

## Is Chick Lit a Fluff or a Product of Jane Austen's Style?

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### Abstract:

*Chicklit.us explains that chick lit genre reflects "the lives of the everyday working young woman" and appeals to readers who "want to see their own lives in all the messy detail, reflected in fiction today". But some writers and critics describe it as a mere fluff or garbage and wastage of time. This present paper deals with the arguments in favour of "CHICK LIT" genre. It tells that it's not only the 'girl thing'. It's an important genre which deals with the problems of those women who are caught between the competing demands of feminism and being an independent woman. It is a via media which helps the women. It's more like an escape, which helps the women too choose. This genre gives them a satisfaction that they are not alone with such and such problem; there are many more like them, to whom they can relate. Moreover, this paper also gives a detailed origin of the genre which takes it back to its roots---the JANE AUSTEN ideas of novel. Chick lit somewhat is the branch of Austen's novels.*

**Key words:** Chick lit, feminism, post-feminism, popular fiction.

Popular romance, in whatever media it may come, is often an expression of a frivolous or silly social mythology, and a value judgement on the social mythology is likely to be more relevant to criticism than a value judgement on the literary merit.

--- Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture*

Popular women fiction does not seem to be considered valuable and significant for its audiences, or also for the shaping of modern literature. Opinions on the quality and significance of this genre of popular fiction vary. It is often considered as fatuous and lacklustre literature, whose only aim is to entertain undemanding female readers. At the same time, however, popular fiction continues to find a large audience and receives enthusiastic response from both readers and reviewers or literary critics. Chick lit is another popular term for female fiction often mistakenly used as an equivalent of the romance literature. The term is often defined as a denotation of a fiction genre written for young, usually single, working women in their twenties and thirties. Chick lit features female protagonists, usually in their twenties and thirties, in urban settings, and follows their love lives and struggles in business. It is also perceived as a type of post-feminist fiction, which in an unconventional way deals with female-related themes and topics. The books usually feature an airy, humorous tone and frank sexual themes and topics. Their immense popularity proves that it plays an important role in popular culture.

Chick Lit is a literary genre that originated in the mid-nineties, with its cornerstone novel, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones Diary*, published in 1996. In subsequent years, chick lit narratives have been further popularized by other media like television, with series such as *Ally McBeal* (1997) or *Sex and the City* (1998), which established the genre as a phenomenon in only a decade. The genesis of the chick lit is punctuated with irony. Novelist Cris Mazza, co-editor of *Chick-Lit: Post Feminist Fiction* (1996) argues convincingly that she was the first to use the term 'chick lit' in print, but for ironic purposes. In her essay "Who's Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of the Genre", she traces how the term worked its way into print after her anthologies were published and reviewed, focussing on the difference between her use of the term 'chick lit' and its subsequent emergence as a type of brand name in the publishing industry.

In the ten years since Mazza and her co-editor Jeffery Deshell first used the term, chick lit has acquired a fixed definition. From the perspective of literary criticism, we can define it as a form of woman's fiction on the basis of subject matter, character, audience, and narrative style. Simply put, chick lit features single women in their twenties and thirties "navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationship" (Ferris and Young 3).

As popular woman's fiction, chick lit has been likened to the contemporary romance popularized by Harlequin in the United States and Mills and Boon in Britain. But here, too, the connection might be an ironic one. Janice Radway's influential work *Reading the Romance* (1984) identifies that genre's single unassailable tenet: the primacy of the male-female couple. The heroine must be connected with one, and only one, man. Yet as Stephanie Harzewski explains in her essay "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners", that requirement along with others, has been subtly subverted by chick lit novels. Supporters claim that, unlike traditional, convention-bound romance, chick lit jettisons the heterosexual hero to offer a more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals.

*New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, in an editorial, lamented the genre as "all chick and no lit"---the novel, once said to be a looking glass of its time, reduced to a "makeup mirror". These distinguished writers said that chick lit is showcased in bookstores with a title "It's a Girl Thing". In Britain venerated novelists such as Beryl Bainbridge and Doris Lessing were against the "chickerati." Bainbridge described chick lit as "a froth sort of thing" that just wastes time. Lessing added, "It would be better, perhaps, if [female novelists] wrote books about their lives as they really saw them, and not about these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight" (Bainbridge").

But Chick Lit has its defenders too, such as novelist Jenny Colgan. Of Fielding's *Bridget Jones* diary, she said, "It's a terrific book and it has sold more than two million copies. They have not all been bought by lovelorn single woman in London" (qtd in Gibbons). Jeanette Winterson, who identifies her work as "unashamedly high art", admitted she has "no problem" with chick lit. (Bainbridge).

Both fan and authors of chick lit contend that the difference lies in the genre's realism. Chicklit.us explains that it reflects "the lives of the everyday working young woman" and appeals to readers who "want to see their own lives in all the messy detail, reflected in fiction today". The typical chick lit protagonist is, as a result, not perfect but flawed, eliciting reader's compassion and identification simultaneously. Heroines deploy self-deprecating humour that not only entertains but also leads readers to believe they are fallible---like them. "The heroines of these books can be rude, shallow, over compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, and witty or surprisingly all of the above, but we love them anyway!" (chicklit.us).

The entire chick lit phenomenon can invariably be traced back to *Bridget Jones Diary*. But as in other cases in which a many-branched genre appears to grow from a single stalk, the genesis of chick lit may not be so simple. After all, *Bridget Jones Diary*, much like the Homeric epics or the first eighteenth century British novels, could hardly have sprung fully formed from Fielding's brain. *Bridget Jones's Diary* came to be commonly viewed as the original chick lit text, 'there were precursors which demonstrated that Fielding had merely tapped a nerve with her own writing which already existed' (Whelehan, 191). So, how can we trace the roots of chick lit?

Many people agree that the entire genre appears to have evolved from women's literature of the past, most notably the works of Jane Austen, who has been described as 'surely the mother of all chick lit' (Mlynowski, 11). Aside from the already much-discussed connection between *Bridget Jones's Diary* and

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, 'from which from which Fielding admittedly borrowed much of her plot and many of her characters (Ferriss, 4), we can see numerous similarities between contemporary chick lit novels and fiction by the likes of Jane Austen and the Brontes, whose work included 'all the romance, negotiations of society and character growth that we can see in many of the popular "chick lit" novels today' (Dawson:2004). Bridget Jones is a direct literary descendent of Austen's Elizabeth Bennet. Considering the relationship between the two characters and the two texts, allows us to focus simultaneously on chick lit's ancestry and its contemporary nature. Thus Bridget Jones Diary and the genre of chick lit prove to be indebted to women's literature of the past and, at the same time, completely independent of it (Ferris and Young 4). In this sense, it would certainly seem viable to argue that chick lit does 'have identifiable roots in the history of women's writing, as do many of the genre's characteristic elements: the heroine's search for an ideal romantic partner; her maturation and growth in self-knowledge, often aided by friends and mentors; and her relationship to conventions of beauty' (Wells: 49), as well as focus on other issues of relevance to women's lives.

Today's chick lit heroines also have a lot in common with those of Austen, whose novels also featured heroines who were beautiful but not unbelievably so and 'whose wit and good temper more than elevate [them] above [their] more glamorous but less likeable romantic rivals' (Wells: 59). Nineteenth century heroines also display an interest in fashion and their image, such as Catherine Morland in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, who 'lay awake [...] debating between her spotted and her tamboured muslin' (Austen, 45). They are often happiest when surrounded by their girlfriends, sharing secrets and stories, and again in case of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine believes that friendship 'is certainly the finest balm for the pangs of disappointed love' (Austen, 16). Nineteenth century heroines also crave independence and have professional

aspirations, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), whose heroine has high hopes for the 'promise of a smooth career' (Brontë, 94) on commencing her position as a governess. All of these traits, as well as numerous others, show an obvious link between nineteenth century women's novels and today's chick lit phenomenon.

Despite all of these obvious similarities, however, the temporal gap between the novels of Austen and the Brontës and today's chick lit novels means that there are some inevitable differences between them from the contextual perspective of cultural norms. The cultural context is now very different, as is the place and identity of women in society. Because of this, we can argue that the chick lit fiction of today cannot be a perfect and descendent of nineteenth century novels. So, rather than the likes of Austen and the Brontës being seen as the 'mothers' of chick lit, it may be said that chick lit writers are, instead, 'their younger sisters, inclined to take a more light-hearted and less complex approach to fiction, even as they benefit from changes in social mores and less conflicted attitudes towards women's professional success' (Wells, 68). In an essay entitled 'Mother's of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History' (2006), Wells describes, in detail, the important and distinct differences in the women's novels from these two generations. As she says:

Chick lit departs from its predecessors, however, in several ways: its emphasis on the role of sexual adventures in the romantic quest; the nature of the conclusion to the romantic plot; the importance of the heroine's experiences in the world of work and her evolution as a professional woman; the delight and consolation the heroine finds in indulging herself, particularly in consumer goods; and the privileging of entertainment value, particularly humour, over any challenging or experimental content or style (Wells, 49).

This is an interesting perspective, as she is suggesting that these novels can function as a social mirror wherein the heroine's experience of her world, specifically in terms of her

interaction with consumerism, is a significant part of the chick lit genre's success. In this way, the genre can act as a Lacanian mirror through which aspects of gender identification with the postmodern capitalist consumer society are, to a degree, validated. Part of the reason why Bridget Jones was so successful was that so many women looked at this representation on the page or on screen and felt that they could relate to it. One text regarding Fielding's protagonist correctly notes how the heroine is 'undoubtedly the woman of her time, while her personal dilemmas have struck modern readers as "realistic" to such an extent that Bridget Jones has become an icon of popular culture and acquired the status of the Everywoman of the 1990s' (Smyczynska: 24).

One of the most successful attempts to analyse and understand the genre seems of popular women fiction and chick lit is *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young. It is a collection of essays that go beyond current positive/negative judgements of chick lit to critically dissect its importance as a cultural and historical phenomenon. The contributors review the genre from a range of critical perspectives, considering its conflicted connection with feminism and post-feminism, heterosexual romance, body image, and consumerism.

Chick Lit is an umbrella term for a variety of works written by and for women, which includes both good and bad examples of the genre. Interestingly, some of the novels begin to openly prose themselves on being both educational and authentic.

Successful chick lit, like most escapist fiction, works because readers identify with the heroines. The protagonists have flaws and problems that usually outsize and comic, and readers see their own lives on a comparative human scale, and take comfort in that. But in non-fiction chick lit, a weird reverse is taking place: the identification goes backwards. Real women are presented as fictional' (Onstad).

Chick-Lit novels are easily recognisable not only because of their characteristic pastel covers but also due to the genre's repetitive formula. Reaching for the book the reader knows what to expect. A heroine to identify with, a love plot, humour, and a happy ending is what the novels guarantee their fans. The genre's predictability and repetitiveness, the factors often used as the arguments for criticism, are, in fact, appealing to the readers. According to Cawelti, all literary forms need some formula, because 'without some form of standardisation, artistic communication would not be possible' (Turnbull). The pleasure of reading depends "both on familiarity with the form and on the experience of novelty afforded by the author's play with form (Turnbull, 76)". The pleasure the readers experience reading the author of this research work, Keyes's novels is caused by the author's play with a standard genre formula and inclusion of nonstandard topics such as mental illness, alcoholism, marital breakup, and family tensions, According to Whelehan:

(...) some of the best known novelist such as Jane Green, Lisa Jewell, Marian Keyes (...) have capitalized on their own success as individual authors to experiment to some degree. In some cases this has been effected not only by the inclusion of topics that would have previously been seen as anathema to the genre, but also by the themes so central to the form having become darker and more reflective (192)

## Conclusion

Above all, you must illumine your own soul with its profundities and its shallows, and its vanities and its generousities, and say what your beauty means to you or your plainness, and what is your relation to the ever-changing and turning world of gloves and shoes and stuffs.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of one's Own*.



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