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TRIVIAL OR COMMENDABLE? : WOMEN'S WRITING, POPULAR CULTURE, AND CHICK LIT

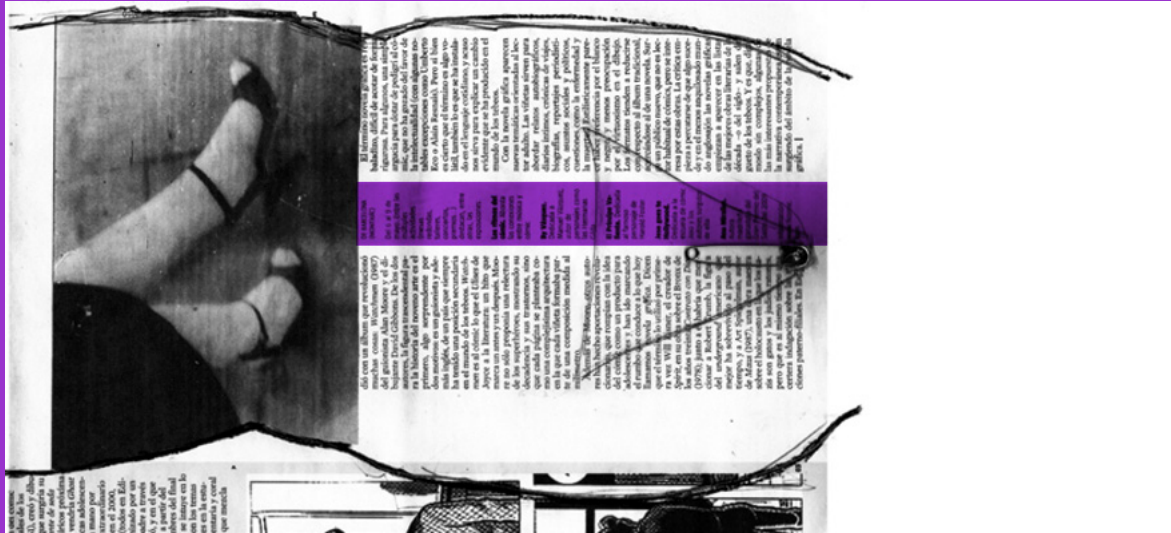
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Recommended citation || RYAN, Mary (2010): "Trivial or Commendable? : Women's Writing, Popular Culture, and Chick Lit" [online article], 452°F. *Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 3, 70-84, [Consulted on: dd / mm / yy], < <http://www.452f.com/index.php/en/mary-ryan.html> >.

Illustration || Xavier Marín

Article || Received on: 02/03/2010 | International Advisory Board's suitability:05/05/2010 | Published on: 07/2010

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Abstract || There are a number of similarities between popular culture and women's writing: both have been dismissed as trivial and worthless, have traditionally received little respect from critics, and have been scorned because of their apparently «low-brow» appeal. Additionally, both were long excluded from the literary Canon. In contemporary culture, the intersection of popular culture and women's writing takes the form of chick lit, the contemporary genre of fiction starring female characters in their 20s and 30s as they make their way through their lives and tackle all the obstacles in their way. As well as outlining the characteristics and history of chick lit, this paper will discuss the negative reception that popular culture, women's writing, and chick lit has often been subjected to, and will show how studies are now emerging with the aim of demonstrating how such genres may have more worth and potential than is typically suggested.

Keywords || Popular Culture | Chick Lit | Women's Writing | Feminism | Jane Austen | Cultural Studies.

0. Introduction

What are the connections between popular culture and women's fiction? An obvious link is that both have long been in receipt of vast amounts of negative criticism. In *A Theory of Mass Culture* (1957), Dwight MacDonalD stated that «Mass Culture began as, and to some extent still is, a parasitic, a cancerous growth on High Culture» (MacDonalD, 1998: 23), while continuing on to complain that the rise in mass/popular culture has resulted in «serious ideas [competing] with commercialized formulae» (MacDonalD, 1998: 24).

Women's fiction has typically received just as little respect; in fact, as Juliette Wells points out, there has been «a long tradition of discounting women writers and their readers» (Wells, 2006: 48). Much of this criticism has attempted to «justify the assumption that novels by women would be recognizably inferior to those by men» (Showalter, 2009: 63). Women's literature has rarely received the recognition it deserves. Indeed, until relatively recent times, most female writers «were scorned by the male intellectual elite because of their «low-brow» appeal» (Rakow, 1998: 282). Additionally, women's writing was virtually excluded from the literary Canon, while «critical issues of quality have been used to question the validity of writings by women, from the authenticity of their authorship [...] to the validity of what they write about and what they produce» (Warhol and Herndl, 1997: 74).

It has been said that «the intersection of “feminism” and “popular culture” has never been anything other than troubled» (Shiach, 1998: 333), and, in terms of contemporary literature at least, this intersection takes the form of chick lit, the contemporary genre of fiction typically featuring female characters in their 20s and 30s as they make their way through their lives and tackle all the obstacles in their way, everything from finding Mr. Right (or, at least, Mr. Maybe) to finding the perfect career to finding the perfect shoes, along with everything in-between, all told in a humorous and self-deprecating tone. Elizabeth Merrick attempts to summarize the main plotlines of the typical chick lit novel in the following extract:

Chick lit is a genre, like the thriller, the sci-fi novel, or the fantasy epic. Its form and content are, more or less, formulaic: white girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while shopping, alternately cheating on or adhering to her diet, dodging her boss, and enjoying the occasional teary-eyed lunch with her token Sassy Gay Friend. Chick lit is the daughter of the romance novel and the stepsister to the fashion magazine. Details about race and class are almost always absent except, of course, for the protagonist's relentless pursuit of Money, a Makeover, and Mr. Right. (Merrick, 2006: 7-8)

This paper will discuss the negative reception that popular culture, women's writing, and chick lit has often been subjected to, and will show how studies are emerging with the aim of demonstrating how such genres may have more potential than are first believed.

1. What exactly is chick lit?

Ironically, for a genre that is described as being written by, about, and for women, the term «chick lit» was originally used by men in a derogatory capacity. In this sense, it seemed that even the way in which women's writing was described was controlled by men. According to Wikipedia:

One of the first uses of the term was in the title of the 1995 anthology *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, edited by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell. The work in this anthology was not chick lit as we know it today, and the term was used ironically. However, James Wolcott's 1996 article in *The New Yorker* «Hear Me Purr» co-opted «chick lit» to define the trend of «girlishness» evident in the writing of female newspaper columnists at that time. This is significant, as major chick lit works such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* originated in such columns. With the success of *Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City* in book form, the chick lit boom began.

Although the phrase 'chick lit' is now used to describe the genre of fiction largely written for, by and about women, some critics have correctly noted that this description could be applied to the vast majority of novels:

If 'chick lit' were defined as what women read, the term would have to include most novels, including those considered macho territory. A 2000 survey found that women comprised a greater percentage of readers than men across all genres: Espionage/thriller (69 percent); General (88 percent); Mystery/Detective (86 percent); and even Science Fiction (52 percent). (Chaudhry, 2006: par. 4)

For this reason, it is beneficial to examine the traits and characteristics that typically constitute the genre of chick lit. While «the parameters and definitions for Chick Lit are evolving daily» (Yardley, 2006: 4), with a wide and varied selection of sub-genres also appearing, there are still certain tropes and features that are commonly linked to the genre.

Chicklitbooks.com, a website dedicated to novels and writers (and, of course, readers) of the chick lit genre, describes chick lit as follows:

Chick lit is a genre comprised of books that are mainly written by women for women [...] There is usually a personal, light, and humorous tone to the books [...] The plots usually consist of women experiencing usual life issues, such as love, marriage, dating, relationships, friendships, roommates, corporate environments, weight issues, addiction, and much more. (par. 3)

Stemming from this definition of chick lit, there are countless variations in describing the genre. These range from the more basic definition of chick lit as a genre of novels that are usually

«written in the first person by hapless, overwhelmed narrators handling the perilous matters of sex, love, career, art, fashion, finance and friendship that make up the daily life of many contemporary working women» (Laken, n.d.)

right through to deeper explanations of the genre. One such definition is seen in *See Jane Write: A Girl's Guide To Writing Chick Lit* (2006), a type of manual for budding chick lit writers written by author Sarah Mlynowski and editor Farrin Jacobs. In this book, chick lit is defined as:

often upbeat, always funny fiction about contemporary female characters and their everyday struggles with work, home, friendship, family, or love. It's about women growing up and figuring out who they are and what they need versus what they think they want. It's about observing life [...] It's about coming of age (no matter how old the woman is – chick lit heroines can be anywhere from teenaged to beyond middle-aged). It's generally written by women for women. It's honest, it reflects women's lives today – their hopes and dreams as well as their trials and tribulations – and, well, it's hugely popular. (Mlynowski, 2006: 10)

As chick lit has now become such a diverse genre, «it would be fair to say that it becomes more difficult to identify the core formula» (Whelehan, 2005: 17). That said, there are a selection of characteristics and themes that are commonly found in most, if not all, chick lit novels. Although many recent chick lit authors have tried to adapt the «traditional» formula by putting their own spin on it or interpreting it in a different way, for instance, many of the basic elements are still evident in some shape or form.

In *Will Write For Shoes: How To Write A Chick Lit Novel* (2006), author Cathy Yardley presents a comprehensive «checklist» of elements that are typically found in chick lit. These include:

(i) That the majority of novels are predominantly set in an urban location, with the idea of providing readers an insight into what is presumably «a more exciting, fast-paced, high-toned lifestyle» (Yardley, 2006: 10).

(ii) Most chick lit heroines work in occupations that are perceived as being extremely glamorous. These have typically included jobs in publishing, fashion, and advertising – «the sort of positions that readers would love to experience vicariously» (Yardley, 2006: 11).

(iii) Linked to the glamorous career is often, if not always, the evil boss, who always treats the heroine as poorly as possible. However, we are comforted by the fact that «the evil boss always gets his/her comeuppance in the end, and it's immensely satisfying» (Yardley, 2006: 12).

(iv) In traditional chick lit, the heroine always had a wonderful best friend who happened to be gay, «someone who can go shoe shopping with them and commiserate on the sorry state of men in whatever city they're in» (Yardley, 2006: 12). It is worth noting that the gay best friend is one element of chick lit that has become so vastly overused that many chick lit authors now shy away from including it in their novels, to avoid being criticized for adhering to the same clichés.

(v) Also inevitable to chick lit is that the heroine will, at some point, be involved with a man who is all wrong for her, but she of course fails to realize this until it is too late and she ends up nursing her heartbreak – at least until she realizes (a) she is better off without him, and/or (b) who she is really in love with.

(vi) Many chick lit novels include scenes where the heroine, accompanied by a gang of her girlfriends (and, of course, her obligatory gay best friend), «goes on a man-hunting expedition to a bar, speed-dating event or Internet dating site. During the course of these adventures, she runs into one "Mr. Wrong" after another» (Yardley, 2006: 13).

(vii) A large number of chick lit novels revolve around the heroine's life taking a drastic turn for the worst, which the heroine must then work her way out of. Typically, this could involve the heroine losing her apartment, being fired from her job, breaking up with her boyfriend... Cathy Yardley calls this «life implosion syndrome» (Yardley, 2006: 14).

(viii) Chick lit also traditionally contains «not only a lot of brand name-dropping, but also a lot of references to pop culture occurrences – often without any accompanying explanation» (Yardley, 2006: 15). This is because it is assumed that readers will already be knowledgeable of these matters.

Of course, these characteristics of chick lit are continuously evolving within the genre as many chick lit writers are finding ways of tackling the traditional formula in unique, deeper, and more serious ways. As

a result, according to Chick Lit Books, chick lit novels are no longer «excessively light, airy and frilly» (n.d.: par. 7), and the typically fluorescent pink book covers are, in fact, «truly masking meaningful, touching, hilarious at times and wonderful chick lit stories» (n.d.: par. 9).

2. Chick lit in the nineteenth century: where did it all begin?

For a genre whose success has taken the world by storm in a relatively short space of time, and one which has caused as much controversy as it has earned praise, there are some discrepancies over how the genre actually began.

In discussing the beginnings of chick lit, many agree that the genre began with Helen Fielding's 1996 novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary* – it has been stated that the «entire chick-lit phenomenon is invariably traced back to this single novel» (Ferriss, 2006: 4). However, while *Bridget Jones's Diary* came to be viewed by many as the original chick lit text, «there were precursors which demonstrated that Fielding had merely tapped a nerve with her own writing which already existed» (Whelehan, 2005: 191). So, how can we trace the roots of chick lit?

Many people argue that the entire genre «proves to be indebted to women's literature of the past» (Ferriss, 2006: 5), most notably the work of Austen, who has been described as «surely the mother of all chick lit» (Mlynowski, 2006: 11). Aside from the much-discussed connection between *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Pride and Prejudice*, «from which Fielding admittedly borrowed much of her plot and many of her characters» (Ferriss, 2006: 4), we can see numerous similarities between modern chick lit novels and fiction by the likes of Austen and the Brontës, whose work included «all the romance, negotiations of society and character growth that we see in many of the popular “chick lit” novels today» (Dawson, n.d.: par. 3). In this sense, it would certainly seem viable to argue that chick lit does «have identifiable roots in the history of women's writing, as do many of the genre's characteristic elements: the heroine's search for an ideal romantic partner; her maturation and growth in self-knowledge, often aided by friends and mentors; and her relationship to conventions of beauty» (Wells, 2006: 49), as well as a focus on issues of relevance to women's lives and interests, such as careers and body image.

Hence we can see that the romantic element of the novels is not the only characteristic common to nineteenth century novels and today's chick lit, although the heroine eventually falling in love with an initially unlikely hero is certainly a major theme in both. Modern

chick lit heroines also have a lot in common with those of Austen, whose novels also featured heroines who were beautiful but not unbelievably so, and «whose wit and good temper more than elevate [them] above [their] more glamorous but less likeable romantic rivals» (Wells, 2006: 59). Nineteenth century heroines also display an interest in fashion and their image, such as Catherine Morland in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) who «lay awake [...] debating between her spotted and her tamboured muslin» (Austen, 1993: 45). They are often happiest when surrounded by their girlfriends, sharing secrets and stories, and, again in the case of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine believes that friendship «is certainly the finest balm for the pangs of disappointed love» (Austen, 1993: 16). Nineteenth century heroines also often crave independence and have professional aspirations, such as in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), whose heroine has high hopes for the «promise of a smooth career» (Brontë, 1992: 94) on commencing her position as a governess. All of these traits, as well as numerous others, show an obvious link between nineteenth century women's novels and today's chick lit phenomenon.

3. The constant criticism of women writers and their work

Female writers have long experienced severe difficulty in terms of gaining recognition and respect for what they write. This tradition of criticizing women writers and their work, «and dismissing certain literary trends as feminine rubbish [...] has a history as long as the popular fiction itself» (Traister, 2005: par. 4). In fact, since the birth of the English novel in the eighteenth century, «critics moaned about the intellect-eroding effects of sentimental fiction» (Traister, 2005: par. 4), and «feminist scholars have [long] been protesting the apparently systematic neglect of women's experience in the literary canon» (Robinson, 1983: 116). In short, «the female tradition in literature has been either ignored, derided, or even [...] taken over and replaced» (Russ, 1983: 103).

There have been numerous «explanations» to justify the assumption that women's writing was «inferior» to men's. One such reason was related to women's perceived limited experience in life:

Vast preserves of masculine life – schools, universities, clubs, sports, businesses, government, and the army – were closed to women. Research and industry could not make up for these exclusions, and [...] women writers were at a disadvantage. [...] Since the Victorians had defined women as angelic beings who could not feel passion, anger, ambition, or honor, they did not believe that women could express more than half of life. (Showalter, 2009: 65-66)

There were moves by some writers to combat this discrimination. Some female writers, such as the Brontës, for instance, «sought ineffectively to veil themselves [and thus their gender] by using the name of a man» (Woolf, 2000: 52), in the hope that their work would gain respect and recognition, or at least be given a chance, on the basis that it was supposedly written by a man. Ironically, however, this resulted in female writers paying «homage to the convention» (Woolf, 2000: 52) whereby the writers were, in effect, unconsciously encouraging the tradition of male writers being «superior», and female writers soon reverted to letting their identities be known and attempted to be published under their own names. This, however, was just the start of more problems that female writers would experience.

The opening quote by Joanna Russ describes only one such problem: that, historically, «there [were] so very few stories in which women can figure as protagonists» (Russ, 1995: 80) as female characters traditionally existed only in relation to the (male) hero. It was long the situation that female characters in novels had the choice of playing one of only two possible types of role: «the vexed and vexing polarities of angel and monster, sweet dumb Snow White and fierce mad Queen» (Gilbert, 1979: 21), thus providing very limited possibilities for female characters to truly shine. Related to this, was the apparent lack of female literary predecessors whose lead other female writers could follow. This resulted in women's writing becoming «at least bitextual; [...] it is a double-voiced discourse influenced by both the dominant masculine literary tradition and the muted feminine one» (Showalter, 2009: xv). After all, as Joanna Russ points out, the «insistence that authors make up their own plots is a recent development in literature [...] It's a commonplace that bad writers imitate and great writers steal» (Russ, 1995: 85-86). This, then, posed a problem for upcoming female writers, whose predecessors were predominantly male and who, naturally, would have different experiences to write about. The alternative for women, then, was «to take as one's model (and structural principle) not male myth but the structure of one's own experience» (Russ, 1995: 88). After all, women would logically experience somewhat «different» lives from men, whether concerning ambitions and problems, the body and work, or societal expectations and restrictions. Therefore, it seems only natural that these issues would begin to appear in writing by the women who are likely to have witnessed or experienced them:

The differences between traditional female preoccupations and roles and male ones make a difference in female writing. Many other critics are beginning to agree that when we look at women writers collectively we can see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation. (Showalter, 2009: 9)

Thus, a new «female» literary tradition has been carved out, in which predominantly female thoughts, feelings, and experiences are portrayed.

This, of course, gave rise to its own problem, mainly that women's fiction was set apart from men's, which was still viewed by many as «Real Writing». This was seen by many to mean that «men write about what's important; women write about what's important to *women*» (Mazza, 2006: 28). Naturally, women will tend to write about different interests, experiences, and values than men will, and yet «it is the masculine values that prevail» (Woolf, 2000: 74). Because of this, any piece of writing that prioritises the experiences of women has tended to be ridiculed and heavily criticized. As Virginia Woolf explained:

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war.
This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop. (Woolf, 2000: 74)

Over fifty years after Woolf wrote this, it seemed little or no progress had been made concerning this disregard for women's experiences, as Russ discussed how critics were still questioning the «validity of writings by women, from the authenticity of their authorship [...] to the validity of what they write about and what they produce» (Warhol, 1997: 74). Russ simplified it further by putting it in the imagined words of the critics discussing the work of women writers: «she wrote it, but look what she wrote about» (Russ, 1983: 97).

This attack on women writers' work is not merely a battle of the sexes. In 1856, George Eliot launched an attack on her fellow women writers, entitled *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*. While Eliot concedes that, due to its lack of restrictions and scope for originality, «fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men» (Eliot, 1856: 1469), she also feels that «it is precisely this absence of rigid requirement which constitutes the fatal seduction of novel writing to incompetent women» (Eliot, 1856: 1469). The novels written by these «incompetent» writers, as Eliot views it, are filled with a «particular quality of silliness [...] the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic» (Eliot, 1856: 1461).

As a female writer herself, however, Eliot allows that there are female authors whose work is criticized merely because of the gender of the author. As she states: «no sooner does a woman show that she has genius or effective talent, than she receives that tribute of being moderately praised and severely criticized» (Eliot, 1856: 1468). In this sense, it is not that Eliot believes that women cannot or should not write novels, but more an anxiety «that men – and women –

interpret sentimental or romance fiction as definitive statements on women's prose craftsmanship» (Harzewski, 2006: 29).

Female writers have always been fully aware that their work was viewed as sub-standard and unimportant, but, instead of deterring them from writing, it seems to have made them all the more determined to succeed and make their voices heard. Jane Austen herself believed that women's novels, «for all their incidental silliness, are important enough in women's negotiation with the world to be worth defending against detractors» (Blair, 2000: 21-22). Austen uses novels such as *Northanger Abbey* to plead for women writers not to turn against one another, but instead to unite against their critics. As she puts it, «if the heroine of one novel be not patronised by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? [...] Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body» (Austen, 1993: 19).

Chick lit is the latest genre of women's writing to be ridiculed and criticized. Even though we are now in the twenty-first century, it seems not much has changed in terms of the reception of women's novels, as many of the same criticisms are used today regarding chick lit as they were in the nineteenth century in relation to the female writers of that time. For many, the phrase «chick lit» is seen as a derogatory term used to dismiss «any possible literary worth in a text which deals with the intimate life of a young urban professional single woman» (Whelehan, 2005: 213). The phrase implies «that this is reading for women only, or not just women but 'chicks'; women not even bright enough to be afforded the title of women» (Levenson, 2009: 90). In keeping with the centuries-old tradition of criticizing the work of female writers, it has been noted that critics «and even other female writers (ones who fancy themselves serious, literary novelists) tend to treat chick lit as some sub-par version of Real Writing» (Mlynowski, 2006: 14). Merrick provides this somewhat harsh description of her perceived differences between «chick lit» and «real literature»:

Chick lit's formula numbs our senses. Literature, by contrast, grants us access to countless new cultures, places, and inner lives. Where chick lit reduces the complexity of the human experience, literature increases our awareness of other perspectives and paths. Literature employs carefully crafted language to expand our reality, instead of beating us over the head with clichés that promote a narrow worldview. Chick lit shuts down our consciousness. Literature expands our imaginations. (Merrick, 2006: 9)

One reason for chick lit's unfair criticism may be simply because chick lit represents the connection between women's writing and popular culture, both of which have traditionally been ridiculed, thus resulting in chick lit inevitably receiving the same treatment:

Women have, of course, traditionally been positioned as avid consumers and producers of generic forms of culture such as the gothic novel, romantic formula writing, and soap operas and, to some extent, «low culture» seems to embrace all these forms which come to be defined as feminine. (Whelehan, 2000: 23)

Related to this, chick lit has therefore received little, if any, attention from a feminist perspective, possibly because of its «low rank within the already devalued arena of “low” culture» (Shoos, 1992: 217). Attempts have been made, nonetheless, to prove the value that may be found in at least some forms of popular culture. As one example, Robert Hurd’s 2006 essay uses theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu to examine the popular American television sitcom, *Seinfeld*. This essay about sitcoms is useful for comparison with chick lit because, like chick lit, sitcoms remain at a relatively low cultural position in contemporary society:

In fact, the sitcom is dismissed as a popular genre not only because of its development on the least prestigious popular medium – television – but also because even within the hierarchy of television programs it occupies the most subordinate position. Television critics and viewers have often viewed the sitcom as the most formulaic, repetitive, or mindless entertainment available. Sitcom writers themselves recognize that the sitcom has never had cultural prestige. (Hurd, 2006: 762)

If we replace the word «sitcom» with «chick lit», and the word «television» with «fiction» in the above extract, the piece would also perfectly describe the position of chick lit: within fiction itself, and even the narrower category of women’s writing, chick lit is seen to occupy the most inferior position; chick lit has, like the sitcom, been dismissed as «formulaic», «repetitive», and «mindless entertainment», and even chick lit authors themselves recognize that their work risks not being taken seriously, simply because of how it is marketed. The sitcom is noted for its action taking place among «surrogate families, such as a group of co-workers, or [...] in a social meeting place» (Hurd, 2006: 765), much like chick lit often revolves around the protagonist and her extended family – her group of friends. Moreover, as chick lit, the sitcom is often criticized for being about «nothing». This «correlates to Bourdieu’s “negative value”» (Hurd, 2006: 766), which implies that, in the case of sitcoms and chick lit, the plot or subject matter is diminished and the element of humor takes precedence. Hurd argues that the element of humor in sitcoms such as *Seinfeld* may have more significance than detractors believe. He notes how, in «a genre that is defined by silliness, *Seinfeld* finds itself in the paradoxical situation of taking silliness seriously, not by becoming serious, but by jettisoning every noncomedic element» (Hurd, 2006: 767). That is, rather «than minutely dissecting the “real world”, as is often supposed in discussions of the meaning of “nothing”, *Seinfeld* transforms it into humor» (Hurd, 2006: 771). Similarly, much chick lit is recognized as being «witty, light-hearted» fiction about «nothing».

Much like Hurd's defense of *Seinfeld*, much of chick lit's humor is located amid truly touching stories, not about nothing, but instead about a lot of serious issues which affect many women's (and, in a sense, men's) lives.

Hurd mentions two important aspects of Bourdieu's theories that are also significant for this discussion of chick lit. Firstly, although Bourdieu's work «mainly concentrated on high-cultural institutions such as museums and universities, he did acknowledge that forms originally designated as “low” [...] can undergo a transformation from illegitimate to legitimate status» (Hurd, 2006: 770), and, secondly, that it is possible, acceptable even, for certain products of culture to be «conceived of as both “good” and “popular”, thus “modern classics”» (Hurd, 2006: 769). These views are particularly relevant as they provide a sense of credibility to a study on any form of popular culture. They suggest that, despite critics' protests, certain products of popular culture may have the potential to «elevate the status of their genre within the cultural field at large» (Hurd, 2006: 772). Hurd points out, however, that this can only happen «when we afford the objects of popular culture the same critical and historical methodology and attention as we do those of literature» (Hurd, 2006: 773). This paper attempted to place Hurd's – and Bourdieu's – hopes for elevating the status of popular culture products by discussing it in terms of a contemporary, and heavily criticized, genre of popular culture (i.e. chick lit) in terms of recognized theoretical concepts, with the aim of demonstrating the value to be found in such novels, thus raising the status of chick lit and women's fiction in general.

Chick lit is just one example of how the «disdain with which both men and women critics have tended to view women's popular culture has prevented them from seeing how it speaks to the real problems and tensions in women's lives» (Rakow, 1998: 284). Yet, for all the criticism it has received, the fact remains that chick lit is not merely «a fad that's going away – it's a mainstream genre that's made an impression» (Yardley: 2006: 9). I would argue that chick lit is an evolving genre, and that there is, in fact, a lot more to the genre than is first imagined on seeing these «easily digestible, pastel-colored packages» (Whelehan, 2005: 187). In fact, chick lit writers «are beginning to take themselves more seriously, and “darker” themes are beginning to pervade the genre» (Whelehan, 2005: 208), resulting in it becoming more difficult, in terms of certain writers at least, to dismiss chick lit any longer as merely «literary junk food for (semi-) professional turn-of-the-millennium women» (Benstock, 2006: 255).

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