

## Position Paper for: Tweens, Teens, and In Betweens: The Legacy of the WB

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In the 1990s and into the early 2000s, shows such as Fox's *Beverly Hills, 90210*, ABC's *My So-Called Life*, the WB/UPN's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, NBC's *Freaks and Geeks*, and WB/CW's *Gilmore Girls* focused heavily on the lives of teens. My own research focused on "the brainy girl" in these shows, and it's surprising to see this character type basically disappear. She's been replaced by the "talented girl" while the brainy girl's original rival, the mean girl or sexpot, still exists but in different form.

Netlets The WB and UPN arose to serve "underserved" audiences, such as teens and "urban" viewers, but The WB quickly abandoned its appeal to viewers of color to UPN, which only achieved interest for teenagers when it poached *Buffy* from The WB. Their merger into The CW network initially started off featuring teens in major roles with *Gilmore Girls*, *Veronica Mars*, and *Gossip Girl*, but now primarily focuses on college age or older characters as these characters grew up and new shows about adults were added, mostly about white, upper middle class or upper class characters. In the meantime, ABC Family has built up a slate of shows featuring teens and somewhat filled in that void.

The teen TV "brainy girl" started off with a demonstrated interest in reading, writing, science, or math, but seemed to abandon those interests as she became more popular and had boys become interested in her. She was often central to plots about academic competition, extracurricular activities such as school newspapers or yearbooks, cheating, or other school-related intrigues that served as a foundation

for the often soapy stories of friendship and romance. The “mean girl” of that time used power to control, and the “sexpot” was known for her sex appeal to men (Sometimes these were the same girl, sometimes she demonstrated only one characteristic). Over time, as the brainy girl got more relatable by becoming friendly and attractive to boys, the mean girl was discovered to be vulnerable, and the sexpot misunderstood.

Teen shows are still with us, mostly on ABC Family. What has disappeared, however, is the focus on schoolwork and school-related topics of earlier teen shows. Girls on shows today, such as ABC Family’s *Secret Life of the American Teenager* and *Pretty Little Liars*, Fox’s *Glee*, and CW’s *Gossip Girl* and revival of *90210*, unlike in earlier shows no longer go through a process of becoming less brainy, less mean, or less “slutty” in order to match a normalized vision of girlhood and fit into a crowd, but rather are nearly all good at school (without flaunting it), sexually attractive (to boys or girls or both), and stylish, from day one. The brainy girl who loosens up so boys will notice her has been replaced by the artistically talented “star”, and the mean girl and the “sexpot”, once villains needing redemption, is now often a powerful heroine or glamorous elusive figure. The focus on stardom or power sends girls messages that they should be divas rather than the “group cohesion” message of earlier shows.

They also often lack the clear concise storytelling of the past. Although *BH* started off earnest and didactic, it became soapy but the stories of friendship rang true. *MSCL* was tightly plotted and well written. *Buffy* hit notes of drama, comedy,

and horror. *Freaks and Geeks* was often very funny and very real. *Gilmore Girls* took family shows to a new place and even valorized the brainy girl.

However, *Secret* is only worth watching for its train wreck quality, and the questions of “how many times we they say ‘sex’ in this episode?” and “What kind of sick morality will they push this week?” *Gossip Girl*, which at least started off fun, and looks gorgeous, is nothing I’d want any kid of mine to watch as the most important question in these kids’ lives is “who can be most glamorous while doing the least productive work?” The revival of *90210* is boring and full of vapid characters who somehow missed the “working the way up the ladder” portion of life. *Glee* tries to be groundbreaking, and has done important cultural work, but often serves up insulting and confusing messages with its music and drama. *PLL* is fun to watch, but it valorizes the meanest girl who ever meaned.

In many of these shows, viewers are subjected to a rapid-fire series of episodes featuring the characters, who frequently do not really seem as much like friends as people who occasionally reluctantly interact at big events like costume parties or performances, or as part of some sort of “caper.” Are young viewers learning anything of value? Are they learning to prize friendship or power?