Name: _____ Class: _____

Keeping Up with the Joneses

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When everyone is getting the latest version of a smartphone, do you feel the pressure to buy one, too? The phrase "keeping up with the Joneses" describes the habit of trying to compete with your peers' social status, wealth, and possessions. As you read, take notes on the historical origin and examples of keeping up with the Joneses.

Origins

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[1] "Keeping up with the Joneses" is an idiom, or popular phrase, that refers to the pressure to "keep up" with your neighbor's social status, wealth, or popularity. It refers to the way people constantly compare themselves to a neighbor and strive to accumulate the same material goods.

The origins of this phrase are not exactly clear. One explanation is that the Joneses were a prominent,[1] wealthy family from New York. The Joneses and other rich New Yorkers began to build country mansions in the Hudson Valley. Soon, the houses in this area became grander and grander. In 1853, Elizabeth Schermerhorn Jones built a 24-room mansion called Wyndcliffe, described as being very ornate[2] and in the style of a Scottish castle. Reputedly,[3] the mansion spurred[4] more and more building by other families who wanted to show that they were of equal or greater wealth, a phenomenon described as "keeping up with the Joneses."

By the mid-century, the Joneses had built up their wealth and enjoyed a grand lifestyle, thanks to their ties to a powerful New York bank. The family started hosting elaborate parties and made a list of four-hundred elite members of society to invite. Being on the "Four-Hundred List" was a sign of respect and popularity, and as a result, earning a spot on it became very competitive.

1. **Prominent** ***(adjective)*** widely and popularly known
2. **Ornate** ***(adjective)*** covered with decorations; usually fancy patterns and shapes
3. according to what people say or believe; supposedly
4. **Spur** ***(verb)*** to cause or promote something into action

History

In Old World Europe, social status depended on one's family name and connections to royalty. Because of this, it was very difficult for a person to change his or her social status or rank — it was something you were born with or you weren't. In the United States, the widespread availability of luxury products such as cars, technology, and homes that show a person's status is one thing that has made social mobility[5] possible. Some say that it is possible in the U.S. to "buy your way to the top." With the increasing availability and appeal of "status goods," people became more inclined[6] to define themselves by what they possessed. The quest for higher social status accelerated.

Effects

[5] The "keeping up with the Joneses" philosophy has widespread effects on some societies — some positive, and some negative. On one hand, it means that it is possible for people to enter into a higher social class. On the other hand, it means that people in a society sometimes become preoccupied[7] with the accumulation[8] of wealth and status, and there may be winners and losers. Some people may not be able to "keep up with the Joneses" and feel dissatisfied or inferior. The "keeping up with the Joneses" phenomenon can happen in any community where people define their own success in relation to the success of peers and compete to meet a competitive standard.

The term has been a commercial and cultural buzzword for over a century, but the phenomenon still resonates[9] today. Especially with society now more interconnected than ever, it is easy for people to notice — and become jealous of — what their neighbors have that they don't. But even in countries where the desire for upward social mobility through consumerism[10] is strong, the poor may not be able to better themselves. Doug Henwood observed that "both the US and British poor were more likely to stay poor for a long period of time: almost half of all people who were poor for one year stayed poor for five or more years, compared with 30% in Canada and 36% in Germany. And, despite claims of great upward mobility in the US, 45% of the poor rose out of poverty in a given year, compared with 45% in the UK, 53% in Germany, and 56% in Canada. And of those who did exit poverty, 15% of Americans were likely to make a round trip back under the poverty line, compared with 16% in Germany, 10% in the UK, and 7% in Canada." In other words, the more unequal the population of a country, the less likely people will be able to move up or down the ladder of social prominence and wealth.

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5. "Social mobility" refers to the ability to move up in social ranking or status.
6. **Inclined** ***(adjective)*** wanting to do something or likely to do something
7. **Preoccupy** ***(verb)*** to think about something a lot or too much
8. **Accumulation** ***(noun)*** a collection or the act of collecting
9. **Resonate** ***(verb)*** to have particular meaning or importance for someone
10. the belief that it is good for people to spend a lot of money on goods and services

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. How does the creation of the "Four-Hundred List" contribute to the idea of "Keeping Up With the Joneses"?

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2. What is one danger to "Keeping up with the Joneses"?
   A. People can become obsessed with physical or economic gains
   B. People can hit a plateau or "ceiling"
   C. People who do not believe physical assets are important are left out
   D. The philosophy does not transfer to other countries

3. How is the phenomenon of "Keeping up with the Joneses" a distinctly American concept?
   A. "Jones" is a typically American name, so the concept of "Keeping Up With The Joneses" pertains to anyone in America that is worth aspiring to
   B. Unlike in Europe, anyone in America was thought to be capable of achieving wealth and status
   C. In America, it was believed that one's social status was tied to their family name (e.g. Jones)
   D. The Joneses and the people who kept up with them desired things that did not indicate high social status in other countries

4. PART A: What is the reality of upward mobility in the United States?
   A. People are more likely to achieve upward mobility in the United States than anywhere else in the world
   B. People who were born poor in the United States tend to remain poor until they die
   C. People who were born poor in the United States tend to have much more motivation to remedy their financial situation than in other countries
   D. People are no more likely to achieve upward mobility in the United States as they are in many other countries

5. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. "...even in countries where the desire for upward social mobility through consumerism is strong, the poor may not be able to better themselves." (Paragraph 6)
   B. "...almost half of all people who were poor for one year stayed poor for five or more years..." (Paragraph 6)
   C. "...in the US, 45% of the poor rose out of poverty in a given year, compared with 45% in the UK, 53% in Germany, and 56% in Canada." (Paragraph 6)
   D. "...15% of Americans were likely to make a round trip back under the poverty line..." (Paragraph 6)

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In your own words, explain the concept of "keeping up with the Joneses."

2. What caused the rush to build overly extravagant mansions in New York?

3. Why do people follow the crowd? Use evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.