the object [...] Beauty, rather, is an internal impression arising from the fit between object and observer and, in a similar way, traits are actually sentiments that arise *in the judging subjects*" (Costelloe).

This puts much more emphasis on the individual and it could also explain why persons from the same culture and social group often judge the same person or the same traits very differently. Looking at it from this perspective, a person's beauty is always created in the mind of someone else and is very subjective.

What also plays an important role in perceiving beauty are emotions like nostalgia. Having memories of happy and cheerful events from the past can lead people to see beauty in things and persons that remind them of these former emotions (Liggett 170). This could also explain why people typically are more attracted by features similar to their own and their families'. Beggan states that people with greater likeness, are more compatible and their relations more stable (92).

Humankind are rational beings, who strive for maximizing their benefits in any given social situation while minimizing potential perils (Hutchinson and Wood Charlesworth), which is evident also in their selection of (possible) partners. Beauty, just like money, functions as a resource to exchange with others, and, accordingly, beautiful people will most likely choose an equally beautiful partner or exchange their beauty for other resources, like those a very wealthy partner could offer (Beggan 92). But alongside assertive mating, there are also other areas of life which are strongly affected by attractiveness, like increased opportunities on the labor market or better treatment with regard to legal issues (Beggan 92).

Commonly, certain physical attributes are ascribed to a specific personality type and associated with specific character traits. The assumption "what is beautiful is good" is familiar to most people and attractive persons are believed to be happy, successful, intelligent and confident. What is true is that attractive people typically have more friends and possess better social skills. However, it is rather society's appreciation of beauty that gives them this advantage than an actual inborn ability or trait. (Beggan 92)

Additionally, it is not an easy task for people to show one's real self under the pressure of having to meet certain standards. While each person has the desire to outwardly represent one's self, the question arises which self it is the people want to display, and it is not easy to say for others whether it is their real self, an imaginary self they wish to be or one they think they should be (Liggett 176).

### **3.4.1 Eating Disorders**

Eating Disorders are, as already stated, not a new phenomenon. However, it is of great importance nowadays, as we have access to more information about the several types, causes and cures for eating disorders than ever and can fully fathom the seriousness of these conditions. According to the Website "Eating Disorders Hope" the symptoms of an eating disorder comprise among many others "body image distortions, irrational fear of weight [and] irrational fear of food" and can sometimes include or evoke "underlying anxiety, depression, mood disorders, personality disorders [and] self-harm issues" (Hamilton and Elenback). These diseases regularly (Liggett) lead to the "loss of menstrual periods for females, infertility, dangerously low blood sugars [and] bone loss" (Hamilton and Elenback). In addition, the "metabolism slows, [...] the gastrointestinal system experiences slowing [...] [and] the pulmonary system experiences muscle wasting and decreased pulmonary capacity" (Hamilton and Elenback).

Generally, eating is an act which ensures the human beings' survival. Regulating one's food intake by simply listening to the body's cues, however, is not an easy task for people who developed eating disorders. Arline and John Liggett stated that the number of persons, not only women, but also men and kids, who are alternately starving themselves and binge eating is constantly growing, and those people are likely to end up with a severe eating disorder in the long term (29).

Many studies show how certain medial representations of beauty ideals and a strong focus on visual appearance can affect especially girls' self-esteem in a negative way. By featuring only thin women, who fit into our society's current beauty ideal, most media sustain eating disorders or unhealthy attitudes towards food and one's body.

### **3.4.2 The power of medial influences**

The question why people are so fixated on their outer appearance and especially their weight and physical shape can be answered not exclusively, but also through medial exposure. Beggan states that medial influences, in particular the Internet, television and magazines, are without a doubt some of the main factors in shaping a person's idea of beauty (91).

What plays a large role in the formation of certain body images is especially advertising, which does not only try to convince people to buy certain goods, but also influences its watchers and readers in terms of values and ideals (Ives 18). Being confronted with non-realistic bodies and representations of "normal" women leads to unrealistic expectations towards the own body, which further might lead to eating disorders and mental issues (Ives 18). Advertising and the media in general mostly foster the established ideal and increase the burden people not conforming to it have to carry instead of guiding people to an understanding that goes beyond one specific ideal and focuses on the acceptance of individual differences (Ives 18). What one easily overlooks is the power that advertising has over the population, which could be used in a positive way by introducing similarly subliminal messages and representations differing from those reinforcing the ideal body image in order to educate the people who are receiving and perceiving the advertisement (Ives 18).

Many researchers, like Barbara French with her book *Coping with Bulimia*, see the media as the main culprit in the increasing number of eating disorders. In fact, the



media establishes close associations between slenderness and sexual attraction and success (Wykes and Gunter 215).

As stated, the desire for outward perfection frequently derives from medial models, which appear in movies, television, art and literature and influence people's way of thinking of themselves, as well as their way of dressing and wearing their makeup (Liggett 176). Being constantly exposed to media does not only bring the benefits, like the possibility to be informed and to communicate and connect with others at any time, but also leaves the spectator, listener or reader with a lot of secondary information, which he or she processes and takes in in an individual and often covert way.

Especially young girls are affected and easily influenced by these medial representations as they often take the content in rather unreflectedly. Most protagonists in nowadays media are thin, beautiful and (at least ultimately or apparently) happy, which leads many girls to see them as role models. The media in question, however, is not just TV, the Internet and other visual types of media, but also articles in magazines and novels often contain very idealistic representations of the female body.

Given the topicality and seriousness of this problem, the question arises how to deal with it. Banning all the media containing idealized representations of female bodies does not seem realistic or rewarding. Instead, experts commonly claim that being encouraged to think critically about the material in consideration and to question the unrealistic and exaggerated medial representations are better ways to minimize the negative impact of media on young girls. An important aspect is the parents' and/or educators' supervision throughout the process of "consuming" a certain type of media, like a movie or a book.

### **3.4.3 Suggestibility of Adolescents**

Body image is highly malleable by the information transmitted by means of medial images and messages of idealized beauty and how to reach it through exercising, surgical interventions or food intake (Yamamiya 74). Most theories and studies also highlight the importance of sociocultural factors, such as peers, parents and the media, as causes for the creation of body image in children and adolescents.

Aside of those factors, however, there is a number of other reasons why especially girls want to change their appearance. A study by Tiggemann et al., for example, shows that girls want to be thinner most importantly because of models and medial influences, but also because of other factors like clothes, having control over their own body, being more popular, being appealing to boys, conforming to society's or peer's expectations and gender roles are mentioned as well (648). This, however, leads to the question how much of the other reasons are just ultimately caused by or at least reinforced by medial representations and stereotyping which established a certain way of thinking.

Media exposure already affects children of a young age (Harrison and Hefner 153). In fact, even though the effects of a distorted body ideal are most visible in adolescents, those fixed concepts regarding the body image are already formed during childhood (Smolak 16f). In the interviews conducted by Tiggemann et al. the great importance of media's influence on girls becomes evident:

“The media portrays the image of girls, how we want to be, like skinny or whatever, and I don't know it just kind of takes over our mind, we don't think properly ... we forget other things, like we don't think about inside, like personality and the inner self.” (649)

Mem Fox argues in one of her articles that gender stereotypes significantly influence teenagers to the extent that the development of their full potential can be blocked and limited (Fox, Men who weep).

Reading is highly influential on the development of one's personality. Certain gender roles can be solidified and strengthened through the information provided by literature (Jacobs 20). This influence literature has on one's thoughts is seldomly evident to its readers and reading often affects people in a very concealed way.

Often eating disorders are caused by medial representations. A study on Chilean adolescent girls confirmed the connection of medial pressure to reach a standardized beauty ideal and the occurrence of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction and that these symptoms most probably arise in older adolescent girls (Caqueo-Urizar 78). Similarly, a study conducted by Anschutz et al. showed that being exposed to media featuring a thin body ideal caused greater dissatisfaction with one's physique and changed the idea of the ideal body in older preadolescent girls (at the age of 11-12 years) (26).

Additionally, these obsessions over weight and body image can increase the risk of depressions in adolescent girls significantly (Rierdan and Koff 615f). A study by Alan Roberts and Emily Good further showed that neurotic women and girls have a higher risk to be negatively influenced by media images of idealized bodies (211).

## 4 Analysis of books

In the following section two contemporary and popular young adult novels will be analyzed. Attention will be paid particularly to the messages they contain with regard to beauty and body image. Their content will be critically evaluated and investigated with reference to current findings and views in the domain of cultural studies, psychology and philosophy.

### 4.1 The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants

Ann Brashare's novel „The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants“ and its four sequels, which were published between 2001 and 2007, are highly popular among adolescents and can be often found in online reading lists created by teenagers (Beach, Appleman and Hynds 29) and the first novel of the series is even listed in the top 10 books teenagers read for fun, according to the “Teen Week Read” survey conducted in 2004 (Beach, Appleman and Hynds 30). The series has also been on “*The New York Times Book Review's* Best Seller List for Children [...] for 136 weeks” (Litton, *The Nature of Female Friendship in the Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants Quartet* 21), with its second novel *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* having even been on top of the list (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* Pos 7654). The series, especially the first novel, is also commonly taught in schools and integrated in the curriculum of English classes.

The first novel tells the story of four young girlfriends, who spend the summer for the first time apart. All of the four girls are in different locations, struggling with their own problems and challenges of a typical teenage life. However, they are

connected by a pair of jeans, which seems to be magical as it fits all four friends marvelously, in spite of their different body types.

It is undoubted that the novels contain various precious and veritable messages about friendship, loyalty and growing up and it is clear that one of the biggest reasons the novel obtained extremely high popularity is the variety of plots, which are subordinated to the bigger story. Topics, such as first love and first sexual experiences; disagreements and problems within the family; death of a loved person; and friendship are arguments most teenagers can relate to.

However, the series also contains a large amount of extremely stereotyped and highly gendered conceptions of beauty and body image.

In order to give an overview of the subliminal, as well as explicit messages it contains, only the first novel of the series will be analyzed in great detail. The second book, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood*, will further be treated in a more condensed and superficial manner. Due to limitations in length and in order to cover another novel, the remaining three books will be left out in this thesis.

#### **4.1.1 Plot and character description**

Four girls, Carmen, Lena, Tibby and Bridget, who are best friends since their early childhood are faced with having to deal alone with their problems, when they find themselves apart for the whole summer for the first time in their lives.

At the beginning of the novel, Carmen buys an old pair of jeans in a second-hand shop. The fact that the pants fit all of the four girls equally well, makes them think that they are somehow magical, and the pair of jeans becomes a symbol for their friendship and their loyalty to each other and helps them deal with their problems the whole summer.

Carmen, the stubborn half Puerto Rican girl, spends her summer in South Carolina with her father, who lives there with his new fiancée Lydia and her children

Paul and Krista. Carmen is devastated when she finds out about his new family and tries everything to manipulate their happiness and win the exclusive love of her father back. She feels excluded by the new family and blames it on her being different from them, caused by her Puerto Rican heritage. Carmen tries to cause fights and uncomfortable situations because she feels invisible to them and wants to provoke any kind of reaction. This goes as far as throwing a stone into their kitchen window. She leaves and goes back to her hometown where she tries to make things right by sending money to her father. However, she tells him during a conversation on the phone how upset she is and what it is that disturbs her so much about the family's new situation. In the end, she surprises her father by showing up at his wedding and they talk about what happened.

Lena, the Greek beauty, visits her grandparents in Oia, a small town in Greece, with her sister Effie. Lena's grandmother wants to set her up with the grandson of a befriended couple, Kostos, but Lena is not interested in an encounter with him at first. She is described as highly attractive and believes that boys are interested in her only because of her appearance. Lena prefers to spend her time painting and being alone or with her family, but then a misunderstanding brings her closer to Kostos, even though she creates a big stir and even causes a fight at first, as she assumes that Kostos was spying on her while she was bathing without clothes. When she finally realizes that she is exaggerating, Kostos ignores her and her real feelings come up. She goes to talk to Kostos about her feelings for him and in the end they kiss.

Bridget, the Dutch-American athletic, spends the summer months at a soccer camp in Baja California in Mexico. There she meets Eric, a soccer coach, and she immediately develops a strong interest in him. She starts flirting with him and becomes more and more insistent on getting his full attention. She breaks several rules, for example going out drinking and dancing, and tries to impress him in every possible

way. She even sneaks into his cabin at night and tries to seduce him, at which she is eventually successful. What she did not expect is that their intimate encounter would be something that changes her and that would leave her upset. Eventually, he finds out that she lied to him about her age and that she was too young for him. They talk about it, but Bridget is overwhelmed by what happened and leaves the camp full of sadness and confusion.

Tibby, the plain, shy middle-class girl, is the only one who stays at home in Maryland and works as a shopping assistant in a superstore. She does not like her summer job and decides to make a documentary about the meaninglessness of people's lives. Tibby is interested in a boy called Tucker, but she assumes that he is too cool for her and that he does not want anything to do with a girl like her. Then one day, when a girl collapses in the store, she tries to help and as a result becomes friends with the girl, who is called Baily, is two years younger than her and suffers from leukemia. Baily wants to help Tibby with her documentary and the two end up spending the whole summer together. They also make a new friend, Brian, for whom she also develops interest. One day Baily is taken to the hospital and Tibby panics about losing her new friend. At the same time, her guinea pig dies, which Tibby ignores by putting its dead body into the freezer in order to keep it intact. She also starts ignoring calls from Baily's mom, because she fears to be confronted with bad news about her health. Eventually, she goes to the hospital to look after her friend, who dies a few days later. After the funeral Tibby is also able to let go of her guinea pig and buries it.

Being back in their hometown, the four girls meet up and tell each other the stories of their summers. None of them is the same girl as they were before summer.

#### **4.1.2 Stereotypical representations and generalizations**

The four main characters in the novel are presented in a highly unilateral way, which is rather unrealistic. In real life each single person's character is highly multifaceted and especially teenagers typically display extremely varied characteristics as a result of the process of developing their real self.

While in reality each person has very different character traits, flaws and strengths, which cause people to act and react distinctly according to different contexts, interlocutors or situations. In the novel, however, each protagonist seems to be reduced to one specific characteristic. In the beginning of the book, Carmen, the fictitious narrator of the first novel and one of the four protagonists, states:

“We’re everything to one another. We don’t need to say so; it’s just true. Sometimes it seems like we’re so close we form one single complete person rather than four separate ones. We settle into types – Bridget the athlete, Lena the beauty, Tibby the rebel, and me, Carmen, the ... what? The one with the bad temper. But the one who cares the most. The one who cares that we stick together” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 8f)

This shows how the characters are presented according to types, rather than portraying and acknowledging the multilateral personalities of the four individual girls, who are in the process of growing up. Bridget and Lena's generalizations are widely appreciated in our society, namely beauty and athleticism. Tibby and Carmen, however, are portrayed in a much less favorable way. Being a rebel or having bad temper are not qualities which are commonly praised. This leads the reader to immediately sympathize more with the two girls exhibiting the highly valued features. Throughout the book this sentiment is kept up and Tibby and Carmen seem to have more serious problems, seem to be less happy and their lives generally appear to be less worthwhile than the lives of the other two girls.

In addition, the constant pigeonholing, might leave the impression that it is essential to construct one's personality around a single trait or feature, which fosters



back and white thinking. Especially teenagers might perceive the message, that being beautiful or athletic is a main constituent of a person's personality and determines how others see him or her. The fact that there is more to a person than one single characteristic, even if it is the complete fulfillment of current beauty standards, might be overlooked, as the book certainly puts beauty and athleticism above other qualities.

Bridget's main characteristics, which are repeatedly mentioned throughout the story, are her athleticism and height and most importantly her long blond hair. It seems as if these qualities are the only ones important to the evolvment of the storyline and the only ones worth mentioning. There is no effort in highlighting good or bad personality traits, but only superficial characteristics.

Repeatedly one can read about Bridget's athletic build. She is described as being tall (32) and even called an "Amazon" (18). "Her legs were long, and she carried no extra weight. It made her a naturally good runner, even when she was out of practice" (90). One notices immediately that the writer wants to put emphasis on Bridget's lean and fit body and her sportiness. These qualities are also admired by the boy Bridget falls in love with ("Bridget, you are beautiful. You are amazing and talented and just . . . just . . . irrepressible." (169); "You'll be this hot soccer star at some great school" (293); "watching you play was a huge turn-on" (292)), which further fosters the foregrounding of physical attributes.

What is even more striking, are the multiple references to Bridget's hair. It almost seems as if her whole personality is reduced to her appearance. Whenever there is a description of Bridget, her hair is also mentioned in a more or less subtle way ("[...] she yanked the elastic out of her hair. Yellow clumps stuck to her sweaty shoulders and back" (95); "Bridget pulled her hair out of her elastic. It fell around her shoulders, seeming to capture far more than its fair share of sunlight" (75f)). Her hair also contributes heavily to her attractiveness. Boys or men are interested in her only

because of her blond hair and it seems to be almost the only feature, apart from her athleticism, which makes her likeable and worth paying attention to (“Bridget hadn’t been to many clubs, but each time was the same. All eyes, at least all male eyes, followed her hair” (133); “There were shouts and stares and catcalls that she suspected were aimed at her – or her hair, anyway” (133)). Bridget also seems to know about the effect her hair has on people.

“Bridget could feel lots of eyes on her, but she didn’t dwell on it. She was used to people looking at her. She knew that her hair was unusual. It was long and straight and the color of a peeled banana. People always made a big deal about her hair” (32f)

However, not only does the reader learn about the effect Bridget’s hair has on men in general, but more specifically on the boy she is interested in. She seems to try to impress him by showing off her most attractive physical attributes and she is not interested in showing him her real self and creating a ‘real’ bond between them. One could even say that she tries to make use of her physical traits in order to obtain his attention (“[...] she was gratified to see that Eric, whatever else he was, was not immune to her hair” (77); “A curtain of her hair fell forward as she leaned, brushing his shoulder” (116); “He held two clumps of her hair in his hands like it was precious stuff” (293); “The wind blew her hair forward. The ends grazed his chest. She wished there were nerve endings in hair” (186); “In slow fascination she watched as he lifted his hand and put it to her hair, pushing it back from her face” (186)).

A physical trait, which is repeatedly mentioned about Carmen, is her bottom. She is commonly described as “the queen of butts” (18). A lot of emphasis is put on her Puerto Rican heritage, which is notable in her curvy body, dark hair and skin and most importantly in her bottom, which even Carmen herself mentions several times throughout the story (“*And dark skin and a big butt?*” (85); “I’m Puerto Rican. I have a big butt.” (248)).

Lena is constantly described as the most beautiful of the four girls. She is depicted as a natural beauty, and several people define her by her outer beauty. This includes not only strangers or acquaintances, but also her closest friends (“Look at yourself! You are a thing of beauty. You are a vision. You are a supermodel.” (20)) and family members (“Oh, Lena, you are a beauty!” (43); “This one is for beautiful Lena,’ she said proudly” (44)), who seem to reduce her to her external appearance. She is even described to have been the show pony as a child (54) and is presented and introduced by her grandmother like a “game show contestant with his new red car” (71). When she and her sister arrived in Greece it is said that “[e]veryone paid lots of attention to Lena at first, because she was striking to look at” (55). Also all the locals in Greece “knew her as ‘shy and beautiful’ Lena” (201). And her “friends called her Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty” (70). It is also presented as a curiosity that even though “Lena was supposed to be the pretty one, [...] Effie was always the one with the boyfriend” (234).

The male characters in the book are reduced to their external characteristics, too. In addition, their physical features often seem to indicate their personality traits. While an unattractive boy is described as being a loser and Tibby “imagined she would be intimidating to a person like Brian” (166), another male character, who is described as attractive and appealing refuses to accept Tibby’s rejection as “[h]e thought she was turning him down out of insecurity. As tough someone so much cooler than her couldn’t possibly take an interest” (299f).

#### **4.1.3 Superficiality**

*The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* contains a large amount of content which promotes a superficial mindset. In many instances, either the novel’s narrator, one of the four main protagonists, or other characters give explicit statements in direct speech, which show how much importance is given to superficialities and appearances.

In fact, some of the expressions give the impression that the girls are actually obsessed with their own and others' physiognomy, and this is portrayed as completely normal.

At the beginning of the novel, when the magical pair of jeans is introduced in the prologue, the narrator already describes them as "just doing their basic job of covering your butt without making it look fatter than it actually is" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 3). This already introduces the constant preoccupation with appearance and weight, which is upheld throughout the book.

In addition, not only the girls seem to be rather fixated on their weight, also their mothers themselves are "complaining about [...] how fat they [are]" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 7). This leads to the assumption that weight and outer appearance is something women of all ages do worry about and that it is completely normal to do so, often even a top priority.

Lena, the girl with Greek roots, is described as extremely beautiful. However, her seemingly only "flaw" promptly gets revealed by one of her friends in the prologue, which leaves the impression of jealousy:

"Lena has big feet, like size nine and a half or something. They are the only part of her that isn't perfect. I love her feet" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 4)

The phrase "I love her feet", her friend added, rather conveys that she loves her feet because of the fact that they demonstrate that Lena is not the peak of perfection, which she at first glance appears to be.

Another example for the fixation they have on their bodies is one of Camen's comments on their bodies: "[t]he summers before [...] are a blur of baby oil and Sun-in and hating our bodies (I got big breasts; Tibby got no breasts)" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 5).

Their mothers also suggest to their daughters that friendship and interpersonal relationships in general are not superior to superficial aspects. This becomes clear in the statement “Mom tells me, ‘Just wait till you get serious about boys and school. Just wait till you start competing” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 8), indicating that their friendship will be over once they start caring more about their looks and their accomplishments. These values that are transmitted through their mothers’ comments can be very harmful to young adults, as there already is a lot of competition and pressure waiting for them in the world outside, and friendships and relationships should be treated as valuable constructs functioning as anchors and a safe place instead of undermining them.

In our society, being thin is not all that matters. One has to be the right type of thin: slender. It is not desirable to be too skinny, but to have the perfect build, with the right body parts showing no signs of bodily fat and the right parts displaying just the right amount of curves. This concept is inherent in the scene where Tibby tries on the pants.

“‘Tibs, you’re such a babe,’ Bridget proclaimed. [...] Tibby had narrow hips and long legs for her small frame. The pants fell below her waist, hugging her hips intimately. They revealed a white strip of flat stomach, a nice innie belly button. ‘You look like a girl,’ Bridget added. Tibby didn’t quarrel. She knew as well as anyone that she looked skinny and shapeless in the oversized pants she usually wore. [...] ‘Those pants are in love with you. They want you [...]’” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 14f)

This section perfectly displays how important it is to fit into certain standardized norms of our society. While the belly has to be flat, the hips should not be too narrow, but show the right amount of feminine curves. Even the convexation of the belly button is of interest here.

Another example of a clear definition of beauty ideals in the novel is Lena’s physical description.

“They were used to Lena, but [...] to the rest of the world she was fairly stunning. She had Mediterranean skin that tanned well, straight, shiny dark hair, and wide eyes roughly the color of celery. Her face was so lovely, so delicately structured [...]” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 16).

This section shows perfectly how certain stereotypical features of beauty are conveyed in the novel. Tanned skin, light eyes, straight hair and big eyes are considered to be markers of beauty.

#### **4.1.4 Beauty and success**

Another important aspect, which will be critically analyzed, is the explicit and implicit connection between beauty and success. Tiggermann et al. state that medial influence can alter adolescents’ thoughts significantly in a way that makes them believe that adhering to certain beauty standards will automatically lead to happiness and success (649).

Accordingly, the girls in *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* attributed with beauty and athleticism throughout the book are portrayed as being more successful with regard to romanticism, friendships, relationships and mastering everyday life.

What is especially striking is that the novel conveys that the girls’ career options seem to be depending on their looks. Tibby, for example “knew from experience that there were few career opportunities for a girl with a pierced nose who couldn’t type and was not a ‘people person’” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 47). This statement gives a very restricted image about the job choices a girl who differs from the norm has nowadays. Not only does it exclude a large variety of occupational areas, which do not include interpersonal contact in the first place, or any form of typing, but also does it suggest that looks that are not in line with the standard female appearance limit one’s opportunities to find a job. This may or may not be the case in real life, and certainly depends on the professional field in which one is interested, but what is more important, it does reinforce and normalize unjust selection strategies.

On the other hand, Bee is told that one day she is going to be “this hot soccer star at some great school, with a million guys” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 293), which also indicates her predicted future success, which is directly linked to her appearance, as she is described as “hot”.

The male counterparts in the novel who are described as being highly attractive seem to have a greater disposition to show signs of success, like for example owning an expensive car.

“It was Tucker Rowe, who was, in her opinion, the hottest junior at Westmoreland. For the summer he’d grown an excellent soul patch just under his lower lip. He was standing by his car, an antique seventies muscle car that practically made her swoon.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 31f)

Tucker is further described by activities, which indicate his financial and social success, like “hanging at the Nine Thirty Club all night while [Tibby] was resting up for her next shift at Wallmann’s” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 128f) and by the cool “stories she’d heard about the places he went and the people he hung out with” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 180f).

Kostos, the Greek boy from Oia, who is described as very handsome, is also successful, as he not only attends university in London, but also played for the national football team (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 71). It is also mentioned repeatedly how proud the whole town is of him (71) and he is called a champion and hero (73).

Eric, the most handsome guy at the soccer camp, is not just any guy, but one of the coaches, which means he is in a high and fairly prestigious position in the camp environment.

On the other hand, guys who are not attractive are depicted as losers in the novel. Brian, for example, is described as being

“a caricature of a caricature of a loser. He was both skinny and doughy and at the same time, his skin as white-blue as skim milk. He had unibrow syndrome, greasy hair the color of dog doo, mossy braces, and a spitty way of talking. (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 164)

He is in no way described to be successful in any area of life, as his daily activities seem to be limited to playing computer games. This reinforces the general picture conveyed by the book, which indirectly and directly suggests a link between beauty and success.

#### **4.1.5 Beauty and jealousy**

There are a lot of instances in the book where beauty is closely linked to jealousy. Especially certain comments the girls express seem to be motivated by jealousy. Whether or not some of the girls' statements are rather intended as jokes than serious affirmations remains up to discussion. In either way, the fact that according to certain psychological ideas, even jokes contain at least a small amount of truth (Freud 106f) justifies their inclusion in this analysis.

There are two kinds of jealousy in the book. Both, however, are linked to beauty. The first kind of jealousy refers to the girls being jealous of another girl's beauty. The second kind of jealousy refers to jealousy regarding a boy's beauty and not wanting any other girl around him for that reason.

The first type becomes evident, for example, when Lena tries the pants on and they fit her very well, one of the other girl's comments “Lenny, you make me sick” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 16). At the occasion of trying on the pants Tibby also declares openly that she envies Carmen's rear. (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 19)

One girl especially turns out to be the victim of disparaging and dismissive comments by Carmen. Kelly, who is Paul's girlfriend and who is described to be very attractive, is constantly despised by Carmen, even though Kelly does not seem to have done anything bad. All the hatred against her descends from Carmen's own insecurity



and jealousy towards her. Kelly is described as Paul's "babelike girlfriend" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 109) who is "made up nicer than a flight attendant" (145) and as being

"so attractive as to actually be ugly. Her cheekbones were too prominent, her eyes too far apart, and her skinny collarbones jutted out." (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 110)

Because of her skinny body Carmen commonly refers to her as "Skeletor", which probably stems from her insecurities about her own body, which is curvy. All skinny girls, who are not her closest friends, immediately become enemies and target of her comments. Likewise, her stepsister Krista, is described as colorless and curveless (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 175), both attributes Carmen herself gained from her Puerto Rican heritage. Instead of embracing her own attributes, she judges and condemns women with different physical shapes. This is a behavior, which can be described as highly jealous.

In Carmen's case her jealousy can be attributed to both types described above. Her jealousy not only derives from the wish to look like someone else, but also from the rancor against people who are close to her loved ones. She is clearly interested in her stepbrother Paul as she even states that "the idea that [she] would be attractive to Paul and a threat to his and Skeletor's happiness is preposterous" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 125). Similarly, her hatred against her stepsister derives from her jealousy about the close relationship Krista is able to build with Carmen's dad as she is living with him, while Carmen lives far away with her mother.

In Bee's case, especially the second type of jealousy becomes evident through the description of her behavior at the soccer camp. She hates every girl who is in Eric's team, because she is jealous about their closeness (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 77). Even the smallest things outrage her, like when Eric laughs at a

joke from another girl and “jealousy stabbed through her heart. She didn’t want other girls making him laugh” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 218)

Lena is in a similar situation with the girls swooning over Kostos, the boy she is interested in. She is described as “study[ing] the faces of the girls on the sidelines. She could tell that Kostos owned the lust of what few local teenage girls there were in Oia” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 279f).

#### **4.1.6 Notions of the gendered female beauty and male beauty**

Throughout the story there are various hints and subtle messages on standardized beauty norms and societal expectations towards men and women of all ages. Comments and observations on beauty are found on almost every page of the book. It is evident that the common belief transmitted by the novel is that being beautiful and aiming at the fulfillment of certain pre-set beautification goals is seen as a positive feature and almost expected in order to be accepted by the society.

While attractiveness is a goal both sexes share, there are various differences with regard to specific qualities and features girls and boys strive for. In the novel, all four main characters have a very concrete idea not only of how they themselves should look like, but also of how boys should look like in order to be desirable for them.

There are a multitude of female bodily features that are portrayed as being worth aspiring to. These traits include being tall, yet not too tall („You look almost . . . small, Bee. Not your usual Amazon“ (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 18)), having symmetric and regular features (“her features were regular – her nose straight, all the things in the right places. The combination of qualities made people mistake her for beautiful” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 33)) and having feminine curves, but still being skinny (““You’ve got a great little butt,’ Carmen pointed out” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 18); “she was surprisingly

narrow through her hips and waist” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 1)). Additionally, there are also various specific features, which are portrayed as admirable, such as prominent cheekbones, eyes that are far apart and skinny collarbones (110). On the other hand, there are various notions of physical features that are described as being not desirable in a woman and as repellent to the other sex.

“Her dark eyebrows crept in toward her nose, Frida Kahlo style. For some reason, Tibby suspected, this meant that she didn’t have a husband” (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 50)

However, physical features are not the only constituents of the ideal of beauty, but also how people chose to present themselves is portrayed as being highly important to the novel’s characters. Women are described as being beautiful when they look neat and cultured, for instance when their hair is done nicely (“[...] wore her blond hair in a perfect bell-shaped bob” (174)). Also wearing feminine and sexy clothes is portrayed as highly favorable. When Bridget, for example, wants to get the attention of a boy, she immediately swaps her everyday clothes for skirts, sundresses and two-piece bathing suits (136). However, while dressing sexy is highly encouraged, it is only acceptable for women who have the right body to put on display. This basically suggests that dressing in a sexy way is almost compulsory for women whose body lies within the accepted norms. At the same time there is something like an unwritten law one can read between the lines of the novel for women out of those bodily norms to dress ‘according to’ their body shape and overall appearance (“Carmen thought it was frankly embarrassing for a woman over forty with two teenage children to wear a big puffy white thing at her wedding” (175); “you should wear long sleeves” (177); your wedding dress makes your arms look fat” (239)).

According to the book, fulfilling all these standards, however, is not enough. One also has to have grace in order to be genuinely beautiful.

She wasn't beautiful. Not like Lena. There was no particular poetry or grace in her face. She knew that, and she knew that other people probably realized that too, once they got over her hair" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 33)

The description of the male characters in the novel is reduced to an almost exclusive reference to their physical traits. Not much is written or said about their personalities, except of what can be deduced from their actions. However, they are described in great detail when it comes to their external appearance ("He was very, very handsome. His hair was dark and wavy, and his eyes were yellow-green. There was a slight bump on the bridge of his nose." (73); "He had dark straight hair and skin several shades darker than hers. He looked Hispanic, maybe. [...] He was beautiful. (75); He looked mellow from sun and running and probably tequila. He had a sexy way of tripping his head to the side" (133f)). These descriptions also give a great amount of information on the ideal standardized male beauty. For example, being tall and athletic, as well as looking older, at least for boys, is described as attractive ("a tall young man, about eighteen, [...] blond and broad, like an athlete" (63); "[he] wasn't disappointing. He was tall. He looked more like a man like a boy; he looked at least eighteen." (70); "He tried out with the national football team [...] He is a champion! He's a hero in Oia!" (71ff)). Other qualities described as enticing are "an excellent soul patch just under his lower lip" (31), being successful ("his car, an antique seventies muscle car" (31); "is going to university in London" (71)) and not taking too much care about one's appearance ("a squinty face that made him look like he'd only just gotten out of bed" (128f)).

Accordingly, there are also several features mentioned, which are not considered to be attractive. A guy who is "skinny and doughy at the same time,[...] [with] skin as white-blue as milk, [...] unibrow syndrome [and] greasy hair the color of dog doo, mossy braces and a spitty way of talking" (164) is described as being "a caricature of a caricature of a loser" (164). Also, wearing earrings and using too much

gel are mentioned as being unfavorable (130). In general, overly groomed and neat boys are not attractive to the main characters.

“She looked at him carefully [...]. His hair was overgelled, his eyebrows were plucked in the middle. His clothes and his reputation seemed fake. She couldn’t for the life of her remember why she had liked him” (299)

All of those statements and comments indicate that what these girls desire in boys and what, according to them, constitute the male beauty norms, is ‘natural’ attractiveness, or at least seemingly natural attractiveness. Girls wanting a man who fulfils all their expectations, but not wanting a man to try too hard to achieve those expectations, is a paradox. According to that, young men either have to fit into the ideal image of the perfect boy with perfect facial and bodily features, or they have to change their features in a way one cannot notice their effort in doing so. Naturalness seems to be a more important indicator of beauty in men than in women.

Additionally, also the male characters’ behavior and manners are strictly observed and evaluated according to manliness by the girls. For example, food choices and punctuality are areas in which a certain behavior is required in order to be manly and to fit into male gender role expectations. Ordering a burger, for instance is considered to be manly, as opposed to ordering a wrap (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 37). Being punctual is not seen as attractive, but being very late would suggest a lack of interest.

“This was a tricky business. Their date was at eight. If Porter came earlier than 8:15, for example, that would seem overeager. It would impart strong loser overtones. If, on the other hand, he came after 8:25, that would mean he didn’t like her all that much.” (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 31)

This shows how important not only male looks are, but how also their behavior is judged by the novel’s characters. The ideal boy/man has to concord with a common set of rules for manly manners. The novels strongly suggest that male characters should follow these rules in order to be attractive for girls, as they are otherwise immediately

described as losers. They also generate high expectations in their female readers towards boys and men, which might not be realistic and applicable for their specific environment and situation. Also, these 'rules' of behavior are very rigid and superficial, and it is problematic that deviating from them is portrayed as being linked to a flawed personality.

#### **4.1.7 Clothing and beauty**

Clothing gives a lot of information on a person and can change their appearance significantly. A great number of people are worrying about how to use clothes in order to appear more beautiful and more successful or how to underline or fake one's affiliation to a certain lifestyle, group or economic class through clothing.

Even though the true importance of clothing lies mostly in its practical function, it is usually the most neglected one. Especially teenagers tend to dress in very unpractical or even harming ways in order to meet their peer group's aesthetic standards.

That clothing is often considered to be an indicator of a person's living conditions is also addressed in the novel, as Lena's mother „hates secondhand clothing stores. She says used clothes are for poor people“ (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 3). One can notice that the message conveyed here is that aside from its practical and its aesthetical function, clothing also has a very important social function. It is therefore used as a marker of where one stands financially and in society or who one wants to be or pretends to be. Trying to convince others to be in a higher economic position by only wearing clothes of famous brands is as common as trying to avoid to convey the idea of belonging to a lower class by condemning certain styles, brands or pieces of clothing.

Just like prestigious clothes of a certain brand or type may indicate that someone belongs to a certain group of persons or has certain features or character traits, there are also non-prestigious kinds of clothes like the above-stated second-hand clothes or certain kinds of work clothing. Tibby, for example feels ashamed wearing her work smock in front of Tucker.

“Tibby couldn’t look at him. The smock was burning her body. She kept her head down while she locked her bike. She ducked into the store, hoping maybe he’d think he’d been mistaken, that maybe the loser girl in the polyester smock with the little darts for breasts was not the actual Tibby, but a much less cool facsimile.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 31f)

This shows that her work wear is not considered cool enough to be seen in and that what she is wearing might lead Tucker to think about her in a different way or that he sees her as different person than who she is or rather tries to be. Wearing a smock makes her immediately feel uncomfortable and she experiences “a plunge in confidence” (181) when she wears it.

Lena, on the other hand, purposely wears clothes that do not underline any of her features, as she does not want to be reduced to her appearance. This is one of the few instances in the novel, where beauty is not praised to the skies and the main character conveys the message that beauty is not the only thing that matters. However, in order to be able to choose to wear unesthetic clothes which do not underline one’s beauty and give one’s personality a chance to be seen, being beautiful is a prerequisite. Having to ‘hide’ one’s beauty in order to facilitate one’s equally beautiful character to ‘shine’ is a privilege only beautiful people can afford to draw on. This suggests that in order to wear non-prestigious clothes without being immediately labeled a loser one has to display a certain amount of beauty.

“She wore practical clothes, ‘stodgy, dull, and pathetic,’ according to her friends. She didn’t like people having more reasons to look at her, to think that how she looked made them know her. She’d been the show pony too often as a child.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 54)

Clothes are normally used to flatter, accentuate or hide certain bodily features and to bring out the best of each body type. Therefore, it is clear that the same pair of jeans normally does not fit different girls with different sizes and body shapes the same. When the girls try the pants on for the first time find out about the magic that resides in them, some of their statements indicate that body shapes are not only of great concern to them, but also that simply talking about different body types and the mere stating of facts is a critical matter as it can easily provoke irritation.

When Carmen tries on the pants Tibby considers her bigger rear and declares that “[she] just [doesn’t] think these pants are going to fit over it” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 19). The girls do not want to compare their bodies and in the beginning they feel uncomfortable trying on the same pair of jeans in front of each other.

“Don’t you think you should try them on?’ Lena asked practically. ‘If they fit Carmen, they aren’t going to fit you.’ Carmen and Tibby both glared at Lena, not sure who should take more offense. ‘What?’ Bridget said, hopping to Lena’s aid. ‘You guys have completely different builds. Is that not obvious?’ (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 14)

When the girls notice that the pants, however, fit all of them in a flattering way, they decide that they have to be magical pants. Indeed, considering the girls’ descriptions it is highly unrealistic that such a pair of pants can possibly exist.

The pants further become a symbol for them and their strong solidarity and an emblem for their friendship. The pants become more than just a piece of clothing to the girls, they “meant support and they meant love” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 321) and probably that was the reason they all felt beautiful wearing them, which becomes evident for example when “Tibby felt a surge of confidence when she remembered she was wearing the Pants.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the*



Traveling Pants 181) or when Lena” “felt sexy in the Pants, which couldn’t hurt” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 301)

The novel also touches the delicate question of the acceptability of a certain type of clothing. As the four girls are all in their teenage years, they experiment with what is acceptable and what is not. This is especially obvious in Bee’s case. Often, she wears highly revealing clothes like “only a white T-shirt skimming the bottom of her underwear.” (186). Eric, the boy she tries to impress uses the same strategy as he is described to have “followed her shirtless, in his boxer shorts” (226). These choices of clothing indicate that both characters try to focus the attention to their appearance and experiment with both their own, and societal limits. This is a rather truthful depiction of many teenager’s reality and seems to be very relatable to them. For Bee this experimenting with the limits of ‘acceptability’ at first is described as uncomfortable and then ends up being shameful.

At this point it is important to note that while feeling uncomfortable in a certain piece of clothing or changing one’s mind about it, even while wearing it, is a completely normal thing, shame is often linked to feelings of guilt, which should not derive from a choice in clothing. Also, in reality certain types of clothing, like very short skirts or very low-cut tops, are closely linked to a sense of shame and lead to pigeonholing. Clothing should never be linked to shame and cannot not be used to ascribe certain traits to its wearers, deduce their consent to anything or make accusations based on it. It is an important part of adolescence to figure out one’s style, one’s limits and one’s boundaries and exploring or even breaking them should not result in shame but should be seen as a part of growing up.

Bee at first does not even think about whether going out just in a bra is acceptable or appropriate, but later on “suddenly felt exposed in her running bra” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 92). This uncomfortable feeling of

exposure arises when the focus is no longer on her appearance and she no longer tries to appeal to Eric on a superficial level, but she opens up and talks about her innermost feelings and personal experiences instead. What first made her feel strong and attractive, the next moment makes her feel vulnerable. As stated above, this describes perfectly how people can change their mind over a piece of clothing according to the environment, the situation, or simply their state of mind. This shows also how clothing can be used and is used by the girls to cover or distract from their true selves and their feelings.

Lena, too, feels uncomfortable in her clothes when they are wet and stick to her body, as it exposes her. “[B]etween pond water and sweat [her shirt] was stuck to her body almost obscenely (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 121). She uses her clothes as a protection from other people’s looks at her body and tries to conceal her beauty with clothes that distract from it in order to stress her other qualities. Here, too, one can see how Lena tries to redirect people’s attention to her other features. However, her description throughout the book, remains highly superficial and focused on her appearance.

Another aspect in relation to clothing choices are gender expectations. Bee, who is almost always dressed in a sporty way according to her lifestyle, suddenly wishes to wear girly clothes in order to appeal to Eric. Even though it does not fit her own personal style, she feels a strong need to dress in a girly way in order to meet the expectations men have according to her. In the beginning of the novel, she is described normally wearing practical clothes as she “never did care much about how she looked” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 32). However, later on she tries to impress by changing her personal style.

“Bridget borrowed a skirt from Diana, who was almost as tall as she was. It was annoying that Bridget hadn’t thought to bring clothes that didn’t make her look like a boy.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 132)

She even specifies what she wishes to wear and what in her opinion would make her look more like a girl and, therefore, more appealing to the opposite sex. She talks about “tank tops and [...] sundresses [...], [a two-piece] bathing suit [...] and skirts [...] the short pink one and the turquoise one” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 136). This shows how a specific image of what girls should wear exists in the young girl’s mind. Even though it never bothered her before, in order to attract a man/boy, she is willing to change her style by pretending to be someone she is not. This normalizes and reproduces the idea that in order to please someone it is not only is it okay, but even necessary to change oneself.

The ‘accepted’ choices in clothing are also highly age-sensitive. A limited variety of garments, and its specific features like color, fabric, length or style, seem to be appropriate for each age group. On the one hand, there are expectations towards young girls and boys to dress in a specific way, following the newest fashion trends and usually dressing in a rather daring way. On the other hand, older men and women are expected to be wearing clothes that fit their specific age group, usually in a more neat or sophisticated way and without exhibiting any body parts that according to general norms should be hidden. This topic is of great importance also in the “Sisterhood” series, as

“Carmen thought it was frankly embarrassing for a woman over forty with two teenage children to wear a big puffy white thing at her wedding.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 175)

Carmen, referring to her stepmother, directly and clearly mirrors societal expectations with regard to clothing. According to these norms, a woman over a certain age should neither engage with too bold styles, nor should she wear clothes that display too much of her body. The latter becomes clear in the following passage when Lydia’s wedding dress is described as “fitted, and the cap sleeves showed a whole lot of over-forty arm”

(Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 176). Additionally, Carmen directly addresses her several times with critical statements like “And you should wear long sleeves.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 177) or “Lydia, your wedding dress makes your arms look fat” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 239). There is a strong aversion between the two female characters. However, Carmen’s view also reflects commonly shared norms and standards for clothing.

In addition, there are common standards about clothing choices not only with regard to age but also to body shape. According to standard societal views one should dress in a manner that fits one’s body shape. This is a hard task especially for teenagers, as they often follow fashion trends, which usually are made for the ideal body shape and, therefore, exclude a vast number of girls, who can either ignore those standards or refrain from wearing most of it. In addition, it can be hard for teenagers struggling with self-acceptance to wear the same or similar clothes as their peers as this leads to constant comparisons between them. For example, when Carmen tries on the same dress as her stepsister because she is supposed to wear it at her dad’s wedding it is stated that “pulling the identical, stiff shiny too-small dress over her damp skin was miserable and humiliating” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 176). Carmen feels highly uncomfortable and

“She knew she looked absolutely awful in the dress. She was part Bourbon Street whore and part Latina first-communion spectacle” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 175)

In this case, again many dismissive comments like “I’m not sure I have enough fabric” (176), “Usually a roughly constructed prototype works as a starting point” (175ff) or “We’ll need to let that out too” (176) can be found, which reflect standard societal norms for clothing.

Lastly, clothes are also used as an indicator of someone's intentions. There are rules for dressing according to specific situations inherent in the novels. When Carmen has a date, she immediately deduces from the boy's choice in clothing his interest in her ("He was wearing a gray button-down shirt and nice jeans. Which meant he liked her more than if he'd just worn a T-shirt" (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 33)). This suggests that by choosing the "wrong" clothes one can easily give a wrong impression of one's intentions.

#### **4.1.8 Racial differences in the notion of beauty**

The four protagonists in the *Sisterhood* series do all have different ethnic and religious background. Tibby's family is American and belongs to the non-conformist movement, Carmen has a Puerto Rican mother, Bridget is Dutch-American and Lena is of Greek heritage. At first glance, this might seem to indicate a positive promotion of multiculturalism and equality among the different races. However, throughout the novel there are several comments and statements of the characters that sometimes point towards a different direction.

Carmen, half Puerto Rican, is constantly reminded of her different looks. For example, when she meets Krista, her step sister, who only knew Carmen's father up to that point, and, therefore, probably does not know about Carmen's Puerto Rican background, Carmen gets immediately labeled as different, or at least as different from what was expected.

"You don't look at all like I was imagining?' Carmen swallowed a big bite without chewing. This didn't help. She cleared her throat. 'You mean, I look Puerto Rican?' She levelled Krista with a stare. Krista tittered and then backtracked. 'No, I just meant. . . you know . . . you have, like, dark eyes and dark wavy hair?' *And dark skin and a big butt?* Carmen felt like adding." (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 85)

Carmen's step mother also makes some comments about her differentness, like for example "It's just that you . . . you must take after your mother," (175), by which Carmen gets very annoyed and replies "I do, [...] [m]y mother is Puerto Rican. She speaks with an accent. She says a rosary" (175).

This difference, which derives from her lineage and especially being constantly reminded of it, becomes a burden for her, as she cannot embrace her unique appearance, but instead suffers because of her differentness. She

"inherited her backside directly from the Puerto Rican half of the family. It was very nicely shaped, and most days she felt proud of it, but here with these pants and her three little-assed friends, she didn't feel like standing out like the big fatso." (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 263)

Carmen often does not have the feeling to fit in, whether she is with her father and his new family or with her friends. Her heritage makes her different from the others and causes a feeling of not belonging to the others in her. Once she even directly states that she does not fit in. When she is asked why she thinks that is, she replies: "Because I'm Puerto Rican. I have a big butt." (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 248). She even thinks that the physical features she inherited from her Puerto Rican mother are conceived in a negative way by the people around her, who in her opinion are normal.

"She couldn't help feeling impressed by Lydia letting her fairy-tale wedding pictures be mucked up by a dark-skinned girl in a pair of blue jeans." (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 296)

This reinforces racist views on different skin colors and physical appearance. Assuming that a white all-American family does not want dark-skinned people in their family is a thought, which is not further reflected in the novel. In no way is this behavior critically treated in the novel, which just normalizes it. Carmen feels inferior to the others because of her racial background and this feeling leads to a kind of repulsion of her heritage and the strong wish to assimilate with the others, which goes as far as

looking desperately for similarities with her all-American father and foregrounding them whenever possible, like for example her height or her aptitude for math.

Lena, just like Carmen, has a non-American racial background. She, however, with the progressing of the story becomes more and more proud of her ethnical heritage. Lena has a petite and delicate nose. Even though, at least for women, having a rather small nose is normally considered to be more attractive than a big nose, Lena wishes to share the big Greek nose with the other members of her family. Again, there is a wish to be similar to a group of persons, in this case, however, to her family. Therefore, Lena dismisses a standardized beauty ideal in favor of being similar to her relatives and to show her heritage.

“As she looked at Bapi, she recognized some of her own features. The nose, for instance. Almost everybody else in the family had the famous Kaligaris nose – her father, her aunt, Effie. The big, prominent nose gave character to all who wore it. Of course, her mother had a different nose – a Patmos nose – but even that was sufficiently distinctive. Lena’s nose was small, delicate, characterless. She’d always wondered where she’d gotten it, but now she saw it right in the middle of Bapi’s face. Did that mean that she had the true Kaligaris nose? Since she was small, she’d secretly wished she had the big family nose. Now that she saw where she got hers, she liked it a little better” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 97f)

In this passage her nose is also described as characterless. This indicates that a nose, like other bodily features, should not only enter within the limits of certain beauty standards – i.e. not too big, not too small, not too prominent, etc. -, but also should it somehow implicate character and be unique. For Lena, however, the sense of belonging, seems to be more important than matching the current beauty ideals on all levels. It might, however, be easier for a person fully corresponding to the standards of beauty, to be willing to alter one single aspect of her appearance in order to gain a more profound sense of belonging to her family in return.

#### **4.1.9 Beauty and food**

In the novel, there are several statements made about food. Often food intake is closely linked to the inner state of the characters and to their self-confidence. When the girls feel good about themselves and beautiful, they do not seem to mind eating, and not even overeating. However, when they feel self-conscious and insecure, they immediately develop negative feelings and even aversions for food.

Bridget's story exhibits most connections between food and her inner state of mind. In the beginning of the novel, she feels very comfortable in her skinny body and she has a good appetite. At the camp, she always eats very big portions of food. For example, for breakfast she is described to take "three boxes of Froot Loops, two cartons of milk, and [a] banana" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 140). However, when her mood changes towards the end of her stay at the camp and she becomes rather depressed, she also does not want to eat anymore. She refuses almost every kind of food offered to her. When her friends ask her if they can bring her some food back to their small cabin, at first, she invents excuses and tells them that she will join them in some time. (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 237) Her friends start to worry about her and keep asking. One of her friends states that she "[has] never seen [her] miss a meal" (238).

"Can I bring you something? You must be starving.' Bridget had earned her reputation as a rapacious eater. But she wasn't hungry. She shook her head. " (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*) 2559

When her friends keep insisting, she finally decides to eat something, even though she does not feel like it.

"She went to dinner with them the next night, just because she was sick of them clucking around her and bringing back care packages. There was a pile of rotting food under her bed" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 290)



These passages show that for Bridget food intake is closely connected to her internal balance. When she is happy and feels good about her appearance, she naturally consumes the right amount of food without even thinking or worrying about it. However, when she feels self-conscious or sad, her gut instinct seems to be non-functional. She does not listen to her own body and does not follow or conceive its natural cues which regulate food intake. Bridget does not want to eat and even loses weight.

Carmen is described to have the same problem with food intake like Bridget. When she refuses to eat dinner with her father's new family, she states that "[she] eat[s] when [she's] happy" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 199), which suggests the same behavioral pattern Bridget adopted.

"She'd laid out four possible snacks on the kitchen table. A tangerine, a bag of Goldfish crackers, a hunk of cheddar cheese, a bag of dried apricots. The theme tonight was orange. Not one thing she'd put in her mouth had tasted good in the almost two weeks since she'd been home from South Carolina. She had hardly eaten a bite of dinner, and now she was hungry" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 292)

In this passage it becomes clear that Carmen, not feeling good about her personal situation with her family, similar to Bridget, loses her appetite because of her shaken mental state. For Carmen food intake becomes just a practical activity with the only scope of allowing her body to function, without any pleasure linked to it.

Tibby has a very strange relationship with food, too. She connects food with certain memories and, therefore, cannot eat without having to think about the food's equivalents in her head. Eating becomes a compulsive action for her when she is overwhelmed by her feelings and a difficult situation. When she feels sad and depressed, she even develops signs of bulimia nervosa.

"First Tibby brought up the box of Entenmann's crumb donuts, but then the crumbs reminded her of rodent pellets, so she ran back to the kitchen and shoved them into the back of the cabinet. Then she thought of ice cream, but she

didn't want to go where the ice cream was. Instead she grabbed a box of dinosaur fruit snacks – Nicky's favorite – and brought them upstairs. Her eyes fixed on Ricki Lake, she systematically chewed through eight packages of garish gummy dinosaurs, tossing eight silvery wrappers on the floor. For *Jerry Springer* she drank two liters of ginger ale. After that she threw up in fizzy Technicolor.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 268)

She continues to eat because of her bad mood and her feelings of sadness and despair. This shows that she, too, is not always able to naturally regulate her food consumption in a healthy and balanced way. Instead, she either cannot eat anything at all or eats too much.

Even though Lena does not seem to have any issues with food intake, when she drinks a glass of wine at a village fair in Oia it makes her „feel tired and sad“ (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 277), which shows how food, or in this case a drink, can influence her mood.

Food choices are also mentioned several times and have great significance in the novels. In several passages, norms about making the right food choices in specific situations are conveyed. For example, it seems to be highly important to make the right choice when it comes to ordering food on a date.

“Bee would have ordered a huge bowl of spaghetti. She wouldn't care if she had noodles hanging out her mouth like tentacles. Bee didn't subscribe to the list of acceptable date foods. Lena did. She would have ordered something neat. A salad, maybe. A neat salad. Tibby would have ordered something challenging, like octopus. She would challenge her date with octopus but she wouldn't order something that would end up between her teeth and cause true discomfort. [...] ‘Sautéed breast of chicken,’ Carmen said to the darkly freckled waiter [...]. Chicken was safe and boring.” (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 36)

This shows how the girls not only have to deal with their own struggles and discomfort related to food, but also worry about how their food choices might influence the way others see them. Therefore, it is even harder for them to develop a healthy relationship with food.

When it comes to boys, a muscular build is described as most appealing. This has to do, among other factors, also with food intake. A boy, who is „both skinny and doughy at the same time“ (164) is called a loser. This shows that for the male characters neither being skinny, nor being doughy is in option if they want to appeal to the opposite sex, and especially not being both at the same time.

Food choices are important also for the male characters in the novels.

“I’ll have a burger. Medium rare.’ He handed in his menu. ‘Thanks’. Very no-nonsense and masculine. It probably would have bothered her if he’d ordered something girlish and trendy, like a wrap.” (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 37)

This shows that there are certain expectations towards men for what to order and eat in public. This certainly has to do with a man’s ideal characteristics, masculinity being one of the most important ones, but is also linked to the beauty ideal for men, which is, as stated above, muscular and neither skinny, nor doughy. As meat consumption is often associated with building muscle, it is obvious why certain choices are considered to be more appropriate for men. A salad, or a wrap, on the other hand, girly options, are associated more with controlling one’s calorie intake and, therefore, with a skinny body.

#### **4.1.10 Beauty and Identity**

All the characters are portrayed as being highly self-conscious. Despite being described as being very attractive, and some of them even being aware of their especially outstanding features, they do not feel comfortable in their own bodies.

This inhibition becomes clear, for example, when Lena, who throughout the book is always described as highly beautiful and as having an ideal body, wants to go skinny-dipping but does not feel comfortable putting off her clothes even when she is all alone in a remote area, because she is “[s]hy even with herself” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 118). Her physical appearance is highly important to

her, but she is not confident with talking about how she looks. She also does not appreciate others defining her through her body and talking about her beauty. For instance it is said that “[s]he’d never trusted a boy to like her for something other than how she looked” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 307). Another example of her being uncomfortable when confronted with her own beauty is this:

“Lena fiddled with the waistband. She was never comfortable talking about the way she looked” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 17)

However, she puts so much weight on her looks as to create her own identity almost exclusively through her body instead of other qualities. Sometimes she even seems to take advantage of the fact that others only see her beauty, as she “usually counted on boys being nervous around her so she could claim the natural upper hand” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 303).

Another passage in which it becomes clear that her identity is based on appearance is when she looks in the mirror after the fight between her grandfather and Kostos’ grandfather, which she herself caused. At this point things change for her. She feels guilty and she realizes her fault. It seems as if, for the first time, real emotions and character features surface through her skin. As she deals with her feelings of guilt and confusion “[s]he put her face right up to the mirror. *Is that really me?*” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 151). This seems to indicate that she fails to identify with her mirror image, which commonly gave her a sense of self-identity. At this point, her beauty is incompatible with how she feels about herself and she is not able to identify with what she sees in the mirror. Further, it is written that Lena “felt like her looks were fake bait, seeming to offer a bridge to people, which she couldn’t easily cross” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 55), which also indicates her failure to identify with her own body.

This problematic relationship between her beauty and the creation of her own identity clearly shows that even though she defines herself almost exclusively by means of her appearance and her beauty, at the same time it upsets her if others define her the same way. She would like to be seen as something more than her beauty but is afraid that she has nothing more to offer. This causes her to remain on a superficial level of her own identity creation until the end of the first novel, where it seems that the development of her personality is brought lightly forward.

Not only Lena, but also the other characters identify a lot through their bodies and put a lot of importance on their looks. Carmen, for example, is afraid to try on the pants at first because

“she wasn’t really chubby but [...] with these pants and her three little-assed friends, she didn’t feel like standing out like the big fatso” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 19).

In this passage it becomes evident that her outer appearance is highly important to Carmen. Even though she is proud of the bodily features she inherited from her Puerto Rican mother, she hesitates to put on the pants, because she is worried about her weight. She lacks self-confidence not only in front of her closest friends, but also in front of herself. When she tries on a dress, which does not suit her well, she is too embarrassed to look in the mirror.

“She couldn’t look at herself in the mirror. She didn’t want the picture living in her memory for the rest of her life” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 176).

Bridget, who defines herself a lot through her appearance and her body weight, especially her most prominent feature, her long blond hair, feels deprived of her self-identity and lacks her typical self-confidence when she cannot rely on her external beauty.

“She felt oddly self-conscious about her appearance. She hadn’t washed her hair this morning, so it probably looked kind of greasy at the top. Her nose was pink from sunburn” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 203).

In the *Second Summer of the Sisterhood* the readers learn immediately that Bee has changed completely over the past year. This inner change she underwent is demonstrated especially through her weight gain, but also through the alteration of other external factors, she identified with before.

“If a person hadn’t seen Bee in a year, they might not have recognized her sitting there. She wasn’t blond and she wasn’t thin and she wasn’t moving. She had tried to dye her hair really dark, but the dye she’d used had barely conquered the famous yellow struggling underneath. Bee was normally so thin and muscled that the fifteen or so pounds she’d gained over the winter and spring sat heavily and obviously on her arms and legs and torso. It almost looked like her body wasn’t willing to incorporate the extra fat. It just let it sit there, right on the surface, hoping it would go away soon. Tibby couldn’t help thinking that what Bee’s mind wanted and what her body wanted were two different things. “I may have lost her,” Bee said solemnly. “Lost who?” Tibby asked looking up from the mess. “Myself.” Bee bounced one heel against a closed drawer.” (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 11f)

This passage clearly demonstrates that Bridget’s identity was built on her appearance. She even has the feeling that she lost herself, because she lost the way she looked like before. Even though she clearly is not overweight, as she was very thin before and 15 pounds would not make her obese, she feels fat. After the traumatic experiences of the first summer, Bee does not feel comfortable in her body anymore and tries to become a different person. By covering her hair with dark dye she tried to conceal her past and who she had been. However, the fact that her blond hair comes through anyway shows that underneath all the physical changes she is still the same person even if she tries to define herself through other features in order to change her identity.

She tries to conceal her real self and protect herself from her own thoughts and actions. She is full of shame and feels as if she has lost her own identity.

“But as she looked longer in the mirror. Bridget saw something different. She saw protection. She had a blanket of fat on her body. She had a coat of pigment on her hair. She had the cover of a lie if she wanted it. She didn’t look like Bree Vreeland. Who said she had to be her?” (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 21)

Bree clearly tries to define herself through her new appearance, just like she defined herself through her old appearance before. She acts as if her 'shell' is the only thing that constitutes her character, as if what is inside does not matter at all. She feels protected by the extra fat and the different looks. She feels protected from her old self and from her true identity. By covering up the features that before defined her, she tries to escape her past and possible traumas. She decides to become a more plain, average girl, who does not get boys' attention, as she accuses her looks to have caused her past suffering.

"He looked at her and though her. She wasn't worried about him recognizing her. Back then she'd been skinny, yellow-haired, and full of joy. Now she was heavy, muddy-haired, and full of care. She might as well be a different person. It was a relief, in a way. Sometimes it felt like a relief to be invisible." (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 70)

It seems like all of the girls feel like a different person and lose their connection to themselves once they struggle with a problem in their lives. They look in the mirror when they feel shaken or lost and fail to recognize themselves, as their identity solely exists as the superficial, most appealing image possible of themselves.

All of the girls are highly concerned with their weight, which is evident also in the rules they make up for wearing the pants.

"You must never say the word 'phat' while wearing the Pants. You must also never think to yourself, 'I am fat' while wearing the Pants (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 26)

This rule shows that they know how important it is to accept oneself the way one is, that language and thoughts do have a great impact on how they feel about themselves and that they probably would like to be more confident in their own bodies. However, throughout the storyline they put a lot of importance on their own physical features, which in no way seem to deviate strongly from the average, but are perfectly normal, like having "little darts for breasts" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*

32), being slightly below or above average height or having a slightly bigger nose than others.

Further, the main characters seem to use physical traits as indicators of the character of a person. For instance, “Lena preferred plain guys to cute ones, but even the plain ones disappointed her” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 70). This suggests that young men, who are not cute, typically do not disappoint girls for their lack of attractiveness and that their character traits are usually more honorable than those of better-looking boys.

Good looks are also associated with certain desirable practices, lifestyles, and a certain degree of popularity, as for example Tucker, a boy described as highly handsome by Tibby, according to her is “probably hanging at the Nine Thirty Club all night” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 128f).

#### **4.1.11 Beauty as the sole foundation of love**

Throughout the novel it is suggested that love is highly superficial. Beauty appears to be the only reason for the characters to fall in love with someone. In various parts the aesthetic aspect is foregrounded and characters are reduced to their appearance, which makes them appealing to others. None of the characters feels attracted to another one because of their intelligence, wit or sensitivity. The message conveyed is that beauty is the only reason there is to be interested in someone and, therefore, the sole foundation of love. Accordingly, all love stories in the book are built on external looks.

Firstly, Lena’s interest in Kostos is caused only by his appearance. Before Lena meets Kostos for the first time she does not seem to be interested in all the stories about his greatness. Her sister Effie tries to convince her.

“Lena, I’m not kidding; you’ve got to see him.’ ‘Why?’ Effie leaned forward on her elbows. ‘I know you’d think he’d be this little . . . Grandma’s boy, but Lena, he is . . . he is . . .’ [...] ‘He’s what?’ ‘He’s [...] Stupendous,’ Effie declared. (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 68f)



When Lena, still before meeting Kostos declares that she is not looking for a relationship, Effie immediately asks her if she can have him instead. Lena reminds Effie of her boyfriend, but she seems to be rather unenthused by that.

“Effie, *yes*. Does it matter that you already have a boyfriend?’ ‘It did until I saw Kostos.’ ‘He’s that great, huh?’ ‘You’ll see.’ (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 69)

This suggests that beauty stands above all other traits a person has and all other factors in a relationship. If only seeing a highly attractive boy makes Effie question her relationship and she is immediately tempted to give it up, the values conveyed here are highly superficial.

Lena, still doubting Kostos’ irresistibility assumes that she will not share the view of her family members.

“It was handy to have Kostos built up so much. When she saw him, he would certainly be disappointing. So Kostos wasn’t disappointing. He was tall. He looked more like a man than a boy; he looked at least eighteen. He was good-looking enough to make Lena suspicious.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 69f)

This passage clearly shows how she immediately becomes interested in him because of his outstanding beauty. He conforms completely to the standard of what is considered beautiful and, therefore, Lena feels instantly attracted to him. With the progressing of the story and as she is continuously surrounded by him and his beauty, she becomes more and more interested and eventually starts a relationship with him.

Bridget’s love story with Eric similarly is built on external beauty. When she first sees him, she carefully examines his build and his physical features. He is described as “beautiful” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 75) and “every kind of hot” (75). She immediately states that she is in love, even before having a conversation with him. (101) This shows the strong effect of his beauty on her. Not only does she state that she feels attracted to him, she even feels love for a person, she does not know,

basing it only on his appearance. When her friends warn her about trying to attract Eric, because of his part in the camp and the lack of appropriateness of a possible relationship between the two, she just refers to his beauty in order to justify her plans and feelings.

“He probably has a girlfriend in New York,” a girl named Rosie said. “We’ll see about that,” Bridget said provocatively. Diana shoved her elbow. “Bridget, you’re insane.” Emily was shaking her head. “Give it up. You’ll get in huge trouble.” [...] }Have you taken one *look* at the guy?” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 115)

She somehow seems to enjoy his unavailability and tries everything in order to attract him. She tries to impress him by wearing very displaying clothes, showing him her sportiness and flirting on every possible occasion. Her desperateness for his body becomes evident when she writes to one of her friends “I WANT him. Did I mention that? I know you are above your hormones, but some of us can’t help ourselves. (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 152). There is a high physical attraction between Bridget and Eric, which she tries to pursue in every possible way. It is new to her and she really wants to give in to this attraction based on physical appearance.

“But for Eric, her body felt something else. Something bigger and craggier and stormier than she had glimpsed before. Her body wanted his in a painful, distinct, demanding way, but she wasn’t even exactly sure what or how much it was asking for.” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 207)

Eventually, however, in Bridget’s case there is a lesson learned. By relying only on her physical attraction to Eric and ultimately doing things with him, for which she is not ready, she falls into a depression. She realizes that Eric was not the right person for her, as she did not even know him and in the end of the book she is hurt and broken from letting herself get involved with him.

“Bridget had seen too many movies. She hadn’t imagined her encounter with Eric would be . . . personal. She thought it would be a jaunt. An adventure to

brag to her friends about. She expected to feel powerful. In the end she didn't. She felt like she'd scrubbed her heart with SOS pads." (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 236)

Bridget is described to have continually attained boys' attention throughout her teenage years. This is said to have been caused especially by her outstanding external features. Not only is she described as not being beautiful anymore when she gains some weight and changes hair color and other external features, but also does she not seem to have any effect on boys anymore.

"Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen Bridget had attracted more wolf whistles and phone numbers and corny pickup lines than she could count. It wasn't because she was – had been – beautiful. Lena was beautiful, truly and uniquely, and boys mostly looked scared when she passed by. It was that Bridget had been thin and striking and outgoing, and, of course, she'd had the hair." (Brashares, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* 69)

Even though also her outgoing character is mentioned here as a reason for which Bridget was popular among the male sex, the focus clearly lies on her appearance. Especially her thin body, as an ideal, which boys look for in women and girls, is highlighted.

Tibby's love story, too, though not being very elaborated, is based on external appearance. When she is asked by her friend Baily what she likes about Tucker she simply replies in a rather annoyed way "Look at him" (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 129). Later on in the book she also states that he is "one of the best-looking guys [she's] ever seen in person" (181). This clearly shows that also Tibby's interest in Tucker only derives from his appearance and is not based on any other feature.

#### **4.1.12 Philosophical notions on beauty**

Throughout the novel there are also some philosophical statements about beauty.

“She perched on her windowsill, gazing at the lurid sun soaking into the Caldera, trying to appreciate it even though she couldn’t have it. Why did she always feel she had to *do* something in the face of beauty?” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 53)

This passage seems to refer to the hardness of simply enjoying the presence of beauty, but somehow having a constant need to actively engage with it. In Lena’s case, she normally draws beautiful landscapes, as this is the only way she can enjoy it. Similarly, she also draws Kostos and only then she can let her feelings out. This non-ability of merely taking pleasure in something beautiful without actively having to do something for it can be transferred to our society. A great number of people might feel that in order to deserve something they have to work for it. From an early age, children are taught that good things do not come for free and that even if at first glance something does not seem to require anything in return, eventually there will be expectations to compensate for it. This is part of our meritocracy.

Accordingly, in order to deserve something beautiful, like a beautiful person on one’s side or being at a beautiful place, one has to earn it. This thought is also present in other parts of the novel, for example when Tibby, not considering herself as beautiful, does not seem to think she deserves a handsome boy like Tucker.

Another philosophical concept about beauty present in the novel is the non-appreciation of beauty in the case one is constantly surrounded by it.

“‘I know it’s beautiful here,’ Kostos said thoughtfully, looking out over the glittering water. ‘But I can hardly see it. These are the only views I know.’” (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 100)

This passage suggests that beauty somehow loses its effect when it is not something temporary, but constant. Even though being conscious about the aesthetic appeal something or someone has objectively on most people, one cannot appreciate it the same way when it becomes an ordinary every-day part of one’s life. In Kostos’ case, it is the landscape in Oia, his Greek hometown, which he knows to be very beautiful, but

fails to see in the same way as people who are not used to it. Many times, it is the fact that a person seems to be out of reach that makes him or her so attractive to others. Once the person gets closer, people tend to get used to their beauty.

This novel normalizes not only a meritocratic view, but also the non-appreciation of something beautiful in the case of having it as a constant part of one's life. What should rather be suggested is to enjoy beauty without feeling the pressure of having to earn it and to appreciate it even if one is used to it.

These principles can be applied to small things in one's life, but also to relationships. Appreciating the other person without taking him or her for granted and enjoying the other's presence and beautiful aspects of a relationship and of a person without feeling obliged to do something for it, but rather wanting to, are important building blocks of a good relationship. Therefore, it would be beneficial for teenagers to be exposed to positive messages about beauty, which help them appreciate in their own lives and relationships. Also, the subjective factor of beauty is not dealt with. It could be beneficial to stress the fact that beauty is not something completely objective, but that each person has their own understanding of beauty, that it can take time for a person to notice it and that no one, including themselves, is completely flawless in all ways, just like no one is completely flawed, which means that beauty can be found everywhere, if one only opens one's eyes.

However, there is also a positive message in the novel. It comes from Effie, Lena's little sister, who is a very direct character who seems to always speak her mind. When she advises her sister to come clear about her feelings for Kostos, she does not reassure her by saying that everything will turn out well or that he certainly will feel the same for her (because of her beauty). Instead, she tells her that that's what being brave is about (Brashares, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* 284). This message is valuable for teenagers, as braveness is a quality they need in order to face certain stages

and situations in their lives, and especially in order to find and fight for love. Taking a risk sometimes is the only way to reach one's goals and fulfill one's dreams, or at least to have the possibility to do so. It also means being brave enough to show one's true self, being brave enough to admit to finding someone or something beautiful even if the person or object deviates from beauty standards and being brave enough to keep looking for beauty in all places, not just on the outside, but also on the inside, of oneself and others.

## 4.2 Princess Diaries

The *Princess Diaries* is a novel written by Meg Cabot in 2000 and is the first of a series of epistolary books, which were published between 2000 and 2015. The books are very popular especially among teenage girls and often used in school settings. The first novel was also made into a movie, which was very successful.

The novel tells the story of a girl who finds out that she is the princess of her father's native country, which changes her life drastically. While she is struggling with the problems of a normal teenage girl, she also has to deal with her new tasks as a princess. Those, however, can be understood in a metaphoric way, and can also stand for the process of growing up, and especially becoming a woman and dealing with society's expectations towards women or teenage girls, which differ from those towards young kids.

The novel, similarly to *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, contains many messages about friendship and loyalty and addresses various topics, which are of great interest for the age group the novel is aimed at. The novel deals with the typical problems of an adolescent girl, such as falling in love, not accepting oneself, being highly self-conscious and difficulties regarding the parent-child relationship, which makes it highly relatable to young girls.

The *Princess Diaries* also contain a great number of messages about beauty, and a highly gender-specific view about how women and girls should look like and behave in order to fit into our society.

In the following section the first novel of the *Princess* series will be analyzed in greater detail in order to highlight the concepts and values present in the books.

#### **4.2.1 Plot and character description**

The novel spans 27 days in the life of its main character Mia Thermopolis. Mia is a 14-year-old girl, who lives in New York with her mother Helen, a liberal artist. She attends high school and sees herself as a loser, because she is not popular and does not fit the common beauty ideal. She and her best friend Lilly Moscovitz are part of a clique formed by rather unpopular average girls in their school. Mia is a vegetarian and a natural girl, who prefers not to wear make-up and to live in harmony with the environment in order to preserve the planet and its animals.

Mia is highly insecure of herself and struggles with the normal range of problems of a teenage girl, when she finds out that she is the princess and heir to Genovia. Her father, who is no longer together with her mother, is the Prince of Genovia and he decided to introduce her into her royal duties, as he cannot have any more children due to testicular cancer. With the help of her grandmother, Mia, the only heir to the throne, shall be transformed into a princess, by changing not only her behavior and manners, but also her appearance. She is expected to conform to the expectations they have towards her and learn her royal duties.

In the meantime, Mia, who wants to keep her new status as a princess a secret from her peers and the public, also has to deal with schoolwork and the problems of growing up. She is interested in a boy in her school, Josh Richter, who is a senior. He, however, does not seem to show any interest in her until she is officially outed as a princess. Additionally, she has a big fight with her best friend Lilly, because she does not accept Mia's transformation. At the school dance, Mia finally finds out the truth about Josh's intentions and makes up with her best friend. She also finally realizes that Josh Richter's beauty does not make him a good person, and that Michael, Lilly's brother, even though not being as attractive as Josh, is the better choice for her.



Mia's mother is constantly trying to encourage her and to make her feel accepted and loved for who she is. She is described as a very attractive woman and she is in a relationship with one of Mia's teachers.

On the one hand, there is her grandmother, who wants Mia's transformation to be immediate, and on the other hand there are society's expectations towards her to gradually become a princess and leave her childish behavior and looks behind.

#### **4.2.2 Stereotypical representations and generalizations**

The novel's main character, Mia, is described in a more elaborated way when compared to the character description in "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants", as her character traits are much more evident, and the readers have much more information about her aside from her looks. However, when it comes to her appearance, she is reduced to few characteristics, which are almost exclusively described as deficient.

Most commonly she is categorized as being a freak. She states in one of her first diary entries that she is "practically the biggest freak in the entire school" (Cabot 7). Her freakishness is justified by the few physical features by which she is repeatedly described in the novel. Firstly, she is not happy with her height. She is five foot nine (Cabot 7) and "the tallest girl in [her] class (16). Five foot nine, which roughly equals 175cm, however, does not seem to be particularly tall at all. Secondly, her freakishness is also caused by her lack of dates or lack of boys showing interest in her. She normally stays at home on weekends or spends the evenings with her best friend Lilly. She has never been asked out on a date in her life (121) and she is convinced that "[n]o boy will ever ask [her] out. Ever." (127). At the age of 14, this, too does not seem very unusual, as she just entered her teenage years. Thirdly, her hair causes her a lot of sorrow, as in the beginning it "sticks out" (65), and "isn't curly or straight, it's sort of triangular"(36) and "it isn't blonde or brunette, it's in the middle, the sort of color they call mouse brown, or dishwater blonde" (36) and later on after her makeover it "is too short" (98).

Other features causing her freakishness are her feet, which are too big (xv) and “look like skis” (36), her big mouth (36) and above all her flat chest (7), to which I will come back in another section. She is even described as a “fashion emergency” (94).

From this summary of her so-called ‘flaws’ one can immediately notice that she is a completely normal 14-year-old girl and has no really uncommon or strange features or problems. In her own head these completely normal concerns and insecurities might make her so-called flaws feel bigger than they actually are make her feel like she is totally different from everyone else.

Lana, who can be defined as Mia’s enemy, is depicted highly unilaterally. She is the pretty, popular and mean girl in the story and descriptions of her are limited to her long blonde hair (10), which is also referred to as “Marcia Brady” hair (71) and her big chest (116).

Through her dismissive comments one can easily identify the kind of personality type she represents throughout the story. She repeatedly insults Mia by calling her a freak (10) or making negative comments about Mia’s flat chest (“Oh, how sweet. I see we still can’t fit into a bra. Might I suggest Band-Aids?” (22)) or her hair (“Nice hair, Amelia [...] Who are you supposed to be? Tank Girl?” (116); “What do you call this color, anyway? [...] Pus yellow?” (116)). However, with the progressing of the story and the revelation of Mia’s true origin, she becomes suddenly interested in a friendship between them. Mia’s comments in her diary entries are accordingly also rather mean and range from “That lousy hypocrite wants to be friends with me, now that I’m a princess” (139), to “She is such a cow” (49). She clearly has the ‘mean girl’ part in the novel, so she is presumable not the most liked character by the novel’s readers. However, even though she is not nice, often offensive and devious, she still usually obtains what she wants/what 14-year-old girls would want because of her beauty.

Josh is described as being a highly attractive, actually “the best-looking boy in Albert Einstein High School” (10), and “the hottest boy [...] in the whole world (58). Even though he does not display a lot of positive character qualities, he is constantly referred to as being sensitive and sweet. This shows how Mia is blinded by his appearance and automatically links positive character traits to his outward beauty. Often, people assume that outward features reflect the character within a person. Of course this is not always the case, but this also plays a big role on a subconscious level.

Lilly Moscovitz, Mia’s best friend is described as being “short and sort of round and kind of resemble[ing] a pug” (22) with a face that “looks sort of squished” (66). However, she does not care about other people’s opinions on her appearance and laughs about insults directed towards her. She seems to be a very strong character in the novel, as she appears to be almost immune to stereotyping, unfounded jealousy and teenage drama.

When it comes to the description of Mia’s peers in school, there are heavy generalizations made.

“There are only about ten tables in our caff, since we have rotating lunch shifts: there’s the table where I sit with Lilly, and then the jock table, the cheerleader table, the rich kid table, the hip hop table, the druggie table, the drama freak table, the National Honours Society table, the foreign exchange students table, and the table where Tina Hakim Baba sits every day with her bodyguard.” (114)

People are divided into different closed groups and are depicted as very unilateral. It seems that there is only one element by which each of them is categorized and which is the only building block of their identity. There is such superficial pigeonholing that it seems that there could not possibly be an overlap between the groups mentioned above, as if they did not have other interests or characteristics other than the group theme. They are reduced to their most obvious characteristic and, therefore, stereotyping and closed-mindedness is normalized and reinforced.

Another passage which suggests that groups of friends normally are or should be rather homogeneous is the description of Lana's friends, the cheerleaders. All girls in this clique are "really pretty, with long hair and breasts and stuff, like Lana" (157). Both the cheerleader group and the jock group are also described to be "the most beautiful people in Albert Einstein's – maybe even in all Manhattan" (157).

#### **4.2.3 Superficiality**

The Princess Diaries contain a lot of superficial statements about characters and suggest the great importance given to the character's looks and appearance. The protagonist obsesses over certain physical features and in order to be happy and gain self-confidence she needs a transformation. It seems as if for Mia, similarly to many other protagonists in popular novels and movies, realizing her dreams and becoming the person she wants to be, is only possible through a radical outer transformation.

Mia is described as a freak, because of she does not match the contemporary beauty ideal for young girls in certain ways. Characters are reduced to their physical features and romanticized because of them. There are even certain positive character traits attributed to attractive people, like Josh Richter, without any evidence of them being present.

In her diary entries Mia constantly judges others by their looks. She criticizes big nostrils (11), tucked in shirts (119) and other superficial aspects. Similarly, she praises superficial aspects like attractiveness or being a senior (12). A muscled and defined body seems to be the most important aspect of a boy's external looks, as she repeatedly mentions them.

Superficiality is also conveyed by the various lists Mia makes for her diary entries, like "Lilly Moscovitz's List of Hottest Guys" (14) or lists about how she wishes she looked or were (164).

Mia is never happy with her looks, and in every diary entry one can find a comment about appearance. She is highly self-critical, and never satisfied when she looks in the mirror. Only after her transformation she starts to gain self-worth and self-confidence, which shows how dependent she is on her outward appearance. Not only can she not accept herself without her transformation, but also others seem to be more interested in her after her transformation and her popularity rises. Even though Michael might have already liked her from the start, the fact that she can only become the heroine of the novel and be successful when achieving certain beautification goals in order to come as close as possible to a standardized beauty ideal, suggests that a certain amount of beauty, or at least the will to achieve beauty by putting effort in one's appearance, has to be present in order to reach one's goals.

She also connects other girls' success with boys only to their appearance. The fact that her friend Shameeka has a date is, according to Mia, justified by the growth of her chest (66).

Mia's need for a stylist who "takes unfashionable frumpy people [...] and makes them stylish [...] for a living" underlines our society's view on beauty. Consequently, if a person is not gifted with natural beauty, he or she still has the possibility or even responsibility to seek help from a professional whose job it is to make people more beautiful.

"Did I mention that I'm no longer dishwater blonde? No. I'm just plain old blonde, now. And Paolo didn't stop there. Oh, no. I now have fingernails. I am not kidding. For the first time in my life, I have fingernails. They're completely fake, but I have them." (94f)

Mia, in the beginning being strictly against those practices, becomes more and more used to it and starts to take pleasure in them. This goes as far as to even suggesting that a woman she does not even know "needs a good eyebrow waxing" (183), which suggests a change of her inner attitude towards beautification practices. As she undergoes her

outward transformation, she also becomes more superficial to others and expects them to engage in certain practices in order to reach a transformation themselves.

The novel also addresses the aspect of superficiality conveyed through media. The book covers of Tina Hakim Baba's novels always seem to depict a beautiful girl, who is thin and turns out to be the heroine of the book ("the teenage girl had long blonde hair and pretty big breasts for someone with such thin thighs" (114), "It had a cover like the last one, only this time the heroine was a brunette" (131)). This means that also in media present within the novel stereotypical and superficial norms are normalized.

Even though thinking of herself as not being superficial, Mia is highly critical when it comes to other people's appearance. Only sometimes she goes beyond her own superficiality and notices things about other people that are not related to their appearance.

"I mean, Tina Hakim Baba is really, really nice, and no one knows it, because no one ever talks to her, because she isn't thin and she's kind of quiet and she's stuck with a stupid bodyguard." (141)

She admits that before getting to know Tina, which was out of desperation rather than friendliness, she thought of her as a freak. Despite the lesson learned here, that judging a person by one's appearance might lead to misjudgments, there is not a strong message about appreciating a person for what he or she is. The friendship that arises between the two girls is rather depicted as an accident and even though she is her friend, she still makes a rather dismissive comment about her as she thinks it is not fair that even Tina has a date for the Cultural Diversity Dance (115).

#### **4.2.4 Beauty and success**

Another aspect present in the novel is the link between beauty and success. Beautiful people seem to be more successful than unattractive ones. This applies not only to money and work, but also to popularity and romantic success.

That this concept is a rather common belief becomes evident for example from the answer an adolescent girl gives during a conducted interview by Tiggermann et al:

“I think people think ‘oh I have to look like that because they think that they will have a perfect life as well. If I’m beautiful, if I’m attractive, if I’m skinny then everything else in my life has to come up as well, like my school grades will come up, I’ll get a boyfriend, you know I’ll have a great social life” (649)

There are several examples for the connection between beauty and success. Mia firmly believes that by increasing her beauty she will eventually be able to solve all her problems. Even though Mia finds out that a lot of the attention she received after her makeover was highly superficial, she still finds happiness only after her transformation. The book suggests that altering one’s appearance, indeed, can lead to an increase in popularity or attractiveness for the opposite sex and with Mia’s transformation she gradually becomes more and more the person she wants to be and lives the life she wants to live. This uncritical way of representing her transformation could cause readers to think that by changing their looks they might as well be crucial in reaching their goals. While change is natural, and especially during adolescence it is very common to alter one’s looks, the message in the novel is rather that the goal is to change one’s appearance in order to reach maximum equality with one’s peers, instead of changing one’s appearance in line with one’s personal growth and individuality.

Josh Richter, as well as Michael, both described as handsome (even though Michael does not seem to be as attractive as Josh) are highly successful with regard to school and their future seems to be highly promising as they have the possibility to attend one of the best universities in the country (12) and enroll in study programs

which allow them to become very prosperous in the future (“Josh said he was really looking for a degree that would guarantee him a minimum salary of eighty thousand a year” (185)) Josh’s family is also described to be rich, as they have a house with “six bedrooms. On Park Avenue. And there’s a Jacuzzi in the master bedroom” (158).

Mrs. Hakim Baba, who used to be a model, is also described to be very rich. She lives in a big apartment with many employees and she does not work (174). Also the fact that she married a rich man could be an ulterior effect of her beauty on her success in life.

The novel suggests that beauty can facilitate to a great extent one’s occupational success, and in some cases, it can even secure one’s existence, like in the case of modeling or being extraordinarily beautiful.

When it comes to popularity, there also seems to be a close connection between beauty and the number of friends one has. When Josh one day greets Mia,

“Lilly says Josh’s synapses were probably misfiring [...], due to heatstroke or something. [...] Why else, she asked, would the most popular senior in high school say hey to [...] Mia Thermopolis, a lowly freshman?” (8)

This suggests that attractive, rich, popular kids like Josh normally do not interact with girls like Mia, who are neither highly attractive, nor extraordinarily rich (at least in the beginning of the novel). Talking to unpopular kids does not seem to be the norm for popular ones, like Lana Weinberger as she would “tarnish her reputation by being seen with us” (18). This shows how teenagers are under pressure to choose the right friends and interact with the right kids in order not to lower their own level of popularity. As each teenager’s status depends on the value they bring to the group, it is obvious that this value is seen in a highly superficial way and reduced to only making the group more beautiful or more powerful. Other qualities, like helpfulness, empathy, loyalty and honesty are almost completely excluded.



The fact that beauty and power are the most important factors in choosing one's friends in the novel becomes also evident as Lana Weinberger, just like Josh, suddenly shows interest in Mia, when she turns out to be a princess and changes her looks. It shows how popularity is not only based on beauty, but also connected with financial prosperity and reputation. While Mia can debunk Lana's intentions immediately ("I am not even kidding. That lousy hypocrite wants to be friends with me, now that I'm a princess" (139)), she has a harder time figuring out the source of Josh's sudden interest in her. This probably is caused by her own interest in Josh and her strong wish to be seen by him.

#### **4.2.5 Beauty and jealousy**

In Mia's diary entries one can find several negative statements that suggest a certain degree of jealousy. Jealousy is a normal component of every person's, especially teenager's, set of feelings. Especially when it comes to physical appearance, often there are conscious or unconscious feelings of jealousy towards one's peers, who might have more favorable features. For example, even though Lana Weinberger is described as extremely attractive, Mia comments on Josh Richter's bad taste for dating her (14). Lana is continuously described as a cow (49) and as so in love with herself, as to almost "walk right up to her [mirror] reflection and kiss it" (71). Mia is clearly jealous of her chest size as she suspects her to put her cheerleading pom-poms in her bra in order to enhance her bra size (116). Because of her mean character, Lana is also displayed as being a witch and when it comes to choosing parts for a TV transmission, Mia and her friend make fun of Lana.

"I said it was too bad we don't have a real witch. I thought we could get Lana Weinberger to play her, but Lilly said that would be typecasting." (18)

Mia's mean comments clearly derive from her jealousy. By denigrating others and looking for flaws in their appearance and character, she tries to elevate herself in comparison. When it comes to first love and flirtation, jealousy is very common sentiment especially in teenagers. As soon as one starts to be interested romantically in others, one also starts to pay more attention to one's physical appearance and to confront oneself with his or her peers. This inevitably leads to jealousy during these very fragile years of adolescence, which are full of insecurities and self-consciousness. However, there are several ways in which one can deal with this emerging jealousy. Speaking badly of someone and trying to put them down certainly is not a very respectable way to deal with one's jealousy. Even though the inclusion of these practices in the novel might facilitate the readers' identification with its characters and its relatability to their real lives, it is depicted very unilaterally and in no way is it suggested that these dismissive practices can have consequences or could cause harm to the other party involved. It seems as if speaking ill of a person who does the same is not considered a bad action.

Mia is also somehow jealous of her friends, as all of them have a date for the Cultural Diversity Dance while she has not been asked out. Clearly, this kind of jealousy is another kind, but in a certain way she also thinks that the lack of boys' interest in her derives from her aesthetic inferiority compared to her friends', which makes her jealous of them in a certain way.

#### **4.2.6 Notions of the gendered female beauty and male beauty**

The novel's content clearly conveys a picture of how people should look like and behave in order to be considered beautiful and in order to fit into our society's standardized norms of external beauty. There is a great number of comments and observations which indicate a set of norms and standards for beauty.

Especially for women, the book contains a large amount of rules, to which they are expected to adhere. Female characters, who are described as highly beautiful are representing the standardized beauty ideal, which other women should and do aim for. Lana's physical features can be used as a reference for this standard. Her blonde hair (10) is considered to be highly attractive, as Mia is apparently jealous of it. Also Mrs. Hakim Baba, who is described as very beautiful and an ex-model, has 'very blonde' hair (174). The very beautiful girls in Mia's school are described to have long hair and big breasts (157). Mia also refers to her mother as a "total Betty" (64) as she is "way hot as moms go" (64) and justifies this statement by the smaller size of her feet, her normal-sized chest and her long hair.

Further, one can deduce from Mia's self-critical comments what is not considered to be part of the normally desired bodily features. For example, her lack of chest, as well as her height (16) are not considered to be attractive. Additionally, hair that sticks out (65), or does not have a distinct color or shape (36), as well as big feet (64) are not considered as attractive female traits.

For women, it also seems to be almost an obligation to take care of their aesthetic appeal in order to please others. Wearing a dress, high heels, doing one's nails and hair, wearing make-up and pantyhose and waxing certain body parts and engaging in various other beautification practices seems to be expected from women.

Summing up, the novel normalizes and reproduces common expectations towards the physical appearance of women, like body size and shape, hair style and color, clothing and the effort one puts into one's visual identity.

As Mia turns out to be the princess of Genovia her grandmother tries to turn her into a "lady". Many factors are involved in her big makeover which should transform an ordinary girl into a sparkling princess. One can see this transformation also as a metaphor for turning an ordinary girl, maybe still rather looking and behaving like a

child, into a girly and feminine young woman, who fits our society's expectations towards women to have a certain looks and demeanor. Even though the message conveyed in the novel might be a little bit exaggerated, as she is gradually turned into a princess and not only a woman, but it also still somehow reflects the standard ideal for women.

I looked at my face in that big mirror and I was like, *This* is the face of a princess? You should see what I look like. You never saw anyone who looked LESS like a princess than I do. I mean, I have really bad hair, it isn't curly or straight, it's sort of triangular, so I have to wear it really short or I look like a Yield sign. And it isn't blonde or brunette, it's in the middle, the sort of color they call mouse brown, or dishwater blonde. Attractive, huh? And I have a really big mouth and no breasts and feet that look like skis. Lilly says my only attractive feature is my eyes, which are grey, but right then they were all squinty and red-looking, since I was trying not to cry. (36)

This passage shows the problems Mia is struggling with before her transformation. All these features she notices as unfavorable in herself are not unusual, but as already stated above, not considered to be part of the female beauty ideal. She does not seem to be happy with either of her physical features. This is a problem that most teenagers during the stage of finding themselves, share. Learning to accept and to love oneself is a process, which is not easy, and which often requires help and guidance from people who already underwent this development.

At first Mia does not want to be turned into a princess/"beautiful girl", because she does not enjoy engaging in beautification practices in order to change certain features about her appearance.

"I've never been good at girly stuff, you know, like putting on make-up and wearing pantyhose and stuff. I mean, I can *do* it, if I have to but I'd rather not" (39)

She even calls those practices "girly stuff", which suggests that that is what girls are supposed to do. In fact, she feels that having to be a princess and meeting those new expectations towards her looks and behavior is rather a burden than a pleasure ("I'm already deformed, *and* I have to be a princess." (68)). This can be seen as a metaphor

for the expectations, which society sets for young girls when reaching a certain age. Mia also declares that she is “not princess material” (80), which can be seen as a statement about femininity, she cannot identify with at that point. She is not ready to become a woman “overnight” but needs time to grow into her new role. As a part of her longs to be more feminine, another part of her struggles against the change. She seems to be overwhelmed by the suddenness in which these demands on her emerged and does not feel ready to live up to these standards, afraid that she will not be able to fulfill them.

“Well, I for one will not stand for it. There isn’t a single inch of me that hasn’t been pinched, cut, filed, painted, sloughed, blown dry or moisturized. I even have fingernails. But I am not happy. I am not a bit happy. *Grandmère’s* happy. *Grandmère’s* head-over-heels happy about how I look. Because I don’t look a thing like Mia Thermopolis. [...] *She’s turning me into someone else.*” (95)

This passage clearly shows how her quest for beauty overwhelms her. She suddenly starts to follow all the norms and standards society sets for woman, but immediately notices that they do not make her feel better. By highlighting one’s appearance, beautification practices foreground the own insecurities and self-doubts even more. However, even if one does not enjoy engaging in those practices, and even if they do not make one happy, they are somehow expected to be followed anyway.

Mia’s grandmother can be seen as a metaphor for society. The fact that she is happy about Mia’s transformation, mirrors how society is happy when someone who does not fit into standardized norms is transformed and turned into someone who does fit.

In the novel her grandmother is the one that directs all those demands to her. When Mia one day after school goes to visit her grandmother she is confronted with a great number of accusations:

““Why are you wearing tennis shoes with a skirt? Are those tights supposed to be clean? Why can’t you stand up straight? What’s wrong with your hair? Have

you been biting your nails again, Amelia? I thought we agreed you were going to give up that nasty habit. My God, can't you stop growing? Is it your goal to be as tall as your father?' [...] 'Tomorrow you will wear nylons. Not tights. Not knee-socks. You are too old for tights and knee-socks. And you will wear your school shoes, not tennis sneakers. You will style your hair, apply lipstick and paint your fingernails – what's left of them, anyway.'" (79ff)

Her grandmother's critiques perfectly reflect society's expectations towards young woman and teenage girls. They do not stop at cleanliness and tidiness of clothes and body, but also dictate women to choose the right clothes, hairstyle and make-up. At a certain age, there is no room anymore for childish appearance and a girl has to dress and look feminine in order to be a good woman. Femininity seems to be the most important aspect of growing up, which might derive from the traditional view that a woman's goal in life is to attract a man.

Mia's grandmother also suggests using certain women as role models. Those women, like Princess Grace and Coco Chanel (84) are considered to be feminine and match the standard requirements for women. She also immediately dismisses Mia's suggestions for role models, like Madonna, as they are not *real* women. The role models Mia's grandmother suggests are best known for their elegance and impeccable beauty and style. On the other hand, women like Madonna are rejected, as they do not fully embody normalized standards and do not fear to stand out or to break a taboo.

There are also certain practices, which in the novel are considered to be appropriate or non-appropriate for a princess/a girl. For example, taking a gift when being invited at a friend's house (131), or not crying in public (149). In general, one can sum it up by stating that princesses/women/girls are expected to 'sparkle' on all occasions (173). To behave in a "feminine way" seems to be almost as important as to look feminine. One could almost say that a woman has to have good manners, has to be calm and quiet, has to make others feel good about their presence, and should not

make others around them feel uncomfortable. All those expectations are very present stereotypes in our society.

The novel also contains some statements regarding male beauty standards. When Mia describes attractive boys, especially Josh Richter, the boy she is interested in, one can clearly deduce general norms about how a boy should look like.

Various comments indicate that having a nice chest and defined stomach muscles (13), or in general looking good without a shirt (58) are important factors in order to be considered good-looking. The attractive jock boys from Mia's school are all described as being muscular and large (157). Further, being tall, around six feet (14), like Josh Richter, seems to also indicate an ideal for men. Blonde hair, similarly to girls' beauty standards, is considered to be beautiful. Additionally, having a good smell (119) and having white teeth (162) is described as highly appealing.

As there are certain physical traits that define the attractive characters in the novel, there are also certain features that seem to justify the non-attractiveness of others. For example, Mia's father is described as having a red face and as being bald, both physical features not considered to be attractive (64). Also, Boris Pelkowski's spindly arm is not seen as desirable (119).

There are also certain practices and activities mentioned which are depicted as manly or attractive in a man or suggesting the opposite. While the attractive boys belong to the jock group is stated to "[eat] excessive amounts of animal by-products" (157), which is considered as manly and appealing, other practices like watching a musical ("He said he didn't know anyone with an ounce of testosterone who could watch *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway without projectile vomiting" (57)) or tucking a sweater into one's trousers ("[...]tucks his school sweater into his trousers, instead of wearing it out, like a normal person" (14)) are considered unmanly and, therefore, unattractive. Also, the fact that Mia secretly wishes that Josh would be "sexually

harassing [her] someday” (13) suggests that sexual harassment, as a manly practice is justified, if only the person doing it is attractive enough. While there certainly is a funny undertone to Mia’s statement, sexual harassment is a common problem in our society and should be addressed in school and home settings with teenagers. This practice should not – especially in a school setting - be normalized or justified in any way. Sexual harassment is wrong, and kids have to know this in order to do better and to understand their rights. It is never appropriate and should not be tolerated or downplayed.

#### **4.2.7 Clothing and Beautification Practices**

The novel includes various messages about appropriate clothing. First, there are many passages, which contain advice or rules about how a princess/girl should dress. For example, nylons are considered to be more elegant and feminine than tights or knee-socks and tennis sneakers are not considered to be appropriate for girls to wear at school (81). Further, miniskirts and tight clothes are also considered to be feminine and appealing, as this is what the popular girls wear (116), and what Mia dreams of wearing (151).

The right piece of clothing can give its wearer more confidence and this is evident in the novel when Mia wears her new dress to the school dance. The dress is made of

“pale, pale blue silk, all scrunched up on top like an accordion, so my being flat-chested doesn’t even show, then straight and skinny the rest of the way down, all the way to my matching pale, pale blue silk high heels. I think I kind of resemble an icicle, but according to the ladies at Chanel, this is the look of the new millennium.” (182)

This passage shows how wearing a dress, which other people admire, and which is considered as elegant and fashionable can lead to a rise in self-confidence. Wearing



certain clothes and following trends and, therefore, spending money on them, is depicted as making a person feel better in one's skin. This is clearly a consequence of our capitalistic system and consumeristic behavior is reinforced. Additionally, it is described how clothes can be used to optically alter certain body parts one is not happy with. Therefore, the purpose of clothes is rather to show a certain wealth or status, or to conceal or alter certain bodily features, rather than underlining one's personal style and individuality.

Even though the novel does not explicitly state any suggestions about what boys should be wearing, Mia states that most boys look "totally geeky in [their] school's uniform" (10), from which one can deduce that wearing the school's uniform is not considered to be very attractive. Additionally, she criticizes the fact that Boris tucks his sweater into his trousers (14), which, too, can be interpreted as an infringement of standardized fashion guidelines.

Clothes can be also chosen deliberately in order to show one's membership to or distinction from a certain group of people. In the beginning, Mia refuses to wear pantyhose to school because "the only girls who wear pantyhose to school are [...] [s]how-offs" (81). Clearly, she does not want to belong to the kind of girls described, and she stresses that none of her friends would wear pantyhose to school (81). So, additionally to isolating herself from Lana Weinberger, she also aims at creating similarities to her own friends. This is a very common phenomenon, especially in teenagers, as groups of friends tend to dress very similarly.

Similar to the choice of clothing, also the choice of undergoing certain beautification practices creates messages conveyed through one's appearance. When Mia gets her makeover, her hair is cut and bleached, and fake fingernails are glued on. With time, she also gets used to applying make-up, like lipstick and nail polish, and undergoes other procedures like waxing her legs or underarms. Through engaging in

certain practices, one does not only enhance one's personal beauty, but it also affects the opinions other people have of one's appearance and person. With her growing interest in grooming, Mia conveys the message to the outside world that not only is she becoming a princess, but first and foremost a woman. She is not a kid anymore and she starts to worry more about her appearance and take care of things she does not like, or things that are not considered to be desirable or favorable in our society. Towards the end of the novel her to-do list even consists in "1. Get a dress. 2. Get hair done. 3. Get nails redone (stop biting fake ones off)" (171). This shows her growing interest in demonstrating her femininity by maximizing her external beauty and following society's standard rules.

"Well, I'm sitting here in my new dress, my new shows, my new nails, and my new pantyhose, with my newly waxed legs and underarms, my newly touched-up hair, my professionally made-up face [...] I got my LEGS waxed for him. OK? And you think that doesn't hurt, think about having your UNDERARMS waxed, which I also had done for him. OK? That waxing stuff HURTS" (180f).

This passage shows how Mia is willing to accept pain in order to become more beautiful and attractive. Especially, appealing to another person, in her case Josh Richter, is a major reason for many women to undergo these practices. Not only are these things highly normalized in our society and girls not following these norms are seen as not beautiful or not feminine, sometimes even as unsanitary, the novel further reinforces the application to these rules as being an inseparable part of growing up for young women. It also further strengthens the capitalist system.

#### **4.2.8 Beauty and food**

In the novel, one cannot find a great number of statements about food. Weight and food intake does not seem to be as important as it is in "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants".

The only person who is mentioned to have weight problems is Tina Hakim Baba, Mia's new friend.

"I looked at Tina Hakim Baba. She had a salad in front of her, just like me. Only Tina eats salad because she has a weight problem, not because she's a vegetarian." (114)

She is also described to drink diet soda (116) and her body shape is said to cause her isolation from the other teenagers, as they do not talk to her because she is not thin (141). Therefore, a slim body is again presented as fitting the beauty ideal and as a crucial factor in belonging with the popular kids.

#### **4.2.9 Beauty and Identity**

Mia, the main character in the novel, is highly self-conscious. Throughout the story she feels highly uncomfortable in her body, except for a passage at the end. She puts so much importance on some of her bodily features as to somehow define her own identity through it. It seems as if her person as a whole is made up almost exclusively by her outer appearance.

The most important aspect of her appearance, through which she identifies, is the size of her chest. She is literally obsessed over the growth, or rather the lack thereof, and defines herself, for example, as having a "lack of chest" (22), having "no breasts" (36), as being "too flat-chested" (60) and "not having any breast or anything" (128). When making notes or lists in her diary about things she wishes she were or had, her bra size regularly comes up as a topic. She constantly measures her chest in order to monitor any possible growth and wishes to wear a double-D bra while being a size 36 (98). Not only does she firmly believe that her flat chest contributes strongly to her being considered a freak, but she is also jealous of every girl already having breasts and desperately waits for the growth spurt forecasted by her mother (16).

“Why was I born under such an unlucky star? Why did *I* have to be cursed with such freakishness? Why? WHY?? I would give anything if, instead of being a five-foot-nine flat-chested princess, I could be a five-foot-six normal person with breasts. ANYTHING.” (127)

She feels strongly limited by her lack of chest, as she thinks that not only it limits her choice in clothing (“I won’t be able to wear a strapless dress, because there isn’t anything on my chest to hold it up” (16)), but especially boys’ interest in her. Mia blames the missing interest of her male peers in her on her small chest (“I was too flat-chested to ever be asked out on a date” (60) and feels utterly embarrassed when the attention is led towards her chest in front of Josh Richter. She is convinced that only through the growth of her chest things would change drastically for her. She even justifies other girls’ dates by the size of their chests.

“Even Shameeka has started dating. She’s been quite popular since she developed breasts over the summer.” 66)

All this obsession with her breast size is, of course, a rather normal symptom of adolescence, which is a hard time on each teenager’s self-confidence. Therefore, it somehow reflects normal teenage thoughts and preoccupations to a certain extent, as almost each young girl is obsessed with a specific bodily feature she wishes to improve. However, there is not much importance given her personality and Mia is depicted in a very limited way. This further conveys the message that focusing on the outer appearance, and specifically on one’s flaws, is the right thing to do, as it is the only thing that matters.

The only positive trait through which she identifies is connected to her inner beauty. She seems to base her identity, besides on her flaws, also on her niceness (“I mean, I know I look weird and stuff, but I really try to be nice to people, you know?” (65)). Even though it is favorable that personality is taken in consideration here and that she is proud of this positive trait, it feels like she is trying to make up for her physical flaws by compensating them with her character strengths. The underlying

message of this concept would be that flawless people do not need to be nice or have a good character, whereas flawed people have to. This is a notion which is also very present in society, and especially among teenagers, as beautiful and popular people tend to remain popular even when their actions are highly questionable or even intentionally cruel.

Another external feature, or rather a group of external features, Mia identifies with are the ones shared with her friends. In the beginning of the story, it is unimaginable for her to wear pantyhose or make-up, because that would make her differ from her friends.

“Pantyhose? To school? I mean, the only girls who wear pantyhose to school are girls like Lana Weinberger, and seniors, and people like that. You know. Show-offs. None of *my* friends wear pantyhose. And, I might add, none of my friends wear lipstick or nail polish or do their hair. Not for *school*, anyway.” (81)

When her makeover starts and she gets the new haircut, her best friend even excludes her because of her different looks, as she seems to have more in common with Lana Weinberger aesthetically speaking, than with her friends. Lilly, rather bewildered states: “Your hair is the same color as Lana Weinberger’s” (99) and asks her: “What’s on your *fingers*? Are those fake fingernails? Lana has those too!” (99). This shows how belonging to a certain group of people can depend on one’s looks and explains why people define themselves over a certain look or fashion item in order to demonstrate their membership to their clique. This practice is not only common among teenagers, but it is very common that people belonging to the same circle, class or professional sphere tend to dress similarly and often adopt an almost identical style.

Surprisingly, what is also important for Mia is being true to herself. She does not seek for identification or self-realization through external beauty. Even though she is jealous of other girls’ looks, she does not want to be changed at any cost. During her

transformation she almost forgets her own values and beliefs, but then quickly makes it clear what she stands for.

“And it is sort of hard when all these beautiful, fashionable people are telling you how good you’d look in *this*, and how much *that* would bring out your cheekbones, to remember you’re a feminist and an environmentalist, and don’t believe in using make-up or chemicals that might be harmful to the Earth.” (95)

She describes herself as being a feminist and an environmentalist even if the novel, at least at first, conveys a different idea. However, remaining true to oneself is an important message, and especially remembering one’s true self amidst teenage insecurities is difficult and the novel positively reinforces this.

Additionally, despite of objectively being positively surprised by the results of her transformation, Mia still is not happy.

“But I am not happy. I am not a bit happy. *Grandmère’s* happy. *Grandmère’s* head-over-heels happy about how I look. Because I don’t look a thing like Mia Thermopolis. Mia Thermopolis never had fingernails. Mia Thermopolis never had blonde highlights. Mia Thermopolis never wore make-up or Gucci shoes or Chanel skirts or Christian Dior bras which, by the way, don’t even come in 32A, which is my size. I don’t even know who I am anymore. It certainly isn’t Mia Thermopolis. *She’s turning me into someone else.* (95)

She feels like she is turned into someone else, which, understandably, does not make her happy, as it implies that there is something wrong with her appearance. Even though she herself is her harshest critic, having other people criticizing her looks hurts her and being told she has to be turned into a princess in order to fit in, is especially hurtful for her. This transformation into a princess, which can be seen as a metaphor for becoming a woman, coming of age, is one that every girl dreams of and wishes for, but at the same time brings about a great deal of confusion and teenage angst. When it comes to the process of coming of age, on the one hand, there is the natural transformation, which is hormonally caused, inevitable and it provokes a lot of fears and anxieties. On the other hand, there is the artificial transformation, often caused by and based on expectations towards one’s body, which are often predefined by society,

one's family, one's peer group and the media. These are also basically Mia's main concerns. This shows how Mia's transformation reflects the change a normal teenage girl is confronted with.

After her big transformation and the revelation of her heritage there is an article published about her in a newspaper. She is described as "the statuesque beauty" (135), which in comparison to her self-descriptions as terribly tall and freakish is a big compliment. However, she cannot appreciate it, as she still clings to her former self and is not ready to let other people transform her into a "statuesque beauty". She states: "I am NOT a statuesque beauty. Yeah, I'm TALL, I'm way TALL. But I am no beauty" (135). This shows that gaining other's appreciation by fulfilling certain standards does not make her anymore happy and does not make her feel like she actually reached these norms. The message conveyed here actually reduces the importance of other people's and society's opinions.

With time, however, Mia identifies more and more with her new physical features and the newly learned beautification practices. One can find more and more hints in her diary entries that even though she is rebelling against her transformation, in a certain way, probably unconsciously, she enjoys it, as she reaches goals she has always dreamt of, but could not have reached without it. Still at the beginning of her transformation, she even considers herself to look good (99), and when they glue on her fake fingernails, they somehow make her feel stronger (101). Additionally, she does not seem to mind the compliments she gets for her new style, including her grandmother's, who remarks that she is "turning out very well, thanks to Paolo's handiwork" (164). With time she even finds pleasure in practices and activities which are considered as being "girly", like trying out outfits and hairstyles ("[...] we can try on different outfits and experiment with our hair to see what will look best for tomorrow night" (172)). This could be seen as a confirmation of the importance of

adhering to certain norms. Contrarily, one could argue that by doing what one really wants and by simply being oneself, there is a big chance of participating in certain stereotypical female/male practices and to be in line with at least some standards and norms. Being contrary to every stereotypical norm in the first place would lead to being highly unauthentic. What eventually matters is doing things that feel right for oneself and reflect on their reasons, causes and consequences. Beautification practices and stereotypical behavior are not bad, it is just their unreflected normalization and standardization that makes them dangerous. And in the end, Mia even appears to have gained a distinctive amount of self-worth. When she is waiting for her date for the Cultural Diversity Dance at her school, she writes in her diary:

“And if he doesn’t show up soon, well, all I can say is HIS LOSS. I look better than I have ever looked in my whole entire life. Old Coco Chanel, she really outdid herself- my dress is HOT: pale, pale blue silk, all scrunched up on top like an accordion, so my being flat-chested doesn’t even show, then straight and skinny the rest of the way down, all the way to my matching pale, pale blue silk high heels. I think I kind of resemble an icicle, but according to the ladies at Chanel, this is the look of the new millennium.” (182)

This burst in self-confidence clearly derives from the transformation she underwent and her newly acquired skills and engagement in several beautification practices. What before seemed to be a denial of herself to her, now turned into something pleasant and worth doing. She seeks self-identification through her looks, but unlike before, she identifies with her good looks. In a certain way, one could say that she was (by her grandmother and by society) turned into a “girly” girl, whose femininity is now part of her identity.

Lilly, Mia’s best friend, is a totally different type of person. She is described as being “short and sort of round and kind of resembling a pug” (22), however “she totally doesn’t care how she looks” (22), which is a sign of self-confidence and self-identification not based on her external appearance. Even when other people insult her, make negative comments about her physical features or her taste, she does not



seem to be bothered and laughs about it. She has a strong identity built on inner values rather than external appearance. She might be the only character in the book, who has this kind of self-worth not based on her appearance. At least she is the only character whose description implies this.

Lana is described as being “obviously in love with herself” (71). She is highly attractive and identifies through her beauty. She constantly directs the attention towards her most favorable features and builds her identity exclusively over her looks, and not her character. This highly unilateral description of her character, in combination of her being the antagonist in the novel, leads the reader to think that these qualities are rather negative. Even though being beautiful is the goal, guiding people’s attention towards one’s beauty and being overly self-confident are not seen as favorable traits.

#### **4.2.10 Beauty as the sole foundation of love**

Like *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, also this novel suggests that love is based on superficial aspects and that without physical beauty no love can emerge. Even though, especially towards the end, several of Mia’s statements indicate a less superficial approach to relationships, eventually there is always the component of external beauty, which is crucial for whether she develops interest in somebody or not. Only Lilly seems to have different expectations, which are not based on good looks, towards a possible partner.

The novel includes a big number of statements about the external appearance of boys and how these features are the reason for the protagonist’s love or interest. These statements suggest that the only reason to fall in love with somebody is one’s exterior beauty.

When Mia is asked if she would choose to be with Michael, Lilly's brother, or Josh Richter if it was the end of the world, she chooses Josh Richter

"because Josh Richter is the hottest boy in our whole school, maybe the whole world, and I am completely and totally in love with him" (58)

She is in love with him even though they never had a conversation, and she does not know anything about his life or his personality. Her interest is exclusively based on his appearance. In her diary entries she continues to describe Josh's eyes ("His eyes are so blue they hurt to look at" (134), "Josh turned his head and looked at her with those hypnotic eyes" (161), "[...] those blue eyes of his are no joke" (162), "I guess I am not the only Thermopolis woman to fall under the spell of Josh Richter's blue eyes" (184), "Then I made the mistake of looking into his blue eyes" (163)), his teeth ("A big smile that showed all his white teeth. His perfectly straight white teeth" (162)) or other bodily features. She wishes she were Josh's girlfriend (168), for the only reason that he is "the cutest boy in the school" (190). She thinks that by attaining the interest of Josh Richter all of her problems will be solved.

"Josh Richter *spoke* to me. He actually *spoke* to me. *Twice*. For the first time in like a month, I don't care that I'm flunking Algebra. I don't care that my mom is dating one of my teachers. I don't care that I'm the heir to the throne of Genovia. I don't even care that my best friend and I aren't speaking. I think Josh Richter might *like* me. "(163)

Attracting Josh Richter seems to be the only goal in her life and all other things appear to be secondary to her. She expects her life to change drastically once she dates the cutest boy in her school.

She has all those feelings even though inside of her a

"tiny part of [her] brain – the only art that wasn't completely stunned [...] – went, He's only asking you out because you're the Princess of Genovia. [...] Then this other part of [her] brain, a much bigger part, went, SO WHAT???" (170)

This shows that even though she has doubts about him and his attentions, and does not know whether he is being serious or not and whether he has a good character or not, his beauty is more important to her and, therefore, she simply ignores her worries. This is a highly superficial way of judging other people and she somehow treats him like an object. Even though external beauty may be a crucial factor in noticing other people and drawing one's interest towards another person, Mia's behavior is very superficial.

Even when he treats her badly and she finally realizes what kind of person he is she keeps thinking that "[i]n spite of that [...] things aren't so bad. [...] [h]e'll look into my soul again with those electric blue eyes and everything will be all right" (189). Clearly, for Mia beauty is the most valuable aspect in a possible partner and she somehow seems to think that beauty can compensate for a bad character.

Mia also believes that normally only pretty girls like Lana Weinberger date the most handsome boys, like Josh Richter and that boys like Josh Richter are only attracted to the kind of girls "like Lana Weinberger who put out" (56). However, when it comes to girls, she is of the opinion that they also have to be nice in order to be appealing to boys. She cannot understand why Josh would want to be with a person like Lana Weinberger, even though she is so mean and how his love can be built only upon his physical attraction towards her (10). This suggests that girls have to be beautiful and mannered in order to attract a man, whereas men only have to be attractive.

Sometimes Mia's remarks suggest that she wishes that love was not built on such superficial factors. When it comes to herself, she does not want to be judged for her looks but expects Josh Richter to see and like her for her real self, "the one beyond the flat chest" (170). Also, she thinks that if one loses one's virginity with the wrong person, it could negatively affect one's future life and she secretly wishes for romanticism in

her life (“I would put out for Josh Richter, but only if [...] [w]e’d been dating for at least a year [...], [h]e pledged his undying love to me” (56)). She even considers the possibility that

“if it really were the end of the world it might be better to be with Michael, even if he isn’t so hot, because at least he makes [her] laugh” (58)

This suggests that there is a small part of her that doubts the judgement she made solely based on his appearance. However, her doubts are not strong enough and she continues to be blinded by his beauty till the very end of the novel. When she finally realizes that Josh’s character is not compatible with hers, that he is not respecting her in any way (“And then, without even asking me, Josh ordered dinner for the whole table [...] [a]nd he hasn’t even noticed I haven’t touched my food” (187)), he is irresponsible and selfish and is just interested in her because she is the Princess of Genovia, she suddenly does not feel anything for him anymore. Suddenly her unconscious interest in Michael is aroused, which is not solely based on his appearance. However, she also states how Michael “looks really good without a shirt” (58) and how “his stomach muscles are extremely well defined” (13). Therefore, one can say, that there is a lesson learned here. However, the novel cannot do without basing love, at least in part, on physical features, which match the standardized ideals of beauty. The overall message conveyed here, however, is a positive one, as she finally sees other persons for who they are and not for how they look like.

Generally, one can say that there is a certain amount of hypocrisy in Mia’s remarks. While she expects boys to look according to meet certain requirements based on standard beauty ideals, she does not want to be judged by her appearance. She constantly judges others by their looks but is very sensitive when it comes to judgements towards her own appearance. For example, she writes that “Mr Gianini’s nostrils stick out A LOT” (11) and asks herself why someone would be interested in

going out with a man with nostrils like his (11). She also states that in her mother's place she would be embarrassed to admit to having had sex with a man like her father, who according to her is not attractive (64). Also, Boris Pelkowski is victim of her judgments, as he does not correspond to her perception of a good-looking guy. However, she clearly contests how it is not her fault her "hair sticks out the way it does, nor more than it's Lilly's fault her face looks sort of squished" (65). This enforces judgmental behavior and stereotypical expectations towards others in combination with self-victimization, which is a normal teenage behavior, but presented as rather harmless.

#### **4.2.11 Naivety**

There is a certain tendency in the novel for ascribing positive character traits to attractive people, even though there might be no evidence for them. In a rather naïve way, Mia believes that Josh Richter, who seems to be perfect on the outside, accordingly is perfect also on the inside and, therefore, does not doubt that he is equipped with only the most honorable character traits.

When her best friend Mia tells her that Josh must have been mistaken when he greeted her one day, she is convinced that

"[t]he truth is, when he's away from Lana and all his jock friends, Josh is a totally different person. The kind of person who doesn't care if a girl is flat-chested or wears size eight shoes. The kind of person who can see beyond all that, into the depths of a girl's soul. [...] [b]ecause when [she] looked into his eyes that day at Bigelow's, [she] saw the deeply sensitive person inside him, struggling to get out." (8)

Even though Mia never had a conversation with Josh and does not know the last thing about him, firmly believes that on the inside he is a highly sensitive boy ("the cutest, most sensitive boy in school" (177)), who is just as perfect on the inside as he is on the outside and that his good looks did not cause superficiality or arrogance. Mia states that she loves Josh Richter

“not just because of the way his blond hair sometimes falls into his eyes when he’s bent over, looking for stuff in his locker, but because [she] know[s] that behind that jock façade he maintains he is a deeply sensitive and caring person. [She] could tell by the way he said *Hey* to [her] that day in Bigelow’s.” (58)

Already from the beginning of the book, she really does believe that he likes her, even though he has a girlfriend, and there are no signs of him showing interest in Mia. However, when he suddenly starts to show interest in her, she believes the reason is her personality and her true self, which he finally noticed, even though it is rather obvious that the main source of his interest is her newly acquired fame. Even when it crosses her mind that the reason for his strong and immediate interest could be her status as the Princess as Genovia, she quickly discards this thought and keeps on romanticizing. She is confident that he “finally looked into [her] soul” (170). This shows that the novel reinforces the belief that a person’s outer appearance reflects his or her personality and inner beauty. This belief implies that people not fitting into the tight frame of predefined aesthetic norms, whether they do so voluntarily or involuntarily, have a bad character. This is a highly discriminatory idea which is widespread in our society and exists mainly on a subconscious level.

Mia desperately tries to see the good in him and overlooks all the disrespectful things he did to her. She just does what he expects from her in order to please him. Mia tries to sugarcoat all of his flaws, as she has this fixed mindset of him being the most beautiful person on the outside as well as on the inside (“[...] and I was thinking maybe everything would be all right” (189), “In spite of that, I’m thinking, OK, things aren’t so bad” (189), “I let him drag me out of the car” (190)).

#### **4.2.12 Philosophical notions on beauty**

Unlike in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *The Princess Diaries* does not contain many philosophical notions on beauty. However, there is one similarity to the first analyzed novel, which is worth pointing out.

Similar to the meritocratic view normalized in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* also here the idea of having to earn something beautiful is conveyed. Mia feels the need not only to maximize her beauty in order to please Josh Richter and to attain his attention, by engaging in various beautification practices like waxing and putting on make-up, but she also believes she has to be nice to him in order to deserve his beauty. While criticizing Lana's meanness in one of her diary entries she states: "Maybe Lana is nice to Josh, though. *I'd* sure be nice to Josh. He is totally the best-looking boy in Albert Einstein High School" (10). This statement makes it evident that she thinks that a girl has to earn a beautiful man by being nice.

Additionally, another statement which can be analyzed in a philosophical way is that

"Nobody ever went to bed one night as one person, and then woke up the next morning to find out that she was somebody completely different." (34)

This statement can be interpreted as a reminder that even though one might change one's appearance through clothing or make-up, or even through a complete makeover, it does not transform a person into someone else. Even though one might look totally different on the outside, what is on the inside remains the same.

## **5 Possible Approaches/Pedagogical Considerations**

Having analyzed both books one can see that they contain several direct and indirect messages and statements about the contemporary beauty ideal. The question arises whether or not they are suitable for teenagers and especially for school settings.

With authors having made their own experiences during their teenage years, and having an individual set of values and opinions, it is impossible for a novel to turn out impartial and non-biased. This would also miss the point of a YA novel, as often certain statements, concepts and ideas are placed deliberately between the lines or as direct utterances. Usually this is done in order to give its readers a helpful tool to form their own opinions and to facilitate the intake of general norms and lessons. However, it is crucial for teachers to do a research on the author of a text and reading it carefully before choosing it for his or her students. By doing so, one can prevent the transmission of critical and radical messages to teenagers.

The messages and norms conveyed by texts can be helpful for the readers, but also dangerous. Just like these norms can be used to facilitate the teenagers' reflection process and to help learning lessons, they can also be deliberately misused in order to contribute to the creation of a certain mindset.

Like every other type of media, literature is a capitalistic venture, which is used for economic reasons. Norms and concepts which are in favor of the financial flow and the market-based worldview, and which kick-start the economy are usually reinforced in TV ads, books, movies and the radio. Authors and producers often get paid for including certain messages or promote the use of certain products. When it comes to body image, it is therefore no wonder that



a certain body shape and appearance are advertised in order to make people spend money on their own assimilation to a normalized model. This can be done deliberately and overt, as it is the case for instance in advertising, or covert and either deliberately or unconsciously through the reproduction of certain ideas and values inherent in the author's personal views.

Therefore, the question arises what can be done, especially in school settings, to prevent the formation of dangerous standardized norms and values. When it comes to addressing critical issues in the classroom, various scholars and experts came up with different approaches. First of all, most scholars are of the opinion that beauty and gender identity in literature are issues that should be dealt with in the classroom. For example, the guidelines for the curriculum formulated by the National Council of Teachers of English suggests that teachers should “[help] students reflect on gender expectations [and] challenge these expectations by showing options and alternatives so readers seek to confront the inequities they find in their own lives” (1).

There is a great variety of books and articles available on how to include critical issues for example of gender identities in a school setting. For example, Rudman formulated guidelines for whoever is in charge of selecting YA novels, like educators or librarians. The criteria he recommends for suitable books are for example the avoidance of stereotypes, the ascription of distinct characteristics to one gender and different grades of appreciation of certain achievements based on different gender roles or the representation of characters as real individuals. Lange further recommends that suitable and appropriate books for young adults should not use clichés, for instance brave heroes, like it was the case in classical fairy tales (28). Furthermore, strategies and methods to work with critical material and texts, like multimodal activities, media study and literature circles

are needed by the teachers in order to deal with the difficult input in a successful way.

### **5.1 Critical books**

One way to prevent the unreflected formation of standardized ideas and values in the teenagers' heads is the use of critical books. Critical books are texts which do not match the standardized values a society creates for its members, or at least refuse one of them.

Eger recommends that books which portray both male and female protagonist in a multilateral way and featuring multiple perspectives should be chosen for the classroom, because they help students to relate to the text (189). This approach encourages students in their individuality and uniqueness, rather than an assimilation to common standards.

However, also a too obvious and direct critical approach is not considered to be helpful, as gender equality has to be conveyed in a very subtle way, similarly to the stereotypical presentation of gender inequality in order to affect teenagers, as “[l]aboring the point kills the point of laboring” (Fox, *Men who weep, boys who dance: The gender agenda between the Lines in Children's Literature* 87). A very direct critical message could be perceived by the students as being lectured by a text and as conveying a rather theoretical concept instead of dealing with real issues.

Another point is that through recommendations of books which reinforce stereotypes, educators, teachers, or parents could cause discomfort in young adults to read books outside of this traditional frame (Jacobs 20). As one can see, the selection of the right book is not an easy matter, and it is important to find the right balance in order to give students an appropriate input for their needs.

An example of a critical text for the concrete topic of beauty would be the *Uglies* series by Scott Westerfeld, which tells the story of a girl living in a post-apocalyptic future, where teenagers undergo a surgical intervention at the age of 16 in order to become a “Pretty”. The surgeries make all citizens conform to normalized beauty standards and alter their mindset in order to make them easier to manipulate and control. The book’s focus lies on the girl’s rebellion against the government and its beautification and assimilation processes. It is clear that this book, even though it is placed in a future setting, displays many parallels to the present situation in the Western world and uses metaphors in order to relate the story to the teenagers’ ordinary lives. Its critical input is meant to make readers reflect on their own inherent values of beauty and to adapt them accordingly.

Even though there are several books available, which have a critical approach to the topic of beauty, as well as many other topics, it is very hard, and it might even be futile to equip students exclusively with critical books, which clearly question society’s norms, as they do not reflect the reality of most books available on the market. One has to consider the fact that the students have access to the whole range of literature outside of school. Therefore, discussing even questionable and critical content together with other peers and a competent guidance can be more helpful for students than eliminating these texts completely from the curriculum.

Additionally, the exclusive reading of critical content would not enable students to recognize and devalue inherent messages and norms in ordinary books and novels.

Mitchell stresses that literature that includes stereotypes should by no means be completely banned from classrooms. Rather than ignoring critical issues and the majority of available books, she suggests implementing these books in the classroom and work with them in a critical way in order to uncover

and eliminate stereotypical content and to provoke the development independent and critical thinking. (89)

Many scholars, like for example Jacobs, highlight the importance of teaching critical reading skills in the classroom in order for young adults to become independent and critical thinkers with their own values and ideas instead of relying on the classical reproduction of the input (19). Peterson further adds that a rise of an attitude towards gender equality would then also cause a rise of literature that does not conform to traditional gender roles and steps out of classical boundaries (3).

## **5.2. Discussions**

Another way of dealing with critical topics, such as beauty ideal and body image, in school settings is to have extensive discussions, which follow the reading or singular reading sequences, and which are used to share and exchange ideas and opinions and get a more complete picture of the novel's impact, content and conveyed norms and messages. They also help students grasp the whole range of overt and covert ideas and values of a specific text.

Discussions can be led in various forms and different group size and organization. The whole class can be involved into the discussion or smaller groups can be formed, who eventually exchange their ideas and findings. Also, the methods used can vary, ranging from an open discussion to a more strategic discussion, or the working on a set of questions, tasks or a questionnaire.

Even role-plays and other simulated forms of discussions can be used in order to cover the whole spectrum of a book and get a deeper insight in its topics, messages and inherent ideas. For example, pupils could be asked to adopt the opinions and values of a certain character, and then lead an open discussion

defending their point of view. This can help them understand the motivations and beliefs of characters and foster their own empathy and open-mindedness. As a follow-up activity, students could be asked to critically evaluate the characters' behavior and ideas according to various parameters like morality or consistency.

### **5.3. Reflections**

Additionally, reflections can be used to help students grasp the full scope of a novel with all its messages and values. Students can be invited to reflect on a certain topic or passage of the book or on the behavior of one of its characters.

Reflections can be done in various ways, ranging from merely thinking about it with possible follow-up exercises, to registering their thoughts in a written form as a complete text, diary entry or simply mind mapping or jotting down their ideas.

Commonly used methods for reflections are, for instance, letting the students write their thoughts about the book in a reading journal or having them write letters from the point of view of one of the characters.

Sprague and Keeling recommend providing questions related to the text, in order to provoke reflection and give students the possibility to question their own beliefs and values (29).

## 6. Conclusion

In this final chapter, there will be a brief summary and conclusive thoughts on the theoretical introductory chapters and of the analytical part regarding the two chosen novels (*Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Brashares and *Princess Diaries* by Meg Cabot).

In the first part of the thesis, theoretical factors were taken in consideration. The historical development of a beauty ideal was outlined, and the formation of stereotypes and beauty norms was explained. Beauty is a concept that is highly sensitive to time and place and can be changed easily. Each society has different ideas of the ideal woman or man, and these ideals also changed significantly over time. However, they have one thing in common: the constant pursuit for conformity with the standardized and normalized ideal. These standards regard physical features and also manners and behavior. Another important aspect which was analyzed, is the influence of sociocultural factors on beauty ideals. Especially the medial influences were highlighted as they contribute largely to the formation of not only beauty standards, but also to gender roles and stereotypes. Through medial production and reception certain external and internal norms of beauty are idealized, normalized and constantly reproduced.

In the analytical part of this thesis inherent direct and indirect messages on beauty standards and other concepts in relation to them were identified in order to show the large quantity of (subliminal) statements on beauty YA literature comprises. These messages, which condition the readers are not always easy to be identified and unmasked as stereotypes, as they already are part of an unconscious mindset. The two novels chosen were *The Sisterhood of the*

*Traveling Pants* written by Ann Brashares and published in 2001 (as well as a small part of the second novel of the *Sisterhood* series) and the *Princess Diaries* written by Meg Cabot. Both novels are highly distributed among teenagers and often used in classroom settings. Even though they are both mostly aimed at female readers, norms and beauty standards inherent in the books could be identified for both sexes.

In the third and last part of this thesis examples of possible ways of addressing texts that contain and reproduce stereotypes and beauty ideals (i.e. almost every single novel published on the market) are given for classroom settings. These ideas are highly subjective and individual and are to be seen only as personal ideas. Clearly, the right approach to certain aspects of literary content and the realization of specific learning aims are highly dependent on the individual group of students, as well as the educator and other factors, such as age, school type, group size, group dynamic and background (knowledge).

However, research conducted in the area of Young Adult Literature containing stereotypes and progressive representations of certain gender roles, typically has led to agreement among scholars. Especially when it comes to the suggestibility of teenagers, as showed above, there is generally accordance that the media, in this case literature, plays a big role in forming adolescent's ideas and values. Therefore, an educator has to guide students in order for them to be able to unmask messages and reflect on them.

Like every other critical topic, 'beauty' is without a doubt to be dealt with in classrooms only after considering the individual needs of the students and properly reflecting on the desired outcomes of certain activities. It requires a great amount of preparation and is more time-consuming than simply reading a

novel. Research on strategies for implementing critical issues and students' reactions to various approaches can give more insight into this topic.

Concluding it has to be said that in world like ours, at a time like ours, something undoubtedly has to change. As a teacher who is guiding and forming young adults, one does not only have the responsibility, but more importantly the great opportunity to equip kids and teenagers with the right tools in order to become reflected and critically thinking human beings, who do not merely reproduce what they are told but who are able to analyze, research and reflect and who are able to form their own weighted opinions on difficult subjects. Beauty and body image are topics that are linked to many other severe problems deeply rooted in our society, like racism, ableism, sexism, classism and many more. Therefore, not only a person's personal wellbeing, mental and physical health depend on one's inherent ideas of beauty, but these collective and standardized ideas govern our society's actions and values. They determine the respect people have towards others who are different from what is the norm and they also define hierarchical structures, which can be applied to all levels, like society, companies, families and peer groups. Therefore, it is crucial – especially as a teacher – to counteract the unreflected reproduction of prejudices and judgements against groups of people or individuals, as well as the reproduction of gender stereotypes. Children and teenagers are inevitably confronted with these norms in their everyday life and preoccupations with their appearance are part of growing up. All teenagers have an individual background and all of them certainly have been confronted with these norms at some point. It is very likely that many of them even relate to some of these norms and prejudices. However, it is important that opportunities are created for students to critically reflect on their own values and choices. The right approach to literature and its analysis can be a good starting



point for follow-up activities regarding this topic and well-chosen texts can be a valuable resource for teachers to contribute to a future where diversity and inclusion could be part of the normalized and reproduced culture.

## 7. Abstract

Beauty ideals have always been part of each society's mindset. Following certain beauty standards is not a new phenomenon but was always of great importance for those who could afford to. The answer to why such narrow rules and norms are preferred to embracing individuality and accepting one's physical appearance lies in various sociocultural factors. The influence of peers and especially the media are of considerable significance for an explanation of phenomena such as eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. Especially teenagers and young adults are easily influenced by overt and covert messages on a certain beauty and reproduced stereotypes, which lead to a typically unconscious incorporation of these values. In order to exemplify these messages and highlight the naturalness with which they are included in the media, two contemporary YA novels (Brashares' *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* and Cabot's *Princess Diaries*) are analyzed and references to beauty norms are extracted and demonstrated. Eventually, ideas considering possible approaches to YA literature and their inherent stereotypical norms in classroom settings are presented.

## 8. German Abstract

Schon immer waren Schönheitsideale Teil des Gedankenguts einer jeden Gesellschaft. Das Anstreben bestimmter Standards im Bezug auf Schönheit ist demnach kein neues Phänomen, sondern war zu jeder Zeit von großer Bedeutung für all jene, die es sich leisten konnten. Die Antwort auf die Frage, warum solche einschränkenden Regeln und Normen der Annahme und Akzeptanz des eigenen Körpers und seiner Individualität bevorzugt werden ist auf unterschiedliche soziokulturelle Faktoren zurückzuführen. Der Einfluss von Mitmenschen und vor allem von den Medien ist von großer Bedeutung für die Erklärung für das Aufkommen von Phänomenen wie Essstörungen und Unzufriedenheit mit dem eigenen Körper. Vor allem Jugendliche und junge Erwachsene werden leicht von direkten und indirekten Aussagen und weit verbreiteten Stereotypen beeinflusst, welche zu einer unbewussten Aufnahme dieser Werthaltungen ins eigene Gedankengut führt. Um diese Aussagen darzustellen und die Selbstverständlichkeit, mit welcher sie in den Medien präsentiert werden, hervorzuheben, werden zwei Exemplare der Gegenwartsliteratur für junge Erwachsene (Brashares *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* und Cabots *Princess Diaries*) analysiert und Bezüge zu Schönheitsnormen herausgefiltert und veranschaulicht. Letztendlich werden Vorschläge im Bezug auf mögliche Herangehensweisen an Literatur für junge Erwachsene und die von ihnen beinhalteten stereotypischen Normen in Schulsituationen angeschnitten.

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