

# Chick lit: the new Jane Austen?

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## Introduction

In the past few years, the book market has been swamped by a new genre; chick lit. The covers are adorned with pastel colors, all kinds of female accessories and curly fonts that showcase the title and author.

The genre has grown exponentially since the popular genesis of *Bridget Jones' Diary* and is targeted mainly at women. As such, readers and reviewers have more than once praised it to be above normal popular fiction and coined authors such as Sophie Kinsella to be 'the new Jane Austen'.

This has sparked the debate on the quality of chick lit. The novels claim kinship to Austen and other women in the literary canon, while critics do not spare them in calling them 'silly froth' or 'trashy fiction'. The responses towards chick lit are either complete praise, or total disgust.

I want to examine in this thesis whether or not chick lit can be compared to Jane Austen. Through this, I also endeavor to find out if there is any literary merit in chick lit. In order to do this, I will first define chick lit and how the term came to be.

I will then analyze two chick lit novels. First I will look at Sophie Kinsella's *Can You Keep a Secret?* Sophie Kinsella is one of the best-known chick lit authors, and therefore represents the genre rather finely. I will also look at Jill Mansell's *Take A Chance on Me* to perceive if other authors handle chick lit differently. This way, I will get a reasonably broad view of the chick lit genre.

I have chosen *Emma* from Jane Austen's oeuvre for the comparison in this thesis. It is one of the best-known of the six novels that she wrote and will be quite effective for analysis and comparison. I will conclude with a comparison.

## What is Chick Lit?

The term Chick Lit has been in use for some time now. To better understand the genre and to clearly define the meaning of the term, I will examine the origination of the term and how it is used today.

### *Origin*

The term originated from an anthology of short stories that examined woman's fiction after the post-feminist era. Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell published their *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* in 1995. In this anthology, postfeminist writers were looked at for their experimental work, the stories were covering female experiences and included violent, perverse and sexual themes.

The meaning of the term changed when James Wolcott wrote an essay in the *New Yorker*, in which he used the term again, but now to describe the women writing pop-fiction in newspaper columns.

"Today," he wrote, "a chick is a postfeminist in a party dress, a bachelorette too smart to be a bimbo, too refined to be a babe, too boozy to be a bohemian." And in his summary, "The butch sensibility that imbued so much female writing in the seventies didn't moderate or modulate into maturity. Instead, too much feminist and postfeminist writing has reverted in the nineties to a popularity-contest coquetry."

In this last paragraph of his essay, Wolcott seemed to be describing not *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* but the chick lit yet to come (Mazza, 22).

### *New meaning*

Although the term originated from the United States, it was the British *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding that was credited as "the eve of the genre" in an expose article by Anne Weinberg in 2003. Since then, the term has been used frequently by British publishers without any reference to the first anthology. The meaning of 'Chick Lit' had changed.

But into what? Rian Montgomery defines it in the following way on [chicklitbooks.com](http://chicklitbooks.com):

Chick lit is a genre comprised of books that are mainly written *by* women *for* women. The books range from having main characters in their early 20's to their late 60's. There is usually a personal, light, and humorous tone to the books. Sometimes they are written in first-person narrative; other time they are written from multiple viewpoints. 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.

Montgomery urges that the thing that makes chick lit different from regular woman's fiction is the tone, which is confiding and personal and always contains a lot of humor.

Still, this is hardly a clear definition of the genre. In an article discussing the rise of chick lit, Kelly James-Enger quotes a few editors giving their personal definitions;

RDI editor Margaret Marbury calls it "modern women's fiction with the emphasis on modern. It's female-focused or heroine-driven; so is romance. But the difference is that there isn't necessarily a male character. It's not about the relationship between two people in every case," she says. "Sometimes it's a coming-of-age story; in some cases, it's a work satire." Bent defines it as fiction involving single, young women, "not necessarily with a happy ending, but usually fairly funny and witty and a bit urban."

"Chick lit to me has always been Sex in the City in book form--the single gal in the big city looking for Mr. Right," says John Scognamiglio, editor at Kensington Books, which publishes its chick lit under the Strapless imprint. "It doesn't really follow a formula--the writers can do anything they want to do." (James-Enger, 43)

It becomes clear that “every editor and agent defines chick lit a little differently”. According to John Scognamiglio, there is no formula for chick lit, but *USA Today* seems to think otherwise. In a news article on the matter, they answer the question “What puts the chick in chick lit?” with the following characteristics:

The heroine is either looking for Mr. Right or getting over Mr. Wrong.  
She's in a dead-end job or is looking to climb the corporate ladder.  
She often works in public relations, advertising or for a women's magazine.  
The tone is often light and funny.  
The story usually is told in the first person.  
By the novel's end, the heroine usually has worked out all her problems and has learned important lessons about life. (Memmott, “Chick lit, for better or worse, is here to stay.”)

#### *Academic look*

Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young write in their introduction to the essay collection *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* that the “responses [to chick lit] have indeed tended toward extremes. On one hand chick lit attracts the unquestioning adoration of fans; on the other it attracts the unmitigated disdain of critics (1).” For them there is a serious element missing in between these two extremes; intelligent discussion.

Yet for all the popular attention it has drawn, it has received little serious or intelligent discussion. The discourse surrounding the genre has been polarized between its outright dismissal as trivial fiction and unexamined embrace by fans who claim that it reflects the realities of life for contemporary single women (Ferriss and Young, *Chick Lit: The new Woman's Fiction*, 2).

In their essay “A Generational Divide over Chick Lit”, Ferriss and Young try to answer *why* there has been so little academic discussion about chick lit and shares their discovery that “many [...] women had been — and are being — discouraged by their (mostly female) professors in women's literature and women's studies from considering chick lit a legitimate area of scholarship.”

According to them, a cause of this reluctance might be the popularity of the genre and its commercial marketing. However, they find a more significant implication in Doris Lessing's criticism, who states that the female novelists should “write about their lives as they really saw them, and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight.”

But according to Ferriss and Young, this is where the problem lies; scholars assume that this is not how women see their lives. They state:

Fans routinely stress their identification with the heroines of chick lit, suggesting that the novels are popular not because they are escapist “froth” but because they tap into contemporary women's struggles and fears. In particular, readers like the protagonists' fallibility: These are not the flawless women of romance fiction, waiting to be recognized by the “perfect” man, but women who make mistakes at work, sometimes drink too much, fail miserably in the kitchen, or “fall for any of the following: alcoholics, workaholics, commitment phobics, people with girlfriends or wives, misogynists, megalomaniacs, chauvinists, emotional fuckwits, or freeloaders,” to quote Bridget Jones (“A Generational Divide over Chick Lit”).

Ferriss and Young summarize by saying that “the concerns of the women in chick lit are not Lessing's, but they are those of a new generation of women.” Their essay collection is the first step in establishing the academic discussion about chick lit. All scholars who contributed to it do not look lightly upon chick lit nor denounce it easily as rubbish. This does not mean that they do not judge it;

Chick lit is certainly one of the next generations of women's *writing* but, in spite of its capacity to invoke the questions that long swirled around women's literary writing, it is not the next generation of women's *literature* (Wells, 49).

And it is not just the scholars that wrote for them who find that chick lit cannot be called literature, they themselves state that "although chick lit raises fascinating cultural issues, it can't compete with the work of Jane Austen, the Brontës, Virginia Woolf, and Zora Neale Hurston (Ferriss and Young, "A Generational Divide over Chick Lit")."

Concluding, we can see that the term 'chick lit', although meant to ironically identify postfeminist literature, has taken on a new meaning. It now covers a genre which is written by women and exclusively *for* women. It is generally defined as having a romance-centred plot, with plenty of attention for the protagonist's career and daily struggles. There is always a 'happy ending'; most problems are sorted or will soon be and the desired goals have been achieved for the heroine.

## **Analysis**

Now that I have defined the genre 'chick lit' more exactly, I will analyze two chick lit novels and one novel by Jane Austen. To see whether or not they can function as literature, I will look at the characteristics that generally define literature.

First, I will look at how the author views her own work in regard to its merit, then run the novel by *USA Today's* 'check list'. I will then analyze the novel itself, by looking how they describe and place the life and society of the protagonists. This subject is relevant to both chick lit novels and Jane Austen, as Austen has always placed the life in the society in the center of her novel and her critical views are reflected in this society life.

The society in chick lit novels is, of course, vastly different. How do the authors describe this new life of the protagonists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is there a critical discussion or a general celebration of the so-called 'city life'?

An important vision in this is the protagonist's *own* view on how her life should be. What are her desires and how appropriate are they in her personal society?

A third aspect by which I will analyze the novels is style. Literary works have always distinguished themselves from normal fiction by displaying a more imaginative language and provoke multiple interpretation through stylistic devices. For this purpose, I will look closely at the three novels to see what kind of style they adapt, and how far it could be called literary.

### **Sophie Kinsella's *Can You Keep A Secret?***

When one talks about chick lit, Sophie Kinsella might be the first name that will ring a bell. The name is a pseudonym for the already published Madeleine Wickham. She takes pride in having studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford, as it is mentioned extensively on her site's biography. Kinsella has a strong opinion on the spread and reaction of chick lit. In an interview with the Guardian, she stands rather strongly against an interviewer who herself does not greatly like chick lit. Regarding her first chick lit writing she says:

"And then I got to the age of 29 or 30, and I thought, OK, now without being defensive, I will write a silly book about things I know, and just make it funny and ridiculous. And if it fails, that's OK (Aitkenhead, 2012)."

*Can You Keep A Secret?* seems to be textbook chick lit. If we use the characteristics list of the USA Today, we discover that;

- Emma Corrigan is with what seems Mr. Right, but is not happy with him. She only discovers this when she *does* meet Mr. Right.
- She is desperate for a promotion to marketing executive, as she has failed a lot of different careers.
- The story hangs together from Emma's embarrassing secrets and awkward moments.
- Emma narrates the story herself.
- At the end of the story, Emma has straightened things out with her family, has found her Mr. Right and finally gets her promotion.

### *Emma's life and society*

Earlier, editor Scognamiglio defined chick lit as being about "the single gal in the big city looking for Mr Right" and Emma seems to be just that. She lives in London, the biggest metropolis of the United Kingdom. But Emma does not actively participate in city life, at least, not actively during the story. Her life, as described to us, centers on her office, her home and her parental home.

The most dynamic of these is her office. She works on the marketing department, but the only people that the reader gets to know are her supervisor and the few colleagues that are close to her. This comes up to four people. Add to that the people she knows from other departments and she knows about six people *well* at the office. All in all, her society is quite small, and it could be argued that she does not greatly enjoy these societies. She has conflicts with a considerable number of people in this society; she gets bossed and teased around at work and is belittled by her cousin and parents.

When we look at this extensively, we see that Emma has quite a problematic situation in this society. She is not greatly respected by anyone, nor does she have anyone else in high regard (other than Jack Harper). This is because she is expected to fulfill a role in her society which she cannot. She is not a serious, hardworking employee, or a successful daughter. She is the underdog of the society.

But there is one place where she is completely safe; her home. Her flatmates love her and accept her the way she is. When we look at Emma in the office society, she seems to be a loser, but at home, we get to see others who have flaws as well;

Lissy is not only my oldest friend but my flatmate, too. She has tufty dark hair and an IQ of about 600 and is the sweetest person I know (12).

In theory, Jemima has a job, working in a Bond Street gallery. But all she ever seems to do is have bits of her waxed and plucked and massaged and go on dates with city bankers, whose

salary she always checks out before she says yes. I do get on with Jemima. Kind of (Kinsella, 39-40).

These rather extreme flatmates are an interesting example of what Wells describes as a characteristic in chick lit: "As with beauty, writes of chick lit commonly garner sympathy for their heroines by making them slightly less fervent consumers than their best friends or foils (Wells, 62)." When we look at Lissy, Jemima and Emma we discover that Emma is the happy medium between her flatmates.

In the end, Emma reconciles all the conflicts she has in her society and becomes the strong, independent woman she dreamt of being, and the woman the society expected her to be –albeit in a different way. In a relative hard and unforgiving society, she overcomes her humiliations and becomes a better person through it.

### *Emma's desires*

On the outside, Emma is the woman of modern society, working and living on her own. But she is not passionate about any of it; she is merely doing it because it seems to be what is 'right'. She is aware of the dreams and aspirations she is supposed to have, but cannot bring herself to actively desiring any of it.

For instance, Emma is in constant conflict when it concerns Connor, because while she is unhappy with their relationship, it is what society expects her to have. This breaks into conflict when Connor wants to take it to the 'next level';

*I don't want to move in with Connor, says a tiny voice in my brain before I can stop it.  
No. That can't be right. That cannot possible be right. Connor is perfect. Everyone knows that.  
But I don't want to-  
Shut up. We're the perfect couple. [...]  
I feel a prick of panic and swallow hard. Connor is the one good thing in my life. If I didn't have Connor... What would I have? (Kinsella, 145).*

Her desires concerning her career are similar. Working for Panther is her "third career in four years (Kinsella, 10)." Her first career started with the promise of making money, but her moral kept her from pursuing it. The second try is much more interesting; she wanted to be a photographer, typically considered as an 'artistic' profession. This idea, photography, seems to be the one time that Emma decided to follow her heart. It seems like she genuinely enjoyed the course and looked forward to actually doing this. But she could not get a job in photography, and it cost her an extensive amount of money that her father had lent her. This seems to have deprived her from ever taking a gamble and following her desires.

As a result, she went for an office job; simply because it is a job. Working there is not so much her desire as getting a promotion is. But not even the promotion is a desire of its own right; it is a step in proving her family that she is worth something.

When she finally follows her heart, she is, initially, severely punished for it. But by the end of the novel, she gets her promotion because she persevered, she ends up with her Mr. Right and has her family's faith in her restored. The novel rewards her for stepping out of what is expected of her and following her own heart; this did mean losing the respect of everyone she knew before regaining it.

### *Style*

Until now, the focus of this thesis has been rather on the narrative structure and plot than the linguistic style, I believe that style is an important part of literature and makes for a completely different reading experience.



A lot of statements have already been made on the subject of style in chick lit. In her essay "Mothers of Chick Lit?" Juliette Wells argues that:

When we look in chick lit for such literary elements as imaginative use of language, inventive and thought-provoking metaphors, layers of meaning, complex characters, and innovative handling of conventional structure, we come up essentially empty-handed (Wells, 64).

While this seems a harsh conclusion, when we take a closer look at *Can You Keep a Secret?* it just might be true. As mentioned earlier, the novel is narrated in the first person, so we're reading a text written in Emma's vocabulary, which is not that stunning. It's not an imaginative use of language; it is more speech language, easy to read and certainly not desiring much deep thought. The sentences are short, sometimes even fragmented. The same goes for the paragraphs; if there is a long sentence, it generally becomes an entire paragraph. The page is dominated by white space.

When it comes to metaphors, one must really search in *Can You Keep A Secret?* The best metaphor comes up when Emma and Connor break up. They have just received a glass teapot as a housewarming gift.

"He stops in shock as, with no warning, I hurl the glass teapot to the floor. Stunned, we both watch it bounce on the floorboards.  
'It was supposed to break,' I explain after a pause.  
'And that was going to signify that yes, I would throw something away, if I knew it wasn't right for me.'  
'I think it *has* broken,' says Connor, picking it up and examining it. 'At least, there's a hairline crack.'  
'There you go.'  
'We could still use it –'  
'No. We couldn't.'  
'We could get some Sellotape –'  
'But it would never work properly. It just... wouldn't work.'  
'I see,' says Connor after a pause.  
And I think, finally, he does (Kinsella, 154-55)."

While it *is* a metaphor, and most readers will understand it, the metaphor does not lead to a deeper level of meaning, rather than emphasize the first level. It is painfully obvious. Both Emma and Connor take the teapot as a metaphor for their relationship, which can, according to Emma, no longer work. If Connor really needed the help of the teapot to figure this out, it might indeed be for the best that they split up.

Certainly in elements of style, *Can You Keep A Secret?* is stereotypical chick lit; the language is simple and reminiscent of spoken language, there is barely to no use of narrative devices such as metaphors to refer to another level of meaning, quite simply because there is no other level; a chick lit does not read for multiple interpretations.

## Analysis of Jill Mansell's *Take a Chance on Me*

While Sophie Kinsella is world-famous for her novels, Jill Mansell is described by some as the 'queen of chick lit'. She churns out about a novel a year, all in the genre of 'romantic fiction' as she herself calls it. When asked: "what's your take on [chick lit], and how do you feel about people labeling your novels 'chick lit'?" she answers:

I'm used to it by now, so I don't really mind, but I wouldn't want people to think my books are only about young single girls obsessing about boys and diets and shoes. I have a wide range of characters in my books, all age groups are included and some serious issues are dealt with. As in life, comedy exists alongside tragedy (Spooner, "Author Interview: Jill Mansell").

But when we put her novel next to *USA Today's* list, we see that;

- Cleo Quinn breaks up with Mr. Wrong in chapter 7 and starts circling around Mr. Right.
- She works as a limousine driver and gives no incentive of looking for anything else.
- She does get to meet a lot of well-off people.
- While Cleo certainly ridicules herself a lot, a few of the other storylines are heavier.
- The story is told in third person, but a great amount is free indirect speech.
- All of the story lines in the novel are rounded off with happy endings.

### *Cleo's life and society*

Cleo Quinn lives in Channing's Hill, and it seems there are not more than twelve people living there. In this village, everyone knows everyone.

Cleo is an orphan, which seems significant to her current life. Harzewski puts this heroine in perspective with other chick lit novels;

That many of chick lit's heroines are orphans, itself a romance trope, indicates the legacies of the Cinderella story and classic heroine-centered novels such as Brönte's *Jane Eyre*. [...] The orphan trope, common also to the romance genre, reflects the continuing concerns over single status for women. A growing body of feminist social science has sought to replace negative images of female singleness –waste, desiccation, and barrenness- with affirmative models (Harzewski, 38-39).

But the fact that Cleo is an orphan is hardly significant to the novel. More significant is her Auntie Jean, who has caused the necessary trouble before drinking herself to death. Secondly, Cleo is not an affirmative model like Harzewski suggests; instead, she is a klutz and manages to screw things up more than once. She is a negative image of female singleness; she desperately needs a man, and the entirety of Channing's Hill is busy proving this to her.

The most important meeting place is the Hollybush Inn, the pub. Here the everyday gossip is discussed between the most important characters. Everyday life only gets exciting when three new persons come to Channing's Hill; Johnny, Sofia and Georgia. Coincidentally, the three separate storylines revolve around these three newcomers. Life is pretty stagnant in Channing's Hill and the society is relatively laid-back. They seem to enjoy the gossip from getting these exciting things from the newcomers, but do not mind their quiet lives much either.

In such a small society where everyone knows everyone, nothing is forgotten. Everybody knows what happened years back, and that might exactly be why the past plays such a significant part in Cleo's relationship with Johnny. According to her, he is somehow to blame that she never got a real education, as "she had left at sixteen and plunged into the first of many jobs (Mansell, 7)." Even after all these years, she cannot forget this and still blames him.

Cleo's work life is separate from her life in Channing's Hill. As a limousine driver, her coworker and even her employer are very off-stage. Her customers are not, though. We have frequent encounters with the people who earn enough to rent a limo –Johnny of course, being one of them. A lot of her thoughts concern her clients and the life they lead;

Cleo nodded, because this was how the other half lived. In her line of work she'd experienced it before. If normal people wanted to treat themselves, they ordered something off the internet or popped down to the local shops to see what caught their eye. Whereas when Mrs Van Dijk fancied a new sculpture for her drawing room, she hopped on a plane to meet up with the artist (Mansell, 113).

Cleo's customers function as a commentary on the 'rich and the famous'; this influences how she looks at Johnny, who she first prejudices as being as conceited as his father, but who is much more humble and artistically inclined.

A great difference with Kinsella is the fact that we have more than one storyline. Cleo's friend Ash is trying to overcome his insecurity to hook up with Sofia (the ex-wife of Cleo's ex-boyfriend) and Cleo's sister Abbie is forced to live with her husband's daughter. In both these storylines, Mansell steps out of the typical chick lit. Rather than simply finding 'Mr. Right', Abbie has to learn with difficulties of marriage, while the Ash-Sofia storyline explores the relationship from both sides. The society is viewed from more than one side and we hereby get a better understanding of the way it works, as well as more round characters in this novel than in Kinsella.

#### *Cleo's desires*

Cleo starts out with a perfect man, who turns out to be irrevocably evil. After that, she convinces herself that she does not "need another man anyway", to which Johnny immediately parries:

"I mean it sounds great, and girls love to say that stuff because it makes them sound all strong and independent. But it's not actually true, is it? Deep down they're panicking, getting more and more desperate, and the next thing you know, they're hurling themselves into a new relationship" (Mansell, 80).

It is not the only time in the novel that Johnny has a better idea about what she wants than she does herself. She tells herself –and the reader- constantly that she is happy with her life as it is, but keeps dreaming about what could have been;

She loved her job at Henleaze Limos, but who knew, if her schooldays hadn't been blighted, she might have gone on to do anything. The sky could have been the limit... she could have become, God, an astrophysicist (Mansell, 9)!

Her job is not the only disappointment. When one of her clients - one of the girls who teased her in school- brags about her wonderful life, Cleo reflects by thinking: "she was Mandy Ross now, married to perfect Gary, mother of two perfect angels, living the perfect life... Unlike poor old Unloved Spinster Cleo Quinn, yet to acquire any of the above (Mansell, 149)." Cleo really dreams of domestic life and looks up to everyone who has already achieved it, even though both Mandy Ross and her own sister Abbie show her that marital bliss is not as easy as it looks.

But while Cleo certainly has hopes and dreams, she never takes any risks; she never takes a jump into the unknown. The developments just sort of happen to her. She is not an independent woman, as she herself might think, but is looking for improvement in her life without grabbing the opportunities herself. She is the princess in the tower, and does eventually get rescued.

### Style

The style in *Take A Chance on Me* certainly differs from what we have seen with Kinsella. The narrative is third person, but contains so much free indirect speech that it might as well be first person. The novel also contains a great deal of internal monologue, which can envelop an entire chapter.

Still, the speech pattern in this novel differs not greatly from the one in other chick lit. There is a lot of 'slang' in the novel, that is quite hard to understand if you're not from Great Britain yourself.

"Casey looked offended. 'Hey, I have my standards. I don't want some ropey old dog with fat ankles and saggy tits.'

'Is that what the women in your world are divided into? WAGs with boob jobs and ropey old dogs (234-35)?'

These terms seep through the dialogue quite casually, and the text is still understandable even if you do not understand them, or fully appreciate them. It is still an easy read. The short chapters make it easy to read on.

Where metaphors are concerned, Mansell seems to be making an actual effort to include them. For instance, on an occasion that Cleo was feeling slightly anxious, she told us that "her stomach was rumbling like cement mixer (120)." A recurring metaphor is that of a 'fox', which are men that leave a woman for a younger one. The metaphor is extensively explained by Cleo the first time she uses it on page 240. But later in the novel, Sofia only *sees* a fox running through the garden when she sees her love interest Ash walk arm in arm with the much younger Georgia, implicating that he's doing the same thing to her. This metaphor is slightly hidden, resulting in the fact that the readers who find it will find themselves exceptionally clever, while the reader that do not notice it as a metaphor do not actually miss an important plot element.

While the chick lit novels have a lot of individual differences, they are extremely similar in style. It is an easy reading, and while it does try to provoke a *little* more thought through the subject matter, the interpretation possibilities are finite.

## Jane Austen's *Emma*

After these two chick lit novels, Jane Austen would seem an odd author for comparison. Her works, despite having been published 200 years ago, are still avidly read by many readers. In her own time, her novels were already reasonably well received, although they were not as popular as they are now. Nevertheless, significant authors of her time *did* take notice of her; Sir Walter Scott gave her great praise while Charlotte Brönte disliked her.

Today, her works are undisputedly part of the Western canon. Her narratives are still being critically analyzed two hundred years after publication, not just for the central love plot that they center about. Austen enriched these novels with moral discussions and a very fine use of irony, for which she has become famous.

Then what place does her *Emma* have next to two chick lit novels? Why are we comparing a canonical writer from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to novels about women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which are often disbanded as 'silly froth'?

“Writers of chick lit, by contrast, frequently invite us to view their works as descendants of women’s literary classics [...] Although such allusions may be marketing tactics, they also encourage readers to see chick-lit novels not as a brief publishing phenomenon but as the next generation of women’s literature, a perspective that ennobles both its writers and its readers (Wells, 48-49).”

This is the explanation for the frequent occurrence of Austen’s name on the back of the chick lit novels. Chick lit writers want to be seen as the new Jane Austen. Therefore I will examine if they can, in fact, stand up to Jane Austen.

To keep in line with the analysis of the chick lit novels, I will look at society in *Emma*, but Austen does not allow for reading just that in her characters and their lives; there is moral criticism there that must be discussed.

Inevitably, I will also discuss the romance plot, because this is the most obvious similarity of the three novels. But more importantly, I will look at style, since this is where Austen proves herself a literary master.

### *Society*

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jane Austen has received a lot of critique on her depiction of society. It was said to be lacking, since they did not show the response to the great events of their time; for instance, the French Revolution. This seemed in direct conflict with Austen’s contemporaries, who actually praised her for her accuracy. In his essay ‘*Real Solemn History*’ and *Social History*, Christopher Kent argues that the latter warrant her reliability;

That they were praised by her contemporaries for their accuracy is a good warrant for reading them as vivid views of gentry life in the southern countries during the late Georgian period seen through the eyes of a clever woman. The language, the moral tone, the social concerns, the recreations, the basic rhythms of life are there to be shared by the reader, who is invited to enter the communities of Hartfield, Longbourne or Meryton (Kent, 95).

He points out the small view Austen is portraying, narrowing it down to the exact circumstances that her heroines enjoy. Austen wrote about small town life, as she does too in *Emma*.

Emma’s life is commented on by Austen through extensive moral commentary throughout the novel. The novel is about Emma growing up in Hartfield, while she is in a horrible position to learn; as the mistress of Hartfield, she receives too much praise from her father and former governess and the only critique comes from Mr Knightley, who holds the moral gravity throughout the entire story. It is

very important to Austen that Emma learns the moral norms, in fact, it is more important than learning other virtues for women;

Almost all of her heroines are deficient in the superficial virtues. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse both neglect their piano practice and hence are no more than moderate performers [...] Yet none of them is called upon to improve in these areas. Their education is complete so far as Jane Austen is concerned once they have corrected certain failings in judgement and/or feeling (Monaghan, 108).

Emma cannot be a good wife until she matures in her moral judgments. The entire novel is “an education in manners (Monaghan, 117)” which has to prepare Emma for “their role as arbiter of manners and preserver of morals (117).”

But aside from manners, Austen discusses another subject in this society. In the eighteenth century, the ideal human being was a person of leisure, because “if the aristocracy and gentry can use their leisure to acquire good-breeding and culture, to make themselves into patterns of human excellence, then the entire society will benefit and learn from their very existence (Nardin, 123).” Austen grew up between novelists who wrote about this sort of heroine. Austen’s heroines are not at leisure, though. They have to make their use in society. Emma is, however, not active in society. She “sees herself as the typical eighteenth-century heroine who uses her leisure to become an admirable, accomplished, exemplary woman (Nardin, 135).” She is busy with all the occupations of the gentry; playing the piano, drawing, doing charity work.

But Austen shows us that each and every one of these activities is not done with her entire heart; she does not apply herself fully, because she has no motivation to. This leads Nardin to the following conclusion:

So Emma, who thinks her life demonstrates her ability to use leisure for self-cultivation and the sort of social benefit that comes when a cultured woman uses her good sense to influence others, in fact demonstrates the inability of a talented individual to make herself work when there is no real encouragement to do so (Nardin, 135).

Austen wants to show that the gentry and aristocracy need labour as badly as the lower class society. In this, she follows the ideas of Samuel Johnson.

Johnson suggests that there are two ways in which a person can express the altruism that is a basic, though not compellingly strong, human motive: indirectly, through useful labour, and directly, through charity. And these, in Johnson’s scheme, are the most important Christian virtues. [...] Thus for Johnson the obligation to labour is as important for the financially secure members of the gentry and aristocracy as it is for those who must work or starve (Nardin, 130).

Emma needs an incentive to be useful in her society. According to Nardin, she will only find this incentive when she marries Knightley. Mr. Knightley is an ideal of Johnson’s ideas, who is completely involved in managing his estate. As his wife, Emma will have the moral duty to fill her hours with useful labour.

### *Style*

Austen’s style of writing has become famous. Though consistent in all six novels, it varies greatly in narrative voices. Andrew H. Wright discusses the six points of view which she uses. As a narrator, he says, she switches between these voices easily and even slyly; “she is by turns omniscient and ignorant, humble and sententious, direct and oblique, the dramatist and the teller of tales (Wright,

36).” The freedom with which she uses the points of view make for the dynamic character of her text.

Most famously of the various styles she employs, is what Wright calls ‘indirect comment’. In this, “she often –by a word, a phrase, a personal note of qualification –discloses a view which cannot represent that of any of her characters, and which may not be her own (57),” while still feigning to write in the authorial, ‘objective’ account. This is found very easily in *Emma* as well;

Emma Woodhouse’s faults are described with a sly understatement which does not detract from the general radiance of tone of the novel, but which nevertheless is meant to announce the problem of the story: ‘... *rather* too much her own way’, a ‘*little* too well of herself’, ‘so unperceived’, and ‘rank as misfortunes’: this is the direction of irony, forcing by its understatement a close examination of what Emma thinks and does in the book, to show evidence of the truth of this criticism (Wright, 61).

She very slyly slips in her own comments on matters through the narrative text, to point the reader to these relevant details that she cannot keep to herself. These little phrases and sentences add that which makes Jane Austen’s work so memorable; her irony.

Through irony, Austen makes most of her judgments and sharply criticizes. A fine example is Austen’s description of Mrs. Goddard:

Mrs Goddard was the mistress of a school –not of a seminary, or an establishment, or anything which professed, in long sentences of refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality, upon new principles and new systems –and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity –but a real, honest, old-fashioned boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies (Austen, 15).

While this looks as an objective description of Mrs. Goddard, Austen almost immediately begins imposing her opinion on both Mrs. Goddard’s school and the other sort of school that she despises. The latter is directly attacked, while appearing as praise for the first. The first is much more covertly attacked; it is the use of words, the way of putting that accomplishments are sold as if they are products in a store, that makes us look at Mrs. Goddard’s school as something to reconsider in its purpose.

The dialogue in Jane Austen plays a prominent part in telling the story. And in writing dialogue, Austen is a genius. In her study *Jane Austen and her Art*, Lascelles describes how Austen can tell her story “through the talk of her characters, even the most unpromising of them (Lascelles, 93).” She characterizes through dialogue, through speech patterns which she consistently keeps throughout the book. Every character has their own way of speaking. As Lascelles says; “She tends to suggest social variants in speech by syntax and phrasing rather than by vocabulary (Lascelles, 95).”

Most famously in *Emma* is of course Miss Bates. Her speech seems confused, but when looked at closely, every sentence makes perfect sense and the train of thought is always followed. In Miss Bates’ dialogue, Austen master of the style shows. Her speech is always consistent, even when telling something essential to the plot; her talking quirks are steady and understandable. She does not finish her sentences, but carries it far enough so that the reader knows how it should be completed; “... upon my word, Miss Woodhouse, you do look –how do you like Jane’s hair (Austen, 258)?” In this quotation, her train of thought is quite well shown as well; she jumps from one subject to another, but thereby showing the correlation between the two.

It also shows in little mannerisms of people. Mr. Elton's habitual phrase 'exactly so' might take a while to be noticed by the reader, but just as it is about to, Emma herself mocks it; "He is an excellent young man, and will suit Harriet exactly; it will be an 'exactly so,' as he says himself (Austen, 37)." Jane Austen thus shows herself the master of dialogue; through incredibly detailed syntax, she makes her characters truly speak.



### **Comparison**

When held to the light, whether or not chick lit can compare to Jane Austen might already be obvious. Jane Austen is not a chick lit writer, and chick lit writers are no Jane Austen. There may be similarities, but the differences are exactly which set Jane Austen apart from her contemporary lady novelists, and what now sets her apart from the chick lit writers.

What stands out is that the novels share a lot of basics; overall plot, setting and characters are similar. For instance, the novels all revolve around a romance plot. The woman's life is supposedly complete, but is still lacking, because the heroine has not yet found a man. Emma Corrigan has a job, a perfect boyfriend and nice roommates, but her life is still not complete; she has not found the right partner. Emma Woodhouse is the mistress of her father's estate, and views herself to be perfectly occupied with her everyday life, but the very thing missing from her life is a proper husband. But the difference lies in how this subject is treated. While *Can You Keep a Secret?* is a humorous discovery of a new boyfriend with some life lessons, *Emma* is a young woman's education which happens to culminate in marriage.

Secondly, this entire romance is treated differently. While we cannot even see a stolen kiss in Austen, Kinsella readily provides us with allusions to sex scenes, as does Mansell. There is a 'happily ever after' but it does not include marriage.

But while the romance is definitely the most important part of Kinsella and Mansell, we have seen that it is not for Austen. She uses her novels to address moral issues of her time. And this is where they truly differ, because as Wells says:

When grown women read chick lit, then, they are shrugging off the serious concerns of adult life to escape into fictional worlds in which pleasure and self-indulgence are paramount, and in which they don't have to think too hard. Chick lit's heroines may grapple with difficult questions about careers, mates, and relationships with family members and friends, but the novels themselves skirt truly challenging territory, whether social or literary (Wells, 68).

Whatever is going on in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, chick lit novels are not writing about it. They even avoid any discussion on the subject of work and labour, while this is supposedly one of the characteristics of chick lit; the strong working woman.

True, Jill Mansell does go a little further than just a romance plot; she discusses marital problems and even gives some critique on the rich and famous, but all of these problems are easily overcome and kissed away. There are no great confrontations, no lessons to be learned.

The style of chick lit is incomparable to Jane Austen. The only identification possible would be on the field of irony, which seems an actively used device in Austen as well as Kinsella as Mansell. But in Austen it is an outside narrator who is the ironic voice, and thus provides a commentary, while Emma Corrigan and Cleo Quinn are the ones employing the irony in their novels.

This first-person narration also leads to a great difference between the two; the chick lit feels a lot more like diaries, personal confessions of the heroines to the reader. This sense is enhanced because all literary devices seem absent; there are barely any metaphors and the language is brisk and on the level of spoken language. This stands in stark contrast to Jane Austen, who consciously chose third-person narration over the epistolary novel (the other popular form in her time) for the greater control she would have in how the story was told.

**Conclusion**

Although chick lit and Jane Austen novels share their central love plot and the relatively small societies they write about, the two are worlds apart. As Wells argues constantly, chick lit is escapism where the reader does not have to think too hard, while Austen incites deep thought.

When it comes to literary style, chick lit comes up short as well.

So, to conclude, chick lit is incomparable to Jane Austen. It does not have the literary value that Austen has. It is not literature, merely popular fiction.

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