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# The Girl in the Postfeminist World: Rethinking the Impact of Chick-Lit Fiction

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Running Title: Chick-Lit Fiction Impact

The Girl in the Postfeminist World:  
Rethinking the Impact of Chick-Lit Fiction

By

Sarah T. O'Connor

\* \* \* \* \*

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
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**ABSTRACT**

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This thesis discusses “chick-lit” series in relation to popular culture, adolescent development, and feminist theory. The role of the female in the United States is currently dominated by both neo-liberal and conservative postfeminist ideology. Postfeminism advocates female empowerment via consumption, sexual attractiveness and physical beauty, while at the same time valorizing passive femininity and the roles of wife and mother. Chick-lit fiction provides a means by which postfeminist messages can be examined as they are presented to adolescent girl audiences, and reveals that the influence of this discourse over female subjectivity is inherently patriarchal. As a genre, chick lit is often dismissed as having little literary value; however, its overwhelming popularity with adolescent readers, including the adaptation of the *Gossip Girl* and *Twilight* novels into a primetime television show and blockbuster film series, warrants a more extensive critical analysis. The facilitation of a postfeminist economic, physical and sexual role for adolescent girls is evident in the five series I examine: *The A-List*, *The Clique*, *Gossip Girl*, *The It Girl*, and *Twilight*. Theories of adolescent development and interviews with adolescent girls reveal the way in which the chick-lit genre also reflects girls’ experiences—and resilience—within contemporary US culture.

*For Cristina*

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## Introduction

*Stopped by the movements of a huge early bumblebee which has somehow gotten inside this house and is reeling, bumping, stunning itself against windowpanes and sills. I open the front door and speak to it, trying to attract it outside. It is looking for what it needs, just as I am, and, like me, it has gotten trapped in a place where it cannot fulfill its own life. I could open the jar of honey on the kitchen counter, and perhaps it would take honey from that jar; but its life process, its work, its mode of being cannot be fulfilled inside this house.*

-Adrienne Rich

With the beginnings of second-wave feminism in 1963, Betty Friedan wrote a landmark social commentary, *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she identified a growing dissatisfaction among women, “the problem with no name.” Her work is often cited as contributing to the renewed feminist purpose, and was a crucial commentary on United States middle-class culture: “The book highlighted Friedan's view of a coercive and pervasive post-World War II ideology of female domesticity that stifled middle-class women's opportunities to be anything but homemakers.”<sup>1</sup> Friedan detailed the ideology of the domestic role of women as resulting in an actual symptomatic affliction: “the forfeited self.” Writing that the systemic loss of subjectivity among women in the United States “did not begin in America until the fire and strength and ability of the pioneer women were no longer needed, no longer used,” Friedan documented a significant social and psychological impasse women collectively experienced in the wake of both first-wave feminism and the Second World War.<sup>2</sup>

It has been almost fifty years since *The Feminine Mystique* was published, yet it appears that women in the United States are facing a similar social and psychological impasse in the wake of second-wave feminism and the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. In this thesis, I will explore this impasse as it shapes adolescent girls’ beliefs about their identities and roles in American

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<sup>1</sup> Jewish Women's Archive, February 15, 2011, "This Week in History - Publication of ‘The Feminine Mystique’ by Betty Friedan." <<http://jwa.org/thisweek/feb/17/1963/betty-friedan>>

<sup>2</sup> Friedan Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1983), 335.

society as they develop into adults. Specifically, I will examine popular “chick-lit” series as important fiction that reproduces the messages of contemporary culture and simultaneously mirrors the experiences of adolescent girls within it.

In the past ten years, a new “postfeminist” discourse has emerged in the United States. Encompassing both neo-liberalism and conservative ideology, postfeminism has been subtly reinstating problematic roles for women and girls that the feminist movements had sought to overcome. Susan Faludi contextualizes the American psyche in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> as primed for recovering “traditional feminine values” messages, such as passivity and the goals of wifedom and motherhood: “Of all the peculiar responses our culture manifested to 9/11, perhaps none was more incongruous than the desire to rein in a liberated female population . . . [B]y February 2002, single women—far more than single men—had been on the receiving end of a six-month matrimonial campaign.”<sup>3</sup> The resurgence of the conservative norm of feminine domesticity—whether as new mother, grieving widow, or supportive housewife—has dominated the cultural landscape since September 11<sup>th</sup>, essentially dictating what it means to be an American woman. Popular television shows such as *Desperate Housewives* or *Modern Family* are examples of postfeminist conservatism, and confirm first the validity, and second, insist on the luxury of the housewife role. Similarly, in romantic comedies, women must still be “chosen” by men in order to have a “happy ever after.”

Meanwhile, the second-wave feminist movement has been superseded by the new neo-liberal postfeminist ideology that similarly celebrates femininity and the “end” of feminism. While postfeminist conservatism idealizes “family values” and “traditional” female roles, neo-liberal postfeminism has been successfully glossing over questions of class, race, gender and

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 21; 111.

sexuality by glamorizing physical and sexual “feminine” roles in society as “empowering” for women. Diane Negra presents a concise and insightful explanation of the way postfeminism has displaced feminist purpose in contemporary society:

By caricaturing, distorting, and (often willfully) misunderstanding the political and social goals of feminism, postfeminism trades on a notion of feminism as rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist. In contrast, postfeminism offers the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics, postmodernism, or institutional critique.<sup>4</sup>

Postfeminism in this sense is not feminism at all; rather, it symbolizes the dismissal and supersession of feminism and a powerful renewal of the wealthy, white, phallogocentric culture that rebinds girls and women to a submissive role.

Neo-liberal postfeminism has also taken the place of the “girl power” feminist movements of the 1990’s. In 1992, feminist Kathleen Hanna wrote in the “Riot Grrrl Manifesto”: “...we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits or being cool according to traditional standards.”<sup>5</sup> Yet in the past two decades, postfeminism has stamped out feminist activism such as that of Hanna’s, through a new image of the “empowered”—and feminine—girl or woman, who, as Negra writes, has “an expressive personal lifestyle and the ability to select the right commodities to attain it” as a glamorous front for capitalism itself.<sup>6</sup> Postfeminism differs from feminism by elevating the female with spending power over the female with subjective power, by

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<sup>4</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? : Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Hanna/Bikini Kill, “Riot Grrrl Manifesto,” in *The Essential Feminist Reader*, ed. Estelle B. Fredman (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 396.

<sup>6</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? : Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.



emphasizing confidence in beauty rather than confidence in identity, and by rewarding heterosexual orientation and conservative values with continual affirmation in the media.

Furthermore, postfeminism remains silent about issues of race and class.

While the neo-liberal and neo-conservative polarities of postfeminist discourse prescribe slightly differing roles for women—that of the “empowered” female consumer and the feminine housewife and mother—they intersect in their celebration of the necessary and timely death of feminism. Faludi illustrates the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>: “In some murky fashion, women’s independence had become implicated in our nation’s failure to protect itself. And, conversely, the need to remedy that failure somehow required a distaff correction, a discounting of female opinions, a demeaning of the female voice, and a general shrinkage of the female profile.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, neo-liberal postfeminism limits the female role by rejecting the truly empowering tenets of feminism and paradoxically endorsing female “power” within specified femininity. As Negra illustrates, postfeminism “presents itself as pleasingly moderated in contrast to a ‘shrill’ feminism.”<sup>8</sup>

Certainly the achievements of the second-wave feminists have improved women’s and girls’ positions in society today. Angela McRobbie notes that postfeminist doctrine concedes feminist accomplishments, writing, “elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, the popular contention that feminism has achieved equality for women and is no longer necessary creates a preemptively disempowering void reminiscent of what Friedan had identified as “the problem

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post – 9/11 America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post – 9/11 America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 1.

with no name.” Despite arguments that women today have advanced toward gender equality, the “feminine” role in terms of physical appearance and sexuality has surprisingly changed very little. As Negra writes, “to the extent that she is visible at all, the contemporary feminist appears as a narcissistic minority group member whose interests and actions threaten the family and a social consensus that underwrites powerful romanticizations of American ‘community.’”<sup>10</sup>

### Why Adolescence?

Contemporary postfeminist discourse is particularly powerful and ubiquitous because it is instantly accessible. Technology and the media provide adolescent girls with immediate contact to the world around them; conversely, the world also has instant, and constant, access to girls. This is particularly significant because the messages that adolescent girls are continuously exposed to through the internet, television, magazines, movies and books, influence their beliefs about themselves and society, constructing their roles and decisions as they develop into women.

The work of psychologists such as Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, and Gilligan highlight the imperative nature of adolescence in shaping an individual’s identity and adulthood. Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan define adolescence as a “universal stage of development,” underscoring its importance because each adolescent is “questioning in its position in life.”<sup>11</sup> Erik H. Erikson outlined the formation of identity, noting that technological advances “put more and more time between early school life and the young person’s final access to specialized work,” thus, extending the period of adolescence.<sup>12</sup> Erikson further writes that “the stage of *adolescing [sic]* becomes an even more marked and conscious period.”<sup>13</sup> Other developmental

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<sup>10</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? : Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, "The Adolescent as a Philosopher: The Discovery of the Self in a Postconventional World" *Daedalus* 100, no. 4 (1971): 145.

<sup>12</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 128.

<sup>13</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 128.

theorists such as Jean Piaget also point to the “new kind of thinking” that signifies the onset of adolescence. Piaget characterizes this thinking “in the form of general ideas and abstract constructions,” the purpose of which is to “predict and interpret experience.”<sup>14</sup> Because adolescents develop this “new thinking,” the types of knowledge and self-knowledge that they are exposed to is critical. For girls, this knowledge is often presented as conflicting “rules” for their actions. As Mary Pipher has observed:

While the rules for proper female behavior aren’t clearly stated, the punishment for breaking them is harsh. Girls who speak frankly are labeled as bitches. Girls who are not attractive are scorned. The rules are reinforced by the visual images in soft- and hard-core pornography, by song lyrics, by casual remarks, by criticisms, by teasing and by jokes.<sup>15</sup>

The governing of girls’ behavior through spoken and unspoken “rules” and models is now more difficult to challenge because the trend has become an accepted element of postfeminist ideology. Piaget further writes that adolescent personality achieves “its final form” as the result of “submission, or rather the autosubmission, of self to some kind of discipline...the person and social relationships he engenders and maintains are interdependent”; thus demonstrating the powerful and disciplining influence of external factors, such as cultural context and social relationships, in shaping personality.<sup>16</sup> As a result, “the final form” of girls’ adolescent personality is in large part affected by their social and cultural environment.

For most adolescent girls, cultural conditions in the United States are largely oppressive but difficult to challenge. As Angela McRobbie notes, “objection is preempted with irony,” as is evidenced in movies like “Mean Girls” that capitalize on adolescent girls’ difficult

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies* ed. David Elkind, trans. Anita Tenzer (New York: Random House, 1968), 61, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 39.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies* ed. David Elkind, trans. Anita Tenzer (New York: Random House, 1968), 65.

developmental experiences.<sup>17</sup> Postfeminist culture, in other words, deliberately avoids criticism for relegating girls and women back to objectifying roles and situations by adding an ironic façade that prevents criticism and rejection. Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan highlight the cognitive vulnerabilities of adolescent girls during development:

For girls coming of age in this culture at this time, adolescence marks a potential point of departure from life experience. Because adolescence is a time when a variety of perspectives can be held and coordinated, a time when the hypothetical and the abstract can be entertained, girls risk losing touch with the specific—with their bodies, with their feelings, with their relationships, with their experience. And thus they are in danger of losing their ability to distinguish what is true from what is said to be true, what feels loving from what is said to be love, what feels real from what is said to be reality.<sup>18</sup>

The difficulties of adolescent development and personality formation, and especially the “rules” and constrictions faced by adolescent girls, requires an examination of the discourse that shapes their transitions into adulthood. As McRobbie writes, contemporary femininity is a “tormented landscape” that includes “young women’s melancholia, with its ambivalence and indifference, its undirected anger, or its anger directed against the self.”<sup>19</sup> Most critics and proponents of postfeminism focus their critiques on popular culture that involves adult women, but very little research has closely examined the way postfeminist culture engages with adolescent girls.

## Why Chick-Lit?

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<sup>17</sup> Anita Harris, introduction to *All About The Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 215

<sup>19</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009),

In discussing the perpetuation of the “problem with no name” Friedan wrote of the popular image of woman in society: “This image—created by the women’s magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis—shapes women’s lives today and mirrors their dreams.”<sup>20</sup> Today, chick-lit series sell millions of copies per installment and have been adapted into primetime television shows and blockbuster films.

The primary texts that I examine include the following series: *Twilight*, *Gossip Girl*, *A-List*, *The Clique* and *The It Girl*. The *Twilight* series features high-school aged Bella’s romantic relationship with Edward Cullen, a vampire who routinely saves her life and who she marries and has a child with in the final novel of the series. Bella does not have close friendships with other girls her age, postpones college indefinitely after having a child with Edward, and becomes eventually becomes a vampire. The *Gossip Girl* series, though also featuring high-school aged adolescents, is much different. The series portrays the luxury and indulgent lives of teenagers from the wealthiest families in Manhattan: they have the best clothes, go to the best schools and colleges, live in expensive homes and are never held responsible for their actions. Similarly, *The A-List* features teenage wealthy socialites of Los Angeles, California. Most of the characters are daughters of important Hollywood stars, but the main character, Anna, is actually from a wealthy “old money” family in Manhattan. *The Clique* differs by featuring the lives of affluent middle-school girls in Westchester, New York. The girls go to the best private school, participate in online shopping, wear name-brand clothing and are chauffeured around in a limo. The main character Claire, though not as wealthy as the other girls in the story, manages to become accepted into the popular clique of girls who call themselves “The Pretty Committee.” Finally,

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<sup>20</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1983), 34.

*The It Girl* features a character from the *Gossip Girl* series, Jenny, who transfers from her school in the *Gossip Girl* series to an elite boarding school in upstate New York. Like Claire, Jenny aspires to fit in with the wealthiest, most popular girls at the school.

Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh define chick lit as “narratives organizing young women after the so-called death of feminism.”<sup>21</sup> The chick lit genre extends to girls and women of all ages, but I will narrow my focus in this thesis to series fiction produced for girls between eleven and twenty years old, or the period encompassing adolescence before adulthood. Chick lit written for the adolescent demographic requires consideration precisely because it is rarely deemed worth studying: “Few branches of literary scholarship have suffered the stigma of insignificance as much as ‘kiddie lit,’ which hangs precariously from the lowest rung of the literary ladder. Few research universities acknowledge children’s and [young adult] literature as a field worthy of rigorous study. Likewise, the immensely popular genre of chick lit receives the academic snub as well.”<sup>22</sup> The overwhelming popularity of chick-lit series written for adolescent girls, in addition to its neglected status as ‘kiddie lit’ in critical discourse, necessitates an examination of what these books are communicating to adolescent girls as they are beginning to develop new ways of thinking.

For the critic, chick-lit series contain a complex duality: they present adolescent characters and situations that restrict and objectify the female role in the United States, yet at the same time provide reflections of girls’ experiences, dissatisfactions, and resilience in contemporary culture. As Mitchell and Walsh note, “on one level of analysis, chick-lit manifests antiquated queries of what women should do, want, think, read, buy, and wear in order to be

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<sup>21</sup> Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, eds. *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008), 228.

<sup>22</sup> Joanna Webb Johnson, “Chick Lit Jr: More Than Glitz and Glamour for Teens and Tweens,” in *Chick-Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, eds. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 141.

happy, healthy, and hip. On another level, chick lit seems to be a barometer for social, cultural, political, and economic issues that concern young women.”<sup>23</sup> My argument will consider the ability of chick-lit series to reproduce what society is already communicating to adolescent girls, as well as the knowledge girls acquire from the series about themselves and their roles in contemporary culture. Throughout this thesis, I will use the theoretical work of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault and Carol Gilligan to consider the way chick lit is complicit with postfeminist culture, as well as how chick lit is resistant to it. My literary examination in the first chapter addresses chick-lit fiction as a product of postfeminism; I describe the aspects of the series that target girls’ economic power, as well as the way chick-lit portrays a lifestyle that excludes races and economic statuses outside of the white, middle and upper class. A Marxist lens allows for a deeper reading of the capitalist strategies in place within chick-lit fiction and an interpretation of chick-lit fiction as a commodity itself. My second chapter will address chick lit as an intricate part of a complex postfeminist discourse that seeks to limit subjective power by shaping a “feminine” physical and sexual role to which all girls should aspire. An application of Foucauldian concepts reveals the way in which the books, as a part of postfeminist discourse, serve as a form of “discipline.” Finally, my third chapter will explore how chick lit reflects girls’ subjective experiences within contemporary culture. Using Gilligan’s theory of adolescent development and relational loss, I reveal girls’ dissatisfaction and isolating experiences within contemporary postfeminist culture, and how this portrayal is resistant to postfeminist doctrine. To complement this analysis, my conclusion will incorporate personal interviews in which adolescent girls respond to the chick-lit series they have read, and demonstrate susceptibility to postfeminist doctrine as well as critical reading skills that suggest their resistance.

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<sup>23</sup> Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, eds. *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008), 228.

Postfeminist discourse attempts to obscure and discount the argument for the continued necessity of feminism. Yet, as I demonstrate through an analysis of postfeminist texts specifically created for adolescent girls, women today are currently facing a social and psychological impasse that testifies to feminism's continued purpose. Friedan was concerned with the "feminine mystique," which she argued allowed for, and even encouraged, women "to ignore the question of their identity," writing, "the mystique says they can answer the question 'Who am I?' by saying 'Tom's wife... Mary's mother.'"<sup>24</sup> Today, postfeminist culture dictates a similar rationale to adolescent girls, encouraging them to sacrifice individual identity in order to perform a collective ideal. Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson, and Idelisse Malave describe this as a negotiation that "takes place where girls trade in parts of themselves in order to become women within this culture."<sup>25</sup> In this thesis, I demonstrate the ways that postfeminism successfully persuades girls and women not to answer the question "Who am I?" with answers such as "Tom's wife," or "Mary's mother," but rather to answer the question "Who should I be?" in terms of a single, objectified role, shaped by messages of economic spending, physical appearance, sexual behaviors and relationships. Because adolescent girls may look to cultural clues like chick-lit texts to help answer this question, I hope to demonstrate why they should be encouraged to critically challenge not only the texts, but also the cultural environment that seeks to shape their identity. Chick-lit fiction is then important to study not only as exemplary of forms of control in contemporary society, but also because the series reveal the ways that girls are already becoming resilient to postfeminist ideology.

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<sup>24</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1983), 71.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson, and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 11.



## Chapter One: The Implications of Capitalism and Commodity Strategy

*Dylan puckered up for her reflection and blew herself a kiss. "Maybe she's born with it," Massie sang. "Maybe it's Maybelline," the others responded.*

—The Clique

In the twelfth century, Andreas Capellanus documented the existing conviction about the fickle—and negative—nature of woman: “For woman is like melting wax, always ready to assume fresh shape and to be moulded to the imprint of anyone’s seal.”<sup>26</sup> This medieval concept of woman as “moldable wax” is remarkably similar to the essentialist way in which women are reduced to their physical exterior in the media today. For example, Maybelline cosmetic products advertise young, beautiful women saying, “Maybe she’s born with it. *Maybe it’s Maybelline!*” both indicating and celebrating the shapeable nature of the female.<sup>27</sup> Gillette Venus advertises razors for women and girls with the slogan “Reveal the Goddess in You.”<sup>28</sup> Dove body products launched the “Campaign for Real Beauty,” specifically targeting adolescent girls with the motto: “Imagine Beauty as a Source of Confidence,” demonstrating that girls’ physical bodies can be converted to become a source of confidence.<sup>29</sup> Cosmetic lines with brand names such as “Bare Escentials” also imply the “melting-wax” nature of the female (Bare) in need of “imprint,” or the brand product (Escentials). As Shelley Budgeon writes, “In terms of constructing femininity, the ideological labor of advertising is to establish the rules and definitions of what femininity means and to provide ‘maps and codes,’ helping us not only to know more about what being a woman means, but to make sense of it.”<sup>30</sup> In the twenty-first century, Budgeon confirms the role of cultural influence within advertising that delivers the

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<sup>26</sup> Andreas Capellanus in *Woman Defamed and Woman defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt and C.W. Marx (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 120.

<sup>27</sup> Maybelline, <http://www.maybelline.com/on-set/94/lash-stiletto-voluptuous-backstage>

<sup>28</sup> GilletteVenus, [http://www.gillettevenus.com/en\\_US/index.jsp](http://www.gillettevenus.com/en_US/index.jsp)

<sup>29</sup> Dove, <http://www.dove.us/#/cfrb/girlsonly/>

<sup>30</sup> Shelley Budgeon, “Fashion Magazine Advertising: Constructing Femininity in the Postfeminist Era,” in *Gender & Utopia in Advertising*, ed. Luigi and Alessandra Manca (Illinois: Procopian Press, 1994), 61.

message of women as moldable wax in need of imprint. In the 1100's, Capellanus wrote that "fickleness" was a "pollution" of the female sex. Today, the negativity of this assertion has been submerged in a media *celebration* of the moldable nature of the female body, the goal of which is beauty. Yet the underlying—and inherently negative—notion that the female body should be molded and improved has remained unchanged.

In contemporary U.S. culture, female agency is directed towards consumerist activities: shoe shopping, makeovers or manicures, for example. "Retail therapy" and "shop 'til you drop" are two whimsical phrases that both affirm and urge female consumption. On the surface, "shopping" is glamorized by postfeminism as equally indulgent and empowering. For example, the title of the fourth installment of the *Gossip Girl* series "Because I'm Worth It" ostensibly connotes license and self-indulgence. However, closer attention to the syntax reveals the assigning of value: "because I'm worth it" is the phrasing of a transaction. The word "it" indicates the objectification of the speaker, or the speaker's equivalent in value, and "I'm worth it" designates the assigning of value to the subject, which in turn becomes the object. Finally, the analogous phrase "it's worth it" signifies, ultimately, a loss or sacrifice. This example demonstrates the way in which the female body is both exploited by capitalism and simultaneously an important vehicle for its propagation. Women's spending supports capitalism, which continues to be a male-dominated economic system in the United States. Thus, female consumerism—most strongly promoted by postfeminism ideology—is an inherently patriarchal endeavor.

This economic position is one in which adolescent girls quickly learn to participate. Anita Harris noted the enormous economic agency of adolescent girls in 2004: "U.S. girls aged eight to eighteen are estimated to be worth \$67 billion." She further writes that "business

magazines and market research companies report on young women's consumer patterns and habits with great excitement about the capacity and potential of this group as economic agents."<sup>31</sup> As a result, popular products specifically marketed to adolescent girls, including chick-lit fiction, are produced en masse. And, as products of postfeminism, chick-lit narratives evoke a world of wealth and glamour, the primary purpose of which is economic: the more a series appeals to its demographic, the more profitable it will be for both the publisher and writer. Wendy Glenn acknowledges the financial advantages for publishers who target the adolescent girl demographic:

Of late, fiction publishers have recognized untapped potential in the teen market and attempted to nab a share of the expendable income held by this age group in the publication of novels intended to entice them as spenders. The market has been flooded with teen-oriented novels that feature wealthy New York socialites who lead lives of privilege and seeming glamour.<sup>32</sup>

These "teen-oriented novels," particularly oriented to girls, act both as products and reproductions of the commodity-centered postfeminist culture, thus justifying both sociological and literary critique. The value of the objectified female body, understood socially in terms of beauty, is also manifested economically within the production of chick-lit fiction and its reinforcement of standards of beauty. In this chapter, I will argue that in the wake of second-wave feminism, postfeminism has reinforced a submissive economic role for U.S. women. This role succeeds by objectifying and ascribing a value to the female body. I will demonstrate this by introducing two prevalent types of beauty portrayed in chick-lit fiction and by applying

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<sup>31</sup> Anita Harris, "Jamming Girl Culture: Young Women and Consumer Citizenship" in *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 166.

<sup>32</sup> Wendy Glenn, "Gossiping Girls, Insider Boys, A-List Achievement: Examining and Exposing Young Adult Novels Consumed by Conspicuous Consumption," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 1 (2008): 34, <http://www.jstor.org>.

Marx's theory of fetishism to the "beautiful" body as a commodity. In particular, I will address the commoditization of beauty—the marketing of commodities to change and enhance beauty—while recognizing that chick-lit novels themselves are products for consumption. An examination of emulation framing will also reveal the way in which this type of beauty functions as an "advertisement" in chick-lit fiction. I will then use a close textual analysis of chick-lit fiction to divulge how postfeminist discourse evades issues of class and race.

### I. Enforcing a Female Economic Role

Postfeminist discourse celebrates the female consumer, guaranteeing "social rights" such as beauty and popularity to women who participate in consumption. Chick-lit fiction accurately illustrates the way in which commodities are presented as life-changing for girls and women, and given an elevated status in postfeminist culture. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra describe this treatment of female physical appearance in contemporary culture:

Postfeminism [p]erpetuates woman as pinup, the enduring linchpin of commercial beauty culture. In fact, it has offered new rationales for guilt-free consumerism, substantially reenergizing beauty culture... and presiding over an aggressive mainstreaming of elaborate and expensive beauty treatments to the middle class.<sup>33</sup>

As a product of postfeminism, chick-lit fiction glamorizes the commercial beauty culture and features the adolescent girl as "pinup." Physical beauty, image, and appearance are integral elements to chick-lit narratives in *The A List*, *Gossip Girl*, *The It Girl* and *The Clique*, and tend to capitalize on adolescent girls' insecurities about their bodies and appearances by depicting both extremely beautiful, and "only" moderately beautiful, characters. As Lois Tyson writes,

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<sup>33</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds., *Interrogating Postfeminism : Gender and the Politics of Popular* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.

“it’s in capitalism’s best interests to promote whatever personal insecurities will motivate us to buy consumer goods.”<sup>34</sup> When understood in combination with Erich Fromm’s observation that the “maximum production and consumption are the unquestionable goals of [capitalist] society,” it is logical that in countries such as the United States, chick-lit fiction would be strategically sellable: produced in series and written to be popular with girls, while at the same time exploiting anxieties over physical appearance in order to perpetuate consumerism.<sup>35</sup> It is important, then, to ask why capitalism most often targets female consumers—specifically young girls. Providing a partial answer is the shift in woman’s economic role in prior centuries from “exclusive private property” in marriage to a more autonomous position economically in present-day society.<sup>36</sup>

Fromm conveys the role commodities play in society by comparing Marx’s notion of “alienation” to the worship of idolatry in the Old Testament: “The essence of what the prophets call ‘idolatry’ is not that man worships many gods instead of only one. It is that the idols are the work of man’s own hands—they are things, and man bows down and worships things . . . In doing so, he transforms himself into a thing.”<sup>37</sup> In this sense, we can use “alienation” to refer to the alienation of women and girls while they are celebrated as consumers. In other words, postfeminism’s elevation of female consumerism can be newly understood as a paradoxical celebration of women and girls reverting back to an economic role as “things.” Returning to the idea of woman as “moldable wax,” we can understand alienation as occurring with female loss of subjectivity. In this way, women have not only been objectified externally by social hegemony,

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<sup>34</sup> Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63.

<sup>35</sup> Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 33.

<sup>36</sup> To clarify the meaning of “private property,” Fromm notes that “Marx never refers to the private property of things for use (such as a house, a table, etc.) . . . ‘Private property’ in Marx’s usage, [a]lways refers to private property within capitalist class society and thus is a social and historical category; the term does not refer to things for use, as for instance, in a socialist society.” [Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 33].

<sup>37</sup> Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 44.

such as patriarchy, but today are also objectified by postfeminism's emphasis on consumerism and the glamorization of the female as "moldable wax," encouraging women to participate in their own objectification and valorizing the process as "empowerment." Thus, girls and women who spend money on commodities to enhance their appearance and their bodies, such as the right cosmetics or perfect shoes, are essentially "in touch with [themselves]" through the "self-worship" of things.<sup>38</sup>

The objectification of women and girls in contemporary culture is hegemonically patriarchal. The present-day process of obtaining female spending power relegates women to the objectified role that signifies their value as commodities, just as throughout history women were passed from father to husband as property. In this way, postfeminist indoctrination of women's figurative "worship" of commodities—commodities they believe can change who they are for the better—enforces the forfeiture of agency to an intrinsically patriarchal economic system that creates their objectification. In an analysis of luxury consumption within postfeminist culture, Diane Negra remarks that "vaunted consumer emancipation is presented as a substitute for more meaningful forms of emancipation in early twenty-first century culture."<sup>39</sup> In the context of my argument, Negra illustrates the irony of a girl spending on her appearance being defined as an economically free or "emancipated" girl.

### **A. Forms and Purposes of Beauty**

Critiques of chick-lit fiction often confront its impossibly high standards of beauty and fashion and the apparent one-dimensionality of its characters. However, there is very little acknowledgement of the purpose of multiple, definable categories of beauty in chick lit, or the meaning of this strategic presentation to adolescent girl readers. In chick-lit series such as

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<sup>38</sup> Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 44.

<sup>39</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? : Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 117.

*Gossip Girl*, *The Clique*, *The A-List*, and *The It-Girl*, I have identified two categories of beauty that appear throughout the series: pinnacle beauty and commoditized beauty. Committed to a postfeminist discourse that promotes women and girls as consumers, both forms of beauty thrive within a fictional realm where perfection, or pinnacle beauty, exists among few female characters. The commoditization of beauty, then, is the commoditization of a physical process by which beauty must be continually pursued and maintained. This concept of beauty functions as an ideology that targets adolescent girls and their spending power as the next best thing to pinnacle beauty. Fromm notes of Karl Marx's concept of man, that Marx "criticized capitalism precisely because it destroys individual personality."<sup>40</sup> Both pinnacle and commoditized beauty are a distinctly postfeminist construction seeking to shape the way adolescent girls view themselves and participate in the culture and economy of the United States. Together, these forms of beauty function within postfeminist narratives analogously to Marx's notion of capitalism: destroying individual personality for the sake of an ideal.

In chick-lit fiction, pinnacle beauty is represented by female characters as a manifestation of the socially-constructed image of the naturally and perfectly beautiful girl. Most often, this female character fits an elitist ideal: she is heterosexual, wealthy, slender, and white, usually with a clear complexion, blue eyes and light colored hair. Younger points out that in most chick-lit fiction, beauty exists in degrees, ranging from beautiful to most beautiful, and that "unless a character is described as *not* beautiful, characters are all good-looking."<sup>41</sup> Despite the pervasive beauty and affluence of the majority of the characters that dominate chick-lit, only a limited number possess pinnacle beauty. The best example of this type of rare beauty is the character Serena van der Woodsen from *Gossip Girl*:

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<sup>40</sup> Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 77.

<sup>41</sup> Younger, Beth. *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 111.

[Serena] sat on the marble Venus de Milo statue's knee, splashing herself with water until her dress was soaked through. It wasn't difficult to see who the real goddess was. Venus looked like a lumpy pile of marble compared to Serena.<sup>42</sup>

The comparison of Serena to the Venus de Milo symbolizes Serena's perceived divine, and unattainable, beauty. Throughout the series, Serena's beauty is conveyed to readers by consistent references to her physical appearance, such as to her "pale blond hair," "enormous dark blue eyes," "perfectly chiseled chin," and her "idyllic reflection."<sup>43</sup> In another scene, Serena attends a gallery opening where she is noticed for her beauty and asked to pose for the photographers:

Serena didn't resist when [the photographer] pulled her into a photograph with him and his brother for the *New York Times* Sunday Styles section. One brother stood behind Serena and kissed her neck while the other knelt in front of her and hugged her knees. Around them, people watched greedily, eager to catch a glimpse of the new 'it' girl.<sup>44</sup>

The reverence for Serena from the brothers, who are gay, and the onlookers, who are strangers, represents how no one can resist her: Serena is once again portrayed as a goddess. Additionally, this scene reflects the way pinnacle beauty is objectifying, because it functions as an object of desire. Furthermore, the effortless beauty is a source of tension and jealousy within the plots of most chick-lit fiction. It exists to be coveted not only by other female characters in the books, but also by the adolescent female readers who cannot realistically compete.

In *The A-List* series, Anna Percy also exhibits desirable pinnacle beauty, and accordingly, her presence causes envy and resentment among the other female characters: "The girl with Ben

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<sup>42</sup>Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 27.

<sup>43</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *All I Want Is Everything* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 9.

<sup>44</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 90.



had the kind of effortless beauty that no amount of plastic surgery could replicate. You had to be born with it. The bitch.”<sup>45</sup> The jealous reactions of other characters to Anna’s “born” beauty does not stop them from continually trying to improve their own appearances: “But even with all the money [Sam had] spent on her appearance—the clothes, the hair, the spa days—Sam didn’t measure up to her friends. Of course, that didn’t mean she shouldn’t try. What kind of girl would she be if she didn’t make an effort?”<sup>46</sup> The many expensive ways Sam tries to improve her appearance are highly reminiscent of the title of the *Gossip Girl* novel “Because I’m Worth It.” Here, Sam is participating in commoditized beauty, and as a result, her own objectification. Furthermore, the idealistic “born with it” beauty in chick-lit fiction intersects with the advertising campaigns of brands such as Maybelline, as well as the brand names of cosmetic products such as “Bare Esentials” that are available to girls for enhancing their physical appearances.

The physical qualities shared by Anna and Serena cannot be overlooked: both are “well-bred” from the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Both characters are also white, thin, blonde and beautiful. Most importantly, as conveyed by the perspectives of other characters in the respective series, Serena and Anna have also won the attention and interest of the wealthiest, best-looking boys, thus confirming the “value” of these girls’ pinnacle beauty, and at the same time, their objectification. In both texts, romantic success is most often correlated with the value of the female character’s body:

‘Who is *that*?’ Sam yelled. ‘I have no idea,’ Dee replied. They stood on the balcony overlooking the rotunda, watching Ben kiss a tallish, slender blonde who, at least from a distance, appeared to look nauseatingly perfect in an entirely natural sort of way.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 68.

<sup>46</sup> Zoey Dean, *Back in Black* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 71.

<sup>47</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 67.

In the first book of the series *The A-List*, Ben becomes romantically involved with Anna, while demonstrating indifference to, and then fully rejecting, Sam, Dee, and Cammie, who do not possess pinnacle beauty. In the first book of the *Gossip Girl* series, Serena is similarly admired by popular, attractive, and wealthy Nate. Nate's adoration of Serena causes him to disregard his devoted girlfriend, Blair, who only possesses commoditized beauty. Winning back Nate's affection, however, forces Blair to participate in her own objectification as she seeks ways to become more beautiful.

Sam, Dee and Cammie from *The A-List*, and Blair from *Gossip Girl* are characters who reveal the outcome of pinnacle beauty's inaccessibility. In a "commoditization" of the ideal, the female characters who are not innately beautiful pursue various avenues to attain pinnacle beauty. Every unsuccessful attempt to become more beautiful is immediately replaced by a newer, more promising commodity to purchase as part of the continuous endeavor. Because most, if not all, adolescent girls are unable to define themselves as perfect, they are presented in chick-lit fiction with illustrations of the choice to become as beautiful as they can. This is the choice which, glamorized by postfeminism, observers of the discourse, and readers of the fiction, may come to believe is the key to their happiness. As Angela McRobbie writes, "postfeminist culture's centralization of an affluent elite certainly entails an emphatic individualism, but this formulation tends to confuse self-interest with individuality and elevates consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents."<sup>48</sup> As I have shown, female dissatisfactions are purposefully exploited by corporations to promote consumerism, at the same time trapping girls and women in

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<sup>48</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 3-4.

an objectified economic role while augmenting the economic success of the affluent male-dominated elite.

Natalie Fenton describes the individual as a “self-made jigsaw of bits and pieces,” explaining that “this frequently relegates to insignificance the fact that someone made the jigsaw pieces in the first place, shaped them, drew particular configurations on them, and gave them to us in particular packaging designed to appeal and sell.”<sup>49</sup> The concept of the “jigsaw” is presented in the following description of Blair, in which she is content with how she looks because she has on the right dress, salon work, hairstyle, makeup and even shoes:

Blair snatched up the Chloe dress, letting it dangle from her fingers. It was long and brown and sleek, with tiny pearlescent beads sewn diagonally across the bodice, and two delicate beaded strands, like necklaces, to hold it up.... The material clung to her figure, but it didn't feel tight—it felt great. Blair examined herself in the mirror. The dress didn't make her look hippy at all. She looked *hot*. Yesterday she'd been waxed, plucked, exfoliated, steamed, and moisturized from her hair follicles down to her toenails at the Aveda Salon and Spa on Spring Street. She had new golden beige highlights in her hair, and her mother's makeup artist had dusted her entire body with sparkling scented body powder. Blair fluffed up her hair, which had just been blown out by her mother's hairstylist. She didn't care if Isabel and Kati weren't happy with their dresses, Nate wasn't going to be able to keep his hands off her tonight. Plus, the dress went perfectly with the Manolos her father had given her for her birthday. ‘You know you want me’ Blair said to her reflection, pretending she was talking to Nate.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Natalie Fenton “Feminism and Popular Culture.” *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 2000), 115.

<sup>50</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 193.

A recurring theme within chick lit is that a girl's beauty, weight, makeup, and clothes can make her more popular, thus promising friendships, dating relationships, and happiness. This quote from *Gossip Girl* demonstrates precisely this appeal: commoditized beauty promises self-improvement and reward. This passage also exemplifies Fenton's concept of the "jigsaw," as Blair is pieced together by commodities. Blair looks "hot" and is happy with her appearance, so the fact that her attractiveness is the direct result of "necessary" luxury commodity purchases is inconsequential. Applying Fenton's notion that creation in popular culture is both piecemeal and purposeful, we can better understand Blair as an advertisement for commoditized beauty. Despite the glamorization of Blair's makeover, facilitated by postfeminism, the underlying notion that the female body is malleable and must be improved remains fundamentally oppressive, and is exploitative not only economically, but also physically and psychologically, as I will explain in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

## **B. Fetishism and Emulation Framing**

Beth Younger notes that "the social convention that beauty is a young girl's most valuable asset is a common theme in young adult fiction, and one that takes on special significance in series fiction."<sup>51</sup> In addition to recognizing the strategic presence of commoditized beauty as a consumer marketing technique, its complicated nature demands further analysis. Commoditization can also be understood in terms of Karl Marx's concept of fetishism. Marx describes the "two-fold" nature of the commodity:

Commodities come into the world in the shape of use-values, articles, or goods, such as iron, linen, corn, &c. This is their plain, homely, bodily form. They are, however commodities, only because they are something two-fold, both objects of utility, and, at the

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<sup>51</sup> Beth Younger, *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 111.

same time, depositories of value. They manifest themselves therefore as commodities, or have the form of commodities, only in so far as they have two forms, a physical or natural form, and a value-form.<sup>52</sup>

However, Marx explains human treatment of the value of a commodity as completely different from the actual “physical properties” of that commodity, writing that as soon as the product of labor “steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent.”<sup>53</sup> Marx compares this phenomenon to that of religiosity: “the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race.” He identifies the human creation of, belief in, and treatment of supernatural beings, or “the productions of the human brain,” with that of commodities, “the products of men’s hands.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, we ascribe character and qualities to commodities beyond recognizing them as a product of labor. Marx argues that this is “the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities.” Thus, human treatment of commodities transcends the actual use-value of the commodity and the means by which the commodity was produced by laborers, as if the commodity arose on its own, instilled with a type of “mystical character.”<sup>55</sup> This additionally allows us to disregard the nature of commodities as objects of human desire and, significantly, enables us to forget the class divisions that the production and consumption of these commodities represent.

The concept of the fetishism of commodities can be extended to the fetishism of pinnacle beauty; in this sense, the fetishism of commodities can also be applied to the fetishism of the objectified female body. In this way, pinnacle beauty has a quality of fetishism in chick-lit

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<sup>52</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* ed. Frederick Engels (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 47.

<sup>53</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* ed. Frederick Engels (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 71.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* ed. Frederick Engels (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 72-72.

<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* ed. Frederick Engels (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 71.

series: “Serena plunked her elbows down on top of the handout and rested her perfectly chiseled chin in her manicured hands, her enormous dark blue eyes gazing dreamily at her idyllic reflection in the mirrored wall. ‘I’m so in love,’ she sighed.”<sup>56</sup> In this passage we see Serena’s reflection, or the appearance of her physical body, as an object of fetishism. Ironically, Serena’s announcement that she is in love reflects the way we often fetishize objects. Similarly, the fetishism of pinnacle beauty is presented from Blair’s point of view:

Once, during a very drunken night at the end of tenth grade, Serena and Blair were soaking in the hot tub, and Blair had kissed Serena full on the lips. Serena hadn’t seemed to remember it the next morning, but Blair never forgot it.<sup>57</sup>

Blair and Serena’s kiss does not convey sexual desire between the two girls, but rather demonstrates Blair’s fetishized desire for Serena’s beauty, and “valuable” body. Once again returning to the title of the fourth *Gossip Girl* novel, “Because I’m Worth It,” we can also newly interpret the commoditization of the body in terms of fetishism: elevating the commodified body—by equating the process of commoditized beauty with the goal of ideal beauty—to have almost supernatural qualities and features. In other words, fetishizing pinnacle beauty becomes the means by which the commoditization of beauty becomes fetishized as well.

In the *Twilight* series, the fetishism of pinnacle beauty is narrated from Bella’s point of view, and represented by the Cullen family vampires:

I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel. It was

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<sup>56</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Because I’m Worth It* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2003), 9.

<sup>57</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 126

hard to decide who was the most beautiful – maybe the perfect blond girl, or the bronze-haired boy.<sup>58</sup>

In the *Twilight* series and in *Gossip Girl*, the treatment of pinnacle beauty is close to that of religious reverence, as evinced by this quotation. Though pinnacle beauty is socially constructed (“perfection” only truly existing in fictitious and imaginative characters) it is fetishized by postfeminist culture, and consequently this fetishism is reproduced by chick-lit fiction in the forms of characters and observers. Additionally, Negra writes, “to a great extent, contemporary culture is organized around the semiotics of elitism with a heavy stress on luxury commodities and experiences as transformative, renewing, and life-affirming,” thus exemplifying the way in which the wealthy lifestyles of characters in chick-lit series enhance commodity fetishism.<sup>59</sup>

Chick-lit characters with pinnacle beauty belong to extremely wealthy families, and so are able to dress in the latest, most expensive fashions. In *The Clique*, Massie assumes the role of pinnacle beauty, and is constantly dressed in style: “In crisp dark denim, an ivory cashmere tee, and her new French Connection cropped boyfriend jacket, Massie was the poster child for casual chic.”<sup>60</sup> Extraordinary wealth, however, also extends to characters who continue to pursue commoditized beauty. Chick-lit fiction thus serves as a perfect medium for a commoditized beauty agenda: it depicts girls with the financial ability to pursue the socially constructed category of pinnacle beauty. The first book of the *Gossip Girl* series introduces the extraordinary affluence of the characters:

We all live in huge apartments with our own bedrooms and bathrooms and phone lines.

We have unlimited access to money and booze and whatever else we want, and our parents

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<sup>58</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 19.

<sup>59</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? : Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 125.

<sup>60</sup> Lisi Harrison, *These Boots are Made for Stalking* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010), 38.

are rarely home, so we have tons of privacy. We're smart, we've inherited classic good looks, we wear fantastic clothes, and we know how to party.<sup>61</sup>

The tone of this description is in keeping with that of fetishism, as “gossip girl” translates commodities into meaningful social capital. The characters in the books are not simply wealthy, smart and good-looking—they transcend labor and class divisions in their affluence. Essentially, these characters become fetishes. In *The Clique* series, similarly, seventh graders Massie, Dylan, and Alicia live in luxury in Westchester, New York. The girls are constantly described as purchasing expensive brand names and the latest styles. The luxury lifestyles of chick-lit characters create a premise by which any type of commodity is attainable; for girls and women, however, the rewarding commodity choices are depicted as those that enhance beauty. In chick-lit fiction, this is especially apparent in the shopping behaviors of the characters. Fashion is often presented as one of the means by which an affluent character who only possesses commoditized beauty can progress towards attaining ideal attractiveness because of the meaning of “fashion” beyond its use-value.

The link between wealth and beauty that is evident throughout chick-lit fiction is immediately perceptible to characters who do not possess it. In *The It Girl* series, Jenny arrives at a new boarding school, only to recognize how much wealthier and more beautiful the other students are: “Jenny felt her body stiffen, suddenly intimidated. Everyone looked so beautiful—scrubbed and clean and fashionable without even *trying* to be, which was so much cooler than spending hours primping, like she usually did.”<sup>62</sup> Though Jenny is routinely described as “cute,” she is also regularly noted as poorer than the other students and as less naturally beautiful. Jenny does not possess the wealth and beauty that characterizes her peers, and yet she is able to fit in to

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<sup>61</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 4.

<sup>62</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *The It Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 25.



some extent through her participation in commoditized beauty. This participation is highlighted by her belief that an expensive lifestyle is fulfilling:

Strolling excitedly toward the dorms, Jenny had to will herself not to skip. Girls in beat-up Citizens jeans and ragged grosgrain flip-flops were spilling out of Mercedes SUVs and Audi wagons, hugging other girls and talking excitedly about what had happened over the summer at their country houses on Martha's Vineyard and in the Hamptons.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, Jenny routinely overspends in an effort to buy the right brand names of clothes and makeup in order to fit in. Tasker and Negra note that “with its frequent emphasis on luxury lifestyle and retail pleasures, postfeminism is thoroughly integrated with the economic discourses of aspirational, niche-market Western societies.”<sup>64</sup> The portrayal of Jenny's belief in having the right name-brand illustrates Marx's concept of fetishism, and the belief in the mystical nature of commodities beyond their use-value.

Portraying the affluent in *The A-List*, *Gossip Girl*, *The Clique* and *The It Girl* functions in two interrelated ways. First, illustrations of these lifestyles benefit “conspicuous consumption,” as Glenn writes:

In these novels, money matters—but outward displays of money matter even more.

References to a Hermes Kelly bag, a Versace pantsuit, the St. Regis Hotel vintage Chanel, an eight-digit trust fund, the Beacon Hill manse, Paris Hilton – all artifacts or representatives of wealth and privilege – appear within the first four pages of *The A-List*.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *The It Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 25.

<sup>64</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds., *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular*, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>65</sup> Wendy Glenn, “Gossiping Girls, Insider Boys, A-List Achievement: Examining and Exposing Young Adult Novels Consumed by Conspicuous Consumption,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 1 (2008): 39, <http://www.jstor.org>.

Negra cites Diana Kendel's theory of "emulation framing" as the way in which extravagant lifestyles are depicted for the profit for consumer imitation: "identification with a level of luxury consumption far out of proportion to one's actual financial circumstances is emerging as a hallmark of contemporary experience."<sup>66</sup> Excessively wealthy adolescent girl characters are better equipped to pursue pinnacle beauty from the outset of the series, whereas characters such as Jenny from *The It Girl*, and Claire from *The Clique*, must—and do—find ways to catch up.

Second, the majority of chick-lit characters' initial possession of youth, wealth, and beauty creates a standard compatible with the goals of commoditized beauty: adolescent readers who compare themselves to chick-lit characters will decide that they too can benefit from retail beauty enhancement. Emulation framing can be understood as facilitated by fetishism and as a distinct quality of commoditized beauty. Throughout chick-lit series, consumer behavior is repeated and glamorized for adolescent girls to imitate: "S buying perfume at Barneys. I swear, that girl is in there practically every day."<sup>67</sup> The continual inclusion of name-brand designs into the narratives also suggests this purpose. Furthermore, even though adolescent girls are not as wealthy as the characters in the series, they can identify with characters like Jenny or Claire, who go to great lengths to achieve beauty, and thereby popularity and happiness. Leora Tanenbaum writes that in contemporary culture, "girls are apparently able to use consumption to secure their social rights... [young women] are constructed as powerful actors in the marketplace who enact their new opportunities for independence and control by purchasing products and displaying a consumer lifestyle."<sup>68</sup> It is significant to note then that Marx believes a commodity's existence is validated through the form of money, which is simultaneously only validated through the form of

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<sup>66</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? : Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 119.

<sup>67</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 44.

<sup>68</sup> Leora Tanenbaum, *Bad Shoes & The Women Who Love Them* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010), 166.

commodity. In this way, the postfeminist narratives are validated by their popularity as well as by the stories of female commoditization. Girls engage in the performance of reaching the ideal while concomitantly acting as consumers of the ideal. To return to the passage in which Blair looks and feels beautiful as the result of commoditized beauty, we can dually interpret her happiness with her appearance as incentive for readers to engage in commoditization in order to feel the same way.

## II. Wealthy and White: The Exclusive Chick Lit

In the mid-1800s, Marx saw what he believed to be two “great hostile camps,” as he writes in the *Communist Manifesto*, “two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.”<sup>69</sup> In the present-day United States, the lines between the bourgeoisie and proletariat have been blurred by an emphasis on commoditization and the collective goal of ideal beauty for girls and women of *all* socioeconomic statuses. Postfeminist culture prevents girls and women from confronting the line between the “bourgeoisie” and “proletariat” by obscuring it; however, realistically and economically, class divisions have not improved. In fact, a CNN report describes the income inequality in America as discrepant even between the upper and middle classes: “Incomes for 90% of Americans have been stuck in neutral, and it's not just because of the Great Recession. Middle-class incomes have been stagnant for at least a generation, while the wealthiest tier has surged ahead at lighting speed.”<sup>70</sup> The very reality of the advancing bourgeois class in the United States is removed from the consciousness of postfeminist narratives, and the wealthy are portrayed as unrealistic or in a satirical fashion. Class consciousness is then overshadowed by postfeminist discourse that encourages girls and

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<sup>69</sup> Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch. (New York: Norton & Company, 2001), 770.

<sup>70</sup> CNN Money, [http://money.cnn.com/2011/02/16/news/economy/middle\\_class/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2011/02/16/news/economy/middle_class/index.htm)

women to focus on the way they may improve themselves *individually* and in terms of beauty, creating the illusion that this will lead to improvements in other areas of their lives.

It seems almost contradictory to this purpose then that chick-lit texts provide readers with stories of the wealthiest fictional girls in the nation. It is precisely because these girls are the wealthiest, however, that the books succeed in evading issues of class. These series avoid criticism by intentionally portraying the rare and extreme wealth of characters so that the lives and situations can purport to be “unrealistic,” thus sidestepping potential critiques of their problematic realism. In *The A-List* series, for example, Sam Sharpe’s wealth is due to her status as the daughter of a famous movie-star:

[Sam] had Louisa the maid keep one set of all her faves in a Brontibay Paris travel case—Crème de la Mer, Z. Bigatti, plus her ReVive Glow Serum that sold for six hundred dollars an ounce at Neiman Marcus but which was hardly ever in stock. She’d been delighted to find a jar in her father’s Academy Awards goody bag.<sup>71</sup>

In passages such as this, wealth is perceived as extraordinary. These portrayals also communicate to girls that extreme wealth occupies a realm apart from the rest of society, thus discouraging inquiry about contemporary divisions of class, and particularly the very real line between the wealthy and the working classes in the United States. Glenn comments that “we must wonder what adolescent readers see in themselves and in their worlds upon entering, in the literary sense, the elite and elitist societies depicted in [chick-lit texts]. In the hands of students who have not been taught to be critical readers, these novels might engender or reinforce belief systems contradictory to those grounded in democratic values of equity and social justice.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Zoey Dean, *Back in Black* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 70.

<sup>72</sup> Wendy Glenn, “Gossiping Girls, Insider Boys, A-List Achievement: Examining and Exposing Young Adult Novels Consumed by Conspicuous Consumption,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 1 (2008): 35, <http://www.jstor.org>.

Because most adolescent girls have not yet developed the critical reading skills pointed out by Glenn, the fact that the majority of chick-lit characters are white, wealthy and entitled may be perceived as “normal.”

When chick-lit fiction does acknowledge class differences, such as in references to “maids” or “drivers,” it does so satirically. As Glenn highlights, “the social hierarchy reinforced throughout these novels is evidenced most clearly when the entitled characters interact with those who lack the requisite family name and financial history. Servants are characterized as clumsy and slow (‘the sloppy Irish maid, Esther, hadn't poured scotch down anyone's dress yet, thank God’ [Gossip Girl, p. 7]).”<sup>73</sup> This blatant ethnic stereotyping in chick-lit fiction is, as mentioned in my introduction, a way in which “objection is preempted with irony.”<sup>74</sup> The irony of overt racism prevents objection by its excess: it is purported to be the way in which the “unrealistic” wealthy—extreme—characters think. To further analyze the example provided by Glenn, we see that the approach used to describe Esther “the Irish maid” in this scene is purposefully snobbish, and therefore satirical. The obvious, “snooty” attitude encourages the reader to attribute the classism of the characters to their “unrealistic” extreme wealth and snobbishness, effectively evading disapproval of the depiction. The problematic nature of the employment of “lower-class” servants and the description of Esther as the “sloppy maid”—despite speaking to class inequalities in contemporary culture—can then remain unchallenged.

These ethnic and race stereotypes extend to sexuality as well. In *The A-List*, for example, Anna describes the romantic feelings she had for an extremely wealthy boy named Scott:

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<sup>73</sup> Wendy Glenn, “Gossiping Girls, Insider Boys, A-List Achievement: Examining and Exposing Young Adult Novels Consumed by Conspicuous Consumption,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 1 (2008): 37, <http://www.jstor.org>.

<sup>74</sup> Anita Harris, introduction to *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity* ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004),

But it soon become apparent that Anna's leggy, patrician blond beauty didn't register on Scott's sexual oscilloscope. He went for the exotic: a dreadlocked art student from Brazil, the black-hair-past-her-butt daughter of the Indonesian ambassador to the United Nations, a gorgeous five-foot-nine Ethiopian girl with a shaved head. He only thing that had eased the sting of Anna's unrequited love was her realization that Scott never hooked up with anyone born north of the equator.

The sexually "exotic" girls Scott "hooks up with" are another overt ethnic stereotype that, because of Anna's ironic unrequited love, prevents critique. While the premise in chick-lit is that unless otherwise specified, all characters are wealthy and white, these girls do not represent diversity outside of sexual stereotyping because it is understood that they are within Anna's and Scott's social circle, and so are wealthy and extravagant. Race is still not mentioned in conjunction with class inequality.

Within the postfeminist paradigm, this preemptive irony can be understood as a strategic way in which popular media circumvents bringing attention to race and class inequality that would draw sympathy for "proletariat" characters, and criticism for the "bourgeoisie." Lois Tyson provides a relevant example of a comedic television show in which a homeless man, sleeping in a bus station, is brought mail by a postman—a scene which is meant to be humorous and incite laughter. However, as Tyson notes:

We are thus encouraged to forget, for example, that a homeless person can't get a job without an address and can't get an address without a job, that most homeless people become so due to economic circumstances wholly beyond their control, and that many people are homeless today because they were evicted from the mental health institutions

closed during the Reagan administration and are, therefore, in need of increasingly expensive medication and/or therapy as well as homes.<sup>75</sup>

In quite the same way, chick-lit novels are “entertaining” girls by offering satirical and extreme class differences, in order to trivialize or discount the actual significance of both classicism and racism in current society. In fact, chick-lit narrative effectively avoids any meaningful or critical mention of other races or classes. In this way, readers of lower economic statuses will excuse the representation of lower-economic-status characters because of the “unrealistic” lifestyles and satirical nature of the portrayal. At the same time, this depiction reaffirms for readers of higher socioeconomic statuses the normalcy of class divisions—specifically, the dominant white patriarchal “right” to wealth as well as white, female affinity for it.

Simone de Beauvoir highlights the problem of female affinity to men as one of the primary obstacles to the cooperation between women of different races and classes for a common goal:

[Women] live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men—fathers or husbands—more firmly than they are to other women. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women.<sup>76</sup>

In other words, women continue to be divided by their primary allegiance, both economically and racially, to men. In the *Twilight* series, for example, Bella (who is white) is romantically “courted” by Edward, who is both white and wealthy (and a vampire), as well as Jacob, who is described as Native American and from a middle-class family. Though the inclusion of Jacob’s

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<sup>75</sup> Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 61.

<sup>76</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 257.

tribe infuses diversity into the novel, it is only superficially, particularly because members of the tribe change into wolves. It is important to note that throughout the *Twilight* series, all characters assume middle or upper-middle class status except for the white, patriarchal vampire family, who are the wealthiest characters, and therefore the unrealistic extreme. Despite the presence of the tribe in the series, and Jacob's love for Bella, her primary allegiance remains to Edward, who she also chooses to marry over Jacob.

It is within both the neo-liberal and conservative branches of postfeminism that girls are being trained within economic roles. Susan Faludi describes the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> as heightening the pressure on women not only to align themselves with men, but also to assume a domestic (and therefore economically weaker and reliant) role, listing “the demotion of independent-minded female commentators, the elevation of ‘manly men’ at ground zero, and the adoration of widowed pregnant homemakers—that is, a cast of characters caught up in the September 11<sup>th</sup> trauma . . .”<sup>77</sup> Faludi cites a particular example of a wealthy, white, well-educated woman who chooses domesticity and as a result is glorified in the media: “[Her] powerhouse career as managing director at Merrill Lynch, combined with her husband's high income at the branding firm Lippincott Mercer, allowed her ‘the financial stability to retire at age 38 with no promise of going back,’” thus forfeiting her education and self-sufficiency for feminine domesticity and reliance on a man.<sup>78</sup> In *Breaking Dawn*, the last novel of the *Twilight* series, Bella marries Edward after she graduates from high school, and forfeits a college education to have a child with him. This portrayal, meant for adolescent girl readers, similarly encourages a dependent, domestic economic role for women as wives and mothers.

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<sup>77</sup> Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post – 9/11 America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 118.

<sup>78</sup> Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post – 9/11 America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007) 133.



Marx declared that the proletariat class must “abolish the conditions of its own life,” or repression and control by the bourgeoisie, in order to “free itself.” In terms of postfeminist discourse, this would especially entail challenging the glossing over of race and class in popular culture narratives by preemptive irony and satire. As Marx writes, “[The proletariat] cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation.”<sup>79</sup> These “conditions” include the stereotypes of the “proletariat” as drivers, maids, cooks, or sexually exotic women from Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America. The neo-liberal and conservative postfeminist doctrines have successfully ignored and even erased acknowledgement of “inhuman conditions” regarding race and class inequalities within the contemporary United States, thus averting both the proletariat class consciousness advocated by Marx and the potential for women to identify with each other, despite race and class boundaries, noted by de Beauvoir. Observers of postfeminist discourse, such as readers of chick-lit fiction, will consequentially not question basic inequalities that appear throughout the series, such as instances when wealthy “well-bred” characters are treated deferentially by adults. Or, in another example, Glenn writes, “the exploits of these characters with wealth reveal a pervasive belief that there is no need to be held accountable for their actions. There is always someone else to bail them out, clean the mess, turn an eye, or take the blame. After the big party, members of the cleaning service inevitably arrive.”<sup>80</sup> Perhaps most directly implicating economic disparity, and the privileges of the “higher class,” is the established entitlement of the wealthy white characters who will attend Ivy League colleges:

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<sup>79</sup> Karl Marx “The Materialist Conception of History,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 149.

<sup>80</sup> Wendy Glenn, “Gossiping Girls, Insider Boys, A-List Achievement: Examining and Exposing Young Adult Novels Consumed by Conspicuous Consumption,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 1 (2008): 37, <http://www.jstor.org>.

...Our families' decorators are already out there collecting samples for us to choose from for our dorm room décor. Yup, the countdown has officially begun: in just ten days the most recent graduates of Manhattan's most exclusive private schools are headed to college. Pretty soon you'll find us settling into our dorm rooms on Ivy League campuses across New England, the first fallen leaves crunching beneath our new, camel-colored Coach riding boots...<sup>81</sup>

This passage from *Gossip Girl* satirizes the characters attending Ivy League colleges by describing the “decorators...for our dorm room décor.” What this passage does not acknowledge, however, is that higher education, and the Ivy League colleges in particular, contribute to a systematic arrangement of society into the same “manifold gradation of social rank” that Marx describes of the “earlier epochs of history.”<sup>82</sup> Marx writes that “the modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.”<sup>83</sup> As Marx indicates, capitalism does not simply guarantee “free trade” for all, but also functions to reorganize the class system. As I have demonstrated, this system remains fundamentally dominated by wealthy white males, excluding lower socioeconomic statuses, non-white races, and most subtly—but also critically—the very same white middle and upper-class women it seeks to exploit. Higher education, and particularly education within the “Ivy Leagues,” is an essential part of this system, reinforcing the division between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat by maintaining the wealth within individual families throughout generations. Higher education is not available to all US citizens—just those who can

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<sup>81</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Don't You Forget About Me* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2007), 1-2.

<sup>82</sup> Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch. (New York: Norton & Company, 2001), 769-770.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch. (New York: Norton & Company, 2001), 770.

afford it. In another example from *Gossip Girl*, Nate contemplates taking a few self-indulgent years off before college:

Nate didn't understand why, at seventeen, you had to map out your entire life. There would be plenty of time for more school after taking a year or two off to sail around the Caribbean or go skiing in Chile. And yet, all of his classmates at the St. Jude's School for Boys were planning to go straight to college and straight to grad school after college.<sup>84</sup>

The fact that the students who attend the most prestigious schools receive the “best” education and obtain the “best” jobs is not exposed here; rather, it is simply taken for granted that Nate will receive the best possible education and disproportionate economic agency without having to work for it. Additionally, Nate's predictable economic success attracts the allegiance of wealthy, educated, white women such as Blair (despite her submissive economic role). As de Beauvoir writes, “woman cannot even dream of exterminating the males... The bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other” (258). Blair aspires to the type of life also previously remarked upon by Faludi: “[Blair] looked like someone who was going to get into Yale and marry the boy.”<sup>85</sup> Blair's anticipation of acceptance to Yale here reflects both her conception of entitlement to higher education, as well as her expectation to marry a boy who is her class equal.

By returning to de Beauvoir's observation that women's primary allegiance is to men of their own race or socioeconomic status, we can better understand that the fundamental problem with this allegiance is that it does nothing to improve women's position:

Both [women and African Americans] are being emancipated today from a like paternalism, and the former master class wishes to ‘keep them in their place’—that is, the place chosen for them. In both cases the former masters lavish more or less sincere

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<sup>84</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *You Know You Love Me* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2002), 18.

<sup>85</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *You Know You Love Me* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2002), 24.

eulogies, either on the virtues of ‘the good Negro’ with his dormant, childish, merry soul—the submissive Negro—or on the merits of the woman who is ‘truly feminine’—that is, frivolous, infantile, irresponsible—the submissive woman. In both cases the dominant class bases its argument on a state of affairs that it has itself created...”<sup>86</sup>

Here, women are compared not to their white male “counterparts,” but rather to another group of people who are oppressed within the very same patriarchal paradigm. This example demonstrates that females are not economically equal, but rather are kept economically dependent on and supportive of men, despite the postfeminist illusion reproduced in chick-lit fiction that they are economically empowered. Thus, the “frivolous, infantile, irresponsible” woman pointed out by de Beauvoir is very often the same one who engages in commoditized beauty, “retail therapy,” and “shops ‘til she drops” in the popular media.

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<sup>86</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 260.

## Chapter Two: Postfeminist Discipline

*Girls will excuse his behavior by saying that the girl was all over him, she was being a slut and what was he supposed to do.*

-Amanda, 17; Queen Bees and Wannabes

Postfeminist doctrine is a form of power that acknowledges gender disparities only insofar as it claims they no longer exist, effectively denying that women continue to be subjugated by patriarchal power. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra write, “indeed, as we have suggested, postfeminist discourses rarely express the explicit view that feminist politics should be rejected; rather it is by virtue of feminism’s success that it is seen to have been superseded . . . [T]he transition to a postfeminist culture involves an evident erasure of feminist politics from the popular, even as aspects of feminism seem to be incorporated within that culture.”<sup>87</sup> That is to say, the postfeminist agenda undermines the argument that patriarchal power continues to oppress women by asserting that feminism is no longer relevant or necessary. As a result, a theory of power that separates the oppressor from the oppressed is no longer useful for explaining girls and women’s role within contemporary culture. In fact, theories relying solely on patriarchal power leave the current issue of female subordination unresolved.

Nancy Hartsock has rejected Michel Foucault’s conception of power as unable “to provide a theory of power for women,” because “systematically unequal relations of power ultimately vanish from Foucault’s account of power.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, Hartsock believes Foucault does not account for consistently disparate relations of power, such as among different races, socioeconomic statuses, and gender. As Ann Brooks writes, “the difficulty is the interaction between Foucault’s understanding of the nature and operation of power, and

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<sup>87</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds. *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>88</sup> Nancy Hartsock, “Foucault on Power” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 165.

feminism's reliance on women's experiences as a grounding for its explanations."<sup>89</sup> Though Foucault did not set out to develop a theory of power, his genealogies documented the exercise of power and the way in which human beings become "subjects."<sup>90</sup> Foucault explained, "power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not a supplementary structure over and above 'society' whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of. To live in society is, in any event, to live in such a way that some can act on the actions of others."<sup>91</sup> While Foucault's conception of power relations may be insufficient in some respects, he explains "power relations" as only one of three domains by which power is exercised: "In a given society, there is no general type of equilibrium between goal-directed activities, systems of communication, and power relations; rather, there are diverse forms, diverse places, diverse circumstances or occasions in which these interrelationships establish themselves according to a specific model."<sup>92</sup> As Foucault notes here, "power" varies culturally and temporally. For the purpose of this chapter, I will employ Foucault's ideas to illuminate a present-day unique power relationship between postfeminist discourse and adolescent girls that reflects precisely the overlap among "goal-directed activities, systems of communication and power relations" noted by Foucault.<sup>93</sup>

Because postfeminism does not acknowledge the presence of unequal power relations in contemporary society, Foucault's comprehensive theory of power, while perhaps not conducive to some feminist arguments, does provide a lens through which postfeminist power can be

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<sup>89</sup> Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms* (London: Routledge, 1997), 56. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/unioncollege/Doc?id=10057206&ppg=62>

<sup>90</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 326.

<sup>91</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 343.

<sup>92</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 338.

<sup>93</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 339.

understood and critiqued. Brooks notes the potential value of Foucault's notion of power despite its tangential nature to feminism:

The obvious tensions between Foucault and feminism highlight fundamental problems in explaining the nature of power relations which both feminism and social theory have failed to solve. These contradictions and problems should not be linked necessarily to any specific weakness in feminism, but, as indicated above, rather to feminism's pragmatic approach to some of the most profound problems confronting social theory.<sup>94</sup>

As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, postfeminism operates by stamping out feminist agendas. As a result, Foucault's concept of power, developed by "deconstructing history and of analysing power relations," provides a new avenue by which we can assess subtle patriarchal power relations.<sup>95</sup> In this chapter I will contextualize postfeminism while presenting an overview of how Foucault's theory of power relates to postfeminist discourse, describing the way in which postfeminism "disciplines" adolescent girls. I will argue that postfeminism succeeds by creating a single power relation whereby girls and women participate in their own subjugation, thus demonstrating that postfeminism in this respect is fundamentally patriarchal and restricts female subjective power. Treating chick-lit fiction as an element of the postfeminist discourse that creates, produces, and distributes cultural messages about beauty and heterosexuality, I will reveal how postfeminist discipline enforces a feminine role for girls and women that, despite its modern glamour, requires conformity to a prescribed physical appearance and heterosexuality that second-wave feminism sought to overcome.

### **A. Power-Knowledge**

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<sup>94</sup> Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms* (London: Routledge, 1997), 53. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/unioncollege/Doc?id=10057206&ppg=62>

<sup>95</sup> Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms* (London: Routledge, 1997), 55. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/unioncollege/Doc?id=10057206&ppg=62>

The first decade of the twenty-first century can be characterized by the growing popular presence of the ideal postfeminist subject, who is a white, middle-class, heterosexual girl. At the same time, the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> facilitated an upsurge in conservative values, including pressure for women and girls to return to the traditional feminine role. Susan Faludi writes that the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> insecurity in the United States was translated into “a sexualized struggle between depleted masculinity and overbearing womanhood.”<sup>96</sup> The result of the perceived sexualized struggle and threat of “overbearing womanhood” has been the renewed glorification of the physically and sexually attractive female, and paradoxically, emphasis on a romantically passive feminine role. Using chick lit as a representative sample of post-September 11<sup>th</sup> postfeminist discourse, I will demonstrate how Foucault’s readings of power and discipline can be reconceptualized to reveal the way that postfeminism informs, and produces, prescribed feminine behavior in adolescent girls. Faludi characterizes “the various impulses that surfaced after 9/11—the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly men, the heightened call for domesticity, the search for and sanctification of helpless girls...”(14). Using Foucault’s conception of power-knowledge, I argue that these collective impulses have led to a restabilization of patriarchy and new emphasis on the feminine, without overtly demanding a reversal of second-wave feminist achievements. Faludi notes the appearance of postfeminist discourse after September 11<sup>th</sup> in the 2004 *Readers Guide*:

Feminism had become little more than a repository for the paltry remains of the women’s liberation movement and, especially, for obituaries celebrating the movement’s demise... Other stories listed under ‘Feminism’ could most charitably be characterized as ‘postfeminist’—like ‘Beautiful Girl,’ a feature on the life of a supermodel, or the article in

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<sup>96</sup> Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post – 9/11 America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 9.



*Men's Health* called 'Babes in Boyland' ... 'Women in TV' offered 'Invasion of the Dumb Blonds' and stories about mean girls on reality TV shows and catfights on *Desperate Housewives*. (34)

Postfeminism successfully promotes the ideal female body, or pinnacle beauty, and a heterosexual orientation. Foucault's theory of the nature of power demonstrates that, in the words of Todd May: "rather than preventing us from being who we are or from realizing our true nature, power operates by making us who we are. We are produced by power."<sup>97</sup> Foucault's concept of power is useful for analyzing postfeminist authority as a pervasive form of oppression that adolescent girls adapt within as they develop in contemporary American society.

In a critique of postfeminism, Negra writes that "crucially, postfeminism often functions as a means of registering and superficially resolving the persistence of 'choice' dilemmas for American women."<sup>98</sup> As opposed to the way in which we commonly conceive of power, such as a force that represses or controls, Foucault reconceives the notion of power as put into effect by creation. Tasker and Negra identify the "creation" of postfeminism as "frequently imagin[ing] femininity as a state of vitality in opposition to the symbolically deathly social and economic fields of contemporary Western cultures."<sup>99</sup> The appeal of postfeminism, and the motivation to enact postfeminist discourse, stems from the portrayal of postfeminist femininity in the past decade as "empowered to recharge a culture defined by exhaustion, uncertainty, and moral

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<sup>97</sup> Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 183.

<sup>98</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

<sup>99</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds. *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular*, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 9.

ambiguity.”<sup>100</sup> In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault constructs a genealogy of power, and presents the notion of “power-knowledge” by writing:

We must admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”<sup>101</sup>

In these terms, postfeminism can be understood as a discourse to be known, and a discourse that affects behavior. Power-knowledge in this sense can be understood in terms of discourse: producing “the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge.”<sup>102</sup> Postfeminism, then, as “power-knowledge” exists circularly, and is maintained as both a discourse and form of power that directly produce each other. Thus, “knowledge” is constructed around the physical and sexual feminine ideal, and “power” can be understood as produced by the options that women know are available to them and “willingly” engage in.

Gisela J. Hinkle expands upon this understanding of power-knowledge: “power relations permeate and constitute the social body and are established, consolidated, and implemented by way of the production and use of discourse which is taken as truth.”<sup>103</sup> Truth, in this sense, however, does not necessarily mean “knowledge of the truth,” but rather, as Paul Fry clarifies, knowledge that “circulates and imposes its effects on us.” This is evident in the current presence of postfeminist discourse and its rejection of feminism as desirable or important. As Faludi

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<sup>100</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds. *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular*, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>101</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 27-28.

<sup>102</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 27-28.

<sup>103</sup> Gisela J. Hinkle, “Foucault's Power/Knowledge and American Sociological Theorizing,” *Human Studies* 10 (1987): 35-59.

writes, “with so many feminist-minded writers disenfranchised by the post-9/11 press, such calumny stood unchallenged...In fact, a feminist perspective on *any* topic was increasingly AWOL.”<sup>104</sup> Fry explains this type of distribution of knowledge, “which for better or worse circulates among us ideas that are in a certain sense governing ideas about whatever it is that’s in question.”<sup>105</sup>

Rather than an identifiable movement such as second-wave feminism, postfeminism is a process evident, and accessible, in contemporary discourse. Foucault further contends that “the processes and struggles that traverse [power-knowledge] and of which it is made up, determine the forms and possible domains of knowledge.”<sup>106</sup> The image of the ideal woman—heterosexual, young, white, thin, wealthy, impossibly beautiful, and “empowered,” for example—is constantly circulated by postfeminist books, movies, music, television and even politics. The power of the postfeminist process in this case works by informing and influencing what girls know to be true. Foucault writes: “If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labour, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination.”<sup>107</sup> In this case, “increased aptitude” refers to postfeminist knowledge that makes available to girls “choices” about physical appearance and sexuality, while “increased domination” refers to the production, and reproduction, of the positive or negative outcomes of these choices. Because Foucault’s work considers power struggles outside of economic conflicts, it is key to demonstrating that besides directing girls’ economic power, postfeminism constructs their behaviors by constructing the positive outcomes

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<sup>104</sup> Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post – 9/11 America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 33.

<sup>105</sup> Paul H. Fry, “Queer Theory and Gender Performativity,” Episode 23, Open Yale Courses, iTunes University, iTunes Store, MP3 audio file.

<sup>106</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 27-28.

<sup>107</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 138.

of available choices. While the psychological ramifications of limiting the choices available to girls will be more closely analyzed in the next chapter, this chapter will use chick lit as an exemplar of postfeminist discourse to evaluate the circulating ideas and options that construct what girls' "know" to be true.

## B. Discipline

Postfeminism conditions girls approaching adulthood to learn to act as their own oppressors. Foucault's definition and explanation of discipline clarifies the success of power-knowledge informing and producing human behavior, particularly that of adolescent girls in contemporary culture. Foucault defines discipline as increasing "the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility)" while diminishing "these same forces (in political terms of obedience)."<sup>108</sup> Discipline in this sense will be used to interpret the way power-knowledge is activated through postfeminist texts such as chick lit. Discipline "works" as "the process that is applied both to bodies and to the interaction between them."<sup>109</sup> This the way in which adolescent girls are informed within a postfeminist paradigm. "Postfeminist discipline" is "active" in a number of ways, such as in terms of girls' and women's participation in self-beautifying and self-improvement techniques, or by girls and women who deny their sexualities, or use up their "energies," in Foucault's terms, in continual pursuit of heterosexual relationships. Postfeminist discipline is further manifested by women as well as girls, who use age-defying cosmetics, or pubic hair waxing, to appear more youthful; women and girls of many colors and races who use skin-lightening techniques to become "whiter," or allow themselves to be represented as "white;" women and girls who succumb to eating disorders in an endless battle to be thin; and finally,

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<sup>108</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 138.

<sup>109</sup> Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 73.

women and girls of all incomes who spend their money on expensive clothing and cosmetics—buying into, rather than challenging, the class inequalities in America. Each of these instances is initiated by power-knowledge, but ultimately produced through postfeminist discipline. As Foucault writes, “the individual is an effect of power, and at the same time [an] element of its articulation.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, as adolescent girls develop into adulthood, engaging in these actions and choices contributes to the same production of knowledge that has, quite literally, produced them. In the Foucauldian sense, postfeminist discipline increases the ways in which certain “forces of the body” in adolescent girls are increased and even exploited. The two major ways girls’ behaviors are formed are through the reinforcement of ideal beauty, as girls come to know they must look and dress a certain way, and in the affirmation of heterosexuality as the “right” or “normal” sexuality. Both of these productions of behavior reinforce patriarchy by stabilizing the roles of the sexes: the “manly man” and “girly girl.” As Negra argues, “postfeminism fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing these within firm limits.”<sup>111</sup> Postfeminist discipline, under a pretext of female empowerment and individuality, actually minimizes and restricts girls’ options, creating “obedience” by othering “undesirable” body types and sexualities. It is then a patriarchal argument that girls’ behaviors, both “healthy” and disordered, such as repressed sexuality and eating disorders, are merely self-imposed.

### **I. Normalizing the Ideal Body**

Postfeminist discipline begins at a very young age: constructing what girls know about their bodies as well as their ability to change their appearances in a way that is condoned by contemporary society. The enforcement of a physical beauty standard for girls and women

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Gisela J. Hinkle. “Foucault’s Power/Knowledge and American Sociological Theorizing,” *Human Studies* 10 (1987): 35-59.

<sup>111</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

predates postfeminism, however, by centuries. Foucault cites Callicratidas and “Affairs of the Heart,” a text credited to Lucian and estimated to have been written between the second and fourth centuries, when describing attitudes towards women’s bodies in the Hellenic period:

One only has to look closely to see that women are intrinsically ‘ugly,’ ‘truly,’ (*alethos*) so: their bodies are ‘unshapely’ and their faces are as ill-favored as those of monkeys.

They must take great pains to mask this reality: makeup, fancy clothes, coiffures, jewels, adornments. For the benefit of spectators they give themselves a spurious beauty, which a careful gaze suffices to dissipate.<sup>112</sup>

This early view of women as naturally ugly and defective—necessitating the “taking [of] great pains to mask this reality”—is significant because it is so similar to contemporary culture, in which girls and women face the reality that beliefs about the female body have remained unchanged. While postfeminism has glorified girl’s and women’s choices to participate in commoditized beauty, the underlying message is that without the right makeup, clothing, and even body type, girls will look unattractive, or be somehow insufficient. Crawford and Unger use media examples to demonstrate that this commercialized message of ideal beauty is presented to girls very early:

Makeup sets are sold for girls as young as 3, advertised as ‘the fun way to learn beauty secrets.’ ...Recently a ‘workout kit’ (jumprope, leotard, exercise mat) was nationally advertised for girls ages 5 and up not as a means of developing coordination, fitness, or athletic skill but as a way to work off that extra chocolate chip cookie.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume Three* (New York: Random House, 1986), 222.

<sup>113</sup> Mary Crawford and Rhoda Kesler Unger, *Women and Gender: A Feminist Psychology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 57.

While this example demonstrates how postfeminism circulates in an economic sense, it also demonstrates another way girls are informed about their appearances. As an unreachable, and often discouraging, standard for women, the goal of ideal beauty in contemporary culture is reinforced by postfeminist discipline, which creates a choice with positive outcomes, and a standard that girls observe and routinely compare themselves to. In her discussion of self harm, femininity, and heterosexual melancholia, McRobbie expresses the condition of the body within the current cultural climate for girls and women:

No matter how many debates there are about the harms caused by the fashion industry, and despite all the pressure put by governments and regulatory bodies on the magazines to only show images of healthy female bodies, the same images of virtually emaciated girls, whose arms and legs show clear signs of anorexia continue to appear on the pages of not just *Vogue* magazine, but also the newspaper fashion pages and supplements.<sup>114</sup>

Similarly, chick-lit narrative evokes images of thinness, valorizing the slender body by negatively correlating a character's weight with her popularity and happiness. Accordingly, the less a female character weighs, the more popular, and therefore happy, she seems to be.

A passage from *The A-List* provides an example of the regular presence of pinnacle beauty, and its purpose, in postfeminist discourse: "That there was competition to be the thinnest was nothing new to Anna—so many of her friends in Manhattan had the same obsession. Anna knew how fortunate she was to be naturally slender. She'd taken ballet for years because she loved it; it was her main form of exercise."<sup>115</sup> Negra identifies "the spectacular emergence of the underfed, overexercised female body" as "one of the most distinctive features of the postfeminist

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<sup>114</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 95.

<sup>115</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 93.

era.”<sup>116</sup> The importance of being thin in this passage becomes more significant when considered in the context of Negra’s assertion that “the relentlessly self-disciplined, fit female body” in the description of Anna’s ballet-trained figure, “tends to camouflage the centrality of that body in the reinforcement of traditional heterosexual desirability.”<sup>117</sup> Anna’s self-identified distance from the existing competition among girls to be the thinnest is a pretext for her individualism. Using Negra’s argument, however, the value of Anna’s thinness is not a positive outcome of her “love of ballet,” but rather a validated representation of the female body because its positive assessment is determined by the male gaze. Anna is fortunate not because she is naturally slender, but because her slender body allows her to be desirable to men. In this way, Anna’s body, and “choice” to be thin, is a form of postfeminist knowledge that a superficial reading will assure us is an empowered choice. In this sense, pinnacle beauty and the value of the slender female body exists as a patriarchal construction, glamorized by a postfeminist emphasis on “personal choice,” and repackaged in chick-lit fiction.<sup>118</sup>

One might argue that if power-knowledge and postfeminist discipline “normalize” thinness, then because not all girls are ideally thin, not all girls’ body sizes are produced by power. However, Foucault accounts for this type of critique in his analysis of discipline, writing:

Like surveillance and with it, normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age. For the marks that once indicated status, privilege and affiliation were increasingly replaced — or at least supplemented — by a whole range

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<sup>116</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 119.

<sup>117</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 127.



of degrees of normality indicating membership of a homogeneous social body but also playing a part in classification, hierarchization and the distribution of rank.<sup>119</sup>

This conception of normalization reveals that power exists within *degrees* of normality that are purposefully ranked. In other words, girls do not simply act because of what they are exposed to, but rather, act because they recognize that their bodies are subject to this implicit “distribution of rank” and as a result will try to improve their “ranking.” As Foucault explains, “In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another.”<sup>120</sup> Accordingly, girls’ bodies are all given degrees of “normalcy” around ideal beauty, and as a result are objects of power. Foucault further notes that “it is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences.”<sup>121</sup> The “underfed, overexercised” female is one way girls’ may learn to work relentlessly towards pinnacle beauty and improve their rank. In postfeminist discourse, this can be understood as the degree of individual difference between the ideal and the “other.”

Younger identifies the recurring theme of necessary weight loss in place of natural thinness in chick-lit fiction, as well as the “othering” of girls unable to reach an ideal weight:

...An unacknowledged assumption about weight functions [as a default]: If a character is presented and no reference is made to her weight, the reader assumes a ‘normal’—read ‘thin’—weight. Most often weight is mentioned only if the character is considered

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<sup>119</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 184.

<sup>120</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 184.

<sup>121</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 184.

abnormal, i.e., fat or chubby, or if the character is thin as a reminder of the importance of being slender. Women and girls who are heavy are *always* identified as such. Even in otherwise progressive books, the fat person is marked as ‘other.’<sup>122</sup>

Readers of *The A-List* are constantly reminded that the character Sam Sharpe has an imperfect weight: “Sam, who always worried about her weight... was a long way from thin (read: she took a size ten or twelve)...”<sup>123</sup> Degrees of “normalcy” are reflected here in the dress sizes: Sam knows that size “ten or twelve” is too far from an ideal size, a two or a four.

As noted by Rice, “In contemporary western cultures, [being overweight or obese is increasingly] interpreted as unattractive, downwardly mobile, physically or emotionally unhealthy, and as [the result of] a lack of body and self-control.”<sup>124</sup> Similarly, Negra notes that “in postfeminism, the morality of the fit body is coming to the fore.”<sup>125</sup> Postfeminist discourse promotes the slender, “healthy” body as positive, even honorable, while weight gain is not only associated with unhealthiness, but also a lack of self-control and immorality. The othering of Sam in this respect is particularly evident in a depiction of her choosing between designer dresses: “At the moment these assistants were hovering around Sam like feeding hummingbirds, hoping that one of the girl’s pudgy fingers would extend toward their dress, shoes, and/or bag, followed by the magic words ‘That one is perfect.’”<sup>126</sup> This unflattering depiction of her “pudgy fingers” and self-absorption exemplifies contemporary “knowledge” about the kind of personality that is attributed to a girl with a heavier body type.

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<sup>122</sup> Beth Younger, *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2009), 5.

<sup>123</sup> Zoey Dean, *Back in Black* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 6.

<sup>124</sup> Carla Rice, “How Big Girls Become Fat Girls: The Cultural Production of Problem Eating and Physical Inactivity” in *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Disorders*, eds. Helen Malson and Maree Burns (New York: Routledge, 2009), 97.

<sup>125</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 127.

<sup>126</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List*, (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 41.

Commoditized beauty does not only function as a marketing strategy, as I have demonstrated in chapter one, but also provides an alluring means by which pinnacle beauty *should* be attained. “Should” is an important keyword to discuss commoditized beauty as a system of behaviors that allow girls to become more beautiful—by what they “should” do. Examples include purchasing the right beauty products, attending the highest profile gym, and having the latest cosmetic surgeries. As I addressed in the previous chapter, medieval writer Andreas Capellanus’ negative description of “woman [like] melting wax, always ready to assume fresh shape and to be moulded to the imprint of anyone’s seal” remains apparent within the twenty-first century.<sup>127</sup> Not only do these actions drain girls’ spending power, but they also serve postfeminist discipline. To return to Foucault’s definition, this entails increasing “the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility)” while diminishing “these same forces (in political terms of obedience).”<sup>128</sup> In other words, girls sacrifice their subjective power for a collective, postfeminist power-knowledge that, claiming to “individualize,” actually informs their actions of losing weight, shopping for the right products and appearing as ideal, and thus, as “normal” as possible. Chick-lit fiction and the promotion of commoditized beauty, furthermore, prevent adolescent girls from perceiving gender hierarchy and challenging it by absorbing their energies in the improvement of the self, thus promoting “the opportunity to work and earn a living...offset by the emphasis on lifelong and carefully staged body maintenance as an imperative of feminine identity.”<sup>129</sup> Neo-liberal forms of postfeminism in this way converge with the growth of conservative ideology after September 11<sup>th</sup> that has aimed to reinstate a conventional, domestic, and passively feminine role for women.

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<sup>127</sup> Andreas Capellanus in *Woman Defamed and Woman defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt and C.W. Marx (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 120.

<sup>128</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 138.

<sup>129</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 63.

The pressure to be thin and ideally beautiful, exhibited by high school girls in *The A-List*, *Gossip Girl*, and *The It Girl*, is also demonstrated by girls as young as seventh grade, who are routinely concerned with dieting techniques, as represented in *The Clique*: “[Massie] sat patiently while (1) Dylan pulled the thick foil off her Zone lunch and sniffed the pale grilled chicken breast; (2) Alicia bit off the corners of several mustard packets and squirted them onto her veggie burger (no bun); and (3) Kristen dipped a banana into a Styrofoam cup of froyo.”<sup>130</sup> This promotion of particular eating behaviors—the portrayal of girls consuming low-fat, yet expensive luxury foods—complements the message of women attaining ideal attractiveness that is prevalent in the media. However expensive makeovers and diets may be, in chick lit they are the remedy for any physical imperfections. In *The A-List*, Sam is painfully aware that her body does not meet the “normal” standard of ideal beauty, even though she is forever working to lose weight: “If Sam could’ve fixed her fire-hydrant calves and fat ankles with plastic surgery, she’d have done it long ago.”<sup>131</sup> Wealthy girl characters, upon self-reflection and appraisal of their own appearances, can pursue self-beautification with ease. McRobbie affirms this role of the “commercial domain” in terms of patriarchal authority: “The authoritative voice of consumer culture is intimate, cajoling and also encouraging. It produces a specific kind of female subject within the realm of its address.”<sup>132</sup> This trend is emphasized in *The A-List*. When Sam reflects on her past, she recalls that by age ten she was “othered” because she “had turned into a chubby, hairy loner with an overbite.”<sup>133</sup> After her father marries “a semi-famous actress with whom he had just finished shooting a movie,” however, Sam is taken by her new step-mom to get her

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<sup>130</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 67.

<sup>131</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 47.

<sup>132</sup> Angela McRobbie *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 62.

<sup>133</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 44.

eyebrows, legs, and back waxed.<sup>134</sup> In addition, Sam is brought “to Dr. Attberg for invisible braces, to Fekkai’s for chemical hair relaxing, and to a bariatric doctor who put Sam on a diet complete with cute little pink pills.”<sup>135</sup> Sam’s beautification, which includes hair-removal and even illegal diet pills, increases her physical “ranking,” earning her both reward and popularity and therefore eliminating her misery as an outcast:

When [Sam’s] father had returned home at the end of the shoot to find his much cuter, much thinner daughter, he’d never asked how she’d lost so much weight so quickly. But he had rewarded her by buying her a pony—a real one this time... Sam returned to school and discovered that now that she was semicute, she was considered semicool. So she undertook phase two of her remodeling campaign.<sup>136</sup>

This quotation demonstrates postfeminist discipline by portraying an adolescent girl character who engages in actions that “normalize” her body and increase her “rank” in terms of the ideal. Therefore, Sam is achieving the reward of acceptance, yet at the same time promoting incentive for fitting into a specific physical role. The repetition of “cute” pink pills and Sam’s resulting “cuter” appearance is an example of the Foucauldian notion of power as a production, or creation. Sam’s “creation” is not only the result of her consciousness of her body rank in terms of degrees of beauty, but also serves as an example, or form of knowledge to other girls, such as readers of the series, that facilitates this form of discipline. Sam’s body in this sense truly becomes an object of discipline, and she forfeits her subjective self. Similarly, in *The Clique*, seventh grader Claire quickly learns the importance of a makeover when she is not accepted by the beautiful, popular girls at her middle school, nicknamed “OCD.” She promptly agrees to

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<sup>134</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 44-45.

<sup>135</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 45.

<sup>136</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 45-46.

wear the expensive brand-name clothes the school nurse offers her after Alicia, one of the popular girls, cruelly splashes red paint on her white jeans:

When Claire walked out of the nurse's office, she looked like she belonged at OCD. She was wearing a camel-colored cashmere tank top, dark denim flair jeans, and a pair of pointy Steve Madden boots. She felt bad for tossing her favorite white Gap jeans, but they were ruined anyway. She walked straight to the café, with her toes squished and her head held high.<sup>137</sup>

Claire's makeover boosts her self-esteem because of her anticipation of acceptance. Though her painful shoes are crippling, Claire's head is "held high." This signifies her correct choice to increase a certain behavior—stylishness—while diminishing another—comfort, exemplifying postfeminist discipline. As Leora Tanenbaum highlights:

Most women who are compelled to wear impractical shoes feel pressured to prove or display their femininity. Paradoxically, many women believe that high heels can signify strength . . . For women's shoes to be effective in keeping our anxieties—whether about sexuality or morality—at bay, they must have a certain appearance we associate with fashionable heeled shoes. 'Sensible' or sexless women's shoes don't serve any anxiety-reducing function. They do not soothe us and they do not reinforce traditional gender identities.<sup>138</sup>

Chick-lit series such as *The Clique* reveal that girls' participation in commoditized beauty, including wearing uncomfortable "sexy" shoes, qualifies them to be accepted by their peers, whether or not they attain the ideal level of physical beauty. Similarly, though Sam is unable to

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<sup>137</sup> Lisi Harrison, *The Clique* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 66.

<sup>138</sup> Leora Tanenbaum, *Bad Shoes & The Women Who Love Them* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010) 51, 127.

become “perfectly” attractive, (“but damnit, she was still not *beautiful*”) her continuous efforts justify her status, as well as her friendships with more “beautiful” girls.<sup>139</sup>

In analyzing Foucault’s concept of discipline, May notes: “Discipline involves a set of power relations that are orientated [*sic*]. Historically, a dispersion of practices – or at least elements of those practices – come together to induce individuals to become normalized and, inseparably, to think of themselves in terms of normalization.”<sup>140</sup> Just as shopping behaviors are strategically portrayed in postfeminist discourse in order to be self-empowering, and as a result, imitated, the ease and optimism with which characters engage in commoditized beauty to enhance their physical qualities may be interpreted by adolescent readers as not only accessible and “normal,” but also obligatory. Whereas weight negatively correlates with popularity and happiness, fitting into a feminine role and concept of beauty is essential for social acceptance and relationships throughout chick-lit series.

### **A. Normalizing Dissatisfaction**

While pinnacle beauty is portrayed as rewarding in postfeminist texts, it also repeatedly causes animosity between characters; girls are divided by jealousy and competition. Foucault writes of power: “it refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed.”<sup>141</sup> The portrayal of behaving and appearing according to the feminine role, and gaining reward, is paradoxical to the simultaneous isolation that results from the rifts this “perpetual penalty” causes among girls. Neatly masked by postfeminist terms of choice, health, and empowerment, this paradox subverts

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<sup>139</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 46.

<sup>140</sup> Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>141</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 182-183.

true female autonomy, and ultimately “ensures a new women’s movement will not emerge,” because in “normalizing” themselves girls are forfeiting a sense of solidarity with each other.<sup>142</sup>

It is interesting that Foucault writes, “pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and enticement.”<sup>143</sup> An analogy is present in Adrienne Rich’s quotation that prefaces the introduction to this thesis. For girls and women there is perhaps a dissatisfaction with a loss of power that runs deeper than the pleasure promised by consumerism and ideal attractiveness. While girls are enticed by possessing the “ideal” body, and the pleasures that possession will reap for them, ultimately, like the honey Rich offers to the bumblebee, “its life process, its work, its mode of being cannot be fulfilled.”<sup>144</sup> McRobbie argues that female discontent is a pervasive, observable, social problem; she writes that female dissatisfactions are treated by postfeminist culture as “a mark of femininity” and, cued by “anxiety on the part of the less visible ‘patriarchies,’” used as a way to “freshly [demarcate] the boundaries of sexual difference.”<sup>145</sup> Evidence for this is the implicitly self-harming disorders suffered primarily by girls and women, such as anorexia or bulimia. McRobbie identifies contemporary culture’s ability, couched within postfeminism, to discount disorders suffered by girls and women, by claiming that “it must be somehow their own doing”:

Indeed if it is the case that the anorexic girl is frequently embroiled in her own family dynamics, and is also tending to be a girl who is seeking approval, in terms of school work and other activities, then we might propose that, at the very least, her disorder is still at

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<sup>142</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 119.

<sup>143</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 48.

<sup>144</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Notes Toward Politics of Location,” in *The Essential Feminist Reader*, ed. Estelle B. Freedman (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 368.

<sup>145</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 95.



least a mark of her femininity and her rightful place within properly oedipalised families, which in turn leads me to suggest that these disorders come to be a way of freshly demarcating the boundaries of sexual difference. These girls may sometimes try to end their own lives, but at least they are surely normal girls in this respect? Cutting themselves, endlessly on diets, fearful of their weight, prone to low self-esteem, frequently anorexic? These are all now healthy signs of unhealthy femininity...<sup>146</sup>

Dissatisfaction with the self often appears within postfeminist discourse as inherently feminine, normal for girls, even a requirement for femininity. As Tasker and Negra write, “The emphasis on female individualism, which is such a marked feature of postfeminist discourse, thus works to shift responsibility for girls’ at-risk status to the girls themselves.”<sup>147</sup> In *Gossip Girl*, though Serena is the epitome of beauty, she too propagates “healthy femininity” by exhibiting an ironic low self-esteem that typifies many of the other female characters in the series: “‘Fatso,’ Serena said to her reflection.”<sup>148</sup> Blair presents another relevant example; she has, perhaps, the lowest self-esteem and most body image dissatisfaction of all the characters in *Gossip Girl*: “Blair checked out her naked body in the mirror. Her legs were too short for the rest of her body, and her boobs were small and not as ‘pay attention to me’ as she would have liked them [to be]...”<sup>149</sup> In these scenes, the normality of girls’ dissatisfactions with their bodies is facilitated by the isolating nature of postfeminist discipline.

In *Gossip Girl*, Blair’s dissatisfaction with her body translates into an eating disorder.

However, the disorder is compartmentalized as solely Blair’s problem in multiple scenes in each

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<sup>146</sup> Angela McRobbie *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 96.

<sup>147</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds. *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 55.

<sup>148</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 35.

<sup>149</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 132.

book, with references such as “...she clacked away in her heels to stick her finger down her throat in the ladies’ room. Some lady.”<sup>150</sup> Though anorexia has the highest death rate of all the psychiatric disorders, taking the lives of over 150,000 sufferers a year, fictitious representations of the consequences of dieting and eating disorders are often satirical, and do not convey any sense that these disorders are emotionally and mentally injurious, physically incapacitating, and deadly.<sup>151</sup> In postfeminist discourse, as represented by chick lit, eating disorders continue to be presented humorously and as normal. Yet clinicians such as Claire Pomeroy write that eating disorders are associated with serious and even fatal medical complications:

Physical signs of bulimia nervosa may be difficult to detect, and many bulimic patients have entirely normal physical examinations. The classical sign of bulimia nervosa is Russel’s sign—the presence of bruises or calluses on the thumb or hand, secondary to trauma from self-induced vomiting (Mitchell, Seim, Colon, & Pomeroy, 1987). Swelling of the parotid and salivary gland has been linked to recurrent vomiting (Buchanan & Fortune, 1994). Erosion of dental enamel on the posterior surfaces of the teeth, as a result of damage by acidic gastric contents during recurrent vomiting, is characteristic in bulimia nervosa... A distressing number of [eating-disorder] patients die, usually of cardiac arrhythmias related to electrolyte disturbances. Dehydration secondary to decreased oral intake, purging, or diuretic and laxative abuse is common and is manifested by low blood pressure and orthostatic changes.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 160.

<sup>151</sup> Claire Pomeroy, “Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder: Assessment of Physical Status” in *Body Image, Eating Disorders, and Obesity : An Integrative Guide for Assessment and Treatment*, ed. J. Kevin Thompson (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), 180, 185.

<sup>152</sup> Claire Pomeroy, “Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder: Assessment of Physical Status” in *Body Image, Eating Disorders, and Obesity : An Integrative Guide for Assessment and Treatment*, ed. J. Kevin Thompson (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), 180, 185.

It is critical to juxtapose the severity of the physical statuses of patients with eating disorders, offered by Pomeroy, against the satirized depictions of Blair suffering from bulimia in *Gossip Girl*:

Just then, a waitress brandished a platter of sushi under Blair's nose. Blair grabbed a chunky tuna roll and shoved it into her mouth... Blair took the champagne, tilted her head back, and poured it down the hatch. The sickly sweet fizziness of it didn't exactly jive with the raw fish and seaweed she'd just eaten. Blair burped queasily. 'I'll be right back,' she told Jenny, practically running for the powder room.<sup>153</sup>

This blatantly unappealing scene is meant to be comical, and is followed later in the book by a chapter titled with an equal sarcasm: "as usual, **b** is in the bathroom and **n** is stoned." Younger argues that bulimia is not glamorized in *Gossip Girl*; rather, the inclusion of Blair's battle with the disorder exposes the issue.<sup>154</sup> However, the representation of bulimia throughout the series drastically differs from Pomeroy's medical analysis of the physical deterioration that results from the disorder. The fact that Blair suffers from bulimia is satirically presented, rather than exposed, trivializing the disorder. There is also no indication that the disorder will eventually have severe consequences for Blair's health. Her automatic inclination to "purge" after unpleasant situations, or at times when she is unhappy, normalizes bulimia, calling attention to her purported neurosis in order to prevent further dialogue about the illness; its causes, as a physical and psychological disorder, are presented only superficially: "'Sorry,' she said bitterly. The quenelle rose up in her throat, mingling fizzily with the liters of champagne she'd already

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<sup>153</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 172.

<sup>154</sup> Beth Younger, *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 114.

consumed. Blair clapped her hand over her mouth and quickly fled the table.”<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, Blair’s privilege and wealth adds an aspect of glamour to the disorder, as she binges and purges on expensive foods and drinks, such as sushi and champagne. The issue simultaneously provides tension and entertainment; because it is addressed and satirized, its gravity can be fundamentally ignored.

As McRobbie has pointed out, dismissive responses toward eating disorders as simply “typical” of girls should be questioned. Treatment for girls suffering from eating disorders occurs after their symptoms become apparent, and is provided on an individual basis. Just as Blair’s bulimia is compartmentalized, this method retains the isolating nature of bodily dissatisfaction. Eating disorders, as well as other self-harming practices, are symptomatic of a larger social problem in the United States; individual treatment is furthermore not preventative. Boskind-White and White Jr. note, “the American Anorexia and Bulimia Association estimates that every year one million women develop eating disorders.”<sup>156</sup> Returning to the notion of power-knowledge, an explanation for the ineffectiveness of individualized treatment to change pervasive social dissatisfaction among girls becomes apparent. Using Foucault’s description of discipline and “the power of the Norm,” we can more clearly understand that girls today are isolated and embroiled in their own “normalcy.” May explains Foucault’s conclusion about the human condition: “We wonder why we are normal... because we are our own prison guards. In a society filled with psycho-services, from therapists to social workers to personnel counselors, there is no need for everyone to be watched. As these services proliferate, most of us will begin to watch ourselves.”<sup>157</sup> We can apply this passage to contemporary culture, identifying girls’

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<sup>155</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *You Know You Love Me* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 211.

<sup>156</sup> Marlene Boskind-White and William C. White, *Bulimia/Anorexia: The Binge/Purge Cycle and Self-Starvation*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 219.

<sup>157</sup> Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 77.

position within postfeminism analogously to that of prisoners in a ‘panoptic’ prison: “The prisoners, in essence, guard themselves. They act as though they are under surveillance even if there is nobody there to observe them. And that, Foucault concludes, is our condition. Given the suffusion of discipline across broad swaths of our society, we are in a condition of what he calls ‘panopticism’. Even if there is no one watching us, even if we are not being monitored, we act as though we are.”<sup>158</sup> Simply put, girls today are their “own guards.” Self-harming disorders, though perhaps not new to women’s experiences, can be newly understood as one consequence of the production of postfeminist discipline and the pursuit of the ideal feminine body. The psychological aspect of this form of self-imposition will be more thoroughly examined in the next chapter.

## II. Sexuality

Postfeminist discipline continues a tradition of repressing female sexuality in three important ways: by reproducing the fairy-tale-like fantasy of the heterosexual union, by presenting subjective female sexuality only insofar as sexual promiscuity remains within the masculine hegemony, and by “othering” female sexualities that fall outside of the heteronormative construct. In the *Twilight* series, Bella’s sexual desire is continually rebuffed by Edward, who believes in maintaining “purity” until marriage when their relationship may be consummated in the way that is “right.” In *The It Girl* and *The Clique*, any challenge to heterosexual relationships, such as lesbianism, is completely unacknowledged. Finally, in *Gossip Girl* and *The A-List*, lesbian desire is portrayed as abnormal, whereas the desirable nature of heterosexual relationships is reaffirmed. Additionally, girls who are sexually active in a

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<sup>158</sup> Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 77.

“threatening” way within each of these series are portrayed as out of control or as having unwelcome, or unfeminine, characteristics.

These various approaches to the repression of female sexuality in chick-lit fiction, and postfeminist culture as well, can be understood in terms of power. Postfeminist discipline is more than simply the communication of ideas, but rather the presentation of specific knowledge: desirable and undesirable outcomes of girls’ available choices. As Foucault writes, “individual or collective subjects” are “faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available.”<sup>159</sup> This is precisely the way female sexuality is controlled; these “possibilities” are actually predetermined choices with fixed negative or positive outcomes that, made available to girls, are meant to enforce the “positive” choices they should be making. The repression of girls’ sexuality begins at a young age, as girls come to know the negative outcomes of sexuality outside of the acceptable femininity prescribed within a patriarchal order. These actions are propagated, as Foucault writes, because the power lies in the performance of “actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions.”<sup>160</sup> The “outcomes” girls are aware of are reinforced by their choice of action. In this way, repression of sexuality can be understood as a form of discipline that pervades behavior in both its outset and by its continuation.

Foucault maintains that “the crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slaves?). At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom.”<sup>161</sup> Postfeminist

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<sup>159</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 342.

<sup>160</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 340.

<sup>161</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 342.

discourse does not simply make available choices (and predestined outcomes) but also provides a persuasive and ostensibly rewarding incentive for those choices. Love in chick lit today is highly reminiscent of fairytales, because finding true love within a heterosexual relationship is the inspiring, appealing, alluring “happy ever after” that induces, and insures girls will continue to conform to and endure within the restructuring of feminine roles in postfeminist culture.

McRobbie describes postfeminist processes as a “disarticulation” of “a field of [feminist] sexual politics”: “Through the repudiation of unstable sexual identities and same-sex desires, there is an aggressive dismantling of the sensibilities which would lead young women, for example, to share a common voice with each other, across the boundaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality.”<sup>162</sup> The reward for the “normalization” of the body and the correct choices girls make in terms of their sexuality is the promise of a life-fulfilling, romantic heterosexual relationship. This illusion exposes another way in which postfeminist discipline inherently supports patriarchy: by sustaining females who forfeit their individual power and acquire the behavior of the collective “norm,” and by actively “othering” females who threaten the patriarchal order.

### **A. Passive Femininity and The Heterosexual Fantasy**

As Younger explains, “much of what many young women and men know about sexuality they learn from peers, television, movies, and the books they read. As a part of popular culture, [young adult] literature is an important source of information about sex.”<sup>163</sup> Chick lit has the ability to create illusions, as well as portray truths, about sex, relationships, and love. The majority of chick lit, however, contributes to the illusive fantasy of an ideal relationship that

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<sup>162</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 26

<sup>163</sup> Beth Younger, *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2009), xv.

precludes a need for true sexual empowerment or a role outside of the positions afforded women within the postfeminist (heterosexual) construct.

In *Breaking Dawn*, Bella's relationship with Edward is constantly described in terms of perfect, passionate, fairy-tale-like love, which culminates in their wedding: "He kissed me tenderly, adoringly; I forgot the crowd, the place, the time, the reason...only remembering that he loved me, and that I was his."<sup>164</sup> The use of adverbs such as "tenderly" and "adoringly," as well as the element of forgetful bliss, reinforces this notion of perfect fantasy. To marry Edward, Bella sacrifices pursuit of a college education or goals of her own outside of marriage. The series in this way remains adamant about Bella's position within the heterosexual relationship: Bella is fulfilled by being "his." Addressing the fact that most young girls are fans of the male characters of the series, Bella's "suitors" Edward and Jacob, Carmen D. Siering notes: "few young readers ask, 'Why not Team Bella?' perhaps because the answer is quite clear: There can be no Team Bella. Even though Bella is ostensibly a hero, in truth she is merely an object in the *Twilight* world. Bella is a prize, not a person, someone to whom things happen, not an active participant in the unfolding story."<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, Bella is infantilized throughout the series, as she not only relies on Edward, but also has sexual feelings that must be kept in check by him:

Then he took my face in his hands almost roughly, and kissed me in earnest, his unyielding lips moving against mine. There really was no excuse for my behavior.

Obviously I knew better by now. And yet I couldn't seem to stop from reacting exactly as

I had the first time. Instead of keeping safely motionless, my arms reached up to twine

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<sup>164</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008), 50.

<sup>165</sup> Carmen D. Siering, "Taking a Bite Out of Twilight," *Ms. Arlington* 19, no. 2 (2009): 50, <http://proquest.umi.com>



tightly around his neck, and I was suddenly welded to his stone figure. I sighed, and my lips parted. He staggered back, breaking my grip effortlessly.<sup>166</sup>

Thus, Bella's sexuality must be kept "safely motionless" according to Edward's terms; she must "behave herself," and as Edward chastely reminds her, she should not be tempting him because he can hurt her, both as a vampire and as a male. This infantilizing treatment of Bella is comparable to the way in which she describes herself: "I was ivory skinned . . . I had always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete; I didn't have the necessary hand-eye coordination to play sports without humiliating myself—and harming both myself and anyone else who stood too close."<sup>167</sup> Bella describes herself as fragile, almost a porcelain-doll-like girl, complemented by her "softness" and clumsiness—the traditional, conservative depiction of femininity. Anna Silver offers a relevant critique of the portrayal of Bella's "retrograde" and submissive role in her romantic relationship: "Edward frequently refers to or treats Bella as a child. When he first met Bella, Edward tells her later, he considered her 'an insignificant little girl' (Twilight 271). Later he calls her 'little coward' (Twilight 279) and 'Silly Bella' (Twilight 281)."<sup>168</sup> Silver points out the infantilizing nature of Edward's treatment of Bella, who often must be "saved." Similarly, Bella consistently describes *herself* as clumsy. Yet, as Silver writes: "[Edward] is almost by default described by Bella as breathtakingly perfect, Bella's 'perpetual savior' (Twilight 166), 'a Greek god' (Twilight 206), a 'godlike creature' (Twilight 256). . ."<sup>169</sup> Edward thus occupies the role of the fantasy male: handsome, romantic, and masculine—and as a vampire, even dangerous. Bella is the feminine female: sexually repressed, domestic, and in

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<sup>166</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 363.

<sup>167</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 10.

<sup>168</sup> Anna Silver, "Twilight is Not Good For Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series," *Studies in the Novel* 42, no. 1 & 2 (2010): 126-127, <http://www.jstor.org>.

<sup>169</sup> Anna Silver, "Twilight is Not Good For Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series," *Studies in the Novel* 42, no. 1 & 2 (2010): 126-127, <http://www.jstor.org>.

need of “saving.” The distinct differences in Bella and Edward’s roles in their relationship are established within the first book, and never shift throughout the series. Even when Bella attempts to become passionate with Edward the night before their wedding, in the final book of the series, she continues to be admonished by him:

I never got over how perfect his body was—white, cool, and polished as marble. I ran my hand down his stone chest now, tracing across the flat planes of his stomach, just marveling. A light shudder rippled through him, and his mouth found mine again. Carefully, I let the tip of my tongue press against his glass-smooth lip, and he sighed... He started to pull away—that was his automatic response whenever he decided things had gone too far, his reflex reaction whenever he most wanted to keep going. Edward had spent most of his life rejecting any kind of physical gratification.<sup>170</sup>

In this passage, Bella’s sexual impulses are once again kept in check by Edward’s virtue and self-control, signifying that the heterosexual fantasy should not be sexual gratification, or at least not sexual gratification on the girl’s terms. Furthermore, the repetition of this scenario throughout the series demonstrates Bella’s contentment with her feminine role and her inability to challenge it. Though Bella’s character may be interpreted as an acknowledgement of female sexual desire, her confessions of behaving “badly” and references to Edward’s chivalrous “moral” conduct demonstrate the limits that the heterosexual fantasy continues to impose on female sexuality.

The fantasy of true love and the promise of a lasting “happy ever after” preclude a need for other significant unions, such as female friendships, that is specifically damaging to solidarity among girls. Throughout the *Twilight* series, Bella’s most important relationships are with the two men who are in love with her; she does not maintain any other strong friendships outside of

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<sup>170</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008), 25.

relationships with potential heterosexual partners. Bella's relationships with other girls generally have little meaning for her: "I knew from experience that once I got Jessica talking, I would be able to get away with a few mumbled responses at the appropriate moments. Only minimal interaction would be required."<sup>171</sup> As Siering pointedly criticizes, outside of her romantic relationship with Edward, and Jacob's romantic feelings for her, Bella has very little individual personality, or friendships that would suggest an inner meaning outside of her role in a heterosexual relationship:

Bella is a blank slate, with few thoughts or actions that don't center on Edward. Outside of him and occasional outings with werewolf Jacob, Bella doesn't do anything more than go to school, cook and clean for her dad, write to her mother, read and romanticize over Victorian literature and find fault with her clothing. She has no other interests, no goals, few friends: Bella does nothing that suggests she is a person in her own right. If Meyer hopes that readers see themselves as Bella, what is it she is suggesting to them about the significance of their own lives?<sup>172</sup>

This evaluation is particularly important when considering the way in which adolescent girls interpret the books in the series. As I mentioned in the last chapter, adolescent girls are most likely not reading chick-lit novels critically, rather, these series provide entertainment.

Therefore, readers may be susceptible to taking cues from the characters (whether consciously or not). Running parallel to the cruel ways that girls behave towards each other in series such as *Gossip Girl* or *The Clique*, Bella's obvious apathy towards female friendships is striking:

"Jessica babbled on and on about her dance plans – Lauren and Angela had asked the other boys

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<sup>171</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 102.

<sup>172</sup> Carmen D. Siering, "Taking a Bite Out of Twilight," *Ms. Arlington* 19, no. 2 (2009): 50, <http://proquest.umi.com>

and they were all going together – completely unaware of my inattention.”<sup>173</sup> Bella’s disinterest in the conversation is the direct result of her attention to Edward and preference for his attention; in this scene, she has been watching him from across the lunchroom.

While the significance of the loss of relationships with friends in pursuit of the true-love fantasy will be discussed more closely in the following chapter, Bella’s representation of an ideal, repressed feminine sexuality, and her definition of self according to her relationship with Edward is a significant message of postfeminist discourse. The conservative negativity associated with pre-marital sex and female sexuality demonstrated in the *Twilight* series has also been noted by McRobbie as the postfeminist “darkening” of the truly “sexually liberated” female: “if women emerge as subjects of sexual desire”—as opposed to its objects—“and if this is also understood, thanks to feminism, as a kind of entitlement, then men must beware.”<sup>174</sup> Thus, women who truly possess sexual subjectivity and liberation are threatening to men in the (post-September 11<sup>th</sup> and post second-wave feminist) re-stabilized patriarchal order. In this sense, postfeminist discipline produces and perpetuates patriarchal power, identifiable by the contemporary rebirth of a glitteringly ideal heterosexual fantasy, and the necessity of female sexual repression to attain it.

While the *Twilight* series realizes the true-love fantasy itself, other chick lit series portray female characters who actually pursue a much less tangible ideal relationship. Series such as *Gossip Girl* demonstrate the “normalcy” of longing for a perfect relationship. Blair, for example, has a very specific preconception of what her sexual role should be with her boyfriend Nate: “...[The sweater] looked so good on him that Blair wanted to scream and rip all her clothes off. But it seemed unattractive to scream in the heat of the moment—more femme fatale than girl-

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<sup>173</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 86.

<sup>174</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 26.

who-gets-boy—so Blair kept quiet, trying to remain fragile and baby-birdlike in Nate’s arms.”<sup>175</sup> Not only does this passage highlight Blair’s idyllic notions about love stories, but it also demonstrates her assumptions about the submissive, even infantilizing role, of the female in a romantic relationship. In other words, Blair recognizes that her actions must symbolize her passive femininity to be pleasing to a heterosexual partner within a sexual relationship. Adrienne Rich identifies the repressed sexual role of the female as stemming from a patriarchal fear that “women could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional—therefore economic—access to women *only* on women’s terms, otherwise being left on the periphery of the matrix.”<sup>176</sup> Rich’s assertions demonstrate the patriarchal incentive for the “fantasy” of the ideal heterosexual relationship that has been presented to women for centuries, but has been rejuvenated by postfeminist discourse.

The emphasis in chick lit on the fantastic-ideal heterosexual relationship additionally functions by masking the larger question of sex itself, for which girls often receive confusing and conflicting messages. Aapola, Gonic and Harris make an important distinction in girls’ understanding of sexuality:

It seems that girls’ and young women’s attempts to position themselves as active and knowledgeable sexual beings may also be exploited, if they are not aware of the possibly problematic power relations within sexual relationships, particularly within such sexual acts that are portrayed in porn videos and magazines. The question, then, is not only about the unequal power relations between men and women in heterosexual relationships, but

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<sup>175</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 9.

<sup>176</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), 15.

also about the type of sexual knowledges [*sic*] that are available to girls and young women.<sup>177</sup>

Thus, in order to attain the fantasy, girls must not only assume a submissive role within a heterosexual partnership, but also believe they should physically express their sexuality in an infantilizing way in order to be sexually desirable to men. In the *Gossip Girl* series, Blair is spotted leaving a waxing salon by gossip girl, and it is assumed that she is preparing to have sex with Nate: “Also, **B** getting a Brazilian wax at the **J. Sisters Salon**. Prepping herself for....”<sup>178</sup>

The ideology behind the Brazilian wax is that it heightens female sexual attractiveness.

However, we can interpret this as another form of postfeminist discipline that relates to the physical, and sexual, infantilizing of girls and women. Negra identifies waxing pubic hair as a recent cultural trend that originated in pornography and is now “predicated on a commitment of time, money, and physical discomfort for the sake of fashion that is axiomatically postfeminist.”

Announced on the “gossipgirl.net” website, Blair’s Brazilian wax appears as if a side-note to her greater quest to lose her virginity. Negra argues that waxing pubic hair “stylizes the female genitalia so as to appear prepubescent.”<sup>179</sup> Though only seventeen years old, Blair goes for a Brazilian wax so that she can appear prepubescent in order to be sexually attractive to Nate, reinforcing what Negra criticizes as “a misogynist belief that female genitalia are excessively complex and need to be simplified and made visible for the comfort and pleasure of a male sex partner.”<sup>180</sup> Blair’s repeated attempts at desirability, coupled with her own desire for a long-term,

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<sup>177</sup> Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity : Girlhood, Power, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 142.

<sup>178</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *You Know You Love Me* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2002), 2.

<sup>179</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 119.

<sup>180</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 119. Only two pages before the notation of Blair’s Brazilian wax, the epigraph to “You Know You Love Me” states: “I’m your Venus, I’m your fire. At your desire.” Interestingly, this has also been the campaign song for the Venus Razor commercials.

committed and consummated relationship with Nate, signify the postfeminist discipline that has influenced her approach towards womanhood. Paradoxically, postfeminist culture dictates that in romantic relationships, she must remain sexually passive and physically appear as a young girl.

### **B. Rethinking the Contradictory Messages of Female Sexuality in the United States**

Girls are exposed to the postfeminist promotion heterosexuality and sexual passivity, as well as another message in which “single” girls come to believe they can be empowered by their “sexiness” to men. Promiscuity is acceptable and even encouraged within the context of masculine hegemony, where female sexuality is unthreatening to the patriarchal order, among single girls or women who are seeking a heterosexual partner. As Ariel Levy remarks: “adolescent girls in particular—who are blitzed with cultural pressure to be hot, to *seem* sexy—have a very difficult time learning to recognize their own sexual desire, which would seem a critical component of *feeling* sexy.”<sup>181</sup> In this way, girls come to know a sexual “empowerment” that is not subjective at all, but rather continues to objectify them within a patriarchal paradigm.

McRobbie describes the European “phallic girl,” who “gives the impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts,” pointing out that despite the “empowering” premise of the phallic girl, “there is no critique of masculine hegemony.”<sup>182</sup> In the United States, however, postfeminism encompasses both a neo-liberal and post-September 11<sup>th</sup> conservative ideology. These two polarities of postfeminism at times provide conflicting messages about the way girls and women should behave within a phallogocentric culture. Postfeminist neo-liberalism encourages the “phallic girl,” while conservative ideology celebrates

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<sup>181</sup> Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 168.

<sup>182</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 83.

passive femininity as the ideal romantic, sexual role. Therefore, girls in the United States are “disciplined” by inconsistent messages: that of the “empowerment” of the sexy “phallic girl,” as well as that of the submissive romantic partner, within the broader discourse of postfeminism. In *The A-List*, Cammie represents this conflict within postfeminist culture:

Ben couldn't help but notice that Cammie still moved like walking sex. She was the hottest girl he'd ever known in his life—Cammie Sheppard could make the Iceman cometh. Even when he hadn't liked her, he'd loved having sex with her, after which he hadn't liked himself very much. But he was over her now. He wasn't about to let his life be ruled by the head below his waist.<sup>183</sup>

Cammie's overt sexuality ensures her desirability to men like Ben. However, having had sex with him makes her an *undesirable* girlfriend, as Ben begins to feel disdain for Cammie and prefer the less promiscuous, but equally beautiful, Anna. McRobbie points to this within postfeminist discourse: “Luminosity falls upon the girl who adopts the habits of masculinity,” such as Cammie, who dresses and behaves as if she relishes casual sex, “but without relinquishing her own desirability to men, indeed for whom such seeming masculinity enhances her desirability since she shows herself to have a similar sexual appetite to her male counterparts.” Cammie epitomizes the femininity McRobbie describes as necessary for the “phallic girl”:

Sam took in Cammie's fabulousness and felt depressed all over again. Cammie had bee-stung lips and deep-set honey colored eyes. Naturally slender, her legs went on forever. True, she'd purchased the 34C breasts and had her ordinary brown hair chemically

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<sup>183</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 73



transformed into that riot of fiery curls, but so what? The total package screamed goddess.<sup>184</sup>

Yet the inconsistency of these messages creates a nearly impossible role for girls to fulfill, as McRobbie also notes, “this is a thin tightrope to walk, it asks of girls that they perform masculinity, without relinquishing the femininity which makes them so desirable to men.”<sup>185</sup> In the US, the requirements for ideal femininity extend to virginity, making Anna a more suitable romantic partner, while Cammie is portrayed as the more desirable sexual partner.

Anna and Cammie represent the tension that results from sexual discipline for women in contemporary culture. Thus postfeminist “sexual empowerment” is another form of oppression, limiting girls’ agency over their own sexuality. Girls are disciplined by the choice (with the promise of a positive outcome) of being sexy, and therefore desirable to men, while at the same time being disciplined by the message that in romantic relationships, they should repress their true sexuality. As Levy writes, contemporary U.S. culture presents the following instructions for girls: “Girls have to be hot. Girls who aren’t hot probably need breast implants. Once a girl is hot, she should be as close to naked as possible all the time. Guys should like it. Don’t have sex.”<sup>186</sup>

In lieu of “true love,” as portrayed in the *Twilight* series, postfeminist discourse informs girls that they may pursue “sexual empowerment.” As mentioned in the previous section, this entails girls becoming more sexually desirable to boys, and often is founded in pornographic or misogynistic beliefs about female sexuality. Girls kissing girls, for example, is attractive to men when performed for heterosexual male pleasure. As McRobbie writes, “a version of lesbian

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<sup>184</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 69

<sup>185</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 83-83.

<sup>186</sup> Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 158.

desire can be accommodated within this space of female phallicism, as long as it remains visually coded to conform to the requirements of the fashion and beauty system which, as has already been demonstrated, sits in judgment, substitutes for hegemonic masculinity and presides over the management of the capacity, in this case sexual capacity, with which young women are endowed.”<sup>187</sup> The accommodation of this “version of lesbian desire” is evident in the scene of the kiss between Blair and Serena in *Gossip Girl*:

Back in tenth grade, Serena and Blair and her friends had spent many a night in Chuck Bass’s suite, drinking and dancing, watching movies and ordering room service, taking hot tubs [*sic*] . . . Once, during a very drunken night at the end of tenth grade, Serena and Blair were soaking in the hot tub, and Blair had kissed Serena full on the lips. Serena hadn’t seemed to remember it the next morning, but Blair never forgot it. Even though it was just an impulse move that didn’t mean anything, thinking about that kiss always made her feel hot and itchy and uncomfortable.<sup>188</sup>

The analysis of this scene I provided in the previous chapter reveals Blair’s fetishized desire for pinnacle beauty. However, an interpretation of this scene in terms of sexuality provides a slightly different reading, though it still does not reveal homoeroticism. Rather, the kiss between Blair and Serena, who are both beautiful and decidedly heterosexual, represents the limitations on girls’ sexuality. Blair kisses Serena impulsively, but when she reflects about it, she feels “hot and itchy and uncomfortable.” This indicates the negative and inappropriate nature ascribed to desire between girls, outside of what is approved within a pornographic, heterosexual context.

In *Gossip Girl*, Vanessa films an artistic video of Nate and Jenny engaging in sexual acts in Central Park: “how often did you see a couple rolling around inside the same overcoat in the

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<sup>187</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 84.

<sup>188</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 126.

middle of a frozen pond, in the middle of the busiest city in the world? . . . It was pure poetry, raw and beautiful.”<sup>189</sup> Yet, Vanessa’s peers respond negatively to the film when her sister accidentally leaks it online: “Vanessa glared at her sister with her hands clenched so tightly, her nails were making welts in her palms. *Now* she knew why she’d received fifteen e-mails this morning accusing her of being a lesbian pornographer-Peeping Tom slut.”<sup>190</sup> Though it is apparent that Vanessa certainly does not intend to behave like a “Peeping Tom slut,” her documentary threatens patriarchal control over sexuality, and so she is admonished within a postfeminist context for acting unrestrictedly. Just as Foucault writes that “the perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes,” Vanessa is differentiated and excluded so that she will become “normalized.”<sup>191</sup> This can then be read as a subtle warning of the boundaries of “normal” to adolescent girl readers. Vanessa’s peers, furthermore, accuse her of perversion, as a “lesbian pornographer,” which seems to conflict with contemporary culture’s celebration of pornography—until we rethink pornography as meant to be produced, controlled and enjoyed by men. Negra identifies postfeminism’s ability to associate “pornography with an exclusive definition of potent and attractive female sexuality . . . [;] male sexuality is dominantly displayed while female sexuality is ever more a quotation of itself.”<sup>192</sup> Therefore, while male production of pornography is acceptable, as a female, Vanessa’s removal from sexual objectification is negatively received; because of her control over the portrayal of the couple (“she would have to get creative with editing”), she is described in vulgar, othering terms as a

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<sup>189</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *All I Want Is Everything* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 104.

<sup>190</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *All I Want Is Everything* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 132.

<sup>191</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 182-183.

<sup>192</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 99.

“lesbian pornographer.” Vanessa’s anger and embarrassment provide another example of the way in which postfeminist discipline informs girls of the negative outcomes of their “choices.”

### C. Compulsory Heterosexuality: Rejecting the Queer

Foucault has described power as “exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free.”<sup>193</sup> In this fashion, postfeminism presents girls and women with “liberating” choices for their own self-improvement. These choices, however, simultaneously and effectively restrict girls’ options and actions within an inherently patriarchal, sexual, paradigm. Perhaps the largest problem within chick-lit fiction, and by extension with the postfeminist discourse of which it is a part, is compulsory heterosexuality. This is a form of oppression that may be more complicated than our understanding of power through Foucault’s concept has thus far allowed, in that it functions by exclusion. Foucault traces the forbidden nature of lesbianism back to the second century AD, using Artemidorus’ *The Interpretation of Dreams* (“a practical work dealing with everyday life, not a work of moral reflection or prescription”) as a general reference: “[S]exual relations between women . . . appear in the category of ‘unnatural’ acts . . . The reason for this is no doubt in the form of intercourse Artemidorus had in mind, which is penetration. By some artificial means or other, a woman contrives to usurp the role of the man, wrongfully takes his position, and possesses another woman.”<sup>194</sup> Today, lesbianism is treated as “taboo” and ominous within both neo-liberal and conservative postfeminist discourse in much the same way. As Sarah Gamble points out, implicitly heterosexist in orientation, “postfeminism commonly seeks to develop an agenda which can find a place for men, as lovers, husbands and fathers as

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<sup>193</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 221.

<sup>194</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume Three* (New York: Random House, 1986), 25.

well as friends.”<sup>195</sup> Lesbianism threatens this order by asserting a sexuality for which patriarchal authority is irrelevant, unnecessary, and unwelcome. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posited that “gender is shaped by gender and power relations.”<sup>196</sup> Lesbianism is not simply about sexual desire; rather, it is a testament that women can thrive without men and therefore destabilizing to patriarchal power that is fueled by gender norms. The *A-List*, and *Gossip Girl* series promote compulsory heterosexuality by “othering” homosexual relationships, while *Twilight*, *The It Girl* and *The Clique* do not acknowledge true lesbianism at all. Thus, in chick-lit fiction, “the hegemony of heterosexuality” is enforced in two distinguishable ways: first, by the enforcement of a heteronormative reality; second, by including instances of “true” homosexual desire, only insofar as the desire is effectively subverted.

The vampires of the *Twilight* series, the Cullen family, are “good” vampires in that they are able to resist the temptation of human blood. As James Blasingame writes in a review of the series, “desire for human blood is not absent from the emotions and hungers of these ‘good’ vampires, but it is solidly under control.”<sup>197</sup> While the nature of the vampire allows for its interpretation as a queer figure, in the *Twilight* series, the Cullen vampires are the quintessentially straight representation of traditional heteronormative family values. J.M. Tyree makes the distinction between the straight and queer representations of vampires in a discussion of other modern-day media representations of the vampire:

The obvious and transgressive sexuality involved in the vampire subgenre has a tricky political side. Classically, being under the spell of a vampire involves effacement by

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<sup>195</sup> Sarah Gamble, “Postfeminism,” in *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 2000),

<sup>196</sup> Sophia Phoca, “Feminism and Gender” in *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 2000), 63.

<sup>197</sup> James Blasingame, “Interview with Stephenie Meyer,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 49, no. 7 (2006): 631, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40017638>.

seduction into an exploitative relationship between an omnisexual seducer and a parade of slave lovers—male and female—who are viewed as both interchangeable parts and as natural resources or blood banks... The way a victim gets ‘unclean’ from a vampire bite involves illicit intimacy, and these pictures run the gamut of marginalized sex acts contained in the political unconscious: premarital hook-ups, gay and bisexual relationships, adultery, cheating, polygamy, S&M, the sexuality of children, and the hovering specter of quasi willing sexual violence.<sup>198</sup>

The *Twilight* series, however, effectively eliminates the possibility of homoeroticism or any other transgressive sexuality by pairing off “abstinent” vampires in partnerships, while also containing them as part of one family unit. Edward explains the heterosexual coupling of the members of his family, and the permanent marital unions, to Bella:

Carlisle brought Rosalie to our family next. I didn’t realize till much later that he was hoping she would be to me what Esme was to him... But she was never more than a sister. It was only two years later that she found Emmett... And they’ve been together ever since. Sometimes they live separately from us, as a married couple.<sup>199</sup>

The coupling in *Twilight* is always heterosexual, and even the vampires who “feed” off of humans often choose victims of the opposite sex.

In *Gossip Girl*, unlike the validated kiss between Serena and Blair, lesbianism is “othered” through the character Elise, who is described as having “problems”: “like her completely flat chest and the podge [*sic*]that padded her hip bones and lower back like a second butt” (95). Not only is Elise depicted as physically unattractive, but she is also portrayed as inappropriate:

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<sup>198</sup> J.M. Tyree, “Warm-Blooded: True Blood and Let the Right One In,” *Film Quarterly* 63 (2009): 31, accessed January 2, 2011, doi: 10.1525.

<sup>199</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 289.

‘Will you paint me?’ [Elise] asked... Then she pulled her pink Gap turtleneck over her head, taking her pull-on crop-top bra with it. When Jenny returned with a clean white canvas and her palette of oils, Elise was sprawled out on the couch, her wiry blonde hair dusting her freckled shoulders, completely naked.<sup>200</sup>

In this installment of the *Gossip Girl* series, lesbianism is ridiculed—and rendered unappealing. While most of the characters, such as Blair, Serena, and even Jenny are described as beautiful, Elise is described as overweight and unattractive. The scene in which she asks Jenny to paint her, and then takes all of her clothes off, is a parody of a romantic scene from the popular movie *Titanic*, where a heterosexual male paints his heterosexual female partner’s nude portrait. In this scene, however, Jenny simply believes Elise is acting strange. In this way, lesbian desire is also presented in heterosexual terms, indicating an inability to imagine lesbian desire on its own terms.

McRobbie elucidates the position of the “real” lesbian in postfeminist culture in comparison to the “phallic girl”:

The seeming freedom of the phallic girl, her openness to sexual adventure, is also, in fact, a means of re-constituting and shoring up divisions between heterosexual and lesbian young women, in the light of the perceived threat that such boundaries might also come tumbling down. The ‘real lesbian’ is reviled in much the same way as the repudiated feminist. The rigorous requirements of the commercial domain addressed to young women are radically uninhabitable by young lesbian women...<sup>201</sup>

Jenny is normal because she is “straight,” and views Elise only as a friend. When Elise asks Jenny to “practice” kissing, her behavior has moved beyond experimentation, and so is portrayed

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<sup>200</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Because I'm Worth It* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 132.

<sup>201</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 86.

unappealing and unromantic: “Elise leaned forward and put her hand on Jenny’s arm. Then she closed her eyes and Jenny closed hers, too. Elise pressed her lips against Jenny’s tightly clenched mouth. It wasn’t a kiss exactly—it was too *dry*. It felt more like a nudge or something.”<sup>202</sup> Just as Blair’s struggle with Bulimia is satirized, Elise’s feelings are presented satirically too: her behavior towards Jenny is incongruous, and the narration from Jenny’s point of view conveys a lack of “true” intimacy or reciprocal romantic feelings: “All [Jenny] had was a single bed that she was definitely not sharing with Elise. Not when Elise was so . . . *horny* and unpredictable.”<sup>203</sup> Elise’s “horniness” is part of the satire, and the “nudge” she shares with Jenny is meant to be repulsive to readers. Elise’s lesbian sexuality then is “othered” as the obvious cause of her strangeness.

Lesbianism is also presented in *Girls On Film*, the second novel of *The A-List* series. Sam develops an attraction for Anna, and throughout the novel contemplates kissing her: “. . .she had become so obsessed with Anna’s mouth that it had taken all her concentration not to stare at it. She wasn’t thinking about the movie she was about to shoot. She wasn’t thinking about anything except Anna’s lips.”<sup>204</sup> Yet, Sam’s therapist advises her that “feeling something and acting on it are two different things.”<sup>205</sup> Heterosexuality is treated as the norm, indicating that Sam should be able to renounce her feelings. The portrayal of Sam’s struggle in the series, rather than sympathetic, depicts lesbianism as a choice with a negative outcome. Adrienne Rich writes:

When we look hard and clearly at the extent and elaboration of measures designed to keep women within a male sexual purlieu, it becomes an inescapable question whether the issue

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<sup>202</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Because I’m Worth It* (New York: Little Brown, and Company, 2003), 146.

<sup>203</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Because I’m Worth It* (New York: Little Brown, and Company, 2003), 165.

<sup>204</sup> Zoey Dean, *Girls on film: An A-List Novel* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 171.

<sup>205</sup> Zoey Dean, *Girls on film: An A-List Novel* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 175.



we have to address as feminists is, not simply ‘gender inequality,’ nor the domination of culture by males, nor mere ‘taboos against homosexuality,’ but the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access. One of many means of enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentarily to view from time to time only to become submerged again.<sup>206</sup>

Post-feminist culture successfully “submerges” lesbianism by “othering” characters with lesbian feelings, as in *Gossip Girl*, as well as portraying characters who have lesbian feelings, but ultimately make the “right” choice against them, as in *The A-List*. By the end of the novel, despite Sam’s growing attraction to Anna, she determines that she can only be Anna’s friend: “Sam pulled her hand away. She could be Anna’s friend, maybe. If they just didn’t touch. No matter what her own body was telling her to do.”<sup>207</sup> Sam’s feelings are humorously presented, and conveyed almost as if independent from her personality. There, Sam quickly and effortlessly rejects them. At the conclusion of the book, Sam has created a happy ending—the heterosexual fantasy—for Anna, by calling Ben, with whom Anna is in love, as readers are well aware, and providing him with Anna’s address at a hotel. Ben and Anna are then able to sexually consummate their relationship: “Anna was sure of nothing, least of all the choice she was about to make. But as [Ben] carried her into the suite and kicked the door shut behind them, she didn’t worry about who she was or who she should be or what anyone would think...”<sup>208</sup> In this way, Sam makes the “positive” decision to be straight, and in bringing Anna and Ben together, validates their heterosexual romantic relationship. This scene also suggests that Sam’s homosexual feelings towards Anna were futile, or even wrong, while Anna’s decision to have

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<sup>206</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), 19.

<sup>207</sup> Zoey Dean, *Girls on film: An A-List Novel* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 235.

<sup>208</sup> Zoey Dean, *Girls on film: An A-List Novel* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 250.

sex with Ben confirms heterosexuality as the normative and superior sexuality. Kathleen Holland Bollerud, Susan Boynton Christopherson, and Emily Schultz Frank write that “girls refuse to separate feelings of love from their consideration of the rightness or wrongness of sex.”<sup>209</sup> In the context of chick-lit fiction, Sam’s feelings are “wrong” since they convey only lust as she contemplates kissing Anna. The scene between Ben and Anna, however, rewards Sam’s decision as the “correct” one, and encourages the fantasy of “true love” by romanticizing and affirming the “rightness” of sex between heterosexual partners.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed the way that girls are essentially controlled by postfeminist discipline. As May explains, power works by influence, and “actions can constrain other actions without anybody’s possessing the power of that constraint”; thus, the nature of postfeminist power is through observation of the discourse, discipline within the discourse, and self-examination that impels girls to make choices based on perceived outcomes.<sup>210</sup> Melissa A. Milkie writes that “a central way women's disadvantage is created and maintained is through cultural beliefs and stereotypes that provide narrower, more distorted, or more harmful images about women than about men. These ideas about what women should do, be like, or look like are powerful yet subtle vehicles through which women are controlled.”<sup>211</sup> The implicitly patriarchal nature of postfeminist discourse cannot be separated from the way in which girls are informed within contemporary society. However, criticism solely of patriarchal oppression can easily be refuted by the postfeminist position that girls are choosing, or imposing upon themselves, a

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<sup>209</sup> Kathleen Holland Bollerud, Susan Boynton Christopherson, and Emily Schultz Frank, “Girls’ Sexual Choices: Looking for What is Right,” in *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School*, eds. Carol Gilligan, Nona Lyons and Trudy J. Hanmer (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 275.

<sup>210</sup> Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 82-83.

<sup>211</sup> Melissa A. Milkie, “Contested Images of Femininity: An Analysis of Cultural Gatekeepers’ Struggles with the ‘Real Girl’ Critique,” *Gender and Society* 16, no. 6 (2002): 839, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3081937> .

feminine role of ideal physical appearance and repressed sexuality. As Tasker and Negra write, “many postfeminist texts combine a deep uncertainty about existing options for women with an idealized, essentialized femininity that symbolically evades or transcends institutional and social problem spots.”<sup>212</sup> Foucault’s concept of discipline is useful in demonstrating that the physical ideal and fantasy of heterosexuality are both forms of power that construct girls’ behaviors: “[Discipline] differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected or as an optimum towards which one must move.”<sup>213</sup> Characters “othered” because they do not fit the postfeminist role of physical “beauty” and heterosexuality are included within chick-lit series to mark the boundary of the abnormal. Girls who observe these characters, and the way they interact with, or are alienated by, the other characters in each series can then qualify their own behavior in terms of its “normality,” correcting deviations in accordance with the paradigm they know. Yet, as girls engage in “normalized” actions prescribed within contemporary discipline, they are at the same time forfeiting their own subjective power in acting out obedience. The purpose of this chapter, and the most important information to gain from drawing on Foucault’s perspective is, as May writes, “how things are is not how they must be. By understanding our history we can intervene upon it.”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds. *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular*, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>213</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 182-183.

<sup>214</sup> Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 21.

### Chapter Three: Dissociating Postfeminism

*Jenny imagined boys drooling over Tinsley's smooth tanned shoulders and her wild violet eyes and girls hating her for the same reasons. Jenny would have hated her too if she didn't feel simultaneously scared and infatuated by her.*

-Notorious: An It Girl Novel

*Not every girl is miserable. There are actually genuinely happy girls. People look up to them. The cliques cut them a lot of slack. I don't come across them very often, but they do exist.*

-Rosalind Wiseman

The first two chapters of this thesis demonstrated that chick-lit fiction should be critically examined as an important literary product of postfeminist discourse. In this chapter I propose another approach to this argument: the portrayal of characters' emotions, thoughts and behaviors within chick-lit series provide a reflection of girls' experiences and struggles within contemporary postfeminist culture. Toward the end of the second-wave feminist movement, Julia Kristeva wrote that women's "desire for affirmation" was beginning to manifest itself in literature:

Is it because, faced with social norms, literature reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth itself about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe? Because it redoubles the social contract by exposing the unsaid, the uncanny? And because it makes a game, a space of fantasy and pleasure, out of the abstract and frustrating order of social signs, the words of everyday communication?<sup>215</sup>

While in the previous chapter, I described the ways chick-lit fiction acts as a form of postfeminist discipline, I will now demonstrate how chick-lit fiction is also resistant to it. As Kristeva indicates, literature holds the capacity to reveal a "secret and unconscious universe." This passage illustrates why chick-lit fiction, written for girls by women, deserves further

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<sup>215</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in *Essential Papers on The Psychology of Women*, ed. Claudia Zanardi (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 392.

attention for “exposing the unsaid,” or the “repressed.” In this chapter, I explore this aspect of chick lit, revisiting the series for features not organized by social prescriptions.

Beyond securing a profit for publishing companies, and beyond reinforcing postfeminist objectives, chick-lit fiction also invokes characters to whom adolescent readers relate, and with whom they maintain a relationship for as long as they continue to read the series. I argue that chick-lit series can be rethought as reflections of adolescent girls’ experiences. The “first-person narration, an adolescent protagonist, and depictions of romance and sexuality,” that Beth Younger identifies as characterizing chick lit mirror adolescent girls’ struggles, and common themes of discontent, within postfeminist culture.<sup>216</sup> As Joanna Webb Johnson points out, “[chick lit] stresses issues relevant to coming of age. The girl characters are typically in a borderland between childhood and adulthood, and the novels show how to move through this difficult transition.”<sup>217</sup> Particularly, chick-lit characters provide insight into girls’ experience of loss as they become aware of possessing an external identity that differs from their internal identity—an identity that contemporary culture encourages them to forfeit. Using the term “dissociation,” I will demonstrate the loss of cohesive identity represented in chick lit by the division of a female character’s external actions and relationships from her internal thoughts and emotions. This division similarly reveals the struggle for subjectivity against a largely objectifying postfeminist culture.

The significance of identity formation in adolescence must not be understated. As Erik Erikson explains:

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<sup>216</sup> Beth Younger, *Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 110.

<sup>217</sup> Joanna Webb Johnson, “Chick Lit Jr: More Than Glitz and Glamour for Teens and Tweens,” in *Chick-Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, eds. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 142.

In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. . . . The process has its normative crisis in adolescence, and is in many ways determined by what went before and determines much that follows.<sup>218</sup>

Erikson's description of identity formation in the late 1960's provided the basis for subsequent studies of adolescent development, and this view of adolescent development is integral to my analysis of adolescent girls. Carol Gilligan theorized that girls come up against a "wall of patriarchy" in adolescence, in which dissociation begins to function on a deeper level, as girls' inner realities become unconscious and they internalize what once was their external reality. In this way, the rite of passage for girls developing in American culture is more than a loss of subjectivity; it appears as an acquirement of a new—socially constructed—form of subjectivity. Michel Foucault's notion of power can be applied to this "new form" of subjectivity "that ties the individual to himself and submits him to others."<sup>219</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, however, I will discuss dissociation as it occurs on a conscious level. The point of view of the characters in each chick-lit series provides insight to the characters' internal realities as well as their external behaviors, thus reflecting this "conscious dissociation."

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<sup>218</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 22-23.

<sup>219</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 331

Foucault additionally uses the term “dissociation” to explain discipline as a force that “dissociates power from the body.”<sup>220</sup> In one sense, discipline enables an individual by increasing her “aptitude” for obedience and internalization of the norm. At the same time, however, discipline is psychologically crippling, and reverses “the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection.”<sup>221</sup> In this way, the concept of discipline discussed in the previous chapter complements Gilligan’s notion that dissociation is the result of development within a patriarchal order; she writes that for adolescent girls, dissociation is “not only essential, but also adaptive.”<sup>222</sup> Gilligan’s and Foucault’s arguments concerning both the individual and larger society resonate today; as Foucault insists, “the struggle against the forms of subjection—against the submission of subjectivity—is becoming more and more important, even though the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared.”<sup>223</sup> Using this statement, I argue that chick-lit fiction represents not only the subjecting influences of postfeminist and post-September 11<sup>th</sup> doctrine, as I have demonstrated in chapters one and two, but also the “struggles against domination” that appear as girls recognize the “splitting” of their internal and external realities. In this way, we can also understand patriarchal power as implicit discipline, and therefore examine it psychologically, rather than by limiting our assessment to the physical oppressions and constraints by which it manifests itself.

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<sup>220</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 331

<sup>221</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 138.

<sup>222</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (Maryland: Vintage, 1995), 245.

<sup>223</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 332

## I. Internal/External Divide

Erikson identified adolescence as the period of cohesive identity formation: “For, indeed, in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without identity.”<sup>224</sup> Yet Gilligan’s concept of dissociation, or a division of identity in female adolescence, highlights the fact that adolescent girls may be hurt during the process of identity formation—and the inability to form a consistent, unified identity—in contemporary culture. Angela McRobbie’s notion of “unhealthy femininity,” or the dissatisfaction among adolescent girls that is often and popularly labeled “common,” has been explored by Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, who have theorized that female discontent, rather than inherently feminine, develops in adolescence as a reaction to difficult identity formation. In a five-year longitudinal study of girls ranging in ages from six to sixteen, Brown and Gilligan found that as a young girl moves from pre-adolescence, when she feels “remarkably sure-footed in the human world,” to adolescence, she succumbs to “dissociation”: a conscious separation of herself into an “inner” reality and “outer” reality. They further write that in this sense, a young girl is “beginning to not know what [she] know[s], beginning to lose relationship [*sic*], beginning not to care about the honesty in relationship which [internally she] cared about passionately.”<sup>225</sup> The susceptibility of adolescent girls to this “division between inner and outer worlds,” as pointed out by Gilligan, occurs when girls become “psychologically attuned to the societal and cultural worlds in which they [are] living.”<sup>226</sup> In other words, as girls move through adolescence, they learn to separate their internal reality, which may not be socially “acceptable,” from their external reality, which allows them to

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<sup>224</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 130.

<sup>225</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 243-244.

<sup>226</sup> Carol Gilligan, “The Centrality of Relationship in Human Development: A Puzzle, Some Evidence, and a Theory,” in *Development and Vulnerability in Close Relationships*, ed. Gil G. Noam and Kurt W. Fischer (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 245.



participate “normally” in society. The dissatisfaction that is the outcome of girls’ who assume an inauthentic identity confirms McRobbie’s notion of a pattern of “unhealthy femininity.”

The dissociative division of adolescent girls between internal and external worlds, as highlighted by Gilligan, is reflected in *Twilight*, through Bella’s first-person narration: “It was nice to be alone, not to have to smile and look pleased; a relief to stare dejectedly out the window at the sheeting rain and let just a few tears escape.”<sup>227</sup> Though Bella is aware of her unhappiness, she is also conscious of *having* to assume a façade of contentment and pleasure around others. The question “Who should I be?” that I presented in the introduction to this thesis can be answered according to Bella’s awareness of her external identity, because that is what she reveals to others. Bella’s relief about not having “to smile and look pleased” demonstrates not only the division between internal reality and external behavior, but also girls’ awareness that they must maintain this divide.

Jean Baker Miller describes the general view among psychologists, such as Clara Thompson and Sigmund Freud, that “for boys, adolescence was seen as a period of opening up, but for girls it is a time for shutting down.”<sup>228</sup> This “shutting down” is evident in the splitting of identity and loss of subjectivity girls experience as they begin to behave according to an external reality. When studying adolescent girls, Marjorie Harness Goodwin found that “girls spend inordinate amounts of time in the activity of glossing and assessing the behavior of others, defining local notions of what it is to be ‘rude,’ ‘geeky,’ ‘cool,’ ‘trendy,’ ‘popular,’ etc., and evaluating what it means to act inappropriately.”<sup>229</sup> Girls compare their external realities to these evaluations, shutting down their “internal reality” in the process. In *The Clique* series, Claire is a

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<sup>227</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 9.

<sup>228</sup> John Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 445.

<sup>229</sup> Marjorie Harness Goodwin, *The Hidden Life of Girls: Games of Stance, Status, and Exclusion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 18.

new student at OCD Middle School, and finds that in order to fit in, she must dissociate her authentic self and create an external self in order to gain an idealized relationship with the “popular” girls: “At school she was the mysterious outsider who, against all odds, had been accepted into the Pretty Committee. And that made her special.”<sup>230</sup> Claire must carefully filter what she says, and how she says it, however, to maintain acceptance by the “Pretty Committee.” This external identity is difficult for Claire, as it requires silencing her internal voice and repressing her internal identity during her interactions with the other girls:

Claire stiffened, hating herself for saying the wrong thing—*again* . . . ‘That was a joke, right?’ Massie looked deep into Claire’s eyes, silently urging her to take it all back. ‘You don’t really want to be back at OCD, do you?’ ‘Of course not.’ [Claire] forced a huge smile. ‘This...’ She opened her arms and turned to face the mall. ‘...is a total fantasy!’ Claire silently thanked her parents for giving her three years of community theater acting lessons.<sup>231</sup>

The internal-external divide represented by Claire’s suppression of her internal identity (“stiffening” anxiously, “forcing” a huge smile) in order to participate in an “appropriate” external reality, is the result of trying to fit in. The difficulty of generating the “normal” external identity has been identified by Gilligan when personally interviewing adolescent girls: “listening to girls speak of themselves, their relationships, their responses to conflicts and their construction of conflicts, their hopes and their fears, I often had the sense that they were living in what they

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<sup>230</sup> Lisi Harrison, *Dial L for Loser* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2006), 4.

<sup>231</sup> Lisi Harrison, *Dial L for Loser* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2006), 4.

knew to be a fictional world, and living in that world as if it were real.”<sup>232</sup> Claire’s fictional world, belonging to the “Pretty Committee,” is facilitated by her external identity.

Goodwin has utilized ethnographic research techniques to study adolescent girl groups, specifically using conversational analysis in order to posit that identity among girls is “an achieved phenomenon.”<sup>233</sup> Claire uses conversation to create an external identity that allows her to “fit in” with the group. As Brown and Gilligan write, “the hallmark of [the loss of internal voice and genuine relationship] in women’s lives and also in men’s is the move from authentic into idealized relationships.”<sup>234</sup> Fully aware that she is “faking,” Claire sacrifices her internal identity in order to gain an idealized relationship with the popular girls of the clique. Thus dissociation causes her to lose the potential for meaningful relationship: “No matter how much fun the girls had together, she would wake up the next morning and need to impress them all over again.”<sup>235</sup> Her dissatisfaction is evident in her anxiety about the status of her relationship with the other girls: “[Claire] wanted to hold on to this false sense of security for as long as possible. Even if she was having trouble sleeping at night, even if her stomach hurt.”<sup>236</sup> Claire struggles repeatedly to become more like the “popular” girls, and she is fully aware that her inclusion in the group is tenuous. As Debold, Wilson, and Malave write, girls such as Claire “give up relationship—with themselves and their own knowledge, desires, and needs—to secure

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<sup>232</sup> Carol Gilligan, “The Centrality of Relationship in Human Development: A Puzzle, Some Evidence, and a Theory,” in *Development and Vulnerability in Close Relationships*, ed. Gil G. Noam and Kurt W. Fischer (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 241.

<sup>233</sup> Marjorie Harness Goodwin, *The Hidden Life of Girls: Games of Stance, Status, and Exclusion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers), 2006, 13.

<sup>234</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 5.

<sup>235</sup> Lisi Harrison, *Dial L for Loser* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2006), 2-3.

<sup>236</sup> Lisi Harrison, *The Clique* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 168.

relationships as prescribed in patriarchal culture.”<sup>237</sup> Accordingly, Claire continues to seek acceptance by engaging in specific conforming behaviors in order to belong.

In contrast to Claire’s externalized—or new form of—subjectivity, there is a presence in chick-lit fiction of female characters who sustain their individual identities, and so withhold power from the postfeminist power-knowledge structure. Rejecting the ideal as well as commoditization, these characters are often socially “othered” in chick-lit fiction by the characters who, in acting out their external realities, alienate them. In *Gossip Girl*, for example, Vanessa is a gifted aspiring filmmaker, who is “othered” for her nonconformist appearance and lack of concern for, and even outright rejection of, an external identity:

Vanessa was an anomaly at Constance, the only girl in the school who had a nearly shaved head, wore black turtlenecks every day, read Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* over and over like it was the Bible, listened to Belle and Sebastian, and drank unsweetened black tea. She had no friends at all at Constance, and lived in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, with her twenty-two-year old sister, Ruby.... Vanessa hated [the school], but she never said anything to her parents. There were only eight months left until graduation. Eight more months and she would finally escape downtown to NYU.<sup>238</sup>

Vanessa does not indulge in an external reality that will subject her to dissociation and dissatisfaction with her internal self. She is indifferent to fashion, and even money, focusing rather on her passions, such as art, filmmaking, and attending New York University after high school. Vanessa’s self-consistency even allows her to turn down an opportunity for a highly paid position with a famous male filmmaker who takes an interest in her talent. Instead, she maintains her own goals and individuality:

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<sup>237</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson, and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 12.

<sup>238</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 54.

Vanessa smiled her half-amused, half-pissed-off Mona Lisa smile. As flattered as she was that Ken had asked her to work with him, she had no intention of becoming a mini-Mogul. She wanted to develop her *own* voice and her *own* career, not put all her energy into someone else's work, however brilliant. She shook her closely shaved dark head. "I'm sorry."<sup>239</sup>

The genuine self-contentment resulting from a coherent identity in characters such as Vanessa demonstrates that chick-lit series reflect a variety of girls' experiences, rather than attempting to condition girls into specific behavior. Vanessa is an encouraging model, then, because though she rejects pinnacle beauty and commoditization, her attitude is still one of expectations: She looks to a future at NYU and her own passion for film-making as a reprieve from the pressure she feels from the other girls who are submitting to dissociative behaviors.

## **II. Dissociating Friendships: Competition and Jealousy**

Erikson described adolescence as a time of defining identity, noting however, that this definition "can be sought by destructive means. Young people can become remarkably clannish, intolerant, and cruel in their exclusion of others who are 'different,' in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and gifts, and often in entirely petty aspects of dress and gesture arbitrarily selected as the signs of an in-grouper or out-grouper."<sup>240</sup> Furthermore, postfeminist discourse fosters an environment in which women and girls compete to conform to a very specific, ideal, female model. The subsequent competition that occurs among adolescent girls, which leads to the loss of meaningful relationships, is reproduced in chick-lit, revealing not only that superficial relationships are normalized, but also, significantly, that girls are aware of and unhappy with the status of these relationships.

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<sup>239</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Because I'm Worth It* (New York: Little Brown, and Company, 2003), 206.

<sup>240</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 32.

While Erikson explains that “intolerance” between adolescent peers may at times be the result of their “defense against a sense of identity loss,” for girls it appears that this behavior is more than just a defense, rather, it is a result of an incoherent identity. Gilligan writes that adolescent girls must negotiate between a desire to “yield to others’ perceptions” and to recognize that “the exclusion of the self, like the exclusion of others, renders relationships lifeless by dissolving the fabric of connection.”<sup>241</sup> In the process of conforming, girls dissociate their external realities from their internal realities, engaging in competitive external relationships that facilitate their pursuit of the ideal. In *The Clique*, Claire demonstrates the difficulty of finding and maintaining friendships. For example, at lunch she must carefully select the table of students to sit with to avoid being labeled undesirably:

Even though Claire had zero appetite, she slid an orange plastic tray along the silver rails in front of the food displays. It was the only way she could blend in while she evaluated the lunchtime scene. She passed sushi platters, tofu steaks, crudités, and a colorful “design your own salad” section, but she didn’t care about any of it. She was too busy checking out the other girls. She didn’t have to have grown up in Westchester to know that the table where she chose to sit in the next few minutes would brand her for life.<sup>242</sup>

Claire’s experience reflects a new type of starvation experienced by girls: rather than worrying about her lunch, Claire is concerned with where she will sit. Her internal thoughts are particularly important to notice because she reflects the social reality of status among girls. As Lyn Mikel Brown explicates, girls feel “an intense desire to be recognized, to be heard,” but also

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<sup>241</sup> Carol Gilligan, “Remapping The Moral Domain: New Images of Self in Relationship,” in *Mapping the Moral Domain: A Contribution of Women's Thinking to Psychological Theory and Education* eds. Carol Gilligan, Janie Victoria Ward, and Jill McClean Taylor (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), 493.

<sup>242</sup> Lisi Harrison, *The Clique* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 69.

“to fit in.”<sup>243</sup> Girls are restricted, however, by knowing “what happens when they speak their minds, take up too much space, break away from what others expect of girls and women.”<sup>244</sup>

Belonging to a group, or clique, provides external relief from the danger of isolation, but in belonging, a girl forfeits her individuality and chooses to stifle her internal reality. Gilligan describes this as “paradoxically giving up relationship for the sake of having relationship.”<sup>245</sup>

This paradox, reappearing throughout chick-lit series, reflects the widespread discontent among girls who face the problem of fitting in, which ultimately prevents their simultaneous efforts to find relationships that are meaningful.

Over half a century ago, Betty Friedan wrote that for women, a balance between performing the ideal—the role of the housewife—and retaining individuality, was impossible:

I never knew a woman, when I was growing up, who used her mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved, and had children... Public images that defy reason and have very little to do with women themselves have had the power to shape too much of their lives. These images would not have such power, if women were not suffering a crisis of identity.<sup>246</sup>

Currently, a similar crisis of identity is appearing in chick-lit fiction. The resulting dissolution of meaningful relationships between adolescent girls in favor of an external reality is also a common theme in each series. Giving up internal identity affects relationship by reducing girls’ ability to establish their end of a meaningful relationship, and enhances distrust between girls

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<sup>243</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown, *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 86.

<sup>244</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown, *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 86.

<sup>245</sup> Carol Gilligan, “The Centrality of Relationship in Human Development: A Puzzle, Some Evidence, and a Theory,” in *Development and Vulnerability in Close Relationships*, ed. Gil G. Noam and Kurt W. Fischer (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 245.

<sup>246</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1983), 75.

who recognize that others may be forfeiting their internal identity as well. The outcome is girls who have lost the ability to have a relationship at all.

While girls' actions, produced by postfeminist discipline, do not necessarily reflect their internal identities, they nevertheless continue to attempt to behave within a prescribed role: the pinnacle female. Because an ideal cannot be completely achieved, this role is merely a constantly repeated performance. Commoditization, or the way girls believe they may attain pinnacle beauty, often results in competition over who can buy—and then appear—the best, as is evidenced among friends in chick-lit series. In this process, girls sacrifice meaningful relationships as their friends become competitors. An example of this appears in a scene from *Gossip Girl*, in which Blair's mother discusses purchasing matching dresses for the girls who will be bridesmaids at her wedding:

'I saw a gorgeous [dress] in Barneys. Chloe, I think the designer was. Chocolate beaded silk with spaghetti straps. Long, cut on the bias. Very sophisticated. It would look stunning on Serena, with her slim legs and fair coloring. I'm not sure though—it might make you look a little...hippy.' ...Was she suggesting that Blair was *fat*? Fatter than Serena?<sup>247</sup>

While both girls could look beautiful in the dress, Blair's mother implies that Serena may look better—accordingly promoting self-evaluation, rivalry, and, because the reader is able to follow Blair's internal reaction, a strain on the girl's friendship. In this scene, competitiveness is first instilled by the ideal and then fostered by comparisons between girls to reveal who is the closest to the ideal.

This competition, too, effectively ends a girl's resistance to dissociation because her capacity to participate meaningfully and genuinely in relationships has been obstructed. Thus,

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<sup>247</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 144.



girls forfeit sincere bonds with other girls due to hostility and for the sake of pursuing a false reality. This fictional portrayal reveals reality for many adolescent girls. When interviewed by Courtney E. Martin, a ninth-grade girl reports her insecurities about dressing, emphasizing that girls often dress to fit in with other girls, though they know they must also be attractive for boys:

Heather\* ... [jumps] in: 'I feel very self-conscious a lot of the time, and a lot of that has to do with the girls who are around me. Girls don't try to impress guys; they try to impress girls. When I get up in the morning and get dressed, I am not trying to look good for girls, but I *am* trying to be accepted by them. If I'm at school around older girls or girls who have a higher social status, I want them to look at me and approve of me.'<sup>248</sup>

Chick-lit fiction provides a reflection of relationships between girls that parallels Heather's experience, in which exterior identity determines social status and relationships. The desire to fit in and be accepted is often manifested externally, by working toward a perfect physique, and buying the right clothes, makeup and accessories for the body: thus, through commoditization.

Goodwin found that socio-economic status was "a more salient factor used by students to make comparisons than race or ethnicity," noting that "girls in the popular clique differentiate themselves in terms of their access to activities and privileges of the upper middle class."<sup>249</sup> In this way, despite socio-economic status, competitiveness ensures that commoditization will continue: girls who desire to be accepted into a "popular" clique, or improve their external identity, will partake in the behaviors that purport to facilitate physical change in the direction of the ideal and perpetuate the necessity of idealized relationships and belonging.

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<sup>248</sup> Courtney E. Martin, *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: The Frightening New Normalcy of Hating Your Body* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 87.

<sup>249</sup> Marjorie Harness Goodwin, *The Hidden Life of Girls: Games of Stance, Status, and Exclusion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 157.

Paradoxically, having a friendship, or fitting in with a certain group, most often does not guarantee a meaningful relationship. The majority of “friendships” between wealthy girls in highschool in the *Gossip Girl* series, for example, are not portrayed as genuine or intimate friendships: “‘It’s so good to have you back, Serena,’ Kati said in her fakest voice.”<sup>250</sup> Brown has found that in adolescence, “cliques and clubs are enforced with a new intensity as girls try to deal with what has become a treacherous relational scene—girls policing other girls in an attempt to secure their own social power and to protect themselves from those with the power to reject and exclude them.”<sup>251</sup>

Conversely, a lack of friendship does not signify a lack of meaning. A relevant counter-example to the formation of cliques and the lure of social power is evident in the first book of the *Gossip Girl* series, where Vanessa is introduced as “friendless” at her school. However, because of this, she does not have to compete with other girls, and retains a meaningful relationship with herself, and characters such as her older sister, by refusing to forfeit her identity for the collective one. Vanessa embodies resistance to postfeminist discourse by revealing that the alternative to dissociation is a cohesive, and more satisfying, reality. Vanessa also demonstrates the fallacy of the belief that being “labeled an outcast” can only result in pain and loneliness. Rather, Vanessa remains self-assured, and her friendship is sought by other characters, such as Serena, who struggle with dissociation and the difficulties of superficial, competitive friendships. By retaining her own power, and not submitting to a group ideal, Vanessa ultimately does not have to seek approval from other girls or protect herself from rejection.

Chick lit illuminates dissociated “relationships” because girls’ experiences are presented in terms of both their internal and external realities: the characters’ internal dialogue allows

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<sup>250</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 62.

<sup>251</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown, *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 86.

readers to understand the character's unvoiced thoughts or dissatisfactions, while also allowing the reader to follow the character's interactions and relationships that are purely external. In the *A-List*, Sam Sharpe's "best friend" is a girl she feels she cannot trust:

Sam looked down into Dee's sooty-lashed blue eyes. Dee looked so sweet. For a moment Sam felt as if she could really bare her soul. But at the last second she stopped herself. So what if Dee looked innocent and cute? Guppies were cute, too. But they still ate their babies.<sup>252</sup>

Brown has found in conversations with adolescent girls that "they talk about knowing when they are being themselves and when they are pretending, performing, or impersonating the right kind of girl in order to keep their relationships with boys or satisfy others' views of appropriate behavior."<sup>253</sup> The difficulty that girls face in forming relationships is also apparent from Claire's point of view in *The Clique*: "Okay, so it wasn't really true. But better to be a liar than a loser right?"<sup>254</sup> Here, the reader is aware that Claire sacrifices honesty in order to gain friendship, even if under false pretenses, so that she can protect herself from becoming a "loser." In other words, chick-lit fiction demonstrates that in contemporary culture, retaining an identity inconsistent with the postfeminist power-knowledge structure results in being marked as an outcast; nevertheless, chick lit also seems to indicate that the label "outcast" is not necessarily worse than the distress caused by dissociation.

In addition to competition with each other, girls' relationships, and dissociations, are most problematically shaped by competition over boys, indicating once more that postfeminism is inherently patriarchal and heteronormative. As Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita

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<sup>252</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 54.

<sup>253</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown, *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 87.

<sup>254</sup> Lisi Harrison, *The Clique* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 74.

Harris write: “Western culture has, since the Enlightenment, constructed the body as something apart from the self, but only offers real rewards for this separation when these selves are men.”<sup>255</sup> This observation is verified by the way female characters interact with male characters in chick-lit fiction. In *Breaking Dawn*, the fourth installment of the *Twilight* series, Bella looks forward to marrying Edward, her vampire fiancé, and becoming immortal: figuratively sacrificing her own body for a superior body that is created by Edward. In essence, she is giving up power over her life to become a vampire, which will also ultimately provide her with pinnacle beauty, or perfect physical features, a heterosexual relationship, and, as she is still only a teenager, eternal youth. Her internal dialogue as a human highlights the “prize” dynamic that is often played out in chick-lit fiction: “I opened my eyes and found his open, too, staring at my face. It made no sense when he looked at me that way. Like I was the prize rather than the outrageously lucky winner... He had the most beautiful soul, more beautiful than his brilliant mind or his incomparable face or his glorious body”<sup>256</sup> This passage exemplifies how chick lit functions as both a product of postfeminist ideology and a reflection of girls’ experiences. Bella reveals that she is a “lucky winner” because of her relationship with Edward. The scene, however, where Edward looks at her like “the prize” reinforces the concept that girls must be prized by a boyfriend, fiancé, or husband, in order to be “winners.” And, as Bella’s syntax conveys, even when girls are “winners,” they retain an insecure belief that they are only—and perhaps fleetingly—“lucky.”

Bella is also exemplary of the insecurities girls feel about their appearances, especially suggesting that the perception of security provided by a committed heterosexual partner, such as Edward, is fragile:

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<sup>255</sup> Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity : Girlhood, Power, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 137.

<sup>256</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company 2008), 24.

I'd never seen Tanya before, but I was sure that meeting her wouldn't be a pleasant experience for my ego. Once upon a time, before I was born probably, she'd made her play for Edward—not that I blamed her or anyone for wanting him. Still, she would be beautiful at the very worst and magnificent at best. Though Edward clearly—if inconceivably—preferred me, I wouldn't be able to help making comparisons.”<sup>257</sup>

This passage demonstrates that even in reaching the goal of a heterosexual relationship, girls are *still* aware that they must maintain it by appearing physically attractive, or else a competing girl will take their place. In this way, chick-lit exposes for readers the imprisoning, and even violating way girls are entirely subject to male determination. These comparisons among girls and women are not only complicit in the suppression of internal identity, but, as demonstrated in *Gossip Girl*, also strain the potential for meaningful relationships: “As always, it would be Serena and Blair, Blair and Serena, with Blair playing the smaller, fatter, mousier, less witty best friend of the blond uber-girl, Serena van der Woodsen.”<sup>258</sup> Blair's ongoing low self-esteem, jealousy, and resultant contempt for Serena are made obvious by her internal thoughts and emotions revealed throughout the series: “Blair saw Serena, her best friend, the girl she would always love and hate. The girl she could never measure up to...”<sup>259</sup> Blair attempts to secure a heterosexual relationship and participate in commoditization, but cannot compete with Serena, who represents pinnacle beauty.

Furthermore, as Debold, Wilson, and Malave write, “patriarchy thrives by keeping women divided, setting them up to compete with each other.”<sup>260</sup> The competition among girls for a boy appears throughout most chick-lit fiction, and dissociation is most prominent as girls come

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<sup>257</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company 2008), 32.

<sup>258</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 22.

<sup>259</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 8.

<sup>260</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson, and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 20.

to hate each other when they cannot succeed—while other girls appear to—in achieving the ideal. While postfeminism capitalizes on the apparent divisiveness and hostility among girls, the internal dialogue of girl characters in chick-lit series reveals desire for meaningful friendships that is directly the opposite. These series also point to the inability of girls to reconcile their internal and external identities as a substantial disadvantage that allows patriarchy to remain superiorly unified. For example, many times, Blair’s contempt for Serena supersedes her need for friendship:

Of course Serena would wear lip gloss with ugly names, and tights with holes in them, and dirty old shoes, and never cut her hair, and still get the boy. Blair grunted at the irony of it all and opened her bathroom window, tossing [Serena’s] lip gloss out into the night... Her head was too full of the new movie she was working on. The movie in which the fabulous Serena van der Woodsen was run over by a bus...<sup>261</sup>

The relational loss Blair conveys in this scene, figuratively throwing Serena out of the window, represents the way girls often choose to sacrifice their friendships and let postfeminism succeed in dictating their desires (such as to look perfect or achieve a heterosexual relationship). Even though Blair intermittently resumes friendship with Serena, it is genuine only externally; her internal dialogue reveals not simply the envy for Serena she often acts on, but also desire for close companionship that she suppresses.

Blair’s tumultuous feelings and dissatisfaction over her relationships are especially pronounced when she compares herself to Serena, and is reminded of how far she is from the ideal. This marks a distinctly postfeminist disillusion: with pinnacle beauty as an ever-present “knowledge,” girls are constantly comparing themselves, and competing with each other to achieve an ideal that can never be reached. This is mirrored in other chick-lit series such as the

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<sup>261</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 139.

*A-List*, where Sam is torn between competition for a boy—the pursuit of the ideal—and her desire to have a meaningful friendship with Anna, whom she simultaneously envies and admires:

For a nanosecond Sam watched herself from the outside—a pathetic girl desperate for Anna to come partying with her. Stupid, stupid, stupid, Sam thought. She is not your friend. She is your enemy. She stands between you and Ben. You hate her guts. But you still need her to like you.<sup>262</sup>

Sam sacrifices her internal feelings, adhering to postfeminist discipline that favors the goal of a heterosexual relationship. Yet, because she must *convince* herself that she “hates” Anna, there is a sense that her choice is the wrong one. This is further suggested by Sam’s resulting distrust of Anna, a “competitor,” and the loss of honesty and genuine friendship: “At the party she’d figure out some way to get Ben away from [Anna]. Anna might be really nice and all that, but all was fair in love and war. Sam figured this was both.”<sup>263</sup> Yet, Sam not only separates her internal identity from her external reality for the higher purpose of “achieving Ben,” but also suffers disappointment and even self-loathing when she is turned down by him. Thus, she does not attain the “prize” of a heterosexual relationship or Ben’s affection, and she also does not have a meaningful friendship or relational way to express her disappointment. Gilligan describes dissociation in this sense as “a brilliant but costly solution to a difficult psychological problem which girls were facing: how to hold different realities and different relationships simultaneously...”<sup>264</sup> In other words, by dissociating from her desire for friendship with Anna, and continuing to pursue a relationship with Ben that she believes is worth more than a meaningful friendship, Sam loses in terms of both her internal need and external desire. In this

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<sup>262</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 108-109.

<sup>263</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 109.

<sup>264</sup> Carol Gilligan, “The Centrality of Relationship in Human Development: A Puzzle, Some Evidence, and a Theory,” in *Development and Vulnerability in Close Relationships*, ed. Gil G. Noam and Kurt W. Fischer (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 244.

way, chick-lit seems to be indicating that the sacrifice of meaningful friendships is not worth the often futile competition over being “prized” by a boy.

Informed by postfeminist ideology, characters like Blair and Sam choose to pursue idealized relationship with boys, who often do not share their feelings, over a realistic, and potentially more fulfilling companionship with other girls. Yet, we are aware of this loss because we know both the “internal reality” of the character, as well as the (often contrasting) way she behaves externally. Gilligan writes that girls must decide “how to keep vital parts of themselves both alive and out of relationship,” revealing that the cost of dissociation is “the ‘honesty in relationships,’” even though “many girls said they wanted” meaningful, honest relationships.<sup>265</sup> Thus, girls suffer a loss of not only friendship, but also honesty, trust, and self-confidence through dissociation. The poignancy of chick-lit fiction in portraying these characters is that the readers are aware of Blair and Sam’s internal identities, and can understand and learn from their unhappiness when they choose to dissociate.

Gilligan argues that “the disconnection [of adolescent girls] from women and the dissociation of vital parts of the inner world are essential to patriarchal societies and culture.”<sup>266</sup> In this way, Blair’s vital desire for Serena’s friendship and companionship is “disconnected,” while her jealousy and competitive behavior is harmful to both herself and Serena, a practice that is essential to patriarchal culture. Revisiting the scene from *Gossip Girl* when Blair reflects on impulsively kissing Serena, we can newly interpret her anxiety after the kiss as a reflection of dissociated desire: the kiss was an unconscious display of Blair’s internal identity and need for

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<sup>265</sup> Carol Gilligan, “The Centrality of Relationship in Human Development: A Puzzle, Some Evidence, and a Theory,” in *Development and Vulnerability in Close Relationships*, ed. Gil G. Noam and Kurt W. Fischer (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 244.

<sup>266</sup> Carol Gilligan, “The Centrality of Relationship in Human Development: A Puzzle, Some Evidence, and a Theory,” in *Development and Vulnerability in Close Relationships*, ed. Gil G. Noam and Kurt W. Fischer (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 249-250.



companionship, which was then suppressed by her external reality, as evidenced by her feelings of shame. This momentary portrayal of desire therefore has many meanings, none of which is final. As Luce Irigaray writes of female desire:

It is therefore useless to trap women into giving an exact definition of what they mean, to make them repeat (themselves) so the meaning will be clear . . . The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary undoubtedly places woman in a position where she can experience herself only fragmentarily as waste or as excess in the little structured margins of a dominant ideology, this mirror entrusted by the (masculine) ‘subject’ with the task of reflecting and redoubling himself.<sup>267</sup>

Thus, the moment when Blair kisses Serena is unclear—we do not know whether Blair longs for friendship, or is sexually attracted to Serena—which reflects the “fragmentary” and “rejected” nature of adolescent girl psychology in an inherently patriarchal, postfeminist environment.

### **III. Mother-Daughter Separation and the Heterosexual Union**

Debold et al. examine “the lies of separation,” or the dependence of contemporary culture upon the concept that separation from mothers is necessary for a child to achieve autonomy. They also identify “mother blaming” as one of the causes of separation between mothers and daughters, arguing that when women are “good” mothers according to social prescriptions, they “betray their daughters’ potential for self-realization” by raising daughters who conform, noting, that to be a “bad” mother means to “raise daughters differently,” “betray the culture,” and “risk ostracism for themselves and their daughters.”<sup>268</sup> Unfortunately, conforming within postfeminist culture entails a loss of power, represented by the dissociative behaviors of female chick-lit

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<sup>267</sup> Luce Irigaray, “The Sex Which is Not One,” in *Essential Papers on The Psychology of Women*, ed. Claudia Zanardi (New York: New York University, 1990), 349.

<sup>268</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson, and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 29.

characters as they commoditize their identities in order to achieve a collective ideal. In some of the chick-lit series, such as *Gossip Girl*, the mother engages in this commoditization herself:

[Blair's mother] twirled around on the raised platform in Saks Fifth Avenue's bridal department, the skirt of the white satin-and-lace wedding dress fanning out around her feet.... Blair's mother stopped twirling and examined herself critically in the four-way mirror. 'I do think it's the most flattering one I've tried on,' she said. 'Don't you, Blair?' Blair nodded enthusiastically. 'Definitely, Mom. It makes you look tiny.' Her mother smiled, delighted. The way to any girl's heart is to tell her she looks tiny. Girls kill to be tiny.<sup>269</sup>

Blair's superficial relationship with her mother, who acts like a young girl, is evident in this passage. As a reflection of contemporary culture, the scene reaffirms the postfeminist "girl," simultaneously revealing that adolescent girls are aware of their mothers' susceptibility to postfeminist discourse, and suffer from the isolating loss of relationship with, and attachment to, their mothers as a result.

Debold et al. write that the "lie of separation leads mothers into an unintentional betrayal of daughters."<sup>270</sup> Serving as both a part of, and a reflection of postfeminism, chick lit repeatedly features a separation between mothers and daughters. Mothers are often portrayed as uninvolved in their daughters' lives or else absent from the story-lines completely; daughters, the protagonists, are usually independent and self-sufficient. By returning to a passage from the first book of the *Gossip Girl* series that I examined in chapter one, we witness a world without parental supervision:

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<sup>269</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *You Know You Love Me* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 114.

<sup>270</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson, and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 20.

We all live in huge apartments with our own bedrooms and bathrooms and phone lines.

We have unlimited access to money and booze and whatever else we want, and our parents are rarely home, so we have tons of privacy. We're smart, we've inherited classic good looks, we wear fantastic clothes, and we know how to party.<sup>271</sup>

Against a backdrop of wealth, the *Gossip Girl* series juxtaposes freedom from parental control with a discouraging lack of support and guidance. Despite the impression given by “gossip girl,” the daughters in the series, such as Blair, are frequently portrayed as dissatisfied with meaningless relationships with their parents, especially their mothers:

‘Excuse me,’ Blair said tightly. Hot tears of rage gathered in her eyes. ‘I just can’t sit here any longer. I’m going home.’ She glanced down at her manicurist. ‘Sorry about the mess,’ she said. Then she stomped out of the room, slipping slightly on the wet tile floor. ‘What was that all about?’ Blair’s mother asked Serena. She was worried about her daughter, but she wasn’t about to go after Blair and give up being pampered.<sup>272</sup>

Though Blair is continuously portrayed as self-sufficient, privileged, and obviously spoiled, her discontent over her mother’s self-absorption and lack of support is unmistakable.

Debold et al. describe the “deeply held cultural beliefs” about the necessary separation between children and parents:

Emotional separation is confused with autonomy, the ability to care for oneself, to be self-ruling. Separation and autonomy are not equivalent: a person need not separate from others emotionally to be autonomous. Under the dominion of experts, mothers are urged

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<sup>271</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 3.

<sup>272</sup> Cecily von Ziegesar, *You Know You Love Me* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 189.

to create a separation and disconnection from daughters that their daughters do not want.<sup>273</sup>

Other main characters in the *Gossip Girl* series, such as Jenny and Vanessa, also have absent mothers. Jenny is raised by her father and older brother after her mother leaves her family, and Vanessa's parents allowed her to move away from them, and in with her older sister in New York City. Like Blair, Serena feels no attachment to her mother, who is also portrayed as self-absorbed.

The dissociation from mothers that daughters "do not want" is powerfully represented in a passage from the *The A-List*. Cammie tries to find comfort and direction at her mother's grave, questioning whether her mother chose to commit suicide – "Was it really an accident, Mom?" – and expressing pain over a broken heart:

'He broke up with me before he went away to college. Right before he dumped me, I was planning to bring him here to meet you. Dumb idea.' ...Cammie wobbled onto the plot itself and lay down on her back, arms splayed. She stared up into the starry, starry night. 'It's so beautiful out, Mom. I wish you could see it.' Tears leaked out of Cammie's eyes and ran into her ears.<sup>274</sup>

Many of the main characters of the *A-List*—as well as the adolescent girl characters of the other chick-lit series—have absent or self-centered mothers. In this passage, however, the suicide of Cammie's mother signifies not only a willful separation between the mother and daughter, but also the finality this separation imposes. The duality of chick-lit series is particularly significant here, as the loss of relationship between mothers and daughters is a product of contemporary

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<sup>273</sup> Elizabeth Debold, Marie Wilson, and Idelisse Malave, *Mother Daughter Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 22.

<sup>274</sup> Zoey Dean, *The A-List* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 148.

culture, but the representation of this loss through the characters speaks to the ubiquitous discontent and unhappiness this causes adolescent girls.

In *Twilight*, Bella's first-person perspective illustrates the internal-external element to this dissociation between mother and daughter:

'I want to go,' I lied. I'd always been a bad liar, but I'd been saying this lie so frequently lately that it sounded almost convincing now... 'I'll see you soon,' [my mom] insisted. 'You can come home whenever you want—I'll come right back as soon as you need me.' But I could see the sacrifice in her eyes behind the promise. 'Don't worry about me,' I urged. 'It'll be great. I love you, Mom.'<sup>275</sup>

Because her mother remarries and wants to travel with her new husband, Bella offers to move in with her father. Chick lit's reflection of girls who are distanced from their mothers emphasizes the normalization and acceptance of this separation within a postfeminist culture. At the same time, chick lit portrays the dissatisfaction, anxiety, and loss this creates for adolescent girls, who suffer not only from the division between their internal and external realities, and the loss of genuine friendships, but also from the weakened relationships with their mothers.

A psychoanalytic evaluation of Bella's character as she moves from a dissociated daughter to a wife and mother may provide insight into the perpetuated power of the heterosexual fantasy I described in the second chapter of this thesis. Annie Reich relates girls' relationships with their mothers to extreme submission in their adult relationship with a male partner. As I have demonstrated, passivity, femininity and submission characterize Bella's relationship with Edward. Reich says that "in the submissive woman the special ecstasy of intercourse must be viewed against the background of anxiety, despair and helplessness which are experienced when she is separated from the object of her love, or when her lover turns away

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<sup>275</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 4.

from her.”<sup>276</sup> In the second novel of the *Twilight* series, *New Moon*, Edward leaves Bella because he believes he is too dangerous for her. The rest of the book then focuses on Bella’s despair, and repeated attempts to place herself in near fatal situations, so that she can “hear” or “see” Edward (usually in the form of protective warnings). In the following example, Bella is standing at the top of a cliff, prepared to jump:

It was only when he was disapproving like this that I could hear the true memory of his voice . . . ‘Don’t do this,’ he pleaded. *You wanted me to be human*, I reminded him. *Well, watch me.* ‘Please. For me.’ *But you won’t stay with me any other way* . . . I rolled up onto the balls of my feet. ‘No, Bella!’ He was angry now, and the anger was so lovely. I smiled and raised my arms straight out . . . And I flung myself off the cliff.<sup>277</sup>

Reich attributes this dependency on a male partner to a previous fixation on the mother, and expectations of “protection, tenderness, food—in short, all kinds of attention.”<sup>278</sup> Thus, the propagation of the heterosexual fantasy may be in part due to girls’ dissociation from their mothers.

Another characteristic of submissive attachment to a male partner is the overvaluation of sexual intercourse and complete happiness of becoming “one” with a male partner, as Reich writes, “intercourse is an experience of extraordinary intensity in these cases of extreme submissiveness in women.”<sup>279</sup> In *Breaking Dawn*, the fourth novel of the *Twilight* series, Bella and Edward are married and the sexual intercourse they have on their honeymoon is portrayed in this way:

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<sup>276</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), 199.

<sup>277</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *New Moon* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 359.

<sup>278</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), 202.

<sup>279</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), 199.

I clutched my arms around his neck again and locked my mouth with his feverishly. It wasn't desire at all—it was need, acute to the point of pain . . . . 'Please, Edward?' I couldn't tell if he was moved by the tears trembling in my voice, or if he was unprepared to deal with the suddenness of my attack, or if his need was simply as unbearable in that moment as my own. But whatever the reason, he pulled my lips back to his, surrendering with a groan. And we began where my dream had left off.<sup>280</sup>

Bella's submissive role and her narration of the ecstasy she experiences when having sex with Edward are both evident in this scene. Reich presents one possible explanation for Bella's need for sexual fulfillment in her marriage with Edward: "In describing this ecstatic state we emphasize repeatedly that individuality is dissolved in complete union with the man. We might also understand this union with the great and mighty as a magic fusion with the mother."<sup>281</sup> I propose, however, that "complete union with a man" within the postfeminist paradigm reflects girls' desire for a cohesive identity because they have already dissociated and suffered from a loss of subjectivity. Union with a man, such as is presented in *Breaking Dawn*, is the ideal psychological and emotional compensation for girls' experience of dissociation not only from their mothers, but also in their other relationships as well as in the internal/external divide they are aware of within themselves. As I have demonstrated in the past two chapters, the necessity of a heterosexual relationship for girls is also reinforced by contemporary culture economically, physically and sexually.

Erikson notes that "to a considerable extent adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one's identity by projecting one's diffused self-image on another and by seeing it

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<sup>280</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008), 108.

<sup>281</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), 202.

thus reflected and gradually clarified.”<sup>282</sup> While this might be considered healthy within equal adolescent romantic partnerships, chick-lit fiction such as the *Twilight* series do not reflect contemporary adolescent relationships where each adolescent is mutually defining himself or herself. Rather, these novels reveal quite a different reality: the heterosexual relationship remains an emblem of women’s dependency on men in postfeminist culture; psychologically, it has become the compensation for girls’ immensely “diffused,” or dissociated, self-image.

#### IV. Conclusion

Female characters of chick-lit fiction reflect the consequences of dissociation: a loss of coherence in identity, the loss of genuine relationships with friends and family, the loss of confidence in sexuality, and a loss of satisfaction that signals a very real problem in contemporary culture. Gilligan notes that psychologists have found “voice” to be “a barometer of relationship because it connects the inner and the outer world,” asserting that “loss of voice is a prime symptom of loss of relationship, a measure of relational deprivation.”<sup>283</sup> The inability of girls to say what they feel, when divided between internal and external worlds, or mean what they say, as demonstrated by superficial friendships, is a loss of voice. Gilligan confirms this point by emphasizing that the appearance of phrases such as “I don’t know,” “you know,” “I mean,” and “I don’t care” in adolescent girls’ conversations, indicates a loss of voice and the onset of dissociative processes.<sup>284</sup> This loss of voice reappears throughout chick-lit series:

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<sup>282</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 132.

<sup>283</sup> Carol Gilligan, “The Centrality of Relationship in Human Development: A Puzzle, Some Evidence, and a Theory,” in *Development and Vulnerability in Close Relationships*, ed. Gil G. Noam and Kurt W. Fischer (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 253.

<sup>284</sup> Carol Gilligan, “The Centrality of Relationship in Human Development: A Puzzle, Some Evidence, and a Theory,” in *Development and Vulnerability in Close Relationships*, ed. Gil G. Noam and Kurt W. Fischer (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 243.



‘We’re not in it for the candy, Kuh-laire,’ Massie said dismissively. ‘We’re in it for the costumes.’ She crossed her arms over her jumpsuit. ‘I’miniforboth,’ [*sic*] Dylan clarified. Claire shrugged at Massie. ‘Whatevs [*sic*]’...<sup>285</sup>

The indifferent “whatevs,” is an attempt to appear casual that actually reflects Claire’s loss of voice in this scene. Mary M. Talbot uses Robin Lakoff’s examination of language to similarly illuminate the inequality of language between men and women: “[Robin] Lakoff implicitly establishes men’s language as a norm to which women’s does not match up. She argues that the way women use particular language forms (e.g., hedges such as *you know*, *sort of*, euphemisms) projects uncertainty, lack of confidence and weakness.”<sup>286</sup> Chick-lit characters provide this kind of reflection of adolescent girls’ experiences within postfeminist culture, establishing the potential of the genre as a lens through which the voices of adolescent girls can be newly perceived and understood.

In some respects, the books allow girls’ experiences to break through the postfeminist paradigm within which the series are couched. Even the girls who are the most popular, and are often depicted as having the most money, best looks, and nicest clothes, feel a sense of loss:

Ribbons of yellow light, sent from the lampposts on the front lawn, broke up the darkness and helped Massie see the box. As soon as she spotted it, a wave of loneliness filled the pit of her stomach. She got the same feeling around Christmas when she’d look at the tree in the middle of the night. Something about seeing it all tall and proud, decorated with lights

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<sup>285</sup> Lisi Harrison, *These Boots are Made for Stalking* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010), 18.

<sup>286</sup> Mary M. Talbot, “Feminism and Language,” *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 2000), 142.

and surrounded by presents, seemed so depressing. Like looking at someone who was all dressed up with nowhere to go.<sup>287</sup>

Importantly, the internal thoughts, feelings and emotions of female characters demonstrate frustration and displeasure with disconnection. It is significant that this moment in *The Clique* is dedicated to Massie's sense of loneliness and lack of fulfillment; it offers a much different perspective of her character than we receive from her interactions with the other characters, such as Claire. As Gilligan asserts, dissociation is sustained by cultural norms that are inherently patriarchal: "the dissociation of vital parts of the inner world are essential to patriarchal societies and cultures."<sup>288</sup> The postfeminist and patriarchal assumption that to be discontent and dissociated, and so traditionally, normally, and conventionally feminine, is unsettled by characters' awareness of, and discomfort with, the conflict they face between internal identity and external behavior as they move through adolescence. Dissociation provides a recurring symbol throughout chick-lit fiction indicating that adolescent girls are relinquishing their internal identities for external performances that satisfy cultural norms. In what is perhaps an indirect critique of postfeminism, this depiction of dissociation in chick-lit series reveals that girls are ultimately left with unmet expectations and a loss of power. If, as Gilligan has found, the external reality is eventually internalized, and a girl's internal identity becomes unconscious, then this shift in subjectivity has dire consequences for what it means to be a woman in contemporary American society.

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<sup>287</sup> Lisi Harrison, *The Clique* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 97.

<sup>288</sup> Lisi Harrison, *The Clique* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2004), 249-250.

### The Adolescent Girl in the Postfeminist World: Interviews and Conclusion

*[Stephanie Meyer] was in her fourth hour of signing books when an 11-year-old girl wearing a rhinestone-studded Twilight T-shirt leaned over the table to get a good look at Meyer. "You're like my favorite author ever!" she said, clapping her hands. "I'm a person who judges authors a lot, and I don't have anything bad to say about you. I mean, I'm really tough, I didn't even like Harry Potter."*

-Entertainment Weekly, 2008

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that postfeminist discourse is creating an environment where adolescent girls come to believe they are “empowered,” while an inherently patriarchal paradigm continues to devalue their experiences, positing them as economic and sexual objects, and subtly complicating their development into women. In the first chapter of this thesis, I examine the way chick-lit fiction is produced by postfeminist culture, proposing that capitalism in the United States exploits female insecurities, assigning value to the objectified female body while enforcing an economic role for females as consumers. Fromm writes, “Marx criticized capitalism precisely because it destroys individual personality.”<sup>289</sup> I similarly criticize capitalism in the United States for functioning within an inherently patriarchal postfeminist paradigm that destroys female subjectivity through commoditization. Angela McRobbie expands upon this idea:

Young women now find themselves, if no longer trapped within the home, then confined to the topographies of an unsustainable self-hood, deprived of the possibilities of feminist sociality, and deeply invested in achieving an illusory identity defined according to a rigidly enforced scale of feminine attributes.<sup>290</sup>

I address “illusory identity” in terms of pinnacle, or ideal, beauty, and commoditized beauty, which promises that pinnacle beauty can be achieved through consumerism and objectification of

<sup>289</sup> Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 77.

<sup>290</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 120.

the female body. Finally, I illustrate the dangers of treating and absorbing chick lit as purely “entertainment,” preventing issues such as race and class from being confronted, and critically interpreted, within each series.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I move from Marxist theory to Foucault’s conception of power relations in order to address ideal beauty and ideal heterosexuality in chick-lit fiction as governing ideas within postfeminist discourse, meant to influence girls’ choices and beliefs about their roles in contemporary society. Adolescent girls today encounter patriarchal power as a form of subjugation without an immediately identifiable oppressor, and in fact, postfeminist discourse presents the subjugation of the female as self-imposed. Chick-lit fiction routinely depicts the “othering” of girl characters who do not fit the specific ideal of beauty and heterosexually, and I argue that this is a strategy meant to commoditize, suppress individualism, and enforce heterosexuality among adolescent girls. In the first part of the chapter, I examine the “normalizing” of the ideal body, and the ways girls are taught to compare themselves to ideal physical beauty. I also reveal the “normalizing of dissatisfaction,” as evidenced through the trivializing portrayal of conditions that afflict adolescent girls, such as eating disorders. In the second part of the chapter, I argue that the sexual “knowledge” conveyed in chick lit indulges a fantasy of “true love” and ideal relationships, while simultaneously dictating the passive romantic roles that girls must assume within them. The limited positive choices for adolescent girls within the heterosexual fantasy, as well as the repression of subjective sexual expression, unveils postfeminist “empowerment” as simply a new packaging for the production of hegemonic norms. Aapola, Gonic and Harris write that in the current cultural climate, and given the current media, heterosexuality is conveyed to adolescent girls as “the only normal and natural sexual expression,” further asserting that:

Heterosexuality is portrayed as natural, biological and inevitable, and in order to be perceived as sexually mature, young women must exhibit heterosexual desire. This hegemony of heterosexuality can be seen in the negative representations or silencing of young lesbians and bisexuals, and in the commonsense view of what constitutes sexual activity.<sup>291</sup>

In chick lit fiction, “the hegemony of heterosexuality” is enforced in two distinguishable ways. Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, for example, successfully employs a technique of excluding themes outside of the heteronormative; Zoey Dean’s *The A-List* and Cecily von Ziegsar’s *Gossip Girl* series, meanwhile, both include instances of homosexual desire, only insofar as the desire is effectively subverted. Conversely, girls who do subjectively embrace their sexuality are portrayed as lacking control and undesirable, while the same behavior among male characters is treated as acceptable and even expected.

My argument develops by recognizing that chick lit can only be critiqued to the extent that contemporary culture must be critiqued. The final chapter of this thesis is dedicated to exploring the way these series are resistant to postfeminist culture. I reveal that chick-lit narratives reflect girls’ dissociating experiences within contemporary culture, despite the outward glamorous appeal of postfeminism. The symptomatic dissatisfactions of dissociation, such as anxiety and unhappiness, reflect the consequences of the loss of power, and thus consequential loss of internal identity, experienced by girls in contemporary culture as they become subject to an underlying patriarchal reality. In my introduction, I note that a goal for the development of an adolescent girl within contemporary U.S. culture—a culture that purports the uselessness of feminism—is an ability to critically evaluate her environment and relationships.

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<sup>291</sup> Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 148.

This evaluation of cultural contexts may provide an adolescent girl agency in shaping her identity; additionally, it may assist her in battling, coping, or overcoming the experience of dissociation as she moves into adulthood.

As this thesis has argued, the *Gossip Girl*, *The A-List*, *The It Girl*, *The Clique* and the *Twilight* series represent postfeminist ideology.<sup>292</sup> Naomi Wolf identifies the major postfeminist themes of these series:

The ‘Clique’ novels are all about status. But sex saturates the ‘Gossip Girl’ books, by Cecily von Ziegesar, which are about 17- and 18-year-old private school girls in Manhattan. This is not the frank sexual exploration found in a Judy Blume novel, but teenage sexuality via Juicy Couture, blasé and entirely commodified . . . The ‘A-List’ novels, by Zoey Dean (a pseudonym for a married writing team hired by the media packager 17th Street Productions, which created all three series and sold them to Little, Brown), are spinoffs of the ‘Gossip Girl’ series.<sup>293</sup>

The nature of these series as mass-produced and infused with messages about sex, status and consumerism is quite different from the authorship of the *Twilight* series: “[Stephenie Meyer and her husband] got married at 21 and have three sons . . . Smart, funny and cheery, Meyer does not seem noticeably undead in person. An observant Mormon, she doesn't drink alcohol and has never seen an R-rated movie.”<sup>294</sup> Yet, the *Twilight* novels are similar to the other series in their popularity with an adolescent girl demographic and enforcement of an ideal, feminine role.

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<sup>292</sup> For brief overview of each series, please see the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>293</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Young Adult Fiction: Wild Things*, March 12, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/books/review/12wolf.html?pagewanted=1&ref=bookreviews>

<sup>294</sup> Lev Grossman, *Stephenie Meyer: A New J.K. Rowling?* April 24, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1734838,00.html#ixzz1FC0ZkDUg>

Additionally, the *Twilight* series further signify the way post-September 11<sup>th</sup> conservatism has been subsumed into postfeminist discourse within the United States.<sup>295</sup>

To complement my analyses, I have conducted in-person and e-mail interviews with adolescent girls, ranging in age from twelve to twenty-one, to gauge more closely the way girls respond and relate to the series as they move into adulthood. A few important patterns emerge among the responses of girls of all ages: first, despite reading chick-lit fiction for “entertainment,” girls also expressed critical interpretations of characters’ behaviors. For example, most girls reported identifying more closely with “normal,” and especially “nice,” characters such as Claire. Yet, at the same time, these interviews also reveal that girls are susceptible to passively accepting and reproducing postfeminist messages, such as the desire for the heterosexual fantasy, or a simultaneous attraction to and jealousy of characters such as Serena, who represent ideal beauty.

“C” is sixteen, white, and from an upper middle class family. She has read the entire *Twilight*, *A-List*, and *Gossip Girl* series. The scene that stands out most to her is from *Gossip Girl*, “because Nate is wearing the green sweater that Blair had given him – you know? – with a heart she sewed onto the sleeve so he would always wear her heart on his sleeve.” C also recalls that every time Serena left the house—“without looking in the mirror, too”—she looked “absolutely perfect.” C would want to be friends with Blair (so she “wouldn’t be on her bad side”), but not Serena: “Because she is perfect and gets whatever she wants [*pauses thoughtfully*] even though I’m kind of obsessed with her.” C’s answer reveals a few recurring themes among

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<sup>295</sup> The cover of an issue of *Entertainment Weekly* in July, 2008 featured Bella, wearing red lipstick, a white dress and being grasped by Edward. Additionally, she is holding a red apple, symbolizing Eve: the first woman, temptress, and sinner of the Bible. The inherently negative image of women as sinners and temptresses—from the beginning of “creation”—stems from conservative gender roles, but has recently been regenerated by postfeminism as “sexy.” This image exemplifies how postfeminism has taken the image of a woman holding the apple, “the forbidden fruit,” and reproduced it as empowering.

girls who answered that either *Gossip Girl*, *The A-List*, *The It Girl* or *The Clique* were their favorite series. Many girls expressed that they felt an uncanny “obsession” with Serena that conflicted with their jealousy of her physical perfection and ideal life circumstances. Nineteen year old “D,” for example, says that she would most want to be friends with Serena, but “*Gossip Girl* is extremely different due to the money. I do not come from a very wealthy area or family.” Furthermore, a few girls identified Blair’s capacity to be “a bitch,” while also sympathetically acknowledging her desperate attempts to win over Nate or compete with Serena.

“B” is fourteen years old and currently attending an elite private school on a full scholarship. Of the series I include in this thesis, her favorite is *The Clique*, and her favorite character is Claire: “Claire was the only normal one, and the most interesting one out of the bunch.” However, B also admits that she likes characters (despite their personality) who are the most exciting: “Massie too, she was the one with the most depth.”

**Interviewer: Which character did you feel the most like?**

**B:** Claire, except I would never want to befriend Massie. I wouldn't have done most of what she did. Maybe Claire before the start of the series.

**Interviewer: Did you have a least favorite character? Why?**

**B:** Alyssa, because there was nothing in her that was interesting. She was fairly boring.

**Interviewer: If you could give advice to her, what would it be?**

**B:** Don't let Massie control your life, but don't even bother trying to break the status quo because Massie always wins.

**Interviewer: If you could go on a date with any character, who would it be?**

**B:** Cam, Claire's boyfriend... He's the only boy who's been shown that seems interesting and cute.



**Interviewer: Which is your least favorite series? Why?**

**B:** *Twilight*, the characters lack depth and the plot is non-existent. Alice and Jacob are the most interesting characters, and the only reason to read it.

B's dislike of *Twilight*, and preference for *The Clique* is particularly interesting because in both series the main character must transition to a new school. However, while in *The Clique*, income, status, and "fitting in" are all of pivotal importance, in *Twilight*, this actuality is not represented. B's discussion of *The Clique* suggests that the reality girls face in terms of popularity and "status" may be similar (though less extreme) to the situations faced by characters such as Claire in the series. B similarly expressed recognition of the "status quo" and cruelty of characters such as Massie. In fact, her acknowledgement that she would "prefer to be friends with Claire *before* the start of the series" signifies that wealthy, cruel girl characters have a pollution-like effect on Claire. As Lyn Mikel Brown, Niobe Way, and Julia L. Duff have observed, "although white working-class girls and girls of color from all socioeconomic backgrounds may seek each other out for support and may be more likely to openly critique and resist dominant cultural norms, the difficulties of negotiating the current social landscape can take a toll on their psyches and can affect their relationships."<sup>296</sup> Of the girls who talked about *The Clique* series, each identified with Claire. For example, 19 year old "F" responded to the question "Which character would you most want to be friends with?" by writing, "Claire from *The Clique*, because she is basically the only one who seems NORMAL [*sic*] and nice." These responses suggest that girls are acting as critical readers. Yet, at the same time, Wolf points to another dimension of girls' relationships with chick-lit series:

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<sup>296</sup> Lyn Mikel Brown, Niobe Way, and Julia L. Duff, "The Others in My I: Adolescent Girls' Friendships and Peer Relations" in *Beyond Appearance: A New Look at Adolescent Girls*, eds. Norine G. Johnson, Michael C. Roberts, and Judith Worell (Washington, D.C: American Psychological Association, 1999), 216.

The series may not change the girl's behavior; but they do posit a model of what the dominant culture says holds value. I know from the girls in my own life that they often feel quite alone these days when they do hold out for kindness or integrity in a social setting. Is this a new problem? No, but in past generations the dominant culture of teen fiction did not make this behavior seem so geeky and aberrant.<sup>297</sup>

The role of chick lit as a “model of what the dominant culture says holds value” is significant because, as I demonstrated in the second chapter of this thesis, “knowledge” is a facet of power that can also facilitate discipline. This reasoning may also explain girls’ simultaneous wariness and acceptance of characters such as Massie or Blair.

Overwhelmingly, *Twilight* was the most popular among the girls I interviewed, also reflecting the larger national trend. The recently published final installment, *Breaking Dawn*, for example, sold “1.3 million copies in its first 24 hours.”<sup>298</sup> When compared to the other series, a pattern emerges that can potentially explain *Twilight*’s ability to so strongly appeal to girls of all ages and a variety of backgrounds.<sup>299</sup> As Anna Silver wrote in 2010, “over 50 million of the books have been sold, the first two of scheduled four film adaptations have been released, and the number of self-admittedly obsessed ‘Team Edward’ fans continues to grow.”<sup>300</sup> The youngest adolescent girl I interviewed, “A,” is twelve years old, white, and from a lower-middle

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<sup>297</sup> Naomi Wolf, Ten Questions for Naomi Wolf, March 16, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/16/books/review/questions-wolf.html>

<sup>298</sup> Stephenie Meyer, Bio, <http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html>

<sup>299</sup> The series is also one of the most popular in the nation, attracting audiences of all ages. There is even a fan site dedicated to fans “aged 18 and up”: [www.twilightmoms.com](http://www.twilightmoms.com). Stephenie Meyer’s website, <http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html>, presents the following statistics: *Twilight* was one of 2005’s most talked about novels and within weeks of its release the book debuted at #5 on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Among its many accolades, *Twilight* was named an “ALA Top Ten Books for Young Adults,” an Amazon.com “Best Book of the Decade...So Far”, and a Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year. The highly-anticipated sequel, *New Moon*, was released in September 2006, and spent more than 25 weeks at the #1 position on *The New York Times* bestseller list. The *Twilight* movie, directed by Catherine Hardwicke and starring Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart, was released on November 21, 2008. *Twilight* debuted at #1 at the box office with \$70 million, making it the highest grossing opening weekend for a female director.

<sup>300</sup> Anna Silver, “*Twilight* is Not Good For Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series,” *Studies in the Novel* 42, no. 1 & 2 (2010): 124, <http://www.jstor.org>.

class family. She has read the *Twilight* series (one of the “best series I’ve read”) and she has heard of *The Clique*. She describes the scene that most stands out to her from the *Twilight* series as “the one where Edward has to leave Bella in book two, *New Moon*. This scene makes me really think about how it was wrong of Edward just to leave Bella like that when he loves her so much.”

**Interviewer: Do you have a favorite character? Why is he/she your favorite?**

**A:** My favorite character is probably Bella because of her personality and that she tells the story in such a great way.

**Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to share about these novels?**

**A:** That the *Twilight* series is definitely a page-turner you won’t be to put down once you start!

One of the oldest girls I interviewed, “E,” is twenty years old and also chose *Twilight* as her favorite series. She reports that in middle school and high school she read the *Twilight*, *Gossip Girl*, *It Girl* and *A-List* series.

**Interviewer: Which character would you most want to be friends with?**

**E:** [From *Twilight*] Alice - she's so nice and good to Bella. I value people who are really devoted to the people they're friends with. Bella would be a terrible friend because all she cares about is Edward. [Laughs]

**Interviewer: Can you describe a particular scene that stands out to you from *Twilight*?**

**E:** I'm a romantic, so one of my favorite scenes is when Bella wakes up in the bed Edward got for her in *Eclipse*. They were both supposed to be really mad at each other, but when they were back together it didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was how much they

cared about each other. I thought it was really sweet.

**Interviewer: If you could go on a date with any character, who would it be?**

**E:** I mean, the Edward that I fabricated while reading the books (not Robert Pattison) is kind of what I would want in a guy- so I'd like to go on a date with him. Again, being a romantic, I love how old fashioned, respectful, and mature he is.

Many respondents chose Edward as their favorite character and recalled scenes that depict his love for Bella. The interviews from the older respondents in particular reflect an adoration of Edward and his “romantic” relationship with Bella. In addition to “E,” I interviewed “F,” who is 18, and “D,” who is 19. Both girls also selected *Twilight* as their favorite series:

**Interviewer: Did you have a favorite character? Why was he/she your favorite?**

**F:** Edward because he was a vampire with super awesome abilities, and cared so much for Bella.

**D:** Edward because he is mysterious yet very intriguing and romantic.

These responses suggest that, especially for girls in late adolescence and entering adulthood, the “heterosexual fantasy” I discussed in the second chapter of this thesis is both appealing and an important goal.

**Interviewer: Can you describe a particular scene that stands out to you from**

***Twilight*?**

**D:** I like the scene where Bella is approached by James, her enemy, in the ballet room and Edward has to save her life.

Similarly, many of the girls also responded that they would prefer to date Jacob, another attractive male character—especially in the films—who possesses immortal powers.

Perhaps the most interesting pattern that emerged in the responses to the *Twilight* series was dislike of, and frustration with, Bella's character. For example, consider the following responses of fifteen year old "S," nineteen year old "F" and twenty-one year old "M":

**Interviewer: Do you have a least favorite character? Why?**

**S:** Bella, because I find her annoying.

**F:** Bella, she was just annoying and didn't appreciate her life at all.

**M:** [Bella] is very sullen and narcissistic. It can get to be very depressing and annoying.

**Interviewer: If you could give advice to him/her, what would it be?**

**S:** You should be more confident.

**F:** Go with Edward, forget Jacob.

**M:** Stop throwing yourself a pity party.<sup>301</sup>

Yet, when I asked seventeen year old "T" if there was anything she would like to share with me about the novels, she replied:

**T:** It's weird that everyone reads them and they are so unrealistic but they take them so seriously... and I think it is weird that some people model their lives after the books.

**Interviewer: How so?**

**T:** I don't know. I guess girls try to be like Bella.

**Interviewer: How do they do that?**

**T:** They go [*High-pitched voice imitation*] I hope some guy tries to date meeee [*pauses*] like all the time!

These responses provide a remarkable insight into the way girls will stress that they do not like Bella's "annoying" personality, but inadvertently admit they desire her "role" within the

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<sup>301</sup> One potential limitation to these responses is that the girls have also seen the *Twilight* films, and their answers may reflect their feelings about the actress who plays Bella, even though the questions were about the novels.

heterosexual fantasy that I have discussed throughout this thesis. The examples I have provided indicate that some girls would like to “be” Bella, and attain a heterosexual partner such as Edward or Jacob. However, these responses also expose feelings of competition over attaining this type of relationship, as evinced in the girls’ expressions of dislike for Bella’s personality, and disdain for the way she does not “appreciate” her relationship with Edward.

For younger readers, the choice of *Twilight* as favorite fiction may relate more closely to the non-threatening, inherent conservatism in the books. While *Gossip Girl*, *The A-List*, *The Clique* and *The It Girl* feature “deviant” activities, such as pre-marital sex, excessive cruelty between girls, drug use and underage drinking, such behavior is absent from the *Twilight* series.<sup>302</sup> As Lev Grossman wrote in *Time* magazine: “Certainly some of the [*Twilight* books] appeal lies in their fine moral hygiene: they're an alternative to the hookup scene, *Gossip Girls* for good girls. There's no drinking or smoking in *Twilight*, and Bella and Edward do little more than kiss.”<sup>303</sup> As I discussed in chapter three, chick-lit novels can be read as a reflection of adolescent girls’ experiences in postfeminist culture. While Bella undergoes a separation from her mother in the first book, moving in with her father, Meyer makes it clear throughout the

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<sup>302</sup> Separating the purposeful portrayal of the hedonistic lifestyles present in chick-lit fiction, in chapter one, from the insight the series into adolescent girl psychology in chapter three, permitted a more profound examination of the way the series mirror not only girls experiences, but also relational fears and desires. To iterate a few fundamental differences between the series that have not been thoroughly noted in this thesis: In the *Gossip Girl*, *A-List*, *It Girl* and *The Clique* series, the female characters at times treat each other with remarkable—and duplicatable—malice. In the first novel of *The Clique* series, Claire is treated cruelly by the popular girls, who send cell phone text-messages to each other, with messages such as “Do we like [Claire]?” with replies that include “thumbs down”: “Massie let out a sigh and stretched her arm across the backseat . . . Obviously Massie wanted [Claire] to see her tiny cell phone display. When Claire saw the thumbs-down icon, her blood boiled and her body froze.” [Lisi Harrison, *The Clique* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2004), 41-42.] The *Twilight* series, however, does not portray instances of such cruelty among girls. In fact, Bella does not maintain any close female friendships outside of a relationship with her boyfriend Edward’s family. In the *Gossip Girl*, *A-List*, and *It Girl* series, most characters engage in under-age drinking, smoking cigarettes and illegal drug use, such as smoking marijuana. For example, in the *It Girl* series, three characters are caught taking ecstasy at their boarding school, and one character, Tinsley, is suspended: “She’d especially enjoy encouraging the theory that she’d selfishly taken the rap for Callie and Brett after the three of them were caught on E last spring, the spring of their sophomore year.” [Cecily von Ziegesar, *Notorious* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 2.] In *The Clique* and *Twilight* series, however, this form of rebellious, and relatively inconsequential, behavior is absent from the narrative.

<sup>303</sup> Lev Grossman, Stephenie Meyer: A New J.K. Rowling? April 24, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1734838,00.html#ixzz1FC0ZkDUg>

series that both of Bella's parents still care for her, and she is additionally accepted into Edward's family. In this way, the books not only reflect Bella's "dissociation," but also serve as a soothing reprieve from the full effects the process of dissociation may have in the lives of adolescent readers. The following responses to the question, "What is this character's family like?" provide evidence of this explanation of *Twilight's* popularity.

**Responses for Bella:**

**H:** Her enthusiastic and love-able mom just married a baseball player so Bella moved in with her quiet and protective father, Charlie.

**A:** Bella's mom and dad are divorced. Her mother is very much more outgoing than Bella and her dad is more mature and grounded. For the *Twilight* series Bella lives with her dad though but she loves both of her parents.

**Responses for Edward:**

**E:** They're very loving and welcoming of everything- super close to each other. I was kind of jealous of that since my family isn't really like that.

**D:** His family is a close, open, loving, caring family that communicates with each other. They are a family of vampires.

In the *Twilight* series, the world is simplified into "right" and "wrong" as well as "good" and "evil." These answers imply that the simplistic divisions in the *Twilight* series, as well as a noticeable absence of cruelty and pressure within social groups, are comforting to adolescent girl readers of all ages, while still appealing to them realistically:

**Interviewer:** Are the lifestyles of the characters in the books similar or different to your own? How so?

**A:** I think the relationship between all the characters and their parents are somewhat similar to mine in their life styles. For instance, Jacob Black and Bella sometimes gets really annoyed with their fathers - which is like how my parents can get annoying. But all the characters love their parents and I do too.

The difficulty in critiquing *Twilight* is that, superficially, there is very little to criticize. As fifteen year old “S” remarked after noting that her least favorite series was *The Clique*, “I think the *Twilight* series is [*sic*] probably the best books I ever read.” Similarly, twenty year old “E” explained of all the series, including *Gossip Girl*, *The It Girl*, *The A-List* and *The Clique*: “I’ve enjoyed them because I always have very serious things on my mind and these let me break away from those for a bit. I’ll never argue that they are good literature, but I don’t regret reading them because they gave me an avenue of escape many times. The only thing I do regret is letting *Twilight* get under my skin—sometimes I get too into stories—it’s a fine line . . . and kind of weird I guess.”

These interviews have demonstrated—in sometimes surprising ways—much of what I have discussed throughout this thesis. Adolescent girls at times are passive recipients of neo-liberal and conservative postfeminist discourse, but are also promising critical readers. The responses of these girls, who represent a variety of ages, socio-economic statuses, and ethnicities, tie together an important concluding point of this thesis: the continued necessity of feminism. Postfeminist culture informs girls that they are no longer subject to patriarchal constraints, and therefore have no use for feminist ideologies. Yet, as I demonstrate throughout this thesis, the economic, physical, sexual, and relational role mapped out for girls in contemporary culture suggests quite the opposite, revealing that feminist thought is still necessary and perhaps even more relevant. Feminists such as Natasha Walter have countered the



contention that women have “made great strides” and are no longer in need of feminism by pointing out the errors in this way of thinking.<sup>304</sup> Using Walter’s example, we can look at the argument that women today have achieved equality because they are represented as CEO’s of Fortune 500 companies. The flawed nature of this assertion lies in the fact that of the 500 CEO’s, only *fifteen* are women, leaving the remaining 485 companies in the charge of men.<sup>305</sup> It is this unsound platform, from which postfeminism attempts to convince women of their (superficial) equality and teach girls that feminism is irrelevant, that necessitates a critical examination of these messages, especially as they are presented to girls in adolescence.

The argument of this thesis reveals that inequalities today are similar to that of the treatment of women throughout history. However, present inequalities are distinguishable, but perhaps less obvious, for two significant reasons. First, women’s continued subordination has been glossed over, and deceptively glamorized in a postfeminist reclamation of patriarchal norms. Second, both neo-liberal and conservative postfeminist ideas are pervasive in popular culture, and facilitated by instantly accessible technology. For this reason, adolescent girls are exposed to gender-oppressive ideas early in development, and may come to accept them, rather than critically challenge them as they move into adulthood. As Shelley Budgeon writes, “beliefs about what it means to be feminine—a woman—remain unquestioned because they are presented as unquestionable, as natural and, by implication, normal. In taking on the form of common sense, these re-presentations [*sic*] not only impede social change and progress, but presuppose that such change is necessary.”<sup>306</sup> In each chapter of this thesis, I provide examples to contradict cultural and media suggestions that the position of women has improved to such an extent that

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<sup>304</sup> Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 3.

<sup>305</sup> CNN Money: Fortune 500, “Women CEO’s,” May 3, 2010, <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2010/womenceos/>

<sup>306</sup> Shelley Budgeon, “Fashion Magazine Advertising: Constructing Femininity in the Postfeminist Era,” in *Gender & Utopia in Advertising* ed. Luigi and Alessandra Manca (Illinois: Procopian Press, 1994), 63.

women no longer need to challenge it. To provide another comparison, I will use Simone de Beauvoir's description of a young girl's insecurities, written in the 1950's, and demonstrate how it may easily be applied to a young girl today:

The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straightforward expression of her individuality; it becomes foreign to her; and at the same time she becomes for others a thing: on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy. She would like to be invisible; it frightens her to become flesh and show her flesh. This distaste is expressed by many young girls through the wish to be thin; they no longer want to eat, and if they are forced to, they have vomiting spells; they constantly watch their weight.<sup>307</sup>

Beauvoir connects the manifestation of a loss of pleasure in eating with the adolescent girl's awareness of her own objectification. The postfeminist "phallic" girl, however, is told she is "empowered" today for accepting objectifying comments, and perhaps even dressing in a way that will provoke them. As Linda Smolak and Sarah K. Murnen write, "women are socialized to accept the less invasive forms of sexualization as normal, and perhaps even desirable, indicators that they are fulfilling expected role norms."<sup>308</sup> Today, de Beauvoir's observations are still applicable. After treating women with eating disorders for over twenty-five years, Marlene Boskind-White and William C. White Jr. suggest a social and cultural basis for the persistence of girls' low self-esteem, negative body image, and other pathologies such as eating disorders:

Powerful socialization rituals force women to internalize confusing demands. It is this brainwashing/training beginning in childhood that creates a vulnerability to depression,

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<sup>307</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 308.

<sup>308</sup> Linda Smolak and Sarah K. Murnen, "The Sexualization of Girls and Women as a Primary Antecedent of Self-Objectification" in *Self-Objectification in Women: Causes, Consequence, and Counteractions* eds. Rachel M. Calogero, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and J. Kevin Thomspon (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 66.

inadequate coping strategies, excessive worrying, and ‘thinking disorders’—low self-esteem, self-hatred/body hatred, and the feeling that whatever is achieved is *still not good enough*.<sup>309</sup>

The objectification of the female, as well as her loss of individuality, has not changed in the past sixty years, except to place the blame of both her objectification and dissatisfaction squarely on her shoulders: whether or not an adolescent girl believes it is empowering, or is “willfully” participating in it, girls’ objectification and dissatisfactions are commonly dismissed as self-imposed and thereby discredited.

In the 1960’s, Betty Friedan examined the cultural landscape of the United States, determining that “American women no longer know who they are. They are sorely in need of a new image to help them find their identity.”<sup>310</sup> Adolescent girls today are facing a similar problem of subjectivity, and often look to popular culture, such as chick-lit texts, for guidance. Despite the oppressive prevalence of inherently patriarchal, postfeminist neo-liberal and conservative ideologies, girls and women are led to believe they are “empowered” by various postfeminist narratives. However, as argued in chapter three, these very same narratives contain within them the potential for critique, something promisingly supported in the interviews, where girls demonstrated a certain amount of resilience to these discourses. Both the analysis of chick lit and the interviews have exposed a few fundamental problems that must continue to be critically interpreted: the negative depictions of, or absence of “true” homosexual relationships, the encouragement of the “heterosexual fantasy,” the mass production of chick-lit series for the purpose of garnering quick and consistent profit, the continued emphasis on and the commoditization of “ideal” beauty, and the preemptive blurring of issues of race and class. I

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<sup>309</sup> Boskind-White, Marlene, William C. White, *Bulimia/Anorexia: The Binge/Purge Cycle and Self-Starvation* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 218.

<sup>310</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1983), 72.

therefore encourage teaching adolescents to think critically about the messages they are receiving as well as their belief about female “roles” and their own identities. Betty Freidan encouraged a “new image” to help women find their identity, and this “new image” translated into the second-wave feminist movement. Today, however, the “new image” is the objectified postfeminist woman, reinforced by the symbolic “death of feminism.” I propose, therefore, that girls must be taught to look inward, and find power within their internal subjectivity, so that they may answer the question “Who should I be?” in terms of who they already are.