The Literary Merits of Chick Lit: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Classic women's fiction and chick lit—a pejorative label assigned to contemporary women's fiction—share many similarities in the way of content and style. Almost always, their stories center on flawed but endearing heroines who face and navigate to varying degrees of success calamitous circumstances—more often than not of their own making—and perfunctorily fortuitous resolutions replete with a happily-ever-after that sees them capture a long-sought-after love interest or a beau they never knew they always wanted. Despite the undeniable parallels between classic and contemporary women's fiction, however, the latter is routinely dismissed by audiences as vapid, pedestrian, and "nothing more meaningful or substantial than a mouthful of cotton candy" (Pinter), while the works of Austen, Brontë, Roth, and Updike remain among the most read, studied, and appreciated of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Many critics cite a lack of complexity, depth, and substance in chick lit texts—elements and constructs that Dr. Juliette Wells calls the "the very bread and butter of literary novels" (64). Some accuse the stories' protagonists of obsessing over the trivial and mundane at the expense of greater, more profound considerations. While others, still, lampoon the genre for its antifeminism, claiming the stories perpetuate the mythical "necessity of female submission for female survival" (Kohn 45). This paper, however, endeavors to challenge chick lit's detractors by demonstrating how the genre's many perceived deficiencies are, in actuality, a cavalier disregard of or unsubstantiated misconceptions about a canon of literature that is rarely afforded the close reading it so richly deserves. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the ideal lens through which to examine the two genres side-by-side. "Rhetoric and composition has always been concerned with the power of spoken and written discourse, in particular the ways in which language can be used to persuade audiences about important public issues … CDA aligns itself with this tradition in attending to

purpose, situation, genre, diction, style, and other rhetorical variables, but also supplements" (Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon 109). An analysis of those variables and supplements as applied to women's fiction, both classic and contemporary, will demonstrate their purposeful employment of diction, syntax, imagery, and irony as well as their intentional use of conventional themes to create provocative worlds inhabited by realistic and investable characters

Defining Chick lit

There is no one, static definition for chick lit. How it is perceived, approached, and understood varies broadly amongst readers, authors, industry professionals, and critics. Despite its ever-evolving identity, the genre routinely finds itself at the center of what has been aptly described as "the ongoing turf battle over what constitutes literary fiction" (Sarricks 374). Chick lit's early iterations spanned the gamut of "light and fluffy romance novels, laugh-out-loud comedies … [and] gritty tales of heartbreak and loss" (Yardley 89). As its popularity grew and it was adapted for television and feature films, the genre came to be regarded as "*Sex in the City* in book form—the single gal in the big city looking for Mr. Right" (Farr 207). Since then, it has only germinated, attracting a bevy of new and diverse suitors. Jane von Mehren, VP and publisher of Random House's trade paperback division, acknowledges that chick lit is "starting to spinoff into subgenres—from bride chick lit to 'fancy moms' lit about getting divorced or moving to the suburbs, … [the genre] is evolving. It is diversifying with different types of stories. Now there's glam lit, hen lit, even stories involving the paranormal" (18). It's an expansion that's even managed to bridge racial and cultural divides by commercializing the ethnic chick lit market. "We're seeing African-American and Latina authors selling very well" (18). Chick lit's versatility, adaptability, and willingness to reinvent itself as a means of catering to its target readers are what make it easy to love but difficult to define. Therefore, in order to

establish the boundaries within which the genre operates as well as to determine its identifying characteristics, we must first consider its origins.

Chick lit got its start across the pond with Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Published in 1996, the story centers on a "hapless comic heroine as the typical thirty-something single woman of the 1990s" (Marsh 52). Bridget's decision to embark down a road to self-improvement drives the plot forward. Readers witness her set seemingly arbitrary goals that she humorously fails to achieve, like being more punctual, sticking to her diet, giving up cigarettes, and completing *The Famished Road*. "Her diary revels hilariously in her insecurities, her mistakes, and her failures even as it qualifies her successes" (52). Though readers and reviewers alike praised the novel, identifying Bridget as both endearing and relatable, critics argue that "the humor of the novel is not consciously created by Bridget but rather is generated at her expense" (52). From a feminist point of view, the fact that she is "criticized for the characteristics that ostensibly render her the object of the novel's humor, especially her failure to remake herself and control her life" (55) is problematic. Characters obsessed with trivialities, fixated on their personal lives, and preoccupied with procuring a romantic interest at the expense of "more broadly meaningful concerns…present an image of contemporary women that contradicts all that feminists have worked to achieve" (53).

Literary pundits acknowledge that "responses [to chick lit] have indeed tended toward extremes. On one hand, chick lit attracts the unquestioning adoration of fans; on the other, it attracts the unmitigated disdain of critics" (Ferriss and Young 1). One such critic is cultural theorist Caroline J. Smith who asserts that even though chick lit texts find "their roots … in the nineteenth century heroine-centered novels [of] Charlotte Brontë … and Jane Austen," (7), they remain sub-literary genre fiction devoid of richly descriptive or poetic passages, metaphors, and

similes, all of which "contribute crucially to the layers of meaning that make literature worth discussing, examining, and rereading" (8). Juliette Wells echoes this sentiment in her essay "Mothers of Chick Lit?: Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," contending that "when we look in chick lit for such literary elements as imaginative use of language, inventive and thought-provoking metaphors, layers of meaning, complex characters, and innovative handling of conventional structure, we come up essentially empty-handed" (64). However, to assume that the chick lit court of public opinion is split evenly into two camps, is a gross simplification of the genre's contextualization in American popular culture. An argument can even be made that its origins are deeply, if not deceptively, rooted in the very belief and value systems it claims to subvert. Journalist Norah Vincent notes, "Embarrassing as it might be to most feminists, Bridget Jones is living out exactly the farce for which her precursors set the stage. After all, is it any wonder Bridget is a spoiled princess when she grew up on the feminist belief that women should and must have it all" (50)? Thus, while some critics accuse Bridget Jones and her successors of undoing centuries of forward progress, other critics point to feminist rhetoric and ideologies as the incubation of chick lit and its Bridget Jones-esque heroines.

Whether chick lit as a genre is little more than substance-less fodder that panders to lovelorn twentysomethings, a scathing indictment of feminist teachings, or something in between cannot be deduced or understood outside of classic women's fiction, the literary standard against which contemporary women's fiction is measured. Consider, then, the linguistic elements, literary constructs, and themes of Jane Austen's *Emma*, a timeless classic written by, arguably, one of the most influential female authors of the eighteenth century.

***Emma*: Linguistic Elements and Literary Constructs**

Jane Austen's writing is often hailed for its keen use of irony, diction, and syntax as well as for its expert employment of third person omniscient point of view. "*Emma* is among the supreme achievements of English fiction. If not Jane Austen's most popular work … it's surely her most inexhaustible" (Wenborn and Moseley 9). As beloved as it is, however, *Emma* is ironically a novel in which very little takes place. Instead, the book is "completely dominated by the personality of its eponymous heroine … and its drama is above all the psychological drama of Emma Woodhouse herself" (9). Despite its want for eventful action, *Emma* has been analyzed, examined, and critiqued by countless readers over the centuries who have assigned countless meanings to and drawn countless conclusions from its pages:

> It has been seen as the story of a woman's humiliation and reform and as a rallying cry for female authority, as a template of the modern detective novel and as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unregulated imagination. It has been read as a book about reading and a book about authorship, and has yielded subtexts on patriotism, health, and religious conversion, among many others. …The novel's multidimensionality continues to offer new perspectives and new challenges not only to each new generation of critics, but also to each reader on each new reading. (9)

Such equivocality is typical of women's fiction as a genre and accounts for why *Emma* has undergone an inordinate number of adaptations and has been the subject of countless, often disparate, interpretations since its first review was published more than two hundred years ago.

Emma's complex characters, subtle plotlines, and ecumenical themes are matched only by its unprecedented textural density, aptly described by critics as "the manifold complexity of the book's web, in which every sentence, almost every epithet, has its definite reference to equally un-emphasized points before and after" (9). The result is an intricately woven fabric of

"astonishing narrative and thematic unity, across which events, scenes, even individual words, resonate with one another" (10). What follows is perhaps one of the novel's most recognized excerpts:

> Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. …The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes for her. (Austen 1)

In her introduction of the protagonist, Austen shrewdly foreshadows the events to come, making her description of Emma simultaneously nuanced, dichotomous, and artfully measured.

From the outset, Austen places readers one step ahead of the protagonist—a crucial component of dramatic irony. First, the author privies readers to Emma's shortcomings. She is both overindulged and arrogant, two characteristics of which the protagonist herself is blithely unaware. Second, the author informs readers that the same traits that bring Emma ease and enjoyment at the beginning of the story, will be her downfall by the end of it. Andrew Wright notes in his book *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure*:

> Emma Woodhouse's faults are described with a sly understatement which does not detract from the general radiance of tone of the novel, but which nevertheless is meant to announce the problem of the story: '… rather too much her own way', a 'little too well of herself', 'so unperceived', and 'rank as misfortunes': this is the direction of irony, forcing

> by its understatement a close examination of what Emma thinks and does in the book, to show evidence of the truth of this criticism. (61)

What results is readers' ability to share in an uncannily intimate way Emma's inner life without ever being inhibited by it.

Austen's use of dramatic irony achieves a number of important ends, enriching the reader's experience on multiple levels. First, it creates a bond and facilitates a rapport between readers and the narrator. That trust is something Austen calls on repeatedly throughout the novel. From one page to the next, readers develop an intimacy and familiarity with the protagonist, and in many instances, they enjoy the advantage of knowing Emma better than she knows herself. Second, Austen's use of irony creates a mounting sense of audience expectation. From the moment Emma is introduced, readers are poised to witness her fall from grace, though they don't know exactly how or when it will happen. As a result, all of Emma's blunders—every miss at true love, each failed matchmaking attempt—builds tension that begs for relief and resolution achieved only through the story's denouement. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Austen's use of irony compounds the readers' investment in the main character. In the novel's opening pages, Austen introduces her audience to a heroine who begs to be hated. Though readers may be inclined to deny it, their interest in the beautiful, wealthy, popular buttinsky with a proclivity for regarding those around her "as raw material for her imagination to play with" (41) is born from a somewhat devious desire to witness her get her just deserts. As the story develops, however, and readers' viewpoints of Austen's heroine come into focus, their opinions of her shift. Emma morphs from a villainous "mean girl" into something decidedly less sinister. At worst she is well-meaning but misguided; at best she is an imaginative, albeit naïve, romantic. Slowly, her

character takes shape into someone relatable, even likeable. Until finally, readers graduate from betting against Emma to rooting for her.

Diction operates similarly to irony in Austen's novel, playing prominently into her writing style both by creating layered meaning within the characters' dialogue and by propelling the plot forward. "Characteristically [in *Emma*], a speech has not one meaning, but often two, and sometimes more. … Nearly all the characters make speeches that contain a covert as well as an overt meaning. … And we readers, like the characters, must comb out the significant elements in all these speeches, and decode them, if we are to understand what is going on" (McMaster 121). The lending of her dialogue to multiple interpretations is part of "what makes *Emma* endlessly re-readable" (122).

Though there are many in the novel to choose from, one example of Austen's perspicacious word choice to create subtly complex dialogue is the scene in which Emma discourages young Harriet from accepting Robert Martin's marriage proposal. Though Harriet loves Robert and he her, Emma unilaterally decides that Mr. Martin is beneath Harriet's station. Rather than express her disapproval outrightly or directly instruct Harriet how to respond, Emma cunningly addresses the matter as if it has already been settled, saying: "When Mr. Martin marries, I wish you may not be drawn in … to be acquainted with the wife, who will probably be some mere farmer's daughter, without education" (31). Emma's words are cleverly calculating, because in her statement to Harriet, the latter's rejection of Mr. Martin is implicit and so, too, is the reasoning behind it. As far as class-conscious Emma is concerned, Mr. Martin's match is an uneducated farmer's daughter or someone else of equally low social standing. In fact, Emma believes her Harriet's admirer is destined to marry the type of woman that Harriet would do well to not associate with at all. So resolved is Emma in her conviction with regard to the issue that

she continues to speak as though Harriet has already rejected Mr. Martin's marriage proposal even after the proposal letter arrives. With measured casualness, Emma cautions Harriet that she "need not be prompted to write with the appearance of sorrow for his disappointment" (52). When unpretentious Harriet, who is unversed in the tactful subtleties of high society, responds by straightforwardly asking, "You think I ought to refuse him, then" (52), Emma vehemently denies any investment or involvement in Harriet's private affairs. The epitome of genteel prudence, she replies: "Not for the world would I advise you either way" (53). Though brief, this exchange between Emma and Harriet exemplifies the method through which Austen manages to create such multidimensional characters and intricate plots. The author's deft use of language choreographs technically flawless verbal waltzes during which what is meant is never said and what is said is rarely ever what is meant.

Along with irony and diction, Austen harnesses the power of thoughtfully structured sentences to develop believable characters with unique foibles and distinguishable dispositions. In doing so, the author often uses "… constructions such as emphatic repetitions, exclamations, and incomplete sentences" (Dry 95). Interestingly, all three can be applied to Harriet's style of speech, characterized as "mostly fragmentary, full of clichés and exclamatory expressions … [with] … grammar [that] is faulty and sentence structure [that is] unvaried" (Lemos 98). Consider the following excerpt in which Harriet, in response to Emma's inquiry as to whether or not Mr. Martin reads, inarticulately bumbles an answer:

> Oh yes!—that is, no—I do not know—but I believe he has read a good deal—but not what you would think any thing of. He reads the Agricultural Reports, and some other books that lay in one of the window seats—but he reads all them to himself. But sometimes of an evening, before we went to cards, he would read something aloud out of

> the Elegant Extracts, very entertaining. And I know he has read the Vicar of Wakefield. He never read the Romance of the Forest, nor The Children of the Abbey. He had never heard of such books before I mentioned them, but he is determined to get them now as soon as ever he can. (18)

As a way of demonstrating Harriet's easily flustered nature, Austen employs short, incomplete sentences, often accompanied by dashes, to create choppy rhythms that mimic the character's awkward, rambling thoughts. Though subtle, Austen's use of sentence structure helps to distinguish Harriet—who proves helplessly indecisive and unsure of herself—from the story's other characters who are decidedly more poised and polished. To further drive home Harriet's artless incertitude, Austen punctuates much of Harriet's speech with qualifiers and contradictions. When analyzing the above passage, for example, Harriet hastily changes her "yes" to "no," only to second guess herself with "I don't know," before arriving back at "yes." Even after settling on a final answer, she feels the need to qualify it by acknowledging that while Mr. Martin does read, it is not material that Emma, with her exacting standards, would hold in high regard.

A second syntactical structure unique to Harriet is her repeated, and at times inappropriate, use "of exclamations with the word odd as its nucleus: 'very odd!' she says (18), 'so very odd!' (20), 'so odd!' (57), 'very odd!' (231), 'how very odd!' (278). Oddly enough, there is usually nothing odd in the situations Harriet thinks as odd" (98). Austen doesn't stop there. She also couples Harriet's gratuitous use of the word odd with clumsy turns of phrase, poor grammar, and idioms used by the common class. "Note … the mistake in 'all them to himself,' the co'loquial: 'sometimes of an evening' and the awkwardness of 'them now as soon as ever he can'" (98). All of these infractions, which are present in Harriet's response with regard

to Mr. Martin's reading habits, work together to sculpt the defects, traits, and nuances that ultimately authenticate Harriet's character.

Point of view is another literary device that Austen skillfully employs in *Emma*. Most notably, the author is praised for her expert use of free indirect discourse—a form of the third person omniscient point of view, used to create narrative ambiguity through which authors are able to control readers' responses to a story's characters. In her essay, "Free Indirect Discourse and the Clever Heroine of *Emma*," Louise Flavin defines free indirect discourse as "a mode of speech or thought presentation that allows a narrator to recount what a character has said while retaining the idiomatic qualities of the speaker's words" (51). When used effectively, free indirect discourse allows authors "to create the effect of heightened feelings, intensifying or dramatizing the character's words, unlike direct speech where the words of the speaker stand on their own without narrator involvement, exposing the speaker directly" (51). In *Emma*, there is, arguably, no character whose reader perception is more closely guided by free indirect discourse than the protagonist herself. Early on, the author cautions her audience that Emma is "a heroine whom no one but myself will much like" (Austen-Leigh 158). And, in fact, for much of the novel, she proves correct. Emma's elitism, pettiness, and obsessive preoccupation with assembling an exclusive social circle make her an especially unsympathetic character.

Emma's worst behavior, however, is arguably reserved for Miss Bates. A humble and poor woman who devotes herself to caring for her ailing mother, Miss Bates is well-liked by everyone in Highbury except Emma. Though Miss Bates does not rival Emma's status, beauty, or intelligence, Emma views her and her ever-expanding social circle as a threat. If Emma is nonplussed by Miss Bates' growing popularity, she is downright outraged when her homely nemesis wins the favor of Frank Churchill and Mr. Knightley, both members of Emma's inner

circle. So, when the rumor mill hints that Mr. Knightley is courting Miss Bates' niece, an exasperated Emma responds with harsh ridicule:

> … How would he bear to have Miss Bates belonging to him?—To have her haunting the Abbey, and thanking him all day long for his great kindness in marrying Jane*?—'so very kind and obliging!—But he always had been such a very kind neighbour!'* And then fly off, through half a sentence, to her mother's old petticoat. *'Not that it was such a very old petticoat either—for still it would last a great while—and, indeed, she must thankfully say that their petticoats were all very strong'"* (225).

Emma's derision of Miss Bates is written in free indirect discourse—italicized for emphasis—in a deliberate effort to "reinforce the mocking tone that Emma wishes to impart" (52). Flavin also notes that "the maliciousness of the parody is in its calling attention to Miss Bates' concern for thrift and trivia, but even more devastating is the mimicry of her excessive gratitude and good will" (52). In this way, Austen's use of third person omniscient point of view or free indirect discourse works to manipulate readers' perceptions of Emma, hampering her likeability both by exposing her as a bully and by casting Miss Bates as her underserving victim. The author's creative liberty with the story's point of view is a narrative stratagem she utilizes often throughout the novel. Through it, she "forces [readers to] continually moderate what [they] see according to whose eyes [they] are looking through" (42). That distance, ironically, is the source of much of the novel's teasing commentary on both Emma's character and the course of events she routinely catalyzes, only to fall victim to. Of considerably broader importance, however, Austen's use of free indirect discourse functions as "a running qualification to the novel's entire moral and epistemological framework" (42).

Emma: The Theme of Transformation

Emma's themes are as plentiful as the interpretations they yield. For centuries readers and critics alike have assigned a wide range of meanings, teachings, and lessons to Austen's novels, which have proven as timeless as they are universal. Central to the equivocality of her works is the fact that Austen herself "is … characteristically tight-lipped about her choices and intentions" (31), rarely identifying or alluding to her novels' end objectives. While interpretations of Austen's writings are constantly evolving, one regularity is the writer's penchant for using her stories to mirror real-life as a form of commentary on larger social issues, viewpoints that ultimately subvert prevailing cultural attitudes. *Emma* is a prime example of this. But, in order to fully grasp and appreciate the novel's themes, it is imperative that the reader, first, consider *Emma* within its historical context. Austen "was writing to a population of readers in a time and a place for whom the attributes of a lady were important" (45). In light of this, the story should be approached as a lesson on ladyhood. While the average modern reader, as a matter of routine, may eschew literary didacticism, "Austen expected that a novel could gratify the cravings of the imagination and provide moral instruction" (45). With this in mind, then, *Emma* distinguishes itself as one of Austen's greatest achievements because it is a *bildungsroman*—a novel that educates, in *Emma*'s case, by inviting readers to deconstruct staunch gender expectations dictated by late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century society. At that time, the pervasive view of a lady or a woman belonging to society's upper echelons, centered on the Victorian house angel, characterized as demure with downcast eyes and a faint, silent smile. "Both male and female authors of popular conduct books of the period defined a lady primarily through what she must lack: personal agency, ambition, desire, and vanity" (46). Emma, then, stands in striking contrast to her era's narrow, celebrated vision of a proper lady, fulfilling Austen's artistic and

social ideals rather than conforming to the culture's hegemonic standards. Emma is neither passive nor demure. Conversely, she "defies every dictum about female deference" (46).

Central to Emma's subversion is the fact that she is a character of many contradictions. For instance, the same wealth that liberates Emma from the economic constraints placed on women by society also dictates her attitude about class, belying her own prejudices and hypocrisies, and informing her imperious worldview. Readers witness this when Emma attempts to broker a love connection between Harriet and Mr. Elton even though the former is admittedly of lower rank and station than the latter. Emma has no qualms about asking Mr. Elton to stoop, as it were, to Harriet's level. However, when Mr. Elton, instead, asks for Emma's hand in marriage, our heroine is profoundly and immediately insulted that Mr. Elton "should suppose himself her equal in connection and rank" (16). Another example is when Emma reads Robert Martin's letter to Harriet. Emma admits that "she [is] surprised. The style of the letter [is] much above her expectation" (31). Rather than use her exceeded expectations as an opportunity to reconsider her view of Mr. Martin as "coarse and unpolished" (13) and as a "completely gross, vulgar farmer—totally inattentive to appearances, and thinking of nothing but profit and loss (16)—opinions based solely on his family's caste—Emma concludes that "one of his sisters must have helped him" (31) write the letter. Thus, even as Emma's wealth relieves her of certain burdens and worries, namely the need for a husband, it severely limits her understanding of herself and others as well as the world they inhabit.

Another of Emma's contradictions is that the goodness and decorum she endeavors to impart to others, she herself in many ways lacks. Take, for instance, her plan to makeover Harriet: "She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners

It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers" (12). Though she offers a mental blueprint for Harriet's transformation, Emma is the central focus. Any benefit to her friend is secondary to alleviating Emma's own boredom and validating her social standing and societal influence. En route to those ends, though, Emma's behavior is decidedly unkind, uncouth, and unladylike. On more than one occasion, she is presented with the opportunity to admit her mistakes and choose a different path, however she holds stubbornly to her convictions. Even the admonishments of Mr. Knightley, whose opinion she often resents but nonetheless holds in high regard, fail to produce a meaningful change. Of convincing Harriet to reject Mr. Martin's proposal, Emma defiantly confesses that she does "not repent what she [has] done" (41). Ultimately, her change of heart comes only after she realizes that she is in love with Mr. Knightley.

A third incongruity is that Emma rejects the notion of love for herself but fills her days attempting to find it for others. On several occasions throughout the novel, Emma makes plain her aversion to marriage. When Harriet questions why Emma with all her charms is not yet married, Emma laughs and replies, "My being charming, Harriet, is not quite enough to induce me to marry … I am not only not going to be married, at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all" (76). When Harriet expresses her disbelief at the thought of a woman choosing not to marry, Emma blames it on her nature. "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall" (76). Emma's personal antipathy to love and marriage, however, do not stop her from ineptly playing cupid in others' lives. In the novel's opening chapter, she takes credit for matching her sister Isabella and Mr. Knightley's brother John. Emma also brags to George Knightley that she is the one who

brokered the match between her former governess Miss Taylor and her new husband Mr. Weston: “I made the match, you know, four years ago; and to have it take place, and be proved in the right, when so many said Mr. Weston would never marry again, may comfort me for anything” (16). She, then, famously moves on to setting up Mr. Elton, an attractive and well-mannered vicar who Emma considers one of Highbury’s most eligible bachelors, and Harriet, described rather unflatteringly by Mr. Knighly thusly:

> She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, with probably no settled provision at all, and certainly no respectable relations. She is known only as parlour-boarder at a common school. She is not a sensible girl, nor a girl of any information. She has been taught nothing useful and is too young and too simple to have acquired anything herself. At her age she can have no experience, and with her little wit, is not very likely ever to have any that can avail her. She is pretty, and she is good tempered, and that is all. (54)

Our heroine’s efforts to rewrite Highbury’s social etiquette by transforming Harriet into a polished and sophisticated lady and by pairing her with a man above her rank are nonsensical, amounting to little more than willful determination and imaginative matchmaking. Yet the fact that social-climbing Mr. Elton and naïve Harriet are ill-matched is evident to everyone but Emma, who is completely taken aback when Mr. Elton makes it abundantly clear that he would never deign to court someone as lowly as Harriet. Slow to learn, Emma goes on to imagine a possible love match initially between herself and Frank Churchill and then between Harriet and Frank Churchill “that again is based on a total misunderstanding of their respective natures and desires” (Goodheart 590). Ironically, the one, and arguably most important, match that she never anticipates and does not manipulate is her own match with Mr. Knightley.

A fourth incongruity can be seen in the real-life consequences that come about as a result of Emma's fanciful imaginings. "Emma Woodhouse is an 'imaginist' … whose imagination creates a world of its own. It is a world made to boundless perfection by desire, for in that dominion conferred by the imagination there are no limits upon life, either upon what can be known or what can be done" (Tave 205). Emma's imagination is on full display when she first meets Harriet, a border at Mrs. Goddard's academy who is something akin to an orphan, as she does not know either of her parents. With Harriet unable to supply satisfactory answers about her upbringing or about the exact circumstances that landed her in Highbury, "Emma [is] obliged to fancy what she [likes]" because she finds it "much pleasanter to let her imagination range and work at Harriet's fortune than to be labouring to enlarge her comprehension or exercise it in sober facts" (61). Emma imagines a past and pedigree for Harriet that makes her an acceptable match for Mr. Elton. Further, she goes to great lengths to imagine a world in which the Eltons readily accept Harriet into their fold. Take, for instance, the elaborate and quixotic picture Emma paints of the imagined moment Mr. Elton shows his family Harriet's picture:

> My dear little modest Harriet, depend upon it, the picture will [be] … his companion all this evening, his solace, his delight. It opens his designs to his family, it introduces you among them, it diffuses through the party those pleasantest feelings of our nature, eager curiosity and warm prepossession. How cheerful, how animated, how suspicious, how busy their imaginations all are! And she succeeds in convincing not only herself, but also Harriet that Mr. Elton harbors romantic intentions toward Harriet. (49)

Emma's romantic reimagining of reality proves so contagious that she succeeds in convincing Harriet of Mr. Elton's affections for her. The problem, of course, is that Mr. Elton, who has all along been courting Emma, is wholly disinterested in Harriet, claiming never to have paid

Harriet any attention or given her any consideration beyond her friendship with Emma. Yet again, then, our heroine falls victim to her own obtuse arrogance. “Emma’s fault is not that she sees herself as a perceptive observer but that she really sees herself as a director and the people around her as extensions of her will. Emma is a matchmaker because she can believe that people will feel as she wishes” (37). Consequently, Emma’s fantasies lead to string of unfortunate outcomes, including Mr. Elton’s contempt, Harriet’s disappointment, and Mr. Martin’s rejection. They also threaten to derail Harriet’s actual prospects and her chance at true happiness with a man who genuinely loves and wants to marry her.

Emma’s contradictions work together to create a complex and multidimensional character who is fallible yet familiar. They also set the stage for our heroine’s moral metamorphosis and spotlight transformation as one of the novel’s central themes. When readers first meet Emma, she is the monarch of her small world. In this role, “she knows no boundaries, recognizes no limits. And because there is no point for Emma where her sphere of influence ends, there is no room for anyone else’s to begin” (Morgan 37). Her unchecked influence and power inform her cavalier attitude toward rearranging other people’s lives to their detriment and for her personal gratification and amusement. Only after she misinterprets sign after sign and intention after intention, bungling one love match after the next, is she awakened to her feelings for Mr. Knightley. “She touched, she admitted, she acknowledged the whole truth … It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself” (370)! On the heels of that revelation, a heart transformation begins to take hold. It is a change that shifts her focus away from herself and replaces it with thoughtfulness, empathy, and compassion for others. Finally, Emma is able to understand the pain and embarrassment caused by her meddling: “How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how

irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on! It struck her with dreadful force, and she was ready to give it every bad name in the world" (365). For Emma, then, change and maturation come when she learns the limits of self. And her world only enlarges when her domain shrinks. Though she is humbled, Austen's heroine remains subversive. Emma simply "learns to balance power and propriety in order to better fulfill behavioral ideals of a 'lady'" (46). In the end, she is no less strong, no less willful, no less independent than when she is first introduced. And Austen's representation of a female with wit, agency, and substance remains intact.

Jane Austen's artful use of irony, diction, syntax, point of view, and theme constitute only a small sample of her authorial mastery. William James Dawson sums up Austen's giftedness as a writer in his book *The Makers of English Fiction*:

> The genius of Jane Austen lies in this perfect and even severe simplicity. Her characters evolve themselves without dramatic episodes. Her plot is as natural and inevitable as a problem in mathematics. Everything is fitted together with the most delicate contrivance, with the art that effectually conceals art. From first to last the atmosphere is exquisitely lucid, the style distinct and firm, the figures, in spite of the old-fashioned stiffness of their phrase and gait, so vital that they are more real to us than many of the people we have dined with. We feel, not that we have read a book, but that we have been magically transported into the eighteenth century and have breathed its air and lived its life. (45)

When considered alongside her many other inventive writing techniques and literary constructs, these elements create vivid worlds and unforgettable characters that remain with her audience long after the last page is read. It is, therefore, not hard to understand why Austen's works are so beloved and highly regarded.

Having, now, established the precedent against which contemporary women's fiction is measured, we can begin our examination of chick lit. While few authors match the skill and mastery of Jane Austen and her contemporaries, for a number of reasons, Jennifer Weiner arguably, exemplifies a comparable literary prowess and instinct. First, Weiner is a prolific writer and stout businesswoman who has published 18 novels that have sold millions of copies in 36 countries and, cumulatively, have spent hundreds of weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Her commercial success is as rooted in her mastery of her craft as it is in her business acumen, her expert knowledge of the trade, her unabashed aim to write quality fiction about women for women, and her willingness to call out and challenge both the gender biases and entrenched sexism in the publishing industry that routinely deem women's fiction as somehow less literary than other genres. Later scholarship has revealed that Austen, too, was a shrewd businesswoman as well as "a highly professional author, determined to reach the widest possible readership, alert to market trends and responses, and as concerned for the commercial as for the critical success of her work" (33). It is a characterization that flies in the face of an enduring myth that she penned stories for the exclusive enjoyment of her close friends and family and was surprised by and grateful for the wider audience her work garnered as well as for whatever meager income it brought her.

Second, Weiner is a fierce and vocal advocate of contemporary women's fiction who is noted and often criticized for vociferously jumping into the fray to defend chick lit against authors who seem to implicitly or explicitly defame it at every turn. Austen was equally aware and similarly vocal when her work did not receive the coverage and attention she believed it deserved, and she did not allow her status as a female in a decidedly male profession to hinder her from fighting for her seat at the table. As an example, a letter to her publisher registers her

disappointment at the fact that an anonymous review of *Emma* in an 1816 issue of the *Quarterly Review* failed to promote the second edition of *Mansfield Park*. Hardly "a self-effacing dilettante, grateful for any crumbs of notice that fall to her table" (33), when Austen was not jockeying for the recognition she deserved, she was an active participant in her contract negotiations, shrewdly parting ways with Thomas Egerton, her longstanding publisher, after he refused to reprint *Mansfield Park* and finding his replacement. Her subsequent dealings with her new publish continued to prove that "whatever else it was for her, [Austen's writing] was a commercial venture" (34). She would go on to refuse the offer of a paltry £450 flat fee for the combined copyright of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. Instead, on her own, she negotiated to publish *Emma* on commission.

Third, Weiner's novels have been optioned and adapted for film and television much the same way Austen's works have been. Her sophomore novel *In Her Shoes* was adapted into a screenplay and turned into a movie featuring powerhouse actors, including Cameron Diaz, Toni Collette, and Shirley MacLaine. The film debuted in 2005. Weiner went on to sign a development deal with ABC Family in 2008 and wrote a pilot for a sitcom called *State of Georgia* that aired 12 episodes before its cancellation. And, in 2020 HBO Max announced that Mindy Kaling is set to produce and star in the film adaptation of Weiner's first novel *Good in Bed*. Similarly, "Jane Austen is securely established at the top of the classic bestseller lists, her international sales fueled by a regular diet of television and film adaptations, including the 1996 Miramax blockbuster *Emma*, written and directed by Douglas McGrath and starring Gwyneth Paltrow" (36) as well as the 1995 cult classic *Clueless*, featuring Alicia Silverstone, that reimagined Austen's novel as a coming-of-age teen comedy set in modern-day Beverly Hills.

The parallels between both authors' literary genius, personal drive and motivations, and commercial success make them well-matched for a comparative analysis.

Good in Bed: Linguistic Elements and Literary Constructs

Like Austen, Weiner's writing is recognized for its deft use of syntax and diction, but her style is, perhaps, most distinguished by its rhythmic prose and richly descriptive language. In the following excerpt, Weiner paints a vivid picture of the protagonist, Candace "Cannie" Shapiro's, childhood neighborhood. Detailed and deliberate, the author's portrayal is foundational to understanding the story's heroine:

> There are two kinds of houses in the neighborhood where I grew up—the ones where the parents stayed married, and the ones where they didn't. Given only a cursory glance, both kinds of houses look the same—big, rambling, four- and five-bedroom colonials set well back from the sidewalk-less streets, each on an acre of land. Most are painted conservative colors, with contrasting shutters and trim—a slate-gray house with blue shutters, for example, or a pale beige house with a red door. Most have long driveways, done in gravel, and many have in-ground pools out back. But look closer—or, better yet, stay a while—and you'll start to see the difference. The divorce houses are the ones where the Chem-Lawn truck doesn't stop anymore, the ones the plowing guy drives past on the mornings after winter storms. … There's no fancy landscaping, no big pool parties in the summer, no construction crews making a racket at seven A.M. adding on that new home office or master bedroom suite. The paint job lasts for four or five years instead of two or three and is more than a little bit flaky by the time it gets redone. (26-27)

Though she is an Ivy League educated woman with a successful career as a columnist for the fictional *Philadelphia Examiner*, Cannie grapples with debilitatingly low self-esteem. She credits

much of her unhappiness to her plus-size body. But the reader comes to discover that her faltering self-worth is also deeply rooted in her father's abandonment of her and her family when she was just a little girl. In her online review, "Close-reading of Jennifer Weiner: Let's Give the Best-Selling Author the Serious, Critical Read She Demands," Laura Miller notes:

> Cannie introduces the trauma of [her father's] desertion in a particularly revealing way, by describing Avondale, the affluent Philadelphia suburb where she grew up, as seen from its streets. Her imagined observer scrutinizes each house for the tell-tale cosmetic flaws and lapses in maintenance that brand it—as if with a scarlet D—as a home where the parents have divorced.

While Cannie seems utterly unaware of the fact that this single event charts the course for all of her subsequent relationships, Weiner's readers understand with piercingly clear insight that her father's rejection not only mars the way she perceives herself but also ultimately dictates her ability to love and to be loved.

Similarly to Austen's use of irony, then, Weiner's handling of descriptive language enhances the reader's experience on a number of levels. First, it builds a world in which the reader becomes fully immersed. From the gravel driveways to the blue shutters to the red doors, the audience is invited to envision Cannie's world with stunning precision. Second, it begins to develop the subtly complex layers of Weiner's well-crafted characters. Rather than cursorily list Cannie's vulnerabilities and shortcomings, Weiner paints a scene through which the protagonist's ostracism and corresponding shame become a visceral experience for the reader. Third, it imparts the reader with an intimate understanding of the protagonist that facilitates the reader's complete investment in her.

Weiner pairs her use of descriptive language in her writing with an adroit use of syntax. While Austen's sentence structures succeed in lending believability to her characters, Weiner makes a habit of employing sentence structure to infuse humor, often self-deprecating in nature. Take, for instance, the following excerpt:

> So here I am. Twenty-eight years old, with thirty looming on the horizon. Drunk. Fat. Alone. Unloved. And, worst of all, a cliché, Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones put together, which was probably about how much I weighed and there were two determined lesbians banging on my door. My best option, I decided, was hiding in the closet and feigning death. (19)

Weiner's short, one-word sentences punctuate the protagonist's matter-of-fact submission to her perceived lot in life. In an act of vulnerability, Cannie exposes herself to the reader—naked and unabashedly flawed. "Here I am," she says, before airing her grievances, one painful disappointment at a time. Aging, overweight, and single, she feels unloved and unoriginal. Still, despite her obvious distress, she is able to make light of her circumstances, poking fun at herself and interjecting the barb about Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones as a candid sidebar intended more for the audience's comic relief than her own.

Wells admits that "in its deployment of humor, the best of chick lit [can] stand up favorably to the tradition of women's writing" (64). She also concedes, however, that "humor, perhaps unfairly, has never been the most valued and respected of literary elements" (64). But when we take into account that many beloved classic women authors, Jane Austen included, are lauded for their clever and witty satire, Wells' assessment has the smack of an inaccurate generalization more so than a proven truth.

Diction also plays a pivotal role in Weiner's writing. Austen's nuanced word choice is most evident in her characters' dialogues. Weiner, on the other hand, employs diction to bolster themes and build emotion through narrative exposition. In the below excerpt, Weiner's word choice underscores Cannie's physical and emotional heaviness, captioning her unspoken but ever-present awareness of her failure to measure up to others' standards:

> I struggled into a sitting position and heaved myself into the bathroom, where I flicked on the light and stared at myself, reviewing the situation and my appearance. Tear-streaked face, check. Hair, light brown with streaks of copper, cut in a basic bob and shoved behind my ears, also present. No makeup. Hint—well, actuality—of a double chin. Full cheeks, round, sloping shoulders, double D-cup breasts, fat fingers, thick hips, big ass, thighs solidly muscled beneath a quivering blanket of lard. My eyes looked especially tiny and squinchy, something avid and hungry and desperate about them. Eyes exactly the color of the ocean in the Menemsha harbor in Martha's Vineyard, a beautiful grapey green. My best feature, I thought ruefully. Pretty green eyes and a wry, cockeyed smile. Such a pretty face, my grandmother would say, cupping my chin in her hand, then shaking her head, not even bothering to say the rest. (19)

What makes this a pivotal passage in the story is that it reflects for the reader a mirror image of Cannie as she sees herself. Weiner's word choice is deceptively simple yet cunningly deliberate. First, she employs adjectives to describe different parts of Cannie's body as big, full, fat, round, and thick. Her sketch accentuates Cannie's size so as to mimic the character's obsessive preoccupation with her weight. Weiner also employs verbs that reinforce readers' sense and understanding of Cannie's heft, noting that she "struggles" to a sitting position and "heaves" herself into the bathroom. The author continues to up the ante, modifying verbs with robust

prepositional phrases and adverbs. When she writes that Cannie's "thighs [are] solidly muscled beneath a quivering layer of lard," (19), she effectively paints the character as the antithesis of dainty, delicate, and feminine.

Heaviness as a theme permeates Cannie's physical and emotional being. Weiner connects the two by only allowing Cannie to see externally what she feels internally and by gradually increasing her awareness, alongside the reader's understanding, of her own avid desperation for acceptance and validation. Weiner employs adverbs of manner to ensure that Cannie's self-loathing remains undeniably prevalent as is evidenced in Cannie's rueful examination of her own reflection. No physical feature or character trait is enough to ameliorate Cannie's perceived shortcomings. The last line of the excerpt is the most meaningful because its poignancy is drawn from what is not said. One disappointed shake of her grandmother's head brings Cannie palpable despair, and the scene, itself, challenges claims that chick lit generally lacks "the subtlety and ironic precision of observation that goes into the creation of Austen's heroines" (Harzewski 67) or "Austen's dexterous use of silence" (67).

Much the same way Austen cleverly manipulates point of view to control how the reader responds to her characters, Weiner manipulates sentence rhythm to control how her reader experiences the story's events as they unfold. The below passage, exemplifies her intentional use of transitional phrases and punctuation to attentively shepherd her audience from the present to the past and back to the present, all while preserving the nostalgia upon which the plot is built and from which Cannie's entire story draws meaning:

> And now, more than three years after our first kiss, three months after our let's-take-a-break talk, and four hours after I'd found out that he'd told the entire magazine-reading world that I was a Larger Woman, Bruce squinted at me across the parking lot in front of

> his apartment where he agreed to meet me. He was blinking double-time, the way he did when he was nervous. His arms were full of things. There was the blue plastic dog-food dish I'd kept in his apartment for my dog, Nifkin. There, in a red wooden frame, was the picture of us on top of a bluff at Block Island. There was a silver hoop earring that had been sitting on his night table for months. There were three socks, a half-empty bottle of Chanel. Tampons. A toothbrush. Three years' worth of odds and ends, kicked under the bed, worked down into a crack in the couch. (11)

The excerpt opens with the transitional phrase "and now," set off by a comma. It is a simple construction that serves two important purposes. First, it manipulates the sentence's rhythm by adding length and stress to the word "now," initiating a pause and forcing the reader to reset. It's a seminal shift considering that the excerpt is preceded by a four-page flashback of how Cannie and Bruce meet and eventually begin dating. The scene is sweet, its tone sentimental, and the narration is primarily mimetic—"a slow telling in which what is done and said is staged for readers, creating the illusion that [they] are seeing and hearing things for [themselves]" (Barry 223). "And now" signals the end of the protagonist's immersive memory and refocuses the reader's attention.

Second, the transitional phrase functions as a metadiscourse marker that helps "clarify the purpose or direction of [the] ... passage [by] acting as [a] guidepost for the reader" (Kollin and Gray 130). As a result, Weiner's audience can easily follow the narrator's movement through time. This technique creates a poignant contrast between the past and the present, drawing a cardinal line between what Cannie and Bruce's relationship started out as versus and what it is now. In this way, then, these metadiscourse markers contribute to the work's overall cohesion.

When it comes to knowing and meeting her readers' expectations, Weiner proves thoughtfully aware and particularly adept. As an example, the sentence "His arms were full of things" is immediately followed by a list of the things Bruce is carrying. Weiner's attention to the direction of her language ensures clarity in her writing, and, like the transitional phrase at the beginning of the passage, creates cohesion from one sentence to the next. The first four items listed are presented in there-transformation, a type of structure that manipulates the rhythm of a sentence by placing the stress on its subject. This rhythmic construction is skillful and deliberate. Weiner could just as easily have written "Bruce was carrying my blue dog food dish, a picture, three socks, a half-empty bottle of Chanel, etc." but this would have failed to evoke the same melancholy tone or punctuate the finality of the scene unfolding. Every item, though insignificant by itself, represents a salvaged shard of their shattered relationship and is individuated as such.

***Good in Bed*: The Theme of Transformation**

Unlike Austen, who was routinely reticent about her writing choices and intentions, Jennifer Weiner has been unapologetically adamant and, at times, controversially vocal with regard to why she writes and for whom she writes. In a 2010 interview with *Huffington Post*, she stated plainly, "I don't write literary fiction—I write books that are entertaining, but are also, I hope, well-constructed and thoughtful and funny and have things to say about men and women and families and children and life in America today" (Pinter). The subjects she tackles in her novels as well as the predominately female audience to which she caters are ultimately what relegate her novels to the inferior status of chick lit. But that doesn't discourage Weiner from writing for women. "My ideal reader is any woman who's ever felt like she needed to get undressed in the dark, any woman who's ever felt miserable about the size of her hips or the

shape of her face or the texture of her hair…which is to say, lamentably, every single woman in America and probably beyond" (387).

Rather than kowtow to critics, Weiner has made a point of addressing gender prejudice head on. It is a battle that began long before her career started and that will undoubtedly continue long after she and her contemporaries clear the way for the next generation of female authors to enter the literary scene. "I think it's a very old and deep-seated double standard that holds that when a man writes about family and feelings, it's literature with a capital L, but when a woman considers the same topics, it's romance, or a beach book—in short, it's something unworthy of a serious critic's attention" (Pinter). And, in fact, a double standard does exist. That same year, a study conducted by VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, a non-profit intersectional feminist literary organization dedicated to creating transparency surrounding gender imbalances and the lack of diversity in the literary landscape, compared the number of author and book reviews printed in popular, reputable publications, including *Harper's Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*. Across the board, male authors were disproportionately read, reviewed, and recognized in comparison to female authors. Though Weiner has faced backlash for her criticism of the publishing industry's gender inequity, some of the literary world's most celebrated male authors have taken note and acknowledge the problem. In an interview with *The Telegraph UK*, famed writer Jonathan Franzen agreed with Weiner's position, "When a male writer simply writes adequately about family, his book gets reviewed seriously, because: 'Wow, a man has actually taken some interest in the emotional texture of daily life,' whereas with a woman it's liable to be labelled chick lit. There is a long-standing gender imbalance in what goes into the canon—however you want to define the canon" (Bertodano).

Audiences' penchant for viewing works by male authors as somehow more literary and worthy of respect and serious consideration than those penned by female authors is not a novel issue or neoteric concern. Classic women's fiction authors, Jane Austen included, faced the same uphill battle, rooted in the cultural illegitimacy of women's voices, issues, and settings:

> The belief that women, and thus domestic novels about women, are not associated with development because they are framed by domesticity is part of a cultural hegemony that views male experience as normal and female experience as abnormal or Other. …The domestic novel has been hard for many critics to read as a genuine novel of development because it often does depict a world where violence is rare and relationships appear safe. What seems to be the safety of the world of domesticity … has caused both male and female readers to dismiss the domestic setting. But heroines such as Emma [and Cannie] *do* have to overcome obstacles … and these obstacles are often domesticated or different versions of those that heroes face on their quest for independence. The domestication of personal obstacles does not, however, make these obstacles any less real or less dangerous for the heroine. The text of the domestic novel simply places personal obstacles in a different context. (48-49)

Therefore, in much the same way Jane Austen's *Emma* is a domestic novel that functions as a *bildungsroman* by educating readers through a depiction of female development that outrightly challenges societal gender rules, while addressing themes, obstacles, and relationships that take place within a decidedly domestic setting and that must be considered within their historical context to be fully appreciated and understood, so, too, is Weiner's *Good in Bed*. In it, Cannie discovers, during what she thinks is a temporary breakup with her longtime boyfriend, that he has not only moved on but has also penned a magazine editorial in which he candidly discusses

her weight and the challenges that accompany loving a larger woman. This heartache catalyzes Cannie's personal journey to self-improvement and healing that include, among other goals, slimming down by joining a weight loss program, jumpstarting her writing career by exploring ways to get her screenplay produced, and healing deep-seated wounds left behind by her father's abandonment. Along the way, Cannie must reckon with her mother's newfound lesbianism, navigate an unexpected pregnancy that includes a decision to raise her child as a single parent after Bruce makes it clear he has no interest in being a father, and grapple with debilitating postpartum depression. Though her journey is fraught with failures and disappointments, it also yields a number of positive, life-changing results. She finds a new love in Peter, her doctor, meets an industry insider who expresses interest in producing her screenplay, gives birth to a healthy baby girl whom she names Joy, and lands her dream job as a regular columnist for *Moxie*, the very same magazine that featured her ex-boyfriend's editorial at the beginning of the story. But, perhaps, the most significant transformation that takes place is within Cannie herself. The same woman, who in the novel's opening pages, cannot look at her own reflection in the mirror without scorn and derision and who also cannot see beyond the rejection of others—particularly her father and Bruce—to embrace her inherent worth, finds strength, self-acceptance, and purpose. Though Cannie's transformation is in many ways radical, it is a change that is inextricably and exclusively rooted in issues faced by modern-day women. Therefore, her story and the lessons therein cannot be truly appreciated or fully understood outside of that context. Weiner admits this is by design:

> In real life, [women] have jobs, and babies, and lovers and husbands, and not all of us are going to end up size two's. …I wanted to encompass the unhappiness of living in a plus-size body, but also show that it's not pure, unadulterated, 200-proof misery. I

> wanted to show the whole scope of things—professional success, rewarding friendships, a loving, if vexing family, … great meals, great adventures, and love, and self-acceptance at the end. (382)

While many works classified as chick lit may lack the poetic prose characteristic of classic women's fiction, many more boast a considerable number of equally important literary features that give them depth and meaning beyond the vacuous subjects of shoes, shopping, and sex. When we exam Austen's *Emma* and Weiner's *Good in Bed* side-by-side, we can see that both authors make creative use of content and structure to build emotion and complexity as well as to create authentic and relatable characters. For these reasons, both women are extraordinary authors whose works bring to their respective genres the rare distinction of being as entertaining as they are literary.

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