How to Find Yourself First

-Shopaholic, Queen of Babble and Chick Lit as a Genre.

Helen Smedlund
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Supervisor: Dr. Alan Shima
Examinor: Dr. Marko Modiano
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1. Introduction

In the middle of the last decade of the 20th century, a new kind of novel began to appear in the aisles of book stores. These novels were written by female authors; they were about contemporary women, and they all had covers with a special, new look. They were pink, light purple or in other pastel colours and the pictures on the covers were pretty and showed things that are considered feminine, such as flowers, shoes, handbags or cute patterns. These novels belonged to a new genre called Chick Lit. Chick Lit is an entertainment genre that belongs to popular literature, written with a female audience in mind.

If a curious reader were to open one of these books, they would find that they were humoristic, contemporary, often chatty, with a new perspective on life in general, and the relationship between men and women in particular. Very soon an increasing number of women began buying and reading these novels, and they found that the woman or women in the novel could have been them, only with a little twist and a lot more sass.

1.1 Purpose and disposition

Although the Chick Lit genre is highly popular among its female readers, there has not been very much research done on it, and in writing this essay I would like to contribute to the small amount of research that actually exists. Some of the current
research has come to the conclusion that Chick Lit is sprung from the genre of romance novels and that it continues in that tradition, but with the difference that Chick Lit novels are set in contemporary times. This presumption leads to the question: Is the Chick Lit novel really only a new version of the romance novel? Can it not be seen as a distinct literary genre? I would like to argue that it can, and that the Chick Lit novel of more recent years can be seen as a coming of age (and wisdom)-novel, and that is what this essay will investigate.

Prior to the essay’s analyses, some background information about the genre will be given. This is relevant, as the literary studies of Chick Lit is still in its early stages, and most people do not know much about the genre. Thus, the reception and earlier research of the genre will be discussed, along with a description of the presumed idea of the Chick Lit novel as a romance novel, and there will also be a discussion about why I do not fully agree with this line of thought when it comes to the two novels that will be discussed in this essay. There will also be critical attention placed on the term Chick Lit and the different sub genres. Following the background section, there will be a comparative analysis of two Chick Lit novels.

1.2 Material and method

The primary sources of the investigation are two Chick Lit novels: Confessions of a Shopaholic (2000) by British novelist Sophie Kinsella, and Queen of Babble (2006) by American writer Meg Cabot,. These two novels have been chosen because they are representative examples of Chick Lit novels where the protagonist's main focus is not to find love in the shape of a man, but to find themselves and their place in the world. It is my belief that these two novels are a sign post as to where the genre is heading in the future, with more serious undertones while still being entertaining.
Firstly the authors will be presented, and then I will discuss and show features in the novels that are typical trademarks of a Chick Lit novel. There will be examples of this from the novels, and my method in that section will thus be a comparative reading.

In the second section of this analysis, the conventional formula of the popular romance novel will be presented, followed by a discussion about the ways in which the Chick Lit novels differs from that formula. This will be followed by a discussion about how *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and *Queen of Babble* can be seen as novels about personal growth and development, and how the novels deal with self-discovery more than anything else.

In the course of this analysis, some texts from *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* will be referred to to help with the investigation. Maria Nilson's *Chick Lit. Från Glamour till vardagsrealism* will also be used. Nilson argues that the Chick Lit protagonists’ struggle to find her true self and to be satisfied with her identity is a common narrative element in the genre.

2. **Background**

**Reception and earlier research of the genre**

The Chick Lit novel is a fairly new addition to the literary world, but in its fifteen years of existence it has provoked and angered many a writer and critic, while a great number of women, the Chick Lit readers, seem to appreciate the novels a great deal. As Susanne Ferris and Mallory Young put it in their volume *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*: “On one hand chick-lit attracts the unquestioning adoration of fans; on the other it attracts the unmitigated disdain of critics” (1) Criticism of the genre has been harsh. It has been dismissed as “trashy fiction” by highbrow critics, and called “a froth sort of thing” that “just wastes time” by British novelist Beryl Bainbridge (Ferriss and Young
1). Nobel prize winner Doris Lessing is another unimpressed novelist who has said: “It would be better, perhaps, if [female novelists] wrote books about their lives as they really saw them, and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight.” (quoted in Ferriss and Young 1-2).

In 2005, an anthology called *This is Not Chick Lit: Original Stories by America's Best Woman Writers* was published. This anthology was “meant to celebrate serious writing by women” according to an article in *The Huffington Post* by editor Elizabeth Merrick. American Chick Lit author Lauren Baratz-Logsted did not appreciate the anthology’s title and its insinuations, and soon afterwards she edited an anthology called *This is Chick Lit*. In the introduction, she writes that there is nothing new about “Lits facing off against Chicks.” Included in the introduction is an excerpt from a 1848 letter written by Charlotte Brontë, author of *Wuthering Heights* and one of the Brontë sisters, in which she shares her, not very positive, thoughts on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, which is a novel considered to be the progenitor to the Chick Lit genre by one line of thought (Nilson 15). Brontë cannot understand why Austen is so highly appreciated by her peers, and writes that she finds Miss Austen to be nothing but shrewd and observant, thereby implying that she has no other traits suitable for an author (Baratz-Logsted 2).

Baratz-Logsted sees Brontë’s objections to Jane Austen and her writing as very similar to the objections people have against Chick Lit now, when they say that the genre is fluff and meaningless. Baratz-Logsted states: “One can almost picture the creator of Rochester and her very own Jane gnashing her teeth, muttering all the while, “What do they all see in her? Why, there aren't even any moors in her books!” (2). If we replace the word “moors” with the word “substance”, the quote could be an example of what the critics of today say about the genre.
Regardless of all this drama and controversy, and the claim that the genre is merely trash, Chick Lit readers love it, and it has had an amazing commercial success. In 2002 for example, books in the genre sold for more than $71 million, and a number of publishers decided to start their own lines of Chick Lit novels (Ferriss and Young 2). This incongruity, with readers loving Chick Lit and literary critics trashing it, is very intriguing. What is it about this genre that makes people react so strongly?

**Chick Lit and the romance novel**

One of the most common assumptions that people have about the Chick Lit novel is that all it primarily focuses on is the way a female protagonist is desperately out on the hunt for a man. The protagonist is someone who does not think her life has any meaning without a man, and needs to find him in order to feel fulfilled. This line of thought comes from the idea that the Chick Lit novel is a modern take on the traditional romance novel, the popular romance, also known as the Harlequin. In an essay called *Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners*, Stephanie Harzewski writes that “...the love story is the central focus of the romance novel...Its main plot must involve a man and a woman falling in love and its conflict center on the pair struggling to make the relationship work” (37).

The 1996 novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding is the novel most frequently used as an example of this modern version of the romance novel. The way Fielding has borrowed the plot and other elements from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* but modified it to place it in a modern setting has often been brought up in research about the novel. *Bridget Jones's Diary* is by many considered to be one of the first Chick Lit novels, since it has the humour, the first-person narrative and the informal tone that have become trademarks for the genre.
The term Chick Lit

It is not entirely clear how the term Chick Lit originated. A not very far-fetched explanation would be that it came about as a literary equivalent to the type of movies called Chick Flicks, the kind of romantic comedies that are immensely popular with a female audience, movies that are romantic, humoristic and sentimental (Nilson 19). Thus, when novels began to be published that strongly resembled the Chick Flick movies, one can imagine that it would not have taken long for some clever publisher to come up with the term Chick Lit.

However, there is someone who begs to differ with that explanation. In 1995, a novelist called Cris Mazza co-edited an anthology of post-feminist fiction by female writers. Its title was: Chick-Lit: Postfeminist fiction. According to Mazza, this was a serious anthology, and it had nothing to do with the genre of Chick Lit that was developed a few years later. Calling it Chick-Lit was a daring move, and the editors did not know how the anthology would be received, although they were fairly certain people would understand the irony of the title. As Mazza explains the name choice: “...the ironic intention of our title: not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype” (18).

It was understandably surprising to her when she a few years later found that that term had turned into something entirely different. “...a stroll through any book store confirms that Chick Lit's second incarnation looks not at all like its first. Somehow Chick Lit had morphed into books flaunting pink, aqua, and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long-legged women wearing stiletto heels” (Mazza 18). Needless to say, this was nothing at all like what she wanted when coining the term.
Different sub genres

At first, the Chick Lit novels all basically followed the same formula: Urban, single girl in her twenties or early thirties tries to balance career, friends and family while searching for true love. However, as the genre’s popularity grew, and more writers began writing Chick Lit novels, the genre became more complex and diverse, and it generated a number of sub categories.

There is now Mom Lit, which explores what happens when earlier mentioned single girl settles down with a husband, and they start their own family. In this version, many new issues arise for the main character, such as putting somebody else's needs before her own, being part of a family and dealing with the expectations people have about you as a mother and, in some cases, also as a wife (Nilson 115).

The earlier form of Chick Lit was often criticised for being single-minded, only focusing on white middle class women, and soon a sub genre developed that is called Multicultural Chick Lit. (http://chicklitbooks.com/sub-genres/multicultural-lit/) Here you can find novels for women who do not feel that the first kind of Chick Lit had anything to do with their lives and experiences. Included in this sub genre you find Chica/Latina Lit and African-American Chick Lit. Indian Chick Lit is also growing rapidly, as is the Asian counterpart.

The genre has also spawned sub genres for those not in their twenties or early thirties. There is Hen or Matron Lit, for a more mature audience, and there is also Chick Lit JR, also called Teen Chick Lit. Additionally, there are some books that are more focused on work and career than anything else, where The Devil Wears Prada (2003) by Lauren Weisberger, and The Nanny Diaries (2002) by Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus are two prominent examples. In these, the workplace and employers are the main
themes, and what the novels primarily focuses on.

Finally, there is one sub genre that has its own history and influences, and that is the novels that I believe follow in the tradition of Jackie Collins and her *Hollywood Wives*-series. In the Chick Lit version of these novels, there are typically two or more main characters, which are all very different from each other. There is always the self-centered power "bitch" and the sensitive and fragile woman who is the victim of the powerful woman in some way, and the novels deal with issues of revenge and hate more often than not. In the end, it usually turns out that the powerful woman is not as hard as she seems, and the fragile woman grows stronger. Irish writer Sheila O'Flanagan's novel *Bad Behaviour* (2007) is an example of this kind of Chick Lit.

3. Analysis

*About Confessions of a Shopaholic and Queen of Babble*

The two novels that I have chosen to analyse in this essay, *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and *Queen of Babble*, are both written by established writers. British Sophie Kinsella, whose real name is Madeleine Wickham, had published five novels under her real name when she decided that she wanted to try something different. She has said in an interview that “I wrote several books under Madeleine Wickham before finding a new voice and realizing how much I loved to write comedy. I already had a publisher but I submitted the new book anonymously -- I wanted them to judge it for what it was” (http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?cid=1020738). The novel was an incredible success, and all in all, there are now five novels in the Shopaholic-series (Nilson 174).

American Meg Cabot had also had a successful career as a writer before *Queen of Babble* was published, and has written over fifty novels, of which most are for children
and young adults. She is best known for *The Princess Diaries* (Nilson 170) but has also written novels for adults. Similar to how *Confessions of a Shopaholic* grew into a series of novels, so did *Queen of Babble*. There are three novels in the series so far, and the two following titles are *Queen of Babble in the City* and *Queen of Babble Gets Hitched*. Here, one can point to the first of many similarities between the two series. The second and third novels in the Shopaholic-series are called *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan* and *Shopaholic Ties The Knot*, and the grand themes in the novels are as similar as the titles suggests: the two protagonists both move to New York in *Shopaholic takes Manhattan* and *Queen of Babble in the City*, and they both get married in the third instalments of the two series.

**Plot summaries**

*Confessions of a Shopaholic*

The novel *Confessions of a Shopaholic* is about Rebecca Bloomwood, a twenty-five-year old journalist who works for a magazine called *Successful Saving*. This is a job that leaves her unfulfilled, as she finds finances both boring and uninteresting, and feels that she is in no way qualified to write about finances. There is also the matter of her salary, which in her opinion is too low. Despite this, Rebecca goes shopping almost compulsively on a daily basis, and tries to live the life style of someone more financially secure. Rebecca does try to do something about her monetary problems, first by cutting back, and then by trying to make more money. Nothing works.

Finally, she flees to her parents in the suburbs to get away from the bank manager and credit card companies that are chasing her. In doing so, she stumbles upon a discovery about an insurance company that is about to scam their investors. She writes a piece about it for *The Daily World* that makes the insurance company confess to what
they were trying to do, and suddenly Rebecca is seen as the new it-girl of finances. She gets a job as a financial advisor on a popular morning TV-show, and realises that those years of copying and pasting articles for Successful Savings have actually taught her a lot about personal finances. Things are going well for Becky, except for the fact that she still has not sorted out her own economy.

Throughout the novel, a man by the name of Luke Brandon has been around Becky, but she has not felt any favourable thoughts regarding him, as he seems to her to be a most humourless and rigid businessman. Their so-called relationship reaches a new low when it turns out that the insurance company that Becky exposed is actually owned by Luke Brandon. However, Luke had nothing to do with what they were trying to pull off, and after a few turns, Becky and Luke end up together. The novel ends with a letter from the bank thanking Rebecca for her £1,000 deposit, showing the readers that her financial situation has been resolved.

### 3.2.2 Queen of Babble

The other novel to be investigated, Queen of Babble, is about vintage-loving fashionista Lizzie Nichols, a woman in her early twenties who goes to England to spend the summer with her new boyfriend Andy, whom she met three months ago at college. Unfortunately, when Lizzie gets to England, it turns out that Andy is not the man she thought he was. He still lives with his parents, his dress sense is horrible, and he does not seem to have read the e-mails Lizzie sent him while they were away from each other. The last drop for Lizzie is when she finds out that he is using the system by working as a bartender while being on welfare, and that he tries to lure her into paying his gambling debt. Very aggravated, she departs for France, where her best friend Shari is spending the summer, working in a château. On the train ride there, Lizzie meets a
man named Jean-Luc, to whom she just cannot stop talking. She tells him all her
secrets, thinking that he is just a stranger that she will never see again. It turns out this
is not the case. Jean-Luc, called Luke, owns the château where Lizzie is heading. She is
mortified, and things get worse when she discovers Luke's arrogant and greedy
girlfriend.

At the castle, the staff, including Shari and her boyfriend Chaz, are preparing for a
large wedding. In the castle's attic, Lizzie finds a forgotten, stained vintage wedding
dress that she manages to restore. Because the dress the bride-to-be has designed herself
is a disaster, Lizzie is asked if she can fix it. This turns out to be an impossible task, but
Lizzie proposes that the bride wear the vintage dress instead, which she happily agrees
to. The wedding is a success, and the positive responses she gets for her work gives
Lizzie an idea of what she wants to do with her life: fixing and selling vintage wedding
dresses. She also manages to let Luke find out who his girlfriend really is, and in the
end he confesses that he is in love with Lizzie. The novel ends with a wedding guest
coming up to Lizzie and saying: “Why, you ought to open your own business!” (308)
and with her responding: “Maybe,” I say with a smile, “I will” (308).

**Comparative analysis**

**Main characters**

The protagonists of the novels, Becky Bloomwood in *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and Lizzie Nichols in *Queen of Babble* are both in their twenties, which
places them on the younger end of the Chick Lit age spectrum. Becky works as a
financial journalist in London, and American Lizzie is a recent graduate from college,
where she has studied the history of fashion. They are both quite the typical Chick Lit
heroine. This means that they are likeable, making it so that readers will care for them and hope that the story ends well for the heroines. People tend not to care as much for a character that they do not like or understand, therefore the heroine ought to be kind, sweet and loveable. This also means that the heroine must not be a threat to other women by being too beautiful or too power hungry. These two traits are instead often given to an enemy of the heroine, and there are examples of such characters in both novels. In Kinsella’s novel, Becky’s arch enemy is Alicia, who works for the love interest in the novel, Luke Brandon. She is the beautiful, power hungry woman, and someone who is very condescending to Becky. Becky in turn calls her Alicia Bitch Longlegs when speaking of or thinking about her. In Cabot’s novel, Lizzie also has this kind of enemy, in the form of gorgeous and arrogant Dominique, the girlfriend of Jean-Luc. He is the Mr. Darcy to Lizzie’s Elizabeth Bennet, the couple from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* that ended up together after a great deal of misunderstanding, hate and drama has been the inspiration for a great number of love stories, including this one.

Another aspect that is of great importance in the Chick Lit heroine is that she is not too perfect. This is important both when it comes to appearance and character. The heroine is usually averagely attractive, so as not to be threatening by being more attractive and beautiful than readers. When it comes to Becky and Lizzie, there are no detailed descriptions of their appearances in the novels. However, Becky on occasion thinks that she looks pretty smart when trying on some new item of clothing. There is nothing that points to Becky having any particular issues with her looks. Lizzie, on the other hand, has lost 30 pounds just at the beginning of *Queen of Babble*, and is still adapting to her new appearance. Along with the weight loss, she has gained self esteem and a new identity, which can be difficult to handle, since she no longer is the over-weight girl she is used to seeing in the mirror.
As to the matter of the heroine's character, a Chick Lit protagonist cannot be flawless, because then readers would respond negatively to her as she is too exceptional, too unlike them. Becky is neither too perfect nor too unlike her intended audience. Among her so-called flaws, there is her tendency to daydream, her way of telling lies when it makes things easier, and the fact that she often finds herself in embarrassing situations. Our flaws are what make us endearing, and they seem to be an important aspect of the Chick Lit heroine's popularity. As for Lizzie, her biggest flaw is of course her big mouth, which often embarrasses her as she speaks without thinking. Her lack of direction in her life is also a big flaw.

**Narrative structures**

The novels are both written from first person perspective, with the protagonist telling her story to an imagined listener, which is a typical narrative structure in Chick Lit. There is a reason why most Chick Lit novels are written from this perspective: as a reader you are supposed to relate to and get to know the protagonist, or heroine, as we might also call her (Nilson 12). This is easily achieved by placing the reader very close to the heroine, making her (or him) a part of the heroine's consciousness and thoughts. Another way of achieving this, something both writers use, is by beginning the novels *in medias res*, that is in the middle of the story. *Confessions of a Shopaholic*'s first chapter begins:

OK. DON'T PANIC. Don't panic. It's only a VISA bill. It's a piece of paper; a few numbers. I mean, just how scary can a few numbers be?
I stare out of the office window at a bus driving down Oxford Street, willing myself to open the white envelope sitting on my cluttered desk. It's only a piece of paper, I tell myself for the thousandth time. And I'm not stupid, am I? I know exactly how much this VISA bill will be.
Sort of. Roughly. (5)

In this short passage, Kinsella puts readers in direct proximity with Becky. We hear her
voice for the first time, thus making us close to her from the start, and we understand that she is very anxious about her economic situation, as she self-consciously instructs herself not to panic over a VISA bill. We are also given the information that we are in London by the mentioning of Oxford Street, and Becky's desk being cluttered tells us about her character. The Queen Of Babble begins:

I can't believe this. I can't believe I don't remember what he looks like! How can I not remember what he looks like? I mean, his tongue has been in my mouth. How could I forget what someone whose tongue has been in my mouth looks like? It's not like there've been that many guys who've had their tongues in my mouth. Only, like, three. (5)

And a little bit further down on the same page:

It isn't like it's been THAT long since I last saw him. It was just three months ago! You would think I'd remember what someone I've been dating for THREE MONTHS look like. Even if, you know, for most of those three months we've been in separate countries. (5)

Cabot uses the same method of throwing the readers into the pit of the heroine's mind. We learn that Lizzie is also fretting about something; the fact that she is unsure of what her boyfriend looks like. We also get a glimpse of what her character is like. In contrast to Lizzie, most people do not tend to worry about forgetting the appearance of someone close to them. We also learn that she sees herself as not very experienced when it comes to men and dating, she has only kissed three men in her life time.

When it comes to form, these two opening passages have a number of similarities. The first is the use of informal language. Becky and Lizzie speak just like normal people do in their daily lives, with slang and informal expressions. The fact that they both go by their nicknames, Becky for Rebecca and Lizzie for Elizabeth, also adds to the informality of the text, inducing a sense of familiarity and the feeling that the protagonist is a friend of the reader already. The protagonists also repeat themselves, in Becky's case about the VISA bill, and in Lizzie's about the tongue in her mouth and the
three months of separation. They ask rhetorical questions, which the reader presumes is a commonly casual and witty way for the protagonists to express thoughts. Moreover, important words, or sentences, that the writers wish to emphasize are in italics or capital letters, to show the readers how to interpret the text. They also both end these cited passages with a short and humorous sentence that proves a point; “Sort of. Roughly.” and “Only, like, three.”

The novels are written chronologically, which means there are no flashbacks in time. The only exception to this is the first chapter of Queen of Babble, which places Lizzie at the airport in London, where she is waiting to be reunited with her long distance-boyfriend. Chapter two begins two days earlier with Lizzie still at home in Ann Arbor, about to celebrate her graduation, and then in chapter three we are back at the airport, and Lizzie's story unfolds chronologically from then on.

In addition to the protagonists' first-person narratives, there are also other textual forms in the novels. Including other kinds of texts into the story is a technique that a number of Chick Lit writers use as a way of breaking up the narrative and making it more interesting to read. Examples of these textual inserts can be letters, text messages and notes in diary form (Nilson 12). Confessions of a Shopaholic includes letters to Becky from her bank and from the credit card companies she uses. Most of the letters deal with her not having paid back what she owns, but there are also some that include new offers to increase her overdraft. A number of these letters are responses to Becky's excuses as to why she has not sent payments when she is supposed to. The manager of her bank account, Derek Smeath, goes from sending Becky these unappreciated letters to becoming a character in the novel, and in doing so he becomes somewhat of a villain. There are, in addition, also a few lists written by Becky, concerning shopping, and ways in which she can improve herself.
In *Queen of Babble*, a large part of the plot concerns the senior thesis that Lizzie has not written, and the fact that she cannot properly graduate until she has done so. Passages of this senior thesis, which is called “History of Fashion” are included in the novel, before every chapter. In addition, each chapter begins with a quote, saying something about people who talk too much, thus pointing to Lizzie, who is, after all, the queen of babble.

Another aspect of the Chick Lit novel that is of great importance is that it should be funny. Since the novel's main purpose is to entertain, humour is an essential narrative element in Chick Lit. It can be found both in the narrative structure of the novel, with the witty narrative voice of the protagonist, and in scenes that are clearly humorist in nature. Both novels display these two trademarks. There is one particularly humorous scene in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, where Becky, who has spiced up her CV by claiming that she speaks Finnish, finds herself face to face with the recruitment director of the Bank of Helsinki. Becky knows that she cannot speak a word of Finnish, we the readers know that she cannot, and yet here she stands, with everyone expecting her to:

“A bearded man rises from his chair, gives me a huge smile, and extends his hand:
I stare speechlessly at him. My face is glowing, as though I'm consumed with happiness. Everyone in the room is waiting for me to answer, I've got to say something.
“I...erm...erm...Haålllo!” I lift my hand in a friendly little wave and smile around the room. But nobody smiles back.
“Erm...I've just got to...” I start backing away. “Just got to...”
I turn. And I run.” (168)

Unsurprisingly, Becky does not get a call back after that interview. The horror and embarrassment Becky must feel in this passage is strong enough for readers to feel it as well, and that makes it quite humorous.
The Chick Lit novel as a novel of self-development

In *See Jane Write: a girl's guide to writing Chick Lit* by Sarah Mlynowski and Farrin Jacobs, they state that:

Chick Lit is... not all about getting a guy. Love may be a happy diversion, or a painful pothole, but the Chick Lit story is about the main character's road to self-discovery. Although there's usually a satisfying and uplifting conclusion, the ending is more about hope for the future than snagging Mr. Right. (10)

One of the purposes of this section is to show how *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and *Queen of Babble* do not entirely follow in the tradition of the popular romance novel but instead deal with the protagonist's road to self-discovery and development. Thus, a definition of the romance novel and some information about its characteristics will help this investigation. In *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced fantasies for Women*, Tanya Modleski writes that there is a formula to writing the popular romance novel that rarely varies:

A young, inexperienced, poor to moderately well-to-do woman encounters and becomes involved with a handsome, strong, experienced, wealthy man, older than herself by ten to fifteen years. The heroine is confused by the hero's behavior since, though he is obviously interested in her, he is mocking, brutal, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile, and even somewhat brutal. By the end, however, all misunderstandings are cleared away, and the hero reveals his love for the heroine, who reciprocates. (36)

Although some of the characteristics of the romance novel can apply to these Chick Lit novels, it would be a difficult task to find a way to make the plots of *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and *Queen of Babble* fit entirely into this formula. In *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, the main plot deals with Becky's struggle to get out of her financial troubles and the insecurities on her part that is the reason behind her compulsive shopping behaviour, and not the kind of social inequality between man and...
woman that is described above. Becky’s involvement with Luke Brandon is one of several side plots in the novel, and not the main one. It is only towards the end of the novel that Luke becomes important, and this happens after Becky has realised a number of important things about herself, thus showing us that her self-development comes before her finding love.

The same can be claimed for *Queen of Babble*, although Lizzie’s problems are not as palpable as Becky's financial situation. Lizzie experiences heartbreak early in the novel, and when she leaves London and the unpleasant Andy, the cause of her heartbreak, it is the end of this relationship and what she is supposed to do now that fills her mind. She does not wish to reconcile with Andy, and is appalled when he later finds her in France and proposes that she come back to him. Consequently, when Lizzie meets her Luke on the train to Mirac, she is still so engrossed in the aftermath of the relationship with Andy that she just sees Luke as a nice stranger on a train who is allowed to hear her confession about recent events in her life. It is only after the long train ride, in which she gets to know Luke really well, that she begins to see him in a different light. From then on, her relationship with him does play a larger role in the novel than the one between Becky and the British Luke in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, but their relationship does not really fit into the romance novel formula, as will be explained below.

Another important aspect that cannot be overlooked is the fact that the two Lukes in the novels have very little in common with the typical romance novel hero, the Mr. Rochester-type (the hero in Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, who frankly is a despicable creature of a man) that is proposed to be an essential character in popular romance novels. Neither the age difference between the hero and heroine nor the hero's traits matches that of the men in these novels. Instead they are civilized, polite and overall
nice men. They do not treat the heroines badly, and, importantly, that is not what either heroine wants. This being said, there is one thing about the men in the novels that agrees with the formula; they are both on the wealthy side. Luke Brandon is the young prodigy executive of his own company, Brandon communications, and Jean-Luc is the heir to a beautiful French château and wine cellar.

If one wants to trace the origin of the Chick Lit boyfriend, there is actually one well known character in literature to which resemblances can be drawn: Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy. Kinsella’s Luke Brandon is like him in a number of ways. Just as Elizabeth in the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* finds Mr. Darcy to be stiff and unpleasant, so does Becky find Luke. Their relationship also evolves in the same way, from Becky thinking that Luke does not like her, to them arguing about the article she writes about one of his clients, to the ending in which Luke reveals who he really is and what he feels, and Becky coming to the realization that she feels the same way about him.

**Rebecca’s road to independence**

Rebecca Bloomwood in *Confessions of a Shopaholic* is an interesting character, and a very convincing example of a person struggling with a compulsive shopping behaviour. At the beginning of the novel, she is working hard at pretending that she does not have this problem. She tells herself, and others, that it is nothing, although she knows deep down that it actually is pretty serious. An example of this is when her flat mate Suze has answered a call from the bank and asks Becky: “Are you overdrawn?” . . . “Just a tad.” I give a careless shrug. “But I'm sure it'll work itself out. No need to worry!” (39). All the while, Becky is thinking that if Suze really knew about the whole situation, she would “need more than yoga to calm her down” (39).
This need in Becky to act like everything is fine, while in truth it clearly is not, only makes her more stressed. And what does a shopaholic do when she needs to relax and take her mind off things? The answer is obvious: she goes shopping, thus completing the vicious circle that she does not seem to be able to escape. Because although Becky is aware of the fact that what she is doing is not good for her, she cannot stop. She must shop. Instead of going to the root of the problem and dealing with the underlying issues that create her compulsive shopping, which could perhaps be helped with therapy, Becky decides to go about the problem backwards, and focus on the fact that she does not have enough money. She tries "Cutting Back", which is her father's answer to hard times, a method that does not work for her at all. Then she goes on to the regime of "Making More Money" as found in a self-help book, by trying to get a job as a futures broker. She is not successful.

Entwined with her monetary problems is the fact that Becky is not happy with her job situation. The irony of her working at Successful Saving Magazine, while being a failure at taking care of her own economy, is quite overwhelming. She claims to know nothing about finance, and thinks to herself that “I've been doing this job for three years now, and I'm still expecting someone to catch me out” (11). Becky tries to make up for this insecurity by at least looking the part of a financial expert. She has a number of outfits that she believes are appropriate, and she often walks around with a copy of The Financial Times under her arm, as she believes it makes people take her seriously.

The turning point for Becky in the novel comes after an embarrassing and eye-opening incident at a shop called Octagon, where her debit card, VISA card, and Octagon card all have been denied, Becky must face the truth. The truth of all the red lettered envelopes that she has been ignoring has finally caught up with her. Becky cannot keep the charade up any longer. Under the excuse that her bank manager Derek
Smeath is a stalker, she hides away at her parent's house, exhausted and in despair. Adding to her mortification is the fact that Becky light-headedly gave her parent's neighbours some advice about what to do with their savings. This advice caused them to lose it all. As she looks over the correspondence from the company that is responsible, she finds some irregularities about the matter that strikes a bell in her mind. She becomes engrossed in the affair, and writes an article about it that is published in *The Daily World*. In writing the article, Becky realises some things about her work career: “I've never cared before whether people take me seriously or not. But today I do care. Today what I'm doing does seem important, and I do want to be taken seriously” (264). Her days of slacking around at a job that is not suited for her seem to be at an end. Becky wants to do something meaningful with her time, and not just sit off the hours and wait for a chance to go shopping.

Her chance to prove that she is serious about this new-found revelation comes quickly; she receives an invitation to the TV-program *Morning Coffee* to talk about her article, and learns after the show that the producers want her to come in again, this time to give financial advice to people calling in. Becky is now starting to realise that she does have knowledge about the financial world that she can use to help other people, which she loves, and she begins to see herself in a new light. This is one of the instances where she grows as a person.

The other instance comes while she is on set on *Morning Coffee* as an advisor. A woman calling in has the same shopping behaviour as Becky, and while Becky tells the caller what to do, she realises that what she is saying applies to her, as well:

“Well, Fran,” I say. “The first thing you've got to do is...is be brave and confront the issue. Contact the bank and tell them that you're having trouble managing.” I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice steady. “I know myself how hard it can be to tackle this kind of problem- but I can honestly tell you,
running away doesn't solve anything. The longer you leave it, the worse it'll get.” (319)

The next moment, Becky sees Derek Smeath in the audience, and her first impulse is to run, like she has done in the past, but acts differently: “. . . then suddenly I stop, midtrack. It's as though I'm hearing my own thoughts for the first time in my life. And what I hear makes me ashamed of myself” (322). With a pounding heart, Becky goes to face up to Derek Smeath, finally able to take responsibility for herself. She admits to her problem and the fact that she needs help sorting it out, and for the first time, she acts like the responsible, adult human being she is on her way to becoming. Smeath sees this, and decides to give her one last chance. Becky, who knows now how irresponsibly and childishly she has behaved, is truly grateful. While walking away from the set, an assistant on the show tells Becky that they want her to become a regular, thus increasing Becky's income significantly. The last segment of the novel is an account of the before mentioned letter from the bank thanking Becky for her £1,000 deposit. This shows the reader that Becky is now in control of her economic situation, and gives hope that with her growing confidence, she will no longer need to use extravagant shopping sprees as comfort.

This protagonist has by the end of the novel gone from an irresponsible, insecure girl to a young woman who is confident, who accepts the fact that she has to take responsibility for herself, and who has found meaningful and rewarding work. At the beginning of the novel, she saw herself as full of faults and in vast need of improvement, but by the end she has realised that she is not so bad, and that she can actually use the sides of herself that she thought needed improving in a positive way.

**Lizzie's development**
Queen of Babble's protagonist Lizzie is another young woman who grows as a person. When we first get to know her, she is fresh out of college, and does not really have a clue as to what she wants to do next. The fact that her family and other people around her think that her three years of studying the history of fashion was a waste of time that will never get her a decent job, does not help. Her best friend Shari is also pressuring her about moving to New York and getting an apartment together, something that Lizzie is not sure is what she wants to do, because she can only think of the summer she is about to spend with her boyfriend Andy in England. Lizzie is sexually inexperienced, and that might be a reason why she is so inclined to believe that her relationship with Andy is perfect.

When it turns out that Andy is not the English Prince Charming of Lizzie's fantasies, she is severely shocked. The fact is that if anybody in this study is anything like the hero of popular romance novels, it is Andy. He treats Lizzie badly in several ways. She learns that he has told his family that she is fat, and that he has lied about his calling to be a teacher because he wants to help children in need, which was something that Lizzie really liked about him. He leaves her alone to fend for herself her first day there, and when they are together he is not at all what she expected. They end up in bed together, but Lizzie is not satisfied with the encounter. What becomes the last straw for Lizzie is when she finds out that Andy is working while collecting the dole. She believes that she can put up with a few things, “But defrauding poor people? Because that is basically what someone who takes unemployment while having a paying job is doing. That I cannot tolerate” (93). Lizzie leaves England after this, and in doing so, she shows that a Chick Lit heroine is not the kind of woman to put up with a man behaving awfully. Herein lays an important difference between the popular romance novel heroine and the Chick Lit protagonist. The first stays with that man and ends up
marrying him, hence showing that she is not worthy of being treated with respect. The second sees him for what he is and instantly, in this case, leaves the country.

Her dealing with Andy is the first instance in the novel where Lizzie grows as a person. When she realises that the fantasy she has created about him does not measure up to reality and she decides to leave, she is doing something that she never thought she could. By taking the chunnel to France and then hopping on a train, she makes a journey not only through Europe, but also away from the hopelessly romantic girl version of herself that she is now leaving behind. When she later meets Luke and gets to know him and becomes involved with him, she no longer carries her childlike ideas of what love is supposed to be. She goes into this relationship with her eyes open.

Lizzie also evolves by going from being fresh out of college and quite clueless about what she is supposed to do with her life to finding something that she is very passionate about and also talented in. Before, no one has taken her and her interest in vintage fashion seriously. She has been questioned about her choice to major in fashion history studies, and been asked what good that could ever do her. However, Lizzie's love for vintage fashion is what saves the big wedding at Château Mirac, as the Givenchy wedding dress that she has found and restored is what the bride finally decides to wear. Lizzie is highly praised for her work, and the novel ends with the idea of her starting her own vintage clothing business.

When it comes to personal development, Lizzie also finds a new strength towards the end of the novel. Throughout the narrative, she is very troubled by the fact that she is keeping things from the people she love, most prominently her best friend Shari, who has a tendency to be quite harsh. The biggest secret Lizzie holds is the one about how she has not really graduated, which is something that has been dragging her down all summer. When she finally reveals this to Shari, her response is: “Well, come on,
Lizzie,” Shari says. “Just because your education was free doesn’t mean it’s all right for you to squander it. History of fashion? As a major?”(263) Shari expresses the negative attitude people have when it comes to Lizzie's college studies. Further on, however, as she understands how important vintage fashion really is to Lizzie, Shari becomes supportive: “. . . let's face it, Lizzie. School was never your thing.” She nods at the sewing basket. “This is.” (264). After this episode, Lizzie can relax about not being an attentive student and the missing thesis, and start to embrace and work on her good qualities, instead of focusing on her failures.

4. Conclusion

With this essay, my aim was to examine the genre of Chick Lit. I reviewed what research had been done about the genre up to now and presented some of that research, along with other relevant background information about the genre.

I offered a comparative reading of two popular Chick Lit novels, Confessions of a Shopaholic and Queen of Babble and argued that the Chick Lit novel is a novel of personal development and focuses on the protagonist’s quest of self-discovery. I used the two Chick Lit novels mentioned above, and showed examples of how they dealt with these issues.

One of my research questions was if the Chick Lit novel was a modern version of the popular romance novel, the Harlequin. I presented the genre conventions for that kind of novel, and investigated if the Chick Lit novel could be said to follow that formula. My conclusion is that although Chick Lit novels have borrowed some themes and characteristics from the romance novels, there is also more to the Chick Lit novel than just the romance theme. Friendships and family relations are as important to the two heroines as finding love is, and in the two novels analysed in this essay, it is
important for the protagonists to understand themselves first, and only after that do they
begin thinking about starting a relationship with the man in their lives. I also found that
the men in the Chick Lit novels do not act like romance novel heroes, as they are nice
men who do not treat the protagonists badly.

The Chick Lit protagonist might start out as an insecure girl with low self-esteem
and no direction to her life, but as the narrative progresses, she begins to figure things
out and learn to stand up for herself, as is the case for both Becky and Liz, who are well
on their way to becoming independent women towards the ends of the novels. It is also
quite clear that the protagonists want more out of life than being somebody's significant
other. Being married and having a husband is not the greatest achievements in their
lives, in contrast to the romance novel heroines.
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