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Chick Lit in the Classroom

Identity and Gender in *Gossip Girl* and *Confessions of a Shopaholic*

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## Abstract

Language and literature give students access to new worlds and present voices that offer new perspectives. Literature is used in the language classroom to improve language skills and is a highly important tool in order for the students to develop and reflect on identities. This essay gives an introduction to the Chick Lit genre, which is a popular genre among young girls. The aim is to problematize the genre by analyzing the Chick Lit protagonists in Cecily von Zieglar's *Gossip Girl* (2003) and Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2000) by using Judith Butler's theories to discuss the normality presented to the reader in terms of gender identities. Moreover, the essay argues that the Chick Lit genre reiterates gender norms but can be used in the EFL Classroom in accordance with Lgr11 to discuss identity and gender roles.

*Key words:* Chick Lit, identity, gender, Gossip Girl, Confessions of a Shopaholic, the EFL Classroom, Lgr11, Judith Butler, performance, the heterosexual matrix

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## Introduction

In schools, both teachers and students use genres as a tool. In the English classroom, it can be used to categorize and separate novels from one another. Thus, the definition of *genre* as “a particular type of art, writing, music etc. which has certain features that all examples of this type share” (LDOCE), suggests a way to categorize what is around us. Teachers can, therefore, arguably use genres as a tool to regulate what type of literature is read in the classroom and students can feel liberated or restricted by the term. Last year, I came across an essay by Maria Ulfgard who had been observing twenty girls, age 15-16 for the duration of two years to gain an insight in their reading habits. Her aim was to explore what they read in their spare time and whether what they read can be related to geographic, social, cultural or religious backgrounds and whether the girls were reproducing gender roles (Ulfgard 2002:13). Her essay discusses observations similar to those I have made working as a substitute teacher when using literature in the classroom. It has been my experience that students prefer to read popular fiction if the choice is theirs and, moreover, boys tend to read autobiographies while girls read romance novels. In fact, there are still youth novel genres on the market that are gender specific, aiming to either one or the other gender, and students still follow traditional gender patterns when choosing what to read. It seems that despite progressive gender theories students still need to be challenged to reflect about gender issues. The curriculum for the Upper Secondary School sends a clear message that equality between women and men is one of its main values (Skolverket, Upper Secondary School, Lgr11), as does the curriculum for the Compulsory School:

The school should actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for women and men. The way in which girls and boys are treated and assessed in school, and the demands and expectations that are placed on them, contributes to their perception of gender differences. The school has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender patterns. It should thus provide scope for pupils to explore and develop their ability and their interests independently of gender affiliation (Skolverket, Compulsory School, Lgr11).

Counteracting traditional gender patterns and contributing to the student’s perception of gender differences is something that can be problematic in the classroom since

gender roles are already established and students have a hard time identifying them. Moreover, students tend to conform to gender roles in the classroom and deviating from the roles can lead to exclusion from the group, being seen as different or even bullied. Consequently, it is important to discuss the issues of gender roles and literature can be a way to do so. With this in mind, I have chosen to look at a genre that has proven to be popular with many of my previous students - the Chick Lit Genre. I will argue that despite its claim of being postfeminist, the Chick Lit Genre reaffirms traditional gender roles. Furthermore, Chick Lit can be used in English class, but for the purpose of illustrating and problematizing femininity and masculinity.

This essay will, therefore, start with an introduction of the Chick Lit Genre. Then, it will continue with a literary analysis, using Judith Butler's identity theories on the protagonists in Cecily von Zieglar's *Gossip Girl* (2003) and Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2000) in order to analyse the issues of identification and gender roles in young adult fiction. It will aim to problematize postfeminism and apply theories by Butler that focus on *performativity*, *performance* and *the heterosexual matrix* to discuss if Chick Lit advances the cause of feminism by appealing to female audiences and featuring empowered, professional women or if it rehearses the same patriarchal narrative of romance and performance of femininity that feminists once rejected (Ferriss and Young 2006:9). Furthermore, the discussion of using Chick Lit in the classroom is an integrated part of this essay and will be discussed throughout. Nevertheless, the concluding chapter will primarily discuss the implications for using Chick Lit in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classroom. Language, learning and the development of a personal identity are all closely related (Skolverket, Compulsory School, Lgr11) and using literature in the EFL Classroom is, therefore, important. However, my aim is to find out whether it is possible to use Chick Lit in the English courses in accordance with the curricula and the syllabi. To do so, I have to problematize gender both in terms of the genre, the curricula and the syllabi.

## 1. The Chick Lit Genre

### 1.1 What characterizes Chick Lit?

From the perspective of literary criticism, we can define chick lit as a form of women's fiction on the basis of subject matter, character, audience, and narrative style. Simply put, Chick Lit features single women in their twenties and thirties, "navigating their generation's challenges of balancing career with personal relationships" (Ferriss and Young 2006:3). The typical Chick Lit protagonists are, as a result, not perfect but flawed, eliciting readers' compassion and identification simultaneously. Heroines deploy self-deprecating humor that not only entertains but also leads readers to believe they are fallible - like them. Narrative techniques such as the diary, e-mails, letters or simply the first person narration, result in realistic elements and the perception is that Chick Lit is not fiction at all. These narrative techniques not only appeal to readers but also link Chick Lit to a large body of women's fiction from earlier generations (Ferriss and Young 2006:4). "The observations stress the similarities that exist between heroine, reader, and author thus blurring what we might have previously considered a fairly stable distinction" (Smith 2008:7). Because of the popularity of the genre, there have been tendencies with publishers and critics to label novels with very varied characteristics as Chick Lit. It has therefore become more difficult to define what is allowed within the genre:

The critic who wishes to present a taxonomy of this popular genre confronts a daunting categorical concern: the task raises the question of what recent fiction by women featuring a female protagonist or cast of women characters is not chick lit? (Harzewski 2011:124)

Because Chick Lit writers are exclusively women and their readers overwhelmingly so, perceptions of the genre are affected by entrenched views that women's writing is inferior to men's and that women readers prefer lightweight novels to literary ones (Ferriss and Young 2006:48). This raises the question, what makes literature literature, and does women's writing count? Do novels have literary merit, especially if they focus on women's experiences, high society, or money, or fashion? Does great popularity, especially among woman readers, disqualify a novel from being

considered literary? Acknowledging this does not make it impossible to consider the question of Chick Lit's literary merits and its debts to the tradition of women's writing. It means instead that it must be taken with full awareness of how women writers historically have fared in the literary marketplace (Ferriss and Young 2006:48).

The Chick Lit term<sup>1</sup> is a new one, but although the term is new, the genre is not. Chick Lit can trace its roots back to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-1748) (Ferriss and Young 2006:143). Furthermore, Chick Lit is claimed by most to have originated in the mid nineties, and had a breakthrough with Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). The most obvious source of Fielding's novel is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, from which Fielding admittedly borrowed much of her plot and many of her characters. Juliette Wells, author of the article on Jane Austen and the creative woman, claims that Fielding's novel cannot justifiably make claim to comparable literary status. Still, its popularity leads to significant issues surrounding the reception of women's literature. She argues that 'to judge whether an individual work of Chick Lit, or the genre as a whole, has literary merit is to participate in a long tradition of discounting both women writers and their readers.' (Ferriss and Young 2006:5).

## 1.2 Chick Lit Jr. and Young Adult Literature

Acknowledging, rather than ignoring what students read in their spare time is important, and the Chick Lit genre is popular. It even has a sub-genre dedicated to young adults called Chick Lit Jr. The term Chick Lit Jr. suggests a form of Chick Lit but for young adults. It too, tries to affirm women, acknowledging insecurities and give lessons in negotiating relationships—usually by showing the wrong way first. With a backdrop of fashion and shopping, these novels embrace the power of consumer culture. However, instead of addressing the challenges of the singleton in women's novels, Chick Lit Jr. stresses issues of coming of age (Ferriss and Young 2006:142). The Chick Lit genre is young; therefore, research about it and, especially didactic implications, are few. According to Bullen et al., academic research in

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<sup>1</sup> The term Chick Lit is a compound word. *Chick* means a baby bird, however, *chick* also has an informal, to some people offensive, meaning, which is: young woman. *Lit* is an abbreviation for literature (LDOCE).

children's literature, an area that includes young adult fiction is centrally concerned with the enculturation of the implied young audience and the narrative strategies through which readers are positioned to accept the values of the text. In spite of this, and perhaps because of their dubious literary merit, the manner in which popular teen Chick Lit series operate within the mass-mediated cultures of postfeminism and consumer capitalism is largely overlooked by children's literature academics and almost entirely in book reviews and commentaries (Bullen et al. 2011:49).

It seems that the research of the Chick Lit genre and its didactic implications are few and, furthermore, is there not a danger ignoring popular literature like this in the classroom? In fact, since the genre is written by and for women, it is gender specific and, therefore, highly relevant to question. Moreover, is using Chick Lit in accordance to the curricula preferred without problematizing gender? To establish in what manner the Chick Lit genre is a genre that reaffirms gender roles and what the implications are for using it in school, I will now go on to discuss postfeminism and in particular Judith Butler's gender theories.



## 2. Theory

### 2.1 Postfeminist Criticism

Postfeminism can be seen as a reaction against earlier feminist theories; however, it is a problematic term to define. Thus, postfeminism can be described as relating to the current state of feminist thinking and the culmination of a number of debates within and outside feminism. Specifically, the term refers to feminism's intersection with elements of cultural theory, particularly postmodernism, poststructuralism and psychoanalytic theory, as well as with the theoretical and political debates around post-colonialism. (Brooks 1997:7). Furthermore, postfeminism is seen as a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement for change. Hence, it represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks (Brooks 1997:4). However, discussed in relations to the Chick Lit Genre, the term is more vague resisting the kind of certainty and clear-cut meaning that a definition demands. According to Harzewski, the postfeminist traits of Chick Lit are not so much given through a social agenda or a critique of power hierarchies but operate instead through defamiliarization. Furthermore, postfeminism maintains a more ambivalent view of independence than feminism and it is propelled by twenty and thirty something women negotiating the tension between feminism and femininity (Harzewski 2011:151). Moreover, if feminism proposes to improve life by making social and political changes, postfeminism answers that large portions of life cannot be dealt with so rationally. Furthermore, since the protagonists in the Chick Lit genre are seen as confident, independent, even outrageous women, taking responsibility for who they are, or as women who have unconsciously internalized and are acting out the encoded gender norms of our society (Ferriss and Young 2006:20-21).

## 2.2 Judith Butler, Identities and the Curricula

Judith Butler is most famous for queer theories, feminist studies and gender studies. Her work mainly focuses on how people's identities are constituted and the theorizations of gendered and sexed identity would probably be regarded as her most important interventions in the diverse array of academic fields with which she has been connected (Salih 2002:2). Her theories are important for this essay because of the questions she asks in terms of the formation of identity and subjectivity and, furthermore, these theories are part of an ongoing discussion of the construction of identities relevant for our time that are absent in the curricula.

According to Butler, the distinction between sex and gender is culturally constructed; hence, gender is neither the result of sex nor seemingly fixed as sex. There is no reason to assume that gender is either feminine or masculine and Butler even goes as far as to claim that gender does not have to be either. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one (Butler 1990:6). In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler goes further to discuss the construction of the body. She claims that it is not enough to argue that there is no pre-discursive 'sex' or to claim that sex is already gendered and already constructed. Instead, she focuses on what the constraints are by which bodies are materialized as 'sexed', which bodies come to matter and why. According to Butler, the category of 'sex' is from the start normative. 'Sex', then, not only functions as a norm, but as part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs. It has a productive power, to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls. In other words, 'sex' is an ideal materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and archive this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms (Butler 1993:2). Furthermore, the forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of 'sex' and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge (Butler 1993:3). According to Barry, Butler's identity theories, including gender identities, are a kind of imitation without an

original. This opens the way to a 'postmodernist' notion of identity as a constant switching among a range of different roles and positions, drawn from a kind of limitless databank of potentials (Barry 2009:139).

The idea of gender as culturally constructed has implications for the school environment. The curricula aim for 'equal rights and opportunities for women and men', 'girls and boys' (Lgr 11), which is an indication of gender norms within the curricula where the Swedish school provides its students with two genders. It is, therefore, already constructed and decided what bodies matter within the Swedish school system: the feminine and the masculine, moreover, could it not be seen as a paradox to, on the one hand, reiterate the two genders, and, on the other, to work to counteract traditional gender patterns?

### 2.3 Gender Roles and the Heterosexual Norm

To explain how gender roles are produced, Butler uses the terms *performativity* and *performance*:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that performance is not a singular 'act' or 'event' but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance (Butler 1993:95).

Butler argues that gender is something we perform when we repeatedly and unconsciously make choices to follow or not to follow norms. She uses the term *the heterosexual matrix*, which is that grid where bodies, genders and desires are naturalized. It is a hegemonic discursive model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense, there must be a stable sex expressed. This happens when masculine expresses male and feminine expresses female. This stable sex is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler 1990:151).

It is through a male hegemonic discourse that the heterosexual matrix is reproduced and by living by it as the norm, gender is produced. The school therefore has a problematic task when it sets out to counteract traditional gender patterns and provide scope for the students to explore their ability and interests independent of gender affiliation (Lgr11). Since no more than two genders exist within the Swedish curricula, it should aim for all education to work proactively in order to expose gender performativity in order to prevent the reiteration of heterosexual norms. One way to do so in the English classroom is to reflect on what is normal and what is taboo in our everyday school environment, but also in the culture we consume. Looking at the Chick Lit genre from Butler's perspective, I will ask whether there is a hegemonic discourse and if there is a heterosexual matrix present? Are there stabled 'sexes' represented in the discourse and is it considered 'normal' when female and masculine are linked or does it have to be female and feminine, male and masculine. Finally, what sort of ideals and identities are readers of Chick Lit introduced to?

### 3. Identity & The Chick Lit Genre

The Chick Lit genre is written for and by women and according to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English the definition of Chick Lit is: “Books about young women and the typical problems they have with men, sex, losing weight etc., especially books written by women for women to read – used humorously” (LDOCE 2009). Hence, we can establish that the genre is gender specific. Therefore, since the genre implies a female only discourse, it would be possible to argue that the entire genre, written by and for women could be read as a reiteration of femininity - an act for teenage girls to learn to repeat the hegemonic heterosexual norm. Furthermore, the entire Chick Lit genre reproduces a stereotypical feminine role for teenage girls to play in the search of an identity. However, is it really possible to disregard the demand of popular culture on these terms? After all, it is a genre that dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and has a long history of being discarded (Ferriss and Young 2006:5).

#### 3.1 Who is the Chick Lit Protagonist?

To be able to discuss how to approach the Chick Lit Genre in a classroom situation I will start by looking at protagonists from two popular Chick Lit novels; Cecily von Zieglar’s *Gossip Girl* and Sophie Kinsella’s *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. I realize that by looking at only two novels it is not possible to draw a general conclusion for the whole genre. However, hopefully the identities of the protagonists will give an indication of what gender roles and sexualities these women represent to their readers. Furthermore, it might indicate how to use it in the classroom. Therefore, this chapter will begin by a literary analysis of Blair and Serena in Cecily von Zieglar’s *Gossip Girl*. The following chapter will present a similar literary analysis of Becky in Sophie Kinsella’s *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and, finally, there will be a concluding discussion about the identities represented and possible implications for using the novels in the classroom.

### 3.2 Blair and Serena in Cecily von Zieglar's *Gossip Girl*

The *Gossip Girl* series is immensely popular and part of the Young Adult (YA) literature. Here, the characters find themselves in a borderland between childhood and adulthood, and the novels show how to move through the difficult transition (Ferris and Young 2006:142). *Gossip Girl*'s protagonists are sexy, confident, rich and beautiful young people who appear to be active agents in shaping their desired life trajectories. The general tenor of the novels is that sex, fashion and partying are lifestyle choices that individual subjects are free to make, to the exclusion of any focus on ethnicity, class, race, sexuality, gender and disability as factors that may limit girls' 'freedom' to exercise choice (Bullen et al 2011:508). However, although the protagonists seem to be free agents, liberated from the material constraints of money, they live in a world full of expectations. There is an ideal to live up to within this world. To be able to fit in here, it is extremely important to wear the right labels and to be skinny and beautiful. The novel is full of descriptions of trends, what to wear, when, and how to look skinny. The bodies of the young protagonists are objectified and regulated by norms of how to look and what is considered sexy for a young girl:

Blair tucked her long, dark brown hair behind her ears and swigged her mother's fine vintage scotch from the crystal tumbler in her hand.[...] She was wearing her new black ballet flats. Very bow-tie proper preppy, which she could get away with because she could change her mind in an instance and put on her trashy, pointed, knee-high boots and that sexy metallic skirt her mother hated. Poof-rock star sex kitten. Meow (von Zieglar 2002:5).

Even though these young protagonists are liberated by wealth, they are controlled by a heteronormative ideal. There is an ideal female body, which is the norm, and the girls in *Gossip Girl* live by it. Moreover, the protagonists have to identify with this norm to be accepted and when they do, they conform to the normative phantasm of 'sex' according to Butler. They agree that it is the female body, in this case, skinny

with big eyes, thick hair, wearing expensive fashion-forward brands that matter. Girls who do not agree will be excluded by not being invited to parties or spoken to in school. It is part of their norm for femininity. The gender norms are therefore manifested and reiterated through the forming of a subject that requires identification (Butler 1993:3).

Although the female protagonist's main focus is romance, there is a sense that the female protagonists are as sexually liberated as the male protagonists. The protagonists in *Gossip Girl* display features of sexual activity frequently throughout the novel and their depiction is candid and diverse. Girls desire boys, boys desire girls, girls desire girls and boys desire boys. Sex, both committed and casual, is presented as something some characters wish to do, and others simply do not, with few moralising narratives condemning or condoning particular sexual behaviors (Bullen et al 2011:508). Still, the moralizing narratives are there, and rules for how the female protagonists should act exist. When Serena comes back from boarding school, boys gossip about how many sexual partners she had abroad: 'Serena was no slut; she was perfect, wasn't she? *Wasn't she?*' (von Ziegstar 2002:51).

It seems that girls are not allowed to have too many sexual partners or they are considered to be sluts. Girls are not expected to be sexual but boys are. This is an ideal supported by both girls and boys in the novel. Furthermore, even though sex appears to be bound with few constraints there are rules for the protagonists to follow. Therefore, there is a heterosexual norm to follow.

Mainly all sexual relations in the novel are heterosexual but there are exceptions. When Blair's father left her mother for another man, it is not seen as something outrageous but commented on as unusual (von Ziegstar 2002:6). Queer relations do, therefore, exist, but they are not part of the norm. Teen Chick Lit, which typically features senior school protagonists, mirrors women's Chick Lit in its approach to sexuality insofar as it, too, jettisons the heterosexual hero of romance to offer a more realistic portrait of single life, dating and the dissolution of romantic ideals (Ferriss and Young 2006, 3). Chick-Lit protagonists' typically ambiguous stands on romance and marriage, for example, are mirrored by the simultaneous contradictory desires expressed by younger generations of women for both independence and security. At the same time, the generic characteristics of Chick Lit, as Harzewski points out, include an uneasy mix of romance. She extends that idea to the split between popular

and literary fiction: “The protagonist's subjective tug-of-war between conventional heterosexuality and autonomy has a corollary in Chick Lit's relationship to the literary: as if still ambivalent toward the woman writer's deliberate strivings for monetary gain, it oscillates between the easy transparency of entertainment reading and more intricate generic innovation” (Harzewski 2011:186).

### 3.3 Becky in Sophie Kinsella’s *Confessions of a Shopaholic*

Sophie Kinsella’s novel *Confessions of a Shopaholic* is, like *Gossip Girl*, the first novel of many in a series. *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, however, is not officially a young adult novel and is, therefore, marketed towards all ages. Becky, its protagonist, is a first-person narrator. She has a great flat, a fabulous wardrobe full of this season’s must-haves and a job telling other people how to manage their money. The only problem is that Becky is a shopaholic and she overspends until she has no way out, and not a single credit card left to use. While constantly being targeted by enforcement officers, Becky goes from panic to calm, often ignoring or running away from both personal and professional conflicts. Satirical and humoristic elements characterize the tone in the novel as well as the plot. Humor and irony is one of the characteristic elements of the Chick Lit genre (Ferriss and Young 2006:4) and can be read as a critique by the implied author. These elements that characterize the genre and the novel are used further to illustrate other issues in the novel. In fact, by exaggerating Becky’s money issues and the impossible situation of owning the latest trends, having a status job while being in complete control, implies a critique towards the Western consumerism and the demands that are put on young women of today. Moreover, Becky’s identification with stores and brands is exaggerated and they give her confidence:

I don’t look bad, I think. I’m wearing my black skirt from French Connection, a plain white T-shirt from Knickerbox, and a little angora cardigan, which I got from M&S but looks like it could be Agnes B, and my new square-toed shoes from Hobbs. And even better although no one can see them, I know that underneath I’m wearing my gorgeous new matching knickers and bra with embroidered yellow rosebuds. They’re the best of my entire outfit. In fact, I wish I could be run over so everyone could see them (Kinsella 2009:20-21).



Becky consumes because she believes it gives her power. She is confined to follow the norms that she feels she cannot live up to. In analogy to the *Gossip Girl* protagonists, her body is just as objectified and fashion functions as her armor against the norms that surround her.

Rules for what a perfect female body is exist and in Becky's world the male is the norm: "Typical, it is all right for men; they don't care what they look like. I shift on my seat, tug nervously on my skirt and smooth my jacket down. They always say that television puts ten pounds on you, which means my legs will look really fat" (Kinsella p. 278). Thus, to be perfect, according to Becky, she is supposed to be skinny, smart and always wear the latest designs. For the Chick Lit protagonist, fashion and trends go hand in hand to produce modern personalities when seeking identities through new and trendy clothes, looks, attitudes, and behavior. They are fearful of being out of date or unfashionable (Ferris and Young 2006:224). Therefore, a female ideal exists also in Kinsella's novel expressing a feminine objectified body. Moreover, this implies what Butler argues to be "a hegemonic discursive model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense" (Butler 1990:151). Becky comes from a white middle-class family with a mother and a father. She is born into a home where two genders are represented and never questioned. Although Becky's relation with her parents is good, she describes them with irony when she goes to visit: "They watch too many soap operas, In fact they were probably hoping I was pregnant, by my wicked married lover who they could then murder and bury under the patio" (Kinsella 2009:223). Furthermore, Becky's romances are strictly heterosexual; in fact, queer relations are not represented. The heterosexual romance is part of the romance genre, however, by giving the female protagonist a number of sexual partners and experiences, Chick Lit lets the story of the heroine's growth and experience stand on its own, rather than simply making it part of a larger romance narrative (Ferris and Young 2006:202).

The humoristic and ironic elements that characterize the genre and the novel are used further to illustrate other issues. When Becky is at work, she is part of a discourse that has a male tradition – the world of finance. She is confronted with stereotypical behavior related to this world and it is illustrated with humor:

The Financial Times is by far the best accessory a girl can have. With an FT under your arm, you can talk about the most frivolous things in the world, and instead of

thinking you are an airhead, people think you're a heavyweight intellectual who has broader interests too (Kinsella 2009:20).

The stereotypical gender roles would be disturbed if Becky effortlessly would fit in within the finance world. It is, therefore, emphasized that she does not fit in this world. Furthermore, it is seen as natural that a girl will not be taken seriously in the financial world unless she somehow manages to trick the people around her that she belongs. She needs to buy attributes such as a status magazine in order to appear empowered, earning the right to talk about whatever she finds to be interesting and still be taken seriously. The male hegemony is, therefore, strong enough to make Becky imitate male behavior to be accepted, with the result that she avoids to be seen as an 'airhead'. Butler argues that gender is something we perform when we repeatedly and unconsciously make choices to follow or not to follow norms. When Becky chooses to follow the norms of the male hegemony, she contributes to upholding its discursive structures by choosing to follow the norms rather than going against them. In fact, it is the agreement that the male gender naturally belongs to power positions that reproduce the male hegemonic structures in the novel. Furthermore, by giving power to patriarchy, it not only manifests the hegemonic relations but also strengthens the very structures that constitute her as a subject.

Men serve various functions in Chick Lit, and while men are sometimes love objects, the Chick Lit heroine's relation to men is often closer to that of the picaresque than to that of romance (Harzewski 2011:33). When Becky describes Luke who is the object of her affection in the novel, he is also described with irony:

A few months ago he was listed as in some newspaper as one of the cleverest entrepreneurs of his generation. It said his IQ was phenomenally high and he had a photographic memory. It'll probably turn out that Luke Brandon is not only a complete genius but he can read minds, too. He knows that when I am staring up at some boring graph, nodding intelligently, I'm really thinking of that gorgeous black top I saw in Joseph and whether I can afford the trousers as well (Kinsella 2009:25).

Luke is described in contrast to Becky. In relation to her, he has an enormous intellect and to really emphasize how perfect he is, in relation to Becky, there are huge exaggerations such as his phenomenally high IQ, photographic memory and the ability of reading minds. Moreover, in the same paragraph her identity as less intelligent is illustrated by a comment on how she is bored and only focused on

fashion. Furthermore, this exaggeration of the two characters' identities is still considered to be normal, even though there is an obvious hierarchy here between Becky and Luke, and how their identities are described. The tone of the novel is often close to parody, especially when issues such as the expectations of gender roles and power structures in terms of money are described.

### 3.4 The Chick Lit Anti Heroine

My discussions of the Chick Lit protagonists show the complexity of gender and identity in fiction. By analyzing the three Chick Lit protagonists, it seems that they all reiterate established gender norms. Blair, Serena and Becky represent similar identities even though they are different ages, living under different circumstances. Together, they represent a white heterosexual mid- to upper class ideal of young women. This is in itself very excluding and far from possible for everyone to attain. They represent female ideals that are exaggerated to the point of irony. Furthermore, the identities of the Chick Lit protagonists suggest a shift in terms of the characteristics and what a female ideal is today. Rather than an older ideal of femininity with an emphasis on the emotional, gentle, and nurturing woman (Brooks 1997:195), the femininities of these protagonists implicate an emphasis on independence, career, fashion and beauty. According to Bullen et al., the protagonists in Chick Lit increasingly model narrative and biographical trajectories organised around individual lifestyle choices and the consumption of brand-name products. (Bullen et al. 2011:505). In fact, what one wears is important enough to include or exclude; this means that if the protagonists wear the wrong handbag, shoes, or top, it might result in an exclusion from a group.

There is an exaggeration of fashion and beauty in terms of how the protagonists' identities are described which is close to a masquerade, and, according to Butler, heterosexuality in itself can be seen as a masquerade. The comparison raises the question of why we accept exaggerated descriptions of gender roles manifested in the Chick Lit protagonists as normal and do not see them as a masquerade? Furthermore, Butler claims that drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced, and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality (Butler 1993:125). Consequently, without questioning these ideals, young girls will imitate these

identities and, therefore, reiterate an ideal where everything different from heterosexual relations and the male and female gender will be seen as an exception to the 'normal'. Furthermore, young girls might strive to become like the protagonists; in this way, the image becomes the reality and the two become indistinguishable.

The heterosexual matrix is present in both novels and there is male hegemony, which is the norm and the girls live by it although on different terms. Even though there are many types of sexualities present, the novels' main focus is on heterosexual relations. The protagonists' bodies are objectified and they have to accept a female ideal to be able to be accepted into the community. Both girls and boys reiterate the ideals and the norms and expectations with regard to what is accepted for girls in terms of femininity.

Young people of today are part of a constant switching among a range of different roles and positions, perhaps more so now than ever. If this is the case, it would implicate that young people of today are freer than they were before. Furthermore, assuming Butler's theories, which in an ideal state would assume that no original identities exist, would theoretically mean a freedom to choose who we want to be (Barry 2009:139). However, my analyses of the identities of the protagonists in these two novels suggest the opposite. In fact, it suggests that girls of today are not freer; instead, they are controlled by different norms. The curricula, however, recognize this issue and an emphasis is placed on finding one's uniqueness:

The task of the school is to encourage all pupils to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby be able to participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom. (Skolverket, Compulsory School, Lgr11)

Questioning identities in literature can be a way to get the students to reflect on gender norms and, since the popular Chick Lit genre undoubtedly is 'all female', this can be a good place to start. Furthermore, questioning fictional identities in school is important for the students in order to develop their own identities and to find uniqueness as individuals. The question is, how to approach the Chick Lit genre in the classroom? I will, therefore, now go on to discuss the implications for using the Chick Lit genre in the classroom.

#### 4. Chick Lit in the Classroom

Having critically considered the two novels as representative of the genre, it seems that the Chick Lit protagonists do provide the reader with stereotypical roles. Furthermore, the two novels contain a male hegemony and a heterosexual matrix where the feminine and the masculine gender are presented as normal. This means that using the Chick Lit genre in the classroom without discussing gender is questionable. However, the gender issues need to be emphasized and problematized in the classroom, due to the fact that this is a popular genre, especially among young girls. Therefore, a strategy to illustrate gender issues in the classroom could be to look at a novel such as *Gossip Girl* or *Confession's of a Shopaholic* and question the exaggerated femininity and the male hegemony. Hence, this chapter will discuss what the implications are when teaching gender in the EFL Classroom. Firstly, I will problematize the benefits of using literature and a gender specific genre such as the Chick Lit Genre in the EFL Classroom. Secondly, I will discuss the curricula in terms of history and gender theory but with a focus on English, and, thirdly, conclude with a discussion of the implications of using the Chick Lit genre in the classroom.

##### 4.1 Literature and Gender Norms in the Classroom

Assuming that gender is what we become and not what we already are has implications for the school environment. It means that all interaction including how teachers and students act will influence the student's gender identities. According to Paetcher, young people's identities are constructed within communities of practice in relation to schooling and schooling itself continues to be implicated in the construction of these communities and thereby of identity (Paetcher 2007:112). Furthermore, the school has an impact on the student's sexuality and identity:

One manifestation of the ways in which the body in general, and sexuality in particular, are effaced from schooling is the general invisibility of students who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. This is partly because such students are threatening to dominant communities of practice of masculinity and femininity, particularly in adolescence: they disrupt the assumptions of heterosexuality that are common to young people's construction of identity (Paetcher 2007:112).

Due to the invisibility of the heterosexual norm, one of the constraints on students and teacher's bodies in school is, that they have to perform heteronormativity and they must behave in such a way as to ensure their identification as heterosexual (Paetcher 2007:113).

Literature is closely tied in with culture; therefore, looking at literature can be a good way to value the meaning of gender. In recent years there has been a shift in what novels to choose when teaching. Today, issues such as class, ethnicity and gender are important factors when choosing novels for literary studies. The canon, and the idea of teaching pre-selected novels dependent on the author, is not seen as important (Glasberg and Wiegman 1999:9-10). Approaching a Chick Lit text could, therefore, be to read it critically with gender identities in mind. One way to do so is to let the students close read descriptions of characters from different genres in order to compare different gender identities to see how they are described and come up with their own thesis as to why this might be. By comparing texts the students use their own cultural values in resisting and questioning the values of the text. Furthermore, the students need to be able to recognize an ideology of a text and decide whether they want to be submissive or resistant to it (Hedge 2000:198).

Many readers, but not all, are aware of how language is manipulated in certain kinds of text and that persuasion is present in almost all kinds of writing. Thus, critical reading pedagogy requires close scrutiny of the language in order to see what a writer may mean by a text (Hedge 2000:199). Furthermore, developing critical reading skills towards texts are main parts of the over all aim of knowledge that the curricula for both Compulsory and Upper Secondary School present. They state that it is "necessary that pupils develop their ability to critically examine facts and relationships, and appreciate the consequences of different alternatives" (Skolverket, Compulsory School, Lgr11). This is further important "in order to take a view on different issues concerning life and values" (Skolverket, Upper Secondary School, Lgr11). The School, therefore, plays an important part in the development of young people's sexuality and identities. Approaching the Chick Lit genre, which is popular for young girls to read on their spare time, could, therefore, result in a discussion of what ideals they are presented to. Moreover, this could also create an awareness of how fiction and texts can be manipulating through language and narration.

## 4.2 The Curricula, Syllabi and Aspects on Gender

The curriculum is part of a historical context, and its attitude towards gender/sex has changed over time. The gender aspect in the EFL classroom is, therefore, one that also changes over time and is far from unproblematic. According to a report made for Skolverket in 2005, the syllabi in English for Upper Secondary School do not specifically aim to problematize gender. Although the report indicates that the English syllabi for Upper Secondary School do not contain a specific aim to raise gender issues, it does state that due to the fact that gender now is an important variable in the overall curricula, gender should always be intergraded as part of the course layout. The report, which aims to examine the curricula and the syllabi for the Upper Secondary Schools from a gender perspective, discusses the gender/sex issues in the curricula over time. It emphasizes how gender as a construction, now is a significant part of the curricula (Larsson and Ohrlander 2005:5). This report made in 2005, focused on the previous curricula Lpo94 and it gives an indication of how gender constantly needs to be problematized in the curricula and syllabi. Since Lgr11 is a more recent document, there is no similar research made yet. However, reading through the syllabus and its aims for 7-9<sup>th</sup> grade Contemporary School and the Upper Secondary syllabus for English 5 and 6, they do not include the term gender. Thus, to justify the choice of course material and course layout one indication is to give the students “the opportunity to develop their skills in relating content to their own experience, living conditions and interests” (Skolverket, Upper Secondary School, Lgr11).

The overall curricula do, however, take a clear stand on the importance of working actively towards gender awareness and acceptance:

The school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise. No one in school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment, or to other forms of degrading treatment. All tendencies to discrimination or degrading treatment should be actively combated (Skolverket, Upper Secondary School, Lgr11).

Previously, I have discussed how assuming Butler’s theories where all identities, including gender identities, are a kind of imitation without an original and how the idea of working against gender reiteration in school is problematic since the Swedish

Curricula support two genders in particular – the male and the female. The curricula itself are, therefore, part of the reiteration process that, according to Butler, naturalizes bodies and gender. However, gender theory has had a great impact on the curricula over time and it is in constant revision. Furthermore, there seems to be a paradox difficult to escape discussing gender and only by using the word one has to assume gender to be something. The question is whether the next curricula will recognize more than two gender roles?

#### 4.3 For or Against Using the Chick Lit Genre in the Classroom?

Choosing what texts to use in a classroom is difficult. A reader confronted with a text above their proficiency level or a text they cannot relate to is unmotivating. Therefore, according to Hedge, a key criterion when choosing what to read in the classroom is that the text is interesting to the students. Furthermore, she claims that using authentic texts with a purpose such as novels, poems and newspapers are preferred over textbooks (Hedge 2000:206). Moreover, the curricula and syllabi do recommend using material that relates to the students' lives and interests. Consequently, by choosing to use novels in English class that the students consume on their spare time may stress an issue such as gender to become real and relevant for their lives.

Discussing gender roles is an important duty for the school. It recognizes that “language, learning and the development of a personal identity are all closely related” (Skolverket, Compulsory School, Lgr11). To start by looking at what roles are considered normal in the culture that the students consume can, therefore, be a way to discuss gender. The reiteration of gender is problematic, and discussing stereotypical roles is arguably reiterating those very roles. However, there are stereotypical roles in today's fiction, and choosing to ignore this fact may result in their living on in the classrooms and further in society, possible resulting in discrimination or bullying. Therefore, they are extremely important to discuss.

Using a genre in the classroom, such as the Chick Lit genre, which might reiterate gender roles and contain a male hegemony without discussing gender roles, would be questionable. However, the Chick Lit genre can be used by critically analyzing the texts through their language and narration in order to find what kind of gender identities the reader is presented to. Hopefully, by using material that is familiar to the



students, they will start reflecting on what they do see as 'normal' gender identities, and start questioning the patriarchy that surrounds them.

## 5. Conclusion

One of the main aims for the Compulsory School and Upper Secondary School is to counteract traditional gender roles. Furthermore, the school does not tolerate any discrimination on the grounds of gender or transgender identities. The aim of this essay has, therefore, been to discuss gender issues in school through fiction and the Chick Lit genre. Talking about gender and sexual identities in the classroom can be difficult, but using fiction that the students consume on their spare time can help make the issues familiar and relevant. This essay has, therefore, focused on a genre primarily aimed at girls – the Chick Lit genre. Furthermore, it has argued that the Chick Lit genre reiterates gender roles to its readers; nevertheless, it can be used in the EFL Classroom. The analysis of the two protagonists showed how stereotypical feminine roles and ideals impossible for most girls to attain were presented as normal to the reader. Furthermore, the ideals were exaggerated and an issue such as the male hegemony was described with irony. Despite the critics' claim for the Chick Lit genre to be postfeminist, it seems that these women still live under the male norm and that the genre does rehearse a similar patriarchal narrative of romance and performance of femininity that feminists once rejected. Therefore, Chick Lit novels should be read critically in the classroom. Chick Lit novels are authentic material and the students will benefit from looking at what gender identities the readers of Chick Lit are exposed to, in order to question the normalcy surrounding a one-gender genre. Furthermore, by doing so, the students develop their skills in both language and narration. Discussing this genre raises the question if there is a genre that can claim to be the male equivalent? Furthermore, what novels written by women starring a female protagonist are not Chick Lit, thus, why do we have to categorize? Moreover, it indicates that little research has been made on the genre in terms of didactics.

The issues of gender and identity are not only issues in fiction but also highly problematic in the classroom and within our society. I chose to mainly use the theories of Judith Butler in my analysis, which has resulted in a more narrow result than if a range of theories had been used. However, I hope that Butlers' theories emphasize how deep the female and the male gender roles go while discussing the novels but also when discussing the curricula and the syllabi. The essay's main focus has been on gender theory and, therefore, issues such as social class and ethnicity

have been touched upon, but not discussed in depth. The Chick Lit genre is an excluding and stereotypical genre in terms of gender identity. Therefore, it would be interesting to find out whether the genre is as excluding in terms of class- and ethnic identities.

Furthermore, the essay has discussed gender in school by looking at the curricula and syllabi in English for both Contemporary School and Upper Secondary School. This has allowed for a more general discussion on the gender aspect rather than looking at specific courses or lesson plans. Nevertheless, the report, previously discussed, which focused on gender in terms of the curricula and syllabi throughout time (Larsson and Ohrlander 2005), suggested that issues of gender within the English syllabi of Lpo94 in the Upper Secondary School are less prominent in English than in other subjects. Therefore, a similar study of Lgr11 discussing gender and identity seems urgent. Furthermore, the question as to why less emphasis is placed on gender within the English syllabi appears as relevant. Thus, the content of the curricula and syllabi are the rules from which the school is run and they therefore influence many lives and identities.

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