

The Great Escape: Modern Women and the Chick Lit Genre

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The Great Escape:

Modern Women and the Chick Lit Genre

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INTRODUCTION

“I think it had far more to do with zeitgeist than imitation.”
—Helen Fielding, author of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, on chick lit¹

Helen Fielding, author of the original chick lit novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, credits the popularity of her novel and its subsequent clones to the way chick lit tapped into the spirit of a generation. Indeed, most explanations of the genre attribute its success to a unique perspective of the issues facing today’s generation of young women. Yet, this generation is never specifically defined, perhaps because the genre’s accessibility spans *several* generations. The original chick lit books of the late nineties captured the attention of young women in their twenties and early thirties – mostly of “Generation X.” In the past decade, a younger group of women has begun to identify with the genre. Young teens of “Generation Y” have grown up reading “tween” versions of the genre in the form of the *Gossip Girls* and *Princess Diaries* series. As chick lit still remains a popular genre, the “zeitgeist” it expresses is shared by an expanding audience of women ranging from ages sixteen to forty. The “chick lit generation” encompasses a large population, which includes any woman raised during a time when “feminism” and “equal opportunity” were (for the most part) accepted and unquestioned ideologies.

A definition of the “chick lit generation” at the opening of this thesis is important primarily because I will be referring to the genre’s readership frequently, but also because the wide range of readers intrigues me. What is it about chick lit that both a sixteen-year-old and a thirty-six-year can identify with? I agree with Fielding that some form of zeitgeist is bringing together women from different generations. They are united by the similar phenomenon of growing up with the knowledge of having more opportunities

than any previous generation of women, but also by witnessing the struggle of older women attempting to balance all of their new responsibilities.

My first encounter with chick lit began with a suggestion from one of my older sisters. Last year I came home on break looking for a lighthearted book to distract me from my work at college. Overwhelmed by existential philosophy and Marxist political theory, I wanted to read something “fun” to forget these bleak thoughts. My sister, who was twenty-five at the time, loaned me a few of her chick lit books, thinking that a breezy, light read would be a great escape from Camus. And yet, the more chick lit I read, the more confused I felt. Instead of being amused by the novel’s protagonists, I was saddened by the descriptions of their thoughts and actions. Anytime I felt a moment of identification with one of them, I immediately felt guilty because of their vapid personalities. Were these women, with their shoe fetishes and self-image obsessions, supposed to represent my sisters and me? What kind of values is the genre reinforcing?

I became more upset as I thought about the novels and the questions they raised. Not wanting to blame my peers or insult their intelligence, I felt there was something troubling about these novels that must be discussed. The genre’s immense popularity demonstrates that the novels have tapped into some cultural tension, but I wasn’t sure what it was. Was there a way to read these novels as subversive? Would I be able to find something redeeming about them?

Chick lit operates on multiple levels and this thesis employs several theoretical lenses to understand the layers. The surface question about chick lit is whether the books are “good” or “bad.” After reading my first chick lit novel, I did a quick Internet search on the genre, which revealed the public debate on the value of chick lit. Hundreds of web

pages turned up, both praising and condemning the novels. My “quick” search led to hours on the Internet, studying what readers and authors of the genre said in its defense, and also what its detractors criticized. For a while, these questions of whether the genre was “good” or “bad” and what it said about contemporary society distracted me. I got caught up in this debate, and indeed, this first layer of questions is what most people believe the subject of this thesis to be. However, the main argument of this thesis is not whether the genre is “good” or “bad” literature or even what the genre *says* about contemporary women. The argument is what the genre *does* to modern women. This is a question that semiotics teaches us to ask. Semiotics, the study of signs, is concerned with the function of the system of signification and expression in communications. I began asking semiotic questions about how the books and their characters were working in society.

Keeping these semiotic questions in the back of my mind, I then turned to a formal analysis of the novels. Before I began discussing what chick lit does, I needed to define the genre, to distinguish chick lit novels from other forms of literature. As the first chapter will discuss, chick lit is both a disputed term and a disputed genre. Magazines, newspapers, websites, and online message boards abound with discussions on the value of chick lit in contemporary society and the genre’s role in the history of women’s literature. A recurring theme appearing in these forums is the anxiety over what classifies a novel as “chick lit.” The boundaries between “chick lit” and “women’s literature” are blurry, and as the genre grows more popular and diverse, the definition of chick lit becomes even more opaque. Is any novel written by a woman chick lit? Does the definition hinge on publishers’ marketing methods? I decided to define the genre based

on the texts themselves, and so a formal analysis of the genre's conventions helped me to create my own definition of chick lit. This definition, based on the structure of the texts, allowed the thesis to analyze the novels on their own terms.

Ultimately, I hoped for the scope of my thesis to be much broader than simply what the texts *say*, so I looked for a different methodology to help me ask and answer my initial semiotic questions about what the texts *do*. Cultural studies serves as the best method to understand chick lit's place in society for multiple reasons. Any study of chick lit could fall under the cultural studies umbrella because of the field's interest in the connection between scholarship and popular culture.

Using an approach that blended Marxist theory, sociology, and semiotics, Stuart Hall and other scholars analyzed aspects of the media and popular culture to portray how power asserts itself and also how people resist cultural authority. They began the cultural studies discipline at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies at Birmingham, England in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the same time in the United States, academics like Janice Radway took "such vilified popular forms as the romance novel and construed them as offering a way for women to resist the patriarchal structures imposed on their lives."² In her second introduction to her book about romance novels, Radway says that she was ignorant of the Birmingham school of cultural studies while writing *Reading the Romance* – she believed her work would be directed towards American studies scholars.³ *Reading the Romance* was published in 1984 when cultural studies was still a developing field. Less than ten years later, when Radway reissued her work in 1991, cultural studies had become a respected and well-known academic area.

Cultural studies attaches significance to every form of pop culture, transforming “ordinary” or “low-brow” cultural objects into texts with deeper significations. Lidia Curti argues that cultural studies is a field “born on the margins” and so pays attention to the outskirts of society.⁴ These margins can include music, hairstyles, clothes, and popular literature. In England, early cultural studies scholars Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart came from working-class families and struggled to gain access to the elite institutions of British higher education. They attempted to reconcile the “high” culture of the academy with the “low” culture of their upbringings. Cultural studies is interested in the way texts operate in society by examining the relationship between dominant and subordinate societies. The field challenges the intellectual class through its restructuring of the academy’s view of the rest of the social order. Williams and Hoggart redefined “culture” through their inclusion of film, paperbacks, music, and other aspects of popular culture in their definition of the “text.” Cultural studies concerns itself with the lives of “ordinary” people, interpreting how they interact with popular culture on an everyday basis.

Radway, one of the first American cultural theorists, studied the debate surrounding the Book-of-the-Month Club in the 1920s, suggesting that underneath the apparent reasons for questioning the club’s role in society lay a deeper argument over who holds claim on cultural authority – academics or entrepreneurs. Radway used the Book-of-the-Month Club debate to reveal the uneasiness over the changing definition of culture and the use of culture in distinguishing economic classes. The upwardly mobile, white middle class used the discourse over the act of reading to separate itself from the blue-collar class. The middle class asserted that its members “pleasure read” for self-

education and improvement while the working class “were made content by simple and simple-minded fun.”⁵ The Book-of-the-Month club marked the beginnings of “mass culture” and a revision in the way culture was defined. Previously, what texts belonged to high culture had been decided by scholars, but the Book-of-the-Month Club used consumerism to spread “culture” to the masses and create “classics” through popularity. Radway used the club to discuss the changing meanings of culture: “In wedding cultural production to mass distribution, and more particularly to mass consumption, Scherman [founder of the Book-of-the-Month Club] was challenging some of his culture’s most fundamental ideological assumptions about the character of culture, education, literature, art, and criticism.”⁶

The developing definition of “culture” discussed by Radway is important to the history of cultural studies. In their literary theory anthology, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan describe the history of cultural studies in terms of the ever-changing definition of “culture.” According to Rivkin and Ryan’s interpretation of cultural studies, the concept of “culture” can be approached from multiple perspectives. Prior to the 1960s and 1970s, when cultural studies was first developed, “culture” meant high art, literature, and classical music. Other academic fields, such as anthropology, used “culture” to discuss how people behaved within societies. Marxist philosophy ties culture to politics, asserting that it is a means of both domination and subversion. Initially, Marxist theory viewed culture solely as a means of domination whereby society reproduced itself. This idea of culture as a political tool originated in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth: “Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their celebrated *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1944], argue that mass culture – the culture of television, radio, film, and

cheap paperbacks – is a tool of domination, a way for capitalism to offer ephemeral gratification to people condemned to lives of work.”⁷ Cultural studies, influenced by Marxist philosophy, is interested not only in how culture is a tool of the dominating class, but also how culture resists the dominating class and expresses opposing views.

Both Radway and the theorists at the Birmingham school studied aspects of culture that oppose capitalism and the dominant social order. By studying “low” culture, such as popular music or romance novels, one can find tremors of resistance. Cultural studies views culture as working dualistically. Rivkin and Ryan state that: “Culture comes from below, and while it can be harnessed in profitable and ultimately socially conservative ways, it also represents the permanent possibility of eruption, of dissonance, and of an alternative imagination of reality.”⁸ I was intrigued by this school of thought because it gives people agency, allowing them to be more than blank subjects manipulated by the dominant class. Chick lit, as a “cheap paperback,” is a method of mass culture that Adorno and Horkheimer would consider a tool of manipulation. I hoped to use Radway’s theories in order to give the readers power and find something subversive about the genre. This thesis attempts to blend these two ways of thinking about culture, as a means of both domination and subversion, and apply them to chick lit. Radway’s work has directly influenced this thesis, especially her study of romance novels through the cultural studies lens. Using Radway’s approach to studying the Book-of-the-Month Club and romance novels, I reanalyzed the public debate over chick lit and the relationship between reader and novel.

Cultural studies analyzes the relationship between the reader and the text, taking into account the reader’s own interpretation of this relationship. Examining the

reader/text dynamic is important to my goal of not undermining the reader's intelligence. Radway's relationship with her readers serves as a guideline for respecting the readers and their thoughts. While working on *Reading the Romance*, Radway listened to how her readers presented themselves and acknowledged that anything she wrote would be "my own construction of my informant's construction of what they were up to in reading romances."⁹ When the readers continually emphasized the *act* of reading over the actual meaning of the text, Radway restructured her project to account for the significance of the act of reading:

Indeed, it was the women readers' construction of the act of romance reading as a 'declaration of independence' that surprised me into the realization that the meaning of the media use was multiply determined and internally contradictory and that to get at its complexity, it would be helpful to distinguish analytically between the significance of the *event* of reading and the meaning of the *text* constructed as its consequence.¹⁰

Radway's study changed its focus from reading as textual interpretation to reading as an act; this change marked how her study began to intersect with the cultural studies work in England. By using cultural studies as an approach to studying chick lit, this thesis will account for how readers interact with the genre and what the act of reading does to them.

As stated earlier, the first chapter will focus on what qualifies a book as "chick lit." Using the actual texts, I will create my own description of what does (and doesn't) belong in this genre. The chapter will define chick lit by focusing on the typical story formula and contrasting the genre to other types of women's literature. It will also summarize the debates in popular culture about the value of the genre and its role in contemporary women's literature and society. The books' readers and writers are very much aware of the tensions implicit in a genre published in today's world about women

searching for fulfillment through romance. This chapter will outline how the authors believe the genre functions.

The second chapter will be a formalist, close reading of chick lit novels on their own terms. The primary goal of this chapter is to understand what values the texts promote and how this analysis compares with what the authors believe their works do. Focusing on the role of the characters, the chapter will explore the ways in which the novels interact with contemporary issues. By comparing chick lit to other forms of literature written by women, specifically Jane Austen, I will discuss the potential of popular literature to effect change.

The third chapter will emphasize the readers and their relationship to the books. Readers of the genre classify the texts as “easy reads” that allow them to “escape” from life. Remembering Radway’s argument about escape reading as an empowering *action*, this chapter centers on what reading the texts *does* to the readers. Using “escapism” as the central theme, I will discuss the failure of chick lit to fulfill the hopes the authors expressed for the genre in the first chapter. This inability stems from the way in which the genre constructs passive readers who don’t ask questions about their world. This last chapter will use Marxism to deconstruct the ideologies that form the texts and what these texts conceal.

CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS CHICK LIT?

► **chick lit** (*occas.* depreciative), *literature by, for, or about women; esp. a type of fiction, typically focusing on the social lives and relationships of young professional women, and often aimed at readers with similar experiences.*¹¹

Chick lit heroines laugh at themselves and chick lit readers laugh at their books.

Chick lit, the popular and potentially derogatory nickname of a genre written for women, about women, gained popularity after the success of Helen Fielding's 1998 novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Fielding's work inspired a new genre of literature written about the contemporary young woman; *Bridget Jones* captured the issues facing women in their twenties and thirties, and many other authors began writing in Fielding's style. Although *Bridget Jones* received praise from both sexes ("Even men will laugh," proclaims the Salman Rushdie blurb), these novels are mostly marketed to the young women they portray. One can recognize a chick lit novel by its cover, which usually depicts illustrations of shoes, martini glasses, or lipstick tubes drawn in pastel colors.

The genre's literary conventions, not only its book covers, separate it from other types of female literature. Using the genre's formulas, this chapter will define the conventions of a typical chick lit novel. In the years since the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, chick lit has grown to include subcategories such as "hen lit," "bridal lit," and "Latina lit," but the most popular books continue to tell the story of the "traditional" chick lit heroine. She is a white, urban professional in her late twenties or early thirties. Her family lives somewhere in the suburbs, popping in and out of the novel as an annoyance in the heroine's life and sometimes as an obstacle between her and the hero. Life in the city consists of working in an uninspiring office job, going to happy hour with co-workers, shopping, and drinking with her friends on a Saturday night (or any other

night of the week for that matter). Alcohol is a major part of most heroines' social lives, while alcoholism is an issue rarely broached.

At the beginning of the novel, the heroine realizes she is acting like a college student at a point in her life when she is “supposed” to be an accomplished professional, a happily married mother, or both. After this epiphany, the heroine meets the hero, but an obstacle – sometimes in the form of an external factor, but often a personal barrier – keeps them apart for the majority of the story. When the couple unites in the last twenty pages of the novel, the heroine’s life has somehow transformed during her journey to him. She usually has a new job, a better income, and has sometimes even improved her relationships with her family. “It’s amazing what a different person I am these days,” says Emma Corrigan in the epilogue of Sophie Kinsella’s *Can You Keep a Secret?* “It’s like ... I’ve been transformed. I’m a new Emma. Far more open than I used to be. Far more honest. Because what I’ve really learned is, if you can’t be honest with your friends and colleagues and loved ones, then what is life all about?”¹² Emma not only changes in terms of personality, she also transforms her material circumstances through her promotion from marketing assistant to marketing executive. *Can You Keep a Secret?* opens with a list of Emma’s secrets – everything unsatisfying in her life, from her relationship with her boyfriend to her unhappiness with her job. By the end, Emma’s only secrets are how much she loves her job and dreams about having children with her new boyfriend.

Flighty Emma Corrigan exemplifies the scatterbrained and self-deprecating protagonist type that is the most popular in chick lit novels. The genre’s heroine is divided into two types: insecure women like Emma and ambitious, organized, and

professional women. The latter is an intelligent type-A personality who has a successful career and a posh apartment. Underneath her perfect façade, however, is a woman afraid of committing to a relationship due to some past emotional trauma. Katherine from Marian Keyes's *Last Chance Saloon*, who never dates a man for more than three months, is one of these women; she can't trust men because her first lover abandoned her when she got pregnant. The Emma Corrigan character type is disorganized, yet quirky and lovable. This character model originated with chick lit's queen, Bridget Jones. She bounces from bad relationship to bad relationship ("relationship" often meaning one-night stand) and job to job without any clear direction for her future. She's constantly dieting and worrying about money, which she spends as quickly as she earns. If the novel is written in the first person, then the heroine often has the writing abilities of a twelve-year-old. Meg Cabot's heroines constantly capitalize, underline, and italicize their words for emphasis and use "like," "I mean," "totally," and "!!!!" so often that it's not difficult to confuse them with the heroine of *The Princess Diaries*, the series Cabot writes for tweens. Like Bridget Jones, Jane Harris of Cabot's *Every Boy's Got One* brings her diary with her everywhere. Her first impressions of Cal Langdon, her eventual love interest, reflect her puerile writing and immaturity: "My God. Who *is* this guy? And why does Mark even like him???? I think I'm going to have to have a word with Holly. Does she know what she's getting herself into, marrying a man who'd be best friends with a guy who doesn't watch TV????"¹³

Cal Langdon, like all heroes in the chick lit formula, is extremely intelligent and successful. Romantic relationships in chick lit differ depending on the type of heroine. For the "type-A heroine," the hero transforms the heroine, melting her ice-queen exterior

and proving to her that she can trust men. “I’ve never cared about anyone so much that what I do isn’t as important as who I’m with while I’m doing it,” career-driven publicist Valerie Wagner confesses to sportswriter Jack Lambert at the end of Donna Kauffman’s *Dear Prince Charming*:

‘I trust you with something a hell of a lot more important than my career.’

He gave her the smile right back. ‘There’s something more important than your job?’

‘Yeah, smart-ass.’ Suddenly she sniffled again. ‘My heart.’ There was a sudden stinging in his own eyes. ‘Yeah?’ he said, his voice barely more than a croak as his throat tightened.

She nodded. ‘Yeah. And I’ve never trusted anyone with it before, so you’d better take good care of it.’¹⁴

Like many type-A couples in chick lit, both Valerie and Jack have had bad past romantic relationships, but at the end of the novel come to love each other. They also learn to put love and relationships above their careers.

While less secure with herself than the career-driven heroine, the “type-B” heroine is also more open to romantic relationships. In these romances, the hero does not have to break down her emotional barriers; his challenge is demonstrating that he understands and respects her quirky nature and doesn’t want to change her. The hero’s acceptance of the protagonist’s weaknesses is essential to the genre: “The female has to have a flaw, but in the end, she finds a guy who loves her despite this,” says 21-year-old reader Christy Dunn.¹⁵ Luke Brandon loves Sophie Kinsella’s “Shopaholic” despite her spendthrift ways; he even takes her on a shopping trip. The hero also is always caring and nurturing to the heroine, helping her settle her financial and career woes. Through the help of boyfriend Jack Harper, Emma from *Can You Keep a Secret?* advances in her career and stands up to her overbearing family. In a somewhat over-the-top storyline,

Mark Darcy, of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, saves Bridget's mother from being prosecuted for fraud.

Sometimes the chick lit hero doesn't want to settle down, and enjoys his responsibility-free single lifestyle. Usually he reveals that he feels this way about women because he, like the type-A heroine, has been hurt in the past. "I'm not going to tell you I've never been in love, because you and I both know that's not true. I was in love once, and it didn't work out, and because of that, I have worked very, very hard to convince myself that love doesn't exist," Cal confesses to Jane before he says that she has made him believe in love again.¹⁶ These modern heroes and heroines reflect the contemporary dating culture, where the average age of marriage is twenty-seven for men and twenty-six for women. (These averages are even older ages for states with big cities.)¹⁷ Chick lit heroes and heroines in their late twenties or early thirties have dated multiple people, and some have even been married before. Also reflecting a contemporary trend, chick lit heroes appear hyper-masculine and macho, but are actually more sensitive towards the heroine's feelings than any other female character. Often, they are even better able to express their emotions than the heroines; Jane's response to Cal's poetic confession of love is a simple "Ngh" – she is incapable of verbalizing her feelings.

These formulaic character types and transformations set chick lit apart from other genres. Chick lit has often been described as a sub-category of the romance novel, and, indeed there are many similarities between the genres. Popular chick lit author Meg Cabot, who also writes teen chick lit, crosses between chick lit and romance writing. Her use of a different pen name (Patricia Cabot) for romance novels proves that in terms of social perception there is a difference between the genres. The genres' conventions are

what really set them apart from each other. In *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway outlines the typical romance formula in her chapter “The Ideal Romance,” using readers’ descriptions of what conventions make the romance novel work well. While chick lit is aimed at a younger reader than the romance novel, the genre’s heroine is older than the romance heroine. In the romance, the protagonist is usually between seventeen and twenty years old, and the chick lit heroine is older than twenty-five. The youth of the romance heroine explains much of her personality traits. Unlike the self-conscious, body-image-obsessed chick lit heroine, the romance heroine has no concept of her physical beauty and maturing body. Not only is the romance heroine the ideal beauty, she also has an “unusual intelligence” and a “fiery disposition.” In contrast, a chick lit heroine can be described as “quirky” or “creative” at best. Even the intelligent, type-A protagonists are more “cool” or “icy” than “fiery.” While some heroines are intelligent and others scatter-brained, all chick lit heroines share a self-deprecating and sarcastic humor. The chick lit heroine could never be described as innocent; she has had many boyfriends and sexual partners. Most romance heroines have never interacted with the opposite sex and are unaware of their capability for sexual urges. Perhaps readers can believe in the romance heroine’s innocence because of the romance’s historical backdrop – time periods when women were assumed to be sexually innocent. A chick lit novel is always set in the present, and usually in an urban setting – the chick lit heroine has no chance for innocence, because contemporary culture is sated with sex.

The love story in the romance and the chick lit novel is also structured differently. Radway says that the ideal romance focuses solely on the developing relationship between hero and heroine. A chick lit heroine might have multiple boyfriends throughout

the novel and not even meet the hero until the second half of the book. The narrative also focuses on the heroine's non-romantic problems: finances, career, and relationships with family and friends. In the romance, the hero begins as cold, indifferent, hyper-masculine, and often misogynistic until the heroine's beauty and compassion transforms him. In chick lit, as discussed earlier, the hero often transforms the heroine, or there is a mutual change as they both begin to trust each other. While the chick lit hero could be described as strong and manly, he is emotional and never hyper-masculine.

The growth of chick lit may be the reason behind a decline in Harlequin romance novel sales, although Harlequin publicly denies this claim. In fact, Harlequin launched Red Dress Ink, a division that publishes books that resemble chick lit rather than the traditional bodice-rippers and are marketed toward the typical chick lit audience in November 2001.¹⁸ Harlequin isn't the only publishing house to jump on the chick lit band wagon. After the success of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and subsequent novels, such as Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series, many mainstream publishers set up imprints dedicated solely to chick lit novels. For example, Random House's Broadway Books imprint has a chick lit division; while in 2003 two strictly chick lit imprints were launched – Pocket Books, a division of Simon and Schuster, created Downtown Press, and Kensington Books launched Strapless. In an often quoted interview, Barnes and Noble buyer Sessalee Hensley told ABCNews.com that since 1998, chick lit has been the fastest growing literature genre in a time when popular authors such as John Grisham, Michael Crichton, and Tom Clancy are experiencing a decline in sales.¹⁹ The newer chick lit genres aimed at specific demographics such as lesbians, women over fifty, Christians, and different racial groups suggest a continuation of chick lit's growth. Most recently, Pocket Books

launched a new line of “teen chick lit” in March 2006, while Hyperion is launching an imprint in spring 2007 devoted to women’s literature, both fiction and non-fiction, geared towards older women.

Despite its continuing popularity, in the beginning of the boom critics believed the chick lit “phenomenon” would soon be replaced by more “serious” books such as Janet Fitch’s *White Oleander* or Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*. In a March 2002 article for the online publication *Spiked*, Jennie Bristow commends the genre for its insights into the problems of the first generation of women with the possibility of “having it all.”²⁰

However, in the same article she writes that chick lit will fade: “One reason has to be that, quite simply, chick lit just isn’t very good. Once the insight had been had, there was nowhere for it to go.” Despite Bristow and other’s predictions, chick lit not only has the same popularity today as it did in its early days, but it is more popular than ever.

Undoubtedly, this genre plays important part of pop culture that should be treated seriously.

Not only is chick lit not a simple passing fad, but many argue that the genre has been around for hundreds of years, encompassing everything from Rona Jaffe’s novel *The Best of Everything*, published in 1958, to Frances Burney’s 1778 novel *Evelina*. This argument states that any book can be titled chick lit if it is written by a woman, about women. Chick lit authors use this argument in defense of their work, often comparing their novels to the British classics, especially those written in the nineteenth century, because of their focus on personal relationships. In fact, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, the first official chick lit book, was loosely based on Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and included many references to Austen’s masterpiece, including the hero’s name. Yet, there

are crucial distinctions between chick lit and all literature written by women. In the next chapter, I will further discuss how the formal structure of chick lit novels separates them from other types of fiction. But chick lit is most obviously distinguished by how it is marketed: sometimes the easiest way to single out a chick lit book *is* judging a book by its cover. Publishing houses use pastel-colored covers featuring material items, such as shopping bags, shoes, and lipstick tubes, to separate chick lit from other novels. However, this method of classification can become murky when a female author *doesn't* want her book to be labeled chick lit, yet publishes a book with “chick lit-esque” cover. Authors who don't want publishers to label their books chick lit are part of the growing negative reaction towards chick lit.

The genre's popularity has created a backlash, placing the genre in the center of a debate about women's literature. On a level that appears unimportant, but actually carries a great deal of social weight, the name of the genre may intrinsically contain a stigma that some argue contributes to the popular feelings that the books are trivial. The moniker “chick lit” entered popular culture after *Bridget Jones* and has stuck. A spin-off of “chick flicks” (movies marketed towards women) the cutesy nickname carries the connotation of a clichéd, formulaic love story with a happy ending. Among contemporary female authors there is an ongoing debate about whether the term should be used at all. The authors who support the chick lit label are always quick to define themselves and the genre/label as feminist and subversive. “I'm the past president of our local chapter of NOW and very much a feminist, and also proud to be a Chick Lit author,” says Jennifer Coburn in a roundtable talk for *Authors on the Web*. In the same discussion, author Valerie Frankel says that although she used to be upset by the term, it has grown on her

because of the popularity of the genre: “Being included in a category of books that millions of women love to death doesn’t bother me one tiny bit anymore.” Chick lit, for these authors, describes more than just a marketing ploy, but an actual support system that bonds females together. “For me, the word ‘chick’ is a strong, affectionate label, woman to woman, not a demeaning one. Now if it were Slut Stories or Tart Tales, I might feel differently,” says Kauffman.²¹

While some chick lit authors agree with their peers’ positive views of the role of chick lit, they disagree with the actual label. In fact, for these authors the condescension of the term “chick lit” means exactly the same thing as “slut stories” or “tart tales.” “Chick lit is a deliberately condescending term they use to rubbish us all,” says Jenny Colgan. “If they called it slut lit it couldn’t be more insulting.”²²

Colgan isn’t the only author to compare “chick” to “slut”; Curtis Sittenfeld, author of *Prep* (2005), came under fire after she panned *The Wonder Spot* by Melissa Bank, whose 1999 *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* began the chick lit explosion in the United States. Sittenfeld criticizes *The Wonder Spot* in her June 2005 *New York Times* review by specifically labeling it chick lit and comparing the label “chick lit” to “slut”: “To suggest that another woman’s ostensibly literary novel is chick lit feels catty, not unlike calling another woman a slut – doesn’t the term basically bring down all of us? And yet, with *The Wonder Spot*, it’s hard to resist.”²³ Sittenfeld’s argument is that Bank’s novel is about meaningful themes but, because Bank failed to write about them in a serious fashion, her “lightweight” book should be labeled chick lit. The chick lit discussion is more important than a “catfight,” as an article about Jennifer Weiner in *Philadelphia* magazine described it, yet the words describing the debate (i.e. “catfight”)

are just as condescending and misogynistic as the term itself. Often the controversy over the term “chick lit” distracts from the larger question about the status of contemporary female literature.

The lack of guidelines over what is and isn’t chick lit contributes to the confusion among female authors about the status of their work. Sittenfeld’s book review sparked arguments among chick lit authors about the role of women in today’s publishing world. Weiner, one of the most famous chick lit authors (*Good in Bed, In Her Shoes*) attacked Sittenfeld in her blog “Snark Spot,” saying that the debate over women’s literature versus chick lit was a grown-up version of a high-school fight: “like so much jockeying for position in the cafeteria and mocking the girls who are nerdier/sluttier/stupider than you to make yourself feel more secure about your own place in the pecking order.”²⁴

Although Weiner unconsciously employs the same misogynistic vocabulary with her high school cafeteria analogy, she raises valid points about the way the publishing world views female writers. In her blog, Weiner writes that Sittenfeld’s own insecurities about being taken seriously as a writer prompted her to put down Bank’s novel. In both her blog and the *Philadelphia* magazine article, Weiner talks about young female authors not being as well-respected as young male authors:

‘People use the term ‘chick lit’ to dismiss women writers,’ Weiner says. ‘Any book with a young heroine dealing with a dysfunctional family, romantic issues or family trauma, any book with autobiographical components,’ gets slapped with the label. ‘It’s not fair. When Jonathan Safran Foer’s first book came out, you know, it was about him, but I feel like the tone of the pieces written about him was much more respectful, and much more, *oooh*, fancy writers. But when women’s books come out, it’s like, oh, you’re not a real *writer*, you’re just publishing your diary.’²⁵

Weiner emphasizes that Sittenfeld has the same education and has been published and profiled in the same outlets as male authors Jonathan Franzen, Safran Foer, Tom Perrotta,

and Tom Wolfe, yet *Prep* was marketed more like a chick lit book than a “serious” novel like *The Corrections* or *Everything is Illuminated*. “The way the book was sold,” writes Weiner, “was *The Nanny Diaries*, only in prep school: a dishy, entertaining glimpse behind the velvet rope (or grosgrain belt) into the lives of privileged elites.”²⁶

This debate about the value of chick lit is the most recent installment in an ongoing dialogue surrounding women’s literature that has lasted for centuries. Some argue that women’s writing has never been taken as seriously as literature written by men. Defenders of chick lit frequently cite Austen as the prototype chick lit author, because while she is respected by academics, she wrote about romantic relationships. A main argument against “light” women’s literature, including George Eliot’s “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” written in 1856, is that a large portion of women’s writing simply isn’t good literature. Eliot’s essay criticized female writers who believed themselves to be intellectual thinkers while writing “silly novels.” She worried that these writers would negatively affect the entire canon of women’s literature through their bad writing: “On this ground, we believe that the average intellect of women is unfairly represented by the mass of feminine literature, and that while the few women who write well are very far above the ordinary level of their sex, the many women who write ill are very far below it.”²⁷ Yet, most chick lit novelists do not take themselves seriously or claim their novels are masterpieces. The next chapter will discuss how the formal shortcomings of the chick lit formula prevent most chick lit novels from being as thought-provoking as a book by Foer or Zadie Smith. For this thesis, the debate is not whether chick lit is “good” or “bad” literature, but what its role is in contemporary society.

Chick lit authors realize that critics, other authors, or even their readers believe their works are “light and fun” reading and not literary classics. In fact, they often embrace the idea that their readers pick up chick lit novels searching for a few hours of entertainment. However, the authors believe that what their novels do for the reader is no laughing matter. In the roundtable discussion for Authors on the Web, chick lit writers debated whether there was any merit beyond entertainment in their literature. “How about reinforcing what the reader already suspects, and thus giving her a warm feeling of camaraderie with the writers, and even the world: that her life is not really as bad as it seems, and that even if it is, there’s always a chance things could get better?” Cabot answered. Sherrie Krantz, author of the “Vivian” series, said that as readers see a bit of themselves in chick lit characters, they realize they are not alone, and their “fears, issues, expectations, and concerns are shared with women all over the planet.” This recollection, according to Krantz, is both “comforting” and “inspiring” – a combination of emotions that other genres cannot offer their readers.²⁸ The comfort of chick lit lies in the idea of a community of readers bonded together by their common experiences.

The ultimate goal of chick lit, according to its authors, is to provide both a comforting connection to other women and an escape from reality. Chick lit authors argue that their novels are so successful because their readers can relate to the formula. “I think the women who read the books are a lot like the women in them – young (ish), accomplished but somewhat insecure, looking for fiction that serves as both entertainment and road map,” said Weiner in the roundtable discussion. The insecurities expressed by the chick lit heroine are indicative of emotions felt by an entire generation.

What is it about life in the new millennium that prompted such a popular genre? What are its readers escaping from? A key component of the chick lit narrative is the fact that the story occurs in the present. There are no historical chick lit novels, and it is impossible to imagine Bridget Jones living in any other time period. Chick lit heroines are part of a specific generation, personifying the “zeitgeist” that Fielding claims *Bridget Jones’s Diary* evoked. The heroines all grew up in a post-feminist revolution society expecting to graduate from college and have careers. They have also witnessed an older generation of women balancing career and family, and are fully aware of the struggles and responsibilities implicit in trying to do that. It’s not surprising that many of the characters are clinging to a carefree lifestyle and unable to commit to any career, person, or cause.

In her article for *Spiked*, Bristow writes that chick lit is popular because it raises the issue of whether the singleton lifestyle or long-term relationships is better: “It threw up the dilemma of how to reconcile the two, and came up with happy endings, invariably involving compromises all around, but not – and this is the key – sacrifices. These fluffy, comforting books told the women reading them that, yes, they could have it all – only that they should recognize the reality of ‘it all’ was not necessarily the same as their ideal.”²⁹ At the end of *Dear Prince Charming*, Valerie offers to give up her publicist job to move with Jack overseas so he can pursue his writing career. When he protests, she says that she’s realized there are other forms of love besides love for one’s job. “‘Love shouldn’t mean sacrifice,’” she says, “‘But maybe ... maybe it does include compromise.’”³⁰ Her whole offer is a set-up, however, because she knows Jack would never make her leave her career to be with him. He will find a new job in her city. This

conclusion is definitely an example of a “fluffy, comforting” ending where everything concludes perfectly for the heroine.

Some authors, including Weiner, believe the genre can do more than offer sugary-sweet stories about love. “My theory is that my generation of women has more choices and options available than any generation in history, and that these choices are empowering but also terrifying. I think that novels, even the ones derided as light ’n’ fluffy, help them think through their choices and make peace with their decisions.”³¹ Weiner’s vision is a genre that goes beyond mere entertainment and serves as a guide to navigating life in the twenty-first century.

What separates chick lit from other literature written by women not only is the genre’s specific formulas, but also the relationship between the authors and readers. While chick lit, like other female literature, is a genre written by women, for women, and about women, its aim to create a community of female readers is unique. This community, the “chick lit generation” mentioned in the introduction, includes the authors themselves as they, too, attempt to make sense of what it means to be a woman in a post-feminist world.

CHAPTER TWO: THE FUNCTION OF CHICK LIT CHARACTERS

“‘Oh honestly, darling. You girls are just so picky and romantic these days: you’ve simply got too much choice.’”

—Bridget Jones’s mother³²

As we have seen in the previous chapter, chick lit novels depend on contemporary readers feeling a bond through their identification with the novels’ protagonists. If, as Jennifer Weiner believes, chick lit can serve as a “road map” for young women in the twenty-first century, the genre must provide strong characters as its readers’ role models. Weiner’s lofty goal requires a genre that can withstand both formal and feminist critical analysis. Are chick lit protagonists well-developed and realistic? Is the genre actually discussing women’s issues in a productive and positive manner? In this chapter I will explore critical responses to the genre’s characters and their roles in the novels, through the lenses of E.M. Forster, Raymond Chandler, and Virginia Woolf, ultimately discussing whether the genre acts as Weiner’s ideal.

Forster’s formalist critique of the novel includes detailed descriptions of characters and their roles within the novel’s structure. Forster dissected the novel in a series of lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1927. These lectures, collected and published as *Aspects of the Novel*, break down the novel’s architecture, exploring why certain works affect readers more than others. Forster cites characters as the most interesting part of the novel, devoting two chapters to them. For Forster, interesting, well-developed characters separate novels from other genres, such as histories, which only deal with actions and surface emotions. A history of Queen Victoria, for example, could never present her actual inner life and emotions. Exploration of humanity’s “hidden life”

is precisely what the novel allows. A novel gives the author freedom to create characters and use his imagination.

As a genre, the novel allows an author the opportunity to create a wide range of diverse characters. In order to analyze the author's creations, Forster divides characters into two types: flat and round. A flat character, also known as a caricature or type, can be described by a single sentence or phrase:

The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as 'I never will desert Mr. Micawber.' There is Mrs. Micawber—she says she won't desert Mr. Micawber, she doesn't, and there she is. Or: 'I must conceal, even by subterfuges, the poverty of my master's house.' There is Caleb Balderstone in *The Bride of Lammermoor*. He does not use the actual phrase, but it completely describes him; he has no existence outside it, no pleasures, none of the private lusts and aches that must complicate the most consistent of servitors.³³

Flat characters abound in chick lit; overbearing mothers, gay male friends, and annoying co-workers surround the protagonists. Yet, according to Forster, a novel containing flat characters is not necessarily a poorly-written novel. In fact, flat characters are needed as foils for the round characters to interact with, and they are easy for the reader to identify in novels with large casts. They also provide much of the humor of a novel, allowing the more developed characters to provide the drama.

In contrast to flat characters, round characters make a novel interesting, by engaging the reader's imagination. Round characters have the "hidden life" that Forster says separates novels from other genres. Their inner emotions and complexities make them more realistic than flat characters: "They are real not because they are like ourselves (though they may be like us) but because they are convincing."³⁴ Chick lit authors and readers frequently describe the genre's heroines as realistic because the heroines behave

like “normal” women. Most chick lit heroines lead average, middleclass lives. Their problems (trying to balance a checkbook, lose weight, date a normal guy) are similar to the reader’s real life experiences, but according to Forster’s definition, well-written characters not only need to reflect the reader but also convince her of their realness.

A round character convinces a reader through her lack of predictability. The key distinction between round and flat characters is that a round character surprises the reader through her actions and words; a flat character never does. Forster acknowledges that there is a range of flat characters. Some cannot be summarized in a single word, and some attempt to surprise the reader and fail. These characters exhibit “the beginning curve of the round” but are still flat characters pretending to be round.³⁵ An example of this type of character would be Valerie Wagner from *Dear Prince Charming*, whom I discussed in the previous chapter as a character who transforms from an ice-queen incapable of loving or trusting men to a woman capable of loving. While Valerie surprises the other characters by putting relationships above her career at the end of the novel, the reader is hardly shocked; it was inevitable that Valerie would find love and learn to value something other than her career aspirations. She does grow and change, but her development is predictable. Valerie is more interesting than some of her sister chick lit characters, but her formulaic story and unconvincing transformation make *Dear Prince Charming* a forgettable book.

Forster isn’t the only critic to cite round characters as the crucial component of a successful novel. Mystery writer Raymond Chandler also makes the case for the importance of characters. Chandler’s 1944 essay “The Simple Art of Murder” critiques his contemporaries, especially writers of popular detective fiction. Chandler criticizes

Dorothy Sayers in particular for dismissing mystery novels as mere entertainment that can never achieve the “loftiest level of literary achievement.” Sayers’s exclusion from writing great literature was not a result of her genre, according to Chandler, but of her formulaic approach to writing. Chandler’s argument is an important way of looking at literature, especially when considering chick lit, a modern “escapist” genre (escapism and the act of reading will be explored in the next chapter). Revisiting the role of characters in detective fiction is an excellent way of examining the role of chick lit’s characters. By confining the detective genre within specific boundaries, Sayers limits the possibilities of her characters’ range of emotions: “If it started out to be about real people ... they must very soon do unreal things in order to form the artificial pattern required by the plot. When they did unreal things, they ceased to be real themselves,” says Chandler.³⁶ (Chandler 987). Sayers’s formulaic characters, not the constrictions of the detective genre, prevent her work from expressing profound emotions and themes.

Thus Chandler extends Forster’s theory of round and flat characters, applying it to an entire genre instead of a specific novel. In turn, I will use Chandler’s analysis of the characters in detective fiction to analyze the characters in chick lit. Like Sayers’s detective stories, chick lit follows a predictable formula, outlined in the first chapter. When a reader picks up a chick lit novel, she knows by page twenty whom the heroine will learn to love. The possibility of the heroine *not* finding a hero is absurd in the genre’s world. With their flat personalities, chick lit characters often function as the “cardboard lovers” and “paper mâché” villains Chandler describes in his essay.³⁷ In the previous chapter, I described the types of heroines and heroes and the formulas that create them; these conventions make the heroes interchangeable from book to book. Flighty Emma

Corrigan from Sophie Kinsella's *Can You Keep a Secret?* could switch places with ditzzy Jane Harris from Meg Cabot's *Every Boy's Got One*, and no one would know the difference. Likewise, their love interests, Cal Langdon and Jack Harper are equally transposable. Chick lit's "cardboard lovers" even share the same physical traits: Jack Lambert from *Dear Prince Charming* has "dark hair streaked with the kind of highlights no salon would create, a tanned face with chiseled features that probably required a twice-a-day shave, a bit lined as well, from extended time spent in the great outdoors. *Rugged* was the first thought that came to mind."³⁸ Jane admits that Cal Langdon: "Is kind of cute. I mean, if you like the tall, rugged, sandy-haired, razor-stubbled-with-piercing-blue-eyes-who-knows-how-to-use-a-Blackberry type."³⁹ Jack Harper also shares the same strong jaw and five o'clock shadow as the other heroes.

Not only do chick lit characters look alike, but they act similarly, too. The novels tell the same story of an unhappy woman whose life changes dramatically for the better. Every chick lit protagonist concludes the novel "happily ever after" in a traditional romantic relationship. The genre's formula produces stories about characters ending with love, better jobs, and improved relationships with family and friends. A character who starts the novel with a boyfriend will inevitably end up with a new and improved one. Once a reader experiences one chick lit novel written with this formulaic transformation to a new, wonderful lifestyle, she knows how all the other stories will unfold.

Some chick lit novels that do not strict follow this formula should be mentioned. Jennifer Weiner's novels are prime examples because of their unusual characters. The male protagonist of *In Her Shoes* is not the rugged, masculine ideal of the above-mentioned books; Simon Stein is an awkward, dorky lawyer. The heroines are funny in a

sarcastic way, not like the “quirky” protagonists of other novels. They are often thirty or forty pounds overweight, instead of Bridget Jones’s five to ten pounds. Candace, the heroine of *Good in Bed*, learns to be content with her body instead of miraculously losing weight. Weiner, a sort of spokeswoman for chick lit, creates characters with deeper storylines than the typical chick lit character. Her novels address divorce, abuse, sexuality, religion, and death while other chick lit novels skim over or completely ignore these important themes of human life. The endings of Weiner’s novels don’t always follow the chick lit tradition of career advancement, resolution of family conflicts, and fairytale romance. At the conclusion of *Good in Bed*, Candace is not talking to her father or her baby’s father. Yet, she still has a boyfriend, has made peace with her mother’s new partner, and is allowing her ex-boyfriend’s mother to be a part of her child’s life. Despite Weiner’s alterations to the genre, her characters conclude the novels with the same conventions as Cabot’s or Kauffman’s.

As Chandler argued, characters, not the genre’s formulas, make a great novel. Forster would agree with Chandler about the importance of characters. While admitting “sadly” that story-telling is a fundamental part of novels, Forster claims the story is the novel’s simplest aspect.⁴⁰ A novel cannot exist without a story, but the story is not essential to understanding the novel’s themes and values. The story, which is the narrative of events, does one of two things: makes the reader want to know what happens next or makes the audience not care about what happens next. “There are the only two criticisms that can be made on the story that is a story. It is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms. Yet it is the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels.”⁴¹ Chandler writes that the story of a book does not

determine its literary quality: “Yet some very dull books have been written about God, and some very fine ones about how to make a living and stay fairly honest. It is always a matter of who writes the stuff and what he has in him to write it with.”⁴² The plot (the narrative of events) is different from the story because of its emphasis on causality.⁴³ The plot and characters work hand in hand, because the characters are tied to the causality. Characters are so interesting to Forster, and this thesis, because they give the novel depth and expand larger themes through their thoughts and actions.

To find an example of novels that deal with similar stories to those in chick lit, we need only turn to the work of Jane Austen. As discussed in the first chapter, chick lit authors often compare their plots to Austen, because they are about single women looking for love. Author Valerie Frankel says that *Pride and Prejudice* was the first chick lit novel she read; it can be called chick lit because it has “a contemporary setting (at the time of its publication) with both urban and rural scenes, a female protagonist (single), a quest for a husband, wit, and satire in abundance. Every modern Chick Lit author bows to Austen.”⁴⁴ Austen writes about young women and romance; chick lit is about young women and romance. Yet, what is the difference between Jane Austen and chick lit? A lot – but the main difference is character formation.

In his formalist critique of the novel, Forster cites Austen as an author especially skilled in creating well-developed characters. Despite her small, rural settings and focus on “female” issues, Forster acknowledges the depth of Austen’s work: “She is a miniaturist, but never two-dimensional. All her characters are round, or capable of rotundity.”⁴⁵ The opposite could be said of chick lit: Most of its characters are flat, or failing at rotundity. *Pride and Prejudice* is an excellent example of an Austen novel with

round characters. The central theme of the book is personal growth and change as Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth learn how misguided their pride and prejudices were. Both characters begin the story feeling secure with their values, but their journey through the novel makes them question themselves. Elizabeth learns not to judge on first impressions, and, for the first time in her life, begins to doubt her judgment. Mr. Darcy admits that his acquaintance with Elizabeth taught him that he was proud, conceited, and selfish. Before his relationship with Elizabeth, Darcy never thought of others: “Such I was, from eight to eight-and-twenty; and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! What do I not owe you? You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous.”⁴⁶ Mr. Darcy’s character develops, but it is conceivable that he could have lived the rest of his life without changing – other characters, like Mr. Wickham and Mrs. Bennet, never learn to change.

In contrast to Elizabeth and Darcy’s developments in *Pride and Prejudice*, Valerie and Jack’s “transformations” in *Dear Prince Charming* are unsurprising and rather unexciting because they are so superficial. The only factor contributing to Valerie’s change is her love of Jack. He teaches Valerie that she needs other people, both lovers and friends. She changes her attitude toward relationships, but nothing else. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth questions her judgment not only of Mr. Darcy, but also her best friend Charlotte Lucas, her father, and the rest of her family. The novel is a series of small revelations leading to the climatic point when she realizes she is in love with Darcy. Also, it’s not only Darcy who makes Elizabeth question her world. Characters like Wickham teach Elizabeth that her first impressions are not always accurate. Charlotte

Lucas teaches Elizabeth that her society can be hostile towards unmarried woman. Some women, like Charlotte, must abandon their ideals in order to obtain security, and

Dear Prince Charming misses its opportunity to discuss larger issues because of its strict focus on Valerie and Jack's romance. The characters briefly discuss their personal histories, but never flesh out the emotional effects of the past. Eric, a main character of the novel, has suppressed his homosexuality for almost twenty years, but the story barely pays attention to his life in the closet. Jack's big "transformation" comes when he realizes he wants to give up his nomadic lifestyle to settle down with Valerie. The novel never explains his complicated relationship history – why it is impossible for him to settle down in the first place. Kauffman gives Jack's character details with a potential for a round character, but fails to follow through. His relationship with his first wife and his deceased mother are barely mentioned. His father's suicide, obviously an important part of his character, isn't mentioned until the very end of the book, and then it is quickly dismissed.

Perhaps *Dear Prince Charming* is too simple a book to compare to Austen, so let's turn our attention to a novel that received critical acclaim when first published. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the first official chick lit novel, is a modernized version of *Pride and Prejudice*, complete with the same cast of characters: a pushy mother, distracted father, and aloof but ultimately caring hero named Darcy. Author Helen Fielding deserves credit for the quirky way she modernized *Pride and Prejudice*, but, if we analyze it according to Forster's guidelines, her adaptation falls short of the original. The characters may look the same as Austen's originals, but on a deeper level, the cast of *Bridget Jones* fall apart. Bridget and her friends are not round characters; they never

grow or develop. In fact, in the beginning of the novel Bridget writes a list of her New Year's Resolutions – everything she wants to change about herself over the course of the year. The book closes with a list of her “progress” and none of her resolutions have been achieved except for learning how to form a “functional relationship with an adult.” Bridget believes this constitutes an “*excellent* year’s progress,” but Bridget has not progressed at all. While the reader finds this passage humorous in its irony, Bridget’s lack of self-awareness remains a serious matter.⁴⁷ Unlike her prototype Elizabeth Bennet, Bridget Jones has learned nothing profound about herself or about others. The novel comes close to a breakthrough for Bridget – understanding her parents as individuals – but then turns her mother into a caricature and her father into a stereotype. Bridget only accepts herself because of her new boyfriend, not because of an inner-realization or change in her values. As readers, we are happy with this new-and-improved Bridget because, for once, her boyfriend is a decent man who will not mistreat her.

Unlike Austen who excels in character formation, Fielding fails to develop Bridget’s supporting characters. One doesn’t even need a full sentence to sum up each the cast of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* to prove they are flat: There is Tom, the gay friend; Sharon, the angry feminist; Jude, the successful businesswoman insecure in relationships; Daniel, the self-absorbed villain; and Mark, perfect in every way but misjudged by Bridget at the start. Creating characters like these, however, does not follow in Austen’s tradition. According to Forster, Austen never created characters that could be described in one sentence: “She may label her characters ‘Sense,’ ‘Pride,’ ‘Sensibility,’ ‘Prejudice,’ but they are not tethered to those qualities.”⁴⁸ While both Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Jones are flat stereotypes of overbearing mothers, Austen’s Mrs. Bennet at least has a credible motive

behind her obsessive match-making. If her daughters don't marry, they will be homeless when the family loses the estate to entailment laws after their father's death. Even if Austen's work is compared to chick lit for their similar plot structures, its characters bring it above common novels.

While characters separate great novels from the rest, they must be complex and contribute to the novel's themes as a whole. Fielding's characters may be modern versions of Austen's, but the authors' works are not on the same level. Austen's characters are realistic through their roundness. Chick lit authors argue that their characters are "real" because they resemble their readers. They also place great emphasis on how "relatable" characters are, but how can a reader relate to a flat character? As discussed earlier in this chapter, chick lit characters cannot "surprise" the reader through their actions, which means they are not round characters. A real character needs the semblance of a real psyche – one with depth.

Virginia Woolf agrees with Forster's argument that finding a similarity between oneself and the character is not enough to create a strong novel. In her praise of Jane Austen, Woolf cites Austen's ability to express depth: "Think away the surface animation, the likeness to life, and there remains, to provide a deeper pleasure, an exquisite discrimination of human values."⁴⁹ For Woolf, characters need to do more than simply reflect human exteriority. A good novel describes the inner workings of the human psyche. Austen's narration and dialogue not only sound realistic, but also illuminate the real motives behind people's actions. By writing about the inner workings of characters, Austen ties her novels to a larger picture of life: "Whatever she writes is finished and turned and set in its relation, not to the parsonage, but to the universe. She is

impersonal; she is inscrutable.”⁵⁰ On the surface, Austen’s novels are simply about romantic relations the countryside, but her work is profound through its larger scope.

Woolf’s praise of Austen stems from her ability to use “trivial” scenes to discuss complex emotions and themes. Her characters’ dialogue reflects much more than the upcoming ball or the latest village gossip: “Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial.”⁵¹ Austen’s novels suggest something beyond the words on the page; they “expand the mind” of the reader, prompting her to think beyond the trivial. While this chapter is interested in how Austen’s novels deliberately prompt the reader to think about society in a critical manner, the next chapter will discuss the *act* of reading and the interpellation of the reader through her recognition of herself in the protagonist.

Austen’s works were a critique of the social structure, examining a society that forced women to be financially dependent on men. At a first glance, her supporting characters act like flat characters, as Austen focuses her attention on the inner lives of the main characters, but even Austen’s flat characters serve a purpose. Austen uses them to expose negative social trends, portraying women who were hurt by the structure, women who perpetuated the structure, and women who work within the structure. Mrs. and Miss Bates from *Emma* are secondary characters who demonstrate what happens to the village vicar’s family after his death – the wife lives in poverty and his daughter can find no husband. Miss Bates has nothing to offer a potential husband. Unfortunately, not everybody is born with the beauty and wit of Elizabeth Bennet, who secures her future by

attracting wealthy Mr. Darcy, or the wealth of Emma, who never has to marry. Emma perpetuates the system through social snobbery because it protects her. As a secondary character Lady Catherine de Bourgh is less likeable than Emma, but she reinforces the same cultural norms. Then there are the supporting characters who understand society's rules and have learned to work within the structure. Both Lucy Steele from *Sense and Sensibility* and Charlotte Lucas of *Pride and Prejudice* realize they must marry well in order to have a stable future. In a way, all of Austen's protagonists perpetuate the structure through their "happy endings" and upwardly mobile marriages. Yet, we can't forget about the Charlotte Lucases and Miss Bateses – and Austen's work doesn't encourage the reader to forget them either.

Austen used her novels to both *say* and *do* something more than portray romance. Not only did Austen criticize societal structure, she directly challenged it by writing. She made history both by being a female writer and by creating a female voice: "Jane Austen looked at it and laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence for her own use and never departed from it."⁵² Believing that the experience of being a woman should shape a woman's writing, Woolf praised Austen for creating a distinctly female style of writing. Both Austen and Emily Brontë rejected the male values about literature by creating their own female novels:

What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to thing as they saw it without shrinking. Only Jane Austen did it and Emily Brontë. It is another feather, perhaps the finest, in their caps. They wrote as women write, not as men write. Of all the thousand women who wrote novels then, they alone entirely ignored the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue – write this, think that.⁵³

A structure built on the relationship among human beings, the novel is subjected to male standards that downplay the importance of relationships. According to the masculine ideal, novels written about the feelings of women in a drawing-room were trivial, while novels written about war were serious. According to Woolf, Austen proved that drawing-room novels were not frivolous and had the potential to contain much deeper themes. Emily Brontë and Austen found strength to go against the mainstream values. These two authors were able to find the emotional “room of their own” to create something outside of their current society.

From Woolf’s discussion, we can understand how Austen’s novels challenged and changed her world. Chick lit has the same potential: to provide an interesting story with interesting characters who addresses contemporary issues. What are chick lit characters doing? How are they discussing current problems? As the Weiner quote from the previous chapter suggests, chick lit serves as “both entertainment and road map” to a group of women with more choices than any generation in history. Chick lit’s readers are a unique generation, having been raised in a post-feminist revolution world. These women can go to any school and get almost any job they want, or they can get married and have children, or they can do both. Yet, although women in their twenties and thirties feel less pressure to get married and have children than older generations did, they are still unsatisfied with their lives and unsure of their direction. Many young women think they don’t need feminism because the fight is over, and so there are few women vocalizing the problems of today’s women.

Female readers of stories about romance have had a complicated relationship with feminism. Radway wrote *Reading the Romance* during the feminist movement in the late

1970s. Her subjects were mostly housewives with children, living the life rejected by feminists. Although her subjects weren't feminists as most would understand the term, they enjoyed stories about independent and spirited women. While a feminist would completely reject the romance novel and its heroine as a perpetuators of patriarchy, Radway argues that the "feisty" protagonist "appears courageous, and even valiant, to another still unsure that such equality is a fact or that she herself might want to assent to it."⁵⁴ Thus, Radway saw the romance novels as a method of slowly introducing the new principles of feminism to the general female population.

The romance novels studied by Radway represent the cultural shift in the role of women occurring at time of their publication. Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*, published in 1972, was a groundbreaking romance novel. The sexually explicit scenes were the first of its kind, sparking a new trend within the genre. Radway writes that Woodiwiss's novel was a result of the feminist and sexual revolution: "Indeed, the extraordinary popularity of Woodiwiss's novel and its rapid imitation by others seem to suggest that large numbers of American women had been affected by feminism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s."⁵⁵ While Radway's subjects enjoyed the sexual freedom of protagonists, they still objected to "bed hoppers." Her readers partially embraced the new philosophy, clinging to the mores with which they were raised. The romance novels of the late seventies attempted to reconcile new ideas of feminism and sexual liberation with the old social standards. More than twenty years have passed since the publication of Radway's study, and the chick lit audience has grown up with the feminist concept of equality as natural. Yet, despite the abundance of choices for young women, the chick lit generation has a new set of problems that its novels must discuss.

Just as the “ideal romance” integrated old and new philosophies, chick lit novels attempt to blend old concepts of fairy-tale romance with progressive ideas of women’s liberation. But how progressive is chick lit? In her conclusion to *Reading the Romance*, Radway speculated about the future of the romance novel. Would it continue its direction towards feminism? Radway hoped that in the future the genre would directly challenge patriarchy:

The developments bear watching, however, for they may indicate that the romance’s long-present but covert challenge to the notion that traditional marriages satisfy all women’s needs is about to take on a more combative, questioning tone. This could occur if romance writers and readers ever discover through the collective sharing of experiences that together they have strength, a voice, and important objections to make about current gender arrangements.⁵⁶

Chick lit authors do realize the strength that comes with their community of readers, yet their novels conclude with the same patriarchy-affirming endings as the traditional romance novels. Twenty years after *Reading the Romance*, chick lit novels claim to show contemporary women how to “have it all,” yet only present one option of how to do so.

Bridget Jones was so successful and groundbreaking because it was the first novel to directly address the issues of the post-feminist generation. Its female characters struggle in their attempts to find the perfect lifestyle. Bridget’s friend Magda represents a woman who was university-educated and held a good job before she left work to raise her child. Magda is unhappy in her stay-at-home mother role, redirecting her energies through competition with other “alpha moms” about whose child is progressing faster. She is unhappy with her domestic role, and her husband doesn’t respect the value of her work. Magda sounds like a woman out of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, forty

years after its publication. She switches from the object of Bridget's jealousy to a pitiable character when she confesses she is jealous of Bridget and her "glamorous" singleton lifestyle:

Talk about grass is always bloody greener. The number of times I've slumped, depressed, thinking about how useless I am and that I spend every Saturday night getting blind drunk and moaning to Jude and Shazzer and Tom about my chaotic emotional life; I struggle to make ends meet and am ridiculed as an unmarried freak, whereas Magda lives in a big house with eight different kinds of pasta in jars, and gets to go shopping all day. And yet here she is so beaten, miserable and unconfident and telling me I'm lucky...⁵⁷

Bridget Jones became a phenomenon because it actually raised issues about why young women – despite their "infinite" choices – felt unsatisfied. Many of its successors stick to the single-girl-in-the-city motif without the social commentary of *Bridget Jones*. Yet, even though Fielding's work raises questions about the lifestyles of the post-feminist generation, it doesn't give any answers. At the end of the novel, Bridget is happy because she finds a caring new boyfriend, completing the traditional romance ending. The novel gives a quick nod to feminism when Bridget lands a more "fulfilling" job, something which will be examined in detail in the next chapter. While chick lit sometimes addresses feminist issues, it never objects to or fights against societal structure.

Even though the feminist revolution of the seventies is said to be over, gender inequality still exists in today's society, and chick lit must address these issues. Maureen Dowd, one of the few remaining vocal and influential feminists in popular culture, raises many of the problems that chick lit attempts to discuss. Disturbed by the youngest generation of women and their attitude towards feminism, Dowd raises contemporary issues often overlooked by our society (especially by women who grew up after the

feminist revolution) in her 2005 book *Are Men Necessary?* Something changed in the past thirty years that changed women from braless feminists to *Desperate Housewives*, from Annie Hall to Pamela Anderson. Feminists in the 1970s tried to dress and act “like men,” while today’s ideal woman is hyper-feminine. Women have become obsessed with physical appearance, as shown through the increasing popularity of Botox and plastic surgery. Dowd also cites women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*, which focus on fashion and how to please a man in bed, instead of women’s issues: “Before it curdled into a collection of stereotypes, feminism had fleetingly held out a promise that there would be some precincts of womanly life that were not all about men. But it never quite materialized.”⁵⁸ Not only has this dream not materialized, it seems to have gone in the opposite direction. Despite their authors’ claims, chick lit novels are more about romance and men than the female protagonist’s development.

Chick lit does portray many of the issues facing today’s young women, including the choice of whether to have children and how to raise them. The genre’s characters also worry about getting married too late to have children. The “biological clock” still plays an important role in women’s lives. Along with the freedom of choice come many more decisions, the consequences of which are still unknown. Magda from *Bridget Jones’s Diary* chose to stay at home to raise her children, and she is miserable. Meanwhile other characters, including Bridget, wish they had enough financial security to give up their jobs and raise children. Dowd also comments on this growing trend: “Five years ago, you would often hear high-powered women fantasize that they would love a Wife, somebody to do the shopping, cooking, and carpooling, so they could focus on work. Now the fantasy is more retro: They just want to *be* that Wife.”⁵⁹ If a woman does choose to have

children and continue working, she frequently has to give up her original career path. At best, chick lit novels will superficially discuss these issues, and then quickly dismiss them. Why don't the novels offer any solutions? Why is the only conclusion of a chick lit novel a romantic ending? Isn't there another satisfying answer?

Dowd's main issue with the "chick lit generation" concerns women and intelligence. She cites a 2005 report by four British universities, which concluded that a high I.Q. hinders a woman's chance to marry while it helps men. For each sixteen-point increase, a man's chance of getting married increases thirty-five percent while a woman's decreases by forty percent. "I've been noticing a trend along these lines, as famous and powerful men took up with young women whose job it was to care for them and nurture them in some way: their secretaries, assistants, nannies, caterers, flight attendants, researchers and fact-checkers," says Dowd.⁶⁰ Chick lit texts reflect this return to gender roles that place woman in the subordinate position, as its heroines frequently date their bosses or other high-powered men; for example, Sophie Kinsella's Emma winds up accidentally charming the C.E.O. of her company in *Can You Keep a Secret?* Dowd cites a University of Michigan a study that showed men would rather marry women in subordinate jobs than supervisors because of a belief that women with important jobs are more likely to cheat on them. How can feminism have already achieved its purpose when these double standards still exist? And how can chick lit describe its mission as a discussion of women's issues when it doesn't directly confront or offer solutions to these trends?

Chick lit novels claim to deal with the problems of women in the twenty-first century, but their formulaic storylines never suggest new possibilities for women. The

genre's characters have "happy endings" without actually developing or solving their original problems. While chick lit discusses themes of love, marriage, and family relations, its novels never go beyond surface relationships. How does chick lit address contemporary issues? What solutions does the genre propose to solve today's problems? The genre does not guide young women on how to balance career, relationships, and family. Chick lit only offers an escape from these problems.

CHAPTER THREE: ESCAPE

“While thought exists, words are alive and literature becomes an escape, not from, but into living.”

—Cyril Connolly

In elementary schools across the United States, D.E.A.R. time is a standard part of each school day. D.E.A.R., an acronym for “Drop Everything and Read,” teaches students the importance of taking time each day just to read, hoping to motivate young readers. As an experience, reading is tied to “dropping everything” and forgetting about the issues of everyday life. While D.E.A.R. emphasizes the need to reserve a block of time each day for reading for pleasure (D.E.A.R. is never a graded activity), it is still a productive time because the students are strengthening their reading skills. This emphasis on the act of reading as “productive” extends to adult readers who classify what they believe to be unproductive books as guilty pleasures. Instead of “dropping everything” to read, adults “waste” or “steal” time while reading their unproductive books.

Chick lit readers often categorize the genre as a guilty pleasure, meant to be read quickly and then forgotten. “Essentially, chick lit is anything with a female heroine that you can read on the beach and either makes you feel better or worse about your personal life,” says Paula Lattanzi, a 26-year-old marketing manager at T. Rowe Price who lives in Baltimore.⁶¹ Paula reads about a book and a half every month, and she likes to alternate between chick lit and “serious” reading. “They are light reading, in the sense that the reader doesn’t have to think too hard to understand what’s going on,” says Elizabeth Perrella, a 22-year-old English major at Trinity College. “There aren’t any extremely profound issues being discussed.”⁶² Chick lit never claims to be great literature; it is a genre, similar to mystery novels and science fiction, read for escape.

What exactly does it mean to read for escapism? Readers and writers frequently use the term to separate good, serious literature from bad, frothy novels. “Easy reads” and “beach books” are read for escape. A classic is not. An assumption exists that if one is reading serious literature, one isn’t “escaping.” This notion stems from the idea that escape is tied to the text itself. Yet, when interviewing romance novel readers, Janice Radway was struck by the importance readers placed on the *act* of reading over the content of the book. Instead of discussing elements of the plot that allowed them to escape, Radway’s subjects focused on the experience of dropping everything and reading. For these women escape is an action, not a state of mind. When we think about escape as the reader’s relationship to the act of reading and not her relationship to the text, the idea of “escape literature” as a genre is questioned. If escape is not related to the novel’s plot but to the act of reading, there can be no escape novel/serious literature binary among texts.

As an act, reading allows one to leave behind the real world and enter a fictional one. Radway’s interviewees savored the break from their daily routine as much as the plot of the novel: “The simple event of picking up a book enabled them to deal with the particular pressures and tensions encountered in their daily round of activities.”⁶³ As Radway discovered, and I will explore in the context of chick lit, there is no such thing as a “simple event” of reading, despite what the term “easy read” implies. Reading evokes complicated emotions, both through the text and the act of reading itself. The romance readers of Radway’s study, a group of Midwestern housewives in the late seventies and early eighties, treasured the “alone time” that reading offered. Unlike television, another form of “escape,” silent reading separates the reader from her surrounding environment;

it is a solitary act. While the readers derived pleasure from the plot of the novel, identifying with the heroine whose happy ending is being appreciated and cared for by another, the readers really enjoyed the autonomy that the act of reading provides: “Somewhat paradoxically, however, they also seem to value the sense of self-sufficiency they experience as a consequence of the knowledge that they are capable of making themselves feel good.”⁶⁴ Not only does reading give the reader a mode of escaping from her environment, but it can also give her a sense of power through knowing that she can make herself happy on her own.

Radway’s subjects were mostly housewives, escaping from the pressures their husbands and children placed on them. While chick lit is also read by housewives, many of the genre’s readers are single, young women similar to the novels’ heroines. The demographic that Radway interviewed is different from chick lit’s readership and twenty years have passed since she published *Reading the Romance*, but Radway’s emphasis on the *act* of reading is important to our discussion about chick lit and escapism. A major discrepancy between romance novels and chick lit, discussed in the first chapter, is the number of similarities between the protagonist and the reader. Romance novels are set in historical eras with heroines who are much younger than the average reader; chick lit features contemporary, single, urban woman – someone very similar to reader Paula Lattanzi or Elizabeth Perrella.

Another connotation of escape is the “easy read,” which is part of chick lit’s appeal. This nickname suggests that escape means not thinking. Under this definition, a person doesn’t escape while reading *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Jane Eyre* because she is “thinking” about the text. Clearly, it is impossible to read without thinking as all

reading requires some sort of thought, although chick novels certainly offer less depth than Dostoevsky and Brontë's works. Chapter Two discussed the shortcomings of the genre's characters, especially its protagonists who remain static and flat throughout the story. But chick lit readers aren't talking about the formal limitations of the genre when they say the books allow them to "not think." The readers are thinking about the text and not thinking about their own lives. When chick lit readers use the term escape, usually they are referring to the act of escaping *from* and not escaping *to*. Both Lattanzi and Radway's housewives describe their reading experience as an escape from life: whether it be from a rough day at the office, a bad relationship, or a child's illness.

As the Connolly quote from the beginning of the chapter suggests, there is a difference between escaping from and escaping into living. Both readers and chick lit authors are aware of the "*escaping from*" aspect of reading chick lit. The genre's authors define their novels as an escape from the reader's everyday life, embracing the genre's role as escape fiction. "Let's not minimize the enormous value of escapism and entertainment," says Jennifer Coburn, author of *The Wife of Reilly* and *Reinventing Mona*. "We live in some pretty heavy times, and anything authors can do to help give people a laugh and a fun ride is of extraordinary value."⁶⁵ For Coburn, and other chick lit authors, escape is tied to humor. If the reader is laughing about Bridget Jones's awkward first date, then she is not thinking about her own life. Chick lit characters constantly find themselves in sticky situations that are slightly over-the-top, but humorous nonetheless. For example, when Bridget Jones attempts to impress her crush by cooking a gourmet meal from a Marco Pierre White cookbook, she ends up making blue soup. Emma, from Sophie Kinsella's *Can You Keep a Secret?*, accidentally spills her most embarrassing

secrets to her company's CEO when their airplane hits turbulence and she believes their plane will crash. These are not actual tragedies. The reader might chuckle at these situations and be diverted for a moment, but she won't continue to worry about Bridget and Emma's fates.

Yet, humor can exist beyond superficial dilemmas. While chick lit authors find comedy in triviality, contemporary author Jonathan Safran Foer uses humor in his writings about truly tragic events. Foer's books can make the reader laugh out loud in the midst of reading about the Holocaust or September 11th. The nine-year-old narrator of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Oskar Schell, exemplifies this mixture of comedy and tragedy. His exuberant personality and precociousness endear Oskar to the reader, making each mention of his father, who died in the World Trade Center, even more poignant. On every page that Oskar narrates, there is a combination of the comical and the profoundly sad:

My most impressive song that I can play on my tambourine is 'The Flight of the Bumblebee,' by Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, which is also the ring tone I downloaded for the cell phone I got after Dad died. It's pretty amazing that I can play 'The Flight of the Bumblebee,' because you have to hit incredibly fast in parts, and that's extremely hard for me, because I don't really have wrists yet. Ron offered to buy me a five-piece drum set. Money can't buy me love, obviously, but I asked if it would have Zildjian cymbals. He said, 'Whatever you want,' and then took my yo-yo off my desk and started to walk the dog with it. 'Yo-yo *moi!*' I told him, grabbing it back. What I really wanted to tell him was 'You're not my dad, and you never will be.'⁶⁶

The humor in Oskar's situation does not allow the reader to forget or "not think" about the tragedy. Instead, the humor is directly related to the core problems of the novel. The laughter elicited from the text provides both a release from and a sharp contrast to the

tragedy. While we are laughing at Oskar's humor, we also want to cry for him and his situation.

In chick lit novels, humor allows the reader to laugh *at* the protagonist, not *with* her. The humor is separate from the plot's problems; laughter at chick lit stems from outrageous, often almost slapstick, comedic situations. The genre's authors realize they are not writing about tragic events and do argue that chick lit's escape is not simply the reader forgetting about her problems because she is laughing. "In anything one reads, there are always insights to be gained. Living in someone else's world, looking at their problems and watching them develop help all of us understand our own lives better," says Coburn. "There hasn't been a single book I've ever read where I didn't learn a little something about my own life and the people in it."⁶⁷ Coburn recognizes the potential in chick lit to be a genre that does more than enable the reader to forget her problems. The concept of learning something through literature is an example of escaping *to* something through reading.

The issue of escaping *from* versus escaping *to* is essential to any discussion about popular fiction. In the 1930s, mystery and detective novel writers debated the worth of escape fiction, asking if books read for escape were an inherently inferior class of literature. As discussed in the previous chapter, Dorothy Sayers writes that the detective story cannot achieve the "loftiest level of literary achievement" because it is a literature of escape, not a literature of expression. "Though it deals with the most desperate effects of rage, jealousy, and revenge, it rarely touches the heights and depths of human passion," she writes. "It presents us only with the *fait accompli*, and looks upon death and mutilation with a dispassionate eye."⁶⁸ Readers escape through detective fiction,

according to Sayers, being soothed by the idea that “life is a mystery which death will solve, and whose horrors will pass away as a tale that is told.”⁶⁹ Mystery novels don’t present the full range of human emotion and don’t challenge the readers to think deeply about life and death. Without directly mentioning these terms, Sayers views the purpose of detective fiction as an aide for the reader to escape *from* life.

On the other side of this debate, Raymond Chandler argues that Sayers doesn’t understand the full potential of detective fiction and the power of escape. Sayers’s definition of escape is too narrow – she sees it only as a way of placating the reader. Escape, according to this definition, is a shallow activity, which requires no more than a cast of flat characters and an engaging plot (such as a murder mystery). Sayers believes there is no way of showing the “inner workings” of the murder’s mind without spoiling the solution to the mystery, thus destroying the purpose of the mystery novel. The detective author must present the victim as a “subject for the dissecting-table” rather than a round character; too much emotion in a detective story disturbs its “delicate balance.”⁷⁰ Chandler agrees that Sayers’s characters are flat, but he believes this is a result of Sayers’s “arid formula” – not of the genre’s limitations. Chandler’s definition of the detective genre and of escape is much broader than Sayers’s. In the first place, Chandler believes that the genre *can* touch “the heights and depths of human passion.” Chandler’s faith in the genre’s capabilities stems from his belief in the power of escape:

All men who read escape from something else into what lies behind the printed page; the quality of the dream may be argued, but its release has become a functional necessity. All men must escape at times from the deadly rhythm of their private thoughts. It is part of the process of life among thinking beings. It is one of the things that distinguish them from the three-toed sloth; he apparently – one can never be quite sure – is perfectly content hanging upside down on a branch, and not even reading Walter Lippmann. I hold no particular brief for the detective story as the

ideal escape. I merely say that *all* reading for pleasure is escape, whether it be Greek, mathematics, astronomy, Benedetto Croce, or *The Diary of the Forgotten Man*. To say otherwise is to be an intellectual snob, and a juvenile of the art of living.⁷¹

According to Chandler's model, *all* pleasure reading is for escape. Just as a reader is *always* thinking while reading, she is *always* escaping, whether she is reading *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Dear Prince Charming*. This definition of escape does not separate "good" literature from "bad" literature and allows *all* literature to provide the reader with a full experience.

Through his argument about the possibilities of the detective genre, Chandler also expands the possibilities of escape. Like Radway's romance novel readers and the chick lit authors, Chandler acknowledges the power of escaping *from* life, believing that escape goes beyond the text and lies in the act of reading. Escape through reading is not a frivolous activity, it is a necessary "process of life," similar to breathing or eating. If escape is a "functional necessity," then the act of reading cannot be a "guilty pleasure" because it is something humans must do to survive. Radway's housewives wouldn't feel guilty for "stealing" an hour each day to read if they believed Chandler's theory of escape.

Yet, although Chandler believes escape is always a release from the worries of everyday life, he sees escape as going beyond the daily world to "behind the printed page." Just as Jonathan Safran Foer sees a potential for humor in literature beyond triviality, Chandler's definition of escape goes beyond leaving behind mundane cares to learn about the human experience. An author who writes mystery stories that depict elements of real human emotion must be creative. Chandler uses Sayers's stories as an example of literature that does not allow for much imagination when he criticizes her

“cardboard lovers and papier mâché villains.”⁷² He condemns Sayers’s lack of imagination as the reason behind the failure of her books to become “first-grade literature.” First-grade literature, according to both Sayers and Chandler, allows for depth of characters and emotions.

Chandler’s argument is fairly simple: Good writing makes good literature. There is no ideal genre or even an “ideal escape,” according to Chandler. But what would the “ideal escape” look like? The perfect escape novel would allow the reader to escape from her life, but, more importantly, provide a place for her to escape to. In this space, the reader could learn something about herself and her world. Perhaps the escape could teach her about others and a different way of living. The escape would be a place where the reader could question her relationship to her world. Chick lit authors appear to be striving for this ideal escape, especially when they write about the genre as a method of learning and dealing with one’s problems. But chick lit is not the ideal escape; it doesn’t provide a space for the reader to question her world, instead the genre acts like Sayers’s definition of the detective novel – a method of “comfort” and “catharsis or purging of his fears and self-questionings” that lulls the reader into complacency.⁷³ Yes, the reader is always thinking when reading, but chick lit novels simply reinforce her thoughts on her world. In a way it’s true that chick lit is a genre that one reads “not to think” because the books allow the reader to ignore certain aspects of her life and culture.

In order to understand what chick lit readers *aren’t* thinking about, we must deconstruct the texts. Deconstruction’s objective, as Catherine Belsey explains it, is to examine process of the text’s production and locate “the point of contradiction.”⁷⁴ The point of contradiction breaks apart the general themes the text appears to be supporting.

After the reader examines the point of contradiction, many other discrepancies will emerge from the text. Deconstruction allows us to see what readers aren't thinking about by finding what ideologies are at work in the books' production. In "Constructing the subject: deconstructing the text," Belsey writes that literature perpetuates ideologies by containing half-truths that the reader recognizes and identifies with:

Ideology obscures the real condition of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions, gaps rather than lies, smoothing over contradictions, appearing to provide answers to questions which in reality it evades, and masquerading as coherence in the interests of the social relations generated by and necessary to the reproduction of the existing mode of production.⁷⁵

The reader is lulled by these smoothed-over contradictions and doesn't question the omissions of the text. Deconstruction takes apart any idea or plot line that the text presents as unified or inevitable. Chick lit's authors purport their literature deals with the questions women face in the twenty-first century when in fact the genre evades them. By finding the gaps in chick lit, we will illuminate what ideologies construct the genre and what issues it avoids.

Throughout our critical reading of chick lit, we must understand that ideology is *not* deliberately created by its authors. The writers are not smoothing over the text's contradictions on purpose; they themselves are blind to the ideologies that shape their world. Marxist critic Louis Althusser writes that ideology is the story we tell ourselves about why we act in certain ways. The means in which a person lives his life is his reality: "What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live."⁷⁶ Common ideologies that are held as truths, especially in chick lit novels, are the concepts of responsibility, romantic love, and the

family. When one is inside an ideology it is difficult, if not impossible, to see, because ideologies are considered truths. When an ideology becomes visible, it is already in the process of breaking down. Yet, new ideologies will immediately take the place of the old ones; no one can escape ideology. People who say they aren't ideological or consider themselves "outside" ideology are still inside ideologies that they cannot see.

Ideology isn't true or false – it's system of beliefs that governs everyone. This thesis is most interested in the way in which ideology hides its own omissions. The concealment of ideologies is essential to the existence of ideology. Critic Terry Eagleton writes that ideology presents itself through the text's silences: "An ideology exists because there are certain things which must not be spoken of."⁷⁷ In our deconstruction of chick lit, we will find the "partial truths" and "gaps" in the novels – the things that must not be spoken of. Where are the gaps and contradictions in chick lit? What are the "not saids" of these novels?

The first place to begin is the portrayal of female protagonists in chick lit. As discussed in the first chapter, the heroines are divided into two types: the first is extremely ambitious and organized; the second is directionless and scatter-brained. Why does such a dichotomy exist? The genre creates two stereotypes of the modern woman and doesn't allow its characters to break out of these molds. Women are either successful and intelligent but cold and lonely, or directionless and clueless but friendly and loving. Why can't there be more of a crossover between these two personality types?

Novels about both categories of protagonists contain many scenes at the protagonist's place of work, which vary depending on the type of heroine. The scatter-brained character typically holds an entry-level position that doesn't interest her. These

characters, like Bridget Jones and Emma Corrigan from *Can You Keep a Secret?*, spend their time in the office talking on the phone to friends and pretending to be busy at their computers. While their superiors boss them around, the protagonists daydream about having big offices and high-powered jobs. Yet, none of these characters demonstrate any ambition or enthusiasm about the profession. “Wish to be like Tina Brown, though not, obviously, quite so hardworking,” says Bridget about her desire to network well at a book launch thrown by her publishing house.⁷⁸ Why is it “obvious” that Bridget doesn’t want to be hardworking? And why does the text make it obvious that Bridget will *never* be as successful as Tina Brown? Bridget’s awkward encounter with Julian Barnes may provide the reader with a laugh, but the text presents her failure as inevitable. Bridget will fail at becoming Tina Brown because of her lack of drive and work ethic. She wants Tina Brown’s celebrity and authority, but none of her responsibilities. Why are characters like Bridget always looking for an easy answer – and why does it always come to them by the novel’s conclusion?

None of these characters attempts to improve her life. Many of the protagonists have been through multiple careers before the novel begins and see their current job as their “last chance” even though they are unsatisfied with it. Why do women stay in dead-end jobs if they are so miserable? Why are these jobs the only possible career choices for women? Bridget Jones only switches jobs from publishing to television after a disastrous romantic relationship with her boss, Daniel. She doesn’t even take action after he dumps her; she mopes around the office until her mother steps in and secures her an interview for a new job. If these jobs truly are their last chances, why aren’t the characters doing their jobs well or actively trying to be transferred to another position? Emma is promoted

after an idea inspired by her grandfather is successful, and she follows her boyfriend's business model. None of the women succeeds on her own merit and the text still endorses her. Why can't these women be intelligent and active?

While the type-B characters wait for someone to help them advance in the workplace, they daydream about bossing around their annoying coworkers. Why are responsibility and authority fantasies for Bridget and Emma, instead of realities? The dream of authority in the workplace is always linked to the vision of the protagonist dressed in a designer suit. "I look just like a top businesswoman," Emma consoles herself when she feels out of place at a business meeting. "I'm wearing discreet gold swirl earrings like they tell you to in how-to-win-that job articles. And I've got on my smart new Jigsaw suit."⁷⁹ Both Bridget and Emma often refer to magazine articles that tell them what to wear (gold swirl earrings) and how to act (like Tina Brown) in order to be successful in the workplace. Bridget also wears a Jigsaw suit to her interview but is immediately horrified when the workers at the television office dress casually. It's "as if, in a hideously misjudged attempt to be formal, I had turned up in a floor-length shot-silk Laura Ashley ball gown."⁸⁰ Throughout all chick lit novels a tremendous amount of attention is paid to the labels of their clothing, whether it is a trendy Fendi pony skin bag or a grotesquely passé Laura Ashley dress. The characters believe that the proper clothing (for example, a stylish business suit) can transform them into something they're not (a savvy businesswoman). Why do they believe buying these products will transform their lives? And when the products don't, as in the case of the Jigsaw suits, why don't the characters question their faith in material goods? Why is there such an emphasis on

shopping? Why do these women have the same attitude toward career advancement as children who pretend what they “want to be when they grow up”?

Perhaps this emphasis on material items serves as a distraction for the reader. There is an obvious correlation between materialism and these novels; one simply has to look at the cover art. Most of the books feature illustrations of shoes, dresses, and shopping bags. “Shopaholic,” the extremely successful chick lit series by Sophie Kinsella, focuses on a heroine who, according to the Barnes and Noble review, “only feels in charge with a credit card in hand.”⁸¹ *Bare Necessity* has a tiny illustration of a shoe at the beginning of each chapter. Curtis Sittenfeld, a vocal critic of chick lit, has nevertheless published two novels with “chick lit” covers. Sittenfeld acknowledges that some people will pick up her novel *Prep*, with a pink and green grosgrain ribbon on the cover, thinking the book is a “jaunty story about fashion.”⁸² Whether Sittenfeld’s books belong in the chick lit genre is another issue, but there is some truth to her remark on stories about fashion. Not only do the covers focus on material objects, but many chick lit plots revolve around consumerism. A distinguishing characteristic of the chick lit genre is its concentration on designer labels and trendy bars. If the novel distracts the reader through its detailed attention to products, she won’t stop to ask questions about the novel’s construction. During the process of reading chick lit, the readers forget to ask questions about how the characters’ lives, and their own lives, could be different.

The genre does present a lifestyle different from the ditzy heroine’s, but it is also a troubled representation. The type-A characters love their careers, rake in huge salaries, and hold a great deal of responsibility and authority in the workplace. The novels describe these characters in the same terms that the type-B characters daydream about

being. These women drive BMWs and wear tailor-made business suits (unlike Emma's secondhand Jigsaw ensemble). Their aloof attitude toward men (no time for relationships because they are so busy at work) is what characters like Bridget strive to have – Bridget's friend Tom even gives her this mantra to repeat when she wants to talk her crush: "Aloof, unavailable ice-queen; Aloof, unavailable ice-queen."⁸³ Yet, despite living the fantasy of the other characters, the type-A protagonist is still unfulfilled. Valerie Wagner, of Donna Kauffman's *Dear Prince Charming*, believes she has her life in order at the beginning of the novel. As the workaholic publicist for the new magazine *Glass Slipper*, Valerie has landed the United States' most popular self-help author (who writes under the pseudonym "Prince Charming") to pen a column for the magazine:

She had the *Glass Slipper*; she had Prince Charming; she even had her own fairy godmother – three of them, in fact. All she needed now was the Be-Dazzler-encrusted pumpkin carriage and the fairy tale would be complete. Her smile spread to a grin. However, her brand-new, sporty little MINI would definitely do in the meantime. Life was good.⁸⁴

Valerie believes she is happy, but the structure of the novel won't let her stay that way. Prince Charming (writer Eric Jermaine) decides to come out of the closet, so Valerie must scramble to create a hybrid "Prince Charming" whose words are Eric's but whose face is Jack Lambert's, a childhood friend of Eric. In the course of getting her career back on track, Valerie realizes she is lonely without any close friends or romantic relationships in her life. While it's a good thing Valerie understands her expensive clothes and car aren't going to fulfill her, why must she need Jack to complete her happy ending? Why did her previous happiness have to be tied to a career that wasn't productive or meaningful?

The novels define “work” simply as a mode of acquiring money to purchase more shoes or handbags or a fancy car. Work is never goal orientated or physical or meaningful. The genre never defines work in terms of making a difference. None of the heroines have a job where they help other people or effect change in the world. Most of the type-A heroines are lawyers in corporate law firms, publicists, or marketing executives. One chick lit character, Emily Miller from *Bare Necessity*, is an English teacher – but for an exclusive London school. When considering new career options after she is fired, Emily bemoans that she cannot go back to teaching. “It seems rather pointless to mention that I actually quite liked teaching. Loved it, in fact. There is a world shortage of teachers.”⁸⁵ Emily does view her profession as performing a greater good for the world, yet it’s doubtful that the shortage of teachers applies to posh private schools for children of the wealthy. Why can’t one of the type-A heroines be a surgeon or a social worker or a public school teacher who is consumed by her work? If Valerie worked for a non-profit instead of a “life makeover” company, the novel would not be able to dismiss her passion for work so easily. Valerie would be noble – not a narrow-minded workaholic. Instead, she needs Jack Lambert to convince her that work shouldn’t be taken so seriously and to invest more time and emotion into her personal relationships. Aside from providing a conflict for the plot, why are these women so dissatisfied with their lives? A uniting theme of chick lit is that women realize they have many choices about their lives, and yet they are unhappy with the position they are in. Why don’t the protagonists have the agency to change their lives by themselves? Why does love *literally* conquer all of the heroine’s problems?

The problematic portrayal of the protagonist's world in chick lit novels excludes contemporary realities. Among the "not-saids" of the protagonist's world is the absence of poverty, multiculturalism, politics, and current events. While there is a growing trend of chick lit books for various ethnic groups, the most popular remain the traditional white, single girl in the city. In the typical chick lit novel, minorities exist only as secondary characters. A chick lit heroine might have a black roommate or an Indian coworker, but they exist only as undeveloped, flat characters. Ethnicity, religion, and nationality never appear as serious issues in the novels, although in reality these concepts play an important role in any urbanite's life. The novels have so much detailed, realist attention about New York and London's bars, restaurants, and department stores, yet they fail to discuss the cities' diverse populations.

The novels also compress homosexuality into a simplified representation, although homosexuality is extremely visible in chick lit novels. A gay friend is an accessory as essential to a character as her cosmopolitan and designer handbag. These men serve to give the heroine advice on fashion, relationships, and entertaining, but never have a real plot of their own. Lesbians never enter the typical chick lit novel, although there is a growing trend of lesbian chick lit. In chick lit, sexuality is simple and never questioned. Some characters are homosexual, but most are heterosexual. The novels relegate any character that blurs the gay/straight binary to a passing role, adding "color" to a scene in a bar or the subway.

We could raise more questions about sexuality, class, and gender in chick lit, but the main issue is that the books' readers never ask these questions. The genre depends on a non-interactive reader who does not question the world chick lit creates. This promotion

of passivity is chick lit's greatest problem; the genre develops passive readers and never engages them to think beyond their worlds. For chick lit, the escape of "not thinking" is not asking questions about the structures of society. Why don't chick lit readers challenge the genre's portrayals of gender, race, class, or sexuality?

One reason readers don't question the genre could be because they are living inside the ideologies the novels construct. Perhaps another reason could be that the novels present a certain way of life as "natural." Just as ideologies create ideas of work and romance, they also promote a concept of "naturalness" that is completely unnatural. Nature and the natural are constructions of ideologies. Marxist Roland Barthes began writing *Mythologies* because of his "impatience" at the confusion between nature and history.⁸⁶ He was frustrated by people saying aspects of culture were natural or "just the way things are." Myths empty reality of history and give it a new meaning – naturalness:

A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence.⁸⁷

Barthes says culture functions as it does because history has made it that way, but cultural myths promote the determinist idea that history is inventible. In *Mythologies*, Barthes exposed cultural myths through examining aspects of popular culture, including advertisements, sports, toys, and food.

Many aspects of the chick lit novels appear to be "natural," as if they were an imitation of reality. The readers don't question the heroine's world because the novel presents this world as a replication of life. "Naturally" everyone who lives in London and New York is upper-middle class. "Of course" the heroine will find true love. "It's

inevitable” that the female characters get drunk and have sex with strangers. “It’s natural” that every young woman acts like the chick lit characters. The books present themselves as late “coming of age” stories, as if every woman goes through the same stages of gaining maturity on her way to adulthood.

The novels claim to echo reality, portraying the world as it naturally is. Barthes argues that history shapes the world, not an inherent naturalness. However, chick lit novels never acknowledge history or its effects on the present. One example is the hero’s wealth, which the books present as a part of his character; the novel never questions the origins of his money. Money and work are completely natural in the chick lit world. The genre’s characters operate within an economic system that encourages excessive consumption and meaningless work. The hero and heroine never question the role of capitalism in their lives, even if they feel unsatisfied with their jobs and consumerism.

What effect do these books and their claims to “naturalness” have on their readers? If we examine how chick lit presents the protagonist’s realization of her maturity as a natural stage of a woman’s development, we can see one way the book shapes the reader. Althusser coined the concept of “interpellation” to describe the process of ideologies producing subjects. Interpellation works because the subject doesn’t recognize that she is being formed: “Ideology suppresses the role of language in the construction of the subject. As a result, people ‘recognize’ (misrecognize) themselves in the ways in which ideology ‘interpellates’ them, or in other words, addresses them as subjects, calls them by their names and in turn ‘recognizes’ their autonomy.”⁸⁸ A chick lit reader is shaped by her identification with the novel. The reader is interpellated by “recognizing” herself in the protagonist’s character and saying, “That’s me. I’m female. I’m single. I’m on my

way to becoming a real adult.” She is not simply forgetting to question the novels’ ideologies, but she is actively responding to their calls.

Chick lit readers aren’t unintelligent; they realize that the “reality” of the books is constructed. Most of the plots are over-the-top and the reader knows that although she feels a kinship with Bridget Jones, she will not have the same fairy-tale ending to her real-life problems. Readers may not question the “realities” and “naturalness” of chick lit, which can be dangerous. The farfetched story lines distract the reader from the true problems of the novels. By admitting that its stories are fantastical, chick lit “inoculates” the reader. Barthes writes that inoculation prevents the myths from being exposed: “One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion.”⁸⁹ The ideology creating chick lit is actually stronger through its acknowledgement that parts of the book aren’t “real.” If some parts of chick lit are unreal, then other parts *must* be real and natural.

Reading, even if for pleasure or escape, is never a passive action. From Radway’s subjects, who found reading self-empowering, to chick lit’s readers, who are interpellated as subjects, the act of reading wields power. The chick lit reader who believes she is reading to escape from society’s problems is, in fact, a part of these problems. Through the act of reading, the reader is actively engaged by ideologies that are harmful. The novels reinforce cultural values such as gender roles and consumerism, and allow the reader to feel justified and complacent about excessive alcohol consumption, confining gender roles, class differences, and racial inequality. How are these “jaunty stories about

fashion” actually functioning in today’s society? What is lighthearted, frothy, and fun about the interpellation of women into passive, unthinking subjects?

CONCLUSION

Chick lit wouldn't exist (and in so many forms) if it hadn't tapped into the "zeitgeist" of a generation, and the continuing growth of the genre proves women still feel this zeitgeist. I believe the reason behind the books' popularity lies in the confusion experienced by women of the post-feminist generation. In the past thirty years, gender roles have been questioned and overhauled, and we are still living in the middle of this process. While contemporary young women have the opportunity to "have it all," each woman must make daunting choices throughout her life. The freedom and the choices provided by the feminist movement have created tensions in women's lives. Chick lit captures this spirit of confusion – how to deal with these new decisions, responsibilities, and consequences. What direction has women's liberation taken us? Has the movement stalled? Will gender equality ever exist? As discussed in Chapter Two, chick lit attempts to explore these problems. The failure of the genre is the way it pretends to address these issues, but then distracts the reader from seriously thinking about them. In order to succeed in its original goal of dealing with women's issues, chick lit needs to directly confront them.

In an ideal form, the genre would directly deal with contemporary problems while still serving as an escape. People do need a temporary escape from their everyday problems, and, as Janice Radway discovered, the act of escape often serves as an assertion of control over these problems. Although the last chapter emphasized the importance of escaping *to* another space through reading, the importance of escaping *from* should not be diminished. Reading for pleasure can be productive, through self-

empowerment or as a way for young students to improve their reading skills. While the act of reading is complicated, there is nothing inherently harmful about “easy” reading. Not every book should be as long and dense as Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* or Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. People need escape from quotidian worries, without having to concentrate too hard on the reading process. Perhaps in the future, chick lit could still be an easy, escape genre *and* directly confront societal problems.

The problematic element of chick lit has nothing to do with its status as an escape genre or even as an “easy” read, but rather from its ability to distract the readers from the contradictions inherent in its texts. The reader cannot escape *from* without escaping *to* another place, and currently chick lit does not provide a good space to escape to; there is a difference between “good” escapes and “bad” escapes. A good escape engages the reader and stimulates her imagination, while a bad escape pacifies her worries and reinforces the dominant belief system. All of the attention paid to Jimmy Choos and flirtinis draws the reader’s focus away from the problems that drew her to the novel in the first place. Not only are the novels encouraging the reader to forget about contemporary problems, they also are fostering and creating more problems. After the reader is distracted, the text begins to smooth over its contradictions. For example, if the reader is paying attention to Bridget’s interest in the feng shui trend and Mrs. Jones’s affair with a Portuguese criminal, she forgets about the dilemma posed by Magda’s situation. As a single career woman, Bridget is unhappy with her life, wishing to live like her friend Magda. Meanwhile, Magda, the stay-at-home mother, wishes for her old single life. By the end of the novel, the reader believes that both Bridget and Magda are happy and their problems have been solved. But actually, nothing has changed or been resolved. The

characters themselves say they are happy, but their conflicts have not been addressed. The “happy ending” pacifies the reader because the text does not reiterate Magda and Bridget’s problems.

Chick lit authors have already realized the potential of the genre to serve as a forum to discuss contemporary women’s issues, to help women with their decisions and the subsequent consequences of their choices. However, chick lit fails to offer any *new* solutions to young women. It simply mirrors a world that already exists and presents this world as natural and ideal. The genre has already tapped into the generation’s spirit, and it still has the potential to create new ideas and question the belief system that produces these feelings of dissatisfaction with the contemporary female role. Instead, the books prompt women to think in a troubling manner. By encouraging women to forget about real problems and focus on consumerism and materialism, the genre serves as a guide to forgetting problems instead of solving them.

Through its focus on fashion, restaurants, and pop culture references, chick lit distracts readers from asking questions and shapes them into passive readers. The passive reader is both non-interactive and non-reactive. The texts train their non-interactive readers by not engaging them. Chick lit is an “easy read” because women quickly read the novels and then forget about them. There are no lasting themes or emotions that spark the reader’s imagination and keep her thinking about the novels. The genre’s passive reader never asks questions about the novel’s structure. She becomes passive because the text focuses on Bridget’s “happy ending” and not on the problem posed by Magda. Similarly, the reader never interrogates why the texts present certain aspects as “natural.” Instead of prompting the reader to question why the protagonist works in an unfulfilling

job, why she depends on the hero to complete her happiness, and why she has no opportunities to change the world, the novels describe the heroine's world as a portrayal of a "natural" reality that doesn't need to be questioned.

Chick lit falls short of achieving its goal of serving as a forum to discuss women's issues, because it's an entire genre structured to pacify the reader into taking no action against these problems. The passive reader fails to interact and *react* to the texts. The novels don't inspire the reader to *do* anything except go back to her previous way of living – even though she turned to the novels because of her unhappiness with that life. The non-reactive reader continues her life without any motivation to effect change. Not being provoked to question the characters' world, the reader feels no need to question her own. Just as the reader didn't question the "naturalness" of the heroine's work, social life, or romance, she doesn't question the "naturalness" of her own world after reading chick lit. A major feature of the genre is how the hero never attempts to change the heroine, which is seen as a good thing among its readership. Yet, nothing changes the heroine – not even the text. The heroine never stops obsessing over shoes and starts attempting to change her world. She never leaves her job to do meaningful work or questions the nature of her relationships. The heroine doesn't react to the problems in her world and neither does the book's reader; she never changes throughout her reading experience. Radway's subjects read for self-empowerment; chick lit readers read for complacency.

Not only are the genre's readers passive, but they're also responding to the texts in a negative way. The interpellation of readers is one of the genre's most disturbing aspects for me, especially as its readership becomes younger and younger. Why should a fifteen-year-old respond "That's me" to Bridget Jones with her excessive drinking, casual

sexual relationships, and lack of self-esteem? The interpellation is just as harmful to older readers. Why is Bridget, an unintelligent and underdeveloped character, a spokesperson for a generation? Why do young women respond to the “endearing, hung over, and running late for work” Bridget Jones model as described by the *New York Times*?⁹⁰ Why do women say “that’s me!” to Shopaholic, Bridget Jones, or even one of the type-A “ice-queen” protagonists?

Perhaps the reason behind this interpellation lies in nostalgia for “simpler times.” These stories go back to an older model of romance where “love conquers all,” but forget that even in the past, these conclusions were always complicated. Again, chick lit smooths over these contradictions, ignoring the problems the texts raised and forgetting history. The role of women in society has changed during the past thirty years; the feminist revolution cannot be ignored. Chick lit characters revel in the possibilities of being modern, young, and single, enjoying the freedom and choices society allows them. When their lives become too complicated, these characters revert to an older model of romance and gender roles. However, this model cannot work in the twenty-first century – too much history has occurred.

Contemporary women cannot pretend to live in the past because the feminist revolution has occurred. As discussed in Chapter Two, many young women (the same age as chick lit readership) are prone to say that the feminist fight is over. This belief that the feminism is passé corresponds with the confusion felt by the chick lit generation. Thirty years, the objective of feminism was much clearer. Now that women have gained equal rights in the legal sense, there is an uncertainty of what women should fight for. Gender inequality and double standards still exist, but the way women react to them is

varied. The feminist movement has splintered, and without a unifying principle, it is difficult to rally women together. Chick lit has found a way to unify women, but the genre doesn't use its popularity to question the status quo.

Not only does chick lit not use its success to discuss the role of contemporary women in a meaningful way, it also has the potential to negatively affect upcoming female authors. The negative connotation of chick lit in popular culture, although partially deserved, can hurt a future generation of women writers. Publishing houses have learned that pastel-colored covers and illustrations of shoes sell books, and authors like Curtis Sittenfeld, who don't want to be classified as chick lit, have to struggle against these labels. Jennifer Weiner was right, Jonathan Safran Foer would never have to negotiate with his publishers over a demeaning cover, yet an upcoming female author faces this challenge. Sittenfeld, a graduate of Stanford University and the Iowa Writer's Workshop, and Weiner and Foer, both Princeton alumni, hold similar credentials, yet Sittenfeld and Weiner must work harder to prove their work is worthwhile. Currently, a female author's reputation is damaged when associated with the chick lit genre, but perhaps in the future a new author will come along and challenge the books' conventions, restructuring the way the genre works in society.

Although chick lit doesn't use its popularity in a subversive manner, it still has this potential. As discussed in the Introduction, culture can function as both a tool of domination and resistance. The growing trend of international chick lit serves as an example of the duality of cultural texts. A March 2006 *New York Times* article reported that the genre is now becoming popular in India and post-Communist Eastern Europe. Time will tell how these novels develop – if they will continue the current trend of

creating passive readers or if they will become a subversive genre abroad. On the one hand, these novels can simply continue to create more passive readers who don't question ideologies about gender roles, consumerism, and the status of women. International chick lit could spread Western ideologies of capitalism and consumerism: "Where feminism hasn't fully taken root, chick lit might be offering the feminist joys of freedom and the post-feminist joys of consumerism simultaneously," Mallory Young, editor of a collection of essays on chick lit, told *The New York Times*.⁹¹ Although Young apparently sees this as a positive development, I believe this description sounds like a continuation of chick lit's shortcomings. However, there is a possibility for these novels to break away from the old chick lit model and find a way to integrate old and new ideas in a thought-provoking way.

Wanting to prove that mass culture can be used as a method of resisting power, I began this project with the hope of finding something subversive about chick lit. Sadly, the more I studied chick lit, the less progressive I found it. From its condescending name to the way it interpellates the reader, the genre is moving women's literature in a disturbing direction. Unlike Radway's study of the romance novel, I couldn't find a way that the genre was attempting to blend regressive and progressive ideologies. Instead, it seems to be mixing contemporary societal attitudes with nostalgia for the past. However, despite my ultimate condemnation of the genre, I still see a potential for it to move in a positive direction. The books have a wide audience; the perfect platform for reaching thousands of women. Perhaps in the future some author will find a way to use the genre subversively. Right now, I think the best way to achieve this goal is to ease away from the traditional chick lit formula.

The failure of current chick lit novels does not mean that the entire genre is doomed to be a failure. In the future, there could be stories about young, single women in the city that don't follow the strict formula. Perhaps there's a chick lit novel that hasn't yet been written that deals with contemporary issues in a significant way. This chick lit text could still provide an escape *from* the reader's world, but also a meaningful world to escape *to*. Just as this novel is still unwritten, the world it would provide does not yet exist. What would chick lit be like if it provided a new world to escape *to*? In this world, gender inequality would passé; both women and men would have equal opportunities to raise families and work. In this world, the characters' careers would be meaningful – more than a simple job that provides the protagonist money to buy more shoes or designer handbags. The protagonist would derive pleasure from activities other than shopping and drinking. These novels wouldn't use consumerism as a mode of distraction from societal problems; instead, they would directly address contemporary issues and offer solutions. This yet unwritten chick lit novel would engage the reader's imagination, stimulating her to question her own world. Instead of forming passive readers, this novel would provoke its readers into action.

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³ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 2.

⁴ Lidia Curti, "What is Real and What is Not: Female Fabulations in Cultural Analysis," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, 135. New York: Routledge, 1992.

⁵ Radway, Janice. "Mail-Order Culture and Its Critics," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, 519. New York: Routledge, 1992.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 513.

⁷ Rivkin, "The Politics of Culture," 1025 (see chp. 1, n.2).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1027.

⁹ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 5 (see chp. 1, n. 3).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

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¹³ Meg Cabot, *Every Boy's Got One*, 16.

¹⁴ Donna Kauffman, *Dear Prince Charming*, 379.

¹⁵ Christy Dunn, e-mail message to the author, March 23, 2006.

¹⁶ Cabot, *Every Boy's Got One*, 318.

¹⁷ Tallese Johnson and Jane Dye, "Indicators of Marriage and Fertility in the United States from the American Community Survey: 2000 to 2003," August 18, 2005. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/fertility/mar-fert-slides.html>

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²⁴ Jennifer Weiner, “*Snark Spot*,” June 7, 2005. <http://jenniferweiner.blogspot.com/2005/06/in-between-unloading-my-galleys-and.html>

²⁵ Jennifer Pressler, “Miss Popularity,” *Philadelphia Magazine*, October 2005. <http://www.phillymag.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/article.view/articleID/7651de0a-78b5-4b4c-85f6-11a7902d7d4d>

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²⁹ Bristow, (see chp. 1, n. 20) .

³⁰ Kauffman, *Dear Prince Charming*, 378.

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³² Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, 169.

³³ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 104.

³⁴ Ibid., 97.

³⁵ Ibid., 104.

³⁶ Raymond Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” in *Raymond Chandler: Later Novels and Other Writings*, ed . Frank MacShane, 987.

³⁷ Ibid., 987.

³⁸ Donna Kauffman, *Dear Prince Charming*, 44.

³⁹ Meg Cabot, *Every Boy’s Got One*, 9.

⁴⁰ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 45.

⁴¹ Ibid., 47-48.

⁴² Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” 986.

⁴³ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 130.

⁴⁴ “Chick Lit Author Roundtable.” (see chp. 1, n. 21).

⁴⁵ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 113-4.

⁴⁶ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* in *The Complete Novels of Jane Austen*, 453.

⁴⁷ Chick lit authors often describe their style as “satiric,” but true satire attempts to expose society’s problems and reform them. While there might be satirical humor, there is no element of reform. Part of the genre’s failures, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter, is its inability to discuss societal conflicts openly or provide any resolution to these problems.

⁴⁸ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 117.

⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, “Jane Austen” in *The Common Reader*, 139.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵² Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 77.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

⁵⁴ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 78.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵⁷ Fielding, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, 114.

⁵⁸ Dowd, *Are Men Necessary?*, 173-4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 62-3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

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⁶¹ Paula Lattanzi, e-mail message to the author, November 29, 2005.

⁶² Elizabeth Perrella, e-mail message to the author, March 11, 2006.

⁶³ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 86.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁵ Jennifer Coburn, “Chick Lit Author Roundtable,” (see chp. 1, n. 27).

⁶⁶ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, 3.

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- ⁶⁷ Coburn, "Chick Lit Author Roundtable," (see chp. 1, n. 27).
- ⁶⁸ Dorothy Sayers, *The Omnibus of Crime*, 31.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ⁷¹ Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," in *Raymond Chandler: Later Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Frank MacShane, 986-7.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 987.
- ⁷³ Sayers, *The Omnibus of Crime*, 9.
- ⁷⁴ Catherine Belsey, "Constructing the subject: deconstructing the text," in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, 54.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁷⁶ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 165.
- ⁷⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 90.
- ⁷⁸ Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, 83.
- ⁷⁹ Kinsella, *Can You Keep a Secret?*, 3.
- ⁸⁰ Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, 170.
- ⁸¹ "The Barnes & Noble Review from Discover Great New Writers," <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbnInquiry.asp?z=y&isbn=0440241413&itm=1>
- ⁸² Sittenfeld. "Curtis Sittenfeld: Reading from Her Fiction." (lecture, Lowell Humanities Series, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass., November 17, 2005). <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/sittenfeld/>
- ⁸³ Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, 64.
- ⁸⁴ Kauffman, *Dear Prince Charming*, 6.
- ⁸⁵ Carole Matthews, *Bare Necessity*, 147.
- ⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 11.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.
- ⁸⁸ Belsey, *Constructing the subject*, 149.
- ⁸⁹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 150.

NOTES TO THE CONCLUSION:

⁹⁰ Rachel Donadio, “The Chick-Lit Pandemic,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2006.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

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