

## “THE TABLE HIERARCHY”, OR AMERICAN SCHOOL CASTE SYSTEM IN MOVIES AND SERIES

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The article highlights the issues of peer bullying and its grounds as shown in American movies and series.

**Keywords:** social hierarchy; caste system; movies and series; social inequality.

## «КТО С КЕМ СИДИТ» ИЛИ КАСТЫ В АМЕРИКАНСКИХ ШКОЛАХ В ФИЛЬМАХ И СЕРИАЛАХ

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В статье освещаются проблемы буллинга со стороны сверстников и ее основания, показанные в американских фильмах и сериалах.

**Ключевые слова:** социальная иерархия; система кастовости; фильмы и сериалы; социальное неравенство.

It is not a secret that hierarchy can be found in various aspects of life: food chain in nature, species classification in biology, after all, it has existed throughout the history of society.

A vivid example of social hierarchy is the caste system, which has existed in some form in India for at least 3,000 years. It is a social hierarchy passed down through families and it can dictate the professions a person can take up as well as aspects of their social lives, including whom they can marry [1]. Surprisingly, some signs of such inequality are observed in American schools. What are the similarities and differences? To find out, we can take a look at the iconic movies and series that show some signs of clique problem, the essence of which we are going to discuss further. We are investigating cinematography as it is a form of pop-culture, which combines music, dance, characters' lines, costumes, cuisine, customs, locations and creates the image of culture, time and place portrayed.

A survey on students' interest in American movies and series about students and their problems was carried out among American high school. We are interested in the level of concern about the issues of American school social inequality, bullying and consequences they can cause. 50% of respondents answered they enjoy such movies. 25% wanted to watch more. As for the school social issues, an absolute majority of the interviewed find the topic relevant and know something about it or want to learn more. As we see, being an integral part of teenagers' life, pop-culture forms the generation's outlook and attitude.

The list of the movies includes such iconic ones as *10 things I hate about you*, *The perks of being a wallflower*, *Mean girls*, *The Breakfast club*, *The princess diaries*, *Diary of a wimpy kid*, *She's all that*, *A Cinderella story* and a brand new but already popular series *13 reasons why*, *Never have I ever*. You can become the love trophy for a popular boy like in *She's all that* and *10 things I hate about you*; turn into a princess from *The princess diaries*, *A Cinderella story*; get into a group of teenagers who study after hours aka as *The breakfast club*, try to become popular like in *Diary of a wimpy kid* and *Never have I ever*; some stories are even tragic and we empathize with the main lead of *Perks of being a wallflower* or *13 reasons why*. The plot, characters, and mood are different in each of them, but there is one thing bringing them together: the table hierarchy, which is connected with the clique problem and it is best described in *Mean girls*.

*Mean girls* was released in 2004 and at first did not really take off, but then sold like hot cakes and became iconic. The script was written by a popular comedian Tina Fey and the movie is based on the book *Queen bees and wannabes*. A Queen bee is the most popular girl in school, so a wannabe is someone who aims to be as successful as their role model. *Mean girls* movie depicts relationships in a girl group and challenges teenagers face. Basically, the movie is a satire on school hierarchy [2]. In the American school cafeteria one can find tables with different cliques (interest groups) sitting at them. Consider North Shore High School as an example: freshmen, preps, J.V. Jocks, Asian nerds, cool Asians, Varsity jocks, girls who eat their feelings, girls who don not eat anything, desperate wannabees, burnouts, finally, The Plastics – the most popular girls [3]. Such separation and classification are usually based on financial and academic status, nationality, health, hobbies, confession, social life, family situation. Even the names sound off-putting and disrespectful, not to mention *the Burn book*, which contains gossips about almost every girl and even teachers [4].

'On Wednesdays we wear pink' is the moment when the Plastics tell Cady, the main character, to follow the rules in order to seat at the table with them. To become a member of a privileged group you must follow

some other traditions, for instance: you cannot wear a tank top two days in a row, and you can only wear your hair in a ponytail once a week. By the way, they only wear jeans or track pants on Fridays. However, this membership does not guarantee absolute success. Relationships within the group are often toxic and hypocritical, you may end up losing everything or even becoming a victim of bullying.

Interviews with common people prove that movies are the reflection of life. Americans share their experience at high school:

“Did you have such cliques at your school?” - “I studied at a small farmer school, so the status depended on the level of your family’s success in agriculture. As for me, I was a geek playing in the orchestra, a so-called prep. There was, of course, a *‘popular girl’s table’* [4].

But why do teenagers need to be accepted and valued by friends that badly? According to the theory Erikson’s stages of development, a major question during puberty proves to be “Who am I?” [5] and the important event is identified with social relationships. Apart from the obvious effect one can observe in their life as the result of being included to a group of peers, for instance, respect or contempt, there is strong emotional impact. The main lead of the movie *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* Charlie Kelmeckis suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder which makes him avoid people or memory related to traumatic experience. Being an antisocial person, Charlie suffers from loneliness and bullying at school. One night changes everything: he finally finds peace and the feeling of belonging somewhere provided by new friends and a seat in the cafeteria. At the same time, significant changes take place: while remaining a wallflower, the main lead tends to participate by listening to rock ballads, by taking part in burlesque Punk Rocky shows, by taking drugs. The above-mentioned transformations are the examples of peer pressure and influence. How else is adolescents’ behavior shaped?

Peer pressure and influence might result in pre-teens and teenagers: choosing the same clothes, hairstyle or jewelry as their friends; listening to the same music or watching the same TV shows as their friends; changing the way they talk or the words they use; doing risky things or breaking rules; working harder at school or not working as hard; dating or taking part in sexual activities; vaping, smoking or using alcohol or other drugs [6].

The apt example for such behavior in pop culture could be the movie *Thirteen*. Thirteen-years-old Tracy gets involved in drugs, thefts and other forms of social misbehavior in order to get closer with Evie.

Doing something you would not otherwise do is not always the way of becoming the member of a friends’ group. One will be likely excluded from it anytime for various reasons: gossip, conflict, betrayal, nonconformism.

Returning to the *Perks of being a wallflower*, one situation must be dwelled on. After some events, Charlie's friendship with schoolmates comes to an end and he feels abandoned, forgotten and miserable sitting at his table in the cafeteria. Despite all the hardships, the main lead is forgiven and at last creates good memories with close people. "And in this moment, I swear, we are infinite", – he says.

Therefore, it is possible for a person to be seen not in spite of their true self, but for it. Charlie is a wallflower, he has always been. Still, the main lead seems to be loved and appreciated by friends. Coping well with peer influence is about getting the balance right between being yourself and fitting in with your group [6].

So, what is so dangerous about social inequality? Not only does it approve discrimination, but may lead to bullying, ignorance, problems with mental health. Besides, not everyone is able to bear it and ask for help or try to make things right, although it is even never the victim's fault. Everything can end tragically: a person commits suicide, becomes an addict or even decides to take revenge. The USA is infamous for mass school shootings and gun violence. Every person knows about the shooting at Columbine, since this tragic event about 350 thousand students in the U.S. have experienced gun violence at school. In 2022 there were more school shootings than in any year since Columbine – 46 [7]. Many of them are the result of bullying. We can never justify murder, but the figure could be less if we paid more attention to the issue.

To conclude, American school social hierarchy is almost as violent as the caste system, it may ruin people's lives and control every step you make and every breath you take, overseeing the way you dress, people you communicate with, music you listen to. With the popularity of social media and messengers, it has never been so easy, and people have never been so vulnerable. The difference is that one can try to use the social lift and do their best to become more respected and recognized. But why do we have to lose individuality and betray principles if the heart of the problem must be worked on?

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