

The postfeminist *flâneuse*: the literary value of contemporary chick lit

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This snapshot outlines the broader area of my research into the literary 'status' and 'value' of contemporary chick lit, and then focuses on one area of my analysis – how chick lit is contributing to the literary debate of the 'flâneuse'. The potential of a flâneuse – a female version of the traditionally male literary figure who observes and experiences the city – has been argued for nearly thirty years. Given Gemma Burgess' use of the term in her 2011 chick lit novel A Girl Like You, could it be that it is now possible, in this postfeminist environment, for women to embody this role? This snapshot will offer a brief overview of the flâneur/flâneuse debate and use Burgess' novel to consider its current relevance – and question whether, finally, a woman can be a flâneuse in contemporary culture.

Keywords: Postfeminism, Flâneur, Chick Lit, Gender, Literary Status

Introduction

Since the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding 1997), the text which is widely credited for triggering the avalanche of novels commonly labelled 'chick lit', this genre of fiction has become one of the most popular amongst the contemporary female reading public. Chick lit has attracted huge attention in the academic world, where these texts have been debated, criticised and analysed at length within the concept of 'postfeminism' (see for example Ferriss and Young 2006b; Genz 2009; Genz and Brabon 2009;

Gill 2007; Harzewski 2011; McRobbie 2009; Whelehan 2005) and in order to examine representations of contemporary femininity and culture (see for example Ferriss and Young 2006a; Fest 2009; Gill and Herdickerhoff 2006; Smith 2008). Yet whilst this work provides a valuable commentary on these postfeminist cultural texts, it could be said that academic analysis thus far has concerned itself with the 'chick' of chick lit, and the 'lit' aspect – that these are 'literary' texts – has been somewhat overlooked. The one exception to this is a common acknowledge-

ment of the intertextual heritage of the genre which most often references the influence of Jane Austen; yet even here it is made clear that although Austen may influence the genre, ‘chick lit cannot justifiably make a claim to comparable literary status’ (Ferris and Young 2006a, 4).

It is this idea of ‘literary status’ which directs the focus of my PhD research. By this I mean the traditional, hierarchical understanding of ‘literature’ as different and somehow more important and of greater value than ‘popular fiction’. Questions of gender continually intersect with these discussions, as it is very often the popular genres of fiction aimed at women which are most derided (see Gelder 2004; McCracken 1998). My research aims to interrogate these distinctions, examining how these categories are decided and validated, and use a literary analysis of chick lit – not only a genre of popular fiction, but a genre intentionally produced by and for women – to seek to destabilise these rigid categories. In this snapshot I will share an aspect of this analysis, offering a brief examination of how the chick lit novel *A Girl Like You* by Gemma Burgess (2011) engages with the literary figure of the *flâneur*.

The *flâneur*

The *flâneur* was originally tied both historically and geographically to nineteenth century Paris, but throughout the last century he has wandered in many directions,

through continued theorisation by a number of literary critics. The *flâneur* figure was first characterised by the French poet Charles Baudelaire, who described him as ‘a passionate spectator’ of the city and its crowds, one who has a ‘capacity of seeing’ and an ‘acute and magical perceptiveness’ (Baudelaire 1964 [1863], 9-12). For Baudelaire the *flâneur* was a philosopher, poet and artist – an observer of modern urban life.

Many critics have continued theorising the *flâneur* and this figure is now widely accepted as ‘the secret spectator of the spaces and places of the city... [whose activity] is essentially about freedom [and] the meaning of existence, or the lack of a meaning’ (Tester 1994, 7-8). The *flâneur* is free to wander the streets in order to experience the city – watching, consuming, thinking – enjoying the privileged position of observer, and yet this figure is not without contention. Along with questions of class, cultural position and contemporary relevance, perhaps the greatest area of debate is over whether the *flâneur* can ever be female: can a *flâneuse* exist, accessing and enjoying the same freedom and privilege as the traditionally male *flâneur*?

Baudelaire’s original assertion was that a woman could not take on this role, predominantly because she is part of the male *flâneur*’s observation: ‘[woman is] the object of the keenest admiration and curiosity... a

kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching' (Baudelaire 1964 [1863], 30). This objectification of woman as idol, made silent and 'stupid', allows no possibility for female agency or subjectivity. Janet Wolff brought attention to the 'invisible *flâneuse*' in her 1985 article by that title, claiming that a female *flâneur* 'was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the 19th century' (Wolff 1985, 45) and this suggestion was subsequently backed up by a number of other theorists (see Felski 1995; Pollock 1988). Yet most of the discussion of the *flâneuse* has been historically situated, focussing on whether *flânerie* was possible for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and based on literature from that time period. My research has led me to question, firstly, whether *flânerie* is a historically defined concept or does the *flâneur* still manifests himself in the contemporary culture of twenty-first century cities? If the response to this is yes, then could it be that given social changes following second-wave feminism, a *flâneuse* could now exist in this contemporary postfeminist moment – found in the pages of contemporary postfeminist novels – finally experiencing the city on her own terms, with the freedom and privilege that brings?

A Girl Like You

There's nothing I have to do.
And nowhere I have to be. With

no destination, no map, and no agenda, I'm free to just wander... [Usually] I have a list of errands to run, shoes to look for, dates to think about, texts to send. Busyb-
usybusy.

But not today.

The French have the perfect word for it: '*flâneur*'. It means to stroll around aimlessly but enjoyably, observing life and your surroundings. Baudelaire defined a *flâneur* as 'a person who walks the city in order to experience it'.

As Plum would say: I'm *flâneur*-ing like a mother****er (Burgess 2011, 339-340).

Given Burgess' reference of not only the *flâneur* but Baudelaire himself, a close reading of this novel was clearly the most appropriate way to begin my literary analysis of chick lit. The heroine of the text, Abigail, both embodies and challenges the figure of the *flâneur* throughout the novel, and whilst this examination may raise more questions than it answers, I will use this snapshot to offer a few examples of her *flânerie*.

Abigail is without doubt a woman in the city and a woman of the city. The text is littered with references to areas of London, at times labelling specific locations: 'my new flatshare [is] in the delightfully-monikered Primrose Hill... my office is just behind Blackfriars... we're meeting at

the Albannach bar, just off Trafalgar Square... we start walking back up Portobello Road towards Notting Hill Gate... I walk towards Fleet Street and then up to Covent Garden' (Burgess 2011, 9, 20, 49, 97, 375). Just as the traditional *flâneur* is 'a living guidebook' who has 'at his fingertips all the important addresses' (Parkhurst Ferguson 1994, 30-31), Abigail has an extensive knowledge of London as locations to be navigated geographically, but she also has an awareness of the city's contemporary cultural environments – she doesn't just know the city, she knows how to use the city.

In many situations Abigail displays the 'aloof independence' and 'disdainful individuality' attributed to the *flâneur* (Gilloch 1996, 153), and she has a nostalgia for the 'old' city in her love of old pubs and coffee shops: 'we walk to a tiny Italian coffee shop that I'm pretty sure has been here since the 1950s... it makes me happy somehow, to be here where they've been serving coffee for 60 years, rather than at a big *Pret-A-Costabucks* chain' (Burgess 2011, 63). This explicit rejection of consumer culture seems most appropriate for a *flâneur*, highlighting the 'necessary distance which characterises the *flâneur's* relationship to the public sphere' (Wolff 1995, 102), and also stressing a desire for authenticity and the 'real' city.

Throughout the novel there are multiple references to people-watching and observation and Abi-

gail often sits outside or at windows in public places and busy areas so that she can see people, fulfilling Rob Shields' claim that 'the *flâneur* is out to see and be seen, and thus requires a crowd to be able to watch others and take part of the metropolitan throng... observation is the *raison d'être* of the *flâneur*' (Shields 1994, 65). Further, the novel includes long sections of introspection, reflecting on what Abigail has seen and experienced. Given that *A Girl Like You* is written in the first person, Abigail becomes Baudelaire's poet, artist, philosopher *flâneur* in her musings: the "I" with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I', at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself' (Baudelaire 1964 [1863], 9).

Whilst this snapshot is just a glimpse of the full analysis, it is hopefully enough to warrant my claim that Abigail is indeed a *flâneur* and perhaps postfeminist culture has provided a way for the elusive *flâneuse* to finally make her way onto the streets of the metropolis – her *flânerie* however, is not without its complexities. One significant way in which Abigail challenges the traditional figure of the *flâneur* is by her persistent need to engage in contemporary cultural social exchanges, most particularly by texting and using Facebook. When she is early to meet a friend she decides to sit outside in Trafalgar Square, seemingly a perfect opportunity to engage in detached observation as

a *flâneur*, yet she chooses to use the time to text a number of friends, expressing agitation when no-one immediately responds. Yet perhaps this is part of how *flânerie* must develop in the twenty-first century, given the contemporary cultural importance of social media and interaction; examination and discussion of this issue will be an integral part of my future research.

More significantly, with regards to this journal edition's focus on current research within 'gendered subjects' and chick lit's position with postfeminism, is the way Abigail's romantic relationships further complicate her *flânerie*; most often her relationship with Robert, the hero of the novel. Abigail's enjoyment of the city is increased when it is shared with Robert, but is severely limited by their erratic relationship – when they argue she is unable to enjoy the city to the same extent: 'I walk back down through Regent's Park, which is far less delightful now that I'm alone' (Burgess 2011, 133). Perhaps in this area Abigail is not quite able to retain the distance from self needed to truly observe, consumed as she is within the minutiae of her romantic entanglements. Anne Friedberg argues that *flânerie* was not possible for a woman 'until she was free to roam the city on her own' (Friedberg 1993, 36), and whilst Abigail does this physically – and often enjoys it – in her mind she is never far from Robert or the man she is currently dating, even whilst

she is observing: 'walking back up Portobello road... I just remembered something about Adam... I wonder if this is what Dave loves about Hong Kong, I think involuntarily... The piazza in Covent Garden is so beautiful and yet it's somewhere Londoners practically never go, I muse... and automatically, my mind goes back to Robert' (Burgess 2011, 97, 341, 375). This consistent focus on the men in her life fulfils Juliette Wells' assertion that 'every chick lit novel centres on a love plot' (Wells 2006, 49), but does little to rebuff the argument against female *flâneurs* which 'stems in large part from [their] presumed incapacity for self-sufficiency' (Parkhurst Ferguson 1994, 31).

Conclusion

Clearly, many questions remain regarding the possibility of twenty-first century *flânerie*, as well as the actuality of postfeminist freedom on offer to women, and I will be continuing to examine these issues. I do feel though, that a 'literary' reading of chick lit not only allows for development in existing theories of gender and postfeminist culture, but begins to challenge the rigid hierarchies of literature. As my research progresses I hope to pursue this interrogation, and potentially work to disrupt and destabilise this categorisation.

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