



University of
Stavanger

FACULTY OF ARTS AND EDUCATION

MASTER'S THESIS

Programme of study: Master in Literacy Studies	Spring semester, 2016 Open
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Thesis title: Chick or Lit: An Investigation of the Chick Lit Genre in Light of Traditional Standards of Literary Value	
Keywords: Literary value Western Canon Popular fiction Chick Lit Postfeminism	No. of pages: 115 + appendices/other:9 Stavanger, 11th May 2016

Abstract

The present master's thesis explores the chick lit genre in light of traditional standards of literary value. The thesis investigates how literary value and quality has been defined through the last couple of centuries, as well as how popular fiction, and chick lit in particular, is evaluated in terms of literary value and quality. The thesis seeks to understand how the popular embrace of genre fiction, like chick lit, relates to the typical critical rejection of such writing. Ultimately, the motivation behind the present thesis is to reach an understanding of why it is necessary to discriminate between good and bad writing, and whether it is possible to discuss literary value and quality without such a binary mode of thinking.

The thesis's first body chapter explores how literary value and quality has been defined in the past. Central works are Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1882[1869]) and 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), Q.D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1960[1948]) and *Culture and Environment* (1977[1933]) and Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (2008[1983]). The chapter aims to show on how these critics have defined literary value and quality, and how they have considered the position of popular fiction.

In the second body chapter, Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1995) and Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire* (1997) are essential. The chapter explores how Bloom and Radway are both engaged with the issue of reading advice addressed to the general reading public. The discussion in this chapter, and Radway's study on the Book-of-the-Month Club in particular, demonstrates the relevance of *pleasure reading* for discussing literary value.

In the third and final body chapter of the thesis, the chick lit genre is explored as an example of contemporary popular fiction. Important works are Stephanie Harzewski's *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2008), Diane Negra's *What a Girl Wants?* (2009) and Rocio Montoro's *Chick Lit: The Stylistics of Cappuccino Fiction* (2012), as well as *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (2006) edited by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, and the two short story collections *This is Not Chick Lit* (2006) and *This is Chick-Lit* (2006) edited by Elizabeth Merrick and Lauren Baratz-Logsted respectively. The chapter explores the following research question: is chick lit valuable reading material, and how do we decide?

This thesis shows that the difference between being entertained and being challenged is fundamental to what separates popular fiction from serious literature. With reference to both historical and contemporary accounts of literary value, the ability to challenge readers is

identified as the nature of literature. In light of traditional standards of literary value, chick lit does not qualify as literature, but is rather juxtaposed to literature. The thesis shows that the issue of defining literary value and quality is a complex matter, and that an objective, universal perspective on literary value is problematized by those who stress the mutability and diversity of literary evaluations. However, the thesis's investigation of chick lit demonstrates how popular fiction fails to challenge readers, and rather works to perpetuate habitual thinking. Thus, the thesis calls attention to the continued importance of discriminating between good and bad writing. The thesis shows that a binary mode of thinking, although arguably both elitist and condescending, is necessary in order to demonstrate why the difference between genre fiction and literature, or between chick and lit in particular, matters.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Brita Strand Rangnes for her enthusiasm in literature lectures, which made me discover my own passion for the sociological field of literary studies. I am grateful also to Jena Habegger-Conti for her encouragement and support during my first year of working on this thesis, and to Heidi Silje Moen for making me write those difficult first words. The support and guidance of my supervisor Dr. Mildrid H.A. Bjerke has been invaluable, and I am very grateful for all her help and encouragement.

I also wish to thank all of my colleagues at Ryfylkebiblioteket Strand for their flexibility and support.

Finally, I wish to thank my whole family for their continuous encouragement and support. I am particularly grateful to my mother for letting me turn her apartment into an office and for being a committed 'mormor' to my girls. Thank you Ylva and Anna for your unconditional love, and thank you Henning for all your support and patience. I could not have done it without you.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Present Study and its Aims

This thesis intends to take a closer look at popular fiction in a discussion of literary value. My starting point has been: what is it that distinguishes Literature, with a capital L, from popular fiction? The thesis will explore this question first from a historical perspective, then through a discussion on the chick lit genre as an example of contemporary popular women's fiction. In other words, the thesis will explore the chick lit genre in light of traditional standards of literary value, and thus focus particularly on the position of women's writing and reading.

At the time of writing, women from all over the world are completely engrossed in the books about Anastasia Steel and her adventures with the 'drop dead gorgeous' Christian Grey. Since the first book in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy was published in 2012, more than a hundred million copies of the books by E. L. James have been sold worldwide. The books were also on the New York Times bestseller list for over a hundred weeks. At the same time, however, most critical reviews of E. L. James' books were merciless in their assessment of the trilogy as lacking literary value, as this quote from Jessica Reaves' review in the Chicago Tribune demonstrates: "Whatever the cause of the book's popularity, one thing seems certain: It has nothing to do with the book itself". (Reaves 2012)

It is interesting how books that are not well received by literary critics still often become major bestsellers, like the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon illustrates. In the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey* it is obvious that there is a gap between the critical and the popular opinion of the books. We can assume that the criteria by which literary critics judge E. L. James's trilogy differ from those of the eager readers of the books. The commercial success that E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* has seen, in spite of poor reviews, shows how the question of how to evaluate and value literature is as relevant today as it was a hundred years ago, when Matthew Arnold set out to articulate the "high standards" of classic poets in his *Study of Poetry* (Arnold 1880,3).

The distinction between genre fiction and literary fiction, or lowbrow and highbrow literature, will be essential for this thesis's discussion. In an attempt to understand the contemporary hierarchical perspective on fiction as low- mid- or highbrow, this thesis will start by looking at literary criticism from the late 19th and 20th century. How has literary quality and value been considered by literary critics and theorists through the last couple of centuries? When looking back on previous discussions of literary value, works by Matthew

Arnold, F.R Leavis, Q.D. Leavis and Terry Eagleton will be central. These critics have been chosen because they are all important and influential critics, and their works can offer us an understanding of how literary quality and value has been viewed and discussed over the last hundred years.

Furthermore, the thesis will go on to consider how works by Harold Bloom and his views on literary value function in relation to Janice Radway's research on middle brow fiction and readers. The question of what constitutes literary authority will become central when we explore the radically different approaches that Bloom and Radway take on researching the value of reading.

In order to center the discussion in on more recent debates concerning literary value, the thesis will go on to investigate chick lit as a specific example of genre fiction of our time. When the discussion turns to chick lit, the two short story collections *This is Not Chick Lit* (Merrick 2006) and *This is Chick-Lit* (Baratz-Logsted 2006) will be central. These two anthologies have been chosen because they are central to a specific debate concerning the chick lit genre, and will be discussed as representatives of two different categories of fiction, that is literary fiction versus genre fiction. Merrick says in her introduction to *This is Not Chick Lit* that "the chick lit deluge has helped to obscure the literary fiction being written by some of our country's most gifted women" (Merrick 2006, ix). Merrick has given her collection the subtitle 'Original Stories by America's Best Women Writers'. Baratz-Logsted's *This is Chick-Lit* was created as a response to Merrick's collection, and Baratz-Logsted admits in the introduction's first page that "this collection was born out of anger" (Baratz-Logsted 2006, 1). This specific debate, and the more general debate concerning the status and cultural position of chick lit will be elaborated upon in chapter four.

To sum up, my main research questions are:

- How have central literary critics of the late 19th and 20th centuries such as Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, Q.D. Leavis and Terry Eagleton defined literary value, and how have they considered the position of popular culture?
- How do Harold Bloom's perceptions of valuable reading relate to Janice Radway's research on middleclass desire?
- Is chick lit valuable reading material, and how do we decide?

These research questions will be investigated chronologically in the three body chapters of the thesis. Ultimately, the motivation behind the thesis is to investigate, with reference to

Victorian, twentieth-century and contemporary criticism, if and why the chick lit debate matters. Thus, the last of the three research questions listed above will be particularly important: in addition to exploring the chick lit genre, chapter four will offer concluding remarks on how the chick lit debate can be understood in light of traditional standards of literary value.

1.2 Background and Definition of Terms

Several different factors contribute to determine how the literary quality of a work is perceived. Not only is the quality of the writing and language of a literary work important, but external elements such as the respectability of the writer, the publisher of the work, how and by whom the work is reviewed, and literary awards and prizes might also be crucial to the overall status of a work. Literary taste and critical approaches to literary quality is something that is constantly changing, and the rapid development of online book reviewing is affecting our contemporary field of literary opinion. With modern online blogs, everyone can have their thoughts on literature published, and individual perceptions of quality can vary enormously from one reader to another. Thus, literary and critical taste will never be absolute, but subject to both historical context and individual preference. By employing both a historical and a contemporary perspective on the debate on literary value the present thesis aims to show that literary evaluation is conditioned by its historical contexts. Particularly, discussing the chick lit genre and the modern ways of expressing literary opinion that are connected to it, will demonstrate the complexity of determining the literary value of a book.

The thesis will consider opinions on literary value of academic, literary critics, as well as new possibilities of expressing personal opinions on book blogs and social networks. This opens up for an investigation of whether there might be a parallel hierarchy between the value of literary works and the value of literary *opinion*, a question which will be central both when discussing research by Bloom and Radway, and when exploring the chick lit genre. How does the average reader's reception of a typical chick lit book differ from that of a professional literary critic, and whose opinion matters the most? What does it mean to be a qualified judge of literary value, or: what constitutes literary authority?

The research context for the present thesis is *literary critical history*, *contemporary literary criticism*, and *sociology of literature*. Furthermore, the issue of gender will be highly relevant both for discussing Harold Bloom and Janice Radway's different approaches to researching the value of reading, and for investigating chick lit as a literary phenomenon.

Thus, also *feminist thought* will be essential as background for this thesis. In the following, terms and concepts that are central to the present thesis will be explored.

Before defining our usage of terms such as *quality* and *value* in literature, it seems necessary to start with the larger question of “what is literature”?

Defining the term *literature* is a complex matter. When asking questions such as what is literary value, what should we read and what do categories such as chick lit entail, what we are really asking is: what qualifies as literature? Or, what *is* literature? Providing a short and concise definition of the term *literature* is challenging, and the failure of generations of critics to identify any such stable definition suggests the difficulty of the task. However, Jonathan Culler’s *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (2011) is a good place to start when trying to say something about what literature is.

When discussing the “literariness” of texts, Culler (2011, 22) admits that it is “tempting to give it up, and conclude that literature is whatever a given society treats as literature — a set of texts that cultural arbiters recognize as belonging to literature”, but he goes on to say that what we need to do is ask “what makes us (or some other society) treat something as literature?” (Culler 2011, 23). For the present thesis, this idea of literature being what society, or particular critics and theorists, recognise as literature is especially interesting: a central part of the discussion will be to investigate how the definition of literature is dependent on the opinion of certain, as Culler phrases it, “cultural arbiters”. Moreover, Culler’s comparison of literature to weeds could be interesting to connect to a discussion on chick lit. Culler makes the point that in order to uncover what a given society considers as weeds

...it would be a waste of time to try to investigate their botanical nature...You would have to carry out instead historical, sociological, perhaps psychological enquiries about the sorts of plants that are judged undesirable by different groups in different places.

(Culler 2011, 23)

“Perhaps literature is like weed”, Culler states. But what if we consider Culler’s definition the opposite way around and say: “perhaps literature is like non-weed”? Something else then becomes the weeds, and will be considered the opposite of literary. How about genre fiction? The juxtaposition of literary fiction to genre fiction will be essential in this thesis. Could we consider chick lit an example of weeds, “judged undesirable by different groups in different places”? We need to take a closer look at what *chick lit* really is.

The term *chick lit* is sometimes simply defined as books by women, for women and about women. However, when studying the short story collections *This is Not Chick Lit* (Merrick 2006) and *This is Chick-Lit* (Baratz-Logsted 2006), it immediately becomes clear that defining chick lit can also be much more complicated. Baratz-Logsted defines chick lit first of all as entertainment: “A wide range of stories designed to draw readers — particularly women — in and, for just a little while, transport them to a new world with new friends, new relationships and new struggles to overcome” (Baratz-Logsted 2006, 1). Merrick, on the other hand, puts it like this:

Quite simply: Chick lit is a genre, like the thriller, the sci-fi novel, or the fantasy epic. Its form and content are, more or less, formulaic: white girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while shopping, alternately cheating on or adhering to her diet, dodging her boss, and enjoying the occasional teary-eyed lunch with her token Sassy Gay Friend.

(Merrick 2006, viii)

The traces of sarcasm in Merrick’s definition of chick lit are not difficult to spot, and Merrick’s negative view on the genre dominates her way of presenting the characteristics of a chick lit novel. Thus, Merrick’s view serves as a contrast to that of Baratz-Logsted: Baratz-Logsted’s way of defining chick lit reflects her positive attitude towards the genre with her emphasis on the escapist and liberating aspect of these books. She begins her introduction to *This is Chick Lit* with the following statement: “I read for many reasons, but the primary reason is to be entertained” (Baratz-Logsted 2006, 1). Merrick on the other hand problematizes the purely entertaining and escapist nature of chick lit:

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

(Merrick 2006, ix)

The differing views on chick lit that these quotes from Baratz-Logsted and Merrick illustrate, are part of a greater debate concerning the value, or as others see it, the *danger* of chick lit. This study aims to uncover different perspectives on chick lit by taking a closer look at the cultural position of chick lit novels and the debate concerning the term chick lit. Is chick lit valuable reading material, or could the genre actually be damaging to the reputation of

women writers in general? Do chick lit novels lack quality? Or does chick lit simply offer another *kind* of quality than that which is usually appreciated by people with literary authority? We need to look at what is meant by the term quality.

An understanding of *literary critical history* will be essential to our discussion of how literary *quality* has been understood over the last few centuries. In consulting critical history the aim is to discover what different literary critics have held as objective truths about literary quality. Literary critics from the 19th, 20th and the 21st centuries will be consulted in order to investigate literary quality from a historical perspective. It is difficult to discuss the term quality without also considering the concept of *value*. The quality of a literary work is unavoidably entwined with the value it is held to possess. However, the term *value* is also a complex one, as described by W.J.T. Mitchell in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*:

...it is best to keep in mind that facts are always mobilized for some purpose, descriptions are never free of bias, objective judgments are widely shared subjective judgments, absolute values are invariably relative to a society and form of life, and quantity becomes quality the moment that language intervenes with categories such as “good”, “better”, and “best”.

(Mitchell in Bennett et. al 2005, 366)

In other words, what has been considered characteristic of literary quality and value by authoritative critics throughout the last couple of centuries can be challenged when literary opinions and preferences are perceived as something invariably individual and subjective. Literary critics have tried to establish objective standards of literature, for example through literary canons. A short definition of *literary canons* is: “the lists of great writers who are usually included in literary anthologies, discussed in the major books of literary history, and taught in schools and universities as the standard texts that are understood to be the heritage of a common literary culture” (Bennett et. al 2005,21). Could the queen of chick lit, Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones, ever become part of the literary canon? If so, what would Harold Bloom have to say about it?

When the thesis turns to studying works by Harold Bloom and Janice Radway, the context is *contemporary literary criticism*. In order to define how the term *contemporary literary criticism* will be used in the present thesis, it is useful to look at what does and does not qualify as criticism. What is it that distinguishes serious literary criticism from personal popular opinion? In his essay *A Critic’s Manifesto*, the American literary critic Daniel Mendelsohn separates criticism from reviewing by pointing our wide erudition as essential to

giving an opinion heft (Mendelsohn 2012). The perception of criticism as dependent on scholarly knowledge is clearly linked to the question of what constitutes literary authority. One could thus assume that authority too is dependent on such scholarly knowledge. In the case of discussing Bloom and Radway, and their different takes on researching reading, the question of literary authority will become central. Bloom and Radway are both Professors of Literature, but have different fields of specialization. Bloom's works include titles such as *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?*, *How to Read and Why* and *The Western Canon*. Radway has done research on middlebrow reading and popular culture. But does one have more literary authority than the other? Is one field of research more valuable than the other?

Radway explains that the impulse behind *A feeling for books* was her "imperfect conversion to the secular religion of great literature", imperfect because she had "selected popular culture as my area of specialization" (Radway 1997, 5). The tendency to regard popular culture as a field of research that lacks academic respectability is further exemplified by Elizabeth Long and her experience with working on *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*: "I often felt that male academic colleagues could not understand why an intelligent person might consider women's reading groups a serious topic for investigation" (Long 2003, x). Is research on popular culture as worthy and important as that on the classics? This question will be investigated further in the second main part of the thesis, by taking a closer look at some of the main works of research by Harold Bloom and Janice Radway. Also, could there be a relation between Bloom's and Radway's different fields of literary research and their gender? The gender issue will be relevant not only when discussing the value of chick lit, but also for investigating what constitutes literary authority. Let us therefore take a closer look at *feminist thought*.

In his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999) M.H. Abrams starts his definition of the term *feminist criticism*, by pointing out that behind the theory "lie two centuries of struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements, and for women's social and political rights" (Abrams 1999, 88). The contemporary debate on the chick lit phenomenon clearly relates to what Abrams describes as a "struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements", more specifically the recognition of women's writing. What makes the chick lit debate complex, however, is the divided opinion *among* women writers on the value and effects of chick lit. But in the same way that women's perceptions of chick lit are varied, so are women's approaches to feminism. Abrams reminds us that feminism is "not a unitary theory or procedure", but rather "manifests a great variety of critical vantage points and procedures" (Abrams 1999, 89). This is a point that also Shari Benstock, Suzanne Ferriss

and Susanne Woods make in their *A Handbook of Literary Feminisms* (Benstock, 2002). As their title indicates, Benstock, Ferriss and Woods seek to present feminist literary criticism from multiple perspectives. They show how the development of postmodernism has affected the way feminist criticism is understood: “By the 1990’s, critics self-consciously avoided references to “the” feminist criticism or theory (new or old), insisting instead on the plurality of feminist positions, on *feminisms*” (Benstock 2002, 176).

Thus, both Abrams and Benstock, Ferriss and Woods bring attention to the complexity of defining feminist criticism. Still, there are certain general assumptions and concepts that the various feminisms share, and Abrams points out three fundamental ideas of feminism: Western society is ideologically patriarchal, gender is something that is culturally constructed, and the patriarchal ideology “pervades those writings which have been traditionally considered great literature” (Abrams 1999, 89). Women writers cannot be perceived as one heterogeneous group, but in the end they *might* all be struggling for the same goal: that of women’s writing being recognised as first and foremost writing, and not something juxtaposed to men’s writing. What is more, it seems unnatural to refer to literature written by men as men’s writing, the term is an unfamiliar one. Men’s writing is simply writing. Women’s writing is something more, or rather, something *less*. Women’s writing is gendered writing. This tendency to see writing by women as something separated from the general concept of writing relates to the perception of women as “defined by negative reference to the male as the human norm” (Abrams 1999, 89). Man is the default sex and woman is “the Other”, an issue which was explored by Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book from 1949 called *The Second Sex*. Moreover, Benstock, Ferriss and Woods point out that the French feminist Hélène Cixous also “accounted for woman’s position in Western culture as Other” (Benstock 2002, 165). With reference to Derrida’s theory on binary oppositions and deconstruction, Cixous argued that the opposition between man and woman is a fundamental binary opposition that is implicit in all other such oppositions (Benstock 2002, 165). Man is the default sex, and fiction written by men seems to be considered the default literature. When it comes to fiction written by women however, the discussion gets more complicated. Exploring the chick lit phenomenon will open up for a discussion on how we in our 21st century Western society still do not seem to recognise women’s writing simply as *writing*. However, exploring the chick lit phenomenon also raises questions about whether all women writers actually wish for their work to be viewed simply as writing. Furthermore, investigating the chick lit genre offers us the opportunity to explore different sources of literary opinion, as both professional and popular evaluations of chick lit will be central.

Both serious literary criticism and different examples of book reviewing will be studied in the present thesis. Separating between criticism and reviewing will be particularly relevant for discussing chick lit. The term literary opinion will be used as a collective term to refer to both academically anchored literary criticism as well as book reviewing of different sorts. In investigating the chick lit genre and specific examples of this genre of fiction, the thesis will explore what separates different sources of literary opinion, and discuss the notion of authority in relation to literary opinion. One example of how literary opinion is expressed in our contemporary society is through blogs, and blogging will be discussed as a central way of communicating literary opinion in the 21st century. Thus, the thesis will show how the opportunity to express literary opinion has developed from the 19th century society of the “man of letters” to the contemporary diversity of literary discussion. But what do these modern online platforms for discussing literature look like? Jill Rettberg (2014, 17) explains that a blog is a “regularly updated website or web page, typically one run by an individual or small group, and is written in an informal or conversational style”. Rettberg further distinguishes between three main styles of blogging; personal blogging, filter blogging and topic-driven blogging. The present thesis will focus on topic-driven blogging, more specifically blogs on literature. The online communities *Chicklit Club* (Chicklitclub, 2016) and *Goodreads* (Goodreads 2016) will be particularly central when discussing how popular opinion on chick lit novels is expressed online. Furthermore, debates and articles from online newspapers will also be referred to.

Discussing concepts such as quality, value and authority is obviously difficult without referring to some kind of set standard. A perception of both literary quality and criticism as hierarchically organized implies a sociological understanding of the literary field. *Sociology of literature* means understanding literature as an institution of participants including for example writer, publisher, critic and reader (Naper 2007, 26). Distinguishing between high-mid- and lowbrow fiction is a way of categorizing literary works in a hierarchical system. Using such distinctions means separating between elite literature (highbrow), well written popular novels (middlebrow) and mass market entertainment (lowbrow) (Laland 2008, 74).

Popular fiction, which will be this thesis’s main concern, places itself as somewhere between middlebrow and lowbrow fiction. Richard Hoggart explains popular literature as

...the books by writers who, probably working under several names, produce anything from four to a dozen titles a year, and are often paid at piece-rates, by the thousand words. The market seems to be highly

competitive, and those who succeed — that is, make a good living without necessarily becoming nationally-known figures — need to have an acute sense of what the public wants.

(Hoggart 1990 [1957], 207)

This idea of popular fiction as primarily giving the public what it wants, can be related to Cathy Yardley's definition of chick lit in her *Will Write for Shoes: How to write a chick lit novel* (2007):

For those writers who take offense at reviewers and critics who call Chick Lit “fluffy” frothy”, or “dumb” and who want to counter by making Chick Lit novels literary heavyweights, I have only one piece of advice: *switch to decaf*. Seriously. As Chick Lit authors, we'll have messages, themes and insights, of course. But our primary job is to entertain.

(Yardley 2007, 5)

Thus, both Hoggart's definition of popular literature and Yardley's perspective on chick lit is saying that in order to be what the public, or specifically ‘chicks’, want, popular fiction must not strive to be anything more than pure entertainment. However, this might be a simplified way of perceiving both popular fiction and its readers, and is an issue that will be more thoroughly examined in the thesis.

1.3 Outline of Chapters: Material and Methodology

This introduction gives a brief overview of what the thesis sets out to investigate. It explains the motivation behind the choice of topic and discusses background and essential terminology. The following final part of the introduction gives an outline of the thesis's chapters and presents an overview of the essential material and methodology that will be used in the discussion of each of these chapters.

The thesis's second chapter will consist of a historical investigation into critical discussions on literary value, and the value of popular culture in particular. Literary theory and the discussion of literary value can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece. In order to limit the scope of the project, this thesis will explore how literary quality has been defined over the last couple of centuries. It will consider works by literary critics from the late 19th century up until today. In the first chapter of the thesis, central literary critics are Matthew Arnold (*Culture and Anarchy* (1882 [1869])) and ‘The Study of Poetry’ (1880), Q.D. Leavis (*Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932)), F.R. Leavis (*The Great Tradition* (1960 [1948])) and

Culture and Environment (1977 [1933]), and Terry Eagleton (*Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2008 [1983]) and *How to Read Literature* (2013)).¹ The methodology for this part of the discussion will be to consult the mentioned critical works while asking: how has literary quality been defined by these critics and how have they judged the value of popular culture? Thus, the second chapter of this thesis seeks to investigate how popular culture, like genre fiction, traditionally has been valued. These particular critics have been chosen because they have all expressed useful thoughts on what they consider as literary quality, and on the position of popular fiction. Furthermore, both Arnold, the Leavises and Eagleton have been central to how English literary studies has developed as an academic discipline over the last two centuries.

In chapter three, the discussion turns to the two contemporary American literature professors Harold Bloom and Janice Radway. Bloom is an established and influential critic who has written several books addressed to the general reader. Radway's *Reading the Romance* has become a key work within research on middlebrow culture. Chapter three aims to investigate how Harold Bloom's work on what we should read functions in relation to Radway's work on middle class desire. In this work, Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1995), and *How to Read and Why* (2000) will be essential, together with Radway's *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month-Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1997) Other publications by both Bloom and Radway will be referred to when needed. Furthermore, essays by Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1984), Richard Ohmann (1984) and Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose (1990) will be consulted to highlight the complexity of literary evaluation. The value of a literary evaluation will be central, as this chapter will explore questions such as how different contemporary critics perceive valuable reading, and how literary authority is constituted. In this way, the discussion aims to demonstrate how the question of valuable reading material offers not one unitary answer, but is complicated by different perspectives on valuable reading. And with a variety of answers to the question of what to read, the question further becomes: whose opinion should we, and do we, value? By discussing the question of canonicity in relation to middlebrow culture, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that the issue of defining valuable reading material is not a straightforward one. This will enable us to investigate the chick lit genre from the perspective that popular fiction is not decidedly unliterary.

¹ The present thesis will refer to the 1882-, 1960-, 1977- and 2008-editions of *Culture and Anarchy*, *The Great Tradition*, *Culture and Environment* and *Literary Theory* respectively, and not first editions of these works.

Chapter four will concentrate on chick lit as an example of popular fiction. The research question for this part of the thesis is: is chick lit valuable reading material, and how do we decide? Thus, the discussion on valuable reading material from the previous chapter will be developed further. Chapter four will begin by exploring the development of the chick lit genre and the characteristics of chick lit novels. This will include a discussion on the Harlequin romance novel and how it is related to the chick lit novel. Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1991) will be essential when exploring how the chick lit genre relates to the traditional romance novel. Furthermore, the question of how chick lit functions in relation to a feminist perspective will be investigated. When the context of the chick lit genre has been mapped out, the chapter will move on to the issue that is most central for the present thesis: what is the literary value of these books? In this part of the discussion one of the questions that will be explored is: how does the popularity of chick lit books relate to the critical reception of these books?

The sales numbers of the Irish writer Marian Keyes, who is often referred to as the queen of chick lit, gives an illustration of how popular this genre is. Keyes has sold more than thirty million books worldwide (Bannan 2015). In an interview with the *Irish Times*, Keyes's editor Louise Moore expresses her opinion on the discrepancy between Keyes's popularity amongst readers and the critical acclaim of her books: "I feel very strongly that she doesn't get the recognition from the literary establishment, in the UK at least, that her writing deserves" (Bannan 2015). Marian Keyes's authorship will be a key example of chick lit in this thesis's discussion on the literary value of the genre. Keyes's authorship will be explored through looking at sales numbers, readers's evaluations of the books, and the critical reception of them. Furthermore, issues of gender will become essential when discussing the term chick lit, and an important element of the discussion is the question of whether refusing the term chick lit is an entirely feminist act, or if it also means suppressing groups of women writers, that is writers of chick lit. The two short story collections *This is Chick-Lit* by Lauren Baratz-Logsted and *This is Not Chick Lit*, by Elizabeth Merrick illustrate the different perspectives and opinions on chick lit that exist *within* the field of women writers. The question of loyalty between women writers is pointed out by Baratz-Logsted in her reaction to Merrick's *This is Not Chick Lit*:

It used to be that there were two major camps in publishing. Literary and Commercial. And within the area of women writers, that distinction has lately devolved into the following: Chicks and Lits. The former resents the greater review attention bestowed on the latter, the latter resents the greater sales of

(the former's) hot market. But what if instead of wasting our time throwing stones at one another, we were to pool our reader resources toward the end of greater benefit for all?

(Baratz-Logsted 2006, 6)

Chapter four will explore the distinction between Chick and Lit by looking at specific examples of these two kinds of women's writing as they are represented in the two mentioned anthologies. What is the difference between Chick and Lit, and why does this difference matter? Furthermore, an investigation of the reception of the two anthologies and the specific debate that the publication of *This is Not Chick Lit* and *This is Chick-Lit* resulted in will be central in chapter four.

Other central material for discussing chick lit include Stephanie Harzewski's *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2008), Diane Negra's *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (2009), Rocio Montoro's *Chick Lit: The Stylistics of Cappuccino Fiction* (2012) and *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (2006) edited by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young. Because these works offer accounts that are both critical and defensive of chick lit, they can contribute to a nuanced discussion of how chick lit is valued in terms of literary value and quality.

By studying how literary quality has been and is defined, this thesis wishes to show that perceptions of quality are not constant, but rather constantly evolving. The professional critical view on mass-produced, modern popular fiction is typically negative, but could a more liberal view on the concept of quality attribute a certain aspect of quality to popular works as well? It might be useful to challenge the traditional academic views on quality, in order to have a more nuanced discussion of the *kinds* of quality that different types of literature might hold. The issue of gender bias is particularly relevant in this regard. What is the position of women writers and women readers in a contemporary literary climate dominated by traditional standards of value? Why is women's literature perceived as something separated from literature? The perception of women's fiction as something opposed to literature in general is one example of our tendency to structure the world according to binary oppositions. We should investigate the possibility of discussing literature without necessarily using binary oppositions such as good versus bad, high versus low, and serious versus non-serious. This could make more room for an understanding of reading as a valuable activity in its own right, with less of a focus on the socially determined value of what is read.

On the other hand, the present thesis hopes to contribute to a discussion of the position of academic literary criticism in a society dominated by the possibilities offered by rapid technological development. Mari Nymoen Nilsen from the Norwegian Critics Association has pointed out how

good criticism should not strive to keep up appearances, by being as mild as possible and avoiding the uncomfortable, strange or difficult. Thus, the more important it is that the critic holds on to his or her own voice and individuality, fires away when he or she feels like it, dares to love, be exhilarated, bewildered and frustrated. This is what will keep the public discussion going: to speak of why and how something is better than something else. ²

(Kritikerlaget 2014)

Could literary criticism become redundant in an era of online book reviewing, blogging and social networks? And if so: who would care? If the bottom line is that literary criticism relies on separating the good from the bad, is it then possible to discuss literary value *without* a binary mode of thinking? The question of whether or not such binary oppositions can be dissolved will be central throughout the present thesis's discussion of literary value and quality. The end of chapter four will offer concluding remarks on this issue in general, and on the binary opposition between Chick and Lit in specific: by seeking to demonstrate the crucial importance of the chick lit debate, chapter four will offer a culmination of the present thesis's discussion of literary value. The essential question becomes: can we discuss literary value without referring to certain kinds of writing as inferior, or: why is it necessary to juxtapose Chick to Lit?

The fifth and last chapter, the conclusion, will offer a summary of the main ideas that the thesis has been concerned with. Moreover, the conclusion will seek to clarify how traditional standards of literary value are affecting the evaluation of contemporary popular women's fiction, or more specifically: how referring to traditional literary criticism might demonstrate the importance of the chick lit debate.

² Quote in Norwegian: "Den gode kritikken skal ikke strebe etter å holde en «god» tone, snakke mildest mulig og unngå det ubehagelige, rare eller vanskelige. Desto viktigere er det derfor, at kritikeren holder på sin egen stemme og individualitet, sparker fra når han eller hun føler for det, tør å elske, begeistres, undres og frustreres høyt. Det er det som kan holde den offentlige samtalen i gang: å stadig snakke om hvorfor og hvordan noe er bedre enn noe annet" (Kritikerlaget 2014).

2. Traditional Standards of Literary Value

2.1 Introduction

The fundamental motivation behind the present thesis is to reach an understanding of the ways in which literary works are valued. Particularly, the thesis is motivated by a fascination with the relationship between critical rejection and popular embrace of genre fiction. The introduction of this thesis has explained that the position of women's writing, and the chick lit genre in particular, will be a central focus. It has also expressed that the thesis seeks to understand the value of chick lit novels in light of how literary value has traditionally been defined. Thus, it is necessary to begin the discussion of the present thesis by looking at what has been said and thought about literary value and quality in the past.

Through an investigation of works by the literary critics Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, Q.D. Leavis and Terry Eagleton, this chapter will examine how the governing thoughts and ideas concerning literary value and quality have developed through the last couple of centuries. How has literary value been defined by these critics? How have they considered the position of popular fiction? We will see that both Arnold and the Leavises have definite perceptions of the kind of literature that is of literary value. However, looking into Terry Eagleton's thoughts on the issue of literary value will show that such definite perceptions as those of Arnold and the Leavises can also be questioned. The mentioned critics will be discussed chronologically in order to map out a background for later discussing contemporary perceptions of literary value. Arnold has been referred to as "virtually the founding father of modern criticism in the English-speaking world" (Leitch 2010, 691), and thus makes a natural starting point for examining the value of literature from a historical perspective.

2.2 Matthew Arnold: Touchstones and Disinterested Criticism

Matthew Arnold was a British critic, poet and educator. For the present discussion it is the critic Arnold and his prose works that will be central. *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) is one of Arnold's most important prose works, and the essay offers an insight into Arnold's particular conception of culture. *Culture and Anarchy* is particularly useful for the present discussion on literary value and quality: in the essay Arnold discusses not only the importance of culture, but the importance of understanding what can actually be *considered* real culture. It is the purpose of this thesis to reach an understanding of how and why genre fiction is juxtaposed to

serious literature. Therefore, let us take a closer look at how Arnold juxtaposes popular culture to real culture, and why he finds it pressing to do so.

In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold immediately proclaims culture to be “the study of perfection” (Arnold 1882, xiii). Arnold states that the scope of his essay is to “recommend culture as the great help of our present difficulties” (Arnold 1882, x). The difficulties that Arnold is referring to concerned the consequences of religion being challenged by science. Charles Darwin’s revolutionary book *On the Origin of Species* was first published in 1859, ten years prior to Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnold saw the decline of religion as a threat, and feared that society would become dominated by anarchy. A, according to Arnold, salvation was to be found in culture: “...the worth of what a man thinks about God and the objects of religion depends on what the man *is*; and what the man *is*, depends upon his having more or less reached the measure of a perfect and total man” (Arnold 1882, xlii). In other words, according to Arnold, a person’s view on religion should only be valued if he has achieved perfection, and this perfection can only be reached through culture. Furthermore, Arnold specifies how this pursuit of perfection means “getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold 1882, x).

Already, it is clear how terms such as *perfection* and *the best* are central to Arnold’s thoughts on the value of literary culture, and the historical context of his argument explains why he felt it urgent to articulate what real culture is. But how are we to understand Arnold’s conviction that only the best and perfect is of literary value? Does Arnold simply hold an elitist view on the value of culture, or is it more complicated than that? What does Arnold actually mean by “a perfect and total man”? In the first chapter of his essay Arnold elaborates on what is meant by the term perfection: “Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming, is the character of perfection as culture conceives it” (Arnold 1882, 12). Arnold’s use of terms like “having and resting” versus “growing and becoming” can be related to the opposition between genre fiction and serious literature. Genre fiction is often understood as literature that offers the reader the opportunity of “resting”, whereas serious literature on the other hand is typically more challenging to the reader. Thus, serious literature might offer the reader the opportunity of “growing”, rather than “resting”. Is this idea of challenging the reader an aspect that Arnold is concerned with in his idea of perfection? We need to take a closer look at why Arnold insists on the importance of perfection. This will also bring us closer to an understanding of Arnold’s emphasis on the terms “sweetness and light” (Arnold 1882, 20), and how they are related to perfection.

A harmonious perfection is a perfection “in which the characters of beauty and intelligence are both present, which unites the two noblest of things, *sweetness and light*” according to Arnold (Arnold 1882, 20). That is, to Arnold, the pursuit of perfection means the pursuit of beauty and intelligence, the pursuit of *sweetness* and *light*. Arnold goes on to explain how the great passion of culture are these two noblest of things, sweetness and light, but that even more important is the passion of culture for making sweetness and light “prevail”. In other words, making culture accessible is the most important responsibility of the cultured: culture “is not satisfied till we *all* come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light” (Arnold 1882, 43). Arnold stresses the difference between culture and what he calls “the ordinary popular literature” (Arnold 1882, 44). Making culture available to the masses is not enough, but it must be *real* thought and *real* beauty that is being distributed. It is obvious that for Arnold, there is a clear difference between good and bad culture. Culture strives to make the true, or good, culture what the “raw” person prefers, and for every man to be drawn “ever nearer to a sense of what is indeed beautiful, graceful and becoming” (Arnold 1882, 16). Moreover, it does not suffice to make culture available to people, but it must also become what every man truly *wants*: “...the aspirations of culture, which is the study of perfection, are not satisfied unless what men say when they say what they like, is worth saying — has good in it, and more good than bad” (Arnold 1882, 16). From this perspective it is obvious that Arnold values certain works of literary culture over others: there is a difference between right and wrong culture.

In fact, for Arnold, the term culture does not encompass popular literature at all. Arnold criticises people who try to give the masses “an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses” (Arnold 1882, 44). Arnold’s emphasis on the importance of making true culture “prevail”, and the importance of every man becoming perfect, can from one perspective be provocative reading. The idea that all of us have to read and appreciate certain works of literature in order to become perfect, and that such a perfection is crucial in our society, can be judged as an elitist and arrogant way of thinking. Remembering that perfection to Arnold means “getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold 1882, x), it is clear that according to Arnold it is only *the best* that is worth any attention. This again brings us to a fundamental question of the present thesis: the best according to whom? There is no doubt that some of Arnold’s statements on the position of culture can be deemed both highbrow and elitist. Statements to the effect that every man needs to be drawn “ever nearer

to a sense of what is indeed beautiful, graceful and becoming” (Arnold 1882, 16) do not leave any room for taste and preferences being relative and subjective. On the other hand, however, it becomes easier to understand Arnold’s position as he explains exactly how he thinks that culture works differently from popular literature.

Arnold sees the distribution of popular culture, and popular literature, as an attempt to “indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgements constituting the creed of their own profession or party” (Arnold 1882, 44). Culture, on the other hand, does something different:

It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely-nourished, and not bound by them.

(Arnold 1882, 44)

Thus, it becomes too simple to immediately judge Arnold’s perspectives on culture and popular literature as elitist and condescending. From one point of view, we might interpret Arnold’s ideas as a *limiting* force. Such a viewpoint emphasises that according to Arnold it is only a certain type of culture, the *true* kind, which we should be occupied with. However, a different viewpoint might emphasise the *liberating* aspect of Arnold’s project. From this point of view Arnold’s ideas, as the quote above shows, are about making culture available to people in order to let them freely reflect upon and make sense of the world. In this way, Arnold is speaking of a democratic project that wishes to make culture, true culture that is, available to everyone. As he puts it himself, “this is the *social idea*; and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality” (Arnold 1882, 44).

This idea of equality is especially interesting for the present discussion on the value of literature. This thesis will inescapably address not only how different literary works are evaluated, but also how both writers and readers of these different kinds of literature are valued. In this context, it is pertinent to take a closer look at what Arnold says about equality, social class, and authority.

Arnold refers to the work that the truly great men of culture have performed as “humanising”: these “true apostles of equality” have made culture available to all by humanising it without compromising the quality of it. They have

laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the *best* knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light.

(Arnold 1882, 45)

Thus, the conflict between a democratic and an elitist perception of Arnold's project is persistent: it is on the one hand easy to sympathize with the idea of culture as humanising, and the importance of making culture available to all. Such a perspective demonstrates the democratic nature of Arnold's project. On the other hand, Arnold is no relativist: his view that only a certain kind of culture is of literary value and that there is a clear distinction between right and wrong culture does not leave any room for the possibility that also the culture which is generally preferred by the masses might hold literary value. But what exactly do Arnold's statements on culture say about the people that are "outside the clique of the cultivated and learned"? Are we to understand that only a certain social class is in need of perfection according to Arnold? Let us take a closer look at what Arnold has to say about social class.

It is easy to assume that the people who are in need of a humanising process of culture are the people of the working class. Such an assumption seems natural, as people of the working class are most often not associated with the "cultivated and learned". Arnold does, however, propose that we try to rise above the idea of class in our search for perfection (Arnold 1882, 79). Arnold separates the different social classes by referring to the aristocracy as the Barbarians, the middle class as the Philistines and the working class as the Populace, but claims that "all of us, so far as we are Barbarians, Philistines or Populace, imagine happiness to consist in doing what one's ordinary self likes" (Arnold 1882, 98). In other words, the need for perfection goes across the different social classes, because the dominating tendency for members of every class is to do only what one likes. What the ordinary self likes is not the same for members of all the social classes, but the essence of Arnold's argument is that doing what one likes can never be anything more than "machinery" (Arnold 1882, 98): "the worship of the mere freedom to do as one likes is worship of machinery" (Arnold 1882, 61). We will later see that Arnold's perception of "effortless" reading as machinery was to influence both Q.D. Leavis and F.R. Leavis. Furthermore, Arnold sees the *opposite* of doing only what one likes as what will provide us with the *light* we need to see that "the really blessed thing is to like what right reason ordains". It is Arnold's opinion that in every class there are some people who have a curiosity about their best self, and these are the individuals who have an interest in disentangling themselves from machinery (Arnold 1882, 98). These

individuals emerge in all classes, and their curiosity for their best self “always tends to take them out of their class, and to make their distinguishing characteristic not their Barbarianism or their Philistinism, but their *humanity*” (Arnold 1882, 99). Thus, we can see how Arnold attempts to speak of culture, or the search for perfection, as something independent of class. With religion being challenged by science and society consequently threatened by anarchy, we are in need of an authority to turn to, Arnold claims. This authority is however not to be found in the aristocracy, or the middle class, or the working class. The answer lies in our best self, a perfect self that can only be reached through culture. The answer is culture:

...by our best self we are united, impersonal at harmony. We are in no peril from giving authority to this, because it is the truest friend we all of us can have; and when anarchy is a danger to us, to this authority we may turn with sure trust. Well, and this is the very self which culture, or the study of perfection, seeks to develop in us.

(Arnold 1882, 80)

Arnold goes on to elaborate how such a development of the best self means letting go of our old habits of only exposing ourselves to what we already master, like and enjoy. A transformation to the perfect self can only come from challenging doing as we like. In fact, Arnold has named the second chapter of *Culture and Anarchy* ‘Doing as one likes’. In this chapter he focuses on light, or intelligence, as a character of perfection. As already mentioned, Arnold stresses that culture is the study of perfection, and that “beauty and intelligence, or, in other words, sweetness and light, are the main characters” of such a perfection (Arnold 1882, 47). Arnold’s emphasis on the importance of challenging doing only what one likes is especially interesting when discussing a hierarchical organisation of literary works. Genre fiction such as chick lit is, as we have already touched upon, typically not considered challenging to the reader. And as we will see in chapter four, this is a characteristic of the novels that readers of chick lit particularly *appreciate*. However, in light of Arnold’s argument, the formulaic and unchallenging nature of genre fiction should not be embraced, but rejected. According to Arnold, the freedom to do as one likes has been overestimated, and is a freedom that keeps us from reaching our best self: “The great thing, it will be observed, is to find our *best* self, and to seek to affirm nothing but that; ... not resting satisfied with a self which comes uppermost long before our best self, and affirming that with blind energy” (Arnold 1882, 81). But why does it *matter* that doing as one likes prevents us from reaching our best self? How does Arnold justify his insistence on the importance of

reaching our best self, and is this justification in any way relevant to contemporary readers of genre fiction?

It is made clear how culture, with its sweetness and light, its beauty and intelligence, will make us reach our potential as perfect human beings. However, towards the end of his essay, Arnold reminds us that such an individual perfection is not the most important function of culture, because the essential concern is making culture universally accessible:

Such is the sympathy which binds humanity together, that we are indeed, as our religion says, members of one body, and if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. Individual perfection is impossible, so long as the rest of mankind are not perfected along with us.

(Arnold 1882, 216)

In this way, Arnold explains that a person's individual responsibility to reach her best self is crucial because of the collective goal that society has of reaching its best self. Thus, for Arnold, culture is both individual and social: the individual responsibility of not only doing as one likes is essential for society as a whole. Can this be related to how writers and readers of chick lit are criticised in our contemporary society? Is there be a connection between how Arnold links the individual to the social and how some women writers today criticise chick lit for obstructing serious women's literature? This idea, that chick lit writers and readers are negatively affecting the field of literature because of their literary preferences, is interesting in relation to Arnold's view, and will be further explored in chapter four.

In *Culture and Anarchy*, as the title of his essay indicates, Arnold's main concern is to demonstrate the crucial function that culture has of opposing anarchy. In the last pages of his essay, Arnold points out how there can be no society without order, and without order there can be no human perfection. This human perfection seems to be the ultimate goal. However, Arnold also comments on culture being not only our way to perfection, but even to safety. Arnold explains this need for safety as a result of the changes that society was facing at a time when religion was being challenged by science. The question of safety is discussed in the essay 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), and this essay can help us reach a further understanding of why Arnold is so concerned with the importance of separating popular culture from real culture.

'The Study of Poetry' is perhaps Arnold's most famous piece of literary criticism, and in this essay Arnold seeks to demonstrate the high duties of poetry. As previously mentioned, the time that Arnold was living in was characterized by the rapid progress of science. In 'The

Study of Poetry' Arnold begins by commenting on the restless situation of his contemporary society: "There is no creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve" (Arnold 1880, 1). In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold recommends culture as the great help of the difficulties society was facing (Arnold 1882, x). In 'The Study of Poetry' he points out poetry as what man must turn to for comfort and security. Thus, where human perfection is the main concern of *Culture and Anarchy*, the focus in 'The Study of Poetry' lies on comfort. Arnold seems to regard safety as a key element for handling the challenges of a society in change, and poetry is what will provide us with this safety. Poetry is what we must turn to when religion and philosophy fails:

The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously; and the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize "the breath and finer spirit of knowledge" offered to us by poetry.

(Arnold, 1880, 2)

Furthermore, because of the crucial social responsibility that rests upon poetry, the more important it becomes to discriminate between worthy and unworthy poetry. Only the best poetry can be trusted with such a responsibility, and only poetry "of a high order of excellence" will be capable of fulfilling such a destiny (Arnold 1880, 3). Arnold attempts to demonstrate how we can develop the necessary "high standard" and "strict judgement" of poetry. He makes use of the term *charlatanism* for accentuating the importance of distinguishing between good and bad poetry: "Charlatanism is for confusing or obliterating the distinctions between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true" (Arnold 1880, 3). Arnold's use of the terms sound, unsound and half-sound seems to correspond to the distinction between highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow. Thus, Arnold's argument once again proves relevant for this thesis's discussion of genre fiction versus serious literature, and to Arnold it is clear that only the sound, the highbrow, the best poetry is of value: "The best poetry is what we want: the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can" (Arnold 1880, 4). Here, Arnold is saying that what we should read is "the best poetry". In the next two chapters we will investigate the question of what to read from a contemporary perspective and thus explore how Arnold's viewpoints can be linked to contemporary debates concerning literary value. Moreover, literary evaluations and the authority of such value

judgments will be central in the following chapters. Let us therefore return to what Arnold says about how to evaluate literature.

Arnold presents two concepts that complicate the business of evaluating the quality of a poem properly: “the historic estimate” and “the personal estimate”. Both historical and personal considerations about a poem might make us overrate it, Arnold explains. Especially our personal preferences can distract us from evaluating a poem or a poet correctly:

Our personal affinities, likings and circumstances, have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet’s work, and to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses, because to us it is, or has been, of high importance.

(Arnold 1880, 5)

This quote demonstrates that *disinterestedness* is a key term for Arnold. Personal preferences do not belong to critical evaluations of poetry, according to Arnold. Rather, disinterestedness is crucial to literary criticism. Thus, in contrast to the personal and the historic estimate stands the *real* estimate. But how exactly are we to become capable of making such real estimates of literary value? Arnold proposes that in order to judge the value of a literary work correctly, and according to the real estimate, we need an established order of truly great literary works that everything else can be compared to. Works of truly high quality must function as touchstones, because “using the poetry of the great classics as a sort of touchstone” is what can “make our estimates of poetry real” (Arnold 1880, 40).

Arnold names Homer, Shakespeare and Milton as examples of touchstones for “detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality” (Arnold 1880, 10). Thus, only those who are familiar with the works of the truly great poets are entitled to form a valid opinion on literary quality. One is to have “always in one’s mind lines and expressions of the great masters” (Arnold 1880, 10). Arnold argues that although his examples of touchstones differ widely from one another, they are all in “the possession of the very highest poetical quality”. If we are thoroughly familiar with such works of quality we will acquire “a sense enabling us, whatever poetry may be laid before us, to feel the degree in which a high poetical quality is present or wanting there” (Arnold 1880, 11). The question which still remains is: what are the characteristics of the highest poetical quality? Arnold attempts to answer this question by pointing out feeling and sincerity as paramount: “The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner” (Arnold 1880, 12). Arnold goes on to

exemplify how the characteristics of feeling and sincerity are equally decisive by referring to the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer. Arnold attempts to demonstrate that Chaucer's work is an example of poetry that possesses the best diction and movement, but lacks the sincerity of the truly great. It has "a virtue of manner and movement such as we shall not find in all the verse of romance-poetry" (Arnold 1880, 19), but is still not one of the great classics. Chaucer's poetry cannot be considered as truly classic, because it lacks seriousness. Arnold is convinced that good literature, as he perceives it, will never lose currency or supremacy because of "the instinct of self-preservation in humanity" (Arnold 1880, 41). We need an authority to turn to for comfort and uplifting: the best poetry will cover our basic human need of comfort.

Questions such as "what should we read" and "why do we read" are central to the present thesis. One possible answer to the question "why do we read", is *our constant search for answers*. When reading, we might be looking for answers to questions like: which choices should we make? Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Understanding reading as an attempt to answer existential questions relates to Arnold's view that good literature will never lose its currency because of "human instincts of self-preservation" (Arnold 1880, 41). However, this is an understanding of reading that also complicates Arnold's argument, because it is a perspective that could be dominated by personal issues: if we consult literary texts with the purpose of answering questions such as those stated above, can reading ever be an objective endeavour? Will we not then unavoidably be affected by our individual concerns, and search the text for answers to our personal conflicts? And is this really an issue that can be affected, or avoided, by whether or not the text is considered a "touchstone"? Thus Arnold's view that touchstones will "make our estimates" real or pure can be challenged.

Another possible answer to the question of why we read might be that we simply want to be entertained. The term *pleasure reading*, which will be investigated further in the following chapters, indicates that being entertained can be an important motivation for reading. Arnold concludes his essay 'The Study of Poetry' by briefly commenting on the development of mass culture:

We are often told that an era is opening in which we are to see multitudes of a common sort of readers, and masses of a common sort of literature; that such readers do not want and could not relish anything better than such literature, and to provide it is becoming a vast and profitable industry.

(Arnold 1880, 41)

Even though Arnold realizes that the development of mass culture will continue, and is concerned about the consequences that this development will have, he is nevertheless convinced that the need for good literature will remain. He once again underscores the supreme importance of “being able clearly to feel and deeply to enjoy the best, the truly classic, in poetry” (Arnold 1880, 41), and is convinced that true culture will remain more important than mass culture. Thus, from an ‘Arnoldian’ perspective, works designed purely for the purpose of entertainment could never be considered good literature. In other words, genre fiction, like chick lit, would not be recognised as literature by Arnold.

In the following, we will take a closer look at how the concept of mass culture developed in the 20th century in literary criticism in an Arnoldian vein. Chick lit is an example of mass produced popular fiction, and in order to shed further light on how this type of fiction has been judged in the past, we will now investigate works by Q.D. Leavis and F.R. Leavis.

2.3 The Leavisites: The Educated Minority and their Cultivation of the Masses

The term ‘Leavisites’ is used to refer to the followers of the British literary critic Frank Raymond Leavis (Baldick 2008, 184). Others refer to ‘the Leavisite movement’, consisting of amongst others F.R. Leavis, his wife Queenie Dorothy Leavis, Derek Traversi and Lionel Charles Knights (Harland 1999, 176). These critics are also known as ‘the Scrutineers’, after their journal *Scrutiny*, which was published from 1932 to 1953 (Baldick 2008, 184). The Leavisite movement was “zealously focused upon a specific teaching mission” (Harland 1999, 176), and education is a keyword in Leavis’s criticism. In *Culture and Environment* (1977), Leavis and Denys Thompson claim that:

the very conditions that make literary education look so desperate are those which make it more important than ever before; for in a world of this kind — and a world that changes so rapidly — it is on literary tradition that the office of maintaining continuity must rest.

(Leavis 1977, 1)

This is a viewpoint that clearly relates to Arnold’s proposal of literature as a substitute for religion and source of comfort and security: “more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us” (Arnold, 1880). But in order for “mankind” to discover this, Arnold insists on the importance of those “true apostles of equality” (Arnold 1882,45), and Arnold’s emphasis on making culture available to

all “yet still remaining the *best*” (Arnold 1882, 45) goes hand in hand with Leavis’s emphasis on educating a literary elite: culture needs to be democratised, but an elite must make sure that this culture is indeed “the *best*”. Thus, both Leavis and Arnold insist on an educated elite. In *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes*, Richard Harland (1999, 176) asserts that Leavis’s criticism “above all harks back to the social and critical position of Matthew Arnold”.

The opening sentence of Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* further highlights the relationship between his own and Arnold’s perspective on literary value: “The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad — to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history” (Leavis 1960, 1). This strong statement demonstrates Leavis’s intention of constructing a literary canon, or tradition, out of a very small number of authors, while “violently dismissing all other claimants” (Harland 1999, 179). His focus on strict discrimination illustrates how Leavis followed in the tradition of Arnold. *Education* and *discrimination* can be considered two key terms when exploring the relationship between Arnold and Leavis.

Furthermore, both Arnold and Leavis are concerned with the importance of literary criticism being a disinterested activity. We have previously discussed the Arnoldian key term *disinterestedness*, and remember Arnold’s definition of criticism as the “disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world” (Leitch 2010, 691). Leavis, too, was of the opinion that “our judgements ought to come from an impersonal centre in us” (Harland 1999, 178). Both Arnold and Leavis were convinced that discriminating between good and bad literature was, and should be, a moral act, and this is one focal point that shows the relation between Arnold and Leavisian ideas. But how did Leavisite criticism differ from that of the “founding father of modern criticism” (Leitch 2010, 691)? In the following, Leavis’s *Culture and Environment* and *The Great Tradition* will be explored further in order to discuss how views on literary value developed in the first half of the twentieth century. *The Great Tradition* was first published in 1948, but before this Leavis had already published several other books, including *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) and *Revaluation* (1936). From 1932 he had also, as previously mentioned, published the journal *Scrutiny*, together with Q.D. Leavis and others. 1932 was an important year for both Leavises: in addition to the launching of *Scrutiny*, and the publication of *New Bearings*, it was also the year of publication of Q.D. Leavis’s *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Q.D. Leavis’s book strongly influenced her husband’s attitude to literature and society (Baldick 2008, 184). Also, Q.D. Leavis’s study offers us an early twentieth-century perspective on the characteristics of a bestseller. Thus, *Fiction and the Reading Public* offers valuable

information for the present study of popular fiction in light of traditional standards of literary value. Furthermore, Q.D. Leavis's investigation of popular culture offers insight into not only the twentieth century, but to earlier periods as well: the Elizabethan age is central to Q.D. Leavis's study. Her work on the development of public reading capacity from the sixteenth to the twentieth century provides us with interesting details for discussing popular literature from an historical perspective. Thus, the following exploration of Leavisite ideas will begin by taking a closer look at Q.D. Leavis and *Fiction and the Reading Public*.

The final point that Q.D. Leavis³ makes in *Fiction and the Reading Public* is that "if anything is done, it will be in this way. If this way offers no hope, then there is none" (Leavis 1932, 273). Leavis is here focusing on the importance of a critical, non-commercial Press, and by "this way" is meant "pamphlets and publications by a private Press with a conscious critical policy" (Leavis 1932, 272). That *Scrutiny* was first published in 1932 thus agrees with Leavis's focus on the need for critical publications.

The issue of commercialisation is a key element of Leavis's discussion on the reading public of her time. She begins her study by discussing the contemporary state of the book market and the reading public. One of the points Leavis makes about the general reader of her time is that "for most people a book means a novel", thus she highlights the important function of *fiction* in society. By referring to figures from the 1927 *Report on Public Libraries*, Leavis identifies the "supremacy of fiction and the neglect of serious reading which characterise the age" (Leavis 1932, 4). In other words, Leavis considers fiction to be something juxtaposed to serious literature, and reading of fiction to be obstructing reading of serious literature.

Commercialisation is recognised as a decisive force in the development of the book industry, and Leavis notices that although the sale of books increased widely during the first decades of the twentieth century, the general public has "acquired the reading habit while somehow failing to exercise any critical intelligence about its reading" (Leavis 1932, 7). The commercial book market of Leavis's contemporary society was causing higher sales of what is referred to as "indifferent and bad books", while the "really good books" were being detained (Leavis 1932, 9). Thus, it is clear that Leavis is not optimistic about the consequences of the development of commercialisation for the book industry. To further explain the changes in the book market that took place from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, Leavis turns to literary periodicals.

³ In the following discussion on *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 'Leavis' refers to Q.D. Leavis.

Leavis (1932, 19) emphasises the important role of literary periodicals as ‘middlemen’ between author and reader, and introduces the terms *highbrow*, *middlebrow* and *lowbrow* to her discussion. She explains how literary periodicals can be divided into three classes, and that there are, in the same way, three different classes, or levels, of reading public. Leavis furthermore expresses that the literary periodicals of the different levels are only useful to the level of the reading public that it is originally intended for (Leavis 1932, 20). The highbrow literary periodicals, such as the *Criterion*, reviews “only those novels which have some pretensions to literary merit and can be criticised by serious standards” (Leavis 1932, 20). Further, the highbrow periodicals will contemptuously dismiss novels that the lowbrow periodicals recommend, and warn against the novels that are admired by middlebrow periodicals (Leavis 1932, 20). In this way, the literary periodicals are shown to “standardise different levels of taste” (Leavis 1932, 20). The problem, or challenge, however, is the obvious preference among the reading public for the lowbrow periodicals and the increasing power that lies in the hands of advertising and journalism: “Their relative sales seem to show a rapidly decreasing minority of taste” (Leavis 1932, 20). One effect of this, Leavis points out, is the lack of individual reflection that comes from the majority of people having their minds made up for them by commercial journalism (Leavis 1932, 22).

The issue of the dominance of commercial journalism and lowbrow periodicals is accentuated in the final pages of Leavis’s book, where she points out the disappearance of “serious politicoliterary periodicals” as “one of the most depressing facts brought out by this study” (Leavis 1932, 272). The “standardisation of taste” and the general reading public’s non-ability to individual, critical reflection is however not caused by lowbrow periodicals alone. Leavis identifies Book Clubs as another example of middleman between author and reader, which is focused upon “giving the public what it wants” (Leavis 1932, 27). And the perception of what the public wants is based upon commercial values: the quantity of books sold defines its success. Thus, giving the public what it wants “has come to mean providing fiction that requires the least effort to read and will set the reader up with a comfortable state of mind” (Leavis 1932, 27). It all comes down to a matter of creating books that can reach as many readers as possible, in order for publishers to gain commercial success. Giving the public what it wants is what enables them to do only what they like. We remember Arnold’s opinion on the negative effects of only exposing ourselves to what we already master, like and enjoy (Arnold 1882, 81). Leavis seems to share Arnold’s view that we must challenge the habit of doing only what we like. Leavis points out how the mechanisms of commercial journalism and publishing are causing the market to close on “genius, talent and distinction”

in order to “satisfy the reading habit” (Leavis 1932, 31). The issue of mass produced literature obstructing “genius, talent and distinction” will be explored further in chapter four: we will see that commercialised chick lit novels are seen by some as obstructing “serious” women writers from getting the attention they deserve (Merrick 2006, ix). But for now, let us take a closer look at how Leavis can offer us a historical perspective on this particular debate.

In order to gain a better understanding of the general reading habit of the public, Leavis conducted an investigation of the characteristics of bestselling novels. To participate in her research, Leavis invited sixty bestselling authors who had written “the novel of the season”, been a steady bestseller over a long period *or* had “proportionately large sales for a given public” (Leavis 1932, 40). The questionnaire consisted of ten questions investigating the participants’ opinions on their personal success, on the characteristics of bestsellers in general, and on the readers of bestseller novels. Of the sixty authors that received the questionnaire, twenty-five gave replies that could be further used in the research. Leavis classified the literary works of these twenty-five authors into four different classes, and the numbers in brackets refer to how many of the twenty-five replies that belong to the respective classes:

- A. ‘Highbrow’ (1).
- B. ‘Middlebrow’ read as ‘literature’ (4).
- C. ‘Middlebrow’ not read as ‘literature’, but not writing for the lowbrow market (3).
- D. Absolute bestsellers (17).

(Leavis 1932, 45)

When terms such as highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow are introduced, it becomes inevitable to consider the issue of condescending and elitist attitudes in the literary environment. And it is interesting to note how Leavis avoids using the term lowbrow about the class referred to as “absolute bestsellers”, although it is said specifically that the class above the absolute bestsellers, the middlebrow, is “not read as ‘literature’, but not writing for the lowbrow market” (Leavis 1932, 45). The question of elitist attitudes can be seen as a thread running through Leavis’s discussion of the replies to her questionnaire. In this respect, two words can be extracted as elementary: the *brain* and the *heart*.

In her discussion, Leavis refers to a passage by Gilbert Frankau from the *Daily Mail*: “Authorship is not so much a function of the brain as it is of the heart” (Frankau in Leavis 1932, 68). Leavis further shows how also participants in her research perceive the *heart* to be essential to the quality of a bestseller. One informant claims that:

Even if many of them [bestsellers] are not works of art, they are on the whole (except the very bad ones) closer to the fundamentals of life and of romance than much of the cleverer stuff that springs mainly from the brain and so fails to reach the *heart*.

(Leavis 1932, 68)

The defensive attitude among the participants of Leavis's research questionnaire is easy to identify also in this passage. The writer here admits that bestsellers are not works of art, but at the same time argues that they are actually *better* than art. As Leavis puts it, they are "uneasily aware of the existence of other standards by which their works is despised" but at the same time "defending their own as in some way better or more genuine than mere 'clever work'" (Leavis 1932, 67). The wrangle between highbrow and lowbrow fiction is particularly dominating in this comment by an author of the "absolute bestseller" class: "Virginia Woolf fascinates but irritates me, an effect I find she has on a good many readers. Her genius is of course undeniable" (Leavis 1932, 61). We can see how this author feels the need to explain, or excuse, his opinion of Woolf's literature by referring to the general reading public as a mass agreeing on his view. At the same time, he makes sure to express that he is of course aware of the high quality of Woolf's work. Leavis comments that this author is "dimly aware of having missed the point and feels cheated" (Leavis 1932, 61), and expresses her thoughts on *why* he, and so many others with him, is not capable of grasping Woolf's literature. In this respect, Leavis turns to the issue of reading capacity, stating that this author "refuses to allow a novel to act on him as 'poetry'" (Leavis 1932, 61). Here, Leavis is making the point that serious literature, such as Woolf's, is not *supposed* to be immediately accessible. The purpose of literature is to *challenge* the reader, which again depends on the reader's level of literacy. The evaluation of literacy among the general public is central in *Fiction and the Reading Public*. In her investigation of the development of general reading capacity, Leavis turns to the Elizabethan age.

One of the major differences between the reading public of Leavis's contemporary society and that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is the development of popular culture. In the Elizabethan age the masses were "receiving their amusements from above... They had to take the same amusements as their betters" (Leavis 1932, 85). In the twentieth century on the other hand, the masses are being "specially catered for by journalists, film-directors, and popular novelists" (Leavis 1932, 85). Leavis points out the Elizabethan drama as in itself "suggestive of a standard of mental alertness and concentration that has never been

reached by the London public since” (Leavis 1932, 85). Thus, Leavis claims that the quality of literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not give the reader, or spectator, the possibility to escape being challenged. The quality of the Elizabethan drama ensured a mental alertness and concentration among the public, and according to Leavis this capacity was to be disrupted by commercialisation.

Leavis refers to the second half of the eighteenth century as the point in time when the reading public started on a process of dramatic change (Leavis 1932, 130). Periodicals, the circulating library and the popular novel characterise movements in the literary environment of the eighteenth century. In the years between 1753 and 1775, the daily sales of newspapers nearly doubled (Leavis 1932, 130). The circulating library became a “symbol for worthless fiction, with constant supplies of fresh novels” (Leavis 1932, 133). The total number of novels published increased dramatically during the eighteenth century: “by 1800 novels had become so numerous and in such bad repute that the *Scots* and *Gentleman’s* magazines had practically ceased to notice them at all” (Leavis 1932, 145). Leavis quotes the English poet, literary critic and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s comment on the function of the late eighteenth century popular novel, from his *Biographia Literaria*:

For as to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not comment their pass-time, or rather kill-time, with the name of reading. Call it rather a sort of beggarly day-dreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness, and a little mawkish sensibility.

(Coleridge in Leavis 1932, 137)

It is not difficult to spot in this statement the pessimistic, or negative, perspective that Coleridge has on the popular novel. Similarly, Leavis makes her opinion on the popular novel clear when she concludes that in the late eighteenth century “a menace to the old standards had appeared” (Leavis 1932, 150). She does mention though, that the high price of novels in the eighteenth century saved “the lower-middle-class public for some time from a drug addiction to fiction” (Leavis 1932, 152). As the quote illustrates, Leavis considers fiction something that the public should be “saved” from to avoid them getting addicted to it.

Obviously, to Leavis, fiction is the opposite of proper literature. The idea that the reading public should be “shielded” from popular fiction can, from a contemporary perspective, be judged both conservative and elitist. But is Leavis’s view on popular fiction really decidedly out-dated, or could contemporary critics in fact have much in common with Leavis? Could Leavis’s idea of “protecting” the reading public from fiction be compared to

Harold Bloom's emphasis on "protecting" the literary canon? Bloom's view on the opening up of the canon will be investigated in the next chapter. Furthermore, in chapter four we will see that chick lit novels are also being judged by some as limiting to both women writers and women readers. So how about those who claim that chick lit is obstructing serious women writers, are they really that far from agreeing with Leavis that popular fiction is an addiction that the reading public should be protected from? What is certain is that avoiding the spread of popular fiction became impossible, and in this respect, Leavis particularly emphasises the role and influence of commercial powers.

An 1863 article from the *Quarterly* comments on a new literary phenomenon of the nineteenth century: the sensation novel. As crucial for the emergence of the sensation novel, the *Quarterly* points at large shares in three commercial channels: the it-periodicals, the circulating libraries and the railway bookstalls (Leavis 1932, 159). Thus, what distinguished the popular sensation novel of the nineteenth century from that of the eighteenth century was the reliance on commercial powers. Leavis refers to the eighteenth century writer Sir Walter Scott and the nineteenth century writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton to illustrate this difference:

...Scott had a splendid self-assurance which Lytton in the next generation woefully lacks, but then Lytton had discovered how to exploit the market, as a mere list of his novels proves. And this lowering of the level of appeal makes Lytton the first of modern bestsellers.

(Leavis 1932, 163)

According to Leavis, the development of the bestselling novel in the nineteenth century involved a lowering of standards, and a lowering of the expectations placed on the reader. Furthermore, this new kind of fiction was not well received by the whole of the reading public: "the sensation novel with its violent incident, stagey dialogue and melodramatic use of coincidence and the wildly improbable was despised by the Trollope-Thackeray-George Eliot public" (Leavis 1932, 158). As a consequence, two levels of reading public developed. Leavis refers to Charles Dickens, Charles Reade and Wilkie Collins as writers representative of the sensation novel. Leavis stresses, though, that a clear distinction between lowbrow and highbrow literature is too early to make at this stage, and points to Charles Dickens as having "a personal outlook and idiom which, though elsewhere only present in patches, succeed in getting the upper hand in *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* sufficiently for these novels to be called literature" (Leavis 1932, 158). Obviously, to Leavis, the typical sensation novel would not qualify as literature. Still, the commercial developments in the nineteenth

century made it impossible to avoid popular fiction reaching the public and becoming what the public desired. But what were the consequences of this development? In the third, concluding part of her book, Leavis discusses how the twentieth century bestselling novel affected the reading public.

One of the most important points that Leavis makes about the effect of popular novels on the reading public, is the weakening of the general reading capacity. The twentieth century general reader does not have the competence to appreciate serious art, Leavis states, because “for so long has it been accustomed to writers who take pains to make their line of thought apparent” (Leavis 1932, 217). Leavis furthermore points out that the audience of Thomas Nashe and Laurence Sterne, that is the sixteenth and seventeenth century general audience, was capable of appreciating works that in the twentieth century are considered too complex for the general reader. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the public was trained in appreciating complex literary works: “sermon and drama and music had accustomed it to follow attentively and alertly” (Leavis 1932, 217). Leavis claims it to be likely that Nashe and Sterne were in fact popular writers of their time, despite the complexity of their work (Leavis 1932, 221). Thus, Leavis argues that in spite of literacy having increased during the nineteenth century, the reading capacity of the twentieth century audience is considerably worse than what was the case two and three centuries earlier: “we have no practice in making the effort necessary to master a work that presents some surface difficulty or offers no immediate repayment...all our habits incline us towards preferring the immediate to the cumulative pleasure” (Leavis 1932, 226). In Leavis’s opinion, literacy of the twentieth century is suffering because the educated minority is losing to the fiction-reading public. And, like both Arnold and F.R. Leavis, she is convinced that an educated elite is required to restore the situation: commercial mechanisms have made disinterested criticism practically a utopian ideal, and furthermore created a society which consist of a cultivated minority that stands in opposition to the general public (Leavis 1932, 264). All hope lies, according to Leavis, in the hands of these cultivated few: “all that can be done, it must be realised, must take the form of resistance by an armed and conscious minority” (Leavis 1932, 270). Leavis emphasises research and education as essential for a cultivated minority to affect the general public: the public needs to be enlightened, as many as possible must be made aware of what is happening to the reading capacity of the general public. Moreover, she continues, the key to this work lies in exhaustive research on the field of reading, and educational work in schools and universities (Leavis 1932, 270-271). Leavis’s claim is that “when the young are made aware of these forces they readily see the necessity for resisting” (Leavis 1932, 271). Thus,

according to Leavis, disinterested criticism by a literary elite in order to educate the public is key. And we have already seen that *disinterestedness* and *education* are essential characteristics of both Arnold and F.R. Leavis as well. The significance of education is something that F.R. Leavis is especially concerned with. *Culture and Environment* was first published in 1933, only one year after the publication of Q.D. Leavis's book.⁴ 'The Training of Critical Awareness', the subheading to *Culture and Environment*, indicates that F. R. Leavis agrees with his wife that education is essential for the future of culture. But what should this education look like? What literary works ought to be taught? And how are students to be convinced that this is the *truth*? In an investigation of the works by F.R. Leavis we once again return to an essential question of this thesis: can literary value be objectively defined?

In *Culture and Environment*, Leavis⁵ immediately expresses that "the very conditions that make literary education look so desperate are those which make it more important than ever before" (Leavis 1977, 1). It is stated specifically that *Culture and Environment* was designed for school use, and that it is concerned with offering teachers on all levels help in teaching literary "taste and sensibility" (Leavis 1977, vii-1). Throughout the book there are examples of exercises aimed at students. These exercises challenge students to reflect upon the effect of advertising and become conscious of the commercialism that governs contemporary society. A nostalgia is apparent through the entire discussion, a tone that is set already in the first pages of the book: "The great agent of change, and from our point of view, destruction, has of course been the machine-applied power" (Leavis 1977, 3). According to Leavis (1977, 3), the machine has "destroyed the old ways of life, the old forms" as well as created new, standardised and levelled-down popular culture, and this is a view that can be traced back to Arnold: Arnold also makes use of the expression machinery to illustrate how such standardised popular culture affects the nature of our reading (Arnold 1882, 98). When reading only literature that we can grasp effortlessly, our reading becomes a mechanical process. Such a mechanical way of reading obstructs our practice in being critically aware of what we are reading. If we interpret Arnold's views on machinery for the purpose of the present thesis, we might claim that chick lit novels contribute to making reading a "mechanical" process. One might claim that genre fiction, like chick lit, does not challenge

⁴ Leavis wrote *Culture and Environment* together with Denys Thompon, but for practical reasons only Leavis will be referred to when discussing the book. The book was based on Q.D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public*, and written in two weeks.

⁵ In the following, 'Leavis' no longer refers to Q.D. Leavis, but to F.R. Leavis.

the reader in any way, and from an Arnoldian perspective such “effortless” reading is making readers unable to critically evaluate the books that are read. It therefore becomes crucial, for both Arnold and later the Leavisites, that the reading public is made aware of the situation. In chapter four we will see that, in the case of chick lit, this issue of awareness becomes politically important, because of how chick lit relates to feminist issues.

The training of awareness is a key point in *Culture and Environment*, which agrees with Q.D. Leavis’s point about the importance of making the public aware of “what is happening” (Leavis 1932, 270). F.R. Leavis states that the public must receive education on the ways in which contemporary cultural processes are affecting “taste, habit, preconception, attitude to life and quality of living” (Leavis 1977, 4). Consciousness followed by resistance seems to be as essential to Leavis as it was to his wife: “we are committed to more consciousness; that way, if any, lies our salvation” (Leavis 1977, 5). Moreover, one must learn to “discriminate and resist” (Leavis 1977, 5). On a practical level, Leavis suggest that such an education should be relevant in not only English-classes, but in classes on advertisement, history and music as well (Leavis 1977, 5). Furthermore, he suggests that in English classes, a whole term should be used for “training in critical awareness” alone (Leavis 1977, 7). Training the public in critical awareness is of such a great importance because of the unhealthy state of contemporary culture. Leavis (1977, 5) believes that a once healthy and organic community has been lost because of industrialisation and urbanisation. He regrets this loss, and wishes to remind the public that “the English people did once have a culture” (Leavis 1977, 3). Bringing attention to the loss of culture is also pointed out by Leavis as the reason for D.H. Lawrence’s greatness: “he did more than anyone else to awake and spread a realization of what has happened” (Leavis 1977, 94). Focusing on the culture that has been lost is so important, Leavis claims, because

the memory of the old order must be the chief incitement towards a new, if ever we are to have one. If we forget the old order we shall not know what kind of thing to strive towards, and in the end there will be no striving, but a surrender to the ‘progress’ of the machine.

(Leavis 1977, 97)

Leavis’s negative view on the machine, and the standardised mass culture that it creates, is evident. In the same way as Arnold insists on touchstones in literary criticism, Leavis too emphasises the “old order” as decisive to the future of culture. In the 1948 publication *The*

Great Tradition, Leavis suggests an English literary canon to be founded on only a small number of novelists.

In *The Great Tradition*, Leavis goes straight to the heart of this matter by immediately stating that “The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad” (Leavis 1948, 1). No other novelists in English are worth reading, Leavis claims. Later, also D.H. Lawrence is included as part of the “great tradition of the English novel” (Leavis 1948, 27). Charles Dickens, on the other hand, is not considered a great novelist by Leavis: “That Dickens was a great genius and is permanently among the classics is certain. But the genius was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than this description suggests” (Leavis 1948, 19). Thus, Leavis explicitly states that the characteristic of literature as *entertainment* does not qualify for inclusion in the literary canon. One could argue that Leavis thus juxtaposes entertainment value to literary value. This view of entertainment as a decidedly un-canonical characteristic can be related to the juxtaposition between chick lit and serious women’s fiction. This opposition will be further explored in chapter four when we delve into the Chick or Lit debate, but it is already evident that perceiving entertainment value as something juxtaposed to literary value can be traced back to both Arnold and the Leavises.

Leavisite criticism was influential in the 1950s and 1960s, before it declined after F.R. Leavis’s death in 1978 (Baldick 2008, 184). Thus, what is arguably a conservative perspective on literary value was dominant only half a century back. How dominant are the traces of Arnoldian and Leavisite criticism in literary criticism today? Are literary critics of today still nostalgic about the loss of an organic community, or has the view on modern popular culture altered since Leavis? These questions will be explored through both of the next two chapters, but first we will take a look at how the contemporary literary critic Terry Eagleton perceives literary value and quality. In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton explains how the concept of culture went through a change in the 1960s, from an elitist to a democratic focus (Eagleton 2008, xii). In his book, which was first published in 1983, Eagleton discusses the major movements in literary studies in the twentieth century. An investigation of Eagleton’s introduction to literary theory might bring us closer to an understanding of how the perception of literary value has developed through the twentieth century. Furthermore, it offers a perspective on literary criticism that critically engages with the views of Matthew Arnold, Q.D. Leavis and F.R. Leavis.

2.4 Terry Eagleton: Questioning Universality and Authority

In his discussion of what he refers to as “the rise of English”, Eagleton emphasises the ideological nature of literature. “Literature *is* ideology”, Eagleton states. He points out “the failure of religion” as the one single explanation for the growth of English in the late nineteenth century (Eagleton 2008, 20), which corresponds to his view on Arnold’s expectations for poetry to replace religion. Religion had been the ruling ideological force, but with new scientific discoveries one turned to literature in the search for moral authority: “the old religious ideologies have lost their force... a more subtle communication of moral values...is thus in order” (Eagleton 2008, 24). Eagleton identifies the years between 1920 and 1930 as significant to the rise of English literature as an academic subject: “In the early 1920s it was desperately unclear why English was worth studying at all; by the early 1930s it had become a question of why it was worth wasting your time on anything else” (Eagleton 2008, 27). By investigating how the concept of literature has developed since the eighteenth century, Eagleton offers us a critical perspective on Leavisite criticism: Eagleton describes literature as a functional, ontological term, the literary canon as a social construct, and value as a transitive term, and thus his views distinctly differ from those of the Leavisites (Eagleton 2008, 10).

The Leavises were key figures in the formation of English Literature as a new academic subject. Eagleton describes *Scrutiny* as “not just a journal, but the focus of a moral and cultural crusade” (Eagleton 2008,29). Again, the resemblance to religious activities is evident, but what could save the students was not literature alone, but the ability to rigorously *discriminate* between different literary qualities. The Scrutineers would go to schools and universities in the hope of developing “a rich, organic sensibility in selected individuals” (Eagleton 2008, 29). Thus, the goal was to have a cultivated minority that could transmit their knowledge to others. Eagleton comments on the elitist nature of the *Scrutiny*-movement: “The *Scrutiny* case was inescapably elitist: it betrayed a profound ignorance and distrust of the capacities of those not fortunate enough to have read English at Downing College” (Eagleton 2008, 30).

Moreover, Eagleton brings attention to an apparent problem with the Leavisite conviction — that reading literature is a fundamentally moral endeavour first and foremost concerned with making you a better person: “Many people were indeed deep in high culture, but it would transpire a decade or so after the birth of *Scrutiny* that this had not prevented some of them from engaging in such activities as superintending the murder of Jews in central

Europe” (Eagleton 2008, 30). Still, the belief that literature was in fact capable of “reconstructing social order” (Eagleton 2008, 39) was not exclusive to Arnold and F.R. Leavis.

Eagleton mentions the Cambridge critic I.A. Richards as a link between Cambridge English and American New Criticism (Eagleton 2008, 38). New Criticism developed in the 1930s and 1940s, and insisted on treating poems as “aesthetic objects rather than historical documents” (Culler 2011, 136). Thus, New Criticism emphasised practical criticism and close reading as essential characteristics of literary criticism. This meant not being afraid to take a literary text apart, and focusing on the “words on the page” rather than the cultural and historical context of the literary work. Thus, the literary work was to be perceived as an object in itself (Eagleton 2008, 38). I.A. Richards and New Criticism relates to the Leavises and Cambridge English⁶, and Eagleton points out how both *Scrutiny* and New Criticism was “the ideology of an uprooted, defensive intelligentsia”: both considered poetry “a nostalgic haven from the alienations of industrial capitalism” (Eagleton 2008, 40). This suggest how poetry, and literature in general, might function and be desired as a source of comfort. To the Leavises, literature offered solace from a damaged, industrialised and inorganic community.

Eagleton compares F.R. Leavis’s attempt at seeking comfort in a concrete, literary tradition with the German philosopher Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. By drawing parallels between Leavis and Husserl, Eagleton points out how the phenomenological emphasis on invariable, universal essences can be related to Leavis’s perception of certain forms of language as universally and intuitively correct (Eagleton 2008, 49). The issue of universality is essential to the present study: we have already seen that both Arnold and the Leavises consider some works of literature to hold a universal, intrinsic literary value. In chapter three we will return to this issue when we explore how Bloom argues for the universal relevance of his *The Western Canon*. Moreover, the question of universality regarding literary evaluations is central to the main focus of chapter four: is chick lit valuable reading material, and how do we decide? We will see that the answer to this question is dependent on whom you ask, and in exploring whether or not such a thing as a universal literary evaluation is possible, the question of literary authority is indeed raised. If it is possible to establish universally accepted judgments on literary quality, then we must ask: *who* has the authority to make such judgments? Let us take a closer look at how Eagleton deals with the issues of universality and authority in *Literary Theory*.

⁶ I.A. Richards was the supervisor of Q.D. Leavis’s PhD-thesis, which *Fiction and the Reading Public* was based on.

Eagleton's book is written as an introduction to literary theory, thus many important figures and movements in the development of literary theory are discussed in the book. In the following we will take a brief look at some of these figures and movements to show how Eagleton engages with the question of universal literary value. Eagleton's portrayal of philosophers and critics like Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, E.D. Hirsch, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and Northrop Frye will all be briefly referred to in order to demonstrate how Eagleton himself is positioned on the matter of universality. In other words, the purpose here is not to explore the development of literary theory in detail, but rather to succinctly demonstrate how Eagleton's discussion brings to light his own critical viewpoint.

Eagleton draws attention to the problem of phenomenology and Husserl's idea of language as "purely expressive of consciousness" and free from indicating any meaning exterior to our mind at the time of speaking: "The attempt is doomed to failure: the only imaginable such 'language' would be purely solitary, interior utterances which would signify nothing whatsoever" (Eagleton 2008, 53). Thus, it is already apparent that Eagleton distances himself from the phenomenological view that language can be 'pure'. Eagleton points out that Husserl's pupil Martin Heidegger broke with Husserl's phenomenology when he realised that meaning could not be free from its historical context (Eagleton 2008, 53). However, Heidegger kept the phenomenological view that a work of art holds "universal truth": Heidegger viewed literature as something that we let happen to us, rather than something we actively do. That is, the words of an imaginative literary work are there for us to listen attentively to. Only by doing this, can we reach an understanding of the phenomenological truth that the work of art contains (Eagleton 2008, 56). This involves considering the work of art as encompassing some kind of universal truth.

With Heidegger's successor Hans-Georg Gadamer, however, the idea of such universal truths was starting to be questioned. Eagleton considers Gadamer's study *Truth and Method* to be bringing up questions "which have never ceased to plague modern literary theory" (Eagleton 2008, 57). These are questions concerning the meaning of a literary text, whether our cultural and historical situation determines our ability to grasp the meaning of a text, and ultimately: is it possible to understand a literary text objectively, or will our understanding always be relative to our own historical situation (Eagleton 2008, 58)?

Eagleton furthermore discusses the American hermeneuticist E.D. Hirsch Jr, and his idea that meaning is isolated from significance. According to Hirsch, readers can assign different significances to a literary text, but the meaning of the text is absolute and wholly resistant to historical change (Eagleton 2008, 58). Thus, Eagleton sheds light on how also

Hirsch believes in an absolute and intrinsic value of literary texts. The problem with Hirsch's philosophy, Eagleton claims, is that he separates the meaning of a literary text from language, that he considers the literary text to be encompassing some objectively pure and universal meaning put there by the author. Such an absolute objectivity is an illusion, Eagleton states: "Meanings are not as stable and determinate as Hirsch thinks....and the reason they are not is because, as he will not recognize, they are the products of language, which always has something slippery about it" (Eagleton 2008, 60).

Thus, Eagleton demonstrates his view that separating meaning from language, like Hirsch does, is impossible. Refusing both the phenomenological belief in universal truth and the hermeneuticist belief in universal meaning, Eagleton instead proposes to consider an author's intention a complex "text" in itself, "which can be debated, translated and variously interpreted just like any other" (Eagleton 2008, 60). That the meaning of a text is relative, implies a shift in attention from the text to the reader. Eagleton is critical of how the reader has previously been underprivileged in relation to the author of a literary text: "For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author" (Eagleton 2008, 65).

Thus, Eagleton moves on to discuss reception theory. With literary critics like Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, attention is turned to the reader. In contrast to Hirsch's belief in an objective, universal meaning of a literary work, the American critic Stanley Fish views everything in the text as a product of interpretation (Eagleton 2008, 74). Eagleton goes on to discuss how, according to the Canadian critic Northrop Frye and 1960s structuralism, reception theory's emphasis on relativity and interpretation made literary criticism merely "a matter of subjective value-judgements and idle gossip" (Eagleton 2008, 79). Structuralism sought to tidy up literary criticism, but by turning the conversation to *post-structuralism*, Eagleton shows how structuralism, and ideology in general, makes use of binary oppositions to make sense of the world:

Ideologies like to draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness, central and marginal, surface and depth. Such metaphysical thinking...cannot be simply eluded: we cannot catapult ourselves beyond this binary habit of thought into an ultra-metaphysical realm. But by a certain way of operating upon texts...we may begin to unravel these oppositions a little.

(Eagleton 2008, 115)

This quote demonstrates a key point in Eagleton's book: "that the history of modern literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch" (Eagleton 2008, 169).

Literary theory is grounded in political beliefs and ideological values, and therefore such beliefs and values are unavoidably affecting how literary works are evaluated for inclusion in the literary canon (Eagleton 2008, 175).

Literary theorists, critics and teachers are more than anything “custodians of a discourse”, Eagleton states, and their concern is to preserve this discourse: those pieces of writing that are especially amenable to this particular discourse are considered the literary canon (Eagleton 2008, 175). But, as a literary theorist, how is Eagleton himself the “custodian” of a discourse? His emphasis on the centrality of ideology is in fact itself what marks Eagleton’s own ideological position: “Materialist critics...assume...that “author” and text speak from a position within ideology that claims about fictional truth and authenticity are, in themselves, to be understood in relation to a particular view of culture and art” (Benstock 2002, 207). As a materialist Marxist critic, Eagleton insist on the “relative autonomy” of literary evaluations (Culler 2011, 143). Benstock, Ferriss and Woods explain how “Marxist interest in the proletariat or working class transferred to literature as an interest in the neglected authors of the lower classes and in works dismissed as appealing to a mass audience” (Benstock 2002, 208). This short description particularly well demonstrates the relevance of Marxist criticism for the present study, which is engaged with exactly such works that are “dismissed as appealing to a mass audience”. Benstock, Ferriss and Wood further point out the central role of the literary critic Raymond Williams in the development of Marxist literary criticism. Eagleton is highly influenced by Williams’s work, and in fact dedicated *Literary Theory* to Williams⁷. To reach a better understanding of Eagleton’s views on the question of literary quality and value, we need to take a closer look at what his materialist, Marxist beliefs entail.

Eagleton argues that a perception of certain texts as better than others is reliant on a critical discourse defined by the literary institution (Eagleton 2008, 176). This literary institution, including publishers, literary editors, reviewers and academia, thus determines what is to be considered great literature. Eagleton questions the authority of such an institution: “there is no such thing as literature which is ‘really’ great, or ‘really’ anything, independently of the ways in which that writing is treated within specific forms of social and institutional life” (Eagleton 2008, 176). Great literature is great literature because the literary institution constitutes it as great literature (Eagleton 2008, 176). These statements testify to

⁷ The book was dedicated to Charles Swann and Raymond Williams.

Eagleton's materialist conviction, and again the question of objectivity is raised: is an objective perception of literary value possible?

According to Eagleton, all critical conventions are “the ideological products of a particular history”, and he furthermore questions the way these conventions are used to attempt to define what being a competent reader ought to entail: “Is there only one kind of competence, and by whose and what criteria is competence to be measured?” (Eagleton 2008, 108). Thus, Eagleton brings attention to the complexity of defining both literary quality and literary competence. But how then, are we to understand literary quality and competence, without simply saying “it's all relative”?

When considering different possible criteria for literary quality, such as originality, universality and timelessness, Eagleton emphasises the importance of realizing that our perception of what constitutes literary quality will always be subject to historical change (Eagleton 2013, 206). However, this is not to say that Eagleton sees literary value as entirely subjective. Whether you find a literary work enjoyable is more a question of personal taste than how you evaluate the work. Your personal literary preferences, or tastes, are not necessarily related to the value judgments you assign literary works. Evaluation relies on certain criteria of value judgments: it relies on a competence of literary criticism. Still, literary judgments can never be completely objective: “If literary judgments were objective in that sense there would be no arguing over them”, Eagleton states (Eagleton 2008, 189). Eagleton denies the possibility of literary evaluation being either purely objective *or* purely subjective, because literary evaluation and personal preferences do not necessarily go hand in hand. This distinction between evaluation and preference is further explored by Eagleton in his book *How to Read Literature*.

In a discussion on literary value from *How to Read Literature*, Eagleton separates the concept of ‘pleasure’ from the concept of ‘value’. The two estimates are not reliant on each other, he explains. That is, we do not necessarily find pleasure in reading a work that we consider valuable. What is more, we can find pleasure in reading a book that we do *not* consider valuable: “Perhaps there are professors of literature who lap up the adventures of Rupert Bear by torchlight under the bedclothes at night” (Eagleton 2013, 188). In light of Q.D. Leavis's⁸ work on bestsellers, this distinction between pleasure and value could be related to the distinction between fiction and literature. In Leavis's view, those books that

⁸ In the following, 'Leavis' once again refers to Q.D. Leavis.

offer pleasure alone do not qualify as literature: to *challenge* the reader is the nature of literature.

We remember Leavis's reference to the reader who "refuses to allow a novel to act on him as 'poetry'" (Leavis 1932, 61). In this way, Leavis relates literary value to literary competence. Leavis claims that reading capacity is threatened by popular fiction, while Eagleton questions how both literary value and literary competence is to be understood. Thus, Eagleton draws attention to the relativity of any reading of literary works. In *Literary Theory* he claims that it is not considered possible to have a neutral reading of an artistic work: "Even some quite conservative critics are these days less given to arguing that radical theorists are ideologically skew-eyed whereas they themselves see the work as it really is" (Eagleton 2008, 208). Such a claim might imply that contemporary literary critics are not as limited as Arnold and the Leavises in judging literary value. However, in the next chapter we will explore a contemporary critic who agrees more with Arnold and the Leavises than with Eagleton: Harold Bloom insists on universal touchstones as essential for judging literary quality and value.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored critical works by Matthew Arnold, Q.D. Leavis, F.R. Leavis and Terry Eagleton. The purpose of this has been to illustrate how critics through the last couple of centuries have treated the question of literary quality, and how they have considered the role of popular fiction. This further enables us to investigate the value of genre fiction and chick lit in light of traditional standards of literary value.

We have seen that Arnold insists on the importance of disinterested criticism to decide on the truly best literary works, and that these works should function as touchstones to all other works of literature. Q.D. Leavis expresses her opinion on popular literature as a "smothering of the best by the inferior" (Leavis 1932, 115). In *The Great Tradition*, F.R. Leavis seeks to establish a literary canon consisting of less than five novelists. Thus, we see how Arnold, Q.D. Leavis and F.R. Leavis all have a strict opinion of what should be considered as Literature with a capital L. Furthermore, both Arnold and the Leavises consider popular fiction as something juxtaposed to, rather than something encompassing literary quality.

Eagleton on the other hand claims that literary canons are the products of an arbitrary authority: "the chancy nature of literary canons...is nowadays quite widely recognized, along

with the truth that some groups have been unjustly excluded from them” (Eagleton 2008, 208). Where Arnold and the Leavises were preoccupied with establishing objective truths about literary quality, Eagleton is concerned with the inevitably arbitrary and subjective nature of such an enterprise. Eagleton’s criticism thus challenges previous perceptions of literary quality and value. By questioning how we should understand and make use of the term *competence*, Eagleton touches upon the fundamental question of literary authority: “Is there only one kind of competence, and by whose and what criteria is competence to be measured” (Eagleton 2008, 108)?

Exploring Eagleton’s work in comparison to the ideas of Arnold and the Leavises has offered us a brief account of some of the ways in which literary value and quality has been understood since the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* demonstrates the importance of reflecting critically upon how notions like literary value and quality are defined. One way of further exploring literary value and quality is to consider literary authority: in the next chapter we will investigate how both Harold Bloom and Janice Radway have engaged with the issue of “what to read”. Both Bloom’s *The Western Canon* and Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* deal with reading advice. We will explore how Bloom and Radway offer two different perspectives on what the general reading public should read. Moreover, the question of literary authority will be essential: what makes a literary evaluation valuable? Thus, we will continue to explore the complexity of defining literary quality and value.

3. “Says who?” — Literary Evaluation, Value and Authority

3.1 Introduction

The distinction that Eagleton makes between ‘value’ and ‘pleasure’ illustrates what will be the topic of chapter 3: how literary value relates to the pleasure of reading. We will investigate two different examples of reading advice: Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon* (1995), and the Book-of-the-Month Club as it is depicted by Janice Radway. Both Bloom and the Book-of-the-Month Club address the general reading public with their advice on what to read. Still, we will see that they represent two different ways of understanding a valuable reading experience, because what is it that makes a book valuable? Taking a closer look at Bloom’s *The Western Canon* and Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* will demonstrate how a

question like “is chick lit valuable reading material” must necessarily be followed by “how do we decide”. This chapter will show that there is no simple answer to the question of what constitutes valuable reading material.

In *The Western Canon* (1995), Bloom discusses literary value by placing Shakespeare at the centre of the canon. Bloom claims that Shakespeare functions as a touchstone for all other literary works. He argues that the great works of the Western literary tradition are what we should turn to when choosing what to read. Bloom’s belief in universal literary touchstones demonstrates his connection to both Arnold and the Leavises. This chapter will begin by taking a closer look at Bloom’s view on what we should read, and his understanding of literary value.

Bloom has a determinate opinion of what the literary canon should look like and how to judge the literary value of a work. But what gives Bloom the authority to define literary value? This issue will be investigated through Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s essay ‘Contingencies of Value’, which appeared in the anthology *Canons*, edited by Robert von Hallberg (1984). The essay by Smith has been chosen because it offers some perspectives and thoughts on literary value that problematizes Bloom’s views particularly well. In the essay, Smith looks into the development of evaluation in literary studies and the validity of literary evaluations. She claims, like Eagleton, that a universal, objective evaluation of literary quality is not possible. Moreover, she highlights the role of the individual common reader in the process of defining literary value.

The role of the common reader is further illuminated in Richard Ohmann’s article ‘The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975’ and Kaplan and Rose’s study of canonization in ‘The Power of the Common Reader: The Case of Doris Lessing’. Kaplan and Rose also comment on the effects of commercial forces on the field of literary evaluation. One example of such a commercial force is the Book-of-the-Month Club. In *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, Joan Shelley Rubin explains the-Book-of-the-Month Club’s role in the emergence of middlebrow culture in the United States in the early twentieth century. By comparing the activities of the Book-of-the-Month Club to that of canon formation, Rubin offers us a new perspective on the question of canonicity: can a literary canon be established based on popular interests rather than academic criticism? The possibility that canonicity does not have to be academically anchored alters the way genre fiction should be judged, and is thus particularly interesting for the present investigation of literary value and the position of chick lit. Can reading advice such as those offered by book clubs really be compared to literary canons? Or is such a comparison rather undermining the canon and professional

literary criticism? If so, what exactly are the differences between professional criticism and reading advice offered by institutions such as the Book-of-the-Month Club?

The Book-of-the-Month Club will be further explored as it is depicted by Janice Radway in her *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1997). The purpose of this will be to show how an academic, literary critic such as Harold Bloom and a commercial enterprise such as the Book-of-the-Month Club are both addressing the general reading public with their advice on reading. How do these two approaches to literary value differ? And ultimately, how do we assess the authority of their work?

The question of literary authority will be essential to this chapter's discussion of reading, value and pleasure. *The Western Canon* and the monthly picks of the Book-of-the-Month Club are both examples of reading recommendations addressed to the common reader. But how do we value these recommendations? Harold Bloom is not reluctant to establish a literary canon of works that we should all strive to read. But what makes his opinion on literary quality a valid one? Let us take a closer look at the literary critic Harold Bloom and his idea of literary value.

3.2 What to Read: Harold Bloom and the Western Canon

Harold Bloom is Sterling Professor of the Humanities and English at Yale University. He has written many books on literature, among them the renowned *Anxiety of Influence* (1973), in which he claims that all writers of poetry will always be compared to the traditional masters of poetry. In a 2011 *New York Times* interview, Bloom explains how his concept of "the anxiety of influence" differs from earlier perceptions of how a poet is affected by traditional standards. The influence of the literary tradition has been perceived of as a source of inspiration alone, Bloom claims: "They assumed always it was a benign process". He further explains how he sees the influence of earlier poets not as something exclusively concerned with gain, but also with loss. "The loss comes from the fact that you are haunted", Bloom says. (*The New York Times* 2011). This illustration of the literary tradition as something that haunts all writers explains Bloom's use of the term *anxiety*. Because of the influence that traditional poets have, new writers must combat the anxiety that their work is worthless compared to the great works of the literary tradition. In *The Western Canon*, which was published more than twenty years after *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom comments on how, in his view, the anxiety of influence continues to be ignored by the majority of literary critics:

“Though most critics resist understanding the process of literary influence or try to idealize those processes as wholly generous and benign, the dark truths of competition and contamination continue to grow stronger as canonical history lengthens in time” (Bloom 1995, 11). But what does this tradition of the greatest literary works look like? Like F.R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition*, Bloom’s *The Western Canon* offers a concrete overview of who the great writers of the Western literary tradition are.

In his book, Bloom discusses twenty-six writers, among them Dante, Chaucer, Whitman and Tolstoy. Bloom places Shakespeare at the centre of the Western canon: “...Shakespeare is the Canon. He sets the standard and the limits of literature” (Bloom 1995:50). Thus, Bloom sees Shakespeare as a touchstone that all other writers, before and after him, will be compared to.

Bloom points out universality as an essential part of Shakespeare’s greatness, and as fundamental of poetic value (Bloom 1995:75). Bloom claims that Shakespeare is not only the centre of the Western Canon, but “the center of the embryo of a world canon, not Western or Eastern and less and less Eurocentric” (Bloom 1995, 62). Here, Bloom touches upon the issue of validity. What makes the canon that Bloom describes a valid representation of the literary canon, and more importantly: to whom is it valid? In the following, Bloom’s perception of the importance and validity of his *Western Canon* will be investigated.

Bloom has called the opening chapter of his book ‘An Elegy for the Canon’, and the conclusion is named an ‘Elegiac Conclusion’, which illustrates his view on the current status of the canon and his expectations for the future of the canon. In these parts of the book, Bloom argues his opinion in the debate on what the twentieth century canon ought to look like. Already in the book’s preface, Bloom makes it clear that he does not intend to adjust his view of the canonical in order to meet the requirements of those who wish to open up the canon. “Mimic cultural wars do not much interest me”, he states (Bloom 1995, 1). The cultural wars that Bloom is referring to, is those between “the right-wing defenders of the Canon, who wish to preserve it for its supposed (and non-existent) moral values, and the academic-journalistic network I have dubbed the School of Resentment, who wish to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed (and non-existent) programs for social change” (Bloom 1995, 4). Bloom insists that the purpose of the canon is related neither to moral values nor social equality, but that it is exclusively focused on aesthetic value: “If we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation. To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgment, to read at all” (Bloom 1995, 29). These statements

testify to how Bloom's view differs from that of Eagleton. We remember that Eagleton insists on the strong relation between literature and ideology: "Literature *is* ideology" (Eagleton 2008, 20). We also remember Eagleton's own ideological position as a materialist, Marxist critic and his questioning of universality and objectivity. But the idea of a universal and objective understanding of aesthetic value seems to be exactly what Bloom is arguing for.

Aesthetic value is an essential aspect of Bloom's work on the Western Canon. Bloom sees aesthetic value as the only valid way to measure a work's literary value, and the only way to determine a work's aesthetic value is to compare it to the great writers of the tradition: "Without some answer to the triple agon — more than, less than, equal to — there can be no aesthetic value" (Bloom 1995, 24). Thus, Bloom argues for his belief in a neutral understanding of aesthetic value by referring to universal touchstones. Bloom points out originality as a quality that is necessary for "any work that incontestably wins the agon with tradition and joins the canon" (Bloom 1995, 6). However, it is Bloom's opinion that the academic environment has developed into an institution where "all aesthetic and most intellectual standards are being abandoned in the name of social harmony and the remedying of historical injustice" (Bloom 1995,7). Bloom leaves no doubt as to what he thinks about the development in the academic institutions and the expansion of the canon. In the previously mentioned *New York Times* interview, the interviewer and Book Review editor Sam Tanenhaus comments on how Bloom is addressing the general reading public, rather than the scholarly environment, with his critical works. Bloom's response to this will be quoted in full, as it particularly well illustrates Bloom's general view on the field of literature studies:

I had so deep a revulsion, as I still do, against what was happening in the academies of supposedly higher education from pretty much 1969, 1970 on, that eventually it drove me out of teaching graduate students, it drove me out of the English department at Yale, I became a department of one, I don't want to take part in this madness in which sexual orientation, ethnic identity, skin pigmentation, gender, origin of one sort or another is deemed to be the most crucial element in apprehending a poet or playwright or story wright or a novelist or even an essayist. I guess I am very old-fashioned. I am not a modernist (my transcription).

(*The New York Times*, 2011)

Thus, Bloom criticises how the academic institutions of literature have developed, and claims that the aesthetic value is no longer treated as essential to a work's literary value: he says that he feels "quite alone these days in defending the autonomy of the aesthetic" (Bloom 1995, 10). And indeed, it seems impossible not to raise questions to Bloom's blunt refusal of the possibility that the traditional canon could be revised to include more African writers, more

Asian writers, more female writers. One can agree that issues such as ethnicity and gender ought not to be “the most crucial element” for judging a literary work, and more importantly, one can agree that a writer ought to be judged by his or her literary accomplishments, separated from elements such as race and gender. However, Bloom claims that the opening up of the canon to previously neglected groups *equals* making “sexual orientation, ethnic identity, skin pigmentation, gender, origin” the “most crucial element” for evaluating literary quality. Thus, according to Bloom, aesthetic value will somehow be ‘lost’ in the process of opening up the canon: those who wish to revise the canon are resenters of aesthetic value. In the following we will investigate Bloom’s view on the opening-up of the canon in more detail, because this is a debate that deals with central issues of the present thesis: what distinguishes a literary work as valuable, and who has the authority to make these distinctions?

Bloom sees the opening-up of the canon as an attempt by multiculturalist to force their way into the canon: “can you compel the tradition to make space for you by nudging it from within, as it were, rather than from without, as the multiculturalist wish to do?” (Bloom 1995, 29). Obviously, Bloom’s answer to this question is a clear no. Once again he points out his belief that “one breaks into the Canon only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam: mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction” (Bloom 1995, 29). Bloom refuses to accept that any work can escape the anxiety of influence and enter the canon without being aesthetically equal to or better than the traditional canonical works. In *How to Read and Why* he puts it like this: “we certainly owe mediocrity nothing, whatever collectivity it purports to advance or at least represent” (Bloom 2000, 27). The possibility that there might be a vast amount of literary works that have not been considered for inclusion in the canon on the basis of the writer’s gender or race does not seem to be an issue for Bloom.

Bloom claims that opening the canon on the terms of social equality is impossible, as the only way of properly entering the canon is by winning “the agon with tradition” (Bloom 1995, 6). “Tradition”, he continues, “is not just a handing-down or process of benign transmission; it is also a conflict between past genius and present aspiration, in which the prize is literary survival or canonical inclusion” (Bloom 1995, 8). The expansion of the canon that certain groups within literary criticism are fighting for is, according to Bloom, destroying the canon and making it into a “program for social salvation” (Bloom 1995, 29). The firm belief that Bloom has in the traditional nature of the canon is clear. But why is the literary canon so important?

We return to the issue of recommending literature when Bloom expresses the true question of the canon thus: “what shall the individual who still desires to read attempt to read, this late in history? (Bloom 1995, 15). *How to Read and Why* also deals with this question, and can be read as a guide to the truly great works of literature. Both *The Western Canon* and *How to Read and Why* are addressed to the common reader, rather than to academics and scholars. In the conclusion of *How to Read and Why*, a book that was published in 2000, Bloom remarks that “these days, many novels are overpraised for social purposes, and what should be regarded as supermarket fiction is canonized by the universities” (Bloom 2000, 196). In fact, Bloom seems to have lost all hope in the academic institutions of English, as this comment of resignation from the elegiac conclusion of *The Western Canon* further illustrates:

Finding myself now surrounded by professors of hip-hop, by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited, I realize that the Balkanization of literary studies is irreversible. All of these Resenters of the aesthetic value of literature are not going to go away, and they will raise up institutional resenters after them.

(Bloom 1995, 517)

This quote once again demonstrates that according to Bloom supporting aesthetic value is irreconcilable with any overt ideological conviction. Bloom perceives aesthetic value as something pure and disinterested, and he leaves no room for the possibility that even multiculturalists might be concerned with the issue of aesthetic value.

Because he has lost all hope in the academic institutions, Bloom addresses the common reader instead, but his definition of the common reader is not necessarily how one thinks of the average, common reader: “Such a reader does not read for easy pleasure or to expiate social guilt, but to enlarge a solitary existence” (Bloom 1995, 518). To Bloom, the common reader, or as he also phrases it, “the legitimate student of the Western Canon”, does not read for easy pleasure, but rather “enjoys the difficult pleasures of aesthetic apprehension” and “learns the hidden roads that erudition teaches us to walk” (Bloom 1995, 35). Thus, although he addresses general readers rather than literary academics, Bloom’s perception of the common reader is still not free from expectations. The common reader should seek to be challenged by what she reads, and this is a view that relates to the Leavisite project of cultivating the masses. Does Bloom agree that the masses need to be educated, and can his view on teaching bring us closer to an understanding of how he defines literary quality?

Bloom’s view on teaching underscores his perception of a qualified reader: “We need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly

individual readers and writers. The others, who are amendable to a politicized curriculum, can be abandoned to it” (Bloom 1995, 17). Once again, Bloom’s opinion of the development of university literature departments is unequivocal: in contrast to aesthetic value stands a “politicized” curriculum. By the term “politicized” Bloom understands all those who teach and study literature from an overtly ideological perspective, be it multiculturalist, Marxist or feminist. Bloom claims that this development of “politicization” has caused the English profession a “loss of intellectual and aesthetic standards of accomplishment and value”, and furthermore a loss of “many of the best students” (Bloom 1995, 18). Bloom regrets this loss because strangeness, or subtlety, is such an important characteristic of aesthetic value, and the ability to make meaning of what is initially strange to us thus becomes crucial in order to grasp the aesthetic value of a work. Furthermore, the strangeness of a text is decisive to its qualification as canonical: “One ancient test for the canonical remains fiercely valid: unless it demands rereading, the work does not qualify (Bloom 1995, 30). According to Bloom, only a minority of students of literature will be able to grasp the true meaning of aesthetic value, as it “cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions” (Bloom 1995, 17). Bloom’s claim that the true meaning of aesthetic value is something most students of literature will never be able to comprehend can, just like Arnold’s insistence on perfection, be provocative reading. Bloom seems to believe that aesthetic value can only be grasped by the few who acknowledge and understand aesthetic value like he himself does: as a universal, un-ideological, ‘neutral’ characteristic of those truly great literary works. And those who *are* capable of grasping aesthetic value are more than anything attentive to a text’s subtlety: literary criticism, Bloom says, is about “noticing what can and should be made explicit” in a work (Bloom 2000, 19). Bloom’s emphasis on subtlety and the implicit in a text is essential to how his work contributes to the present study of literary quality and value, because how does genre fiction relate to this notion of subtlety? More often than not, genre fiction is valued by readers for being “easy to read” and thus immediately accessible. In chapter four we will see how chick lit is described as first and foremost entertainment. Genre fiction is entertaining rather than challenging, and from Bloom’s perspective this alone makes it impossible for genre fiction to hold aesthetic value.

If a text offers the reader no challenge, if everything in the text is explicit, then the text cannot be the object of literary criticism. Therefore, Bloom points out that reading “the best poems, stories, novels and plays” must be more challenging, or, as Bloom puts it, “constitute more difficult pleasure”, than most of what is offered to us on television or film (Bloom 2000, 122). In this way Bloom juxtaposes “the best” to “most of what is offered” and this can be

related to Q.D. Leavis's juxtaposition of proper literature to fiction: Bloom does, like Q.D. Leavis, refuse the possibility that an unchallenging text can hold literary value.

We remember Leavis's view on fiction as something that the reading public ought to be protected from. Similarly, according to Bloom, a reader who is only looking for simple pleasure in reading can never be an accomplished reader of the Western Canon, because "the text is there to give not pleasure, but the high unpleasure or more difficult pleasure that a lesser text will not provide" (Bloom 1995, 30). Thus, Bloom's account of valuable reading corresponds to Eagleton's note on the relation between literary value and reading pleasure. We do not necessarily take pleasure in reading texts that we award literary value, but are perhaps motivated by something more, or something different, than immediate pleasure. Bloom refers to the poet Shelley's definition of "the poetic sublime" to explain his perception of a great text: "an experience that persuades readers to give up easier pleasures for more difficult pleasures" (Bloom 2000, 122). Once again it is obvious that, in Bloom's opinion, a text that offers easy pleasure is not of literary value. The emphasis is on how a reader should seek to advance from such easy pleasures to the more difficult, but rewarding great texts. In other words, to read genre fiction will not offer an experience of "the poetic sublime".

This brief account of Bloom's views has shown that Bloom understands literary value as an objectively defined, universal aesthetic value. The question of universality and objectivity was raised in chapter two, where we saw that Eagleton challenges such notions. Bloom has proven to have more in common with Arnold and the Leavises than with Eagleton, with his firm belief in universal touchstones and disinterested aesthetic value. In the opinion of both Arnold, the Leavises and Bloom, genre fiction cannot be of literary value. But for the purpose of further investigating the relation between genre fiction and serious literature, we need to problematize Bloom's idea of literary value. How can we evaluate Bloom's evaluations? What is the value of his value judgments? Is it really impossible that genre fiction like chick lit can hold literary value? In the following, the issue of evaluating literary value judgments will be explored through Barbara Herrnstein Smith's discussion on the "contingencies of value".

3.3 The Value of an Evaluation: Barbara Herrnstein Smith

Bloom discusses the development in English departments from the 1960s as an issue of "idealism" concerned with abandoning "all aesthetic and most intellectual standards...in the name of social harmony and the remedying of historical injustice" (Bloom 1995, 7). In the

conclusion of *The Western Canon* he clarifies his viewpoint: “The idea that you benefit the insulted and injured by reading someone of their own origins rather than reading Shakespeare is one of the oddest illusions ever promoted by or in our schools” (Bloom 1995, 522). The final and concluding point that Barbara Herrnstein Smith makes in her essay ‘Contingencies of Value’ (1984) deals with this exact matter. Smith points out the cultural relativity of the Western Canon, and the importance of understanding that the authority of the Canon must be considered also from a global perspective:

It is well to recall, however, that there are many people in the world who are not — or are not yet, or choose not to be — among the orthodoxly educated population of the West: people who do not encounter Western classics at all or who encounter them under cultural and institutional conditions very different from those of American and European college professors and their students.

(Smith 1984, 35)

Smith goes on to point out the possibility that the great figures of the traditional, Western Canon such as Homer, Dante and Shakespeare, from a non-Western perspective, actually “*do not have value*” (Smith 1984, 35). Moreover, Smith criticises the tendency that Western literary authorities have of taking such devaluation of Western literary traditions as “evidence or confirmation of the cultural deficiency — or, more piously, “deprivation” — of such people” (Smith 1984, 35). This is a point that can be related to debates on literary quality more generally: Smith is focusing on how literary authorities might take devaluation of Western literary tradition as a sign of cultural deficiency, but how about those who prefer and value genre fiction over canonized classics? We have already seen examples of how literary authorities, from Arnold and the Leavises to Bloom, deny the possibility that genre fiction is of any literary value. In chapter four we will explore the chick lit genre in our search for answers to how literary value can be understood. Must chick lit readers’s literary preferences be taken as evidence of cultural deficiency as well? We will continue to explore the issue of literary quality and value throughout this thesis: is it possible to reach a definite understanding of what constitutes literary quality and value? Or must any judgment of what is valuable reading material be understood as relative? And if so, then what is the point of literary studies and criticism at all?

In her essay, Smith describes a debate that well illustrates the relativity of Western traditions. In 1977, Onwuchekwa Jemie published a study of the poetry of the African American poet Langston Hughes. Jemie was a poet and critic born in Nigeria, but educated in America. His study received a bad review in the London *Times Literary Supplement*, in which

the reviewer referred to Jemie's comparisons between Hughes, Eliot and Ezra Pound as "painfully irrelevant" (Smith 1984, 13). Shortly after the publication of this review, the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* received a letter from Chinweizu, another writer and critic who was born in Nigeria, but educated in America. Chinweizu's response to the Jemie-review was strong:

Painful to whom? Irrelevant to whom? To idolators of white genius? Who says that Shakespeare, Aristophanes, Dante, Milton, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Pound, Sartre, Eliot, etc. are the last word in literary achievement, unequalled anywhere? ...The point of these comparisons is not to thrust a black face among these local idols of Europe which, to our grave injury, have been bloated into "universality"; rather it is to help heave them out of our way, clear them from our skies by making clear... that we have, among our own, the equals and betters of these chaps... In this day and age, British preferences do not count in the Black World. As Langston Hughes himself put it half a century ago: "If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter".

(Chinweizu 1984, 13)

This quote elucidates particularly well the notion that no definition of literary value is neutral. Moreover, it reminds us that the evaluation of aesthetic value is a problematic issue. Bloom seems to consider aesthetic value as something that is for him, and the few who agree with him, to define. He sees movements such as Marxism, Feminism and New Historicism to be in an endless struggle against supporters of the aesthetic, such as himself (Bloom 1995, 18). Smith however points out that the development of these ideological disciplines within literary studies represents a shift from the evaluation of literary works to that of *interpretation*. She further stresses that because of this development, "the entire problematic of value and evaluation has been evaded and exiled by the literary academy" (Smith 1984, 5). In her essay, Smith investigates the traditional view on literary value, and how it is being challenged by those who question the validity of traditional value judgments. Thus, she sheds on light on the essential question behind the present study: can a valid judgment of contemporary popular genres, like chick lit, be founded on traditional value judgments of literary quality?

Smith refers to the work of literary critics like F.R. Leavis, I.A. Richards and Yvor Winters as examples of the traditional "practice of evaluative criticism" (Smith 1984, 7). Further, Smith describes their form of criticism as dependent on "an always questionable and increasingly questioned set of assumptions: namely that literary value was a determinate property of texts and that the critic, by virtue of certain innate and acquired capacities (...), was someone specifically equipped to discriminate it" (Smith 1984, 7). As a result of this kind

of evaluative criticism, value judgments are displayed as objective truths. Furthermore, from this perspective, aesthetic value is perceived as a set, universal quality, and the definition of this value is non-negotiable. To state an example of this traditional view, Smith quotes the German professor Walter Hinderer's comment on the value of value judgments:

The relativity of value judgments merely proves that subjective judgments are conjoined with the person, that mistaken judgments — of which there is no dearth in the history of literature — are always the fault of the person.

...Just as the universal validity of a mathematical proposition does not necessarily imply that everyone can understand it, "but merely that everyone who understands it must agree with it," so the universal validity of aesthetic value does not necessarily mean that evidence of it is felt by everyone. Aesthetic values demand an adequate attitude, a trained or reliably functioning organ....

...The value-feeling organ must not be encumbered with pre-judgments, pre-feelings, or arbitrarily formed opinions if it wishes to address itself adequately to the object...

(Hinderer in Smith 1984, 19)

Hinderer's idea of a functioning "value-feeling organ" resembles Arnold's insistence on disinterested criticism free from "the historic estimate" and "the personal estimate" (Arnold 1880, 5). Furthermore, Hinderer's view that not everyone is capable of grasping aesthetic value, relates to Bloom's claim that aesthetic value "cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions" (Bloom 1995, 17). Thus, both Arnold, Bloom and Hinderer seem to agree that a value judgment can be proven either wrong or right, and that there is a universal and timeless correct answer to the question of a text's literary value. Smith, on the other hand, represents a widely held view on aesthetic value that contradicts the more traditional one.

With her essay, Smith says that she seeks to "clarify the nature of literary — and, more broadly, aesthetic — value" (Smith 1984, 14). In contrast to both Hinderer, Arnold and Bloom, Smith claims that universality and objectivity are *not* the fundamental characteristics of literary value. Rather, she accentuates "mutability and diversity" as essential qualities of value, and accuses the more traditional view of being "obsessed by a misplaced quest for "objectivity", and for having "foreclosed from its own domain the possibility of investigating the dynamics of that mutability and understanding the nature of that diversity" (Smith 1984, 14). Thus, Smith represents an understanding of aesthetic value that does not oppose, but rather relies on individual preferences. In this way, literary value can be understood as something that is not objectively defined, but individually experienced.

Smith suggests that the mutability of aesthetic value relates to the “intrinsic value” of an artistic work. She explains that the individually experienced value of an artwork is contingent to “the personal economy constituted by the subject’s needs, interests, and resources” (Smith 1984, 15). Our individual economies are, Smith continues, “a continuously fluctuating or shifting system, for our individual needs, interests, and resources are themselves functions of our continuously changing states” (Smith 1984, 15). In this way, Smith argues that aesthetic value is dependent on an “evaluative consensus” rather than, as Hinderer claims, “the healthy functioning of universal organs” (Smith 1984, 20).

By using the term “evaluative consensus”, Smith underscores the individual choice one has of either agreeing or disagreeing with an evaluation of literary value. She does not deny that the role of the literary academy is significant in the process of defining the literary and establishing literary value: “Those who are in positions to edit anthologies and prepare reading lists are obviously those who occupy positions of some cultural power” (Smith 1984, 29). Yet, Smith insist that the *value* of the academy’s evaluations is ultimately dependent on the individual reader’s needs and preferences:

The actual interest of that information, however, and hence the value of that evaluation to *us* (and “we” are always heterogeneous) will vary, depending on, among other things, the extent to which we have any interest in the object evaluated...or, of course, the extent to which we have an interest in the evaluator’s sentiments.

(Smith 1984, 24)

In this way, Smith makes her point that the “value — the “goodness” or “badness” — of an evaluation is itself contingent” (Smith 1984, 26). Moreover, Smith highlights the role of the individual common reader in the process of evaluating and producing literary value.

Harold Bloom claims that his books are intended for the common reader. We have seen that his perception of a good book is not one that offers immediate pleasure, but rather one that rewards the reader’s effort with an experience of “the poetic sublime”. According to Bloom, the common reader should pursue the “difficult pleasures” rather than the easy ones. But who *is* the common reader? And what does the common reader recognise as a good book? With Smith’s point on the contingency of a literary evaluation in mind, we will take a closer look at Kaplan and Rose’s essay on how the common reader relates to the canon. This will be useful for further problematizing that literary value and quality can be defined based on traditional literary evaluations alone. If the common reader can have the authority to define

what a good book is, what happens to the juxtaposition between genre fiction and serious literature? Is there really an opposition between Chick and Lit?

3.4 Commercial Forces and the Process of Canonization

The essay 'The Power of the Common Reader: The Case of Doris Lessing' was published in Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose's book *The Canon and the Common Reader* (1990). In their study of the process of canon formation, Kaplan and Rose refer to Richard Ohmann's model of canonization. Kaplan and Rose point out how Ohmann's model illustrates "the inseparability of cultural formation and market forces" (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 72). By exploring the idea of market forces as significant to the process of canonization we will continue to problematize the more traditional perspective on the literary canon represented by Bloom amongst others.

Ohmann opens his discussion by pointing out how terms such as "great literature", "good writing" and "serious fiction" are problematic because of the question of their validity (Ohmann 1984, 377). Like Smith, Ohmann questions the relevance of a literary opinion: "great literature", "good writing" and "serious fiction" are concepts that are invested with value. As long as the terms are used in an environment where there is agreement about what for example the concept of "great literature" entails, then there is no problem. The conflict arises when someone expresses that they do not agree with how these concepts are defined. The chick lit debate that will be explored in the next chapter is one example of such a conflict. This conflict, or debate, arose when chick lit writers did not agree with how their genre was being defined by other women writers as 'unliterary'. The chick lit debate, like Ohmann's article, demonstrates that value is not a constant concept, but rather socially and historically contingent: "since not everyone's values are the same, the negotiating of such concepts is, among other things, a struggle for dominance" (Ohmann 1984, 377).

The perception of value in general, and the value of literature in particular, as an unstable concept elucidates how the authority of a literary opinion can be questioned. Bloom is definite in his refusal of the expansion of the canon, but Richard Ohmann points out African American writers's demand in the 1960s as an example of how concepts of value can be the issue of conflict. They demanded that black literature be included in school and university curricula, and thus expressed their opinion on how the perception of "great literature" needed to be adjusted. They brought attention to their view that black literature had not been given access to the constitution of great literature, and Ohmann comments that "We

don't usually notice the power or the conflict, except when some previously weak or silenced group seeks a share of the power" (Ohmann 1984, 377). This can be related to how the publication of Elizabeth Merrick's anthology *This is Not Chick Lit* provoked chick lit writers: in the debate that followed, chick lit writers expressed their anger that chick lit was being discarded as mere "froth". And while the chick lit debate is complex, like the issue of literary value and quality in general is, we must ask: can genre fiction really belong in a discussion of canonization? Let us return to what Ohmann says about the process of canonization.

Ohmann uses novels written by Americans in the years between 1960 and 1975 as a starting point for discussing the process of canon formation. In his attempt to discover how a novel makes its way to becoming part of the literary canon, Ohmann describes a route consisting of three steps. The first step a novel makes towards candidacy for inclusion in the canon is, according to Ohmann, becoming a bestseller (Ohmann 1984, 379). At this point, Ohmann underscores the importance of a particular group of people in society that were "of better-than-average education (...), relatively well-to-do, many of them professionals, in middle life, upwardly mobile, living near New York or oriented, especially through the *New York Times*, to New York cultural life" (Ohmann 1984, 379). This is the characterisation of people that were particularly influential in the process of a novel becoming a bestseller through recommending books to friends and family. Thus, for a book to achieve bestsellerdom it would need to pass through a screen that was formed by this small group of book buyers (Ohmann 1984, 381). Becoming a bestseller was only the first step towards canonization, however, and Ohmann states that only a few of these bestsellers would continue to be sold and read extensively (Ohmann 1984, 382). The question then becomes: what, or who, decided which novels would achieve something more than a short-lived bestseller status? Many chick lit novels become bestsellers: in the introduction we discussed the contradiction between Marian Keyes's high sales numbers and the lack of critical attention her books receive. And according to Ohmann the right critical attention is exactly what a book needs to make its next step towards canonization.

Ohmann points out the "top intellectual journals", and the *New York Times Book Review* in particular, as essential for distinguishing between "ephemeral popular novels and those to be taken seriously" (Ohmann 1984, 382). Other influential and important journals mentioned are the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Yorker* and *Saturday Review*. Ohmann points to Charles Kadushin's description of such journals as "the American equivalent of an Oxbridge establishment" that have "served as one of the main gatekeepers for new talent and new ideas" (Ohmann 1984, 383). Thus, both large sales *and* the right kind of critical attention

was necessary for a work to establish itself as precanonical, Ohmann claims. (Ohmann 1984, 384). When a novel had gained attention from the influential, critical journals it could “make its way into college curricula” (Ohmann 1984, 384).

In this way, Ohmann brings attention to the role that commercial success plays in the question of canonization. Kaplan and Rose refer to Ohmann’s route “from bestsellerdom to candidacy for inclusion in the academic canon” in their discussion of the case of Doris Lessing (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 67). In their article, Kaplan and Rose explore the canonization of Doris Lessing in an effort to discover something general about the process of canon formation. The present thesis is concerned with canonization as a process that is authoritative in the matter of distinguishing serious literature from less valuable texts. Kaplan and Rose shed light on the role that the common reader plays in the process of canonization. Furthermore, their study offers an insight into the development in literary academia in the late 1960s that Bloom so distinctly disagrees with. In the following, Kaplan and Rose’s case example of Doris Lessing will be studied more closely in order to further investigate the question of literary authority and the relationship between literary value and reading for pleasure.

One of the points made in Kaplan and Rose’s article is the influence that the Modern Language Association has on the inclusion of an author on college and university curricula: “the Modern Language Association and its regional offspring (like NEMLA) establish the acceptable parameters of scholarly and critical discourse and the roster of authors and books deemed worth studying” (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 66). According to Richard Ohmann’s route to candidacy for inclusion in the canon, such academic attention is the final step that can distinguish a work as worthy of inclusion in the canon. A point to be made here is that chick lit is actually getting academic attention: “As journalists repeatedly pronounce chick lit “dead”, it is fitting that the university, recognizing it as a subgenre, is starting to incorporate chick lit into the classroom” (Harzewski 2011, 194). Harzewski herself teaches the course “Sex & Sensibility: The Rise of Chick Lit from Jane Austen to Bridget Jones” at the University of New Hampshire, and in the above quote from her book *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, Harzewski brings attention to the fact that chick lit’s lack of critical attention from journalists and reviewers has not stopped the genre from getting academic attention. Harzewski mentions that universities like California State University, the George Washington University and Harvard University all offer courses on chick lit (Harzewski 2011, 194). But can this academic attention improve the status of chick lit as long as influential journals refuse

to give chick lit novels any critical attention? Is it possible to “skip the second step” in the process of canonization?

In the case of Lessing’s canonization, though *not* an example of chick lit, the distinction between the second and third step on Ohmann’s route was actually elided according to Kaplan and Rose. This became the case as the same critic wrote about Lessing in both influential, critical gatekeeper journals and scholarly publications (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 71). Lessing received academic attention even before she was “lionized by the New York cultural establishment” (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 71). Still, in general, the amount of academic attention awarded to Lessing developed parallel to her commercial success. This strong connection between academic attention and commercial success, the “inseparability of cultural formation and market forces”, is emphasised by Kaplan and Rose as an essential quality of Ohmann’s model (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 72). They do, however, also emphasise that there is more to how a novel becomes both popular and prestigious than the commercial forces of the book industry. Kaplan and Rose insist on the power of the common reader.

According to Kaplan and Rose, and as observed by Ohmann, it is essential for the agents of commercial book industry to be “in tune with the needs and desires of the common reader” (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 73). Citing Margaret Drabble, Kaplan and Rose call attention to how “most of us read books with this question in our mind: What does this say about my life”? (Drabble in Kaplan and Rose 1990, 73). This is a perspective on reading that clearly contradicts Arnold’s emphasis on disinterestedness. And a perspective that might even include the ability of “speaking to the common reader” as necessary for a book to achieve commercial success. In the case of chick lit, the high sales numbers of these books demonstrate their appeal to a vast amount of women readers: chick lit novels “speak to the common reader”. Kaplan and Rose highlight the power of the work’s ability to appeal to individual readers when they describe the reception of Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*.

John Carey and Paul Schlueter were the first Americans to write their dissertations on Doris Lessing. They both refer to Lessing’s ability to speak to them on a personal level. Carey explained that *The Golden Notebook* had “a profound effect on my life and influenced me in a number of personal ways”, while Schlueter was “amazed at how much it spoke to me and my own situation” (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 75). As Kaplan and Rose put it, “both were impelled to write about Lessing, despite reservations by some senior professors in their departments, because she seemed to speak directly to them as human beings” (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 75). The issue of “senior professors” being hesitant to accept Lessing into scholarly work brings us

back to the question of the nature of the literary canon and how traditional views on the canon can be challenged.

Bloom sees the opening up of the canon as an attempt by multiculturalists to “compel the tradition to make space” for it, which is an attempt he obviously opposes: “Whatever the Western Canon is, it is not a program for social salvation” (Bloom 1995, 29). Kaplan and Rose point out that Lessing’s entry into the canon was part of this process of opening up the canon. They explain how disruptive professors in the late 1960s wanted to “force the literary profession to re-examine its ideology” in order to, as expressed by Bruce Franklin, “explore the class biases, sexual biases and ethnic biases in the structure of literature departments as well as in their operational definition, evaluation, and presentation of literature” (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 76). Kaplan and Rose claim that the cultural revolution of the late 1960s is an example of how the ideological process of canon formation is “constantly challenged by subversive elements within it”. More specifically, the insistence from “first-generation Lessing scholars”, such as Carey and Schlueter, on studying the work of Lessing are also examples of how the dominant ideology of canon formation can be challenged (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 86). In other words, according to Kaplan and Rose, the canon *can* be compelled to make space for new and previously marginalized writers.

The study by Kaplan and Rose emphasises the role of the common reader in the canonizing of a work. The first scholars to choose Lessing’s literature as the object of their PhD-studies emphasised her ability to speak to them directly, on a personal level, as an essential quality of her work. Thus, one could say that they contributed to making emotional response a legitimate literary quality, and part of what qualifies literature for scholarly attention. This is an approach to evaluating literary quality that contradicts with both Arnold’s rejection of “the personal estimate” and Q.D. Leavis’s criticism of those who claim that “authorship is not so much a function of the brain as it is of the heart” (Leavis 1932, 68).

Furthermore, Kaplan and Rose, together with Ohmann, call attention to how commercial forces play a part in the process of canonization. In contrast to Bloom’s perception of aesthetic value as the only element that should affect the value judgment of a work, Kaplan and Rose highlight entertainment value as a quality that matters. By referring to Ohmann’s model on the process of canonization, Kaplan and Rose point out entertainment value followed by commercial success as the first step a novel makes towards becoming a part of the canon (Kaplan and Rose 1990, 69). Entertainment value might not be the element one first and foremost associates with canonical literature. Rather, it would be natural to relate entertainment value with *middlebrow* literature. However, in *The Making of Middlebrow*

Culture Joan Shelley Rubin suggests that the phenomenon of canon formation bears strong connections to the development of middlebrow culture.

Rubin recognises that the voices of middlebrow culture are more often than not subject to being marginalized in the process of canonization (Rubin 1992, xviii). The emergence of middlebrow culture in America in the 1920s, -30s and -40s was a process of “making literature and other forms of “high” culture available to a wide reading public (Rubin 1992, xi). This was also the time when the Leavises were working to educate the masses and demonstrate the inferiority and harmful effects of popular culture: “we have no practice in making the effort necessary to master a work that presents some surface difficulty or offers no immediate repayment...all our habits incline us towards preferring the immediate to the cumulative pleasure” (Leavis 1932, 226). Rubin points out how other cultural figures such as Virginia Woolf, Clement Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald also accused middlebrow culture of being harmful.

In a 1942-essay Woolf associated the middlebrow with a “corruption of taste by commercial interests”, and referred to the consumer of middlebrow culture as “betwixt and between”, a “pernicious pest” to come between highbrows and lowbrows (Woolf in Rubin 1992, xiii). In 1948, the art critic Clement Greenberg accused the middlebrow of “devaluating the precious, infecting the healthy, corrupting the honest, and stultifying the wise” (Greenberg in Rubin 1992, xiii). Still, the article ‘Masscult and Midcult’ from 1960 is according to Rubin the “most famous critique of American middlebrow culture” (Rubin 1992, xiv). Like Woolf, Dwight MacDonald poses middlebrow culture as even worse than lowbrow culture, because “it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them” (MacDonald in Rubin 1992, xiv). Thus, Rubin elucidates how middlebrow culture from its emergence was subject to harsh critique.

However, in her discussion of “middlebrow figures”, Rubin further proposes that “because of their efforts as book reviewers and list makers, many of them can also be seen as canonizers themselves” (Rubin 1992, xviii). The list of monthly reading recommendations by the Book-of-the-Month Club is one example of what Rubin refers to as “middlebrow canon making” (Rubin 1992, xviii). The idea that the Book-of-the-Month Club’s reading recommendations could be considered as an alternative canon is particularly fruitful for the present discussion.

So far this chapter has shown, with reference to works by Smith, Ohmann, Kaplan and Rose and Rubin, that the traditional view on canonization can be challenged, and that the common reader might have a central role in distinguishing between good and bad literature.

Furthermore, our discussion so far has shown that emotional response does not have to be disregarded when evaluating the quality of a literary work. Thus, the objective disinterestedness that characterises works by both Arnold, the Leavises and Bloom has been problematized. Calling attention to the role of individual readers and relevance of emotional response enables us to see the chick lit debate from a more nuanced perspective. Still, the question of authority is persistent: even though a book becomes a major bestseller and is praised by readers for “speaking to their hearts”, is this enough to grant it *literary* value?

In the following we will explore the Book-of-the-Month Club in order to pursue the question of literary value further. The question of literary authority will also stay essential: who were the persons behind the book-of-the-month pick? What kind of books did they recommend? And to what degree were they qualified to give reading advice?

3.5 What to Read: The Book-of-the-Month Club

The Book-of-the-Month Club was founded in 1926 by Harry Scherman (Radway 1997, 152). The club is still running, but is now part of a larger company called Bookspan. The present discussion will be based on Janice Radway’s account of the Book-of-the-Month Club: Radway’s study is focused on literary value and can thus contribute to this thesis’s discussion of literary value and quality. The full title of Radway’s book highlights her study’s relevance for the present thesis: *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*. This title signals that the Book-of-the-Month Club can offer us insights into how notions like feeling and desire relates to those of taste and value. In this way we can continue to explore how the common reader’s desires and emotional responses to books function in relation to evaluations of literary quality and value.

Radway conducted her research on the club in the late 1980s. In *A Feeling for Books* Radway describes the club as “profoundly hybrid” because of the way it sought to make use of modern, commercial methods to distribute “high” literature (Radway 1997, 172). A 1926-advertisement for the club presented the club’s selection committee together with the promise that the committee would select for you “the best new book each month” (Rubin 1992, 201). Radway points out Scherman’s use of the phrase “the best” as a deliberate reference to Arnold’s “the best that has been said and thought in the world” (Radway 1997, 172). Thus, Scherman sought to demonstrate the legitimate, cultural value of his book club, which would “guide you in obtaining books that are really worth-while” (Rubin 1992, 201). But how did the club decide which books were the “best each month” and “really worth while”? And what

authority did they have to make such considerations? Let us take a closer look at the Book-of-the-Month Club selection committee, and how it made its monthly picks.

In her substantial study of the Book-of-the-Month Club, Radway admits how she was surprised to discover that many of the prominent figures of the club came from academic backgrounds. Executive editor in 1985, William Zinsser, had taught writing at Yale University before joining the Book-of-the-Month Club. Joseph Savago was executive editor of the club when Radway first began her ethnographic research, and Radway comments that Savago actually made her, the academic professional, feel inferior to him by the way he “fluently commanded the high aesthetic language of literary evaluation, criticism and commentary” (Radway 1997, 30). However, both Zinsser and Savago demonstrated an unpretentious attitude regarding literary taste with their “willingness to be open to all sorts of books” and “love of feeling and emotion” (Radway 1997, 35). The early members of the selection committee, or “the judges” as they later came to be known as, were also concerned with approaching the question of value openly (Radway 1997, 273).

Both Radway (1997, 268) and Rubin (1992, 123) present Henry Seidel Canby and Dorothy Canfield Fisher as the two most powerful judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Canby and Fisher were both academics with doctorates in English. After several years of teaching at Yale, Canby became editor of the *New York Evening Post's Literary Review* in 1920 (Rubin 1992, 114). Thus, he began his career as a literary reviewer.

The role of the literary reviewer is, according to Canby, substantially different from that of the literary critic (Radway 1997, 273). The Book-of-the-Month Club judges did not perceive themselves to be traditional literary critics, but rather in opposition to the academic standards of value. The important difference between book reviewing and literary criticism, they felt, is related to the degree of openness and flexibility. The literary critic is concerned with evaluating and judging the aesthetic value of a text. The book reviewer on the other hand, is less concerned with deciding the universal aesthetic level of a book. Rather, it is the job of the book reviewer to *inform* readers of new books (Radway 1997, 269). Moreover, Fisher claims that the degree of value a particular review holds is dependent on the relevance it has for the reader: “both kinds of reviews are interesting, worth-while and of value — but only when read by those for whom they are intended. Each kind is exasperating and disappointing when read by people who are looking for the other kind” (Radway 1997, 269). Thus, the Book-of-the-Month Club represents a view on literary value that can be related to both Eagleton and Smith: the value of a literary evaluation is relative to the individual reader's needs and preferences.

The judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club saw themselves as mediators between books and readers. Both Fisher and Canby were aware that Book-of-the-Month Club subscribers did not compose a homogeneous group, but had different interests and tastes (Radway 1997, 269). Much of the job for the judges therefore became to categorize literature and match readers with the right kind of books. From this perspective, the value of a book is considered in terms of how well it matches the needs and interests of its readers. Canby claimed that “the best book is worth nothing at all if it never finds a reader” (Radway 1997, 266).

To consider the value of a book to be dependent on who reads it goes against the traditional idea of intrinsic, aesthetic value and universal touchstones. But, rather than “measuring all works against a single, universal standard”, Canby was “motivated by a mission to ensure the utility of books by getting them into the hands of people who might best understand them” (Radway 1997, 266-267). In other words, in exploring the possibility that the Book-of-the-Month Club judges were producing an “alternative literary canon”, we can already establish that their point of departure in assessing a book’s value was quite different from that of more traditional critics like Arnold, the Leavises and Bloom. And the judges did indeed receive harsh criticism from the established literary authority.

In what is referred to as “the book club wars”, the debate on standardisation reached a new level. The 1920s-debates on the development of democracy, machines and mass production, as problematized by for example F.R. Leavis, affected the reception of organizations such as the Book-of-the-Month Club in the wider literary circles (Radway 1997, 204). In the beginning, it was the method of distribution of the Book-of-the-Month Club that seemed most threatening to the academic literary critics: “what most disturbed the literary scene was the very nature of the club’s distribution process and the way that process threatened to remake active, discriminating readers and writers into passive, feminized consumers and effeminate poetasters” (Radway 1997, 204). During the 1920s and 1930s, however, the critics of the book club turned to the judges by questioning their literary authority (Radway 1997, 219).

The critics accused both the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild, which was the Book-of-the-Month Club’s highest competitor, of stereotyping and standardising taste (Radway 1997, 226). In their methods of recommending and distributing literature, the book clubs were overestimating their own cultural authority, the critics claimed: “in recommending their preferences to a large group of people rather than to individuals, and in doing that as a committee rather than as individuals, the book club’s advisers were dangerously centralizing

authority that was otherwise understood as dispersed” (Radway 1997, 228). In the critics’ minds, the book clubs were destroying a public reading sphere that would otherwise have been exercising “independent aesthetic choice” (Radway 1997, 226). Radway points out, however, that what the book club critics failed to recognise, was their own claim to critical authority: “cultural authority, it appears, was something to be questioned when it was claimed by others, but it was to be erased or denied with respect to one’s self” (Radway 1997, 224). Radway suggests that the criticism of the book clubs was a matter of power and control of the literary field: “their criticism was driven at least in part by their unconscious concern that the club’s power as an organization would enable it to usurp their role as cultural mediators, as arbiters of literary value and excellence” (Radway 1997, 255).

Those who were criticising the book clubs did not offer any attention to the fact that publications by traditional literary critics might also be affecting the “independent aesthetic choice” Thus, the essential problem with the book clubs, in the critics’ view, seemed to be the nature and quality of the literary recommendations and evaluations that were being made: again the issue of literary quality and value proves to be fundamental. That their level of literary taste was inferior was not the understanding within the Book-of-the-Month Club itself, though.

Canby responded to the critics by admitting that he was contributing to a standardisation, but defended it as a standardisation that was raising the general cultural level: “standardize reading of the better sort, and automatically you will destandardize lack of judgment and cheapness of taste” (Canby in Rubin 1992, 121). Thus, Canby sought to justify that the Book-of-the-Month Club was standardising taste on the grounds that their taste was not at all different to highbrow standards. The Book-of-the-Month Club was concerned with *serious* literature, and argued that their success merely “proved the intelligence of the American people” (Rubin 1992, 97). Furthermore, although they were criticised as much as the Literary Guild, it was important for the Book-of-the-Month Club to mark its distance and difference from the Guild (Radway 1997, 35).

Although the Book-of-the-Month Club was criticised for being a commercial enterprise, the editors of the club frequently referred to their organization as fundamentally different from that of the Literary Guild. The Book-of-the-Month Club editors were of the opinion that the Literary Guild was, in contrast to themselves, striving for “the merely popular, for that which simply sells the most” (Radway 1997, 37). The Book-of-the-Month Club, on the other hand, was concerned with quality. In their board meetings the editors could discuss a purely entertaining book for a long time before concluding that “still, this is clearly

not for *us*. Let's leave it for the Guild" (Radway 1997, 35). Thus, books that offer pure entertainment do not hold the literary quality that the Book-of-the-Month Club wished to represent, they were not considered serious literature.

By defining themselves in opposition to the Literary Guild, the editors were signalling a "crucially important boundary" (Radway 1997, 35). According to the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Guild was merely concerned with "the inferior world of women's reading, romances, books on forming relationships and rehabilitating marriages, make-over manuals, and the most salacious celebrity biographies" (Radway 1997, 35). Chick lit novels, which are considered "women's reading", bear strong connections to "romances" *and* which are more often than not about "forming relationships", would obviously fall into this category of books that the Book-of-the-Month Club describe as inferior. The statement quoted above demonstrates two aspects of the Book-of-the-Month Club that particularly inform the present argument: the judges were actively engaging with the issue of literary value and quality when making their selections, and the definition of books that were considered below the Book-of-the-Month Club's literary level was noticeably gender biased. The statement illustrates that the tendency to label women's reading as inferior started long before the chick lit genre emerged. Furthermore, it shows that not only highbrow, academic critics, but also middlebrow book reviewers feel the need to mark their distance from lowbrow genre fiction. In the eyes of the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Literary Guild was publishing what would qualify as lowbrow literature, and it was important for the editors to mark their distance from these kinds of books.

The Book-of-the-Month Club insisted on being taken seriously, but Radway points out that their demonstration of distance to the Literary Guild can be paralleled to the academic resistance to middlebrow culture: "This tendency to define the self by dismissing the tastes and preferences of others was disturbingly familiar to me...Academic high culture, after all, constantly defines itself against the suspect pleasures of the middlebrow" (Radway 1997, 37). And although Fisher and her colleagues were determined to consider only "serious works" (Rubin 1992, 118), the Book-of-the-Month Club *did* prove to be a middlebrow organisation.

When studying the practices of the Book-of-the-Month Club from the inside in the late 1980s, Radway noticed that "although the club's inhouse editors shy away from "trash" in evaluating possible selections, Fisher's criteria of "value, truth, and literary skill" are "secondary to a search for the engaging "personality" and interesting story line" (Rubin 1992, 328). The strong reactions that the book club editors could have to highbrow works

demonstrate their loyalty to the general reader. One editor, Marty Asher, commented on the work of a highbrow writer thus:

Now I can join my colleagues from around the country, from all walks of life, of all ages and say 'I tried to read a(n X) novel.' I got to page four. I'm willing to grant that it's very profound and meaningful because I didn't understand a word of it. Ten years ago I probably would have read 40 pages before coming to this same conclusion. But I'm getting on and life is too short for these intellectual indulgences anymore. Know what I mean? Can I go now?

(Asher in Radway 1997, 71)

Asher's conclusion that "life is too short for these intellectual indulgences" makes an illuminating contrast to Bloom's justification of the canon: "There is only so much time, and time must have a stop, while there is more to read than there ever was before" (Bloom 1995, 30). Bloom sees the limited time we have on earth as yet another reason to read only those truly great canonical works and not waste our time on "mediocrity". Asher, on the other hand, argues that "intellectual indulgences" are a waste of time. Thus, on the issue of which books we should choose to read during our short time of living Bloom and Asher clearly do not agree. The Book-of-the-Month Club was engaged with "serious literature", but according to the club's understanding this literature did not come into conflict with reading pleasure, because they believed serious books "both gratified reader's immediate desires and confirmed their sense of themselves as people willing to be expanded and challenged" (Radway 1997, 102).

Thus, in their efforts to make serious literature more available, the Book-of-the-Month Club was created explicitly to address the general reader (Radway 1997, 94). We have already seen that Bloom also addresses the general reading public with his books. However, like the above comparison of Bloom and Asher demonstrates, Bloom's approach to the task of guiding general readers is quite different from that of the Book-of-the-Month Club editors: "the editors placed themselves and their subscribers somewhere between the ordinary, common reader on one hand and the highly trained professional on the other". Thus, the Book-of-the-Month Club was in effect a middlebrow organisation. Both Canby, the chair of the Selecting Committee from the club's emergence, and the 1980s-executive editor Joe Savago represented the middlebrow taste, and they admitted to enjoy "many different kinds of books" (Radway 1997, 33).

Canby was both interested in and capable of reading highbrow literature. His education from Yale had "endowed him with an appreciation for the complexities of

specifically literary descent and equipped him with the perceptual capacity to identify aesthetic effects” (Radway 1997, 291). At the same time, though, Canby was also dedicated to texts that offered “intense identification and participation”, and he foregrounded the important part that such texts could play in the development of a “love for the experience of reading”. This particular state of reading, in which the reader feels completely immersed in the text, Canby referred to as “deep reading” (Radway 1997, 290). The juxtaposition of texts that are “of specifically literary descent” and texts that offer “intense identification and participation” is not new to us, and can for example be related to Q.D. Leavis’s juxtaposition of proper literature to fiction. Still, the case of Canby does offer a new insight: that both of these kinds of literature can be equally appreciated by a competent reader. This perspective is important to bear in mind for the next chapter’s discussion as well. Rather than asking *Chick or Lit*, perhaps the question we need to ask is: can we value both *Chick and Lit*? Canby valued both books of high literary quality and books that appealed to him on a purely emotional level. That the act of reading should offer the reader a feeling of strong identification with the text, was equally important to the Book-of-the-Month Club judges in the late 1980s.

During her time of observation, Radway noticed that “reading was considered at the club as an event for identification, connection and response” (Radway 1997, 283). The judges were, like Canby, convinced that a state of “deep reading” was not only valuable, but also exactly what the Book-of-the-Month Club subscribers were looking for: “an experience of total immersion, a sense of being surrounded or embraced by a book” (Radway 1997, 283). Savago pointed out that he did not see his appreciation of texts that offered complete identification and immersion to be contradicting with his preference for “literary” books. We remember MacDonald’s account of middlebrow culture as a culture that “pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them” (MacDonald in Rubin 1992, xiv). Thus, according to the critics of middlebrow culture, Canby and Savago’s appreciation of both highbrow and middlebrow literature was problematic. Savago on the other hand rejected that his highbrow taste conflicted with his middlebrow desire: “he did not assume that to value works like these he had to deny different pleasures offered by quite different books” (Radway 1997, 33). This particular point is one of the main issues in Victor Nell’s study of “the psychology of reading for pleasure” (Nell, 1988).

In *Lost in a Book* (1988), Nell claims that the traditional distinctions between lowbrow, middlebrow and highbrow literary tastes are in fact invalid (Nell 1988, 4). In Nell’s opinion, it is pointless to label readers according to such categories, because we are not homogeneous in our reading preferences. One could argue that both Canby, *The Book of-the-*

Month Club judges in general, and Savago offer examples to prove Nell's point. Readers like Canby and Savago do, in the words of Nell, "have the capacity and the desire to enjoy deeply felt and delicately wrought literature", *but* "they continue on occasion and if their consciences allow them, to delight in...the stereotyped narratives that recount the endless victories of invincible heroes and heroines" (Nell 1988, 4). Nell strongly criticises how traditional literary critics have defined themselves in opposition to a lowbrow class of readers. He refers to the traditional belief that "as sophistication grows, coarser tastes wither away" as "the elitist fallacy" (Nell 1988, 4).

Thus, Nell refuses to accept that *any* reader can in fact be purely highbrow, and he refers to statistics from his own research to support this view: when asked to rate their personal pleasure reading, the thirty-three participants in Nell's study claimed that an average of 42,6% of their reading material could be labelled as "trash". Moreover, Nell points out that many of the participants in his research were of "trained minds". One of the participants rated 90% of her/his reading material as "trash". That person was an English Literature Ph.D. student (Nell 1988, 4). Nell's findings are further supported by Radway's experience in the early years of her English studies.

In the introduction to *A Feeling for Books*, Radway describes her personal ambivalence between highbrow and popular literature. Radway became a member of the Book-of-the-Month Club while she was an English graduate student (Radway 1997, 1). According to Radway, the club, and middlebrow culture in general, was "aimed at people like me who wanted desperately to present themselves as educated, sophisticated, and aesthetically articulate" (Radway 1997, 5). However, Radway saw her membership in the Book-of-the-Month Club as something that needed to be kept a secret from both her peers, and herself: "With grim determination I restricted this reading to late at night just before bed and devoted long daylight hours to the business of learning to describe the aesthetic complexities of true literature" (Radway 1997, 3). After having completed her doctoral dissertation Radway was offered a job at an Ivy League university. However, she felt that her entry into the professional, literary circle was "imperfect", both because she was still harbouring a suppressed desire to read less "literate" books, and because she had selected popular culture as her field of specialization (Radway 1997, 5). And she was probably right to assume that her research field would be judged insignificant by some.

It has already been pointed out that Bloom conceives of aesthetic value as the one and only worthy measure of a work's significance, and he regrets the "flight from the aesthetic among so many in my profession, some of whom at least began with the ability to experience

aesthetic value” (Bloom 1995, 17). Thus, Bloom would probably not acknowledge that Radway’s study on popular culture has any relevance to the academic English profession. However, Radway makes a point that her choice of popular culture as a field of specialization was, in part, a protest against the traditional, academic criticism: “it promised a haven from the redundantly masculine world I had elected so unconsciously, a world whose highest accolades were reserved for writers who could display ostentatiously their refusal of all things soft, lush, mushy and feminine” (Radway 1997, 350). As an undergraduate student, Radway had been so focused on achieving the cultural authority of a literary academic, that she had uncritically accepted the established norms of English studies: “the way of reading we were taught required our subordination to an all-powerful text, whose flinty, virile power was always highlighted by its rejection of feminine sentimentalism. It did not occur to me to ask what was wrong with sentiment” (Radway 1997, 350). Thus, Radway draws attention to what she experienced as a “still-masculine image of professionalism” (Radway 1997, 349).

This brief account of the Book-of-the-Month Club has once again demonstrated the complexity of discussing literary value and quality. The Book-of-the-Month Club was recognised as middlebrow, but the judges and editors were highly educated professionals whose literary tastes could be defined as highbrow. Investigating the Book-of-the-Month Club has proven that literary evaluations are invested with the issue of literary value and quality, both for the highbrow academic and for the middlebrow reviewer. Furthermore, the distinction between highbrow and middlebrow has been blurred by the recognition that readers might equally appreciate both highbrow literature *and* middlebrow fiction. In the next chapter we will problematize these distinctions even further when we turn to lowbrow genre fiction.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to investigate how literary value relates to the act of pleasure reading. Bloom is concerned with urging readers to pursue “difficult pleasures” because these are the experiences that can reward the reader with a feeling of the “poetic sublime”. To Bloom, the books that offer “difficult pleasures” are the only ones that hold aesthetic value, and the intrinsic aesthetic value of a text is the only measure of its literary value. Furthermore, he claims that the books of the Western Canon, and the works of Shakespeare in particular, are the most valuable texts, also from a universal perspective.

The perception that a text or writer can be deemed universally superior is challenged by Smith. In the essay 'Contingencies of Value', Smith points out how great Western writers, such as Shakespeare, might actually be worthless to a lot of people (Smith 1984, 35). Furthermore, Smith questions that literary value can be evaluated in terms of an intrinsic quality that texts are proven to either hold, or lack. Rather than universality and objectivity, Smith stresses qualities such as mutability and diversity as essential when discussing literary value. Finally, Smith argues that the value of any literary evaluation is contingent, and dependent on the personal needs and interests of each individual reader.

A focus on individual readers is central also to Ohmann, Kaplan and Rose. Ohmann's route to candidacy for inclusion in the canon sets out from the premise that the book first becomes a bestseller. Thus, Ohmann underscores the importance of appealing to the common reader in the process of canonization. Kaplan and Rose give an example of how Ohmann's route could be applied to a specific canonization in their essay 'The Power of the Common Reader: The Case of Doris Lessing'. Kaplan and Rose point out how Lessing's ability to appeal to readers on a personal level was crucial to why the first Lessing-scholars simply "had to" choose her work for their dissertations. Thus, with canonizations such as that of Lessing, we are getting closer to a connection between literary value and reading pleasure. And when turning to Radway and her study on the Book-of-the-Month Club, the reading act becomes purely pleasure focused.

The Book-of-the-Month Club was concerned that the books distributed were serious literature, and claimed they would send out "the best" book each month to their subscribers. What a closer look at the club shows, though, is that their definition of "serious literature" was not necessarily equal to that of traditional literary critics. The Book-of-the-Month Club editors and judges first of all valued books for their ability to promote feelings of identification and participation. Consequently, they were looking to give their readers books that offered "an experience of total immersion, a sense of being surrounded or embraced by a book" (Radway 1997, 283). A valuable book is from this perspective a book that offers pleasure in reading.

This chapter's discussion has sought to demonstrate that the issue of defining literary value is complicated by, in part, individual tastes and preferences. We can turn to Bloom when we need someone to tell us what texts are valuable. Bloom has written several books that will let us know what we should read, and what kind of books will be a waste of time. His title as Sterling Professor of the Humanities and English, and the amount and popularity of his books on the field, surely grant him the authority to express himself on the matter. However,

as Smith explicitly points out, the value of any evaluation is dependent on the needs and preferences of each individual reader. What we still need to ask, though, is: does this contingency of literary evaluations make it *impossible* to define literary quality and value? This chapter has brought attention to how the middlebrow reader's perception of literary value might differ from that of the professional reader. But does this mean that middlebrow and highbrow perceptions are equally valuable from a literary perspective? Does the relativity of literary evaluations make all literary judgments equally valid and right? If so, then what is the point of discussing literary value and quality at all?

In the next and final main chapter of the thesis we will explore different perceptions of literary value even further when we introduce a lowbrow perspective to our discussion. Investigating the chick lit genre will both provide us with a lowbrow perspective on literary value and enable us to explore the possibility that even lowbrow genre fiction might hold literary value.

4.The Value of Chick Lit

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the chick lit genre as an example of writing that is defined in opposition to serious literature. The previous chapters have served to demonstrate that there *is* a juxtaposition of popular fiction and serious literature. In this chapter we will go deeper into *how* popular fiction and serious literature differs, and *why* this difference matters. What are the differences between Chick and Lit? How is the chick lit debate engaged with the issue of literary quality and value? And why does it matter whether we choose to read Chick or Lit?

So far, this thesis has been concerned with investigating literary value and quality from an historical perspective. Furthermore, the emergence of mass produced popular literature and how it has functioned in relation to traditional evaluations of literary quality has been central. To Arnold, only the best highbrow poetry is of literary value, and popular literature is perceived by him as something to be juxtaposed to culture (Arnold 1882, 44). Q.D. Leavis describes the popular novel as “a menace to the old standards” (Leavis, 1932, 150).

These old standards of canonical literature are challenged by perspectives that consider canon making a culturally relative process. Eagleton (2008, 208) argues that literary

canons are of a “chancy nature”, and Smith also points out the cultural relativity of the Western Canon (Smith 1984, 34). Thus, both scholarly perspectives such as those of Eagleton and Smith, and the development of mass produced fiction can be seen to problematize and challenge traditional views on literary quality.

In the previous chapter, the thesis turned to research on middlebrow culture by Rubin and Radway in order to develop the discussion of mass produced fiction and its relation to traditional standards of value. The chapter sought to demonstrate how an investigation of middlebrow fiction, and the distribution of books through the Book-of-the-Month Club, offers a different perspective on literary value from that of literary critics like Arnold, the Leavises and Bloom.

According to the Book-of-the-Month Club judges, a valuable reading experience for the middlebrow reader is “an experience of total immersion, a sense of being surrounded or embraced by a book” (Radway 1997, 283). This description of middlebrow reading brings associations to the typical romance reader as she is depicted on the cover of Radway’s famous study *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1991). But how does the reading of lowbrow genre fiction such as romance novels compare to that of middlebrow fiction? What separates the middlebrow from the lowbrow, and how is literary value considered in the eyes of the romance reader?

This chapter will begin by taking a closer look at the history of the romance novel because of the close link between the Harlequin romance and chick lit. Scholars on chick lit describe the genre as “a postfeminist alternative to the Harlequin” (Harzewski 2011, 26). This quote from Harzewski demonstrates both that chick lit bears connections to the Harlequin romance and that it is connected to the idea of postfeminism. Thus, before we can delve into the chick lit debate, it is necessary to take a closer look both at what the Harlequin romance is, and what postfeminism is. Important works for this will be Radways’s *Reading the Romance* (1991), Harzewski’s *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011), Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young’s *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies* (2008) and Diane Negra’s *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self In Postfeminism* (2009).

Furthermore, this chapter will explore the question of literary quality and value through the chick lit genre. Important works for this will be *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (Ferriss and Young, 2006) and *Chick Lit: The Stylistics of Cappuccino Fiction* (Montoro, 2012). Moreover, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the reclamation of self in postfeminism* (Negra, 2009) and *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (Harzeswki, 2011) will continue to be central. We will seek to answer questions like: how have these scholars engaged with

the issue of literary value in their work on chick lit? How do they explain the massive commercial success of the genre? And what exactly are the characteristics of a chick lit novel?

This last question on how what characterizes a chick lit novel will continue to be explored through the two short story collections *This is Not Chick Lit* (Merrick 2006) and *This is Chick-Lit* (Baratz-Logstedt, 2006). These are both collections of short stories, and we will take a closer look at some of these stories in order to discuss what the differences between Chick and Lit are. Moreover, the anthologies are central in a specific debate on the value of chick lit: *This is Chick-Lit* was published in response to *This is Not Chick Lit*, and the editors of the two anthologies have contrasting views on the chick lit genre. Elizabeth Merrick, the editor of *This is Not Chick Lit*, describes chick lit as “white girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while shopping, alternately cheating on or adhering to her diet, dodging her boss, and enjoying the occasional teary-eyed lunch with her token Sassy Gay Friend” (Merrick 2006, vii). Lauren Baratz-Logstedt, the editor of *This is Chick-Lit*, seeks to prove that chick lit is *not* “all Manolos and Cosmos cookie-cutter books about women juggling relationships and careers in the new millenium” (Baratz-Logstedt 2006, 4). We will take a closer look at this specific debate, and explore the reception of these two different anthologies of twenty-first century women’s literature. We will also analyse two short stories in some more detail, one from each of the two anthologies. This will enable us to see how the texts themselves either confirm or contradict Merrick’s claim that “Chick Lit’s formula numbs our senses. Literature, by contrast, grants us access to countless new cultures, places and inner lives” (Merrick 2006, ix). Studying the contrasting views that Merrick and Baratz-Logstedt have on chick lit opens up for a discussion on the consequences of the chick lit phenomenon. From a traditional feminist perspective, chick lit is offering a narrow representation of women’s lives and obstructing serious women writers. From this perspective, chick lit is limiting of both women readers and women writers. On the other hand, from a postfeminist perspective, chick lit is offering readers an escape from their daily responsibilities and worries, and giving many writers the chance to be published. From this perspective chick lit is liberating to both women readers and women writers. Thus, the dialogue between feminism and postfeminism will stay essential as we explore the characteristics and the consequences of chick lit.

In order to bring the discussion of women’s literature fully up to our own day, this chapter will round off by considering how the rating of books online are one example of contemporary evaluation of literary value. Marian Keyes’s authorship will be essential in this

part of the discussion, and we will examine how the critical reception of her books differs from the readers's ratings that her books receive on web pages like the Chicklit Club (www.chicklitclub.com) and Goodreads (www.goodreads.com). The ambition is that by the close of this chapter we will have a deeper understanding of what the chick lit debate looks like, and why the debate *matters*.

One of the central aims of this thesis is to explore how contemporary women writers and women readers are judged in light of traditional standards of literary value. The previous chapters in this thesis have been concerned with reaching an understanding of these traditional standards. In this chapter we turn to women writers and women readers: the continued popularity of chick lit novels proves that the chick lit genre is a phenomenon that concerns a vast amount of women writers and women readers of our contemporary society.

4.2 Women and the Romance Novel

Chick lit has been described as “the daughter of the romance novel” (Merrick 2006, vii). This chapter will begin by taking a closer look at the traditional romance novel in order to provide an outline of the background for the development of the chick lit genre. Stephanie Harzewski offers an extensive insight into the romance novel in her work on establishing a historical literary framework for the chick lit genre. Harzewski draws on work by Annette Townsend when she calls attention to the long tradition of denigrating the romance novel, which according to Townsend can be traced all the way back to the end of the sixteenth century (Harzewski 2011, 42). Harzewski also refers to the American poet John Trumbull, whose couplets illustrate particularly well how the act of romance reading was mocked in the eighteenth century:

For while she reads romance, the Fair one
Fails not to think herself the Heroine;
For ev'ry glance, or smile, or gace,
She finds resemblance in her face,
Thinks while the fancied beauties strike,
Two peas were never more alike,
Expects the world to fall before her,
And ev'ry fop she meets adore her.

(Trumbull in Harzewski 2011, 43)

This piece by Trumbull, which was written in 1773, is making fun of not only the romance novel, but even more so of the romance reader. Although the romance novel can be traced many centuries back, we will in the following be focusing on the Harlequin romance as an example of how the romance novel developed in the last half of the twentieth century: who was the typical Harlequin reader, and was the act of romance reading still being ridiculed two hundred years after Trumbull's time?

The publishing house Harlequin Enterprises plays an essential role in the development of the romance genre in the twentieth century. Harzewski points out how Harlequin by 1964 was publishing exclusively romance fiction (Harzewski 2011, 26). At the time of writing, Harlequin has sold more than six billion books worldwide (Harlequin 2016). In her study *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1991), Radway also points out the central role of Harlequin Enterprises (Radway 1991, 39). Consequently, her study on romance readers is also a study on the Harlequin reader. The term romance reader will in the following therefore be used as an umbrella term that encompasses both the typical Harlequin reader and the more general romance reader. Radway's study offers us useful information on the romance reader. Let us therefore take a closer look at what Radway's study reveals.

At the core of Radway's study lies the ethnographic research she performed in a Midwestern city in the USA called Smithon. Radway interviewed customers of a book store run by owner Dorothy Evans, and sought to discover how romance readers value their reading material and the act of romance reading (Radway 1991, 47). Radway's choice of book store and customer circle, in the study referred to as the Smithon women, was not unintentional. Dorothy Evans did not just offer her customers regular reading advice as they came to her store, but also made her own newsletter on romances which included reviews of the latest publications within the genre. Thus, Dorothy Evans, or Dot, is more dedicated to the romance genre than the average book store owner.⁹

Dot is a proper advocate for the romance genre, and she is engaged with encouraging the readers of her newsletter to feel proud of their reading. Moreover, she aims through her newsletter and engagement with customers to "provide them with a model of indignant response that they can draw upon when challenged by men who claim superior taste" (Radway 1991, 54). This is welcomed by the Smithon women who struggle with the issue of having to defend their reading to their husbands.

⁹ Dorothy Evans is not the real name of Radway's informant, but a pseudonym created for the purpose of Radway's study.

When responding to Radway's questions, the Smithon women admitted to feeling both guilty and ashamed of their romance reading (Radway 1991, 90). In the context of the present thesis and its focus on literary value and quality, one might instantly assume that such a notion of guilt must be connected to the critical, literary status of what is being read. The literary and social status of the romance novel also seems to be Dot's concern when she is encouraging her customers to stand up to "men who claim superior taste" (Radway 1991, 54). However, the romance genre's status as lowbrow fiction does not seem to be the issue for the Smithon women.

When Radway's informants are asked to explain why they feel guilty about their reading, the issue of quality or value of their reading material is not mentioned. What does make them feel guilty about reading, however, is the amount of time that is spent on reading, which they feel is "stealing" time from children, house and husband (Radway 1991, 103). A second reason that they give for feeling guilty about their passion for romances is the amount of money that they spend on books. (Radway 1991, 103). Both of these two concerns, spending time and spending money, could be understood as an expression of these women's feeling of responsibility for their family and the household. Radway reports that the Smithon women do feel selfish, both for buying and for reading their romance novels (Radway 1991, 103). Still, the romance readers also defend their reading, for example by comparing it to their husbands' interest in sports. By equating romance reading to other leisure activities like watching sports, the Smithon women defend their "right to escape" (Radway 1991, 103).

The third explanation that these women give for their feeling of guilt, is the only one that is concerned with the actual nature of their reading material. The Smithon women worry that the graphic representations on the front covers of the romances are making the books look like pornographic novels.¹⁰ This is problematic because people might get "the wrong picture", the romance readers explain (Radway 1991, 103). Thus, the women in Radway's study do not think that the illustrations of "cleavage and nudity" on the romance covers are representative of the books' contents (Radway 1991, 103). Another possibility is that the readers are too embarrassed to admit that what they are reading could be compared to pornography. The introduction of this thesis refers to the massive popularity of E.L James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. These books are explicitly erotic, and the commercial success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* indicates that erotic fiction is becoming more socially acceptable. The informants of Radway's study, however, refuse to acknowledge that romances are erotic, but

¹⁰ In Norway, the romance genre is commonly referred to as "husmorporno", directly translated "housewife-porn" in English.

rather claim that they are reading to learn about “foreign places and times” (1991, 60), and thus that they are reading to be instructed (Radway 1991, 107). In this way, the Smithon women might be engaging with the question of literary value and quality after all. We need to look into what the romance readers say about their reasons for reading.

Radway reports that “education” was one of the first responses she got from the Smithon women when informally talking to them about their reasons for reading. However, when the women were to answer this question in an anonymous questionnaire, forty-five percent of the informants named “simple relaxation” as their number one reason for reading. Only fourteen percent said that their main ambition is to “learn about foreign places and times” (Radway 1991, 60). Radway claims that the discrepancy between the women’s spontaneous answers and the results of her questionnaire testifies to the romance readers’ need to justify their reading. The educational aspect of romance reading becomes a “secondary justification”, Radway says, “that has been articulated by the women to convince sceptical husbands, friends, interviewers that the novels are not merely frothy, purposeless entertainment” (Radway 1991, 107). Thus, what Radway’s work shows is that also the romance readers are caught up with the question of quality and value of books. In order to demonstrate the value of romance novels, romance readers “stress the books’ educational function” (Radway 1991, 112). They insist that the act of reading romances is actually changing them, making them not only more educated but also more independent: when reading about intelligent and independent heroines “their self-perception is favourably transformed” (Radway 1991, 102). The romance readers feel inspired by the heroines in their books, but Radway brings attention to the fact that the main focus of a romance novel is that the strong heroine’s characteristics are making her attractive to a man (Radway 1991, 102).

However, Radway also stresses how the act of romance reading itself can be seen as a “declaration of independence” (Radway 1991, 211). Even though the Smithon women admit to feeling both guilty, ashamed and selfish about their reading, they also claim that “they too have a right to escape” (Radway 1991, 103). And the amount of books that these women read shows that they *do* claim their right to escape from their daily “duties” as mothers and wives: more than one third of the Smithon women read from five to nine romances every week (Radway 1991, 60).

Radway conducted her research on romance readers in the late 1980s, and one question that arises from the fact that this research is not quite up to date is: to what degree can the experiences of the Smithon women be taken to represent the experiences of the contemporary romance reader? A 2015 advertisement-video from Harlequin signals that

publishers still portray the woman reader as using romance reading as an escape from her responsibilities as a mother and wife (Harlequin 2015). The one-minute long video titled 'Love of Reading Lasts a Lifetime' pictures a teenage girl who turns into a woman, wife, and eventually mother, all the while keeping her Harlequin novel close to her. In fact, it is when tucking a romance novel into her purse that she bumps into the tall, dark and handsome man who later becomes her husband. Even more essential, though, is how the romance-reading mother is presented in the video: she paves her way through kids' toys that are covering the floor, makes it to her favourite chair, sits down with the laundry basket beside her, and reads. This 2015-representation of romance reading signals that women might still be identifying romance reading as a protest against the responsibilities they feel as mothers and wives.

The scope of the present thesis does not allow for a detailed investigation of how the female gender role has developed during the last centuries. However, when the thesis turns to chick lit the issue of women's role as nurturing and caring, and particularly as mothers, will again become relevant. Diane Negra uses the term "retreatism" to refer to postfeminist culture's "romantization of female withdrawal from the working world" in her study *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (Negra 2009, 25). The balance between working life and family life is a central topic in much of chick lit fiction, and will be further explored in chapter 4.4, 'Women and the Chick Lit Novel'.

Radway stresses that it is essentially important to investigate the act of romance reading from a feminist perspective. She is particularly concerned with the responsibility that feminists like herself and her readers have of picking up on "these small protests" (Radway 1991, 220). Radway claims that "romance reading originates in very real dissatisfactions", and thus she draws attention to the romance reader's feeling of responsibility for house, children and husband. Radway points to the act of romance reading as a "limited, but valid protest" (Radway 2011, 220). Radway's focus needs to be questioned though, and the issue of responsibility is key here: Radway stresses the responsibility that feminists have of being alert to "these small protests". But does this mean that the women represented as romance readers in Radway's study are free from all such responsibility? Even if their act of reading can be interpreted as a sign of protest, do not these women too have a responsibility to be more actively engaged with the feminist cause? Radway is right to point out the connections between feminism and romance reading, but might be too quick to judge the romance readers' protests as valid.

This brief investigation of the 1980s Harlequin romance reader has shown that also lowbrow readers are engaged with the issue of literary value and quality. Romance readers do

not agree that their reading material is “merely frothy, purposeless entertainment” (Radway 1991, 107). On the contrary, readers insist that romances are valuable reading material because they are making them both more educated and independent. This lowbrow perspective on literary value and quality needs to be challenged, and particularly the view on romance reading as a feminist act must be further investigated.

Harzewski also points out the romance novel’s link to the feminist movement: “While the market for the Harlequin romance exploded with the advent of second-wave feminism, chick lit emerged in what has been described as a postfeminism era, and it has been frequently pointed to as evidence, if not the cause, of feminism’s debilitation” (Harzewski 2011, 8). Thus, both the Harlequin romance and the chick lit novel are connected to movements in the feminist tradition, according to Harzewski. In the following, we will investigate how popular women’s writing relates to feminism by focusing on the chick lit phenomenon. Are chick lit novels engaged with the issue of feminism? If so, are they communicating and causing “valid protests”? Or do chick lit novels rather turn out to work against the feminist cause? Before we investigate the chick lit genre in detail, it is necessary to take a brief look at what the feminist cause is, and how postfeminism fits into this perspective.

4.3 Feminism and Postfeminism

In their book *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies* (2008) Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young give a summary of what they see as the main characteristics that separate feminism from postfeminism. Ferriss and Young will be quoted at length here, as they offer us both a summary of second wave feminism’s concerns and a concise overview of how postfeminism can be distinguished from the feminist tradition:

Feminism:

- Reliance on political action, political movements, and political solutions;
- The primacy of equality; resistance to and critique of the patriarchy;
- Choice is collective — it refers to women’s right not to have children and to enter careers and professions formerly closed to them;
- A rejection — or at least questioning — of femininity;
- Suspicion of and resistance to media-driven popular culture and the consumerism it supports;
- Humor is based on the disjunction between traditional women’s roles and women as powerful, independent people.

Postfeminism:

- The personal as political; agenda is replaced by attitude;
- A rejection of second-wave anger and blame against the patriarchy;
- Choice is individual — whether of family, career, cosmetic surgery, or nail color;
- A return to femininity and sexuality;
- Pleasure in media-driven popular culture and an embracing of the joys of consumerism;
- Humor is based on the discrepancy between the ideals put forward by both feminism and the media, and the reality of life in the modern world; as such, the humor of postfeminism is often ironically self-deprecating.

(Ferriss and Young 2008, 3-4)

Many of the postfeminist concerns that Ferriss and Young point out will be crucial to the discussion in chapter 4.4. called “Women and the Chick Lit Novel”. When exploring the chick lit genre, postfeminism’s embrace of consumerism and return to femininity will be particularly central. However, there is one question that demands our attention before we can delve into the chick lit genre: how can postfeminism be distinguished from third wave feminism?

We have just seen that postfeminism sees choice as individual and personal rather than political and collective. Furthermore, a focus on the pleasures of consumerism is central in postfeminism. However, individualism and consumerism are also described as characteristics of third wave feminism. Julia T. Wood notes that “some, but not all, women who identify as third-wave feminists embrace traditional ‘girl culture’ by placing a premium on being pretty, feminine, sexy and having the latest fashions” (Wood 2015, 76). Thus, Wood comments on the third wave view that “there is no contradiction between being feminist and being sexy” (Wood 2015, 76). Wood also refers to individualism, which she explains as a reflection of the personal politics of third wave feminism: “third wavers claim that because women are so different and their issues are so diverse, there can be no political agenda” (Wood 2015, 78). In some respect then, third wave feminism seems to concur with postfeminist ideas. So how are we to separate the two ideologies? Harzewski’s *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011) might offer us some answers.

Harzewski recognises the confusion that exists between postfeminism and third wave feminism. To highlight the complexity of the term, Harzewski refers to Lisa Yaszek’s confession that the meaning of the term postfeminism has been “somewhat hazy for many thinkers, even college-level instructors of gender studies such as herself” (Harzewski 2011, 151). Harzewski stresses that “the third wave should be seen not as a stage prior to

postfeminism, but as recent feminist nonfiction produced by social theorists” (Harewski 2011, 153). Rebecca Walker is one writer of third wave nonfiction that Harzewski calls attention to. Walker, who is daughter of the famous writer and second wave feminist Alice Walker, was the first writer to use the term ‘third wave feminism’ (Harzewski 2011, 151). Walker is a founding member of the Third Wave Foundation, which was established in 1996. Her anthology *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and the Changing Face of Feminism* (1995) is considered one of the most influential works of third wave feminism (Harzewski 2011, 152). Thus, Harzewski distinctly places Walker within a third wave feminist tradition. However, the relationship between third wave feminism and postfeminism is once again blurred when we consider Diane Negra’s discussion of one of Walker’s publications. We need to take a look at what Negra says, in order to explore the differences between third wave feminism and postfeminism further.

In the second chapter of *What a Girl Wants?* (2009), Negra explores family values in a postfeminist context. Negra calls attention to the contradictions between second wave feminism and postfeminism, and claims that “the postfeminist celebration of mothering reaches heights that would have been unimaginable a generation ago” (Negra 2009, 65). It is when discussing postfeminist accounts of motherhood that Negra refers to Walker’s *Baby Love: Choosing Motherhood after a Lifetime of Ambivalence* (2005). The issue of motherhood will be one of our central focuses for exploring the chick lit genre, and Walker’s account illustrates particularly well the contrasting views on motherhood of second wave feminists and postfeminists. Negra puts it like this:

What is particularly striking in Walker’s account is her construction of a specifically generationally-marked contrast between what she represents as her utterly healthy and natural desire to be a mother and the negative legacies of her own mother who seeks (unconsciously or otherwise) to smother her daughter. This contrast is striking because Walker’s mother is the Pulitzer Prize-winning feminist novelist Alice Walker, a woman whom her daughter seems to classify within a set of unnatural, angry “witch feminists” when she writes that “These mothers did not seem to know, with all their potions and philosophies, their desire to rehabilitate ancient scripts of gender and identity, that there is a natural order, and that natural order involves passing the scepter to offspring with unconditional love and pride”.

(Negra 2009, 66-67)

Negra refers to Walker’s account of motherhood as an example of postfeminist “mommism” (Negra 2009, 70). This “mommism” will, together with consumerism, be essential when we

take a closer look at the chick lit genre. The above quote shows that, in spite of being a Third Wave Foundation founding member, Walker is according to Negra also taking part in postfeminist activism. Walker's resentment towards earlier generations of "witch feminists" is agreeing with postfeminism's "rejection of second-wave anger" (Ferriss and Young 2008, 4). What is more, Walker's reoccurring use of the term "natural" might even bring associations to first wave antifeminists perception of "women's natural roles as wives and mothers" (Wood 2015, 64).

It has proven a difficult task to pin down the differences between third wave feminism and postfeminism. The case of Rebecca Walker testifies to the complexity of discussing movements in feminist tradition. Is Walker a third wave feminist or a postfeminist — or both? And more importantly: how is postfeminism affecting contemporary chick lit? Is postfeminism's "celebration of motherhood" (Negra 2009, 65) representative of contemporary women's values? Do women of the twenty-first century long for a return to domesticity? In the following, we will be exploring the chick lit genre as an example of popular culture and, more specifically, an example of postfeminist fiction. The most crucial question that we need to bear in mind is: what are the consequences of postfeminism's influence on chick lit novels?

4.4 Women and the Chick Lit Novel

We remember that Ferriss and Young (2008, 4) point out a return to femininity and pleasure in consumerism as two important characteristics of postfeminism. The following discussion will focus on both femininity, more specifically the celebration of mothering, and consumerism as central themes in chick lit novels. Before we look into how these specific matters are dealt with in chick lit, though, we need a brief introduction to the history of the genre.

In 1995, Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell published an anthology of short stories by women writers. *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* was well received by critics and also received academic attention (Mazza 2006, 19). Mazza and DeShell were happy that their work was being validated by both critics and scholars, and saw their anthology as representing fiction that "transgressed the mainstream" and "challenged the status quo" (Mazza 2006, 21). The short stories in *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* were followed by a second anthology called *Chick Lit 2: No Chick Vics*, which was published early in 1996. Both anthologies were celebrated as experimental avant-garde fiction, and the chick lit term was born. However, a

New Yorker editorial published in May 1996 was to change the understanding of Mazza and DeShell's term.

In his editorial 'Hear me Purr: Maureen Dowd and the rise of postfeminist chick-lit' James Wolcott characterised Mazza and DeShell's anthology as "pop fiction", and claimed that the concerns of the anthology's protagonists were "fairly divided between getting laid and not getting laid" (Mazza 2006, 22). Thus, in the words of Harzewski (2011, 45), the chick lit term was "appropriated" by Wolcott. In a defense of Mazza and DeShell's anthology, Harzewski claims that Wolcott's editorial was an attempt to discredit "the original artistic and social intent of the anthology" (Harzewski 2001, 150). Furthermore, Harzewski refers to "two types of chick lit" and points out the significant differences between the fiction of Mazza and DeShell's anthology and the commercial fiction that has later been characterized as chick lit:

The edgy and in some instances sardonic quality of the narrators in Mazza and DeShell's anthology differs significantly from the confused though upbeat temper of the commercial counterpart. While the experimental volume featured a wide gamut of sexual and bodily acts, mainstream chick lit's representations of female sexuality are largely heterosexual. Both types of women's writing reject or complicate the figure of the Superwoman, yet the original version does not share commercial chick lit's capitulation to the marriage plot and investment in romantic ideology.

(Harzewski 2011, 150)

Harzewski discusses Mazza and DeShell's anthology as a counterpart to commercial mainstream chick lit, but also calls attention to the fact that they are both examples of women's writing. The issue of how to define and evaluate women's writing is essential in the debate between Merrick's and Baratz-Logsted's anthologies *This is Not Chick Lit* and *This is Chick-Lit*. Can the opposition between original chick lit and commercial chick lit that Harzewski refers to be related to the way Merrick's anthology *This is Not Chick Lit* seeks to oppose commercial chick lit? Is the fiction in Merrick's anthology an example of original chick lit like Mazza and DeShell intended it to be? Merrick's and Baratz-Logsted's anthologies will be explored further, but first, let us return to how Mazza and DeShell reacted to the appropriation of the chick lit term.

Mazza contributed to Ferriss and Young's *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* with an essay called 'Who's Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre' (Mazza 2006, 18). The latter part of this title refers to how the meaning of the chick lit label changed during 1996. Chick lit went from representing experimental avant-garde fiction, such as Mazza's own anthology, to representing an entirely different kind of fiction, and

Mazza's description of this development as a "perversion of a genre" leaves no room for misunderstanding. The word "perversion" signals Mazza's attitude towards what Harzewski refers to as commercialised chick lit, and Mazza clarifies that "when we titled our anthology *Chick Lit*, it was not to reduce the contributing authors into shopping-and dieting airheads" (Mazza 2006, 27). This statement shows Mazza's frustration with how the term chick lit had changed and how it had come, all of a sudden, to refer to a whole different kind of literature than the works of fiction in *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*. The statement also reveals what Mazza thinks about this new kind of chick lit in terms of value. Understanding Mazza and DeShell's anthology as chick lit, after the meaning of the term had been altered, suddenly meant reducing the literary value assigned to the contributing authors because of the term's association with commercialisation.

Mazza's reactions to the appropriation of the chick lit term demonstrates how the term is invested with the issue of both commercial and literary value. The question of literary value, and how it can be seen in opposition to commercial value, is essential to the present thesis. We have seen that chick lit, from its very inception, has been questioned in terms of value: Mazza's essay on the early history of the chick lit term illustrates how chick lit has become a label that refers to mainstream, commercialised women's literature. In the following, the term chick lit will be used to refer to this "new" kind of chick lit. This is obviously a kind of writing that Mazza does not want to be associated with, but does she mean to say that authors of commercialised chick lit *are* "shopping-and dieting airheads"? Let us take a brief look at how shopping and consumerism is represented in chick lit.

Sophie Kinsella's books about Becky Bloomwood are particularly well suited to demonstrate the focus on consumerism in chick lit. Kinsella has written eight books about the "shopaholic" Becky Bloomwood. *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* was published in 2000, followed by *Shopaholic Abroad* (2001), *Shopaholic Ties the Knot* (2002), *Shopaholic & Sister* (2004), *Shopaholic & Baby* (2007), *Mini Shopaholic* (2010) and *Shopaholic to the Stars* (2014) (Kinsella 2015). The books in Kinsella's shopaholic series centre around the protagonist Becky's obsession with beautiful commodities, and with the act of shopping itself. Anna Kiernan puts it like this: "the mere thought of shopping alleviates her worries and promises diversion" (Ferriss and Young 2006, 222). Thus, shopping offers escape for Becky Bloomwood in the same way that reading about her can offer readers a way to escape. However, it is not only the act of reading the shopaholic books that offers an escape from everyday worries, but also the act of buying the books. Thus, the books offer readers an instant relief from their own consumerist cravings. The covers of the shopaholic books are

without exception dominated by an abundance of shopping bags, which makes an interesting parallel to a particular illustration on the author's web page: the website's overview of Kinsella's published books is introduced by an illustration of shopping bags that are overflowing with *shopaholic books*. This signals to readers that not only reading but *buying* the shopaholic books will offer satisfaction. The books themselves become commodities.

This idea of chick lit books as commodities relates to Rocio Montoro's description of the chick lit genre as "cappuccino fiction": in *Chick Lit: The Stylistics of Cappuccino Fiction* (2012) Montoro argues that the label cappuccino fiction

conjures up images of a kind of aspirational lifestyle among the females of the genre, symptomatic of a kind of middle class existence which also encodes certain urbanite and consumerist values of the society these females live in and which is so often depicted in these novels

(Montoro 2012, 15)

The chick lit novel is, just like a nice cup of cappuccino, one of the commodities that many contemporary women readers crave. These readers are constantly searching for new chick lit titles. Montoro puts it like this: "Chick Lit readers have become faithful and avid consumers of the genre" (Montoro 2012, 179).

Montoro's description of chick lit readers as "faithful and avid consumers" bears resemblance to the typical Harlequin reader. We remember from Radway's research that more than one third of the Smithon women read from five to nine romances every week (Radway 1991, 60). Thus, when it comes to the actual consumption of books, not much seems to have changed from the 1980s Harlequin reader to the contemporary chick lit reader. However, Harzewski points out the focus on consumerism as one of the characteristics that *separates* the chick lit novel from the Harlequin romance. Harzewski claims that in chick lit commodities have been given "such a central position that they come to displace the hero" (Harzewski 2011, 33). In other words, *how* romance novels are consumed might perhaps not have changed much, but what women read *about* has. This is not to say that the love plot is not important in chick lit novels. Rather, it simply confirms that the chick lit genre is focused on representing the concerns of twenty-first century women. Aside from shopping, this includes the postfeminist issue of how to juggle family life with successful careers, and we will now turn to investigate this topic in some more detail.

In *What a Girl Wants?* (2009), Negra offers a thorough investigation of how motherhood is represented in modern popular culture. Moreover, Negra points out that the

problematizing of motherhood in popular culture is not isolated from, but rather interrelated to the genre's focus on consumerism. This point is particularly useful for the present discussion, and enables us to see how both of these chick lit themes, consumerism and motherhood, are part of a larger postfeminist trend. Negra explains: "Popular culture insistently asserts that if women can productively manage home, time, work, and their commodity choices, they will be rewarded with a more authentic, intact and achieved self" (Negra 2009, 5). Here, Negra brings out what twenty-first century popular culture communicates to its consumers: that they should strive towards "having it all". Negra also seems to suggest that the general motivation behind consuming popular culture, like for example chick lit novels, is to arrive at a "more authentic, intact and achieved self". The question of why and how we choose our reading material has already been touched upon, and we remember how the highbrow pursuit of the "poetic sublime" differs from the middlebrow pursuit of "intense identification". We will return to this issue when exploring the popular and critical perception of the value of chick lit. First, let us take a closer look at how motherhood is represented and depicted in chick lit in order to investigate how the novels might be affecting the values and attitudes of readers.

Negra's primary concern is with the movie format, but many of the films that she discusses are chick lit novel film adaptations. One example of this is Allison Pearson's novel *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002), which was made into a movie in 2011 starring Sarah Jessica Parker as Kate Reddy.¹¹ Kate is a working mother who is fighting a constant battle to stay on top of her 'responsibilities' as a wife, a mother and a fund manager. The question of responsibility becomes essential in this context, and one might ask why *men* are not reading books about how to balance their careers with their responsibilities as husbands and fathers. Chick lit is considered women's literature, and Negra confirms that "a great number of fictional and non-fictional postfeminist texts embed the assumption that women remain uniquely responsible for the conditions of family life" (Negra 2009, 152). Does this mean that chick lit works to problematize women's advancement in working life, rather than to problematize how their traditional roles as caretakers are obstructing their professional advancement? According to Negra, the answer is: yes, popular culture is representing working life as an obstruction to domesticity, rather than the other way around.

Popular culture is contributing to what Negra describes as a "romantization of female withdrawal from the working world" (Negra 2009, 25). By referring to Lisa Belkin's 2003

¹¹ Sarah Jessica Parker also stars as Carrie Bradshaw in the HBO-series *Sex and the City*, which is based on Candace Bushnell's novel of the same title. Both the novel and the television series are important and influential examples of postfeminist culture.

New York Times article ‘The Opt-Out Revolution’, Negra calls attention to how women at the turn of the millennium were opting out of the career race. It became a trend for “well-educated, affluent (largely white) professional women” to leave paid work in order to stay at home with their children (Negra 2009, 25). We have already discussed how the postfeminist view on motherhood contradicts that of second wave feminism, and Negra claims that “retreatism is emerging as one of the key social practices of postfeminist culture” (Negra 2009, 25). The present discussion is partly concerned with investigating whether the act of reading chick lit has unfavourable consequences. Therefore, the question for us becomes: is popular culture, and chick lit novels in particular, affecting, or simply representing what women want?

In the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which was first published in 1944, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer discuss how popular culture affects the masses. Their account of what they call “the culture industry” is particularly helpful for investigating the issue of how chick lit novels affect readers. Popular chick lit novels are embraced by a vast amount of women readers and typically become *New York Times* bestsellers. We will later see how the reception of Marian Keyes’s books demonstrates the popularity of the chick lit genre. Moreover, the example of Keyes testifies to the loyalty of chick lit readers: chick lit readers are devoted to the genre in general, and to their favourite writers in particular. In light of the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer, this loyalty can be understood as proof of how chick lit readers have been successfully manipulated by commercial forces into believing that chick lit is everything they want and need. In the introduction to this chapter, the following question was raised: why does it matter whether we choose to read Chick or Lit? The most essential aim of the present discussion is exactly to reach an understanding of why the chick lit debate matters, and in this concern the idea that chick lit readers are in fact manipulated into uncritically celebrating everything that chick lit offers and represents must be explored further. Let us therefore take a closer look at what Adorno and Horkheimer say about the culture industry.

In the chapter ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’, Adorno and Horkheimer call attention to how the issue of the needs of consumers are key to understanding how the culture industry works: “...it is claimed that standards were based in the first place on consumers’ needs, and for that reason were accepted with so little resistance. The result is the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows even stronger” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944], 121). Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the culture industry has succeeded in making the consumers

themselves reinforce the very system that manipulates them: “the attitude of the public, which ostensibly and actively favors the system of the culture industry, is part of the system and not an excuse for it” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944], 122). From this perspective, the loyalty that chick lit readers have to the genre must be understood as a force that contributes to the continued manipulation of the readers themselves. Although Adorno and Horkheimer see the consumers as actively engaging in the culture industry, they still highlight that consumers are not primarily to blame:

Capitalist production so confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them...Immovably they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944], 133)

Thus, capitalist forces are at the root of the culture industry, but these forces have succeeded in manipulating the masses into loving what is offered to them. Furthermore, the devotion that consumers have to popular culture has become “a greater force than the cunning of the authorities” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944], 134). From this perspective, chick lit readers are unknowingly partaking in a process that is making them eternal consumers: “the culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises...all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944], 139).

The stereotypical formula-based chick lit novel would be a typical product of the culture industry where “the real point will never be reached”. According to chick lit writers and readers themselves, though, chick lit is supposed to entertain, and from this one might understand that “the real point” is not supposed to be reached. What it essentially comes down to, though, is what we identify as “the real point”. From a literary perspective one might say that “the real point” is to reach new insights. From Bloom’s perspective “the real point” is to reach a feeling of the “poetic sublime”. From chick lit writers and readers’ perspective “the real point” is to be entertained — but is this desire to be entertained in fact a consequence of the culture industry? According to Adorno and Horkheimer it definitely is. They claim that entertainment has become so influential that the entertainment industry *is* the culture industry: “the culture industry remains the entertainment industry. Its influence over the consumers is established by entertainment” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944], 136). In *What a Girl Wants?*, Negra also insists that the entertainment business does indeed have a “cultural agenda” (Negra 2009, 8). Let us take a closer look at what Negra says in order to further

highlight the relevance of Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry for the chick lit debate.

Negra is convinced that both the plot and the protagonist of postfeminist popular culture are contributing to an idealization of marriage, pregnancy and motherhood. Furthermore, Negra claims that these postfeminist texts are communicating female retreatism as a kind of "salvation for women" (Negra 2009, 88). In her introduction, Negra states that one of her goals with the book is to "counter the idea (still surprisingly widespread in film studies) that such films offer pure entertainment sessions that have no cultural agenda" (Negra 2009, 8). Thus, it is obvious that one might consider popular culture to be forging a certain kind of ideal for women, in this case the ideal of the stay-at-home mom. But even if Negra is correct to point out retreatism as a widespread phenomenon in recent years, and popular culture's role as a promoter of this tendency, what can we really know about the reasons behind women's retreatism? One has to consider the possibility that many women of our contemporary society genuinely welcome the "salvation" offered by retreatism. On the other hand, we need also to consider the possibility that not all chick lit *is* promoting retreatism.

Heather Hewett discusses the complexity of "mommy lit" in her essay 'You Are Not Alone: The Personal, the Political, and the "New" Mommy Lit' (Hewett 2006, 119). Hewett, like Negra, refers to Pearson's novel about working mother Kate Reddy as a key example of this specific type of chick lit. However, Hewett also points out that mommy lit encompasses a lot more than Pearson's novel and the genre fiction that followed her novel *I Don't Know How She Does It*: "mommy lit has come to signify, for many, all forms of writing that explore the private and public dimensions of motherhood" (Hewett 2006, 135).

Hewett explains her own craving for "books on the subject of motherhood, but not books that made me feel worse" (Hewett 2006, 121). Hewett refers to how she as a mother-to-be personally wanted to read books that could make her laugh and feel better, but she is nevertheless aware of the disputed role that humour holds from a literary perspective. Moreover, Hewett points out that from a second wave feminist perspective, humour was not necessarily appreciated either: "some critics have charged that although this kind of humor may make us feel good, it preserves the status quo" (Hewett 2006, 128). Hewett points out Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* as one example of the second wave view that "the way out of the housewife trap lay not in laughter but in fulfilling one's intellectual and artistic potential" (Hewett 2006, 128). The second wave feminism of the 1960s was convinced that what women needed was social and personal change, not humour. Yet, Hewett argues that humour might not be as decidedly "antifeminist" after all:

I Don't Know How She Does It revives the same debate over humor. On one hand, you could argue that its effect is ultimately depoliticizing: instead of connecting with other mothers, we sit at home, alone, and bond with a fictional character; instead of becoming angry, we laugh; and instead of changing the world, we buy more books. On the other hand, Pearson's book exposes the ways in which our culture still falls short, and combats the unrealistic expectations placed on working mothers through laughter. When you consider the potency of the new mommism — the way that advertisements, television shows, toy companies, and publications sell an impossible-to-attain image of motherhood to so many of us — you realize how important, and how self-empowering, it is to laugh.

(Hewett 2006, 129)

Mommy lit like Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* enables readers to realize that the media-produced image of the perfect mother who, without a care, balances motherhood with a professional career is not realistic for most of us. Realizing this can, as Hewett points out, be self-empowering to readers, but can it also, like Negra suggests, contribute to a growing number of women retreating from professional life for a return to domesticity? How do chick lit novels affect their readers? What are the implications of chick lit's focus on the joys of consumerism and sorrows of working life? What are the consequences of women's high consumption of chick lit books? We arrive now at the core of the present discussion: is chick lit valuable reading material, or does it, to the contrary, have unfavourable consequences for both women writers and women readers?

4.5 Women Writers: Chick Lit — a Limiting or Liberating Force?

So far, this chapter has sought to offer the reader an understanding of the context that the chick lit genre has developed within. We have seen that chick lit novels are related to the Harlequin romance novel, and that the development of postfeminism is essential to how the chick lit genre has taken shape. We have investigated two themes that are central to much of chick lit: consumerism and motherhood. However, the present thesis is essentially concerned with the question of literary value and quality, and it still remains for us to explore more thoroughly the literary value of chick lit.

We remember that Mazza did not approve of how the chick lit label changed after Wolcott's *New Yorker* editorial. Mazza and DeShell did not intend for chick lit to be what it has become today, and the new way of understanding chick lit has meant a lowering of literary standards associated with the label. Harzewski puts it like this: "the label *chick lit* inevitably casts the genre in the figure of a bubbly but dumb blonde" (Harzewski 2011, 40).

The titles of the two anthologies *This is Not Chick Lit* and *This is Chick-Lit* demonstrate the relevance of how fiction is labelled. We will take a closer look at these two collections of short stories in order to investigate whether the chick lit genre is limiting or liberating for women writers and readers.

Merrick's *This is Not Chick Lit* and Baratz-Logsted's *This is Chick-Lit* were both published in 2006. As mentioned in this thesis's introduction, Baratz-Logsted's short story collection was "born out of anger" and published as a response to Merrick's anthology. In *This is Not Chick Lit*, Merrick states that the chick lit genre is obscuring fiction written by other women writers (Merrick 2006, ix). Merrick is not alone in her claim that chick lit is actually damaging to the reputation of women writers.

Harzewski is one of the contributors to Ferriss and Young's anthology *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (2006). In her essay 'Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners', Harzewski points out that Dame Beryl Bainbridge has denounced chick lit as "froth" and that Doris Lessing has deemed this kind of women's writing "instantly forgettable". She goes on to explain some of the reasons behind such harsh criticism towards the chick lit genre:

They, as well as a growing number of women journalists, are defensive that this genre not only will be taken as representative "women's writing" but also will disqualify aspiring and younger women writers from critical recognition. As increasing numbers of titles are pigeonholed into this classification, showcased in bookstore displays titled "It's a Girl Thing", this transatlantic media phenomenon has been the recipient of increased ire by women critics fearful, like Eliot, of frothiness becoming the only suitable literary expression.

(Harzewski 2006, 30)

Here, Harzewski discusses the exact issue that Merrick wants to elucidate in her anthology. That chick lit might not only be taken as representative of women's writing, but even more importantly, that it is actually preventing other women writers from getting the attention they deserve. "The problem is, rather, that the chick lit deluge has helped to obscure the literary fiction being written by some of our country's most gifted women — many of whom you've never even heard of", Merrick states (Merrick 2006, ix). Moreover, she has given her anthology the subtitle 'Original Stories by America's Best Women Writers'. The contributors to Merrick's collection include critically acclaimed writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Aimee Bender, Jennifer Egan and Jennifer S. Davis. It is worth taking a brief look at some of the praise that the collection refers to in its opening pages.

One observation that can be made from the praise for *This Is Not Chick Lit* is that many reviewers draw on characteristics of fiction that *is* characterized as chick lit, in order to bring out what makes Merrick's collection great:

"Far from breezy chick lit, these stories are for anyone who enjoys fine fiction"

-*Rocky Mountain News*

"These tales ask us to take a break from the cream-puff narratives we may have been splurging on and to remember how good it feels to read something nourishing and substantive, to once again engage in stories that feed the soul"

-*Los Angeles Times*

"Ultimately, the writing and the breadth of creative subject material are what remind readers that this is not the frothy, raspberry-vinaigrette-drenched 'lit' of our generation. Here, in these eighteen stories, is literature."

-*The Daily Texan*

(Merrick, 2006)

These reviews all illustrate how the works in Merrick's anthology are characterised as the opposite of chick lit novels. As the title of Merrick's collection clearly states, these short stories are first and foremost *not* chick lit. They are *not* "breezy chick lit", they are *not* "cream-puff narratives" they are *not* "frothy, raspberry-vinaigrette-drenched 'lit'". To the contrary, the short stories in Merrick's anthology are "fine fiction", they are "nourishing and substantive", they are "literature". These examples of praise for *This is Not Chick Lit* leaves no doubt that the chick lit debate is at its core concerned with the question of literary value. But what is it then that distinguishes Merrick's collection of literary fiction from the breezy and frothy genre 'lit'?

The Daily Texan points out "the breadth of creative subject material" as essential in its praise for *This is Not Chick Lit*. The importance of representing a variety of lives and destinies in women's writing is something that Merrick herself is engaged in. She claims that "chick lit reduces the complexity of the human experience" whereas "literature" on the other hand, "increases our awareness of other perspectives and paths" (Merrick 2006, ix). Consequently, we must ask: do the short stories in Merrick's anthology increase "our awareness of other perspectives and paths"? In order to investigate this, we will take a closer look at one of the short stories in *This is Not Chick Lit*.

The short story 'The Thing Around Your Neck' by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the opening story of *This is Not Chick Lit*. The story is written from a second-person point of view and tells the story of Akunna, a young Nigerian woman who has received an American visa and travels to the U.S to attend university. Her uncle in America offers her a place to live and helps her enrol in a community college. When Akunna's uncle approaches her sexually, she leaves. With no financial support she is forced to quit college and seeks employment as a waitress in a restaurant. Here she meets a man and a romantic relationship develops between them. The following brief analysis of 'The Thing Around Your Neck' seeks to demonstrate how the story does indeed increase "our awareness of other perspectives".

The second-person point of view that Adichie makes use of in this story challenges the reader to identify with what Akunna experiences. This is a rhetorical move that becomes particularly powerful when the reader's worldview is essentially different from that of Akunna's. My experience with reading this story is inevitably influenced by my own identity as a young, white, Western woman. To illustrate how the second-person point of view challenges the reader, consider the following extract from the story:

Some people thought you were from Jamaica because they thought that every black person with an accent was Jamaican. Or some who guessed that you were African asked if you knew so and so from Kenya or so and so from Zimbabwe because they thought Africa was a country where everyone knew everyone else.

So when he asked you, in the dimness of the restaurant after you recited the daily specials, what African country you were from, you said Nigeria and expected him to ask if you knew a friend he had made in Senegal or Botswana.

...He asked your name and said Akunna was pretty. He did not ask what it meant, fortunately, because you were sick of how people said, Father's Wealth? You mean, like, your father will actually sell you to a husband?

(Adichie 2006, 7)

The perspective represented in the above quote offers the reader a chance to reflect upon what it is like to be African in America. The use of second-person narrative particularly makes the reader seek to understand Akunna's experience of being a young, Nigerian woman in America. The most significant effect of saying "you" instead of "I" in this story is that it makes the issue of how Americans and Westerners perceive Africans an issue that concerns Americans and Westerners as much as it does Africans. Adichie's story offers the reader examples of how Africans might experience subtle discrimination: "...the girls gawked at

your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take the braids out? All of it stands up? How? Why? Do you use a comb?" (Adichie 2006, 4). But it is even more important for the present discussion how the protagonist of 'The Thing Around Your Neck' is offering readers something different from the formulaic white heroine of the standard chick lit novel: Adichie's short story is offering readers something else than perspectives that they *identify* with: it is offering readers *new* perspectives. The following quote from the short story illustrates this particularly well:

...white people who liked Africa too much and who liked Africa too little were the same —
condescending.

(Adichie 2006, 7)

This is another example of how Africans might experience subtle discrimination, by white people being too eager to demonstrate their absolute enthusiasm for Africa. This tendency is further illuminated by Akunna's experiences with having a white boyfriend: "...the white women who said, "What a good-looking pair", too brightly, too loudly, as though to prove their own tolerance to themselves" (Adichie 2006, 12). Adichie's representation of race issues in this short story offers readers new insights and perspectives on race. The idea of white people trying to "prove their own tolerance to themselves" illustrates an issue that it is important to reflect upon. The most valuable insight that Adichie's short story offers, though, is that we must constantly be reminded of the importance of pursuing new insights: we must never stop challenging our own worldview. And for the present discussion, *challenge* is the key word here. It is Merrick's claim that literature challenges the reader, whereas "chick lit reduces the complexity of the human experience". The above analysis of 'The Thing Around Your Neck' has sought to offer an example of how literature might challenge readers and offer "new perspectives". According to Merrick, chick lit cannot offer the reader such new insights and perspectives. We will now return to Merrick's account of chick lit in order to reach a better understanding of how Chick and Lit differs.

Merrick argues that the lack of complexity in chick lit novels, the genre's narrow, formula-based plots and characters, has negative effects on readers: because chick lit is not at all challenging, readers cannot reach new insights and perspectives. This is a perspective on genre fiction that can be related to Q.D.Leavis's claim that popular fiction negatively affects the reading public because "for so long has it been accustomed to writers who take pains to make their line of thought apparent" (Leavis 1932, 217). Leavis's description of "writers who

take pains to make their line of thought apparent” can be read as a description of the typical chick lit writer, and once again chick lit seems to be perceived as decidedly *unliterary*. We must ask ourselves, though, is it possible to draw such a distinct line between the literary and the “frothy”? Is it really as straight forward to place women’s writing on one or the other side, as Merrick seems to suggest? Merrick argues that “chick lit as a genre presents one very narrow representation of women’s lives” (Merrick 2006, xi). But perhaps Merrick’s own representation of women’s writing as either Chick or Lit is too narrow as well?

Still, Merrick’s point that the chick lit genre is too limited in its representation of women’s lives is supported by both Adichie, Harzewski, and Negra. In her investigation of a collection of postfeminist texts, Negra concludes that “what is perhaps most striking is the diversity of identities and social experiences it neglects” (Negra 2009, 153). Negra explains the motivation behind *What a Girl Wants?* (2009) thus: “By pinpointing the pervasiveness of postfeminist shibboleths about life, work, marriage, and motherhood, I hope to identify the kinds of identities that are withheld from postfeminist display practices and to argue for a more capacious view of women’s lives, interests and talents than is generally fostered by the current culture” (Negra 2009. 4). Similarly, Harzewski argues that the standard “success story” of chick lit protagonists “leaves the impression that every media employee will become a columnist, a bestselling author, or TV personality — and while she is still under thirty-five” (Harzewski 2011, 57). The success story is, according to Harzewski, what makes chick lit not only limited, but unrealistic in its representation of women’s lives.

Merrick, Negra and Harzewski all agree that the chick lit genre is offering narrow and limited versions of women’s lives. Furthermore, Merrick leaves no doubt that she considers the chick lit phenomenon responsible for limiting the possibilities that women writers have of succeeding. And as we have already seen, Merrick has received praise for shedding light on this issue. However, Merrick has also been criticised for her claim that chick lit writers are standing in the way of writers of “real literature”:

The reasoning here strikes me as incredible. Are we to believe that ‘serious’ women writers would achieve greater notice by publishers and the public if chick-lit authors were to lay down their pens? Rather than berating chick-lit authors, its female detractors — the authors and editors of literary fiction — would do well to stop blaming other women for their misfortunes in the publishing world and to redirect their anger to its true source, briefly alluded to by Merrick herself: the male-dominated literary establishment that, she notes, supports and awards the ‘big boy books’ that get much more ‘airtime’ than ‘women writers of literary fiction’ (Merrick, 2011).

(Modleski 2008, xxiii)

Here, Modleski is responding to an article that Elizabeth Merrick wrote for the *Huffington Post* called ‘*This is Not Chick Lit. What’s in a Title?*’ (Merrick 2011). In the article Merrick comments on the massive debate that followed from the publication of her anthology, but concludes that “if the title of my book opens the door to a much larger audience reading eighteen amazing women writers they might not otherwise run across, then my job is accomplished” (Merrick 2011). Thus, Merrick once again brings attention to her view that literary women writers are not getting the attention they deserve because chick lit writers are ‘stealing the limelight’. Not surprisingly, Merrick’s strong statements about the consequences of chick lit has provoked writers of this genre.

Rachel Pine responded to Merrick’s *Huffington Post* article in her own article called ‘*This is Chick Lit: Sick of Being Kicked Around*’ (Pine 2011). Based on the statements that Merrick makes in her introduction to *This is Not Chick Lit*, Pine claims that the collection was “published to teach chick lit readers a lesson” (Pine 2011). Pine argues, like Modleski, that Merrick is directing her frustration and anger in the wrong direction when she blames chick lit writers for serious women writers not getting enough attention. Pines sarcastically comments on Merrick’s claim that chick lit is promoting a narrow worldview by referring to Merrick’s own worldview as limited: “As for a narrow worldview, well, let’s just say that I know one when I see one” (Pine 2011). Thus, Pine makes it clear that in her opinion Merrick’s view on chick lit is both judgmental and more representative of a narrow worldview than the genre in question.

The above references to both Modleski and Pine illustrate the strong reactions that followed Merrick’s short story collection. With her choice of title and unambiguous introduction, Merrick caused controversy, and Baratz-Logsted’s anthology *This is Chick-Lit* is one result of this controversy.

In the anthology edited by Baratz-Logsted, the chick lit writers first give a short response to Merrick’s publication, followed by their own contribution to *This is Chick-Lit*. In the following, we will take a closer look at some of these responses in order to reach an understanding of how the chick lit writers themselves reacted to Merrick’s anthology.

Pine is one of the contributors to *This is Chick-Lit*. And like in her *Huffington Post* article, Pine once again makes use of sarcasm to express her thoughts on the chick lit debate: “Who knew we’d still be in high school all these years later, with the popular girls sitting on one side of the cafeteria as the smart girls glare across from the other?” (Baratz-Logsted 2006, 259). Thus, Pine agrees with Baratz-Logsted’s that the chick lit debate has created two opposing camps of women writers. Jennifer Coburn, another chick lit writer contributing to

the anthology, is of the same opinion: “Is this where we are — one group of women writers mocking another, deeming its work irrelevant?” (Baratz-Logsted 2006, 7). And according to Baratz-Logsted it would be better for all women writers if the “chicks” and the “lits” were to pull together instead of “wasting our time throwing stones at one another” (Baratz-Logsted 2006, 6). This is why Baratz-Logsted decided to ask all the contributing writers of her anthology to name one *literary* work that they would recommend to their readers so that “after the stories, you’ll find an appendix listing just which Lits each Chick chose” (Baratz-Logsted 2006, 6). Thus, Baratz-Logsted is not rejecting the distinction between genre fiction, like chick lit, and literary fiction. However, her main concern is to point out that fiction like chick lit is not supposed to be particularly challenging, or expanding our perspectives. Chick lit is supposed to entertain. The question that we must ask, though, is: does the fact that chick lit is *supposed* to be pure entertainment make the issue unproblematic?

Chick lit writers write to entertain because chick lit readers want to be entertained. In *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* (2007), Cathy Yardley points this out by reminding aspiring chick lit writers that “our primary job is to entertain” (Yardley 2007,5). But the issue of what chick lit readers want is complicated by the fact that their wants and needs might be manipulated by commercial forces. We remember Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1997, 121) description of “the circle of manipulation and retroactive need”, and from this perspective chick lit readers’ desire for entertainment becomes a result of the culture industry. Furthermore, this makes chick lit’s focus on pure entertainment problematic, because from this point of view chick lit readers become what Adorno and Horkheimer (1997, 133) refer to as “helpless victims”. Thus, one might claim that chick lit readers are tricked into believing that chick lit novels are the only kind of books that they can enjoy, and by reading only chick lit, readers are constantly reinforcing the conventions and values that chick lit represents. This, moreover, is problematic because of the nature and limitations of these conventions and values: we have seen that both Merrick, Negra and Harzewski argue that chick lit is offering a narrow representation of women’s lives. Still, it remains for us to consider how a concrete example of chick lit either confirms or contradicts this claim. In the following we will therefore take a closer look at one of the stories in *This is Chick-Lit*.

The present discussion on chick lit has emphasised the representation of consumerism and motherhood in this genre. Heather Swain’s short story ‘Café con Leche Crush’ is particularly well suited to shed further light on both of these two themes: the plot of the story is that Hannah, the mother of two weeks old baby twins, escapes to her regular coffee shop for a long-awaited cup of her favourite coffee. The following analysis of ‘Café con Leche

Crush' aims to demonstrate how characteristics of postfeminism are represented in this short story.

One of the central traits of postfeminism is “an embracing of the joys of consumerism” (Ferriss and Young 2008,4). This claim is confirmed in ‘Café con Leche Crush, in which the protagonist’s joy as a result of finally getting a cup of her favourite coffee is a central theme. Hannah’s desire for a café con leche could be interpreted as a desire for freedom: “...I was transported back to when I came here nearly every morning for my *café con leche* fix and held a space that was mine alone” (Swain 2006, 150). However, the elaborate descriptions of both the making and devouring of the coffee testifies to how the story focuses on the joys consumerism:

Esteban transfers the frothy mix from the pitcher into a clean white mug. He carefully spoons milk foam on top of the steaming drink before dusting it with cinnamon. Then he sets the mug on a small plate, adds a fat slice of buttered toast to the edge and sets it down in front of me. I close my eyes and wrap my hands around the mug, letting the warmth seep into my fingers and palms. I lean over the cup as the steam caresses my skin. I’m no longer in wintry Brooklyn. The coffee has transported me to the tropical climate of some beach town below the equator.

I bring the mug to my lips for that long-awaited sip of *café con leche*. It’s even thicker and sweeter than I remembered, almost like warm caramel. Then the slightly bitter twinge of coffee cuts through the milk and the cinnamon dances on my tongue, waking up my taste buds from their long dormant caffeine exile....With the next sip, my mind explodes.

(Swain 2006, 152)

This extract demonstrates how chick lit represents the postfeminist embrace of consumerism. The scene that follows the one quoted above further illustrates postfeminism’s influence on chick lit: when Hannah’s “mind explodes” she is transported into a dream world of sexual fantasies with the barista Esteban. Thus, this scene offers examples of how postfeminism represents a “return to femininity and sexuality” (Ferriss and Young 2008, 4). Consider the following quote from the scene: “I am with Esteban. Rolling across the tangled sheets of an unmade bed. My hair is long and wild. My body lithe beneath him” (Swain 2006, 152). The last sentence of this quote illustrates how the protagonist centres on femininity: she fantasises about her femininity being enhanced by the contrast between her “lithe body” and Esteban’s masculinity. The scene furthermore literally represents a *return* to sexuality, because Hannah, who has had a Caesarian section, fantasises about being “...whole again. Unencumbered by stitches. Unexpected by anyone else but this man who wants only to give me pleasure. “*Voluptuous,*” he whispers in my ear and I submit, willingly, happily, hungrily” (Swain 2006,

152). But it is not only in Hannah's sexual fantasy that 'Café con Leche Crush' represents a postfeminist return to sexuality. In a conversation between the costumers in the coffee shop Hannah takes part in making jokes about female sexuality:

"They say a woman reaches her sexual peak after she's had her first child," Albert says from the stool at the end of the counter. Everyone leans forward just slightly. "And it gets better after each one."

"Is that right, Senor Gonzales?" Esteban asks. "You should know. How many children did your wife have?"

"Nine," says Mr. Gonzales and he wiggles his eyebrows lasciviously.

Anywhere else in the world, this kind of talk would infuriate me. I'd protest, huff and likely stomp off after a well-placed comeback on behalf of all women. Only here it's different because in the past I've participated, too. I've razed these guys about dates and sex and marriage and made my own snide comments to Esme about penis size and multiple orgasms. I've proven myself a willing accomplice to the sometimes-adolescent humor of this crowd. Not only that, but I've enjoyed it.

As the heady fragrance of the coffee fills the moist warm air, I begin to perk up and get my game back. "So, since I had two babies at once...?..."

(Swain 2006, 150-151)

Here it seems like the writer suggests that Hannah is really a feminist, but that this situation is "different". The idea that Hanna is really a feminist becomes difficult to acknowledge, though, because the reason she gives for this situation being different is simply that "in the past I've participated too". Moreover, the protagonist admits that she actually enjoys this kind of humour, in spite of acknowledging that it is offensive to women. She decides to participate by making herself the 'victim of the joke', which is an example of how "the humor of postfeminism is often ironically self-deprecating" (Ferriss and Young 2008, 4).

'Café con Leche Crush' offers more examples of this kind of postfeminist humour. A scene from when Hannah has just entered the coffee shop demonstrates this:

I'm a big frumpy mess in sour-smelling sweats. My breasts are swollen to the point of hilarity, as if some thirteen-year-old boy drew them on his notebook. My belly is distended so that I still look five months pregnant...And my ass, don't get me started on the state of my ass. Suffice it to say, gravity has not been kind over the past nine months.

(Swain 2006, 148)

This humour is a way of ridiculing not only how the protagonist looks, but women's postnatal state in general. In this way, the quote above demonstrates how the humour in 'Café con

Leche Crush' could be identified both as self-deprecating *and* as a rejection of feminism. The postfeminist "rejection of second-wave anger and blame against the patriarchy" (Ferriss and Young 2008, 4) is further represented in the description of Hannah's thoughts when she returns home to her husband Jasper and their two baby boys:

They are so peaceful sleeping together like this and I realize that I am resentful, jealous and feel left out. Then it hits me. I'm mad at Jasper.

...He's been the dumping ground for all my unexpected aggravation and disappointment of becoming a parent. But seeing him here with our sons, I understand how unfair and displaced my fury with Jasper has been. I know none of the problems have been his fault.

(Swain 2006, 155)

Thus, Hannah seems to experience an epiphany by realizing that she has been unfairly blaming her husband. This realization, that the man is not to blame, is what leads Hannah to conclude that "I simply have to accept that motherhood will always be full of sacrifice..." (Swain 2006, 156). In this way, one might claim that Swain's story is depicting 'the realization that man is not to blame' as what enables Hannah to come to terms with her new identity. What is more, this newfound peace that Hannah is experiencing as a mother is depicted as what can finally make her happy: "...I know that this is the moment I've waiting for. All of us cuddled together happily on the bed. This is the family that I imagined all along" (Swain 2006, 156). This quote from the ending of Swain's story testifies to what Negra refers to as chick lit's "celebration of mothering" (Negra 2009, 65). After wishing to escape to her previous life, Hannah returns home to realize that her new life as a mother is what she truly desires.

This analysis of one of the short stories from *This is Chick-Lit* has demonstrated why chick lit can be referred to as postfeminist fiction. Based on Ferriss and Young's listing of postfeminist traits, 'Café con Leche Crush' has proven to represent both "an embracing of the joys of consumerism", "a return to femininity and sexuality", a self-deprecating humour and "a rejection of second-wave anger and blame against the patriarchy" (Ferriss and Young 2008, 4). Furthermore, both the general theme and ending of the story demonstrates chick lit's focus on and celebration of motherhood. The above analysis has shown that, together with motherhood, consumerism plays an essential part in Swain's story.

If we look back on the analysis of Adichie's short story, we remember that an essential part of 'The Thing Around Your Neck' was its representation of an African woman's experience with living in America. In Adichie's short story, readers are offered new

perspectives on the situation of African women that they might otherwise not have experienced: because of the different backgrounds and worldviews of Adichie's protagonist and the white, woman reader, readers are able, through literature, to reach new perspectives on this specific issue. Let us, in light of the analyses of both 'The Thing Around Your Neck' and 'Café con Leche Crush', consider the following claim by Merrick:

Literature employs carefully crafted language to expand our reality, instead of beating us over the head with clichés that promote a narrow worldview. Chick lit shuts down our consciousness. Literature expands our imaginations.

(Merrick 2006, ix)

I argue that the analyses of Adichie and Swain offered in this chapter serve as confirmation that literature expands our perspectives in a way that chick lit does not.

With its elaborate descriptions of the perfect cup of coffee, Swain's 'Café con Leche Crush' relates particularly well to Montoro's description of chick lit as "cappuccino fiction". We have already discussed that Montoro's reference to chick lit as cappuccino fiction is partly concerned with the chick lit genre's connections to consumerist values and lifestyles. Another reason that Montoro gives for why chick lit can be described as cappuccino fiction is that the feel-good factor of reading a chick lit novel can be compared to the feeling of enjoying a cup of cappuccino:

Chick Lit readers seem to yearn for a sense of satisfying contentment at the moment of novel-closure and this is always associated with the happy ending and congenial resolution that they have come to expect in the works. This happy resolution of the novels begets the comforting feeling that readers pine for so that they are left with a 'sweet taste', as if they had just enjoyed a cup of their favourite cappuccino.

(Montoro 2012, 15)

Are Yardley, Baratz-Logsted and Montoro right in their claims on what the chick lit reader wants? In order to come closer to an understanding of how the chick lit genre is affecting the literary field we need to take a closer look at what readers say. What can chick lit readers tell us about the value of women's writing? By exploring online sources like www.chicklitclub.com and www.goodreads.com we can learn how chick lit readers themselves value different books. Moreover, moving on to online sources offers us the

opportunity to bring our discussion of chick lit up to present-day circumstances of book reviewing on social media.

4.6 Women Readers: Chick or Lit?

In their introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* Ferriss and Young call attention to the general discrepancy between the popular and the critical reception of chick lit books: “On one hand chick lit attracts the unquestioning adoration of fans; on the other it attracts the unmitigated disdain of critics” (Ferriss and Young 2006, 1). This tendency that Ferriss and Young refer to, of critical attention not answering to sales numbers, has proven to be the case with Marian Keyes’s authorship.

The Irish writer Marian Keyes has sold more than thirty million books worldwide (Bannan 2015). During 2005 Keyes’s novel *The Other Side of the Story* (2004) sold 488,508 copies. Montoro highlights how big Keyes’s sales numbers are by referring to the fact that “the ‘average’ novel sells approximately 5,000 copies” (Montoro, 2012, 3). *The Other Side of the Story* has received 800 readers’ reviews on goodreads.com, dating from March 2007 till February 2016 (Goodreads, 2016). The book holds a total score of 3,67 stars out of 5 possible in the website’s rating system, which is representative of the average rating of a Keyes book on goodreads.com. On chicklitclub.com books are rated on a scale from 1 to 10. Here, *The Other Side of the Story* is given an 8, and is thus classified as a “highrater” on the website (Chicklitclub, 2016). Also on this website the rating of *The Other Side of the Story* is representative of how the average Keyes book is rated by readers. Many of the comments that readers make about *The Other Side of the Story* are based on a general appreciation of Keyes’s work:

I like Marian Keyes, that’s why I bought this book...(mellyana)

I was looking forward to reading this book as I’ve loved the other Marian Keyes books that I’ve read...(Kate)

Marian Keyes manages to win my heart again (Lauren Biddell).

(Goodreads, 2016)

Thus, Montoro’s claim that “Chick Lit readers have become faithful and avid consumers of the genre” (Montoro 2012, 179) seems to be the case not only for the genre in general, but

also for the individual chick lit author. Chick lit readers are loyal to their favourite chick lit writers.

Keyes's high sales numbers testify to her popularity amongst readers, but how are her books received by critics? A quick search on google for critical reviews of *The Other Side of the Story* gives only one hit: Helen Falconer's review in the Guardian (Falconer 2004). Marian Keyes's official website refers to reviews from the *Evening Herald*, the *Daily Telegraph* and *USA Today*, in addition to that of Falconer. Not surprisingly, all of the reviews that are listed on the official Marian Keyes website are praising her novel:

It's a great read (*Evening Herald*).

Let me assure you that it is packed with sound writing, wit and common sense. (*The Guardian*).

The rest of us can only gaze on with a mixture of adoration and envy: we are potted meats, she is caviar. And, treat of treats, *The Other Side of the Story* is her best book to date (*The Daily Telegraph*).

Keyes writes intelligent and entertaining fiction that is too grown-up to be called chick lit (*USA Today*).
(Keyes, 2016)

Marian Keyes is praised by not only readers, but journalists and reviewers as well. The question that still remains, though, is: what kind of authority do these critical reviews hold? Do they qualify as *critical* reviews, or should they be considered evaluations? The introduction of this thesis refers to the American literary critic Daniel Mendelsohn's claim that "wide erudition" is what separates criticism from reviewing (Mendelsohn 2012). Mendelsohn's point is helpful for the present discussion on the reception of chick lit, and it is important to keep in mind that there is a distinction between scholarly criticism and newspaper reviewing. The purpose here is to point out that the critical attention that Marian Keyes's books receive is limited. Searching for reviews of Keyes's books gives no results in for example the *New Yorker* or the *New York Times*. Another important finding from the up-to-date examples above is that websites like goodreads.com and chicklitclub.com confirm the continuing relevance and popularity of chick lit, both as a genre and as a term.

Many of the books that have been used in the present discussion on chick lit are from 2006. Both *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, *This is Chick-Lit* and *This Is Not Chick Lit* were published in 2006. This was also the year when the online chick lit debate really escalated. However, works like *What a Girl Wants?* (2009) *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*

(2011) and *Chick Lit: The Stylistics of Cappuccino Fiction* (2012) show, together with online resources, that the debate has continued into our own decade. Does this mean that chick lit is the new generation of women's literature?

This issue is explored by Juliette Wells in the essay 'Mothers of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History' (Wells 2006, 47). In the essay, Wells comments on the trend in chick lit publishing of making references to canonized authors like Edith Wharton, Jane Austen and Jane Eyre on chick lit covers. One example of this is the blurb on the front cover of Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* which describes the novel as "Jane Austen with a martini". Wells argues that such references might work to increase sales, but moreover they might affect readers' understanding of the literary value that the chick lit novel holds: "Although such allusions may be marketing tactics, they also encourage readers to see chick lit 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 2006, 49). In order to investigate whether chick lit writers like Bushnell can in fact be the next generation of women's writers, Wells compares works of chick lit with those of classic women's literature.

Wells pins down "a central love plot, a conclusion with the heroine happily paired off but not married, and frank sex scenes" as the three main characteristics of chick lit novels. Of these, she continues, only the central love plot can be found in classics like Jane Austen's novels (Wells 2006, 50). Wells goes on to comment on the differences in "literary achievement" between chick lit and classic women's novels:

Many of the differences between chick lit and the tradition of women's writing discussed so far can be attributed, at least in part, to changes in social custom and expectations that have affected both writers and readers. No such explanation is possible for the wider gap in what we might call literary achievement between chick lit and women's novels. 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 2006, 64)

Thus, Wells argues that chick lit novels do not reach the literary level that recognises classic works of literature like those of Jane Austen. Wells even goes as far as to claim that chick lit does not hold any of the qualities that qualify a work to be considered as *literature*. Consequently, and most importantly for the present discussion, chick lit does not hold literary

value, according to Wells. Thus, chick lit cannot be considered the next generation of women's literature, Wells claims, although it is definitely "one of the next generations of women's *writing*" (Wells 2006, 49). Once again we return to the essential issue that the present thesis deals with: the categorisation of fiction in terms of quality and value. What is literature? Who gets to say what is literature and what is not? What do the criteria for literary quality and value look like? And how is women's writing judged in this context?

The issue of how women's writing is evaluated is recurrent in accounts that are defensive of chick lit. Both chick lit readers and reviewers refer to the general devaluation of women's writing in their defences of chick lit. One example of this can be found in Tara Flynn's review of Keyes's latest novel *Making It Up As I Go Along*. In the *Irish Times* review, Flynn immediately admits that she has been dismissing chick lit, partly on the grounds that she is a feminist and wants to "read something of interest to men and women" (Flynn 2016). However, in her praise for Keyes's latest book, Flynn expresses regret that she for years "didn't properly submit to the joy and genius of Marian Keyes" (Flynn 2016). Flynn further underscores that her desire to read "something of interest to men and women" does in fact *not* conflict with her praise for Keyes:

Humour writing can seem easy to dismiss. But, when it's good, the blood, sweat and tears that go into it come from the same glands as those of the Big Lit lads. Don't be a gom like I used to be and diminish quality work by calling it "chick lit". This may come as a surprise to some, but men and women can both read women's words; they're often the same words. And when it comes to arranging those words, Keyes is one of the very best.

(Flynn 2016)

Thus, Flynn calls attention to how the denigration of chick lit is part of a long tradition of denigration of women's writing. Juliette Wells agrees that women's writing is, and has been, given less critical attention and respect than men's writing. However, Wells strongly believes that *chick lit* still does not deserve to be named the next generation of women's literature: "That women's reading and writing have for centuries been trivialized does not mean, however, that any genre currently favoured by women writers and readers necessarily deserves *literary* regard" (Wells 2006, 68). Wells represents the widely shared critical view that chick lit does not qualify as literature. But might it be that readers of chick lit frankly do not care? And if this is the case: why is it important that they *should* care?

According to chick lit writer and reader Jenny Colgan it is exactly the case that chick lit readers do not care about the genre being labelled as "unliterary". In an article for the

Guardian, Colgan responds to Beryl Bainbridge's assessment of chick lit as "a frothy sort of thing". The title of Colgan's article speaks for itself: 'We know the difference between foie gras and Hula Hoops, Beryl, but sometimes we just want Hula Hoops' (Colgan 2001).

Obviously, Colgan is referring to the distinction between literary fiction and genre fiction, and her concern is to state clearly that chick lit readers and writers are as aware of this distinction as anyone else. She further demonstrates that she does not think of her own writing as anything other than what it is: "I couldn't write a literary novel - so what? Does that mean I shouldn't be able to write anything at all?" (Colgan 2001). Thus, Colgan defends her right to write.

Harzewski has also commented on Colgan's statements. In *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* Harzewski is concerned with how the chick lit genre relates to feminist views. Under the subtitle 'I'm not a feminist, but...' Harzewski explores how "the F-word" is used in works of chick lit. Her observation is that the words 'feminist' and 'feminism' are in fact not used, but rather impossible to trace in central works of chick lit like *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Harzewski states that words like feminist and feminism are avoided in chick lit so that readers will not perceive of the novels and its characters as "shrill" (Harzewski 2011, 165). This marks chick lit as postfeminist fiction, but what are the implications of chick lit being postfeminist?

One of the ultimate aims behind the present discussion of chick lit is to explore *why* it matters that women are choosing Chick over Lit. What are the consequences of chick lit's postfeminist values, and how does chick lit affect readers politically? Is reading chick lit an "antifeminist" act?

According to Harzewski, chick lit should not be considered "antifeminist": "As a form of postfeminism, chick lit does not operate through renunciation (...) but struggles to reconcile our feminist desires with our feminine desires" (Harzewski 2011, 181). Thus, chick lit represents how most young women relate to feminism: "It's embrace of women's rights but eschewal of the feminist label mirrors the most common response of young women toward feminism today" (Harzewski 2011, 165). Harzewski's book is from 2011, but the trend she points out of young women refusing the "f-word" also reflects the situation five years on. The fact that the words 'feminist' and 'feminism' are charged with negative associations for so many women is one of the crucial reasons why the chick lit debate matters. To become aware of how popular culture, and chick lit in particular, is contributing to a rejection of feminism is essential in order to strengthen the feminist cause. Chick lit readers need to become aware of how chick lit is, in the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, "manipulating" them, and how their

loyalty to the genre is causing them to constantly reinforce postfeminist ideals. Calling attention to how chick lit represents these ideals thus becomes essential, but it is also crucial to unburden the “f-word” from its negative associations. This is a matter that three Norwegian feminists recently approached.

In 2015 the feminists Marta Breen, Madeleine Schultz and Jenny Jordahl published the book *F-ordet: 155 grunner til å være feminist* — “The f-word: 155 reasons to be a feminist” (my translation). As the title of this book shows, Breen, Schultz and Jordahl are concerned with how the “f-word” is understood, or rather misunderstood, in our contemporary society. With its use of bright colors and illustrations, the book is easy to read and directed at younger readers as well as adults. On the back cover it is stated that the book is intended for those who are wondering if they are feminists, and for those who just want to confirm that they are right (Breen, 2015).¹²

One example of how Breen, Schultz and Jordahl aim to unburden the “f-word” is when they describe a particular project of their own. This project consisted of them posing with a poster that said “This is what a feminist looks like”, and then posting their picture on social media like Facebook, Instagram, blogs and Twitter. Most importantly, they urged others to participate in the project, and received great response. Breen, Schultz and Jordahl explain that the idea behind this project was to confront the “uncomfortable myths that feminists are uglier and angrier than others”. They were motivated by “how much it bothers us that political opponents have succeeded in making the f-word negatively charged” (Breen 2015, 148).¹³ Thus, *F-ordet: 155 grunner til å være feminist* testifies to the fact that the “f-word” is a “negatively charged” word in our contemporary society. Chick lit, with its complete avoidance of the terms feminist and feminism, contributes to the negatively charged popular conception of these terms. It is important to reach people, and perhaps particularly young men and women, with an explanation of what the words ‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’ actually entail, and consequently it becomes important to call attention to how chick lit is contributing to reinforce facile preconceptions of these terms. The main challenge is to convince writers and readers of chick lit that this is in fact a *problem*, and thus we return to the essence of the chick lit debate: why the difference between Chick and Lit matters.

¹² Quote in Norwegian: “F-ordet” er en morsom og politisk selvhjelpsbok for deg som lurer på om du er feminist, eller som bare vil få bekreftet at du har rett” (Breen 2015, back cover).

¹³ Quote in Norwegian: “Vi diskuterte de ubehagelige mytene om at feminister er styggere og sintere enn andre, og snakket om hvor mye det plaget oss at politiske motstandere har lykket med å gjøre f-ordet belastet” (Breen 2015, 148).

4.7 Conclusion

In the introduction to this chapter several questions concerning chick lit are raised: what are the differences between Chick and Lit? How is the chick lit debate engaged with the issue of literary quality and value? And why does it matter whether we choose to read Chick or Lit?

A historical perspective on chick lit shows that the genre is closely related to the Harlequin romances that flourished in the 1980s. Therefore, this chapter began by taking a closer look at the Harlequin romance and the romance readers. Radway's research on romance readers reveals that the readers themselves perceive romance reading as a break from their responsibilities as housewives and mothers.

The issue of motherhood was further investigated when we explored how postfeminism relates to the feminist tradition. Ferriss and Young's concise account of the differences between feminism and postfeminism enabled us to establish that a celebration of consumerism and return to femininity are central characteristics of postfeminism (Ferriss and Young 2008, 4). The postfeminist return to femininity is represented, for example, in what Negra refers to as "mommism" (Negra 2009, 70).

Negra's description of popular culture's "romantization of female withdrawal from the working world" (Negra 2009, 25) became central when exploring chick lit's representation of motherhood. Negra refers to women's increased return to domesticity as "retreatism" and claims that popular culture is highly responsible for this development. Furthermore, the reading of chick lit itself could be understood as "retreatism".

Focusing more specifically on the issue of literary value and quality, the discussion turned to the two short story collections *This is Not Chick Lit* and *This is Chick-Lit*. Looking at the reception of these two anthologies proves that the chick lit label is invested with evaluations of literary value. Works by Merrick, Negra and Harzewski testify to the commonly held belief that chick lit is representing a narrow and limited view on women's lives. However, others, like Baratz-Logsted, Modleski and Pine, argue that those who merely dismiss chick lit are the ones who are really narrow-minded.

A closer look at examples of short stories from the two mentioned anthologies testifies to the claim that literature can expand our perspectives in ways that chick lit cannot. 'The Thing Around Your Neck' by Adichie offers the reader insights into new perspectives on the issues of femininity and race. 'Café con Leche Crush' by Swain confirms that the celebration of consumerism and motherhood are central themes in chick lit.

Thus, the texts in *This is Not Chick Lit* and *This is Chick-Lit* serve as examples of how Chick and Lit differs. Furthermore, both chick lit readers and chick lit writers also seem to acknowledge this difference. A chick lit reader describing the genre puts it like this: “They are not at all realistic and that’s also partly why people read them. They just want a nice romantic story with no ending, no sadness (if they expected realism they’d read proper literature!;))))” (Montoro 2011, 173). The title of Colgan’s piece, discussed above, expresses the same sentiment: ‘We know the difference between foie gras and Hula Hoops, Beryl, but sometimes we just want Hula Hoops’ (Colgan 2001). Thus, the crucial issue of the chick lit debate is not to prove or disprove the difference between Chick and Lit. On this matter both Chicks and Lits seem to agree. The essential issue of the chick lit debate is rather why the difference between Chick and Lit matters.

The two literary analyses offered in this chapter give one example of how this difference matters: Swain’s short story provides an elaborate description of how the perfect cup of *café con leche* can make your “mind explode” into fantasies of passionate sex with the barista. Adichie’s short story, however, grants readers the opportunity to perceive racism from a perspective they might never have experienced before. This is a difference that *matters*.

Those in defence of chick lit emphasise that chick lit is not supposed to challenge, but to entertain. From a critical perspective this is exactly what makes chick lit “unliterary”, because literature *is* supposed to challenge. The chick lit debate matters, because being challenged matters.

5. Conclusion

The contrast between being entertained and being challenged has been a fundamental part of this thesis’s discussion: both traditional literary critics and contemporary critics of the chick lit genre have recognised the ability to challenge readers as the nature of literature. Arnold refers to this contrast thus: “Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming, is the character of perfection” (Arnold 1882, 12). According to Arnold, literature is about offering readers the opportunity of “growing and becoming”, not “having and resting”.

Q.D. Leavis identifies lack of individual reflection as an essential problem with lowbrow writing, and refers to Book Clubs as one example of how the distribution of literature has become preoccupied with simply “giving the public what it wants” Leavis

1932, 27). According to Q.D. Leavis, readers who do not accept the challenging nature of literature are not qualified readers of serious literature at all: the reading public's level of literacy has been reduced by mass produced fiction and "the really good books" are suffering because of it (Leavis 1932, 9, 61). Because the reading public is reading only mass produced fiction instead of real literature they are no longer capable of mastering the complexity of proper literature, Leavis claims.

The issue of how "really good books" should be recognised has also been an essential part of this thesis's discussion: how is literary value defined? Arnold insists on the importance of disinterestedness for evaluating literary value and quality. According to Arnold, a "real estimate" of a work's literary value and quality can only be achieved by resisting the "historic estimate" and the "personal estimate": one's personal experiences and preferences must not affect one's evaluation of literature. Arnold furthermore believes in establishing an order of truly great literary works that all other works should be compared to.

F.R. Leavis, like Arnold, insists on the importance of the "old order" of canonical touchstones: "If we forget the old order we shall not know what kind of thing to strive towards, and in the end there will be no striving, but a surrender to the 'progress' of the machine" (Leavis 1977, 97). The discussion at the end of chapter two serves to demonstrate how such a reliance on the "old order" can be challenged: an investigation of Terry Eagleton's view on the evaluation of literary value has offered a different perspective on the literary canon from that of Arnold and the Leavises. Eagleton claims that literature is a functional, ontological term and that the literary canon is a social construct (Eagleton 2008, 10). He insists on the ideological nature of literature, and consequently claims that there can be no neutral, genuinely disinterested evaluation of literary value. For Eagleton then, value is a transitive term, and consequently, what the individual reader ought to read must be subjectively rather than objectively defined. In order to further develop the thesis's discussion on what we should read, chapter three explored two different kinds of reading advice, both from the late twentieth century.

Chapter three opens by looking at Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1995). Bloom, like Arnold and the Leavises, thinks that some truly great works of literary value must function as touchstones. Bloom perceives a work's aesthetic value as the only measure of its true quality: only aesthetic value will qualify a work for inclusion in the literary canon. Moreover, Bloom insists on the universal relevance of the Western Canon. The opening up of the canon for a more varied representation of race, ethnicity and gender is considered by Bloom as a destruction of the canon. Bloom's view on the canon serves to demonstrate how literary

quality might, also by contemporary critics, be universally and objectively defined: Bloom insists that the traditional works of the Western Canon are what the general reader should read.

In order to investigate a different perspective on what to read, chapter three turned to explore middlebrow culture, represented by the Book-of-the-Month Club. We have seen that from a middlebrow perspective, literary value can be identified as an intense feeling of identification and total immersion. The discussion on the Book-of-the-Month Club has served to demonstrate how traditional old standards of literary value are challenged by popular culture, and furthermore how an emphasis on the pleasure of reading contradicts with the traditional view that literature is fundamentally challenging.

Chapter four has explored chick lit as a specific genre of popular fiction in order to further investigate the juxtaposition between serious, challenging literature and mass produced, entertaining fiction. Our discussion of chick lit has proven that the debate between wrong and right literature is as relevant today as it was when Arnold argued his case for true culture. The chapter on chick lit is somewhat longer than the previous two body chapters: chapters two and three has served to offer a framework for discussing the chick lit genre in light of traditional standards of literary value, whereas chapter four has offered the culmination of the thesis's discussion.

A key point from the discussion in chapter four is exactly how the chick lit debate can be related to earlier discussions on literary value: the issue of how readers are affected by what they read has been central throughout the thesis. In chapter four this issue was approached by exploring why the chick lit debate matters: why does it matter whether one chooses to read Chick or Lit? By emphasising how chick lit is related to postfeminist ideals, I have sought to demonstrate that the chick lit debate matters because of the way it affects its readers. This is an approach that resembles Q.D. Leavis's claim that the embrace of popular novels matters because of these novels' negative effects on reading capacity. This might make us wonder: even though the context and circumstances for the present discussion of literary value differs from those of Q.D. Leavis's, is the debate essentially the same? Throughout the thesis we have seen how literature is characterised as challenging rather than entertaining: in their defence of true literature, both Arnold (1882, 61) and F.R. Leavis (1977,3) refer to how popular culture results in the dangers of "machinery". Bloom points out strangeness, or subtlety, as crucial for a work to hold aesthetic value, and claims that literature offers not easy, but "difficult pleasures" (Bloom 1995, 35). Merrick identifies a text's ability to challenge the reader as crucial to how chick lit is juxtaposed to literature: "Chick lit shuts

down our consciousness. Literature expands our imaginations” (Merrick 2006, ix). The present thesis has demonstrated that chick lit is one example of writing that “manipulates” readers into appreciating only a certain kind of entertaining, formulaic books. Moreover, the thesis has, with reference to both traditional literary critics and contemporary critics of the chick lit genre, shown that such popular, entertaining books are not recognised as literature: the nature of literature is to challenge, not entertain.

Many of the accounts of literary value represented in this thesis might be judged as elitist and condescending. Just like Arnold in the late 19th century, the chick lit debate is essentially about separating between right and wrong culture: then and now, the idea of right culture relates to literature as in its nature challenging. In the same way, wrong culture relates to writing that perpetuates habitual thinking. To draw such distinct boundaries between what does and does not qualify as literature represents a binary mode of thinking. It becomes a matter of valuing one over its juxtaposed other: literature versus genre fiction, challenge versus entertainment, Lit versus Chick. This thesis has demonstrated that such a binary mode of thinking, although arguably both elitist and condescending, is necessary in order to demonstrate why the differences between literature and genre fiction are important.

By investigating the chick lit genre in light of traditional standards of literary value, this thesis has shown that the issue of defining literary value is not constant, but subject to both historical context and individual convictions: ideas of literary value as objectively and universally defined, represented by Arnold, the Leavises and Bloom, have been challenged by critics who emphasise the mutability and diversity of literary evaluation, like Eagleton, Smith and Radway. Thus, the thesis has sought to demonstrate the complexity of discussing literary value and quality, and at one point one might have been, in the words of Culler, tempted to “give it up, and conclude that literature is whatever a given society treats as literature” (Culler 2011, 22). However, the investigation of the chick lit genre in chapter four has served to demonstrate why it nevertheless *is* essential to separate between capital L-Literature and genre fiction: the thesis has shown that the chick lit debate is important because of the fundamental difference between reading that challenges the mind and reading that perpetuates habitual thinking.

The thesis’s examples of literary analyses of Chick and Lit testify to how literature can challenge readers to see the world from new perspectives, whereas chick lit is typically concerned with the joys of consumerism. The high sales numbers and continued popularity of chick lit prove that a vast number of women readers choose entertainment over challenging literature, and this is problematic because of the way that formulaic genre fiction fails to

challenge readers' habitual way of thinking. In the case of chick lit, readers are conditioned into a postfeminist way of thinking that encourages an embrace of consumerism and motherhood without problematizing this in terms of feminism: both the act of chick lit reading itself and the postfeminist ideals that chick lit represents become a kind of "retreatism"

This thesis's discussion of chick lit as a specific example of popular genre fiction has brought attention to the continued importance of separating between good and bad writing, and thus to how traditional standards of literary value are related to contemporary discussions on literary value and quality. An essential question still remains: how can the reading public in general, and chick lit readers in particular, be convinced that the difference between challenging literature and entertaining genre fiction is important? Although there unarguably *is* a difference between chick and lit, how can chick lit readers be convinced that this difference matters? The chick lit debate discussed in chapter four has shown the complexity of the issue raised above: Merrick's *This is Not Chick Lit* (2006) and her attempt to point out why the difference between chick and lit matters resulted in a massive defence of the chick lit genre, rather than any widespread recognition that chick lit is indeed inferior to other kinds of women's writing. How then, is the issue of demonstrating the difference between chick and lit to be approached? It is my hope that the present thesis has proven not only the importance of discussing chick lit in terms of literary value and quality, but also why further research on chick lit is needed.

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