The Coming of Age of a Genre: The Slow Maturation of Chick Lit

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Preface

I have always been a fervent reader and by the time chick lit became a well-known and popular genre, I had reached the right age to witness, and read, this phenomenon from the start. I have been reading chick lit for over ten years now, and still very much like doing so. Therefore, when I was trying to find a suitable topic for this thesis - after having rejected two earlier ideas - I eventually chose this already familiar genre to research. Instead of reading superficially, for the sake of entertainment, I have enjoyed analyzing chick lit more thoroughly, digging deeper for a change. My findings have surprised me, and I do not think I can ever read a chick lit novel in the same careless way as I did before committing to this topic for my thesis, which I consider to be a good thing. As all thesis writers, I have at times felt very frustrated, but enthusiasm and fulfillment have been part of the process as well. Finally, I would like to remark that I feel I have learned much about both the skills of reading and writing and for this I give many thanks to my supervisor, dr. I. Visser.
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Introduction

Chick lit is a new genre of women’s literature that since 1996 has swamped the bookstores with its pastel covers featuring cocktails, shoes and pretty women. It is a genre that has gained a lot of popularity; women who do not usually take up a book, may read chick lit once in a while, and highly-educated career women may have a secret stash of chick lit to read on the subway or on the beach. The fact that chick lit books mostly looks cute on the outside, does not necessarily mean that the content is also merely sugar and spice, as is often the misconception. The genre of chick lit is often considered to be incapable of presenting serious topics in good writing. Novelist Beryl Bainbridge, a five-time nominee for the Booker Prize, called the genre ‘a froth sort of thing’ (qtd. in Ferriss and Young, 1). Doris Lessing, the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2007, preferred women to write about ‘their lives as they really saw them, and not those helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight’ (qtd. in Ferriss and Young, 2). However, many women and girls of my generation indeed worry about their weight, and at times also feel helpless or get drunk (or both at the same time). The prejudice is in the idea that this is all that chick lit has to offer and no more, and it is not taken into account that chick lit also touches upon the issues behind the desire to be thin and sometimes - or too often - drinking too much alcohol, thus reflecting the serious, perhaps darker side that contemporary women also face while struggling to lead a satisfactory life.

Chick lit gets its name from an anthology of women’s writings that initially used the name mockingly. When the anthology, Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction was published in 1995, the name was chosen by the editors, Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell, because it best encompassed the variety of stories by exclusively women writers. The title was meant to be ironic, ‘not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype’ (Mazza, 18). Somehow the term was picked up in the early twenty-first century by the British book-industry and from that moment on applied to a variety of novels dealing with
‘chicks’ in their twenties and thirties and the different challenges life offers them with regard to career, family and finding true love. These are the core issues of chick lit, even though many subgenres have emerged that expand the genre to include older and younger protagonists, from different religions and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, not all chick lit is just focused on finding true love; many may also deal with for instance cheating, conflicts within a marriage or problems in a relationship after having a baby.

Critics who have studied the genre of chick lit have made use of a comparison to the genre of romance. Romances have not always been a respected area of study, but this changed with Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1987). It has been claimed that chick lit is just a newer, hipper version of the romance novel, as opposed to being a new genre in itself. The preoccupation with love is a definite similarity, as is the growth of the protagonist. However, there are also differences to be pointed out that set chick lit apart from romances. Chick lit for instance is defined by its variety. Where romances are always focused on the same deep structure of the Ur-narrative – a man and a women fall in love, face problems in their relationship, overcome those and get married - in the genre of chick lit the Ur-narrative is used more freely, providing greater variety. Romances also are not usually related to contemporary problems, as in the case in chick lit. By deviating from the Ur-narrative, a more realistic, plausible or authentic reflection of contemporary culture can be achieved. This authentic reflection also makes it easier to relate to the protagonists and the struggles they experience.

Chick lit has also been considered from a feminist perspective. Liberal feminism operates from the conviction that both sexes should have equal rights. This includes the right, and the social structures, to have both a career and a family, just as men. This idea has opened one of the doors that led to a period of postfeminism, because the contemporary woman is so overwhelmed by life choices and struggling to have both a career and a family and not suffer from burn-out, that she blames and thus rejects the feminist ideas. Despite the fact that second-wave feminism can take credit for, for instance, chick lit protagonists’ professional lives and their attitude to sex, most
protagonists ultimately long for married life with their one true love. In that sense, chick lit resonates more postfeminist or even patriarchal notions than feminist ones. This also reflects that we are living in postfeminist times, since the popularity of the genre could very well be a sign that chick lit novels are touching a nerve. For the generation of women that I belong too, dating is confusing, because it is no longer clear what a man’s intentions are; it is a relief, not to mention entertaining, to read about protagonists who are experiencing the same. Moreover, this generation of women is at times overwhelmed by study choices and then by professional choices. On the one hand, we want to pursue a career and possibly travel the world, but at the same time we do not know how to combine this with our desire to stop dating and get married and start a family, and time seems to start running out according to our biological clock.

This thesis analyzes the characteristics that have shown to be most defining for the genre according to the current debates about chick lit. Three chick lit novels for will be analyzed on how the Ur-narrative is used, the ability of protagonists to be relatable and their use of feminist and postfeminist elements. In chapter Three, I will make a comparison with aspects from the genre of children’s literature that are deemed similar to aspects from chick lit. According to Peter Nodelman, an expert in the area of children’s literature, an enjoyable children’s book shows a transformation in the protagonist near the ending of the story. At that point, the child protagonist can look back at his ignorance and grow more mature. Since it has been claimed that in chick lit, the focus is on self-development, I will analyze my selection of novels for the presence of a transformation, or a sign of their growth. Nodelman links this moment of transformation to his theory about the ‘double pull’, by which he means that the reader feels an ambivalence because he/she can identify with the protagonist, but at the same time also knows better. This is also a characteristic of chick lit.

The three novels are chosen because of the established names of the authors. The first novel is *Rumour Has It* by Jill Mansell (2009). Mansell has been writing chick lit since 1991 and has delivered at least one novel a year. In my experience, based on reading chick lit novels for over ten years, when someone tries to explain the genre of chick lit or discusses it, Mansell is one of the first
writers to be mentioned. She is the only writer of the three who is better known by her name than by the titles of her novels, in contrast with Cecelia Ahern and Jennifer Weiner, the other two authors who will be discussed in this thesis. Cecelia Ahern is best-known for her debut novel *P.S. I Love You* (2004). It is likely that her father’s fame as a former Irish Prime Minister will have contributed to her success. She also gained more recognition because of the hugely popular 2007 film version. Since 2004, Ahern has published six more novels. Jennifer Weiner is equally best-selling and productive. Her second novel, *In Her Shoes*, also became a film version. In this thesis, *Certain Girls*, the sequel to *Good in Bed*, will be discussed. In the case of Ahern, I chose her best-known novel. The novels from Mansell and Weiner have been chosen because they are from 2009: it will make it easier to identify any shifts away from the earlier days of chick lit and see if what was written about the genre earlier this decade is still applicable to more recent chick lit novels. It will also indicate if any changes have occurred in the above-mentioned aspects, due to the influential status of the authors.

In chapter One of this thesis I present the genre’s critical context. The topics of chick lit’s literary roots and the comparison to the genre of romance will be discussed, as well as feminism and postfeminism with regard to chick lit, the criticism on its supposed lack of literary merit and the children’s literature characteristic of double pull and transformation. In chapter Two, I will present an analysis of the use of the Ur-narrative, how relatable or authentic the protagonists are and the presence of feminist and postfeminist elements. In order to carry out this analysis, I will use close reading. The results will be compared and placed in the genre’s critical context as discussed in chapter One. In chapter Three I present the analysis of the comparison between chick lit and children’s lit based on the double pull and moment of transformation and also compare the results. The outcome of the analysis was different from what I had anticipated beforehand. My initial idea was that the novels that I selected would be innovative, by for instance moving away from the fixed formula of the Ur-text, in which the focus lies on two lovers who marry at the end of the novel after overcoming one or more obstacles in their relationship. I also wished to argue that the genre of
chick lit has more substance than dealing only with ‘boys and shopping’ (pubisherweekly.com, Weiner, 29) but is capable of moving into a more serious direction, by deviating from the Ur-narrative, showing an authenticity comparable to lives of contemporary women and incorporating more feminist elements. However, what I found was that there is great diversity between the three novels themselves, reflecting Imelda Whelehan’s claim that ‘[l]ooking at the diversity of chick lit available today, it would be fair to say that it becomes more difficult to identify the core formula and claim that the women depicted are all latter-day Bridget Joneses’ (16-7). The selection of novels show some variations on the Ur-narrative; they also show a certain amount of authenticity and reflect issues contemporary women deal with, and not all about dating, but also about raising a teenager, deciding to have children, and dealing with grief after losing a spouse. Despite these findings and contrary to my expectations, I found that chick lit is also still close to the genre of romance and postfeminist elements are more easily to be found than feminist elements. All three novels are patriarchal in the sense that marriage is presented as very important and the support of a man necessary for a woman to reach her full potential. Instead of chick lit being as innovative as I expected it to be, only small changes could be detected, mainly in the variations on the Ur-narrative, the occurrence of some more substantial topics different from dating, and thus a more authentic account of life than displayed in romances. However, despite the diversity created by these characteristics, chick lit still leans on the genre of romance in its emphasis on the love plot, importance of marriage and presentation of prefeminist and postfeminist sentiments.
Chapter 1  Chick Lit: The Past, the Present and the Future

Chick lit is a rather recent genre in a long tradition of women’s writing. The publication of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in the UK in 1996 is considered the genre’s kick-off and since then it has developed into a huge part of the publishing industry. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, editors of *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* claim that ‘the entire chick lit phenomenon is invariably traced back to [a] single novel’, namely *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Fielding, 1996) and even call it the ‘single urtext’ of chick lit (4). However, before 1996 the phenomenon of chick lit was already emerging, since Marian Keyes’s *Watermelon* had already been published in 1995 and Jill Mansell has been writing chick lit *avant-la-lettre* since 1991. Both writers have been well-known and popular within the genre to this day.

Despite the diversity caused by the many subgenres within the genre of chick lit, it is possible to make an attempt at defining chick lit. The following definitions show that the heroine’s constant battle with both professional and personal choices is perhaps the most defining characteristic for chick lit. One definition is mentioned by Ferriss and Young: ‘[C]hick lit features single women in their twenties and thirties “navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships”’(3). Stephanie Davis-Kahl describes the genre as ‘compelling stories […] about modern women struggling and succeeding with work, relationships, motherhood, infertility, finances and yes, the right shoes to wear with the right dress’ (18). Both definitions cover a struggle with job or career and relationships; these three aspects could be considered the key ingredients to chick lit.

Within the genre of chick lit, many subgenres can be found. Ferriss and Young claim that ‘[chick lit] has crossed the divides of generation, ethnicity, nationality, and even gender’ (5). For example, besides regular chick lit, the reader can now choose from hen lit (which focuses on protagonists over forty), chick lit jr., ethnic lit, church lit (Christian chick lit), bride lit, work lit and lad lit. Despite the fact that the basic characteristics of a young woman finding her path in life and love would also apply to the subgenres, Imelda Whelehan also maintains that when ‘looking at the diversity of chick lit
available today, it would be fair to say that it becomes more difficult to identify the core formula’ (17).

However, despite chick lit’s popularity and diversity, the genre has not received much academic attention. Online, in for instance book review sections of newspaper websites, as well as on book blogs, chick lit is a popular topic for discussion. The genre itself is also well-represented online, with websites such as chicklitbooks.com. However, in the academic world ‘it has received little serious or intelligent discussion’ (Ferriss and Young, 2). Davis-Kahl suggests that it is prejudice and ignorance that at least partially explain ‘academia’s lukewarm reception of chick lit’. She states that ‘[r]easons behind the reluctance to study the genre could include [...] a belief in the conventional wisdom that all chick lit is about stiletto heels and pink drinks, and men; or an assumption that very popular, highly marketed and lucrative literature must be “too low culture” to warrant scholarly attention’ (19). This is changing nevertheless. She points to four dissertations and six master’s theses that have been written on chick lit in the subject areas of American, British and modern literature and women’s studies since 2005 (19-20). Ferriss and Young published their collection of essays called Chick Lit, The New Woman’s Fiction in 2006 and in April 2009, a study called Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit was published.

One of the topics regarding chick lit that received some serious discussion is its place in literary history. This discussion revolves around the question of chick lit’s legitimacy in the history of women’s writings. On the one hand, there is, for instance, Stephanie Harzewski, who says: ‘Helen Fielding’s re-visioning of Austen’s Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion [...] anchors the genre in respectable literary origins’ (25). Furthermore, she claims that chick lit could be connected to the genre of prose romances, with roots that go back as far as the Middle Ages (31). On the other hand, for instance, Juliette Wells argues that ‘chick lit cannot justifiably make a claim to a [...] literary status’ (Ferriss and Young, 4). She claims it’s ‘certainly one of the next generations of women’s writing but [...] not [...] of women’s literature’ (qtd. in Ferriss and Young, 5).
Chick lit is also closely related to romance fiction\(^1\). Davis-Kahl, Harzewski, Pearce and Whelehan are four critics who make use of this comparison. The romance genre is sometimes considered a degenerate form (Pearce, 521), just as chick lit, or, as Ferriss and Young claim, ‘it attracts the unmitigated disdain of critics’ (1). Nevertheless, romances have been well-studied\(^2\), as opposed to chick lit so far. Both chick lit and romances feature female protagonists and their search for love and self-development. This characteristic is perhaps why both genres are sometimes considered to be secondary. However, Pearce says: ‘what is most degenerate is also most defining’ and that it is in romance where the ‘deep structures’ are ‘laid most bare’ (521); in other words, in romances the Ur-narrative is at its most degraded because it is reduced to nothing more than the formulaic use of this narrative. By claiming that it is also most ‘defining’ Pearce stresses the importance to study these deep structures. She also claims that these deep structures, or ‘Ur-narrative’ - the story of two lovers who meet, lose each other through a misunderstanding or other impediment, but reunite in the end - ‘is no longer confined to “Mills and Boon”’ (521). Furthermore, in both romances and chick lit the heroine has to go through a phase of personal development or transformation.

Both chick lit and romance are genres that are read compulsively. The supply is huge: Ferriss and Young call chick lit a ‘commercial tsunami’ (2). Two reasons for the compulsive readership of romance and chick lit have been suggested. The first one is perhaps the most obvious: reading as a kind of escapism. ‘Romance [offers] a utopian distraction from the mundane and the difficult’ according to Makinen in *Feminist Popular Fiction* (37). The Ur-narrative requires that there is a period of loss and desperation before the heroine can reconcile with her lover, by overcoming an obstacle. Pearce remarks on this transformation from feeling lost to being reunited, or even completed, by claiming that this ‘sense of transformation/completion achieved by the heroines of such texts cannot fail to be compelling […] to readers “ever hopeful”’ (526). Pearce is claiming that the reader is always

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\(^1\) The romances referred to in this dissertation are the ones published by Harlequin and Mills & Boon, or the so-called ‘hard romances’ (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 490).

\(^2\) In chapter 2 of Merja Makinen’s *Feminist Popular Fiction*, which also focuses on romance, more than 20 essays and academic books are mentioned that consider romance.
hopeful for that sense of transformation of completion in her own life, which creates a compulsion to relive that moment again and again through stories, or through the deep structures in these stories. While the mass production of both genres is similar, chick lit and romances also differ from each other on many points. There is a difference in emphasis: in romances the focus is on the love plot, whereas chick lit tends to focus on the development of the heroine. Harzewski claims that ‘[t]he quest for self-definition […] is given equal or more attention than the relationship conflict’ (37). Pearce points out, however, that a great part of the pleasure women take from reading romance also centres around the ‘growth of the heroine’ (526). This growth could be considered the same sense of transformation from feeling lost to completion that Pearce refers to, as discussed above. The difference is therefore one of nuances, as well as the origin of chick lit in Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary.

A difference, however, is that chick lit can also be characterized by its realism, while romance cannot. Where chick lit tries to create a more or less realistic account of today’s world as it may be experienced by young women, romance tries to incorporate an element of fantasy, according to Michele Glasburgh (4). The fact that romances are always modeled after the so-called Ur-narrative, whereas chick lit may deviate from, or create variations on it, is one example of chick lit’s more realistic account of contemporary women’s lives. For instance, one deviation is that the two lovers are not reunited, so that ‘the novels […] present a more realistic portrait of single life and dating, exploring […] the dissolution of romantic ideals or exposing those ideals as […] unrealistic’ (Harzewski, 39). Another example of chick lit’s realism is that it treats sex differently than romances do. In romances a ‘sexually inexperienced’ heroine is preferred and no attention paid to previous sexual partners, if any (Pearce, 526). This as opposed to chick lit, where sex is considered ‘a necessary part of romantic exploration’ and ‘a chick lit novel without a few satisfying […] sex scenes is hard to find’ (Wells, 50). The characteristics of the Ur-narrative, how it may be varied upon in order to create a greater sense of authenticity and the degree to which sex is used will be explored in chapter Two.
Some literary characteristics of romance and chick lit have been compared. Romance novels are usually written in a third-person narrative, whereas chick lit is generally known for its first person perspective. Another typical characteristic of chick lit is its deliberate use of humour (Harzewski, 38), through either witty language, absurd situations or comical characters. Other differences concerning the genre are, for instance, the fact that chick lit has some subgenres that cannot be found in the romance genre, such as mom lit, lad lit and ethnic lit (Davis-Kahl, 19). The genres also aim at different audiences. The average age of the romance reader is 45, but today’s chick lit publishers ‘have begun reaching out to the next generation of female readers’ (Mabry, 193). Considering the content of the chick lit novels under discussion in this thesis, this is only clear for Rumour Has It; P.S. I Love You and Certain Girls have more serious content that could also appeal to an audience somewhat older than the regular chick lit protagonist.

Chick lit has also been under the scrutiny of feminist criticism. Feminist literary criticism developed after second-wave feminism in the 1960s. According to Whelehan, feminism is ‘founded upon the belief that women suffer from systematic social injustices because of their sex’. A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (2005) states that feminism ‘reflect[s] concern with the silencing and marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture, a culture organized in the favour of men’ and later mentions that it fought for ‘enforcement of equal rights and an end to sex discrimination’ (223). Susan Faludi states that ‘[f]eminism’s agenda is basic: It asks that women not be forced to “choose” between public justice and private happiness. It asks that women are free to define themselves-instead of having their identity defined for them, time and again, by their culture and their man’ (Faludi, xxiii). In 1970 Germaine Greer published her ‘feminist classic’, The Female Eunuch (Harzewski, 39). There was no chick lit around yet, but Greer devoted a chapter to criticizing romances, claiming that they created a false consciousness. By this she meant that the hero ‘lures women into ignoring reality’ (Makinen, 31), and that the female reader is ‘cherishing [her] chains of bondage’, ‘a slave to the romantic myth’ (qtd. in Harzewski, 36). According to Gill and Herdieckerhoff, ‘in the 1960s and
1970s romance novels were seen variously as a seductive trap which justified women’s subordination to men’ (490).

When considering contemporary views on feminism, whether women are by now truly liberated is not yet a given fact. Susan Brownmiller says that she and her ‘radical sisters’ wanted a ‘total transfiguration of society – politics, business, child-rearing, sex, romance, housework, entertainment, academics’ (qtd. in Levy, 48). She says that she ‘felt the most optimistic about the [women’s] movement’s success’ when in 1973 abortion was legalized in the U.S. By then the Civil Rights Act had been in place for almost ten years, which banned discrimination on the basis of sex and made it illegal for businesses to reserve specific jobs for men or women or to fire a woman for getting pregnant (Levy, 53). Furthermore, ‘one of the fundamental initial goals of the women’s liberation movement was to advance women’s sexual pleasure and satisfaction’ (Levy, 54). When I look at my generation of girls and women, for whom it is no more than normal to go to university, pursue a career or be on the pill, it would seem that feminism has done its job. However, both Levy and Faludi ask themselves if that is really true. Levy remarks on the culture of nakedness and sex that women have created for themselves to feel “empowered” by claiming that “r+auncy” and “liberated” are not synonyms’ (5). In Backlash (1992), Faludi states that feminism has come a long way, but is not nearly there yet, since before it could really follow through with its aims of equality and (sexual) liberty, ‘the media declared the advent of a younger “postfeminist” generation that supposedly reviled the women’s movement’ (xix) and thus created a ‘backlash that stopped the feminist purpose in its tracks. She claims that ‘the positive strides made by feminism have been diminished by one of the chief strategies of backlash ideology, which is to invent moral panics which halt the march of female equality’ (Whelehan, 188). So by using the male-dominated media to play into women’s fears of ending up alone and aging, they are steered back under patriarchal yoke.
Michele Glasburgh looks at five aspects of postfeminism as defined in Faludi’s *Backlash* and uses these to analyze ten chick lit novels in her 2006 Master’s Paper, in order to investigate the relationship between chick lit and postfeminism, as well as the idea that chick lit accurately represents modern women’s lives. Glasburgh describes postfeminism as ‘a shift away from the feminist idea of needing to right the wrongs of a patriarchal society with regard to women’ (7). She concludes that indeed ‘feminism is out of touch with [...] womanhood’ and ‘constrictive’ (77). 

However, it is partly thanks to feminism that both real women and the heroines in chick lit can now enjoy economic independence yet many writers of chick lit apparently have mainly post-feminist sensibilities. According to Glasburgh, when one ‘take[s] away the pink advertising and the silly titles, [...] we’ve got postfeminist text on our hands’ (87). Nevertheless, A. Rochelle Mabry suggests that feminist notions are being explored in chick lit as well. For instance, the popular TV-show *Sex and the City*, based on the chick lit by Candace Bushnell, ‘undercuts traditional ideas about gender roles’ (199) and ‘represents the desires and attempts of many real-life contemporary women to investigate the mysteries of [...] gender roles on their own terms’ (199-200). So contemporary women have been liberated to some extent by feminism and this is reflected in chick lit as well: ‘chick lit *is* in dialogue with feminism’ (Whelehan, 5).

However, Mabry also argues that the voice that women have been given by feminism has to be silenced in order for them to end up in the arms of the one they love. Before reuniting with Mark Darcy, Bridget Jones rejects her own voice in despair of losing him when she cries out ‘everyone knows diaries are just full of crap’ (qtd. in Mabry, 205). Gill and Herdieckerhoff take this one step further and claim that also ‘the downplaying of intelligence sometimes appears to be essential to make the dynamic between the strong hero and the needy heroine work’ (495). They suggest that the heroine manages to win her hero because she ‘conform[s] to traditional stereotypes of...
femininity’ (495). One of the characteristics of postfeminism is its revival of femininities not allowed through feminism (see footnote 3). Gill and Herdieckerhoff illustrate this with an example provided by Marian Keyes, who says she lived in fear of ‘being “told off” by feminists and “having everything pink taken out of [her] house”’ (499). Nevertheless, Gill and Herdieckerhoff also conclude that there is a ‘suture between feminism and femininity’ (499), similar to Whelehan who claims they are in ‘dialogue’.

Nonetheless, another characteristic of postfeminism is its rejection of feminism, because women today are still miserable, not despite, but because of it. The independence that women today have thanks to feminism— for instance the access to universities and a wider range of jobs - has also led to multiple possibilities how to live their lives and ‘the idea of more choices has led women to increased anxieties over life decisions’ (Glasburgh, 85). Because feminism brought us economic independence, these longings can now make women feel as feminism is a guilty conscience ‘lurking in the background’ (Whelehan, 176), spying on us to check that we make the correct, feminist choices. Connect today’s hesitation concerning feminism with the ‘moral panic’ Faludi claims is spread by male-dominated media and it is perhaps no wonder that contemporary women turn their focus back on finding security in a relationship. This is reflected in chick lit, according to Whelehan, who claims that ‘[c]hick lit seems to be built on an acknowledgement of the ‘failure’ of feminism and in each case ‘empowered’ women must find true self-determination through the right kind of men’ (Whelehan, 188).

Chick lit as a genre has required a reputation of being light, unliterary and pink. ‘On one hand chick lit attracts the unquestioning adoration of fans; on the other it attracts the unmitigated disdain of critics’ write Ferriss and Young in their introduction to Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction (1). Glasburgh advocates discussion about chick lit because it is ‘important to remember with a genre like chick lit, just as with romance or fantasy or science-fiction, […] there are usually underlying meanings and reflections of society in each that are worth exploring’ (86). However, chick lit is most
often criticized for its lack of style and content. Many woman journalists claim the vocabulary is too simplistic, the plots flimsy and formulaic, the books poorly written. Juliette Wells agrees in claiming that chick lit misses actual literary characteristics, such as poetic or descriptive passages (65), the use of metaphors and similes (65-6) and that no chick lit ‘demands of its reader the kind of attention and detective work required by the epistolary form or the stream of consciousness technique’ (67), despite the fact that some narrative devices might be borrowed from Frances Burney or Virginia Woolf. She does admit to the deployment of humour (64) and chick lit’s ‘satiric employment, and sometimes invention, of contemporary slang and lingo, such as BJD “fuckwittage”’ (64). Where content is concerned, Cris Mazza says that ‘the genre is nearly oblivious to social concerns’ (26). Wells explains that because there is so little use of proper literary devices, it becomes hard to find more layers of meaning in chick lit, since these are so often created by those devices (66).

The genre of chick lit has also been defended. It is not only about the fun stuff in life, it also deals with ‘darker themes’ because the genre is starting to take itself more seriously (Whelehan, 208). Weiner says in an interview with publishersweekly.com that ‘[t]here’s a lot of malicious stuff out there saying it’s just boys and shopping. [...] It’s more, how do I fit in the world? It’s big questions that mean a lot to a lot of people’. As has been mentioned above, chick lit may not ‘make broader claims’, but it criticizes and varies in its depiction of gender roles, contemporary relationships and women’s choices. Chick lit plots are often considered to be formulaic. However, it has already been mentioned that chick lit writers are trying to vary on the Ur-narrative. Whelehan claims that ‘[l]ooking at the diversity of chick lit available today, it would be fair to say that it becomes more difficult to identify the core formula and claim that the women depicted are all latter-day Bridget Joneses’ (16-7).

Criticism on women’s fiction seems to be well-rooted in the past. Wells notes that ‘[w]hat women prefer to read, and to write, has historically received less respect than what men create and consume’ (68). Chick lit is a genre dominated by female authors and readers. The only exception seems to be the subgenre’s ‘lad lit’ and ‘dad lit’, but there are not many of those in comparison to
the ‘avalanches’ of chick lit written by and for women. It is also women who have criticized women’s writings; for instance, George Eliot called it ‘frothy, prosy, pious, pedantic’ (Harzewski, 29). Women’s writings also have been defended, e.g. by Virginia Woolf: ‘But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are “important”; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes “trivial” ’ (qtd. in Davis-Kahl, 19). Jennifer Weiner uses this same argument in the twenty-first century: ‘It’s sexist when critics automatically relegate anything concerning young women’s lives to the beach-trash Dumpster bin – especially when they’re automatically elevating anything about young men’s lives to the exalted spheres of Literature’ (qtd. in Davis-Kahl, 19). Both Woolf and Weiner’s defenses resonate with the feminist notion of demanding equality between the sexes.

Chick lit may be compared to other genres that are usually marginalized, such as fantasy and detectives, among others. The genre of children’s lit once shared that status, but not anymore. In the past 40 years, it has acquired a full academic status. Furthermore, both genres also share their immense popularity and large amount of new publications in bookstores.

Despite the fact that children’s lit and chick lit function in two different worlds (that of children and that of the female adult), both genres have certain characteristics in common. About children’s literature, Perry Nodelman writes: ‘apparent simplicity contains depth, surprisingly pessimistic qualifications of the apparent optimism, counterproductive possibilities: [these texts] continue to develop significance […]. These are texts that resonate’ (1-2). He argues that this resonance come from a constant ‘ambivalence’, resulting from ‘pulls in opposite direction’ (2). The examples of this double pull he discusses have to do with the focalization through the mind of the character and the moment of the protagonist’s transformation. Both examples can be connected to characteristics in chick lit as well. First, the first person narrative usually used in chick lit also creates focalization, because the reader is only being given insight into what the protagonist experiences and
understands. Second, chick lit heroines also undergo a transformation in their stories, since the focus of the genre is at least partially on the heroine’s personal development. These characteristics will be explained in more depth in Chapter Three. Moreover, the ambivalence created through focalization also allows the reader to stand back, see more than the protagonist, and thus feel superior to any stupidities of the protagonist, according to Nodelman. Chick lit readers will recognize this, because many of their heroines are all too familiar with embarrassing actions as well, of which Bridget Jones’s are only one example.

Another similarity, not involving content but on plot level, is created by the transformation that occurs in both children’s lit and chick lit. Nodelman suggests that the transformation ‘allows us to indulge repeatedly in a ritual reenactment of the move from child to maturity, innocence to knowledge’ (6) and so gives a possible explanation for the addictive quality of the genre. This could be applied to chick lit as well, in which the reader then ‘indulge[s] repeatedly’ in the development of the heroine, according to Pearce. This characteristic links the two genres in the readers’ motives to return to these genres compulsively.

Due to the scope of this thesis, the comparison will only be based on Nodelman’s theory of the double pull and specifically on its element of transformation. In the genre of chick lit, the protagonists also develop during the story and may have a moment of insight comparable to the moment of transformation in children’s lit. Despite the fact that both genres also share the characteristic of having a happy ending (1), this will not be analyzed in this thesis. Neither will the use of humour, even though this characteristic of chick lit is often to be found in children’s lit as well. Other literary elements that are usually associated with literature for adults, such as a complicated plot or serious themes like death and grief, are often dealt with in children’s lit. In this thesis they will not be taken into account, though.

In this thesis, three chick lit novels (one published in 2004, two in 2009) are analyzed for characteristics that have been discussed previously in this chapter and that are pivotal to the genre: my focus will be on the use of the Ur-narrative; the so-called “realistic”, plausible or authentic
account of contemporary women’s lives; the occurrence of feminist or postfeminist notions and the presence of the double pull. The books that will be discussed are Jill Mansell’s *Rumour Has It* (2009), Cecelia Ahern’s *P.S. I Love You* (2004) and Jennifer Weiner’s *Certain Girls* (2009).

They have been chosen for reason of popularity and their status as bestsellers; also because these authors are established names in the genre. The first book that will be discussed is *Rumour Has It*, by Jill Mansell. It was published in 2009 and in that same year reached the top 50 spot in The Official UK Top 50 of bestsellers (www.thebookseller.com), which indicates Mansell’s popularity, seeing that she shares this list with authors such as Dan Brown and Stieg Larsson. At the moment of writing, her newest novel, *Take a Chance on Me*, takes a number 7 spot in the Top Ten Fiction Hardbacks Bestseller List of the *Sunday Times*. Mansell published her first novel in 1991 and has written twenty-one novels since then, the latest published in 2010. The second book under scrutiny is *P.S. I Love You*, by Cecelia Ahern. This was also her debut. Since 2004 she has published six more novels, but *P.S. I Love You* stands out because of the enormous popularity of its film version. It was also chosen by the “Richard and Judy Book Club”, which might have led to its sales figure of 400,000 at the end of 2004 (www.allbusiness.com). The third book is *Certain Girls* by Jennifer Weiner. This book is the sequel to the 2001 bestseller *Good in Bed*. In between, Weiner has written five more novels, one a collection of short stories. In the summer of 2010, her eighth novel will be published, which roughly comes down to one novel per year. Her second novel *In Her Shoes* was made into a film starring Cameron Diaz and Toni Collette. Her seventh novel *Best Friends Forever* immediately jumped to number one on the New York *Times* bestseller list.

In Chapter Two, I will address the use of the Ur-narrative, and analyze to what extent this narrative structure is used in my selection of novels, and in what ways these chick lit novels deviate from it. These characteristics also play a role in how realistic the story and the heroine are in relation to the lives of contemporary women, since chick lit claims that it reflects ‘the lives of everyday working woman [...] in all the messy detail’ (chicklit.us qtd. in Ferriss and Young, 3). This sense of realism will also be discussed in chapter Two, not only according to Ur-narrative, but also by looking
at the character of the heroine and the issues she faces. The three novels will also be analyzed for the presence of feminist and postfeminist notions, on issues of being single versus being married, work life versus love and marriage and the attitudes toward sex. In Chapter Three, the double pull and its characteristics focalization and moment of transformation will be analyzed in order to make a comparison to their presence in the three chick lit novels. Contemporary bestselling authors keep to the formula or Ur-text of chick lit with minor variations only, mainly in the order of the Ur-narrative and the plausibility or authenticity of the protagonists. This proves that the genre is remarkably conservative, rather than showing significant changes in the areas of Ur-text, authenticity and feminism since its start in 1996.
The use of the Ur-narrative is an important characteristic of the romance genre and has been briefly discussed in chapter One, as well as the difference between romances and chick lit considering the use of Ur-narrative: in romances the entire story revolves around this structure, whereas in chick lit it may be of secondary importance, for instance when the heroine of the story realizes an important lesson about love or herself. Harzewski claims that ‘the traditional romance presents a narrative that emphasizes action or plot over character development’ and that ‘chick lit replicates romance conventions in the heroine’s union with Mr. Right, though this is not requisite’ (37). In other words, chick lit uses this conventional Ur-narrative, but the traditional ending of the lovers reuniting is not necessarily present.

The Ur-narrative seems to have a universal and timeless appeal, since the deep structures that underlie its narrative continue to touch readers, including the readers of chick lit. Pearce states that ‘romance of the “degenerate” kind is now a staple point of reference’ - by ‘degenerate’ the most basic and thus formulaic romance structure is meant - and ‘contemporary culture is as obsessed with this particular “Ur-narrative” as ever’, in which case it would make sense that chick lit, since there is so much choice and it is so popular, would be part of this “obsession”. She also remarks that the success of this “Ur-story” ‘can ultimately only be understood in terms of the “deep structures” that enable its endless reproduction’ (522), and that despite the different opinions on what these deep structures might mean, ‘an ideology or “false consciousness” [...] or a psychic foundation with roots simply too deep to shake’, they all share the same starting point (522). It does not matter whether one prefers the “degenerate” form of Mills and Boon - a story where the deep structures are laid most bare - or another version that might have more literary merit, ‘here is a story and/or a set of conventions and clichés that none of us can escape’ (522). Especially in a time of ‘social, cultural, and demographic changes that include high rates of relationship breakdown’, the
story of romantic love seems to gain significance, instead of losing it (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 493). The three novels will be analyzed for the extent to which the Ur-narrative is represented in them and in what ways the stories might present variations on the deep structures of the Ur-text.

In Mansell’s *Rumour Has It*, the Ur-narrative revolves around Tilly and Jack. Tilly is the novel’s protagonist, but the deep structures in this story are bare to such an extent that more story lines are needed to give the book enough substance. Ferris and Young’s remark about the main romance plot is very applicable to Tilly and Jack’s story: ‘The heroine must be connected with one, and only one, man’ (3). Just as in the romance genre, in this novel every character’s love is focused on only one other person; there is no ‘Mr Wrong or Mr Maybe’ in *Rumour Has It* (Harzewski, 37). Tilly’s best friend Erin and Fergus are connected to each other; his ex-wife Stella represents the obstacle that needs to be overcome before they can make their relationship public, because she will not accept that Fergus is leaving her. Tilly’s employer Max’s ex-wife, Kaye, and Parker, her long-distance admirer, are connected and have to decide who of them quits their job and moves to the other side of the U.S. in order to be together. In this respect, the Ur-text is presented in a traditional form where love is directed exclusively at one significant other.

With regard to the misunderstanding that needs to be resolved in order for the two lovers to reunite, Tilly does not trust Jack immediately, because she is warned that he has been incapable of commitment and has slept with every woman in town after his fiancée died five years ago. He is ‘[s]trictly no-strings [...]. Bedpost? There’s been that many notches there’s no bedpost left’ (46). Eventually she learns that that is not the truth and that the women who dated him all just keep up the appearance of having slept with him. However, in the meantime, Tilly refuses to give in to Jack’s declarations of love, because ‘she knew the subsequent untold misery would far outweigh the fleeting moments of joy’ (379-80). It is not until Jack proposes to her and immediately takes her to a jewellery shop to pick a ring that Tilly realizes that ‘he was serious. He really, really meant it’ (408). Wells claims that ‘few [...] chick lit novels end with the heroine’s wedding; much more common are mutual declarations of love after a long and tumultuous period of misunderstandings, with future
marriage likely but not guaranteed’ (50). In this respect, Rumour Has It leans more towards romances than contemporary chick lit due to the significance of the proposal and the engagement ring. Jack and Tilly declare their love now that the misunderstandings have been cleared away, but she still needs the wedding ring in order to be convinced that he is serious about their relationship. This chick lit novel hardly moves away from the genre of romance, as the use of the Ur-narrative is kept firmly in place by the exclusive love couples and the emphasis on marriage.

Ahern’s P.S. I Love You is based on the Ur-narrative as well, but the structure is not used in its original order, thus creating a variation. The Ur-story usually has a couple that falls in love and needs to solve some issues or clear away misunderstandings before they can get married. In P.S. I Love You, the heroine, Holly, is already married to her great love Gerry, and the story begins when he has just died. However, by using flashbacks, the reader gets some peeks into their happy marriage, thus creating the same ‘emotional[...] satisf[action]’ that is defining for romances because of their use of the Ur-story (Harzewski, 37). Furthermore, Holly meets another love interest, Daniel and at the end of the novel, she has coffee with another ‘nice’ man, Rob. The role of these characters in the novel connect the story to the Ur-narrative; it takes some focus away from Holly’s process of mourning and instead turns the attention to the theme of love. Besides, it makes the reader wonder whether the obstacles - in Holly’s case also the fact that she still loves her deceased husband - will be cleared out of the way for Daniel/Rob and Holly to give the book the traditional “Ur”-happy ending. This is where the story deviates from the Ur-narrative: Holly is still single at the end of the book, albeit ready to ‘open her heart and follow where it [leads] her’ (503). Harzewski states that ‘not all of chick lit ends with [...] modern romance’s one defining constant, the inevitable happy ending’ (37). This seems to apply to P.S. I Love You, as there is no resolved love story in the end. However, the ending is happy in that Holly feels positive about her future again, including meeting a new love.

Despite the fact that P.S. I Love You presents a variation on the Ur-narrative, the storyline concerning Holly’s friend Denise strengthens its presence. Just as in romances, this story also ends with a wedding, but this time it is the protagonist’s friend, Denise, who ties the knot. Wells states
that in chick lit one of the heroine’s friends is usually almost obsessed with weddings (50), which applies here too. Denise used to be anything but willing to settle as she ‘hated to be tied down to one person’ (203), but finding her ‘Mr Right’ (Harzewski, 37) has turned her into someone who is ‘all talk about her wedding arrangements’ (Ahern, 306). In this sense, P.S. I Love You falls back on the same formulaic aspect that is used in romances, where the wedding is a significant aspect of the final stage of the Ur-narrative.

Weiner’s Certain Girls is also a deviation on the Ur-narrative. The focus is less on the love story than in P.S. I Love You, which is partly because there are two protagonists: Joy who is only thirteen years old and her mother Cannie, forty-two and married. The main focus of the story is on the mother-daughter relationship. According to Wells, ‘[e]very chick-lit novel centers on a love plot, although the nature of that plot varies according to its heroine’s age and marital status’ (49). She suggests that if the heroine is happily married, she will discover ‘that her husband is having an affair and will either patch things up with him after an interval of freedom […] or endure his departure and begin a new […] relationship’ (49). Cannie, however, needed an interval of freedom before she could marry Peter. The reader learns through a flashback that Cannie thinks she ‘can’t be a good wife to anyone anymore’ after her bad break-up with Bruce and her dysfunctional relationship with her father, who verbally abused his children and left his family when Cannie was a teenager (original italics, 98). She solves her issues as best as she can and finds her ‘happy ending’ with Peter: this is Ur-story, but in a different order because the reader learns this through several flashbacks. The “Ur” notion of overcoming obstacles in order to get to another stage in your life – usually from single to settled – does apply to Cannie in that Peter wants to have another baby, and Cannie is not immediately enthusiastic: ‘I thought of our lives, perfectly arranged, the three of us safe, cocooned from the world’ (16), ‘why does Peter want to change everything?’ (35). They overcome the obstacles of finding a suitable surrogate and Cannie becomes mother of a baby boy, which would account as the happy ending to this variation on the Ur-story. However, Peter dies before the baby is born. On

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4 See appendix
the one hand, this presents a serious deviation to the formulaic happy ending. Nevertheless, the novel does not end on an unhappy note. The final chapter, when Cannie and Joy see the baby for the first time, shows a sense of acceptance: ‘I felt my mother’s hand on my shoulder and saw her face reflected in the window, her expression tender as she looked at the baby in my arms, her eyes shining as she kissed me and then the baby’s forehead’ (407). The novel ends with the focus turned back on the mother-daughter relationship, and therefore shows hope for the future rather than grief over the fact that Peter will never see his son. In this sense, the novel deviates from the Ur-narrative in that eventually, the greater part of the story is about Cannie and Joy rather than about Cannie and Peter, so the love plot has to make space for the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in this novel.

Of the three novels discussed here, *Rumour Has It* follows romance in using the traditional Ur-narrative structure, whereas *P.S. I Love You* and *Certain Girls* deviate from this, as fits the tradition of chick lit. Those last two vary in ways different from each other, since *P.S. I Love You* still shows many Ur-story characteristics that focus on the love story, whereas *Certain Girls* gives a different twist to the deep structure of overcoming obstacles in order to have happy ending involving a child wish within an stable relationship. Both Ahern and Weiner could be considered examples of ‘the [...] key to the enduring significance of romance as a discourse lies in its ability to adapt or mutate (Pearce & Stacey qtd. in Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 493), as they show adaptation of the Ur-narrative within chick lit. They show that chick lit as a genre is indeed capable of using the power of the Ur-narrative in mutating its deep structures, albeit not to a large extent in both cases. Aspects of the Ur-narrative, such as the focus on the love story, the notion of overcoming obstacles and the idea of a happy ending are still present in *P.S. I Love You* and *Certain Girls*, thus also creating a formulaic part, beside the variations.

A difference between romance and chick lit is the authenticity that is used in the novels: i.e. do the heroine and her experiences reflect the lives of contemporary young women? Jennifer Weiner states
that chick lit has “an authenticity frequently missing from women’s fiction of the past, [...] heroines that were fun to read about, but just felt nothing like where you were in your life’ (qtd. in Ferriss and Young, 4). Glasburgh believes this connection between fiction and real life to be one of ‘[t]he most pervasive reason as to the skyrocketing popularity of the genre’ (4) as it enables the readers to easily relate to the story. According to Ferris and Young ‘such identification is augmented by chick lit’s narrative style’ (4) by which they mean the use of first-person narration and the often ‘confessional style of letters and e-mails’ (4). However, of the three chick lit novels discussed in this thesis, only Certain Girls make use of first-person narration. Letters and emails are not used as stylistic devices in either three of the novels. In P.S. I Love You the plot could be argued to revolve around letters, but these are short notes from Gerry and do not function to enable to reader to get inside the protagonist’s mind and therefore will not be taken into account.

Besides the narrative styles, the character of the heroine is another factor in the relatability, by which the ease with which the reader can relate to the protagonist is meant. This creates a greater sense of authenticity, since the reader can recognize herself in the heroine. ‘The typical chick-lit protagonist is [...] not perfect but flawed, eliciting readers’ compassion and identification simultaneously’ according to Ferris and Young (4). However, In Rumour Has It the characters seem to lack complexity. Tilly, for instance, is always considerate about her best friend Erin, whether that means sleeping on the sofa or standing up for her when being falsely accused. This may seem like the kind of thing one would do for a friend, but in the book, this is the only side of the relationship described, which makes Tilly more ‘perfect’ than ‘flawed’. This in contrast with Holly in P.S. I Love You, who is capable of envy: at the news that Denise is engaged and Sharon pregnant, she cannot ‘[b]ring herself even to smile for them. She was angry with them for moving on without her’ (290). By not reacting in a way a friend should, Holly shows she is not perfect, but ‘leads readers to believe [she] is fallible-like them’ (Ferris and Young, 4).

However, Wells also remarks that chick lit heroines do not usually suffer from ‘competing impulses’ or ‘fundamentally opposed traits’ (66). Tilly might be one-dimensional, but she is a good
example of competing impulses, namely her inner struggle between giving in to her love and lust for Jack and her fear of being hurt: ‘loss of control was just too scary to contemplate, particularly when it involved someone who could have anyone they wanted, because why [...] would they choose you?’ (379). Cannie from Certain Girls also suffers from ‘competing impulses’. On the one hand, she has ‘daydreamed about a baby’ with Peter (15), on the other, she is at first reluctant to his idea of having a baby through a surrogate because it would change their ‘perfectly arranged’ lives (16). Her fallibility also shows by her confusion as mother of Joy who’s hitting puberty. ‘[I]f [Joy] had gotten her period, she would have told me, I thought— even as a twinge of unease worked its way up my spine and I wondered whether it was true. [...] “It’s a phase, right?” I fretted’ (30-1). These examples show the ‘realistic account of today’s world’ that Glasburgh puts opposite the ‘element of fantasy’ that occurs in romance (4). Nevertheless, despite the fact that these protagonists show relatable and authentic emotions in the above-mentioned examples, this does not lead to more ‘openness to interpretation’, as should be the case according to Wells (66). These emotions are significant for the novels in the sense that they create characters and a story one can relate to, which is an important characteristic of chick lit, but they do not give these novels more literary merit by adding a new layer of interpretation.

The relatability of chick lit protagonists is not only created by the flawed characters of the books, but also by their experiences. What chick lit heroines face in their lives is supposed to be a reflection of what contemporary young women experience. Davis-Kahl claims that chick lit ‘represents issues that modern women face’ (20). The issue that Tilly faces concerns her conflicting feelings about how to handle her love-life. Max and Kaye have warned her not to get involved with Jack and so Tilly believes he is not ‘remotely interested in any kind of meaningful relationship’ (134). Jack ‘ha[s] some persuading to do’ (207) to convince Tilly he is serious. He cannot convince her until he literally puts an engagement ring around her finger. Despite the fact that Rumour Has It does not present ‘a more realistic portrait of single life and dating, exploring, in varying degrees, the dissolution of romantic ideals’ (Harzewski, 39), I would suggest that it does reflect possible
experiences of contemporary women. Tilly’s insecurity (possibly reminiscent of Bridget Jones) about whether taking a chance with Jack or listening to her friends’ advice, could be considered contemporary in that it is no longer clear what the rules are and how to interpret the signs: what does Jack mean when he gives her attention or when he confesses he has feelings for her, because ‘what if he was just getting carried away because she was the box he hadn’t ticked yet?’ (403).

Whelehan states that chick lit foregrounds questions about how to conduct ‘intimate relationships in a world where the ‘rules’ have been swept away’ (6-7), but it seems as if Rumour Has It answers true to romance: the only solution in these insecure dating times is marriage, since that is what it takes before Tilly gives in. In this sense, Rumour Has It appears more conservative than P.S. I Love You and Certain Girls. Holly is ready to start dating again, without any thoughts on a possible next marriage yet. In Cannie’s case, it is Peter who wants to tie the knot so much that he walks away when Cannie is not yet capable of such an official commitment. Nevertheless, in P.S. I Love You, being married is the norm, since Holly was happily married, as is her friend Sharon, and Denise’s wedding actually takes place in the novel. Cannie also gives in eventually and marries Peter. Therefore, Rumour Has It may be more conservative than the other two novels, but only slightly.

The experiences of Holly and Cannie’s friend Samantha are not as completely focused on love as Tilly’s. However, they have their own issues to face, which also reflect the status of singleness for contemporary women today. While Holly goes through a mourning process for her dead husband, a large part of this process also focuses on being single and finding love again. For instance, she wonders if she will ever feel the kind of love again that she felt for Gerry. Moreover, she has a hard time dealing with being single: ‘There would be plenty of times in the future when she would be alone like this, the only singleton in the company of couples, and she needed to adapt’ (131). It is not only because of the word ‘singleton’ that Bridget Jones’s same frustration is sensed here as well. Whelehan claims that Bridget Jones ‘speaks to some deep-seated angst at the heart of many a young woman’s life’ (175) and Holly is another chick lit heroine example that reflects the fear of singleness in a world where couples are still the norm. Her former ‘man-eater’ friend Denise also reflects this
sentiment when she remarks that ‘maybe single isn’t all it’s cracked up to be’ (256). In the case of *Certain Girls*, this feeling of being excluded because of single status is not applied to the protagonist, but to her Jewish best friend Samantha. ‘I am not looking for perfect’ she says, desperately trying to find a date for her brother’s wedding, turning to internet matchmaking sites as a last resort to find someone to make sure her mother will not make humiliating remarks at the wedding about her single status. Her desperation is showed most poignantly when she says: ‘Actually I would take a Jew with a pulse at this point’ (31).

One of the issues that Cannie has to face that resonates in chick lit as well as in contemporary culture is her struggle with her body and the status of beauty. She is overweight and pretends not to care about her looks, but does feel uncomfortable when she notices that she is not dressed up for whatever occasion she attends. Wells claims that ‘a heroine who is completely free of care about her looks and happily self-accepting is nowhere to be found in chick lit, an absence that suggests that such a character is too unrealistic to appeal to image-conscious women readers’ (59). Cannie shows her image-consciousness when she has a meeting with her publisher: ‘I […] studied myself in the mirror, wishing that I’d accepted […] help with my make-up and outfit, because the clothes that looked perfectly acceptable that morning in Philadelphia […] now seemed dowdy and dull’ (112). Cannie confesses that ‘it is not politically correct to say so, but in the real world, good looks function as a get-out-of-everything-free card’ (6). Gill and Herdieckerhoff use the chick lit *Jemima J.* as an example of a protagonist who after her metamorphosis is suddenly ‘blessed with excellent career prospects […] and the love of her adoring hero,’ thus giving of the message that to be beautiful is to be loved (497). *Certain Girls* does not explicitly present this message; on the contrary, it also presents criticism on today’s standard of beauty, for instance expressed in Cannie’s ‘[determination] to be a good role model, to set a good example for my daughter, to be judged on the content of my character as opposed to the size of my thighs’ (11).

Despite the fact that Tilly is subject to ‘competing impulses’, she is not a very flawed character, and seems too perfect perhaps to be able to relate to. However, her experiences with love
do resonate with the insecurity that contemporary female readers might experience in their dating life. Holly and Cannie are easier to identify with, ‘both gain our sympathy by being […] humane’ (Wells, 52). Holly is trying to get her life back together but in the process shows for instance that she is not yet capable of being the friend she is supposed to be. Cannie shows her struggle with her body and the current norm of beauty dictated by fashion and the media. Friends of the heroines also portray experiences with being single and how hard it can be to find a suitable man, representing the message that a settled status is preferred over a single one. While these novels are exemplary of the genre of chick lit in that the protagonists and their friends show an authentic fallibility that contemporary women can relate to, as well as the struggles with dating, relationships, weight and even death, the novels also show an ideal reality rather than a felt reality. Cannie does not lose weight and Gerry will not come back to life, but every single character in the three novels who is looking for love eventually finds what she seeks, whether that is being able to just enjoy being on a date again, as is Holly’s case, or getting married, like Tilly and Denise.

Both feminist and postfeminist notions have been referred to in critical articles on chick lit, but the notion of postfeminism seems to pervade the genre most. Ferriss and Young say that ‘the generations of women coming of age after the women’s movement of the 1960s find themselves in an ambiguous position: they have indubitably benefited from feminism’s push for education and access to the professions, but they still experience pressures from without and desires from within for romance and family’ (9), reflecting the postfeminist anxiety of my generation of girls and women over making the correct life choices now that women can do anything they want, and how to juggle a career with their longing for marriage and a family. However, with regard to for instance the feminist notion of sexual liberation, Mabry argues that chick lit ‘give[s] contemporary women a voice’ (192) and ‘represents the desires and attempts of many real-life contemporary women to investigate the mysteries of […] gender roles on their own terms’ (199-200). In between elements showing the
postfeminist struggle of how to create a satisfactory life with a balance between work and love, also feminist elements can be found in chick lit novels.

The biggest gaps between postfeminism and feminism are in attitudes towards men, being single and femininity, as discussed in chapter One. Where feminism is trying to free women from being dependent on men and being defined by men (Faludi, xxiii), postfeminism shows that the fear for an overwhelming future due to too many possibilities, chances and therefore choices, is creating a longing for domestic safety in the arms of a strong, protective man. According to Mona Charen in her article titled “The Feminist Mistake”: “In return [feminism] has effectively robbed us of one thing upon which the happiness of most women rests-men” (qtd. in Faludi, x). Furthermore, feminism tries to create a positive image of single women, so instead of being incomplete without a man, they can be considered as in a state of ‘openness and self-sufficiency’ (Harzewski, 39). This clashes with the feelings about singleness that have been discussed above: Tilly from Rumour Has It, Denise from P.S. I Love You and Samantha from Certain Girls are examples of women who consider singleness as being incomplete and prefer marriage, or at least a relationship. Julie Klausner reflects this postfeminist sentiment that a relationship creates a sense of completion in life in her novel I Don’t Care about Your Band when she writes ‘significant others are only the frosting on the cake of life. But everybody knows that cake without frosting is just a muffin’ (16). However, feminism was suspicious of marriage and viewed it as ‘an arrangement that usually corralled women back toward the subservient lives their mothers had lived, instead of forward into the glorious futures they imagined for their daughters’ (Levy, 47). Bridget Jones is an example of a postfeminist protagonist who daydreams about a wedding while trying her best to pull off a ‘glorious future’ of being an independent career woman, but failing every time. Femininity is the third issue that presents a gap between feminism and postfeminism. First of all, Gill and Herdieckerhoff mention that the notion femininity has changed from an association with caring and motherhood, to one of having a “sexy body” (498). Nevertheless, they claim there is a ‘suture between feminism and femininity’ (499),
since this “sexy body” can be connected to women choosing to define themselves instead of being
derined by a man (Faludi, xxii) and to sexual liberation.

When analyzing postfeminist aspects in Rumour Has It, P.S. I Love You and Certain Girls, we
find those are pervasive in all three novels. Nevertheless, some feminist influences are also present.
These feminist influences are clear in that all three protagonists deal with sex in a way that could be
considered ‘liberated’ to some extent. Harzewski claims that ‘[d]aughters of educated baby boomers,
chick-lit heroines, in their degree of sexual autonomy and professional choices, stand as direct
beneficiaries of the women’s liberation movement (37). In Rumour Has It, Tilly does not actually
have sex during the story, since the one time she was expecting to sleep with Jack, their date is
interrupted before it even began. Despite the fact that they have only kissed, but not slept together,
they both agree to marriage, showing a ‘fairly conservative image’ (Mabry, 192). However, the fact
that Tilly has had relationships before, was planning on having sex with Jack and believes that Jack
has shared his bed with many women in town, shows contemporary sexual morality that could be
attributed to feminist sexual liberation. Holly in P.S. I Love You has only slept with her husband Gerry,
since they met in high school and had been together ever since. Her pondering that ‘being his wife
was all she was good at’ (130) does not reflect feminism’s view on marriage, but rather the
postfeminist notion of femininity through domesticity. This notion can also be found in Certain Girls,
where Cannie is for instance very proud of her garden, ‘after ten years of attention, […] in full flower’
(16). Furthermore, she is also happily married, but shows a sense of sexual liberation through verbal
remarks such as ‘[m]aybe they all assumed I had the flexibility of a nineteen-year-old Romanian
gymnast and the imagination of a porn star’ (11). Sex is not considered taboo, but as something that
is a normal part of life, and of love. In these chick lit novels, there are no sexual affairs with men that
the protagonists do not take a romantic interest in, except for perhaps Denise in P.S. I Love You, but
eventually she gets into a loving relationship as well. I would claim that in these chick lit novels, sex is
presented as connected to love and relationships.
Both Cannie’s and Holly’s professional lives, or careers, are entwined with their marriages. Feminism cleared the way for women to have access to universities and jobs. Levy claims that ‘because of the feminist movement, women today have staggeringly different opportunities and expectations than our mothers did’ (33). Cannie is an example of a chick lit heroine who excelled at university and became a successful writer, creating economic independence for herself. However, the fame that her authorship brings stops her from writing novels under her own name, because she cannot deal with the idea that she as a public figure puts her husband and daughter at risk by being hurtfully gossiped about in the press (174). It is not until after Peter dies that she picks up the pen and starts writing a real novel again. From a feminist perspective, it could be argued that men, or perhaps marriage or domesticity, are in the way of a woman’s professional capabilities here.

However, Gill and Herdieckerhoff state the opposite by claiming that in chick lit, it is ‘the love of a good man [that] gave [the heroine] the confidence to pursue her goals (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 495). From this perspective, it seems almost pre-feminist that a heroine needs the support of a man to rise up to her potential. ‘Being saved from the responsibility of single motherhood is also a common feature of chick lit novels. The heroines are presented as welcoming their rescue from economic and social independence’ according to Gill and Herdieckerhoff (495). In the case of Cannie, she becomes a mother again just after Peter dies and will not be “saved” from single motherhood, but it is clear that Joy steps up and takes her role as big sister very seriously. In the case of Holly, she also needs the support from Gerry to start searching for a new job (291). Holly ‘has always hated school’ (299) and in that respect could be argued to show a prefeminist notion in that she did not make use of the road paved by feminism to higher education. Before landing a job selling advertising space at a magazine, she worked temporarily as a secretary, a job that Faludi considers to be a ‘traditional “female” job (xiii).

Effects of the sexual revolution can be detected in all three chick lit novels. However, despite the presence of sexual references in all three novels, they seem to show a conservative side as well and eventually put marriage up the highest pedestal. With regard to the professional life of all three
female protagonists, of a working life for Tilly there is no mention at all; Holly and Cannie show they need the support of a man to rise up to their potential, so these chick lit novels present the message that women are still incomplete without men. Multiple times the men are called ‘strong and dependable’ (Mansell, 376) and at one point in the novel, Cannie believes that Peter saved her (370). This strengthens the idea that women are dependent from men; that on their own, they are not capable of solving their own problems and creating enough confidence to follow their hearts, but rather that men are needed to help them when in trouble or choose for them. Faludi’s claim that feminism stands for women wanting to define themselves is nowhere to be found anymore, since up to a certain degree, these protagonists give men the power to define them. Moreover, postfeminist aspects cannot only be found in the preoccupation the protagonists and their friends have with marriage, but also in their enjoyment in domestic tasks such as looking after the house (as is Tilly’s job as a Girl Friday) or the garden, and taking care of family.

The prefeminist and postfeminist notions displayed in the novels are in line with the findings on the Ur-narrative. Even though some variations have been found, especially in Certain Girls where the focus is on the mother-daughter relationship, on the whole the three novels have not shown a great deviation from the deep structures, thus stressing the importance of the traditional love plot and subsequently the importance of the male protagonist, or love interest. The sense of authenticity suffers from this, because the felt reality becomes an ideal reality, since the love plot also implies a happy ending.
Chapter 3 The transformation of a genre?

Perry Nodelman argues that children’s literature creates an ambivalent feeling in the reader that he calls ‘the double pull’, as has been briefly discussed in chapter One. Nodelman’s theory will be the main focus of the comparison between chick lit and children’s lit in this thesis, based on the similar attention paid to the growth and transformation of the protagonist in both genres. Other similarities and differences will not be discussed here, due to the scope of this thesis.

One of the characteristics he mentions that explains this ‘double pull’ (5) is the transformation the main character goes through, or ‘the move from childhood to maturity, innocence to knowledge’ (6). Despite the fact that the heroines in chick lit are long past their childhood, the so-called double pull is arguably present, since chick lit protagonists also undergo a transformation, or a ‘move’ from one state of (lack of) wisdom to another. According to Nodelman, the double pull creates ‘texts that resonate’ (2), by which he means that they ‘continue to develop [...] importance [and] complexity’(2). Therefore, they are interesting for my analysis of chick lit novels. The double pull involves reading on two levels at the same time. On the one hand, we go along with the protagonist in the behaviour that is still typical for her ‘innocence’ (6). At the same time, we judge this behaviour because we already know it is not wise, mature or based on the entire truth. We already have a bigger picture, which allows us to ‘see with a [...] protagonist and also against that protagonist’ (3), hence, there is an ambivalence, or a double pull. At one point in the story, the protagonist ‘sees past the innocence, acknowledge[s] it as ignorance, and becomes more mature’ (4), so in a way catches up with what we already knew (of thought we knew). The double pull is solved, and shortly after the story ends (4). The question is now to what degree the so-called double pull of children’s lit exists in chick lit. Do the protagonists go through a development that could count as a transformation and is there a specific moment when they realize their former lack of wisdom or maturity?
In Rumour Has It, it is easy to see both with and against Tilly. From the moment she lays eyes on Jack - ‘there was one of the most disconcertingly good-looking men she’d ever seen in real life’ (43) - we know that Tilly will fall in love with him, despite, or more probably because, her defensively thinking a few moments later: ‘As if [I] would be attracted to Jack Lucas for one moment. Honestly, the very idea’ (46). Tilly shows us that she is afraid to give in to him because ‘what if he was just getting carried away because she was the box he hadn’t ticked yet’ (403), but we also suspect that Jack is really serious about her, and thus feel an ambivalence, or double pull, while reading. However, in children’s lit, seeing with and against the protagonist usually means seeing how his or her innocence lands them foolishly in dangerous situations. In this case, Tilly’s ‘innocence’ is keeping her away from Jack, who could be considered ‘dangerous’ in his way of dealing with women. I suggest that seeing the experience of seeing with and against Tilly is for the greater part romantic suspense, instead of a double pull comparable to the one existent in children’s lit as described by Nodelman.

Tilly moves from innocence to knowledge when she finally realizes that she can believe Jack. However, this moment lacks reflection on the previous process; Tilly does not look back and reflect on her former state of ignorance. The transformation happens in a clearly indicated moment and is brought about by Jack’s action of putting the engagement ring around her finger. He ‘slid it slowly and deliberately on to the third finger of her left hand’ and she realizes ‘[h]e really, really mean[s] it’ (408). This moment resolves the entire story but does not succeed in creating the ‘resonance’ that Nodelman refers to, as ‘the climactic moment’ does not ‘celebrate maturity’ in a way that ‘questions the completeness of its wisdom’ (4). The ring seems to indicate nothing more than a transition from single status to engaged status and does not seem to add anything to Tilly’s own development; for instance, it has not taught her that she needs to learn to trust herself instead of listening to other people.

The amount of reflection explicitly used in P.S. I Love You prevents the reader from being able to see ‘against’ Holly. Throughout the book Holly gains new insights into how to live her life without Gerry, and these come with many ups and downs. Nodelman claims that in children’s lit, the
reader knows ‘more and better than the focalized characters do’. The many parts in the novel where Holly thinks about her feelings keep the reader from knowing better than she, creating focalization, since the reader only understands what she understands and follows her grieving process at the same pace as Holly is going through it. One example of her many reflections is when Ahern describes Holly’s state of mind in May, four months after Gerry’s death, when she tries to ‘find a routine she could fall into so that she felt as though she belonged in her body and her body belonged in this life’ (137), and ‘[S]he would have her happy days [...] [then] she would fall into days of deep dark depression’ (138). Holly also admits that she does not know how talk about Gerry (58) and later is very confused about how she feels about Daniel (469). Throughout the novel, Holly goes through many complex emotions, but no space is left for seeing against her, or for different interpretations of these emotions, due to the rather elaborate explanations of these emotions. There is also no actual moment of transformation. Her move from innocence to knowledge is a process. At the beginning of the book, all Holly can do is grieve. ‘She didn’t want to hear the truth. She didn’t want to hear how she had to get on with her life’ (16-7). At the end, at Denise’s wedding, Holly realizes that even though ‘[s]he had enjoyed every second of her life with Gerry, [...] now it was time to move on. [...] [I]t would be difficult; she had learned that nothing was ever easy. But it didn’t feel as difficult as it had been a few months ago’ (497). If living with Gerry could be considered a prolonged childhood, because it kept her from living her own life since ‘she had lived her life being interested in Gerry,’ then her transformation could perhaps be viewed as one into maturity: Holly is learning how to stand on her own two feet, like any adult (130). However, considering that she was already a twenty-nine-year-old woman, such a transition seems too straightforward. Holly as a person has obviously grown after Gerry’s death and by the process of mourning, but she gains wisdom that for other people might come across as obvious, and not exclusively for widows who get their lives back together. In that sense, the transformation does not ‘celebrate maturity’ nor does Holly ‘see past her innocence’ (4). It should not take a spouse’s death before a woman learns to live her own life.
In *Certain Girls*, it is possible to see both with and against Cannie and Joy. Furthermore, they reinforce each other’s perspectives. Where Cannie keeps ‘a close watch on [her] daughter’ (6), because ‘[s]he need[s] special attention’ (15), Joy is annoyed that ‘[her] mother would never, ever forget [her]’ (22). ‘Leave me alone, I can’t breathe with you this close to me!’ is Joy’s side of the this mother-daughter relationship coin (25). Since Joy is only thirteen, there is an extra layer in the comparison to children’s lit, because the chapters that are written from her first-person narration could be considered children’s lit because she is still considered a child. Nodelman claims that in children’s lit ‘innocence is dangerous’ and thus the adult reader experiences ambivalence in enjoying the innocence that incites an adventure while at the same time realizing the dangers (3). For instance, Joy flies to Los Angeles on her own to meet her grandfather, without informing Cannie or Peter. Therefore this element is present (as it was not in *Rumour Has It*) which indicates a closeness between this chick lit novel and children’s lit.

For both Cannie and Joy a moment of transformation can be pointed out. These moments do not trigger the transformation, as in *Rumour Has It*, but rather signify it, for the process of transformation is visible throughout the story. When the book begins, Cannie is afraid of change: ‘I thought of our lives, perfectly arranged, the three of us safe, cocooned from the world’ (16). Peter thinks Cannie has a purpose and should live up to it, by writing a ‘real book’ (357). Cannie answers that she has ‘a purpose. [...] I take care of Joy.’ Peter, however, believes she has ‘done her job, as well as every parent can’ (357). When Peter dies, Cannie has to transform: ‘Peter had used the desk. [...] I had never written a word there [...] I turned on the light, retied the belt of Peter’s wardrobe, and took out a notebook and pen’ (386). She lets go of her fear and becomes the writer she is. Joy’s moment of transformation is very clearly marked, also symbolically because it happens at her bar mitzvah, which is literally the Jewish ritual of becoming a woman. At the moment of her speech, she deviates from what she has prewritten and rehearsed with the rabbi. Nodelman claims that the ‘childlike point of view seems to come to a triumphant climax at the moment when the child sees past the innocence, acknowledges it as innocence, and becomes more mature’ (4). This happens to
Joy the moment she states that ‘the truth is, what I learned this year is that life is hard. [...] When you don’t get what you want, you take what’s left and make the best of it. [...] You lean on the people who love you. You do the best you can, and you keep going’ (393-4). This may be a truism, but taking into account that Joy is thirteen years old, at this moment she sees past her innocence. Again this is an indication of the closeness between this chick lit and children’s lit.

The analysis of these three chick lit novels does not indicate a distinct correlation between the genres of children’s lit and chick lit according to Nodelman’s double pull. There are some occurrences of ambivalence created by seeing with and against the protagonists, mainly in Certain Girls, and to some extent in Rumour Has It, although in the latter that could be regarded as romantic suspense as well. Certain Girls also presents a moment of transformation for both protagonists and even a literal ‘celebration of maturity’ for Joy during her bar mitzvah. In P.S. I Love You there is no ambivalence creating double pull or an insightful moment of transformation. Where in children’s lit the ambivalence is created by a pull into opposite directions due to the gap between innocence and wisdom, in chick lit the focus is not as much on reflection and transformation, but rather on romantic suspense and the different relationships of the protagonists.
Conclusion

In chapter One, the words of Imelda Whelehan, author of *The Feminist Bestseller*, that chick lit is a genre that is becoming more and more diverse are quoted. I conclude that my analysis shows that chick lit is definitely diverse in many ways, although the characteristics of the genre always remain present. With regard to the three novels that have been analyzed in this thesis, all three novels discussed in this dissertation are representative for the genre. Tilly in *Rumour Has It* falls in love with a man she has been warned for; Holly in *P.S. I Love You* tries to find a way to live her own life again and be open to new love after her husband dies and Cannie in *Certain Girls* decides to have another baby with her husband by way of a surrogate and tries to keep her grip on her teenage daughter and her job in the meantime. Despite obvious plot differences, these three stories fall under Davis-Kahl’s definition of chick lit being about ‘modern women struggling and succeeding with work, relationships, motherhood, infertility, finances’ (18).

However, on closer reading, significant differences can be pointed at. First of all, there is the difference in narrative. *Rumour Has It* and *P.S. I Love You* are written from a third-person perspective, but *Certain Girls* is written from the first-person perspective of two protagonists, providing a less straightforward, more challenging read. Secondly, the novels’ use of themes is significantly different. *Rumour Has It* focuses mostly on the different love stories of the characters, its main theme being that love is the most important thing in life. In *P.S. I Love You*, love is also an important theme, but so are family, friends, death and grief, hence this novel presents a more intricate thematic layer. This is true as well for *Certain Girls*, in which love is also a theme, but not nearly as much as the theme of motherhood is. Most chick lit features friendship as a theme, as does *Certain Girls*, but this theme is connected to Joy and hardly to Cannie. Besides, also death and career are important themes in *Certain Girls*. The use of different themes creates thus more variety and depth in the stories, in comparison to the rather straightforward story in *Rumour Has It*. A third
significant difference is how the protagonists’ emotions are displayed. In Rumour Has It and P.S. I Love You, what the protagonists feel is mostly directly expressed to the reader by the omniscient narrator. Certain Girls is also more interesting in this sense, because much is not immediately expressed, but shown to the reader through the remarks and behaviour of the characters. Together, these differences indicate a great diversity with regard to the complexity of narrative, theme and character, showing thus the difference in literary merit within the genre of chick lit.

However, I wish to point out that chick lit has not just started becoming diverse in the twenty-first century, but already showed much variety by the time Bridget Jones’s Diary was published. Jill Mansell has been writing the same light love stories since 1991, beside the chick lit novels with darker themes that have been published before the millennium as well, of which Marian Keyes’s Rachel’s Holiday (1997), which deals with addiction and rehab, is only one example. Chick lit novels with a more interesting narrative, such as Certain Girls, have also been around a while, in for instance Candace Bushnell’s Sex and the City (1996) and Elise Juska’s Getting over Jack Wagner (2003). So chick lit has not become diverse; it has always been diverse, from easy reading to hosting more substantial themes and creative narratives. Nevertheless, all these novels still fall under the heading of chick lit, according to the definition of Davis-Kahl: ‘modern women struggling and succeeding with work, relationships, motherhood, infertility, finances’ (18).

On close reading, many formulaic aspects have also been found in the selection of novels. In all three novels, elements of the formulaic Ur-narrative – a woman and a man fall in love, are separated because of misunderstandings or other obstacles, but overcome those and eventually get married – are clearly present, especially in Rumour Has It. P.S. I Love You and Certain Girls both provide variations on the Ur-narrative by using elements of it in a non-chronological order, or applying these elements to a relationship different from a romantic one. Therefore, these two novels also show chick lit’s ability to deviate from the Ur-narrative.

Nonetheless, these novels also show that the genre of chick lit is still close to the genre of romance. This is especially so in the case Rumour Has It, where the focus on the love plot, the idea
that for every woman there is one man and the importance of the engagement ring strongly resonate the formulaic romance elements of Ur-narrative, exclusive love – for every woman there is only one man who can be her true love – and a wedding at the end. In P.S. I Love You, Holly’s story deviates from the Ur-narrative, but her friend Denise’s story reinforces it again, by getting married at the end of the novel. Certain Girls also presents a deviation, especially in the importance of the mother-daughter relationship, but the protagonist is married, mainly because her love interest Peter would not continue their relationship without this formal commitment. The fact that the focus in these chick lit novels always ultimately turns back to love and marriage mirrors the importance these elements have in the romance genre, so chick lit and romance remain close to each other, despite chick lit’s variations on the Ur-narrative.

Even though critics have claimed that chick lit presents alternatives to marriage and alternative gender roles are explored, marriage still remains the ultimate ideal. Novels written by other established chick lit authors, such as the Shopaholic-trilogy and The Domestic Goddess by Sophie Kinsella, Angels and Rachel’s Holiday by Marian Keyes, How to Be Single by Liz Tucillo and also Bridget Jones’s Diary by Helen Fielding present women who daydream fanatically about marriage, get married at the end of the novel or return to their husbands. Chick lit novels in which the protagonists are not in a relationship or a marriage at the end of the novel, usually have gained insight into themselves or the kind of relationship they desire, creating the right basis for meeting a man in the future who will be suitable for marriage. In the end, all protagonists desire marriage, and a chick lit novel could just reflect a part of the protagonist’s journey on the way to her dream wedding.

From my analysis I conclude that in all three novels, relatability to the protagonists is present to some extent, creating the authenticity in chick lit that Weiner refers to. The two elements that make it possibly for a reader to relate to the protagonist are her fallibility and the resemblance of issues she deals with to the issues contemporary women deal with in real life. This also reflects the definition of chick lit according to Davis-Kahl. Tilly’s issue of not knowing whether to trust Jack and how to interpret his behaviour reflect today’s uncertain, or lack of, rules in dating. This entire
concept of having to rediscover how the world of dating and relationships works today, when the credo ‘anything goes’ seems to apply, is the basis of the tv-series *Sex and the City*, based on the chick lit novel by Candace Bushnell. This series immense popularity (two films have followed the series, which lasted six seasons) is a sign that it touches something that is important to many women today. The death of Holly’s husband in *P.S. I Love You* and her subsequent process of mourning, as well as Cannie’s trouble with handling her teenage daughter and regaining the confidence to write another novel are also serious topics, reflecting contemporary culture and real life in the way that they are dealt with: Holly’s has to face being single again and trying to find a job without a college education, dealing with the fact that her friends are getting more and more settled, while her life has been uprooted. This contrast creates authenticity. In *Certain Girls*, Cannie has to raise Joy, her now teenage daughter, who is starting to rebel, which shows a more realistic account of parenting than in for instance *Rumour Has It*, where Tilly’s employer Max and his daughter Louise always get along, even when they do not agree.

With regard to fallibility, all three protagonists show flaws. However, these chick lits in essence remain inauthentic, or implausible. Tilly shows her fallibility through her competing impulses: trust Jack or keep away from him? However, for the greater part, she is too one-sided and perfect to be very authentic. Holly shows great authenticity and relatability by not being a perfect friend and Cannie by not being a perfect mother and struggling with self-acceptance because of she is overweight. Both protagonists show doubt about the what the right future choices are as well. However, much still remains unauthentic. Cannie is an authentic character as a doubtful writer, but writing best-sellers is not a mainstream job. Holly is hired because she shares her grief with her new boss, not because of her resumé, and Tilly takes a job as a Girl Friday at the age of twenty-eight. These things might happen, but are exceptional rather than ordinary and are thus not very realistic. In conclusion, the novels present an ideal reality rather than a felt reality.

From my analysis, I conclude that more postfeminist than feminist elements are present in the selection of novels. Feminism stands for equal rights for men and women; the right for women to
define themselves and not be defined by men; a skeptical attitude towards marriage and the claim that women can have it all, i.e. both a family and a career. Postfeminism, on the other hand, represents today’s rejection of feminism by women because they are overwhelmed and unhappy by trying to juggle both a career and a family and blame feminism for this, and are refocusing their lives on finding love and creating a home. As I conclude from my analysis, this is reflected in the three novels, as they are all focused on love and family, even though the three protagonists are at different points in their lives. The only clear feminist trace is connected to the sexual liberation aspect of feminism, since references to sex are indeed made, but in none of these three novels, explicit sex scenes are described. The novels present an almost pre-feminist sentiment, with being married as the highest ideal and most definitely preferable over being single. All women in chick lit are looking for love, although the phase of the search they are in may differ from novel to novel, and the stories usually end when love seems secured in marriage, suggesting that the protagonists are now no longer incomplete. The fact that they need the support from men in order to rise up to their professional potential also indicates the same pre-feminist dependence. The women show contentment in being dependent; none of the protagonists displays rebelliousness or indignation about needed support from men, instead, they express relief that strong and dependable men come to their rescue.

From my analysis of the children’s lit characteristic of double pull and moment of transformation in the three chick lit novels, I conclude that there is no connection between the genres based on this characteristic. The double pull occurs when the reader is able to see both with the protagonist and against the protagonist at the same time, knowing better than him or her and judging his or her behaviour. Near the end of the story, the child protagonist realizes his or her ignorance and thus gains new knowledge and matures. Because it has been claimed that in chick lit the focus is more on self-development than on the love story, a similarity between the genres with regard to growth and maturing makes sense. However, the only link is created by Joy, but she is thirteen years old and thus still a child. None of the adult protagonists go through a transformation
that creates insight into their former lack of wisdom. The focus is not much on their self-development; instead the love plot is emphasized, and in Certain Girls, the mother-daughter relationship between Cannie and Joy. In Rumour Has It, it is possible to see both with and against Tilly, but this is due to romantic suspense instead of to ambivalence created by the double pull. In P.S. I Love You neither the double pull by seeing both with and against the protagonist occurs, nor a moment of transformation. It is possible to see with and against Cannie and Joy in Certain Girls, and because of the double narrative, they reinforce the ambivalence. They also both have a moment of transformation. However, Cannie is forced to transform and start writing again due to financial reasons as well, and does not look back on her lack of wisdom. Joy, on the other hand, admits to her former innocence and expresses her new-found maturity during her bar mitzvah.

My initial idea was that the genre of chick lit was moving into a more serious direction by deviating from the Ur-narrative, focusing on the self-development of the protagonist and thus dealing with more substantial topics; moreover, that this would create a sense of authenticity and relatability, and lastly, that chick lit was presenting more feminist notions. Even though all these aspects indeed occur in chick lit, they do to such a small extent, that a greater affiliation with the romance genre exists than I expected beforehand. This is confirmed by the comparison to the double pull and moment of transformation as we find in children’s lit. This characteristic of children’s lit shows an emphasis of growth towards knowledge and maturity, but cannot be found in chick lit in the same way.

The three novels show that there is diversity within the genre of chick lit, but true change or development since the publication of Bridget Jones’s Diary in 1996 is slow. The popularity of the genre lies in its recognition and relaxation, and although serious issues are touched upon, they are not profoundly treated. The style is mainly descriptive and dialogues, taking away possibilities for extra layers of interpretation. Jennifer Weiner claimed that there is chick lit that deals with big questions that mean a lot to a lot of people: a statement that leaves many doors open for the exploration of even more contemporary female culture than has been dealt with until now.
Bibliography


Summary of the novels

*Rumour has it* revolves around Tilly Cole, twenty-eight, who stumbles upon a mysterious advertisement for a job, decides to call and finds herself hired as a ‘Girl-Friday’ at the Dineen family, existing of father Max and thirteen-year-old daughter Lou. Mother Kaye is a soap actress and lives in Hollywood. They have gotten divorced after Max discovered he was gay. Tilly soon meets Jack Lucas, a friend of the family, who she falls in love with. However, he has a reputation of having slept with every girl in town, after his fiancée died tragically five years ago. Tilly’s best friend Erin also lives in town, and has a secret relationship with the soon-to-be divorced Fergus. His soon-to-be ex-wife Stella, however, doesn’t want to acknowledge that he has left her and is making Erin’s life miserable. Then Kaye is the victim of a Hollywood scandal and comes home to England. Here she meets the love of her life Parker. She eventually gives up her acting job and moves to New York to be with Parker. Lou is being bullied by a guy at school because her father is gay, but Max solves this when he joins them on a school trip. When Stella turns out to have cancer, her former best friend gets pregnant, and it is rumoured that it is Jack’s. Tilly eventually finds out that all girls were just lying that they had slept with Jack to keep up appearances. Jack proposes and Tilly agrees to marry him.

*In P.S. I Love You* the protagonist, Holly Kennedy, who turns thirty during the story, finds herself a widow after her husband Gerry dies of a brain tumor. To get her through her process of mourning and help her get back on her feet again, Gerry has written ten letters with assignments for Holly. Every month, she is allowed to open one and she has to do whatever Gerry has planned for her. She gets over her fear of karaoke, finds a job, goes on holiday with her best friends Denise and Sharon and attends the Christmas Ball she and Gerry used to go to together. She also meets Daniel and finds a dear friend in him. However, Daniel falls in love with Holly. She discovers she is not ready
yet for another relationship. In the meantime, Holly has to deal with the fact that life goes on, for her friend Denise meets the love of her life and starts planning her wedding, and Sharon gets pregnant. Her oldest brother Richard loses his job and is no longer wanted by his wife, while her younger sister Ciara is reunited with her great love who she met in Australia. After the ten letters and a year without Gerry, Holly is still grieving, but has gotten her life back together.

Cannie (Candace) Shapiro, forty-two, and her thirteen-year-old daughter Joy are the protagonists of Certain Girls, the sequel to Good in Bed, in which Cannie goes through a bad break-up, deals with her verbally abusive father and her weight, gets accidentally pregnant by her ex-boyfriend Bruce Gubernman, but ends up in a stable relationship with Peter Krushelevansky. The baby, Joy, is born premature because Cannie is shoved against a sink by her ex-boyfriend’s new love. In Certain Girls, it turns out Cannie has written a best-seller called Big Girls Don’t Cry about this episode of her life. She wasn’t happy with the negative attention that came with fame and became an anonymous writer of science fiction instead, while taking care of Joy, who is almost completely deaf due to being born prematurely. Joy is now twelve and preparing for her bar mitzvah, when she finds out about the book her mother wrote. This makes her doubt much about her life: who she is, if she was wanted. Cannie has to deal with going to the process of having another baby with a surrogate, since she can’t have any more children herself. Her publisher also asks her to write another novel. While Joy is trying to figure out the truth about her family, Cannie is trying to figure out what is going on with Joy. Then Peter suddenly dies, and Cannie and Joy are left to raise the new baby by themselves, and Cannie starts on her second novel.