

An Irish Feminist Chick Lit?

Examining the Social and Cultural Contexts of Marian Keyes’ Work



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Work**

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or part, by me or another person, for the purpose of obtaining any other qualification.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

For my parents and for Seán;
Thanks for always believing in me

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‘A Feminism of Their Own? : Irish Women’s History and Contemporary Irish Women’s Writing’. *Estudios Irlandeses*, Issue 5, 2010, pp. 92-101.

[http://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/Issue5/Issue5_pdfs/Mary_Ryan.pdf] (6,361 words)

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‘What’s Love Got To Do With It? : Family, Sex and Domestic Violence in Contemporary Irish Women’s Fiction’. *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*, Issue No. 20 (2011) (10,024 words)

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‘Don’t Judge a Book by Its Sparkly Pink Cover: Irish Chick Lit’s Discussions of the ‘Unsafe’ Topics’. *Anything But Safe: Sex, Sexuality and Gender Essay Collection*. Adam

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis will present a study of the work of Irish writer Marian Keyes in terms of her texts, and the cultural context of these texts. The nature of chick lit as a formulaic genre will be examined, and the ability of Keyes' work to transcend the apparent limits of this genre by addressing important social issues will also be addressed. This close examination of Keyes' work, both her fiction and non-fiction, will demonstrate that she uses the genre's framework to provide progressive perspectives on a wide variety of other issues.

Keyes's writing will be examined through three contextual paradigms. She writes from, and within, three different perspectives: her role as an Irish author (and, importantly, a female Irish author), her role as a chick lit author, and her potential to be an author who addresses contemporary feminist issues. Working within the chick lit framework, Keyes tends to feature Ireland as the setting of most of her novels (and memories of Ireland and Irish life in the novels that take place elsewhere), while also writing about an increasing number of feminist issues, including domestic violence and sexual harassment and discrimination.

It is thus hoped that this thesis will provide a serious, theoretically-informed reading of an author who is widely read and very popular, which will demonstrate that her writing addresses serious issues in society from a broadly post-feminist perspective. I hope to show that Marion Keyes is a significant figure in terms of any analysis of the position, location and complexity of the role of women in contemporary culture.

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Introduction

Chick lit is simultaneously fiction about and for the “new woman”, the contemporary reader of our postfeminist culture, and a new “woman’s fiction”, a form of popular literature (largely) written by women for a female audience. (Ferriss: 2006, 12)

Irish writer Marian Keyes is most commonly referred to as a “chick lit author”, due to the content, style, and even the covers of her books, which are seen to fulfil the characteristics of this contemporary genre of fiction which has ‘come to be recognised for its distinctive subject matter, character, audience and narrative style’ (Genz: 2009, 84). Unfortunately, while ‘the mainstream media has been quick to take up the subject of these young, single, working women, the academic community has been slower to respond’ (Smith: 2008, 4), so applying the chick lit label to Keyes’ writing has meant that her work is at risk of being subjected to ridicule and disdain, rather than being examined from a serious, objective, academic perspective. This is not a wholly surprising situation: chick lit is in the precarious position of being both popular fiction, which is usually ‘seen as easily understood, simplistic, and formulaic’ (Hinds: 2006b, 169), and women’s fiction, and so it has become ‘an easy target for the critics’ derision, relegated to both subordinated spaces – the popular and the feminine’ (Smith: 2008, 4). In terms of popular culture alone, while some critics have ‘emphasised the importance of popular culture in the everyday experience of individuals, the view that mass culture should not be merely thought of in negative terms, either as a tool of capitalist ideology in maintaining the political and social status quo, or as the exclusive determinant of individual and collective identity, is still relatively uncommon’ (Smyczyńska: 2007, 34). As long ago as 1960, Dwight MacDonald condemned popular culture as not even having ‘the theoretical possibility of being good. [...] It is not just unsuccessful art. It is non-art. It is even

anti-art' (MacDonald: 2006, 9). The condemnation of popular culture is, therefore, by no means a recent viewpoint, as Tania Modleski states:

Criticism of mass art can often be a tedious affair. Periodically, a champion of high culture will deplore at great length the decline of taste and sensibility on the part of the reading or viewing public. At least since the publication of Q.D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* in 1932 and many "high-art" critics have assumed that mass art dulls the mind and renders its consumers unfit to appreciate the beauties of great works. (Modleski: 2008, 103)

Resulting from such views, it has simultaneously been the case that 'culture which is widely disseminated and consumed by large numbers of people – that is, popular culture – has attracted ever more study and analysis' yet also 'remains in many ways inadequately studied' (Hinds: 2006b, 163). This has happened largely because popular culture has always tended to be viewed as "mere" entertainment or "just" a commercial enterprise or "only" a phenomenon without "depth" or "seriousness" – and thus is not worthy of the kinds of critical thinking that colleges and universities are supposed to foster' (Harmon: 2006, 62). Stemming from such circumstances, chick lit has not only been dismissed for being linked with popular culture, but has also joined the 'long tradition of discounting women writers and their readers' (Wells: 2006, 48), a tradition within which the quality of women's writing has been questioned by critics who are 'quick to label women's fiction as low art, a term which, by default, often denies any thoughtful consideration of that art' (Smith: 2008, 4).

While chick lit has often been denied any credibility, with critics asserting that the genre is no more than a passing fad, it is also undeniable that chick lit is 'a significant cultural phenomenon and one which could only have emerged in a specific social and cultural context' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 10). This is the case with much popular culture which is no longer, and perhaps never has been, merely "entertainment." Popular culture also functions in 'a number of positive ways, which too many people have overlooked' (Harmon: 2006, 69). The study of chick lit, as with all popular culture, is important and relevant simply because it is 'with the people, a part of their everyday lives, speaking their language. It is therefore irresistibly influential. [...] It is the everyday world around us: the mass media,

entertainments, diversions, heroes, icons, rituals, psychology, religion – our total life picture’ (Browne: 2006, 75). In this sense, a study of popular culture, in any form, ‘is a way of examining the broader culture itself’ (Harmon: 2006, 63), an enterprise that, far from being trivial or worthless, is ‘as complex and serious an enterprise as any available in academia’ (Harmon: 2006, 63). Additionally, a study of the texts of popular culture, particularly, in this case, of ‘contemporary mainstream feminine novels, is one of the many recent efforts to investigate practices of the “silent majority”’ (Smyczyńska: 2007, 24), that is, those who have traditionally been marginalised and excluded from public discourse. These are just some of the reasons why a study such as this seems not only worthwhile but valuable to the larger study of popular culture and feminism, in that it may position at least some chick lit as being ‘far more than a form of trivial entertainment; it is a powerful means of disseminating discourses of modern identity’ (Smyczyńska: 2007, 23).

In “The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia” (1987), Michael Schudson made the following statement:

On the one hand, it seems perfectly appropriate to study formulaic literatures, romances or detective stories, to see how they work, to think about *why* so many people respond so eagerly to them, and to contemplate the meaning of form and formula and genre in literature generally. On the other hand, there is justification for a critical tradition that pays greatest tribute to work that challenges form, breaks or becomes self-conscious about formula, blurs the boundaries of genres, or seems to surpass the limits of meaning possible within a genre. (Schudson: 2006, 94)

This thesis attempts to enact both of these objectives suggested by Schudson by studying an apparently formulaic genre (chick lit) and, secondly, by studying how Keyes also transcends the apparent limits of this genre and how she utilises its format to address many more issues than is typically perceived. This close examination of Keyes’ fiction and non-fiction demonstrates that she is not completely limited by the chick lit conventions, but instead uses the genre’s framework to incorporate perspectives on a wide variety of other issues. This thesis intends to undertake such an examination, exploring how Keyes writes from, and within, three different perspectives: her position as an Irish author (and, importantly, a female

Irish author), her position a chick lit author, and her potential to be a contemporary feminist author. These three contexts offer pertinent points of analysis in terms of Keyes' writing because, together, they comprise the contextual frameworks of her writing. Working within the chick lit framework, Keyes tends to feature Ireland as the setting of most of the novels, and with memories of Ireland and Irish life in the novels that take place elsewhere, while also writing about an increasing number of feminist issues, including domestic violence, sexual harassment and discrimination. Keyes herself proves an interesting subject for this study, not only because of the content of her work, but also because she is an author with whom we are very familiar, both because she has spoken freely and openly about her battles with alcoholism and depression, and also because she writes non-fiction, which provides an insight into her views on a number of issues which also appear in her novels, allowing readers to form a connection between the author and her work.

This thesis is not attempting to compare Keyes to other authors and their novels, nor is it aiming to cite Keyes as the only author whose work may extend from the boundaries of the genre within which they write, as there are undoubtedly others who are writing in equally positive and diverse ways. Similarly, this thesis is also not aiming to claim that all chick lit is undeserving of the criticism it receives, as, within any genre, there are novels which are arguably "better" or "worse" than others, and each novel should be judged on its own merits. Instead, this thesis is attempting to use Keyes as just one example of how an author can simultaneously write within a genre's conventions while, at the same time, stretching that genre's seemingly restrictive boundaries to explore a wide variety of issues. The thesis will examine the three contextual frameworks already outlined, and will analyse how Keyes is both bounded by their conventions, but also how she attempts to transcend them. Using a theoretical matrix that is postfeminist as well as deconstructive, her work will be located in terms of issues of identity, gender and the interaction between the private and public spheres.

In doing so, this analysis of Marian Keyes' work will employ a largely thematic approach in undertaking a close reading of her fiction and non-fiction, examining it in terms of specific Irish societal issues, in terms of the feminist aspects of her work, and also examining the generic context within which she writes. The key aims of this thesis are as follows:

- To present a close reading of the work of chick lit author Marian Keyes, using a thematic approach, from socio-cultural, feminist, and generic perspectives.
- To determine how Keyes depicts a variety of Irish issues, particularly relating to the role of women. This includes examining how Keyes represents contemporary Ireland, and the changes this encompasses, while at the same time displaying an awareness of the on-going influence of Irish views from the past.
- To examine how Keyes' work fits within the chick lit framework. In doing so, I will investigate how Keyes' work is shaped and limited by the genre, and by attitudes surrounding it, but also how she transcends the genre's perceived limitations and utilises the genre to discuss a variety of serious issues.
- To suggest that Keyes' work may have the potential to be viewed as the twenty-first century form of "feminist fiction", as it speaks to and about contemporary women's lives, while also discussing areas of concern to feminist politics in an accessible format.
- In its entirety, this thesis aims to suggest that chick lit may have the potential to be a powerful form of fiction to contemporary readers, who may be empowered and emancipated by reading stories of women "just like them", who are experiencing similar issues while maintaining individuality, and who find peace and happiness in their lives while overcoming all that life throws at them.

The thesis will suggest adequations between parts of Keyes' work and theoretical considerations of such issues and will suggest that she can be seen to give fictive

embodiment, within the broad paradigm of popular culture, to issues which have concerned theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Hélène Cixous as well as a number of contemporary postfeminist authors, including Judith Butler, Natasha Walter, and Naomi Wolf. It is hoped that it will provide a serious reading of an author who is widely read and very popular but whom, I would argue, is also a significant figure in terms of any analysis of the position, location and complexity of the role of women in contemporary culture.

Chapter Summary

In his essay regarding the methodology for studying popular culture texts, Harold E. Hinds recommends that, after selecting ‘a popular text for study, it will be necessary to place it within its broad historical, temporal, economic, technological, and cultural contexts’ (Hinds: 2006b, 164). Taking such advice, this thesis will examine Keyes’ work in terms of three distinct areas. Chapter One will examine the socio-cultural context of Keyes’ work. It will explore how Ireland’s historical and cultural development has influenced, or limited, her work. More specifically, by analysing Keyes’ fiction and non-fiction, it will observe how her work is influenced by, and represents, the place of women in Ireland in terms of historical issues, social values, and legal issues, by offering a brief overview of the changing status of the role of women in the Irish public sphere, as well as by discussing the belated nature of Irish society with respect to contemporary Anglophone and European countries. In the process, chapter one will discuss the primary areas that have been of issue to women in Irish society, including: marriage, motherhood and the family; women and work; sex and the body; and homosexuality, tracing the slow process towards a more liberal and liberating paradigm, a paradigm which has both shaped Keyes’ work, but which she is also in a position to influence through that work. The chapter will analyse how Keyes’ work underscores the position of Irish women at the same time as offering possible fictive scenes which suggest an alternative role for women in such socially-restricting situations. It will suggest that some of

these fictive scenes offer emancipatory possibilities which could be seen to affect the reality of readers' lives.

Chapter Two will focus on the generic context of Keyes' work by examining how she adheres to, or indeed, expands, chick lit's thematic conventions. It will discuss the history, background, and characteristics of the chick lit genre, as well as the criticism the genre has received. The chapter will then explore if, and how, Keyes adheres to chick lit's typical conventions, and will also examine how she may have the potential to transcend the genre's limitations through a more innovative use of these generic tropes.

Hinds recommends that 'one may well want to limit the "close reading" to one critical approach' (Hinds: 2006b, 167), so Chapter Three will therefore explore the gender context of Keyes' work, namely the feminist potential of her writing. Specifically, it will examine her work from the perspective of third wave and post-feminism, the contemporary waves of feminism most commonly associated with chick lit and the period in which it is written and based. Third wave and post-feminism are especially relevant because, unlike earlier feminist waves, they 'critically engage with popular cultural forms – television, music, computer games, film and fiction – and position these within a broader interrogation of what "feminism" means in a late twentieth- and twenty-first-century context' (Genz: 2009, 160).

This chapter will discuss the work of a number of theorists associated with these waves of feminism – such as Judith Butler, Natasha Walter, and Naomi Wolf – and will examine how they correspond with Keyes' work, in terms of a focus on broadly similar issues. The chapter will also refer to Keyes' non-fiction to discover her own attitudes to women's issues. In short, this chapter will examine how Keyes' work presents a certain parallel to some issues raised by third wave and post-feminism. In doing so, this chapter will discuss popular culture and politics; in this case, women's popular culture (chick lit) and feminism. It will suggest that some of Keyes' work may be said to "embody" feminist

thought in that, rather than rehearsing feminist theory, she embodies it by presenting examples of women's repression in her characters and by showing how the perspectives of feminism can ameliorate some of these problems. Some of the areas discussed will include the "family versus career" debate, workplace harassment and discrimination, and issues relating to sexuality. It will be suggested that her work can be seen as mimetic postfeminism as opposed to diegetic post-feminism as she shows, rather than tells, the experience of women in contemporary culture. In this sense, chick lit, as with popular culture in general, may be said to circulate political issues to a wider audience than is available to pure theory, and in an arguably more reader-friendly discourse.

While there are numerous full-length books and shorter articles already in publication about chick lit, I believe this thesis, while undoubtedly adding to these texts, also contains a number of original elements which differentiate it from existing knowledge, or, indeed, expands on these existing texts. These include the fact that:

- This thesis is the first full-length academic study of Marian Keyes.
- This is the first full-length study which undertakes a theoretical reading of chick lit in terms of socio-cultural, generic, and feminist contexts.
- This thesis aims to explore the importance of chick lit as a genre.
- It presents a clear connection between chick lit and contemporary feminism.
- It examines a specific link between Keyes' chick lit and its portrayal of Irish women's history.
- It compares generic chick lit (in terms of its typical – stereotypical, even – representations and characteristics) and the specifics of Keyes' own work; that is, how she writes within the chick lit conventions and how she also transcends them.

It is undeniable that 'historically rooted biases against both popular fiction and women's writing have existed and continue to exist even today, as evidenced by the heavy criticism

aimed at chick lit' (Smith: 2008, 15). Yet I hope, by the end of this thesis, to have suggested that Marian Keyes is an example of a chick lit author who proves that the genre is broader and more worthwhile than many would believe. Whereas chick lit – indeed, popular culture in general – was once criticised and ridiculed for being trivial and formulaic, the work of writers such as Keyes, who covers issues regarding Irish women's history, Irish society, and feminist concerns, proves that the genre's potential may be without limits. Just as generic transformations have seen the work of writers who have not been critically acclaimed in the past become retrospectively significant, I would argue that there is a case for some chick lit to be given a critical reading and this is what I hope to accomplish in this thesis through a theoretical reading of the work of Marian Keyes.

Chapter One

Marian Keyes as an Irish Author: Keyes' Irish Socio-Cultural Context

If we listen with new ears, we can hear how this floodtide of women's narratives is changing Ireland. In a culture where words and their makers matter, the effects of such creative expression will be deep and lasting. (St. Peter: 2000, 169)

The French theorist Jacques Derrida has made some pertinent comments regarding the interaction and interpenetration of text and context which I feel are relevant to this examination of the work of Marian Keyes. His much-cited remark from *Of Grammatology* that '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' ('there is nothing outside the text') (Derrida: 1976, 158) has often been taken to mean that theory has no real purchase on the lived life of material reality, but nothing could be further from the truth. I think that what Derrida is actually saying is that the interpretive strategies that we bring to reading are also those that need to be brought to the structures and sign-systems of reality. Twelve years later, in *Limited Inc*, Derrida would offer another such aphorism: '*il n'y a pas de hors contexte*' (there is nothing outside of context) (Derrida: 1988, 136). This tag has become one of the most contested items in the discussion of deconstruction. Derrida, basically, is stressing the constructedness of almost all sociocultural and linguistic structures, and adducing the need for interpretation and contextual placement if interpretative activities are to have any sense of purchase on reality, a perspective underlined by Jacques Lacan who feels that each individual and the meaning of their lives and works are context-specific – 'his [sic] history is unified by the law, by his symbolic universe, which is not the same for everyone' (Lacan: 1991, 197). In other words, it is through the relationship of text and context that meaning is to be found. Texts are written within a certain context and they are both constituted by, and affect some measure of change

in, those contexts. In this study, I propose to examine specific contextual aspects of Keyes' work, namely national, generic and theoretical contexts, and in this chapter, I am going to focus on the Ireland in which she is writing. As Derrida notes, one 'never accedes to a text without some relation to its contextual opening and that a context is not made up of only what is so trivially called a text, that is, the words of a book or the more or less biodegradable paper document in a library' (Derrida: 1989, 841).

One could see the relationship between text and context as akin to that of culture and identity, as while an individual is defined by his or her culture, nevertheless he or she can also individually interact with and transform, to some small degree, that culture. Lacan uses the image of a mirror to describe this interaction in his programmatic essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in which he suggests that identity is formed through misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of the self in the image of that self in a mirror:

It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [assume] an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity's term, '*imago*.' (Lacan: 2006, 76)

In other words, he sees identification as an individual interaction between the self and its image. As Elizabeth Grosz notes, Lacan hovers between seeing the mirror stage as a purely internal, biologically regulated process; and as a linguistically structured, socially regulated relation (Grosz: 1990, 32), and it is the broader range of meaning of the mirror phase that is of interest to me in this study. If we see the mirror in which we misrecognise our identity as a metaphor for the language, images and symbols of our cultural context, then the products of that culture have an ongoing influence on our identity as an individual. In this chapter, I will look at Keyes' books as both cultural productions, and also as meta-mirrors through which women readers can identify with some aspects of behaviour and experience, and through which their gendered roles are defined. So while her work is generically and culturally

situated, it also affects readers in terms of their individual cultural identity, and this is the strand which I wish to examine in this thesis. My main focus will be on how her work functions as an identificatory mirror for women, for, while Keyes does have a number of male readers as well, whether these are acknowledged or not, the predominance of her readership and, indeed her fan-base (judging by the responses on her website), are female, and it is on the experience of women that I will concentrate in this thesis. Initially, I will examine the cultural context of her writing, looking at how her culture has influenced her, and also how she, in turn, has influenced her culture.

This chapter will examine how Ireland's historical and cultural development has influenced, and indeed limited, aspects of Keyes' writing. However, as the historical and cultural development of Ireland is too extensive to study in one chapter alone, it is necessary to limit the areas of discussion. Hence, this chapter will examine how her work is influenced by, and representative of, the place of women in Ireland in terms of historical issues, social values, and legal principles. Her thoughts on the role of women in Ireland will also be explored through an examination of both her fiction and her non-fiction. It will offer a brief overview of the changing status of the role of women in the Irish public sphere, as well as discussing the belated nature of Irish society with respect to contemporary Anglophone and European countries. In particular, this chapter will discuss a selection of sites of contestation in terms of gender issues in Irish society, specifically those of marriage, motherhood and the family; women and work; sex and the body; and homosexuality. It will trace the belated process towards a more liberal and liberating paradigm in terms of all of these areas in contemporary Ireland. This will form a significant contextual framework within which to situate both Keyes and her generic form.

Irish women's history: A brief overview

In her introduction to a study about Irish writer Kate O'Brien, Adele M. Dalsimer cited the two structures that have long been identified as central to Irish culture: she says, the 'family is at the centre of communal life; Catholicism is the anchor of unquestioned orthodoxy and cohesive moral standard' (Dalsimer: 1990, xiii). Related to this, it is therefore possible to recognise the 'foundations of Irish culture – state control of women's reproduction, and the nationalist and religious mythologies, Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland – that have framed and, therefore, limited Irish women' (Moloney: 2003, 198). This emphasis on both the Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland has resulted in women occupying a unique position in Irish society. They have been reduced to little more than "symbols" of the Irish nation, and it has been noted that women's 'contribution to Ireland's cultural and literary heritage has not often been acknowledged or, indeed, recognised' (Hill: 2003, 214). I would argue that to be part of the symbolic capital of a culture is to lessen the real capital value of a subject, and this has very much been the case for Irish women, specifically in the context of other European or Anglophone countries in the developed world, a context against which the movement of women from the private to the public sphere in Ireland has been very much belated.

The family has long been at the heart of Irish life, and Irish women in particular were expected to have no ambitions other than those of wife and mother. Though these attitudes were largely enforced by the Church, whose teachings were adopted by the entire nation, the law in Ireland also reflected these same attitudes:

Women working in many other jobs had no legal redress when obliged to resign on marriage. Women were not entitled to unemployment allowances, because it was assumed that some man would provide for them. The income of a married woman was deemed to be her husband's for tax purposes. (Scannell: 1988, 74)

Thus women had no financial or legal status, and even in the area of nomenclature, they were dependent on their husband as they invariably took on his family name.

Given their attenuated status in the Irish public sphere, Irish women's lives were strictly confined to the private domain, and women's issues were often silenced and hidden from public knowledge. Additionally, both Church and state maintained that women should hold a certain morality, particularly relating to areas of sexuality and reproduction:

Single motherhood was considered shameful in Ireland at that time and children born outside of wedlock were discriminated against in the law. Domestic violence was widely considered a private issue to be dealt with primarily within "the family", and use of contraception/artificial family planning was illegal. (Connolly: 2005, 3)

Thus, the place of women was definitely in the private familial sphere as they had no defined role in the Irish public sphere. Even when there were attempts to try to improve the situation of women in Ireland, such measures were slow to be implemented. In 1970, for instance, the Irish government appointed a Commission for the Status of Women. This commission issued a report in which men and women were equally represented, and which 'contained forty-nine eminently reasonable recommendations for improving women's rights in a number of areas. The government was in no rush to implement them' (Scannell: 1988, 74), which seemed to suggest that the Irish government – Irish society in general, even – maintained a belief that women were only entitled to limited rights and roles.

As feminism began to change the lives of women around the world, Irish feminists decided to work towards improving the situations of women in their country, women who had for so long been repressed by Church and state. This meant that many women's issues, including reproduction and sexuality for instance, were no longer confined to the private sphere, as Irish women's groups 'brought about collective knowledge of the reality of women's lived experience, still "invisible" and unexplored in Irish public discourse at this time' (Connolly: 2005, 27). In 1970, for example, the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM) was active in the public arena. Their principal areas for concern included ' "one family one house", removal of the marriage bar, equal pay, equal access to education, legal rights and availability of contraception' (Connolly: 2005, 27). It took until 1975 for another

women's group of comparable scale to the IWLM emerged Irishwomen United (IWU). As well as concentrating on the key demands of the IWLM, Irishwomen United 'added free contraception, self-determined sexuality, equal pay based on a national minimum wage and the establishment of women's centres' to their list of aims and priorities (Connolly: 2005, 31). That all of this should be taking place only thirty years ago underlines the belatedness of any notion of equality for Irish women when compared to their European counterparts.

It is, then, 'possible to outline general trends and to identify events which, in retrospect, represented important turning points in women's collective experience' (Hill: 2003, 240). Keyes notes how Ireland is currently in a 'strange position', as the 'stranglehold the Catholic Church had on this country has largely disappeared, but a vacuum has been left by its departure' (Keyes: 2001, 70). The belated nature of the breaking of this stranglehold, and the speed at which this has occurred, means that many issues of equality which had long since been addressed in an Anglo-European context, were still problematic for Irish women in the recent past: for example, it is only since 1975 that Irish women have been allowed to serve on a jury. Because of this belatedness, Keyes correctly diagnoses the sense of political and cultural vacuum, as the values and laws which were once in place were quite rapidly changed, removed, or ignored. Irish people in general, but more especially Irish women, have been left in a state of confusion about whether to follow the traditional mores or to espouse a more relativistic modernist or postmodernist paradigm in order to move into the twenty-first century.

Keyes is very conscious of these contextual parameters that shape aspects of her own writing, and in her interviews and essays she makes it clear that she is well-aware of such issues and of their effect on her work. As she explains:

Spiritually speaking, we're two nations, and the split is almost entirely along age lines. Above a certain vintage – and it's hard to see exactly at what age the cut-off point is – devout Catholicism is still the name of the game. Below that the waters become muddied, and a trawl through several thirty-something acquaintances indicates that they have a smorgasbord of

beliefs, where some of the more attractive superstitions and rituals of Catholicism are included – we're still big on white weddings. And some of the more onerous ones – like the ban on sex outside of marriage – have been jettisoned. (Keyes: 2001, 237)

As Keyes notes, 'holy Catholic Ireland [is] no longer so holy or Catholic' (Keyes: 2001, 238), with many Irish people now adopting a more 'à la carte approach' to Catholicism (Keyes: 2001, 240). This sense of societal self-critique can be seen in her fiction, as she focuses on that cut-off point of which she speaks and attempts to explore the liminal zone between the two nations of which she speaks. As noted in *Documenting Irish Feminisms: The Second Wave* (2005), despite the fact that 'Irish women have benefited from the mainstreaming of second-wave feminism in the spheres of employment and law reform especially, change has neither been universal in all areas or realised in all Irish women's lives' (Connolly: 2005, 110). Keyes' texts are reflective of this almost schizophrenic attitude to change in contemporary Irish society, as her characters both seek a more empowered lifestyle and yet remain to some degree locked within an older paradigm.

In *This Charming Man* (2008), for example, she demonstrates a recognition that Irish women's lives are still subject to discrimination, and that the Irish government still needs to implement laws to improve important specific areas of women's lives. In this novel, Keyes introduces the character of Dee Rossini, the Minister for Education and member of an unnamed Irish political party, who was 'vocal about anything to do with women – Ireland's comedy child-care provisions, the dearth of funds for women's refuges, the absence of regulation for plastic surgery' (Keyes: 2008, 168). However, Dee consistently meets opposition in her attempts to help to change the lives and situations of Irish women, and is disgusted at the level of neglect of women's issues that still occurs in Ireland:

She was always highlighting unpalatable treatment of women [...] Only last week she'd objected to the appointment [...] of a male judge, who'd stood against a female candidate, pointing out that rapists and wife-batterers rarely got anything but joke sentences from a sympathetic, almost entirely male judiciary. (Keyes: 2008, 168)

This reflects the anomalous position of women in the contemporary Irish public sphere at the time. Women in powerful positions were still very much isolated in their attempts to change both legal and ideological attitudes to women as the two nations of which Keyes spoke were clearly exerting contrary gravitational pulls.

One possible reason that the status of Irish women's lives remained attenuated and repressed could be that their experiences were 'largely unremarked upon and unrecorded in the historical record' (Hayes: 2001, 3). This consistent lack of research into areas of women's social and economic position in Irish society has meant that 'the lives of both Irish women and Irish men remain under-researched and [therefore] insufficiently understood in many important areas' (O'Gallchoir: 2008, 18). This is true of women of all classes, but especially true in the case of working class women.

Critics of the women's movement in Ireland have argued that Irish women's rights activists were 'essentially an interest group of well-educated, middle-class, Dublin-based feminists who secured extra rights for already privileged women while "ignoring" their working class and rural sisters' (Connolly: 2005, 197). As a result, these "militant activists" only tended to represent a very small proportion of Irish men and women, while other issues affecting the majority of Irish people were often largely ignored; while feminist activists were campaigning for issues that only directly affected a small proportion of the population:

The majority of people, north and south, [were] preoccupied with the daily anxieties of finding and keeping work, and the pleasures and pressures of courting, marrying and raising families. While such activities did not make headline news or provide the material for history textbooks, they made up the bulk of everyday experience. (Hill: 2003, 97)

Ironically, by bringing some issues into the public sphere, other issues, by default, remained unvoiced in the private sphere, and these were often issues that were more domestic and which affected women engaged in more traditional role activities. It is therefore important to examine the position of women's lives in terms of these everyday situations experienced by the "typical" Irish woman, if there can be said to be such a thing. Such "daily anxieties" that

are explored in Keyes's fiction and non-fiction include the importance of family and motherhood in the lives of Irish women, the difficulties faced in the working world, sexuality, and issues concerning the female body, such as reproduction and contraception.

It is hoped that this chapter will reflect a more well-rounded portrayal of the everyday experiences of women in Ireland, experiences that had difficulty finding a space in the public sphere, as well as exploring how Keyes' work can be seen to address this position by offering possible fictive scenes which suggest an alternative role for women in such socially-restricting situations. It will suggest that some of Keyes' fictive scenarios have the potential to offer emancipatory possibilities that could be seen to have a positive effect on some readers' own lives. I do not want to make claims for her work that are untenable; however, given the postmodern context of Keyes' writing and reading – of her texts and their contexts, to cite Derrida again – the point can be made that her texts have their place in the shaping of their contexts and, by extension, of the position of women in a contemporary Irish context.

Ireland, the family, marriage and motherhood

Much feminist debate has tended to focus on the 'timeless and naturalized association of women with the home' (Whelehan: 1995, 9). In the so-called "natural" order, the family was supposed to be provided for by father and nurtured by mother. As Imelda Whelehan explains further:

The home was once again regarded as the proper haven for the 'whole' woman. For 'normal' women – women who married and had children – maintaining the household was to be their proper destiny; indeed it became an identity in itself, to the exclusion of all others. (Whelehan: 1995, 7)

Even when women do enter the working world, their professional life is often considered either 'as a stop-gap or an indirect qualification for marriage' (Greer: 2006, 76). As a result, contemporary society still tends to view the nineteenth-century ideal of the family as the

norm, and many 'attempts to widen the image of the model family further have as yet met with strong rejection' (Pilcher: 2004, 46).

Ireland has often been viewed as a predominantly patriarchal society, largely due to 'its "traditional stance" on [issues such as] reproductive rights and the low participation of women in the labour force' (O'Connor: 1998, 3). These factors have meant that the connection of women with the home and family is perhaps even more of an issue with regards to Irish society, given the belated nature of its embrace of a more modernist socio-cultural perspective. In 1937, the Irish Constitution included a number of laws which 'encouraged the maternal and submissive roles expected of women through which they were meant to improve their country's fate' (Barros del Río: 2000, <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/research/perspectives/i12/EdnaO'Brien.html>!, par.1). Thus Irish society allowed two very limited options for the roles of women: the image of the Virgin Mary was regarded as the ideal role model for women, while the image of the mother was considered to be the prototype of Irish women.

This is a significant iconic and semiotic position for Irish women. In terms of a symbolic order, the role of woman was defined by the metonymic connection with virginity and childbirth, and this position was now enshrined in both the socio-political and cultural-religious sphere. In looking at a societal mirror, women found the reflections to be two-dimensional and very much prescriptive in terms of gender expectations. For Jacques Lacan, the initial object of desire is the identification with the image of the self in the mirror, a process symbolic of the identification with the 'ideal-I'.

Lacan's theory of the mirror stage sets out the importance of the image in the process of forming a cultural identity. In *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*, which was initially delivered on July 17, 1949 in Zurich, at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis, he set out a revolutionary

theory of human identification and relationship between the social and the unconscious. In his formulation, the child enters the mirror phase between six and eighteen months. It is a crucial point in the development of subjectivity, because it is the point at which the child begins to perceive itself as an autonomous, self-controlled entity. Lacan describes the function of the mirror stage as 'a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a connection between the organism and its reality' (Lacan: 2006, 78). The term *imago* differs from the term 'image' by including in its definition 'the *subjective* determination of the image', in other words, the effect of the image on the developing subject at an unconscious level (Evans: 1996, 84). Between the age of six months and two and a half years, the captation of the *imago* dominates the child's behaviour even in the presence of other children, as illustrated in the phenomenon of transitivity, which refers to the way in which young children mirror each other's actions. For example, a child who hits another child on the left side of the face will touch the right side of his/her face and cry. For Lacan, transitivity 'illustrates the confusion of ego and other which is inherent in imaginary identification' (Evans: 1996, 214). This confusion of the ego and the other gives further weight to the significance of the mirror stage, and the confusion of ego/other and image/reality inherent in both sets up a pattern of misidentification, or 'misrecognition' in Lacan's terms (Lacan: 2006, 80), that I will argue has defined the position of women in particular in our image-saturated society.

The two-dimensional image or *gestalt* that the child sees in the mirror is a *méconnaissance* (misrecognition). This *gestalt* anticipates a self-mastery that the child has not yet achieved. The process allows the child to recognise his or her separate identity as a subject, yet it means that the child experiences that identity as inherently alienated, because it presents a coherent, self-governing subjectivity (the Ideal-I) that the child has not, and never will, attain:

For the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a *gestalt*, that is, in an exteriority in which, to be sure, this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all, it appears to him as the contour of his stature that freezes it and in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it. Through these two aspects of its appearance, this *gestalt*—whose power [*pregnance*] should be considered linked to the species, though its motor style is as yet unrecognizable—symbolizes the I's mental permanence, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination. (Lacan: 2006, 76)

The mirror stage situates the agency of the ego 'before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone' (Lacan: 2006, 76).

Lacan stresses that the Ideal-I, which the child internalises in the mirror stage, remains indelibly stamped upon the subject and forever steers subjectivity onto a path of fragmentation and alienation:

The subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality...[internalises] the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. (Lacan: 2006, 78)

Lacan's suggestion that the identity of the individual is based upon a false image of reality is especially relevant to the role of women in society. Identification with images, and particularly with images of ideal perfection, begins with the mirror phase, but continues throughout the entire life of the individual. Societal discourse such as legal, political and medical fields all reflect an image back to the individual, and this image is creative of the identity of each individual, to some degree. Similarly, in the cultural sphere, media advertising, iconic images of women in magazines, the cult of celebrity, the fashion and cosmetics industries all participate in this process. Each of these discourses creates an ideological ideal-I with which the ego of the individual identifies, and as such, creates a constitutive context within which a reified image of women is created.

For Lacan, subjectivity is centred on the interaction of the developing ego with what he terms the 'other'. He sees the identity of the human subject as developing through a number of interactions between the individual and two orders of meaning which he has termed the imaginary and the symbolic. Lacan suggests that self-recognition or, to put it more

correctly, misrecognition is constitutive of the development of the human subject. In the mirror stage, Lacan postulates a child seeing its image in a mirror and becoming fixated on the image, which is both unified and coherent, as opposed to the child's own inchoate motor development. However, the image is also two-dimensional as opposed to three-dimensional. The fragmented infant identifies with, and desires to be like, an image of such wholeness, a process which Lacan sees as seminal to the imaginary order. For him, the mirror stage 'establishes the watershed between the imaginary and the symbolic (Lacan: 2006, 54), and this is the very nexus of the birth of the ego and of a sense of identification with the other of society – ideology, gender, politics and the social sphere. These contextual frameworks are seminal to the development of identity and any discussion of the role of women in culture must take account of this fluid structure. He goes on to suggest that all forms of identification are based on this misrecognition of the self in an image, and extrapolates this into a cultural paradigm where it is the image of the self which is reflected back by social, cultural and ideological mirrors.

Such a societal mirror is to be found in an Irish context in one of the foundational documents of the Irish Republic, and that is the constitution, which dates from July 1st 1937. Within the Irish Constitution, 'the word "mother" is used, interchangeably, with the word "woman" in Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2' (O'Connor: 1998, 91). This "Institution of Motherhood", as it became known, was heavily criticised by feminists, who argued that motherhood was a concept created by patriarchy to exert a strict control on women's reproductive capacities; it served to keep women secluded in the home, dependent on the male breadwinner.

However, this limited and restricted portrayal of individual women was also metamorphosed onto the Irish symbolic order, as woman as trope became an important anthropomorphisation of Ireland as a nation:

In the Irish context, the concept of womanhood led to that of motherhood by law and faith and this destiny was wrapped in a well-spread set of values that did not take into consideration any other facet women could develop. In the island, the fusion of the two allegorical characters, Mother Church and Mother Ireland, relied on the fact that both of them depended on their children to make them whole and glorious which, at the same time, also condemned them to be mere objects rather than subjects of action. (Barros del Río: 2000, <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/research/perspectives/i12/EdnaO'Brien.html>!, par.10)

This conflation of Ireland-as-woman and woman-as-mother has become so inherent in both Irish society and in its cultural mentality, that the ‘images of suffering Mother Ireland and the self-sacrificing Irish mother are difficult to separate’ (Meaney: 1991, 188). The Lacanian mirror in which Irish women looked to see an idealised version of what their society expected of them reflected a very clear and one-dimensional image:

The Irish ideal woman then – the self-sacrificing mother whose world was bound by the confines of her home, a woman who was pure, modest, who valued traditional culture, especially that of dress and dance, a woman who inculcated these virtues in her daughters and nationalist ideology in her sons, a woman who knew and accepted her place in society – served the purposes of the ruling Irish male elite. (Valiulis: 1995, 157)

This gender ideology was further strengthened when it was given ‘religious endorsement by the Roman Catholic Church, which emphasised the “natural” female virtues of obedience, servility and self-sacrifice for women and repressed the reality of female sexuality’ (McCarthy: 2000, 105-106). Within Irish society, the institutional church played a large role in the social and cultural reality; even today, it is possible to witness the influence of the Church on various aspects of Irish social life, particularly in understanding the position of women in Irish society. It is still impossible for a woman to become a priest in the Catholic Church, and given that over ninety per cent of the population profess to be Catholic, this is another strong iconic index of the secondary role of women in the Irish public sphere.

Ireland’s emphasis on women’s morality and home-making duties was thought to be so important that even the education which was provided to young girls reflected the duties they would be expected to perform when they married and had a family; it was assumed that

this would be every Irish girl's future, and it was unthinkable that any woman would desire, or obtain, something other than marriage and motherhood:

The education offered to middle-class girls in schools and by governesses alike reflected society's expectations as to their future. It consisted of English, history, geography, arithmetic, French (sometimes Italian and German), music, religious instruction and needlework. The object was to equip girls with accomplishments considered suitable for young ladies. The spirit was unmistakably aristocratic; the useful was spurned in preference for the ornamental. The fact that fate might not necessarily confer security in the shape of a husband or comfortable legacy was ignored. (Breathnach: 1980, 44)

These ideals were encouraged in various other formats; even the Irish television and radio broadcasting company, RTÉ, was once advised 'to defend traditional ideals of marriage and motherhood' (Hill: 2003, 143). Irish women thus felt enormous ideological pressure from a wide variety of hegemonic influences – Church, society, family, culture – as to the path their life should take and, as a result, marriage and motherhood became the ultimate goal of most young women in Ireland. While such gender streaming was found in all European and Anglophone cultures, the specific point that is important here is how recently this was the norm in the Irish context. It was only in the late 1990s that major change began to be felt in the socio-political and economic spheres, with the election of Mary Robinson as president of Ireland setting up an oppositional symbol of woman in the Irish symbolic order. Her own address to her primary constituency of '*mná na hÉireann*' (the women of Ireland) was especially significant as women were now being apostrophised in the public sphere and as such, were being performatively acknowledged as part of that sphere. Indeed, her acceptance speech contained the iconic phrase: 'the hand that rocked the cradle rocked the system' (*Irish Independent*, October 28, 2010). That this all took place in 1990 is a strong indicator of the belated nature of the appearance of any form of real equality in the Irish public sphere, and I would contend that this is an important part of the cultural context which frames Keyes' writing as she began publishing just five years after Robinson's election, with *Watermelon* being published in 1995.

It is clear, then that Ireland has tended to confine women to the roles of wife and mother until comparatively recently; however, 'for all the emphasis on the desirability of the married state, most brides reached that altar in blissful ignorance of the details of wifely duty' (Hill: 2003, 21). Looking at the different experience of women all over the developed world, Irish women began to feel dissatisfied with the constricting nature of life secluded in the private sphere, as they began to realise that their "natural" place in the home could also be filled with limitations, stresses and struggles; that even though 'women who married and had children were conforming to their gender role, this did not leave them immune from unhappiness' (McCarthy: 2000, 105). While much of this unhappiness stemmed from feelings of loneliness and isolation, one of 'the most common, yet least discussed, causes of marital unhappiness, and indeed of relationship problems in general, was abuse, mental or physical, usually inflicted by men on their female partners' (Hill: 2003, 148). It has been suggested that, within Ireland and other countries, female 'writers have become very powerful because their work allows women's problems and concerns to be voiced in a way that is difficult to ignore' (Goodrich: 2001, <http://www.msu.edu/~goodri32/eng310/eng310paper.htm>, par.1). This is particularly noticeable with regards to issues such as domestic violence and rape, issues which were once silenced and hidden from public knowledge, and which Keyes has discussed in two of her later novels, *This Charming Man* and *The Brightest Star in the Sky* (2009). Both novels contain frighteningly realistic accounts of domestic violence and abuse, and are also indicative of the extent to which domestic violence and rape have been unreported and, perhaps worse, ignored when they have been reported. *This Charming Man*, for instance, is a frighteningly realistic tale of domestic violence. Its account of the shocking cruelty many women are subjected to in relationships is portrayed in alarming and utterly shocking extracts such as the following:

'You're a stupid, useless bitch and this is your own fucking fault.' He was panting from exertion as he stood over her, curled in a ball beneath him. 'Say it. You're a stupid, useless bitch and this is your own fucking fault.'

He was pulling his leg back for another kick. No. She didn't think she could take another one and still live. The toe of his boot slammed her stomach against her spine. She retched, retched, retched, retched, nothing but bile left.

'Say it!'

'I'm a stupid, useless bitch,' she whispered, tears streaming down her face. 'And this is my own fault.'

'Own *fucking* fault. Can't you get anything right?' (Keyes: 2008, 315)

He carried her bag from the car and solicitously helped her inside. 'What would you like to do now?'

'I'd just like to go to bed.'

'Okay.' He grinned. 'Mind if I join you?'

'Um...' Perhaps she had misunderstood. 'I'm going to go straight to sleep.'

'Come on, you can stay awake for twenty minutes.' He was steering her towards the bedroom. He was opening his jeans, his intention clear. 'Take your knickers off.'

'But – no! I've just had an abortion.'

'Excuses, excuses.' He pushed her onto the bed, his knee pinioning her in position while he wrenched off her tights and pants.

'Please stop, please. I could get an infection. I can't have sex for three weeks.'

'Shut up.' He was on top of her, he was shoving up into her, into the blood and loss, rubbing her raw with his frenzy. Then he pushed himself up on his hands, as if he was doing a press-up, and slapped her, hard, across the face. 'For fuck's sake, try and look like you're enjoying yourself.' (Keyes: 2008, 363)

Rather than merely skirting around topics as serious as this, as chick lit is often accused of doing, Keyes discusses domestic violence as honestly as she can, giving equal attention to the brutality of the perpetrator, the pain of the victim, and the ignorance of the people around her as to what is going on. It is a mimetic portrayal of the woman as victim, and of the bodily intrusion of her abuser into her life. She shows how women often, initially, make excuses for violence, claiming it is a sign of the love and passion in the relationship:

Passionate disagreements were routine, practically mandatory. It was like a game, this ritual of dramatic accusations, followed by tearful reunions; their way of demonstrating how much they loved each other. [...]

From time to time the emotional game-playing spilled over into the physical; a shove here, a slap there, on one overwrought night, a punch in her face. (Keyes: 2008, 527)

As the violence escalates, Keyes shows how women feel confused that this could be happening in *their* relationship – surely domestic violence only happens to other people? People often ask how and why a woman stays in a volatile relationship; in *The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism*, Ellie Levenson outlines the numerous excuses that women may make for their situation:

What would you do if your partner hit you? It's easy to say, when not in this situation, that you would leave any such partner immediately. Or to say that once may be because you provoked him, or because he saw red, or because he didn't know what he was capable of doing and is truly shocked at himself, and that you'll forgive once but not twice so if it ever happens again then you'll definitely leave him. (Levenson: 2009, 164)

In this extract, Levenson is outlining how easy it is for people to believe that it will never happen to them but, as Keyes points out, 'when you're in the middle of it, there's a world of difference' (Keyes: 2008, 547), until eventually even the once-strong woman has no fight left in her:

My indignation had died and the time when I was strong enough to leave him had passed. (Keyes: 2008, 549)

Keyes is cleverly reminding us how abuse and violence can affect the victim over a period of time, until they feel that they can no longer seek help or advice. In doing so, Keyes is helping to show how such feelings can result in many domestic violence victims not seeking help until it may be too late:

It may be easy to say that [a woman should leave a violent relationship], but we know for most women, leaving is not as easy as that. We know that women with abusive partners do not tend to leave them after being hit once or even after being hit twice. No, on average a victim is assaulted thirty-five times before contacting the police, and many more never report is at all – other research (by Victim Support) suggests that as little as two per cent of domestic violence is reported. (Levenson: 2009, 164)

On the other hand, what are the consequences if a woman had testified? Unfortunately, in a lot of cases, outsiders are slow to intervene, dismissing such instances initially as “only” a domestic’ (Keyes: 2008, 591). In the Republic of Ireland alone, it has been estimated that a staggering one-fifth to one-third of all women have, at some time, experienced violence within a relationship, figures which are reiterated in *This Charming Man* (Keyes: 2008, 179), though it is thought that these figures may not cover the full extent of violence, due to so many cases remaining unreported:

Concern has been expressed about the often lenient sentencing of offenders, but even more worrying is that so many of the cases are not brought to court. A range of factors may prevent women from taking action – concern for the welfare and safety of their children, embarrassment, fear of reprisals, insecurities about finance and housing, and for many, the feeling that they themselves are to blame for their situation. But evidence suggests that even

when they are willing to take action against their partners, abused women find it difficult to be taken seriously and have little confidence in the police. (Hill: 2003, 192)

It is significant that Hill wrote this as recently as 2003, as it underscores the belated context of equality both before the law and, more importantly, before the normative ideology of society, which was obtained for women in the Ireland in which Keyes was writing. It is also significant that Keyes herself cited the statistics in her novel, suggesting that she is anxious to address the broader macro-context of abuse in the real world through her own creation of characters in a fictive one. Keyes presents us with middle-class women who suffer this abuse, and by so doing she draws attention to the disempowerment that such violence causes and also to the fact that such abuse can happen in any relationship and crucially to the accretive nature of such abuse. In Lacanian terms, it becomes another mirror of identity as women start to almost feel that they are responsible and so feelings of shame are significant as causal factors in not bringing the details of their private sphere into the public sphere.

Such circumstances similarly provide the contextual framework for *The Brightest Star in the Sky*, where newly-married Maeve is brutally raped by her ex-boyfriend. As well as containing shocking descriptions of the act itself, the book also focuses largely on the concern that so many rape and domestic violence cases tend not to be taken seriously. Evidence collected by 'Women Against Rape' shows that many cases were 'dropped for flimsy reasons: because a woman waited two days before reporting the case; because she had drunk two vodkas; because there was no independent witness to the attack; because one witness, who was a friend of the assailant, had not supported the victim's story' (Walter: 1999, 126). Such instances are clearly alluded to in *The Brightest Star in the Sky*; even when Maeve finds the courage to report the crime, she is devastated to realise that no one believes her. She is questioned about the clothes she was wearing at the time of the attack, to which her husband retorts that they are 'not very provocative, are they?' (Keyes: 2009, 533), alluding to the misconception that if a woman dresses and acts "provocatively" then she is

thought to be at least partially, if not totally, responsible for being raped. In this sense, rape is viewed as 'a punishment for women who express their sexuality' (Viney: 1989, 54); in other words, the woman is seen to be "asking for it", to use a colloquialism. Natasha Walter discusses this shocking treatment at length, criticising how a 'woman's character and sexual history are still unfairly brought as evidence against her in court' (Walter: 1999, 129). She criticises the law which, she feels, means that rape, as a crime, seems to require finding a *rapee* rather than a *rapist*, which constitutes a huge difference; as she continues:

And only a tiny minority of women can fulfil the conditions laid down for a rapee. If a woman goes out alone, or wears make-up, or wears cute underwear, or has had early or frequent sexual experiences, or has had an abortion, or is an unmarried parent, she must expect that this will be brought as evidence to question the possibility that she could be saying no. And this method, of using our new freedoms against us, almost invariably succeeds. Because more and more women now do go out alone, or go out late, or wear sexy clothes, or dance with men they do not know, or have had abortions or more than one sexual relationship, the misogyny that is still displayed in the legal system has led to a great spurt of acquittals. Women live in a different world from the archaic world they meet in the courtroom, and they are constantly reminded of this. (Walter: 1999, 129)

Rather than receiving reassurance from the police, Maeve is made to feel that the rape was her own fault, and is dissuaded from making a formal complaint, which serves to support the unfortunately common situation that 'the chilling effect of what women believe their experiences will be if they go to the police silences the great majority of them' (Walter: 1999, 124):

'It's your word against his. Look,' Vincent leaned closer to her. 'Are you sure you didn't just, you know, get a bout of the guilts? One last go, for old times' sake, then got afraid that hubby there might get wind.'

'I'm sure.'

'Are you sure you want to go ahead with this? Taking it further?'

'I'm sure.'

'Because it'll ruin his life, you know. Just so as you know.'

 (Keyes: 2009, 336)

Maeve is later informed that it has been decided that there is not enough evidence to result in a conviction and so the police are not proceeding with the prosecution:

'Innocent until proven, and all that.'

'But how can it be proved if it doesn't go to court? Maeve and I, we work in the same place as him. You're saying he'll just carry on with his job and everything like nothing happened?'

‘In the eyes of the law he’s done nothing wrong.’ The guard heaved himself up to leave. ‘Why should the man lose his job?’ (Keyes: 2009, 537)

In this last sentence, the whole patriarchal ideology that governed and dictated women’s lives in Ireland is summarised. A man’s job and standing in the social sphere is far more important than a woman’s body and sense of selfhood in the private sphere, and by posing this question, Keyes is asking her readers to ponder the justice of this situation and to question whether this situation is one which is appropriate for contemporary Ireland. In this sense her work dramatises the asymmetry of value between the public and private sphere and between the status of men and women in society. She does not offer any glib answers, but rather opens the area to debate, and in this sense, her texts can be seen as interrogative of their cultural contexts.

Such were the choices many women had: suffer in silence, or speak up and risk being ignored or possibly worse, become a pariah in the workplace, which suggests that even when women find the courage to report such crimes, ‘speaking out isn’t getting them where they want to go’ (Walter: 1999, 123) and does not necessarily equate to justice. This would seem to support Walter’s claims that, as ‘with rape, so with domestic violence: the criminal justice system has been found wanting’ (Walter: 1999, 137). In Maeve’s case, her feelings of isolation and helplessness resulted in both her and her husband becoming severely depressed and suicidal. Maeve’s husband, Matt, reflected on the injustice that arises out of many rape allegations, which allows Keyes to report on the shockingly low conviction rates for rape in Ireland, facts which have added to fears that the ‘low number of rapists who are convicted leads to a strong belief among rapists that rape is not really a crime at all’ (Walter: 1999, 124):

Matt had discovered things he’d never before thought about: that only one in ten reported rapes make it to court; that out of them, only six in a hundred result in a conviction. And what about all the rapes that are never reported, because the girl is too scared. Of her rapist? Of the police? All those rapes unacknowledged, unavenged. It was enough to drive him mad. How was the world as normal as it was? How was all that rage and injustice and grief and fear contained? (Keyes: 2009, 541-542)

Here, Keyes is probing the context of victimhood, and extending her analysis to the partner of the raped woman, thereby broadening the scope of her interrogation, and I would argue, broadening the typical perception of the genre itself. In doing so, Keyes is helping to 'highlight the serious nature and widespread prevalence of violence experienced by women' (Hill: 2003, 148), and, if more authors follow Keyes' example and openly discuss such serious issues, it will hopefully result in it becoming an issue which is increasingly difficult to ignore. In this respect, Keyes is contributing towards an amelioration of the context in which women live their lives, in however small a manner. Keyes herself has been quite open about her own struggles with depression and in this novel she shows the effects of violence on the physical and emotional wellbeing of both the victim and her partner. She is also bringing this issue before a significant audience in numerical terms.

Women suffered so much in the private domain largely because there were very few laws in Ireland which protected them in the home, and, indeed, within society in general. The private and public spheres were not allowed to interact, especially in the context of the treatment of women. In fact, until the early 1970s, the family law statutes in Ireland were the same since the Victorian period, a time when women were received little legal recognition, and crimes such as domestic violence and rape were silenced and hidden from the public. Additionally, laws were in place which meant that the 'battered wife and mother could not exclude her violent husband from the home (which was almost invariably his) except by resort to the most cumbersome procedures' (Scannell: 1988, 73). While progress has since been made to protect women and children in such situations, theorists have noted that even in the late twentieth century, women in Ireland 'remained vulnerable to violence within the home' (Hill: 2003, 191), further underlining the very slow progress towards gender-equality that is being made in Ireland.

Similar experiences are further explored in *This Charming Man*, where a victim of domestic violence, model/actress Zara Kaletsky, describes how the police did nothing to help her, seeing the violence she was so obviously subjected to as “only a domestic”, leaving Zara feeling that reporting the crime to the police was a “mistake”:

‘I made the mistake of going to the police. He was so angry I thought he was going to kill me.’

She went to the police?

‘And was he, like, *charged?*’ How had he kept that out of the press?

‘Not at all.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘These two fat eejits showed up in their yellow jackets and as soon as they’d established it was “only” a domestic, they told us to kiss and make up, then were off down the road to buy chips and batterburgers. All I could do was apply for a barring order – which would take twelve weeks.’ (Keyes: 2008, 591)

When we consider that Zara was informed that her only option was to apply for a barring order, which would leave her vulnerable to even more violence during the months that it would take to organise, this again highlights that the Irish law is not yet seeing the full extent of the seriousness and the danger that some women experience in the home; as journalist Grace Gildee dejectedly realises in the same novel, ‘no one cares about domestic violence’ (Keyes: 2008, 179). In these texts, Keyes is dealing with a serious issue for a mass audience and she is unequivocal in stressing the damage that such violence can do, and in opening these issues to scrutiny in popular cultural generic media.

Irish feminists made the point that the Irish family was, for many women, a far from perfect place; that women were afforded few rights and were often trapped in damaging and unhappy situations, from which they could see little escape. It was noted how ‘the depiction of male violence, rape, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, marital violence or pornography as “not that serious” erodes women’s sense of their own bodily integrity and ultimately their sense of their own value’ (O’Connor: 1998, 14). With the help of feminist activism in Ireland, which worked relentlessly to protect women in family life, eventually women’s situations were brought to public attention, and laws began to reflect this new knowledge. Theorist Clodagh Corcoran stresses that if society is to combat issues such as

rape and domestic violence, along with other forms of oppression, then such issues must be treated 'as a civil rights issue for women, demanding appropriate legislation' (Corcoran: 1989, 20). *The Brightest Star in the Sky* fictively reflects this aim to bring such issues to public attention, as one of the final chapters is a flash-forward to the future in which most of the main characters are attending a public rally on the streets of Dublin to 'protest against the low conviction rate for Irish rapists' (Keyes: 2009, 594). One may read this in two ways: as a progressive and optimistic view that women's issues will be more a central part of the public sphere in the future, or as a more cynical sense that even in the future, such rights will need to be fought for in rallies and in demonstrations, as women's place in the public sphere is one which is never guaranteed.

Irish feminism has demonstrated that the family could potentially be a dangerous and damaging place, by highlighting the extent of both physical and sexual violence in Ireland:

Until the recent past, both the law in Ireland and the Catholic Church tended to regard domestic violence as a private matter to be dealt with within the private sphere of the family, and this invisibility was mirrored in academic writing and research and in other areas such as the law and policing. In this area in particular, Irish feminists have struggled for decades to achieve social and political recognition for the nature and extent of physical, psychological and sexual violence against women and children in society. In the process, important services were established. (Connolly: 2005, 98)

An example of such services was the Dublin AIM (Action, Information, Motivation) group, 'which, among other things, offered advice on how to have a violent husband barred from the family home, [and] went on to establish the Irish Women's Aid Committee, opening the first refuge for battered women in Ireland in April 1974' (Hill: 2003, 156). The dates here foreground the context in which Keyes' two novels were written, a context which is significantly different to that of the rest of Western Europe. Discussing the changing public view and knowledge of domestic violence, Natasha Walter states that, no longer 'a kind of joke in the police force and the law it has become an issue which demands police time, media coverage and new legislation. That cultural revolution has relied on women's articulacy. This was an area where men could not and would not speak for women' (Walter: 1999, 109).

Related to this, Keyes' books give voice to issues which have been systemically silenced in the Irish social and public sphere and, to that extent, these texts have an influence on their social contexts. Keyes, I would argue, is part of such an exercise through her own work, and popular culture can also be an agent of change in the public sphere, by dealing with issues which are not generally voiced. I would also suggest that these issues broaden the boundaries of a genre that has often been described by the adjective 'frothy'; these instances of violence, powerlessness and a patriarchal apathy towards the welfare of women, as set out in chick lit novels, would seem to challenge that stereotype.

Another such area that proved problematic among Irish women was the fear of pregnancy outside of marriage, which was ironic considering official Ireland's reverence of the notion of motherhood. The long-running controversy regarding the availability, or non-availability, of contraception, combined with the changing attitudes to sexual behaviour in Ireland, resulted in an increasing number of pregnancies occurring outside of marriage by the 1990s. This posed a threat to the strict Catholic morality in Ireland. Records of the number of "illegitimate pregnancies" which occurred in Ireland in the late twentieth century have shown an enormous increase on both sides of the border, 'from 2.6 per cent of all births in the Republic in 1970 to reach 22.5 per cent by 1995, and from 3.6 per cent to 21.8 per cent in the North in the same period' (Hill: 2003, 146).

The marginal and stigmatised position of the unmarried mother 'provides a good perspective from which to consider changing gender roles, and the values and institutions in society' (Joannou: 2000, 42). Within Irish society, with its emphasis on chastity and self-restraint, despite assertions regarding the sanctity of motherhood, the reality was that 'children were only welcomed when born within a union legalised by marriage' (Hill: 2003, 27); illegitimacy was considered socially unacceptable, and the unmarried mother faced punishment by society for her "deviant" ways. Such attitudes resulted in many Irish women

being conservative in their pre-marital relationships. The Catholic Church once maintained that 'illegitimacy rates were low because of the shame and humiliation with which such a condition was associated' (Hill: 2003, 29); however, with the absence of reliable, accessible, and affordable contraceptive methods until relatively recent years, it was more likely that other precautions were taken to assure that a child conceived out of wedlock was not considered "illegitimate", largely in order to protect the mother (and her family) from shame:

It is likely that in many cases couples – Catholic and Protestant – legitimated their expected child by marriage, either through preference or under pressure from family and Church, passing off the 'early' birth as premature. Illegitimate children were also frequently brought up by their grandmother or other family member, or in the workhouse or other charitable institution. (Hill: 2003, 29)

Of the women who gave their babies up for adoption, their experiences have often remained hidden, their "wrong-doing" silenced. Those women who did fall pregnant outside of marriage, and who remained unmarried and kept the child, had to rely on their families for economic survival, and this was only when the woman in question could depend on her family's tolerance and acceptance of her "sexual nonconformity". Many Irish parents, particularly those of the middle classes, who were 'fearful of public contempt or reluctant to support the economic burden of an unmarriageable daughter – cast their daughters from their homes' (McCarthy: 2000, 104). Up until the early 1960s, in fact, 'women who had children outside of marriage were perceived as "Magdalenes", and were cut off from the community for most of their lives in institutions under Church control' (O'Connor: 1998, 119). As well as creating shame and controversy for both families and society in general, the unmarried mother is also viewed as problematic in Irish society because she is seen to undermine the sanctity of the family that was inherent to Irish morality for so long:

The pregnant woman evokes not only the fragility of the public/private divide (because her condition makes sexuality visible), but by self-consciously performing pregnancy in defiance of social norms, she implies that national, religious, and gender identities are less stable than they appear. As a multiple and split subject, she acts as an emblem of the underlying indeterminacy of all identities. (Pramaggiore: 2006, 118)

Single motherhood was once considered so shameful in Ireland that 'children born outside of wedlock were discriminated against in the law' (Connolly: 2005, 3). However, this situation has changed in Ireland in the last few years, largely due to the fact that 'the number of unmarried mothers in Irish society continued to increase during the last two decades of the [twentieth] century' (Hill: 2003, 193). In these early years of the twenty-first century:

Ireland's birth rate outside marriage is among the highest in Western Europe. There is no simple explanation for these statistics. In the South, everyone over sixteen has had the right to contraception since the early nineties, and with AIDS making it a public health issue, condoms could be bought from machines from 1993. (Hill: 2003, 193)

Whatever the reasons for the high birth rates outside of marriage, it is clear that the consequences of pregnancy outside of marriage are now considered less catastrophic than in earlier decades. Some theorists, such as Pat O'Connor, have even depicted lone parenthood in a positive light, stating how it has the potential to reflect 'the ability of women to survive on their own, and their willingness to redefine the family, excluding a residential heterosexual tie as the basic element in that unit' (O'Connor: 1998, 119).

This recently-found tolerance of single motherhood in Ireland is evident in a number of Keyes' novels which portray single mothers. *Watermelon* (1995), for instance, is a novel centred on single motherhood, in which the husband of protagonist Claire Walsh leaves her for another woman on the day she gives birth to their first child. Claire is portrayed as a strong, independent woman who admirably copes with her situation with grace, humour, and maturity, as portrayed in the following extract in which Claire reflects on her circumstances:

My marriage had broken up, but I had a beautiful child. I had a wonderful family, very good friends and a job to go back to. Who knew, one day, I might even meet a nice man who wouldn't mind taking Kate on as well as me. Or if I waited long enough maybe Kate would meet a nice man who wouldn't mind taking me on as well as her. But in the meantime I had decided that I was just going to get on with my life and if Mr Perfect arrived along, I'd manage to make room for him somewhere. (Keyes: 2003b, 565)

There is an element of empowerment here that can be seen to echo the increasing societal ease with which single-parent families are treated in contemporary Ireland. While Claire's discourse suggests that she is in some control of her own life and her own body, there is also,

crucially, a sense of a more emancipatory social context within which Claire can choose to raise her baby as a single parent. There is no longer the strong ideological stigmatising of sex and birth outside of marriage, and Keyes is reflecting this altered paradigm in the attitude of her protagonist. Marriage is on the list of her desires but it is not the teleological goal of this woman as it had been for so many women of previous generations.

Taking this notion of control over the reproductive system a stage further, Keyes also presents women who become remain single mothers by their own choice, such as in *Anybody Out There?* (2006), when Anna's best friend, Jacqui becomes pregnant as the result of a one night stand. Far from this being the tragedy it would have been up until relatively recently, Jacqui is admirably calm and rational about the situation:

'I know. I've been thinking.' Pause. 'Being pregnant isn't the horrible disaster it would have been five years ago, or even three years. Back then, I'd no security, I hadn't a bean and I'd definitely have had a termination. But now... I have an apartment, I have a well-paid job – it's not *their* fault that I can't live within my means – and I sort of like the idea of having a baby around the place.' (Keyes: 2006, 470-471)

In the epilogue to *Anybody Out There?*, we learn that new-mother Jacqui is part of the narrator calls a 'modern-day family unit' (Keyes: 2006, 587) in which the baby's parents both enjoy time with their child but do not feel obliged to become a couple merely for the child's sake, as Irish society would have traditionally expected. The novel therefore demonstrates how the marginal position of the unmarried mother, once viewed as a threat to the *status quo* and a cause for unofficial concern, now provides a 'good perspective from which to consider changing gender roles' (Joannou: 2000, 42). *Anybody Out There?* presents a depiction of this "modern" family, where the parents are happily unmarried, and neither mother nor child are "punished" for this. By portraying lone parenthood in a positive sense, novels such as *Anybody Out There?* provide an implicit challenge to 'the traditional "unthinkableness" of a family life which is not based on a residential conjugal unit' (O'Connor: 1998, 122), thus helping to remove the stigma so commonly associated with unmarried mothers. In this sense it is offering a somewhat different Lacanian mirror in which the reflections of identity are

gradually being transformed. Whether one can claim that her novels are a factor in this transformation is open to debate, but what is not open to argument is the fact that cultural productions have been important factors in societal change, as they are part of the transforming of the societal sense of identity of Ireland. And as Keyes is writing at a cuspal moment in that process of change, and given the very large readership, I think the point can be made that her texts participate in this process of contextual transformation, especially at the level of popular culture.

Despite the numerous obstacles, protests continued and eventually the laws began to change. In 1987, for instance, 'the Status of Children Act removed the differential treatment of "illegitimate children" in Irish law and protection for the rights for children born outside marriage was introduced' (Connolly: 2005, 94). Another major area of discussion within Irish society was the issue was legal separation and divorce. A number of Keyes' novels refer to divorce, including *Sushi for Beginners*, *Watermelon*, and *This Charming Man*, and none of the characters appear to be condemned by family or society (as they once would have been), for divorcing their partner which implies that Irish society has perhaps embraced a more tolerant and accepting attitude towards legal separation. However, it is important to note that this was an area to which, for a long time, the majority of Irish people objected on grounds of immorality. When Northern Ireland passed a law granting divorce in 1978 (a decade after the same law was passed in Britain), the conditions were made so difficult in terms of costs and conditionality that many people were unable to avail of the provisions of the law; constraints such as these no doubt also reflected 'the ongoing concern with the impact of modern values and individualism on Irish family life' (Hill: 2003, 191).

Additionally, the strong influence of the Catholic Church in the Republic meant that allowing legal separation in this area was still contested, and so 'marriage breakdown was dealt with in other ways: desertion, for example, became increasingly common' (Hill: 2003,

148). Although campaigns to legalise divorce in Ireland first emerged in the 1980s, it was not until February 1989 when a Bill was passed by Fine Gael which 'allowed legal separation by the courts once it was proved that a marriage had broken down for a year' (Hill: 2003, 191). This Judicial Separation Act 'dealt with division of property, maintenance and issues related to child custody' (Connolly: 2005, 94), though it did not grant Irish citizens the right to divorce or remarry. Further steps were taken by the Irish government when, on 24th November 1995, the constitutional ban on divorce was removed. However:

The conditions on which it was granted were stringent, involving a four-year period of separation to ensure that a couple had the opportunity to fully consider the implications of their actions. These constraints no doubt reflected ongoing concern with the impact of modern values and individualism on Irish family life. Moreover, a substantial proportion of the population had voted against divorce, and its legality is not likely to change the minds of those for whom it remains unacceptable. (Hill: 2003, 191)

Nevertheless, despite public opinion asserting the sanctity of marriage, it seemed apparent that the social stigma which had traditionally been attached to divorce, 'as well as the greater range of legal and financial supports open to divorced or separated women, means that mistakes can be rectified, abusive relationships left behind or new partnerships embarked upon' (Hill: 2003, 189). Nowadays, according to the fictional "Mammy Walsh" advice column in *Further Under the Duvet* (2005), the only real problem that people are finding with the legalisation of divorce is that there 'isn't the same security for women' as people can now get divorced 'in the twinkling of an eye' (Keyes: 2005, 314). As the end of the twentieth century neared, it has been noted that, in Ireland, following the lead of other Western European countries, there was 'a dramatic decline in the rate of marriage and an increasing awareness of the extent to which the concept of "family" has been and can be used to exploit and/or nullify the needs of women and children' (O'Connor: 1998, 4). Marian Keyes' heroines are all too aware of this change in expectations for women, and her books reflect this. While divorce allows for an end to a disastrous, failed or violent relationship, there are also less positive aspects of this for women, and Mammy Walsh's advice stresses this. In

Derridean terms, the overturning of the binary opposition has led to a condition of undecidability. For Derrida, any position which is changing the rules opens the field of decision or of decidability:

It calls for decision in the order of 'ethical-political responsibility. It is even its necessary condition. A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. (Derrida: 1988, 116)

The positions which Keyes is outlining in her narratives about relationships are very much of this order: she is not offering any easy solutions but instead is opening a space for discussion of issues, in the public sphere, to a broad audience, some of whose concerns are being articulated in this discussion.

In *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* (1996), the title character explains it clearly when she says that the 'days of the little woman staying at home and doing the housework in a little cottage with roses round the door, while the man went out and toiled from dawn to dusk, were long gone' (Keyes: 2003a, 302). Keyes also represents the diversity in women's choices regarding family life in contemporary Ireland: in *Watermelon*, for instance, the heroine, by her own admission, is 'more of your fifties wifely type' who 'was perfectly happy to be a home-maker while husband went out to earn the loot' (Keyes: 2003b, 200). Conversely, Lisa, one of the protagonists in *Sushi for Beginners* (2000), almost got divorced because her husband felt that she prioritised her career too much, while she fumed that he merely wanted her 'barefoot, pregnant and manacled to the kitchen sink' (Keyes: 2007, 335), implying that Lisa has no intention of being a stay-at-home wife and mother. *The Brightest Star in the Sky* also refers to another change in family life: that is, that women are now having children later in life and there is now a recognised 'a trend of single, first-time, forty-year-old mothers' (Keyes: 2009, 144). There is a recognition here of the changed perspective on marriage and divorce that is now a legal fact in Ireland, and in terms of cultural capital, Keyes' books reinforce the legal changes through fictive experiential narratives, which have clearly struck a

chord with her readership. Both Lisa's career aspirations, something with which many women can relate, and the fact that many women are now having children later in life, suggest another possible cause for the change in the idea of the Irish family, namely an increasing participation by women in the public sphere. Increasingly more Irish women are choosing to work outside of the home, and many are now concentrating on a career before starting a family. So Keyes' books are reflective of the changing patterns of expectation and behaviour that have resulted from the altered socio-cultural context of Ireland in the third millennium, both in the family and in the workplace.

Irish women and the working world

The role of women in the workplace has long been considered to be of secondary importance, 'not only to the work of men, but also to what was seen, until comparatively recently, as women's true vocation – domesticity' (Hayes: 2001, 190). This sanctity of the home and motherhood, as discussed above, was particularly apparent in Irish society until quite recently, and low numbers of women in the Irish workforce was the result of 'the dominance of the church and from state employment policies which inhibited women's participation in paid employment' (O'Connor: 1998, 3). It was believed that women's participation in the public sphere, including the working world, simply drew them away from their 'proper domestic sphere and gave them access to an arena in which they neither belonged nor were needed' (Valiulis: 1995, 152). The emergence of Irish women in the working world was, for many people, a problematic break from tradition:

Despite the reality of women's experience, female employment was viewed by society at large as a temporary condition, preceding marriage, or supplementing the earnings of a husband. Their work was regarded as unskilled, and the large pool of available labour also served to keep wages low and jobs insecure. (Hill: 2003, 48)

Irish society's objection to women in the workforce could have been because, for many years, the Irish economy was noted as having a relatively low number of married women in paid

employment: 'only 5.6 per cent in 1926 and remaining at around this level until the 1960s' (Hill: 2003, 100). The Irish feminist movement, as with feminist movements around the world, was blamed by advocates of traditional values for its apparent prioritising of 'the promotion of women in the workforce to the complete neglect of women's rights in the home' (Connolly: 2005, 96), and a number of laws were passed with the aim of keeping women in the home and out of the workforce, particularly targeting working wives, whose role, it was assumed, was to concentrate on raising a family. A woman's sexuality was often cited as the reason for resisting women's rights to equal pay and equal opportunity: it was thought that child-bearing and rearing 'were factors that would interfere with a woman's ability to hold down a job outside the home; her child-bearing and rearing would suffer if she worked outside the home' (Viney: 1989, 57). In 1933, for example, a law was passed which required national schoolteachers to resign on marriage, and the 1935, Employment Act extended this marriage bar to include all civil service posts:

The Free State's 1935 Act further restricted the participation of working-class women in paid employment by giving the Minister for Industry and Commerce powers to prohibit women from working in some industries, and to prevent employers taking on more women than men. Although [...] this had little practical effect, it could certainly be seen as demoralising and as sending out a clear message about the preferred role of women in Irish society. (Hill: 2003, 100)

Even though the marriage bar in Ireland was never legally enforced on employment positions outside of the civil service, there were clear indications that, up to the mid-1970s at least, it was expected that women would retire upon marriage: it had become almost an unconscious ideological factor in the context that defined Irish women, and one which made the transition from the private to the public sphere even more difficult as it exercises a profound effect on societal progress for women. There was an ideological undercurrent which saw that what happened by law in the public sector also happened by enforced choice in the private sector. This was encouraged in a number of ways: 'through the marriage gratuity (i.e. a lump sum paid to women on their marriage and subsequent retirement); through separate and higher pay

scales for married men, and through related tax and social welfare arrangements' (O'Connor: 1998, 38). Again, this context is featured in Keyes' thematic framework in her books.

In *The Other Side of the Story* (2004), one of Keyes' protagonists, Gemma, considers this lack of options her mother, like many other women, had as a young woman in Ireland:

Hard to believe that Mam had once had a job – she'd worked in a typing pool, which is where she'd met Dad. But she gave up work when she got pregnant with me; after the previous miscarriage she wasn't taking any chances. Maybe she would have given up her job anyway, after I'd been born, because that was what Irish women did in those days. (Keyes: 2004, 61)

This extract demonstrates Simone de Beauvoir's claim that 'it is often astounding to see how readily a woman can give up music, study, her profession, once she has found a husband' (de Beauvoir: 1997, 391). It also illustrates the manner in which Keyes' work is involved in seminal aspects of the existential existence of Irish women, as her characters embody some of the ideological contradiction and dilemmas which were the lot of Irish women in a changing environment.

With such a strong emphasis on the home and family in Irish society, the issue of women entering the workforce, either instead of or as well as having a family, was one which was initially met with disapproval and dispute. However, ambitious women did persevere and, by the year 2000, records noted the large number of married women in paid employment. We can, of course, see differences between how this situation evolved in the North and South of Ireland:

In line with employment trends in the UK, the proportion of married women in the labour market in Northern Ireland rose sharply, from just under 30 per cent in 1961 to almost 45 per cent in 1981. While this figure was always higher in the north-east than in the rest of Ireland, in this period it was more than double the rate in the Republic (20.4 per cent), where the sixties boom reflected, instead, rising male employment. Moreover, while the increase in Northern Ireland was mostly due to part-time employment, women's part-time employment in the Republic remained the lowest in the EEC. (Hill: 2003, 141)

By the end of the twentieth century, the situation had improved somewhat, as 'women made up 38.3 per cent of the workforce in the Republic, a substantial increase in the figure of 27 per cent for 1971, though still low by European standards and lagging behind the Northern

Ireland figure of 50.4 per cent, which is in turn less than that of Great Britain (64.9 per cent)' (Hill: 2003, 208). Once again, the belatedness of the Irish context is worth noting. It is important to note that these increases in women's employment were attributed to changes in the economy, as opposed to the advances of feminism and equal opportunity campaigns. Nevertheless, a number of campaigns arose to support women in the workforce, particularly around issues of maternity leave and childcare provisions. Additionally, legislation was passed in order to combat discrimination and promote equality in the workforce:

In the mid-1970s, Ireland's first employment equality legislation was passed. The Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act 1974 was followed by the Employment Equality Act in July 1977. In October 1977, the Employment Equality Agency was established. These acts and initiatives were intended to eliminate sex discrimination in employment and, despite their limitations in practice, they marked significant change in attitude to women and work in Ireland. (Connolly: 2005, 90)

Perhaps in a bid to demonstrate these changes, some of Keyes' heroines choose to prioritise their careers, sometimes regardless of what else they have to sacrifice in the process, because they believe the 'rewards had always seemed worth it' (Keyes: 2007, 359). She highlights the nuanced difficulties that can accrue with a successful business career, especially in terms of other aspects of life, and by so doing, she is posing serious questions of her readership in terms of looking at their own lives and the work/life balance therein.

Keyes, of course, has first-hand knowledge of prioritising a career: in *Further Under the Duvet* she relates how, although her husband was in a successful job, he gave up work when Keyes became a full-time author, while she, perhaps unusually for wives at the time, became the main breadwinner:

As soon as I could, I gave up my day job in order to write full-time and discovered that my writing had so much associated admin that I needed a full-time PA/dogsbody/kind person to hold my hand and tell me I'm not crap. Himself has a degree from Cambridge, can do hard sums in his head and knows the meaning of ataraxy. But he became that full-time PA/dogsbody/kind person to hold my hand and tell me I'm not crap and resigned from his job, waving goodbye to the car, the money, the grudging respect. Soon his days were an undizzying round of phone answering and five o'clock dashes down the road to catch the last post. In short, I ruined his life. (Keyes: 2005, 137)

Keyes is quick to point out that the general situation of one partner staying home while the other earns the family money is not in itself unique or surprising; however, 'until recently it was nearly always the women who made the sacrifice – not necessarily without justified, cat's-arse-faced resentment, but it has been done' (Keyes: 2005, 137). In a similar sense, she goes on to say how, when she and her husband had discussed having children, she 'accepted that I would have to be the one to be pregnant for nine months – that this was one thing he couldn't do for me – but the plan was that he'd take up the reins of childcare as soon as the head was engaged' (Keyes: 2005, 141), again showing how Irish women are slowly moving away from the expected roles of stay-at-home wife and mother, and are instead sharing such duties with their husband/partner, as well as it now being increasingly acceptable for either (or both) partners to work and be the main breadwinner for the family. It is also interesting that Keyes, in her autobiographical work and in her interviews, essays and webposts, is writing about her own struggles as a woman in the public sphere in a way which makes clear her reflective practice on writing and on the nature of the issues which she pursues in her fiction. These pieces make clear that she is keenly aware of issues concerning women and that she is also aware of the power of the writer to influence an audience, and by extension, to influence aspects of a cultural context. I would suggest that her very openness about her own struggles with depression is part of the reason for her popularity, as her style is very much that of sharing the problems of her readership and of being equally challenged by these problems and unsure of any clear answers. In this sense, Keyes is enacting the range of choices which move from women being either at home or in the public workplace to a deconstructive situation where this reversal of a previous binary has led to that undecidable stage of which we spoke earlier. Writing about one of his own neologisms for this undecidable state, *différance*, Derrida noted that it is 'neither this nor that; but rather this and

that' (Derrida 1995, 161), and this is very much the paradigm of choice which Keyes outlines for her characters.

Keyes' novels question whether women can, by nature, be "too ambitious", and once again starkly present how women's opportunities may never be equal to those of men, showing how difficult it is to forget and remove the traditional association of women with the home:

She left, sunk deep in a crisis of the soul. Was Mark right? Was she too ambitious? But that description was never applied to men – in the same way it was impossible for a woman to be too thin; it was impossible for a man to be too ambitious. A man would never have to choose between his ambition and his emotional life. (Keyes: 2004, 559)

Extracts such as this suggest that the traditional idea of it being men's "right" to be the main earner, the breadwinner in the family, may in fact still be ingrained in the minds of some Irish people, and given the belatedness of any sense of equality in Ireland that we have been discussing, this should not be any surprise. It shows how, while women are now told that they are entitled to make the "choice" to embark on a career, there are still questions as to how much of a choice women *really* have, as 'unlike the male experience of work, women's choices often have to, at the least, be informed by a recognition of their "natural" obligations to their families' (Whelehan: 1995, 52).

Irish society has undoubtedly undergone many changes, particularly towards the end of the twentieth century, which had a direct impact on Irish family life, including easier access to divorce and remarriage, a gradual but undoubtedly increasing acceptance of lone-parent families and cohabiting couples, and more women working outside of the home. Nevertheless, while progress has been made, and Irish society has become more accepting of behaviours which deviated from the "norm", issues such as those of single-sex relationships and women's sexuality, among other things, have taken longer to be acknowledged, and have been the source of much controversy and objection, as the following sections will discuss.

Sex and the female body in Ireland

Ireland has long been recognised as being pervaded by a strict puritan morality which was seen to spread itself through a large portion of Irish culture. In *Under the Duvet* (2001), Keyes recalls being flashed at by a man on the Tube in London and, somewhat sarcastically, remarks that such behaviour would never happen 'in holy Catholic Ireland' (Keyes: 2001, 210), alluding to the, perhaps misguided, illusion of Ireland as a place free of sin and scandal. Speaking somewhat more realistically, Keyes refers to the "goldfish-bowl syndrome" she often experienced in Ireland, continuing to describe how Ireland's apparent obsession with morality and chastity often left people feeling limited and repressed, as if their every move was being scrutinised by society in general:

Escaping from parental control and what I felt was the goldfish-bowl syndrome of Ireland was immensely liberating. I could be anyone I wanted to be. Hell, I could even be myself. I made full use of the fact that I no longer had anyone breathing down my neck to go to Mass. Every Sunday was spent savouring the freedom of Not Going To Mass. And I could do the Walk of Shame anytime I wanted in London and no one turned a blind eye. Whereas in Dublin if I'd returned home at seven in the morning, wearing last night's clothes, my knickers in my pocket, I was convinced it'd get on the evening news. (Keyes: 2001, 211)

Connected to this analysis of the work of Marian Keyes, popular culture is an example of one area which was hindered by the application of strict censorship laws in Ireland. For example, many books, particularly by female authors, were banned for containing scenes which were deemed morally "unsuitable" for Irish society. Irish writer Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* (1936) was banned in Ireland for obscenity, while her later novel *The Land of Spices* (1941) was also banned due to a brief hint at a gay male relationship. All three books in Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls* trilogy were similarly banned under Ireland's Censorship Law; perhaps most notably, *Girls in their Married Bliss* contains explicit sex scenes that surely must have appalled the censor. Reading them today, one must wonder what all the fuss was about' (Imhof: 2002, 73). The feminist magazine *Spare Rib* was also banned in Ireland on numerous occasions, once because it 'showed women how to examine their breasts' (Wolf:

1991, 138), and again 'because it carried information on contraception' (Connolly: 2005, 39).

Films also did not escape Irish censorship laws as, for example:

Gone with the Wind was not screened in the Republic of Ireland when it was released because the official film censor, James Montgomery, required so many cuts that the distributor withdrew it. Ironically, Montgomery vigorously objected to the childbirth scene! Thus, while the state of maternity was formally recognized with the Irish constitution, the embodied processes of becoming a mother – sex and childbirth – were deemed obscene. (Pramaggiore: 2006, 120)

Clearly while mothers were part of the symbolic capital of Irish society, the reality of how women's bodies reacted in birth was very much not part of the societal narrative. Birth was part of the private sphere and was not for public consumption. Even the world of sports was, until as late as the 1970s, strictly for men, as 'the conservative, Catholic ethos of the Free State effectively removed women from competitive athletic sports' (Hill: 2003, 7), after Pope Pius XI decreed in 1929 that the "violent exertion" and "notable scantiness in clothing" which was associated with women's sports, as well as the fact of women performing in front of crowds of male spectators, was an unsuitable situation for any woman to be in and still retain her purity and reserve (see Judge: 1995).

Much of this censorship was related to the issue of women's sexuality and the female body, both of which were considered a source of sin in Ireland. Keyes depicts how such traditionally censorious attitudes to the female body have had a type of "hangover" effect on women in Ireland in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In *Under the Duvet*, Keyes herself states: 'I am Irish, therefore I am inhibited' (Keyes: 2001, 50). Keyes links being inhibited with being a woman in Ireland in a number of different novels. In *This Charming Man*, for instance, one of the protagonists reflects on how Irish women often seem to feel embarrassed or overly-critical of their bodies, a fact which becomes more noticeable on witnessing the body-confidence displayed by women of other cultures:

Bell tinged. The arrival of Nkechi. Everyone looked. Plenty to look at. Nigerian, excellent posture, braids hanging all the way down her back, very long legs, then a really quite large bottom perched on top of them. But Nkechi never tried to hide her bottom. She was proud of

it. Fascinating to me. Irish girls' lives were a constant quest for bottom-disguising or bottom-reducing clothing tactics. We can learn much from other cultures. (Keyes: 2008, 32)

It is interesting to note that the protagonist in the above quotation notes how many Irish women often try to hide or minimise their curves; in other words, the very aspects of their body that make them look like women. Clearly, the Lacanian mirror, from a specifically Irish perspective, has long been a restrictive one, and this is clear in Keyes' writing. This would suggest that the traditional attitude in Ireland, which likened the female body to a source of sin, may still be impacting Irish women who feel that they may have to conceal their *womanliness*. This is further hinted at in *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* (1996), when the protagonist reflects how both her lack of confidence in her body image and her deep-rooted "Catholic guilt", similar in that they both reflect Ireland's traditional encouragement of female "morality", have affected her enjoyment of a healthy sex life:

I suspected that if I had big bouncy breasts and long, slender, cellulite-free golden thighs I could have overlooked my Catholic guilt. I would probably have been a lot more likely to confidently hop into bed with total strangers. Maybe sex would have been an activity that I could just enjoy, instead of it mostly being an exercise in damage limitation, trying to act like I was enjoying myself while at the same time managing to hide a bum that was too big, a chest that was too small, thighs that were too... etc., etc. (Keyes: 2003a, 239)

Keyes repeats such feelings in *Under the Duvet*, when she comments that 'middle-class guilt coupled with Irish Catholic guilt is a fairly irresistible combination' (Keyes: 2001, 213), suggesting that the restraints many Irish women feel are imposed on them are still hard to escape. In *This Charming Man*, we also witness the measures that many people still take in order to portray the illusion of leading a "moral" and chaste life, because they believe this is still expected in contemporary Ireland. One of the characters is dating a politician and, although she has effectively moved into her boyfriend's home, he advises her to keep her own home as well and to pretend that she is not living with him, in case the voting Irish public turn against him for "living in sin" with his girlfriend, alluding to the idea that the traditional sense of Irish morality may still be prevalent in many people's minds and therefore still hard to escape:

In actual fact, it had been months since she'd spent a single night in her own house, but Paddy said they had to pretend. The Irish electorate was an unpredictable beast, he said: one minute as liberal as you please, the next breathing ire and indignation about people 'living in sin'. In fact, Paddy had tried to insist that they *genuinely* live in their separate homes until after the wedding, but this was one issue that Alicia stood her ground on. She'd waited too long for him, she loved him so much, she couldn't *not* be with him. (Keyes: 2008, 231)

Here we see Keyes' two nation's theory at work as she is acutely aware that there is no single grand narrative at work in Ireland any more. Irish writer Nuala O'Faolain described Irish communities as being 'savagely punitive', and added that, for many years, these communities were 'fully in the grip of an institutionalized fear of women; that is, of sexuality' (O'Faolain: 2006, 294). This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider how:

The dominant Catholic ideology of the newly established Irish Free State in the 1920s and 1930s in a sense desexualised women to such an extent that even sex within marriage was considered too risqué for public and often even for private discussion. One consequence of this taboo was that little historical attention was directed towards unearthing the sexual activities of Irish women. (Hayes: 2001, 79)

Interestingly, this was not always the case in Ireland; in fact, 'there was a spectacular range of sexual relationships in nineteenth-century Ireland, thus challenging the stereotype of a country of exceptional chastity and prudery' (McLoughlin: 1994, 81). The notion of Ireland as a country which was, until recently, free of any form of sexual deviance – including sexual relations outside of marriage, prostitution, infanticide and child abandonment – is a myth, as Dymphna McLoughlin explains:

Economic factors played a pivotal role in Irish women's sexual expression. Women of property had to be very circumspect in their behaviour. Women of different classes and circumstances could behave differently in entering short- or long-term liaisons, with men of their own or indeed higher social class. These women essentially drew up their own sexual contracts. (McLoughlin: 1994, 81)

However, from the late nineteenth century on, Irish society became increasingly intolerant of sexual diversity. This occurred particularly in relation to women; since they 'were believed to have no sexual desire they were compensated with a superior "moral nature" and a heightened sense of right and wrong in sexual matters' (McLoughlin: 1994, 81). As a result, societal norms vigorously asserted that women should wait until marriage to indulge in sexual intimacy.

Of course, this situation was once widespread throughout the world, when it was believed that to suggest 'that sex is a desirable aspect of a woman's life, whether she is married or not, presents a significant challenge to traditional morality' (Joannou: 2000, 58); after all, as one of the characters in *The Brightest Star in the Sky* is reminded, 'a woman's good reputation is all she has' (Keyes: 2009, 472). Similarly, virginity in females was 'valued so highly in many circles that to lose it outside marriage seems a real disaster' (de Beauvoir: 1997, 400). Perhaps this is why, in novels such as *Angels* (2002), the protagonist recalls how her mother takes pleasure in telling people that her daughter married her first boyfriend, implying that her daughter was chaste and virginal, and adhered to the sense of morality encouraged in Irish women, despite the fact that such an implication may not necessarily be the full truth:

He'd been my first boyfriend, as my poor mother never tires of telling people. She reckons it demonstrates what a nice girl I was, who never did any of that nasty sleeping-around business [...] But what she conveniently omits to mention when she's making her proud boast is that Garv might have been my first boyfriend, but he wasn't my only one. (Keyes: 2002, 2)

Such measures may have been taken to convince people of women's sexual morality because, for women, to possess a sexual appetite was thought to be one of the main symptoms of moral insanity: 'it was subject to severe sanctions and was regarded as abnormal or pathological' (Showalter: 2009, 99). However, the feminist movement and the "Permissive Society" of the 1960s was supposed to change this situation, and women 'were to gain the "right" to choose sex before marriage with more than one partner [...] and the "right" to enjoy sex' (Whelehan: 1995, 148). As a result, it is often insisted that we 'no longer subscribe to the notion of the heated lust of the marriageable virgin' (Greer: 2006, 102).

In Ireland, however, the influence of the permissive society took longer to be accepted within society as a whole, as a result of the belated paradigm which we have been discussing:

While sexuality came out into the open in other societies, here it remained in the closet. Irish women (and men) have not involved themselves to any great extent in the agonising over sexuality which has occurred in other Western countries. While the feminist literature of other

countries has endless dissertations on sexuality, discussion of the subject among Irish feminists was never able to surface into the public domain. (Viney: 1989, 64)

The strict sense of morality which clouded Irish society seemed to equate sin almost exclusively with sex, which, in turn, meant that 'Irish social standards and Irish legislation have never embodied principles and behaviours that respect the sexual rights of women' (Corcoran: 1989, 18). Women's sexuality was typically censored and controlled more severely than men's, to the extent that even discussing matters relating to sex was forbidden in many, if not most, Irish households. Such matters were considered so taboo that many young girls were, as a result, not even prepared for the arrival of their periods. In a survey conducted among Irish women regarding such matters:

Only two respondents were told about them, one by her mother and the other by a female cousin. The overwhelming memories of the rest of the women were of being shocked and frightened when their first period occurred and feeling ashamed by the secrecy of the monthly rituals of soaking and washing soiled cloths and towels which had to be kept hidden from male family members. Given this taboo, it is perhaps not surprising that most women reported that they were ignorant of sexual matters during their youth. (Lambert: 2000, 183)

Additionally, in an essay about Ireland's Enniscorthy Asylum, Áine McCarthy described how women's reproductive system was even cited as the cause for women's perceived "madness":

Careful notes were made in the casebooks about the biology of their female patients. One of the first questions put to a woman on committal was the pattern of her menstrual period and details of regularity and quantity of the blood were duly noted. [...] Such a focus on female biology placed the problem of madness within the woman's person, rather than the social reality of her life. (McCarthy: 2000, 103)

It has been noted that such a marked revulsion for menstruation, as well as society's efforts to keep it secret, is not necessarily a thing of the past; even in contemporary society, 'while sanitary pads are publicly displayed in supermarkets and magazine advertisements, menstruation is still regarded as if it were a guilty secret' (Viney: 1989, 60). Keyes directly refers to this in *Last Chance Saloon* (1999), in which one of the main characters, Katherine, explains the 'rules' of creating an advertisement for tampons: 'two hard and fast rules existed for tampon ads: the product is only ever referred to euphemistically; and the colour red must

never appear' (Keyes: 1999, 59). It appears that the spectre of the birth scenes in *Gone with the Wind* still haunt the Irish public sphere, to some degree.

When we consider current advertisements for tampons and other sanitary products, we realise how true Katherine's words are. In her ground-breaking essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey has argued that 'woman's desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound' (Mulvey: 1975, 2). There is a strong link, therefore, between feminine sexuality and menstruation, and there is a veil of representational silence in literature, and both popular and high culture, about menstruation. This is also clear from the many tampon advertisements in which the women appearing in them are always shown undertaking strenuous physical activity while smiling happily; adding to the patriarchal misconception that menstruation is women's problem and the discomfort it causes should be hidden from public knowledge. However, Keyes not only acknowledges the censorship of menstruation, but also refers directly to it: 'The flash of red caught me by surprise. Blood. My period' (Keyes: 2006, 300). Despite the simplicity of the reference, the very fact of its inclusion is a positive indicator of how Keyes is helping to provide an outlet for the discussion of menstruation in Ireland. One could argue that the formal structure of this quotation with a one-word sentence and a two-word sentence, neither of which is grammatically correct, is mimetic of how language has to be fractured in order to cope with representing what has been for so long unrepresentable. In terms of a text challenging its context, the mention of menstruation, and the overt mention of blood does just this – it makes the point that there is no real need to hide this fact of biological existence, or to attenuate the colour of blood. This issue has long been problematic for feminists, as the physiological facts of women's bodies have been used by patriarchy to justify the lack of equality given to women. The physical fact of menstruation has been used by patriarchy to characterise women as castrated males, with a bleeding wound. Society still views the menstrual cycle as abject,

with menstruation being viewed as 'dirty, disgusting, defiling, and thus must be hidden' (Young: 2005, 107). Camille Paglia discusses the hitherto unmentionable subject of menstruation, stating that even females are reluctant to confront it: 'white middle-class feminists of every age have shown themselves spectacularly unable to confront the grossness of their own psychological processes' (Paglia: 1994, 32). The Lacanian mirror held up to women's bodies by Irish society was a far from liberating one, and the added connection between women and motherhood had a further influence on the way women's bodies were viewed within culture, as women's sexuality was defined by 'the assumed link between reproduction and female sexuality' (Whelehan: 1995, 160).

As Irish society viewed sex as a sin, women were only allowed sexual freedom within the confines of marriage, and even then, only with a view to conceiving. Even childbirth, with the perceived "uncleanness" of birth, was surrounded with purification rituals, such as the ceremony of churching, a type of 'blessing after childbirth' (de Beauvoir: 1997, 178), which supposedly cleansed the woman from the "sin" of having had the sex which resulted in the baby being conceived. As a result, this 'taboo of the pregnant woman' (Cixous: 1975, 359), became another area which has traditionally resulted in the repression of the female body. From an Irish perspective, it is ironic that childbirth was so severely censored, when we consider the sanctity of motherhood and the family which was inherent in Irish society, and also how woman as mother, both in the family, and in the religious context of Mary the mother of Jesus, has been such a metonymic trope of Irish womanhood. Yet, areas concerning fertility and childbirth were often thought to be 'messy considerations which women should confine among themselves (except for the lucrative practice of gynaecologists)' (Viney: 1989, 60). It has been noted how 'accounts of women giving birth are rare until the twentieth century and are usually depicted from the spectator's point of view rather than the mother's, perhaps from the father's or someone in attendance' (Joannou:

2000, 45). Additionally, we can be reminded that not only were such issues silenced in the private and public realms, but even depictions of pregnancy and childbirth in the media were censored, as revealed in the earlier quotation regarding how *Gone with the Wind* was once banned in Ireland because of a childbirth scene, and once again, we find Keyes facing up to these issues in her work.

Novels such as *Watermelon* not only help to describe pregnancy and childbirth from the woman's point of view, but also suggest that the father should not even be *present* during the birth:

I subscribed to the classical, or you might say, the traditional role fathers play in the birth of their children. Which goes as follows.

Lock them in the corridor outside the delivery room. Allow them admittance at no time. Give them forty cigarettes and a lighter. Instruct them to pace to the end of corridor. When they reach this happy position, instruct them to turn around and return to whence they came.

Repeat as necessary. (Keyes: 2003b, 1)

Watermelon also presents an overt account of the effects of childbirth on the female body, once unheard of in a country which often went to great lengths to conceal the female body:

In fact, it was only a week since I started wearing normal knickers again.

Let me explain.

Maybe you don't know it but you don't return to normal living and, more importantly, normal clothes the moment you give birth.

No indeed!

It's a long time before certain bodily processes stop. I don't want to sound unnecessarily gory here but can I just say that I could have given Lady Macbeth a run for her money.

Don't talk to *me* about blood being everywhere, Missus! (Keyes: 2003b, 276-277)

Such extracts are helping to bring women's issues and experiences into the public sphere, a place where they had hitherto been classed as "taboo". In doing so, Keyes is helping to normalise women's bodies and women's sexualities, a trend which other Irish writers will hopefully continue. I would argue that by participating in this process, Keyes is part of a postfeminist perspective which is 'is an unabashed celebration of all things feminine' (Lazar: 2009, 381).

In a society where often extreme measures to maintain morality were enforced, it seemed inevitable that the advertisement, discussion, and availability of contraception – often viewed as a taboo subject – would prove controversial. Section 17 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1935, for instance, banned the importation and sale of contraceptives, while Sections 16 and 17 of the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) prohibited the printing, publication, distribution and sale of any publication which was seen as advocating either contraception or abortion as a means of birth control:

The argument was that the sexually explicit nature of such information – for example, on how to insert a cervical cap – made it unacceptable. As with the banning in 1941 of a book about the infertile period, because of a fear that spreading such knowledge could lead to indecent conduct and public immorality, this says a great deal about public assumptions around female sexual behaviour. (Hill: 2003, 104-105)

In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, for a large proportion of the twentieth century, Ireland was recorded as having the highest marital fertility rate in Europe, and so, for many social activists, ‘the social and economic condition of very large families in Ireland was a longstanding concern [...] women suffering from ill health, malnutrition and anaemia were expected to bear children frequently and then to rear them in often squalid conditions’ (Connolly: 2005, 53-54). It is clear that, despite the successes of the sexual revolution in other parts of the world, it ‘was slow to impact on the South [of Ireland], where family life was highly valued and where, despite the liberalising tendencies of the Second Vatican Council launched in 1962, the Catholic Church retained a tight control over moral and sexual behaviour’ (Hill: 2003, 145). For much of the twentieth century, the right to use contraception in Ireland was prohibited by the dominant attitude of the Catholic Church; in 1951, ‘Pope Pius XII reiterated the use of the “safe period” as the only acceptable form of fertility control’ (Connolly: 2005, 54). It was not until April 1963 when the first family-planning clinic was opened in Holles Street Hospital in Dublin, for the purpose of giving advice on the safe period. The contraceptive pill was initially pharmaceutically available in Ireland in 1961, and, by 1967, it is estimated that around 12,000 Southern Irish women were

taking it, not just to regulate the menstrual cycle, the reason for which it was usually prescribed, but also 'to avail of its well-publicised "side effects" to limit or space their children' (Hill: 2003, 145). In 1968, then, it understandably came as a major blow to Irish women when the Papal Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* prohibited the use of contraceptives in Ireland only a few short years after it became available; this initiated much public debate on the topic, and, for perhaps the first time, Irish women were provoked to challenge the legislations of the Catholic Church, as Irish feminist activists and groups in the 1970s were prompted to focus on fertility control and reproductive choice as key to Irish women's liberation. Contraception was only partially legalised in 1979, although it was being illegally provided for some time by the Well Woman Centre and family-planning clinics. It was not until 1985 that a legislation to permit the sale of condoms without prescription was introduced as a response to the AIDS virus, although they were only available to those over 18 years of age. Nowadays, the stigma that was once linked to contraception in Ireland appears to have noticeably lessened, and the use of contraception has become an expected "norm", as implied in *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*, when the protagonist notes that she and her boyfriend 'hadn't mentioned birth control, but when the time came we were both responsible adults living in the HIV-positive nineties' (Keyes: 2003a, 731). Once again the specific cultural context of Ireland has influenced the way in which Keyes relates issues dealing with women, and is also part of the cultural mechanism of change, which is necessarily slow and accretive at the level of representation.

Abortion has been equally problematic in Ireland, if not more so. Induced abortion occurred in Ireland for centuries in an underground manner, and continued until legal abortion was introduced in Britain in 1967, and Irish women began to travel there for safer terminations. A "Women's Right to Choose" group was set up in Ireland with the aim of devising a strategy to decriminalise abortion and to establish a feminist pregnancy

counselling service in Ireland. Nevertheless, Ireland has battled with severe censorship regarding the issue of abortion. After the 1983 referendum on abortion, for instance, the Irish national broadcasting station, RTÉ, was banned from undertaking any live discussion about abortion on both radio and television. In addition, this censorship of information included:

The removal of women's self-help books (such as *Our Bodies, Our Selves*), and even the removal of British telephone directories from public libraries. It also involved the taking of legal action against the Dublin Well Women Centre, Open Line Counselling and the Union of Students because these bodies were seen as providing such information. (O'Connor: 1998, 93)

Such censorship has been reduced in Ireland, as authors such as Keyes can at least now discuss abortion. In *Last Chance Saloon*, for example, Katherine recalls how, when she became pregnant by a married man when she was a young woman, she felt she had no choice but to travel to England for an abortion (although she miscarried before this could take place). As well as referring to the situation of Irish women travelling to England to avail themselves of legal abortion services, this novel also highlights the mixed feelings that Irish women may have on the topic: it is another undecidable. Katherine, like many women, was raised to view abortion as a sin, and vocally protested against the campaigns to legalise it; however, when she became pregnant, she realised that it was not so easy to condemn it until she was in that situation and had to make the choice herself, a choice that she would have to live with for the rest of her life:

'You know that I don't – at least I didn't – believe in it.' Katherine couldn't meet Tara's eye, as she remembered how, at school, she'd always made mealy-mouthed pronouncements along with the nuns about how abortion was murder, about how no one had the right to deny life to the unborn. But all that had been swept away by the terrible terror that had possessed her. From the moment Lorcan had run out on her she'd wanted to have an abortion. She could see no other way to avoid her life falling apart. She'd known she'd burn in Hell, but she didn't care. She was in Hell already. (Keyes: 1999, 567-568)

This is a complex moral and ethical issue and Keyes offers no easy answers or options to her character. The event in the book is a fictive situation which mirrors the plight of thousands of women, and offers no guiding path or fairy-tale ending. Similarly, towards the end of *Angels*, we learn that protagonist Maggie became pregnant when she was seventeen years old and still

in school. Unlike Katherine, who miscarried before she aborted her unborn child, Maggie did travel to England for the termination. Despite initially feeling ashamed and alone, as if she was the only person to ever have an abortion, Maggie eventually learns that a number of her friends go through the same thing, indicating the frequency with which Irish women travel abroad to avail of a legal abortion, but also the silence that has reigned in Irish society on this topic. Maggie's feelings and reflections on the termination display an honest and objective attitude to the both the decision to have the abortion and to the feelings that may be experienced afterwards, asserting that, despite what women have been brought up to believe, they should do what is right for them as, like Katherine, she realises that no one can decide what is right for another person at a particular time in their lives. The extract also demonstrates that abortions are not only carried out on teenagers and very young women who become pregnant while still in school and feel they are too young to cope with a baby, but that such services are also availed of by women of all ages and in a variety of personal situations, helping to lessen the stigma often attached to abortion:

For a long time, I was the only person I knew who'd had an abortion. Then, when she was twenty-five, Donna had one and Sinead's sister had one when she was thirty-one. Both times I was called on to relate how it was for me and I told them honestly what I thought; it was their body and they had the right to choose. They shouldn't give any credence to those pro-life bullies. But – at least if they were anything like me – they shouldn't expect to emerge unscathed from the experience, but should brace themselves for fall-out. Every emotion from guilt to curiosity, shock to regret, self-hatred to wretched relief. (Keyes: 2002, 360)

Although the Government has set up the Crisis Pregnancy Agency, which suggests that abortion is at least being addressed in Ireland, whether abortion will eventually be legalised in Ireland remains an elusive prospect. The Irish Government has, for instance, not yet introduced 'legislation to clarify the circumstances in which legal abortion may be carried out in Ireland [and] it is widely accepted that this will not be forthcoming in the foreseeable future' (O'Connor: 1998, 52). So the confused feelings of these characters mirror the confusion that is part of the public sphere in Ireland on this issue and Keyes, by talking about the issue openly, is making a point about the need for more open discussion on this issue, as

well as noting the covert nature of all such discussions given the legal status of abortion in this country. That such a topic is being discussed at all is an interesting aspect of the value of Keyes' work as after two very divisive referenda on the issue, the Irish public sphere has maintained an eloquent silence on the topic, and Keyes, by breaking this silence, is demonstrating her ability to contribute to serious debate.

Despite the issue of abortion remaining controversial in Ireland, feminist activism and women's groups have undoubtedly helped to significantly improve Irish women's relationship to their bodies. For instance, 'the legal right to use contraception to plan a family, combined with other factors, has contributed to the quite dramatic reduction in the average size of families that occurred in late twentieth century Ireland' (Connolly: 2005, 54) has been secured. It is also important to recognise that:

It is no longer the case that *all* heterosexual acts are categorically viewed as a potential conception, as the Catholic Church traditionally advocated. The pursuit of sex and obligatory reproduction can now, in principle, be treated as two separate matters, both institutionally and intimately, in contemporary Ireland. (Connolly: 2005, 54)

Much of this change has resulted from the decreasing impact and influence of the Church in Ireland. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, 'a realignment of the relationship between Church, state and civil society indicated that the Church's authority, particularly on sexual matters, was gradually diminishing, and that a gulf was beginning to emerge between formal religious practice and the activities of everyday life' (Hill: 2003, 5). As a result, views regarding sexual matters in Ireland are becoming increasingly more open-minded, albeit slowly, as suggested in Keyes' earlier two nations comment:

From the days of parish priests beating the hedgerows for courting couples when sex outside marriage was the paramount sin, and of women being castigated in confession for refusing intercourse to their husbands, there is now a somewhat more rational view of this human condition and its functions. However, with some people, a certain amount of prurience still attaches to the subject, a hangover from the severe repression of those bygone days. (Viney: 1989, 48)

Such a "hangover" effect from Ireland's days of cherishing national ideological representations of sexual innocence may be located in novels such as *Rachel's Holiday*

(1998), as, even though women in Ireland now arguably have more sexual freedom than ever before, the notions of chastity and restraint may have been so ingrained in the minds of Irish people that some may still long for this apparently “simpler” time, at least in terms of sexual relations, and some would probably quite happily cherish an element of innocence in their relationships:

We sat quietly and still, Chris's arm tight around me. I closed my eyes and, for a few moments, let myself pretend it was a perfect world and he was my boyfriend.

It reminded me of an earlier, more innocent age, when the most a boyfriend did was put his arm around you and – if your luck was in – kissed you. The enforced decorum demanded by the Cloisters was sweet and romantic. It touched, rather than frustrated me. (Keyes: 1998, 358)

The mixed feelings that are aroused by his behaviour are symbolised by the phrase ‘touched, rather than frustrated’, as there is a definite ambiguity here in her reactions. Nevertheless, in the majority of Keyes' novels, most of the characters display a recognition that opinions regarding women's sexuality have changed in Ireland, and while women were once expected to remain chaste, pure and virginal until their wedding day, ‘now the rule seemed to be that if you wanted to hold on to him you'd better deliver the goods asap’ (Keyes: 2007, 228). However, in terms of her creation of undecidable ethical situations, Keyes has noted how some women in contemporary Irish society may still feel that it is shameful to mention any aspect of their specifically female existence. However, she also follows the advice of theorists such as Cixous who urged women to “write their bodies”, and is therefore attempting to remove the stigma attached to the specifically female body parts and functions.

Germaine Greer described how disgust for the female genitals has had a negative impact on sexual relations, where, ironically, the ‘vagina is described as a *problem* preventing some of the niceness of being close’ (Greer: 2006, 290), which seems to imply that the disgust for the female genital organs may, ironically, decrease the pleasure experienced during sex. As a result, many women have felt uncomfortable and ‘embarrassed by cunnilingus, and feel sure that men must find it disgusting’ (Greer: 2006, 290). Keyes helps

to disprove this situation, not only by depicting sex scenes in her novels, importantly without showing the woman as needing to be punished for embracing her sexuality, but also by having her protagonists discuss oral sex. Some of Keyes' characters state that they do not necessarily feel embarrassed by this act, or by their bodies, but instead do not actually enjoy it, describing it as 'the watching paint dry of sex' (Keyes: 2003a, 729). Another protagonist states how she endures oral sex because it is one of the few areas of sexual intercourse where the pleasure is focused on the woman, although she does note that her partner feels he deserves even more pleasure in return for granting her this "favour":

But I'll just tell you very quickly that I think cunnilingus is the most boring thing God ever created. I'd rather spend a day filing than endure a five minute stint of it.

And when they're finished with their few minutes of slurping they act like you should be so *grateful* for it. Beaming up at you like they deserve a medal. And then act like they're entitled to a year's supply of no-questions-asked blow-jobs. (Keyes: 2003b, 363)

Keyes' discussions of oral sex are interesting and important for Irish women because, not only do they provide an overt outlet for the discussion of the female genital organs and female sexuality, but because they also provide women with a voice, an opinion, regarding sex. They show that women, in Ireland and all over the world, have an active role in sex; rather than women only being expected to endure sex as a means to conceive, they allow women to say that they enjoy sex (or, in the case of these protagonists, the right to say that they *do not* enjoy oral sex, which is equally important) and that it is a desirable and healthy aspect of being an adult woman. They also bring an essentially private act into the public sphere and as such, are mimetic of the altered position of women in the discourse of sex in Ireland. In this case, 'oral sex' has a polysemic relevance as talking about women's bodies and sexual pleasure has long been anathema in Ireland and Keyes is participating in the dismantling of this ideological shibboleth in her work.

Yet another area that has proven problematic in Ireland is the issue of homosexuality and other sexualities that deviate from the supposed heterosexual "norm", which the next section will examine.

Homosexuality, race, and Ireland's "others"

According to both Catholic theology and Irish law, homosexuality was long considered a sin and a crime; it has already been stated how books were banned under Irish censorship laws for depicting homosexual relationships. This was often in spite of the fact that, in some cases, homosexuality may not necessarily be approved of, or the word "homosexual" may not even have been used, as in the case of Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*. In such instances, it was argued that 'even to mention or suggest the possibility of homosexuality could be read by some as a promotion of it: whether or not homosexuality is approved of in the novel was irrelevant to those who chose to be offended by it' (Breen: 1993, 168). Even when Irish censorship laws became less severe, to speak, for instance of 'sex between women would still have been inflammatory' (Enright: 2005, v) as it was seen to provide a threat to Ireland's Catholic ideologies, 'whose ideal of the lovely Irish girl did not include her falling in love with other women' (Enright: 2005, viii). Novels such as *Anybody Out There?* recognise the mixed, and often negative, views surrounding lesbianism in Ireland as the protagonist's mother feels that being a lesbian – women she views as "exotic creatures" rather than "normal" women – would be the very worst thing that one of her daughters could possibly do:

Angela Kilfeather is the most exotic creature that ever came out of our road. Well, that's not really true – my family is far more dramatic what with broken marriages and suicide attempts and drug addiction and Helen, but Mum uses Angela Kilfeather as the gold standard: bad and all as her daughters are, at least they're not lesbians who French-kiss their girlfriends beside suburban leylandii. (Keyes: 2006, 8)

Of course, it was hardly surprising that homosexuals felt alienated in Irish society; along with the criticism and censorship of sexual relations, particularly regarding women, and stressing the importance of marriage and family life, homosexuality was another area which saw the Church and state working in accord with one another. Both Irish Church and state argued that the criminalisation of homosexuality served to benefit public health, Irish morality, and the

institution of marriage, and homosexuality remained illegal in Ireland until as recently as the 1990s. Once again it is important to note the socio-cultural belatedness of the context within which Keyes was writing. Issues which had long been debated and liberalised in the Anglophone and European public spheres were still very raw in an Irish context. In *Last Chance Saloon*, published in 1999, Keyes makes reference to how the term 'gay' was still seen as 'the taboo word' and that having 'a gay friend still carried kudos and novelty value' (Keyes: 1999, 107). The fact that homosexuality was only legalised in Ireland relatively recently in 1993 is portrayed in *This Charming Man*, as one of the protagonists, Alicia, realises on her honeymoon that her husband who, in his fifties, is a lot older than her, is in fact gay. Although Alicia and Jeremy remain firm friends, Alicia cannot understand why Jeremy is still not openly gay, forgetting that a man his age still remembers homosexuality as being illegal:

'Why not just be openly gay?' she sometimes asked him. 'Ireland has changed. It's okay now.'

'I'm from a different generation to you.' (Keyes: 2008, 239)

Keyes also, however, attempts to render homosexuality unexceptional by including homosexual characters in major roles, most notably *Last Chance Saloon*, in which one of the main characters, Fintan, is a homosexual male, and, of the three main protagonists in the book, Fintan's relationship is shown as the strongest and most loving. *Last Chance Saloon* discusses the link often made between homosexuality and AIDS. Although he is eventually diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease, throughout the novel, when Fintan originally repeatedly complains of not feeling well, the automatic assumption is that, as a gay man, he has contracted AIDS:

That was the problem whenever a gay friend became sick. The A-word always cropped up. Then she felt uncomfortable with her train of thought – did she think gay people and Aids were uniquely linked? (Keyes: 1999, 130; see also pp 244-245)

However, Fintan is quick to remind Tara that someone in a heterosexual relationship is just as susceptible to AIDS as homosexuals, thus helping to normalise homosexuality and to show that HIV and AIDS are no longer solely "gay diseases":

'Look me in the eye,' she interrupted forcefully, 'and tell me that you've had an HIV test recently.' [...]

'Have *you* had an HIV test?' Fintan surprised her by asking.

'No, but...'

'But what?'

Fintan interrupted, 'Do you always use a condom with Thomas?'

'Well, no, we don't always, but...'

'And has Thomas had an HIV test?'

As if, Tara thought. He'd be the last man on earth to have one. 'No, but...' [...]

She said nothing, damning her misplaced, knee-jerk concern. There was probably more chance of *her* being HIV positive than Fintan. (Keyes: 1999, 158-159)

One of the strengths of Keyes' writing is to place stereotypical opinions in the minds and mouths of her characters, thereby making these characters familiar to the readers who may be similarly uninformed about such issues, or who may never have thought about these issues in a structured manner. Such conversations do evoke resonances in the reader, and they do serve the purpose of stimulating internal debate and of questioning the Lacanian mirror of societal identification and misrecognition.

Last Chance Saloon is effective in portraying the injustice and discrimination that homosexuals are, unfortunately, still often subjected to, even in contemporary Irish society. When Fintan is hospitalised with Hodgkin's disease, even his own mother does not believe that he has cancer, despite Fintan's friend Katherine's protests that he does not have AIDS:

'Fintan is sick? Sick? Is it serious?'

'Yes, I'm very sorry, he's got -'

'Aids,' JaneAnn interrupted. 'I've been waiting for this. There was a thing in the paper about it.'

'No, Mrs O'Grady,' Katherine forced herself to be gentle, 'he hasn't got Aids.'

'I know all about it.' Her voice was dignified. 'Just because I live in the backs of beyond, don't think I don't know.'

'Mrs O'Grady, Fintan has a form of cancer.'

'I'm his mother. The truth is bitter but tell it out to me anyway. Don't fob me off with talk of cancer.' (Keyes: 1999, 245)

Around the same time, Fintan finds out that his boss has sacked him in case, as a gay man undergoing hospital treatment, he brings a bad reputation to the company, an instance which once again highlights the level of discrimination regarding sexual orientation:

'You mean she came into the hospital and sacked you in bed? But why? Can you be sacked for being sick?'

'She was concerned – get this – that I'd give the wrong image of the company.'

Suddenly Katherine understood. 'She thinks you're HIV positive.'
Fintan nodded. (Keyes: 1999, 351)

This is the very theme that made Tom Hanks' portrayal of a gay man in *Philadelphia* (1993) such a *cause celebre*, and Keyes handles it with equal poignancy in an Irish context. Once again, such a topic hardly qualifies as 'frothy', and makes the point that popular cultural texts can be agents of debate, reflection and transformation in societal attitudes.

As well as homosexuality, Keyes also addresses another marginalised gender category: cross-dressing and transvestism. *This Charming Man* features a sub-plot in which one of the protagonists, Lola, befriends a group of secretive cross-dressers in a rural Irish village. As she helps them to choose clothes and express themselves (she is a stylist by profession), her residence becomes a type of "safe house" where these men can perform this other part of their gender without fear of ridicule. As with *Last Chance Saloon*, which helped to articulate the discrimination and mistreatment to which homosexuals have often been subjected, the following two extracts from *This Charming Man* similarly attempt to articulate how similar mistreatment is often experienced by those whose gender does not "conform" to what society expects. The first extract discusses how the man's experiences of cross-dressing in the past have led to feelings of shame and depression, while the second extract discusses how, when one's gender deviates from the "norm", it can result to the person in question feeling ridiculed and even disgraced in society:

Fascinating. 'And did your parents know?'

'Oh yes. Every time they caught me, my father'd belt me black and blue.' Curiously upbeat delivery. 'But couldn't help meself, Lola. Tried a million and one times to stop. Have suffered desperate shame.'

Chattier than he'd originally seemed.

'And what are your current circumstances...er...Blanche? Married?'

'I am indeed.' (Keyes: 2008, 283)

Over the years he had assembled one outfit of his own – dress, accessories, wig, make-up but no shoes – was making do with open-toed slingbacks in size 8, biggest he could get, but toes and heels stuck out over edges and were painful to walk in. He kept outfit in bag in boot of his car. Lived in fear of wife finding it [...]

I had sudden thought. 'Would it be so bad if she knew?'

‘Jesus!’ He buried fizzog in hands. ‘Don’t even want to think about it! No one must know! I have three young children. I am respected in community. I am taking massive risk telling you all this.’ (Keyes: 2008, 272-273)

These passages also serve the purpose of helping to open the readers’ minds to such a marginalised gender category, increasing our awareness of the hardships, criticism and shame that they are made to feel for the cross-dressing element of their personality. This activity is still one of the more taboo activities in Irish society and Keyes’ humanisation and normalisation of the characters is an interesting way of bringing such activities into the public arena. Additionally, as each man describes cross-dressing as a time when he can be his ‘true self’ (Keyes: 2008, 273), Keyes is attempting to render cross-dressing, not as something to be hidden or shamed, but as unexceptional; it is seen as just another interest that some men have, almost in the same way as some men like sport or films. Even Lola, who initially felt uncomfortable around the cross-dressers, eventually sees that there is no threat involved in these men enjoying nice clothes. As a stylist, she spends her time ‘trying to make women beautiful. No different now just because women were men’ (Keyes: 2008, 285). The image of women being transformed into men is interesting here as she is granting the primacy of their female identity which is a deconstruction of the whole activity of men dressing as women in the first place. The narrative voice here is attesting to the primacy of these characters’ female identity and, by so doing, is an emancipatory perspective on the whole issue of trans-gender identity. The fact that this is done in an understated, conversational inner monologue is in no way to diminish its effect.

Keyes’ views call to mind Judith Butler’s ideas on gender as largely performative, as a form of masquerade. Given our earlier discussion of the horror that patriarchy evinces for menstruation, the image of cross dressing, and of the liberation that can accompany the elision of the normative gendered straitjacket suggests that the idea of the masquerade is significant here. Coined by Butler, in her analysis of Lacanian constructions of identity

around the term 'phallus', this was first introduced by 1929, in Joan Riviere's essay, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', which introduced the notion of femininity as masquerade in terms of a theory of aggression and conflict resolution (Butler 1990, 50). Butler goes on to argue that being a woman is about performatives in a context, and we can see the relation between the text-context dialectic that was introduced at the beginning of the chapter here. For Butler, de Beauvoir's notion that 'one becomes a woman' (de Beauvoir 1997, 281), rather than being born one, is a significant point, and she goes on to develop a theory of performative gender, a process which is being enacted in Keyes' book, as the men insist on being called women's names when they are cross-dressing, and the narrator finds their personalities to be significantly changed. I would argue that this is a noteworthy example of a popular culture text attempting to inform its readers by taking on such little-discussed areas and bringing them into the light of day. The portrayals of the men, while comic, are also sympathetic and this is important as they become identificatory figures in the text.

This Charming Man also serves another purpose: as well as helping to open readers' minds to the hardship and discrimination to which "other" genders are subjected, Keyes also presents a type of hope for the future in terms of acceptance. In the later part of the novel, as Lola learns more about cross-dressing and opens her mind to the existence of different gender performances, we are presented with a near-utopian image of a disco where the cross-dressers no longer have to hide their "true selves", but can be fully expressive and are supported, rather than ridiculed, by the people around them:

Sue, Chloe and I found a ledge to balance our sticky pink drinks on. Stared out at dancefloor. Some cross-dressers looked like real women.

'Because they are,' Chloe shouted above the music. 'Wags. Wives and girlfriends of cross-dressers, who come to be supportive.' (Keyes: 2008, 449)

The wag term can be read as an oblique reference to performativity of gender as, in popular culture, wags (or wives and girlfriends of footballers) are supporters and beneficiaries of performative athletes. The reference suggests a cultural shift as cross-dressers are

performative in their own way and, in this micro-context, are celebrities and deserving of support. On a related topic, lesbianism was an area that largely divided feminist discourse, because, although meant to liberate all women from patriarchal confines:

Feminist discourse was and still is dominated by heterosexual women, and the area of sexual identity itself was often neglected as a potentially divisive subject, which meant that lesbians felt alienated and unrepresented by mainstream feminism. Heterosexual women themselves appeared to be threatened by lesbian dissenting voices in the movement. (Whelehan: 1995, 160)

Irish society has typically rendered lesbians invisible, an occurrence which is 'rooted in pervasive gendered societal attitudes to Irish women and their sexuality' (Connolly: 2005, 173). Particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was noted that the Irish women's movement appeared unwilling to address the issues and experiences of lesbian feminist activists in Ireland, and so 'the question of lesbian feminism became one of the points of dissonance within the Irish women's movement' (Connolly: 2005, 176). Although it is difficult to estimate the extent to which lesbianism was a common experience among Irish women, it was around this time that we can pinpoint an emergence of specific lesbian communities in Ireland, in response to the apparent neglect of specifically lesbian issues within general feminism. More recently, while there is an Irish lesbian community which has been noted for its political activism, it has been recognised that academic, political, and media analysis has placed more of a focus on gay men than on lesbians in Ireland:

The public face of activism in the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) communities in Ireland in the late 1980s and early 1990s was mainly focused on service provision around the HIV/AIDS crisis and on rights-based activism (principally the campaign for the decriminalisation of male homosexuality). Although many lesbians participated in this work, women did not have the same kind of public or media profile as their gay male counterparts, and many made deliberate choices for one reason or another to work 'behind the scenes'. (Connolly: 2005, 172-173)

Although attempts are now being made to compile a specific history of what it is to be gay, lesbian, and bisexual in Ireland, this process is still in its very early stages. It proves to be problematic when we realise that a 'marked difference between contemporary LBT communities in Ireland and those in other Western countries can be discerned in terms of the

age profile of such groups – there is not a visible presence of “out” lesbians/bisexuals over the age of sixty in this country, which is telling’ (Connolly: 2005, 192). Once again, that belatedness of which we have been speaking is foregrounded. Perhaps this is because, while the decriminalisation of homosexuality occurred in Britain in 1967, it was not decriminalised in Ireland until as recently as 1993. Additionally, while there have been remarkable changes in the attitude to LGBT communities in Ireland in the past two decades, it is nevertheless obvious that some prejudices remain:

So for example, although current equality legislation guarantees protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, there have been few cases taken so far involving lesbians. To make such a case involves taking a public stand, and clearly few lesbians are ready to take this step. (Connolly: 2005, 173)

Perhaps this is partly the reason why representations of lesbians in Irish fiction are still quite rare; as the protagonist in *Watermelon* points out, although Ireland has admittedly become more tolerant in terms of sexual relations and sexual diversity, for example there is no longer any ‘shock value left’ in issues such as prostitution, an issue such as ‘lesbianism hadn’t been done to death yet. People still got a little bit hot under the collar about it’ (Keyes: 2003b, 343). Although Keyes has made real efforts to present gay men and even cross-dressers, she may be accused of neglecting any real discussion of lesbians, adding to the above claim that lesbian existence in Ireland has tended to be ignored and neglected. Keyes’ representations of lesbians have, thus far, been limited to secondary, minor characters.

In *Angels*, for instance, the protagonist, Maggie, leaves Ireland and goes to stay with her friend in Los Angeles, where she is awe-struck to meet what she calls a ‘real-life lesbian’ (Keyes: 2002, 81). Maggie admits that she had never met a lesbian before, alluding to the aforementioned “invisibility” of lesbians in Ireland, despite the increasingly visible presence of gay men:

Lara was a *lesbian*. I’d never met a real-life lesbian before. Not knowingly, anyway. Plenty of gay men, of course, but this was a new one on me and I had no clue what to say. Congratulations? (Keyes: 2002, 81)

Even when Maggie has a brief lesbian encounter with Lara, rather than it developing into a lesbian relationship, and therefore presenting lesbianism as a healthy lifestyle choice for women, it is instead merely shown as Maggie's brief moment of rebellion, her chance to do something "crazy", before she returns to her husband and her marriage in Ireland. Clearly lesbianism is another undecidable in terms of Keyes' writing, and its absence in her work is, we can assume, a direct effect of the long-term ignorance and silencing of lesbianism in Ireland.

Despite such difficulties in finding ways to present homosexuality as a healthy lifestyle chosen by some of the population, the 'ongoing development of LGBT communities and cultures in a variety of locations is indicative of a thriving and active community moving into the twenty-first century' (Connolly: 2005, 193). In terms of this realisation, we can be optimistic that Ireland will continue to advance its tolerance and acceptance of homosexuals, just as it has raised its awareness of other areas which were once considered to deviate from the "norm".

Racial prejudice, it is said, 'is often based on ignorance or fear, particularly when there is little contact between people of different nations or ethnic groups' (Fitzgerald: 1992, 249). Although becoming more diverse in terms of ethnicity and cultures in recent years, Ireland, in particular, is recognised as a society that has traditionally been, and perhaps to a point still is, predominantly white, and its struggles with racial prejudice have therefore tended to be just as problematic as its battles against sexism:

The emerging struggle of minority groups for equal rights and protection against discrimination in Ireland has its parallel in the feminist movement. After long and hard battles sexism is now at least recognised as existing, though we have not yet managed to free Irish society of sexist thinking and behaviour. Racism is still struggling to be recognised as an inequity. (Fitzgerald: 1992, 253-254)

Ireland's slowness to accept "other" races is evident in novels such as *Sushi for Beginners*, in which one of the protagonists, Lisa, recalls her mother's shock when Lisa first introduced her to her new boyfriend:

Her heart had nearly stopped with fright the first time she'd met Oliver. If only she'd been warned that her daughter's boyfriend was a hard, gleaming, six-foot tall black man. Coloured man, African-American man, whatever the correct phrase was. She had nothing against them, it was just the unexpectedness of it. (Keyes: 2007, 39)

Again, there is the shock of the new that we saw in previous issues that are dealt with in Keyes' novels: there is no attempt to hide the mixed motives or conflicted feelings when faced by an issue that may be contentious, and there is very little sense of political correctness in the internal monologue of the narrators. Oliver recognises that he is treated differently in Ireland than he has been in other countries; when he arrives at the airport to meet Lisa, for example, he feels that he is victimised by security because of his skin colour:

'Sorry, babes,' his lips curved around his shockingly white teeth, 'but I was stopped by Immigration. Only person on the whole plane to be.' He put his hand on his hip and said with exaggerated curiosity, 'Now, I wonder why *that* was.'

'Bastards!'

'Yeah, just couldn't seem to convince them I was a British citizen. Despite having a British passport.'

She clucked with concern. 'Are you upset?'

'Nah, I'm used to it. The same thing happened the last time I visited here.' (Keyes: 2007, 351)

When Lisa and Oliver are considering getting a divorce as they both have different aims in life, Lisa's mother even cites the fact that they have different skin colours as the reason for their separation, again representing the narrow-mindedness and ignorance which some people have towards racial issues:

'Was it because you were ... different?'

'Different, Mum?' Lisa was tart.

'Well, with him being ... coloured?' (Keyes: 2007, 39)

In order to combat racism, we are encouraged to 'change both our thinking and our behaviour in order to develop anti-racist practices. We need to monitor our conscious and unconscious attitudes 'if we are to bring about individual and collective change' (Fitzgerald: 1992, 252). Such "conscious and unconscious attitudes" are reflected in novels such as *The Brightest Star in the Sky*, as Lydia's Polish flatmate discusses how Polish people are often subjected to unfair treatment and discrimination in Ireland because of misconceptions and misjudgements which are often drawn from people's own ignorance and a reliance on stereotypes:

Ire rose in Andrei. Everyone misjudged them. They thought Poles were simply hard-working but passion-free builders. They had no idea of what they were really like. (Keyes: 2009, 174)

The same novel also suggests that the problems that Irish people may have in accepting people from other countries and cultures may be as simple as a language barrier; that, as different cultures speak differently and have different customs, it is taking time for such people to bond because they have not yet spent enough time together to *understand* each other:

'I vos jokingk.' He sighed with abrupt gloom. 'Ukrainians are a joke-loving people. Like you Ireesh, we, as you say, love the craic, but the language barrier... I joke, joke, joke all the day long but Ireesh do not understand.' (Keyes: 2009, 582-583)

Although not yet as common, Irish authors such as Keyes are beginning to recognise that we now live in a multi-cultural, multi-racial society, and a gradual but growing acceptance of different races and ethnicities among Irish people. In *Sushi for Beginners*, despite Lisa's mother's original shock at her daughter's relationship with Oliver, as discussed above, she does eventually come to genuinely like Oliver, and, as Lisa says, 'once she'd got used to him, she was able to get beyond his colour and see that he really was a nice-looking boy. To put it mildly' (Keyes: 2007, 39). Again, there is a plurality of response enunciated in these novels, and this reflects Keyes' ability to engage with many different perspectives on issues that pertain to the role of gender and race in contemporary Irish culture.

Keyes' latest novel *The Brightest Star in the Sky* (2009) also contains a large number of characters from various parts of Africa and Eastern Europe: protagonist Lydia's boyfriend is 'a native of Lagos, Nigeria, [though] he had made Dublin his home for the past six years' (Keyes: 2009, 123). Lydia is housemates with a couple of Polish men, and meets people from the Ukraine and other areas through her job, again acknowledging that the races and ethnicities located in Ireland have expanded in recent years. It is refreshing that these changes are being portrayed, and if such trends continue – and, as Ireland is becoming more diverse in terms of race, it is likely that they will continue – Irish authors such as Keyes may be viewed

as actively influencing ‘the role Ireland plays in ensuring that we live in a society which respects fundamental rights and rejects all forms of discrimination’ (Fitzgerald: 1992, 265).

Until recently, there existed a ‘notion that the only sexuality compatible with Irishness is marital heterosexuality’ (Pramaggiore: 2006, 118), and issues of race and ethnicity were rarely discussed in Irish fiction. That Irish writers are beginning to tackle such topics is a huge step towards portraying Ireland as a more tolerant and racially-aware society, therefore helping to diminish the traditional ‘homogeneity of the Irish nation in terms of race, gender, and sexuality’ (Pramaggiore: 2006, 118). Keyes’ work may thus be viewed as developing into becoming more socially-aware, in terms of positively portraying, and promoting, difference and individuality.

Marian Keyes and Ireland

This chapter has attempted to outline a number of contextual areas which have affected Irish women, both in the past and still today, including the sanctity of marriage and motherhood, the body and female sexuality, Irish women in the working world, and issues regarding homosexuality and race. In doing so, this chapter has examined how these same issues have appeared in the work of Marian Keyes: how Keyes recognises the effects of women’s oppression in Ireland in the past, how some of these same issues may still affect some women today, and how Irish society’s general opinion on other issues has changed in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. It also attempts to account for the ability of popular culture texts to participate in the ongoing dialectical process of identity-formation and creation as well as questioning some of the givens with regard to the ideological representation of women in popular culture.

Her discussion of the female body, pregnancy, abortion and menstruation, as well as issues of trans-gendered identity, all parallel the work of feminists such as Judith Butler, who asks whether ‘being female constitutes a “natural fact” or a cultural performance, or is

“naturalness” constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?” (Butler: 1990, viii).

Some Irish feminist theorists have noted that any discussion of the changes of women’s lives in Irish society over the past few decades ‘tends to illicit two views: that it has changed completely, and that it has not changed at all’ (O’Connor: 1998, 1). While it is certainly possible to argue for the latter view, it is also important to note that the lives of Irish women have undoubtedly changed considerably in recent decades, and ‘in modern Ireland things which were once hidden are now being told’ (Hill: 2003, 218). This exploration of Keyes’ work in terms of its representations of Irish women’s history and Irish women’s issues has shown how her novels are part of this process of ‘telling’ about many Irish women’s issues, particularly those which were once hidden and silenced. In a sense, she is working to the paradigm set out by Butler in terms of gender as ‘performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence’ (Butler: 1990, 27).

Pat O’Connor expressed concern that, unless Ireland’s ‘institutional structures reflect and reinforce a positive valuation of womanhood in all its multifacetedness then, truly, it remains no country for women... or indeed for men’ (O’Connor: 1998, 257). This chapter has shown that Keyes’ work may be providing a glimmer of hope in terms of O’Connor’s fears, in that it is making significant statements about women’s lives, is portraying Irish women in all their individuality, and is finally providing an outlet for the open discussion of women’s issues that were once considered taboo in Ireland, including domestic violence, women’s sexuality, and sexual orientation. An article by Kathy Cremin cites Keyes herself as linking ‘her popularity to the fact that she is narrating a different kind of Irishness’ (Cremin: 1999, <http://www.iol.ie/~iwc/kcremin.html>, par.18), which would suggest that her novels are showing how the lives of Irish women have changed, as well as representing the issues that were formerly considered unmentionable in Irish society. Following on from this chapter’s

account of Keyes' discussion of Ireland, and its women's issues, the next chapter will examine her work in terms of chick lit, the popular genre to which she is most often linked. In both chapters, the relationship between text and context is shown to be both complex and nuanced, and the relationship between Keyes' work and her culture and generic context is never simple, nor, indeed, is the relationship between popular and high culture. In terms of coming to any understanding of the relationship between these areas, I would agree with Derrida when he notes that 'this is my starting point: no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation. What I am referring to here is not richness of substance, semantic fertility, but rather structure: the structure of the remnant or of iteration' (Derrida: 1979, 81).

Chapter Two

Marian Keyes as a Chick Lit Author: Keyes' Generic Context

To a good portion of the reading world, [chick lit] means [...] something light and fluffy, the literary equivalent of a marshmallow. (Mlynowski: 2006, 93)

Beneath the glittering veneer of girly gab about shoes, shagging, and shedding pounds in the genre of Chick Lit, lies the universal questions that all great literature considers: who am I? why am I here? what really matters? Judy L. Rogers (Freitas: 2005, i)

In an essay on the study of popular culture, David N. Feldman states that attempts 'to extract cultural values, myths, icons, and formulas from popular culture works is manifestly worthwhile, but to fail to work with the form and structure of a writer's work is to deny the study of what is often the main concern of the artist' (Feldman: 2006, 199). As such, while the cultural context of Keyes' work, as discussed in the previous chapter, is necessary in locating Keyes and the background to her writing, it is also crucial to examine Keyes' texts in terms of the genre with which they are most commonly associated: the contemporary genre of women's fiction known as chick lit. Chick lit typically features female characters in their 20s and 30s as they make their way through their lives and tackle all the obstacles in their way, everything from finding Mr. Right (or, at least, Mr. Maybe) to finding the perfect career to finding the perfect shoes, along with everything in-between, all told in a humorous and self-deprecating tone. Elizabeth Merrick attempts to summarise the main plotlines of the typical chick lit novel in the following extract:

Chick lit is a genre, like the thriller, the sci-fi novel, or the fantasy epic. Its form and content are, more or less, formulaic: white girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while shopping, alternately cheating on or adhering to her diet, dodging her boss, and enjoying the occasional teary-eyed lunch with her token Sassy Gay Friend. Chick lit is the daughter of the romance novel and the stepsister to the fashion magazine. Details about race and class are almost always absent except, of course, for the protagonist's relentless pursuit of Money, a Makeover, and Mr. Right. (Merrick: 2006, vii-viii)

It will already be clear that Keyes' work differs from this formulaic outline in its discussion of issues of race and class, so already we can view her work as transforming, to some degree, the conventions of the genre. Nevertheless, for a genre that has been dismissed as formulaic nonsense, chick lit has generated a lot of controversy. Opinions on the genre are clearly divided: 'on one hand chick lit attracts the unquestioning adoration of fans; on the other it attracts the unmitigated disdain of critics' (Ferriss: 2006, 1). Keyes reflects on this point in *The Other Side of the Story*, a novel about chick lit writers and agents, in which one author is informed, 'the critics may not love you [...] but your readers do' (Keyes: 2004, 283). Chick lit has also 'received little serious or intelligent discussion' (Ferriss: 2006, 2), and has rarely been the subject of serious academic study, while a significant proportion of the critical interest in chick lit has tended to be from a predominantly negative perspective. As with the mixed views regarding the reception of the genre, it has similarly been noted how much of the 'discourse surrounding the genre has been polarized between its outright dismissal as trivial fiction and unexamined embrace by fans who claim that it reflects the realities of life for contemporary single women' (Ferriss: 2006, 2). Before examining the generic implications of Keyes' work, I feel it is instructive to examine the concept and practice that surrounds the whole area of generic classification itself, as such an examination will provide for a contextual framework for my current analysis.

Generic convention is often seen as fixed and static: a chick lit novel is popular culture, whereas Jane Austen is high culture. However, such generic stability is constantly under challenge in our postmodern condition, for just as the grand narratives are becoming fragmented, so too are generic conventions. Writing about generic conventions, Derrida has made the point that issues of genre or literary typology or academic convention should not attenuate the complication of one's intervention, nor should it justify any dispensing with analysis. He notes that:

If the “intellectual” still has a responsibility or some dignity, these require that at every opportunity he try to analyze publicly the socio-political scene in which he is participating, in which he is inscribed even before subscribing to it, and which his analysis in any case contributes to changing. (Derrida: 2002, 78)

It is interesting that even as he decries the generic complicity of critics who are caught up in predefined generic constraints, he is also generically constrained himself by his adequation of the intellectual with the male gender as indicated by the use of ‘he’ in this quotation. This means that the power of genre is still strong in terms of prescribing reactions to individual works, and I will explore this in the case of the reception which Keyes’ work has received. Part of my argument will be the need for a complex and nuanced response to her texts as both reflective of, and possibly transformative of, their cultural context, and for this response not to be delimited by generic considerations.

The genre of chick lit can be seen as a sub-genre of popular culture and this in itself is a problematic term. The Gramscian notion of hegemony, taking its cue from Marx’s *The German Ideology*, sees culture as hegemonically assimilating and passing on the values of the ruling class. From this perspective, one might see chick lit as being part of this societal discourse. Angela McRobbie, in her ground-breaking study of the import of the *Jackie* magazines, has done some work on popular cultural interpellation through these magazines as a form of Lacanian mirror through which young women are interpellated into the desired hegemonic discourse. For McRobbie, hegemonic ideology, as it ‘takes shape through the pages of *Jackie* is immensely powerful, especially if we consider it being absorbed, in its codified form, each week for several years at a time’ (McRobbie: 1991, 131). She makes the point that this magazine is an ongoing ideological vehicle: ‘teenage girls are subjected to an explicit attempt to win consent to the dominant order—in terms of femininity, leisure and consumption, i.e. at the level of culture’ (McRobbie: 1991, 87). The genre of these magazines would certainly have similarities with the genre of chick lit, as the core ideological *telos* would be the ‘culture of femininity’ which, ‘as part of the dominant ideology’, ‘has saturated’

the lives of young girls, 'colouring the way they dress, the way they act and the way they talk to each other. This ideology is predicated upon their future roles as wives and mothers' (McRobbie: 1991, 93).

I think that a form of adequation can be suggested between her analysis of the ideological position of *Jackie* and the general generic overview of chick lit. McRobbie goes on to outline the four main criteria of such a culture of femininity, and certainly three of these codes are germane to the generic structure of chick lit. Firstly, she looks at 'the moment of bliss' (McRobbie: 1991, 94), which involves romantic quest for the right boy. In chick lit, the age profile is different, and the boy had become a man but, essentially, it is a similar narrative arc. Her second code involves the real-life problems that are central for the teenage girl, typically seen in the problem page. Again, the autobiographical nature of the chick lit genre mimics this trend, with each book being concerned with the enunciation, investigation and, ideally, the solution, of personal and romantic problems in the life of the protagonist. The third code is that of 'fashion and beauty' (McRobbie: 1991, 117), which she sees as teaching readers how to look and dress to meet the demands of this ideology, and instructing them in 'the sphere of feminine consumption' (McRobbie: 1991, 125). Again, this is a prevalent trope in chick lit, with shopping or retail therapy being an important activity, and one which is often related in a confessional manner. Her final code, that of pop music and fandom, does not really apply but this is a matter of the age-profile of the characters as opposed to any real qualitative dissimilarity between the different genres.

Clearly, then, the generic implications for any analysis of Keyes' work are significant. She is participating in a genre which, almost by definition, is prioritising the personal private sphere over the public one, and thus perpetuating the strong patriarchal imperative of reducing women to the domestic sphere and delimiting their access into the public sphere, and popular culture can be seen as a way of enforcing such hegemonic practices. However,

while this is true, and while I would not suggest that Keyes' work can be seen as radically feminist or a philosophical treatise on women, nevertheless I would suggest that this deterministic view of popular culture is not the only relevant perspective. In a sense, McRobbie's work can be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy, which perhaps delimits our reading of the texts themselves in terms of any positive gender implications. As Barker puts it, McRobbie knows that *Jackie* does not paint a feminist picture. Thus she was bound to discover in it an anti-feminist message (Barker: 1989, 158–159). I would suggest that, if we uncritically approach chick lit as a genre, we may be implicated in the same practice. While a lot of chick lit is formulaic and adheres to a rigid structure which reinforces the codes which McRobbie outlines, there are examples within the genre which, as opposed to perpetuating, can be in some ways transformative of hegemonic patriarchal codes. This point is made in Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment's definition of popular culture:

Popular culture is a site of struggle, where many of these meanings [of the power struggles over the meanings which are formed and circulate in society] are determined and debated. It is not enough to dismiss popular culture as merely serving the complementary systems of capitalism and patriarchy, peddling 'false consciousness' to the duped masses. It can also be seen as a site where meanings are contested and where dominant ideologies can be disturbed. Between the market and the ideologues, the financiers and the producers, the directors and the actors, the publishers and the writers, capitalists and workers, women and men, heterosexual and homosexual, black and white, old and young—between what things mean, and how they mean, is a perpetual struggle for control. (Gamman and Marshment: 1988, 2)

I feel that Keyes' work, while enclosed by its generic conventions, nevertheless attempts to participate in that struggle for control of which Gamman and Marshment speak. While her books may never change society, they are, I would suggest, texts wherein 'dominant ideologies can be disturbed'.

Of course, it would be naive to argue that every chick lit novel ever written should be considered as having literary significance. As with any genre of fiction, there are texts which are apparently more formulaic, trivial, and unoriginal, while others may be recognised as tackling important and serious themes, and bringing a sense of originality, be it in terms of content or style, to a genre which has been criticised of being overly formulaic and 'as

dwelling on the trivial and the quotidian' (Whelehan: 2005, 200). In this sense, I am not attempting to disprove all criticisms which have been written about chick lit. Instead, I am aiming to examine how Keyes is an example of one author who is attempting to use the framework of chick lit to comment on issues that are relevant to the functioning of our culture and, specifically, to the role and modes of identification of women in that culture.

This chapter, a close reading of Keyes' texts in terms of common chick lit conventions and tropes, will first discuss the history of the chick lit genre, the origins of chick lit, and some of the other women's genres from which chick lit is thought to have evolved. The remainder of the chapter will examine the typical characteristics of chick lit, as well as the criticism the genre has received and, in turn, the perceived limitations of chick lit. In doing so, this chapter will observe how Keyes both adheres to these typical chick lit characteristics but how she also has the potential to transcend the genre's limitations through a more innovative use of these generic tropes.

The origins of chick lit

For a genre whose success has taken the world by storm in a relatively short space of time, and one which has caused as much controversy as it has earned praise, there are some discrepancies over how chick lit actually began.

In discussing the origins of chick lit, many agree that the genre as we know it began with Helen Fielding's 1996 novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary*. It has often been stated that the 'entire chick-lit phenomenon is invariably traced back to this single novel' (Ferriss: 2006, 4), which offered a 'model and formula that many other writers were to adopt' (Genz: 2009, 84). However, as Joanna Russ points out, the 'insistence that authors make up their own plots is a recent development in literature [...] It's a commonplace that bad writers imitate and great writers steal' (Russ: 1995, 85-86), and so some attempts have been made to further trace the origins of chick lit, to discover which earlier texts and literary trends may have gradually

evolved into the chick lit genre we recognise today. As a result, while *Bridget Jones's Diary* came to be commonly viewed as the original chick lit text, 'there were precursors which demonstrated that Fielding had merely tapped a nerve with her own writing which already existed' (Whelehan: 2005, 191). So, how can we trace the roots of chick lit?

Many people agree that the entire genre appears to have evolved from women's literature of the past, most notably the work of Jane Austen, who has been described as 'surely the mother of all chick lit' (Mlynowski: 2006, 11). Aside from the already much-discussed connection between *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, 'from which Fielding admittedly borrowed much of her plot and many of her characters' (Ferriss: 2006, 4), we can see numerous similarities between contemporary chick lit novels and fiction by the likes of Jane Austen and the Brontës, whose work included 'all the romance, negotiations of society and character growth that we see in many of the popular "chick lit" novels today' (Dawson: 2004, <http://www.ukula.com/TorontoArticle.aspx?SectionID=3&ObjectID=1913&CityID=3>, par.3). In this sense, it would certainly seem viable to argue that chick lit does 'have identifiable roots in the history of women's writing, as do many of the genre's characteristic elements: the heroine's search for an ideal romantic partner; her maturation and growth in self-knowledge, often aided by friends and mentors; and her relationship to conventions of beauty' (Wells: 2006, 49), as well as a focus on other issues of relevance to women's lives.

Today's chick lit heroines also have a lot in common with those of Austen, whose novels also featured heroines who were beautiful but not unbelievably so, and 'whose wit and good temper more than elevate [them] above [their] more glamorous but less likeable romantic rivals' (Wells: 2006, 59). Nineteenth century heroines also display an interest in fashion and their image, such as Catherine Morland in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, who 'lay awake [...] debating between her spotted and her tamboured muslin' (Austen: 1993, 45). They

are often happiest when surrounded by their girlfriends, sharing secrets and stories, and, again in the case of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine believes that friendship 'is certainly the finest balm for the pangs of disappointed love' (Austen: 1993, 16). Nineteenth century heroines also often crave independence and have professional aspirations, such as in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), whose heroine has high hopes for the 'promise of a smooth career' (Brontë, C.: 1992, 94) on commencing her position as a governess. All of these traits, as well as numerous others, show an obvious link between nineteenth century women's novels and today's chick lit phenomenon.

Despite all of these obvious similarities, however, the temporal gap between the novels of Austen and the Brontës and today's chick lit novels means that there are some inevitable differences between them from a contextual perspective and from the perspective of cultural norms. The cultural context is now very different, as is the place and identity of women in society. Because of this, we can argue that the chick lit fiction of today cannot be a perfect and direct descendent of nineteenth century novels. So, rather than the likes of Austen and the Brontës being seen as the 'mothers' of chick lit, it may be said that chick lit writers are, instead, 'their younger sisters, inclined to take a more light-hearted and less complex approach to fiction, even as they benefit from changes in social mores and less conflicted attitudes towards women's professional success' (Wells: 2006, 68). In an essay entitled 'Mothers of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History' (2006), Wells describes, in detail, the important and distinct differences in the women's novels from these two generations. As she says:

Chick lit departs from its predecessors, however, in several ways: its emphasis on the role of sexual adventures in the romantic quest; the nature of the conclusion to the romantic plot; the importance of the heroine's experiences in the world of work and her evolution as a professional woman; the delight and consolation the heroine finds in indulging herself, particularly in consumer goods; and the privileging of entertainment value, particularly humor, over any challenging or experimental content or style. (Wells: 2006, 49)

This is an interesting perspective, as she is suggesting that these novels can function as a social mirror wherein the heroine's experience of her world, specifically in terms of her interaction with consumerism, is a significant part of the chick lit genre's success. I would agree and further make the point that, in this way, the genre can act as a Lacanian mirror through which aspects of gender identification with the postmodern capitalist consumer society are, to a degree, validated. Part of the reason why Bridget Jones was so successful was that so many women looked at this representation on the page or on screen and felt that they could relate to it. One text regarding Fielding's protagonist correctly notes how the heroine is 'undoubtedly a woman of her time, while her personal dilemmas have struck modern readers as "realistic" to such an extent that Bridget has become an icon of popular culture and acquired the status of the Everywoman of the 1990s' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 24). The same is true of many of Keyes' main characters. It is no longer the all-encompassing identification of women with women; rather is it now a more nuanced and situationist sense of identification with aspects of these characters. Readers may not always respond to situations with humour and wry self-deprecation, or an orgy of shoe-shopping, but they will empathise with some aspects of this behaviour, a "'that's me" moment of recognition' (Genz: 2009, 86). As Michele Lazar has noted, 'instead of the dualistic split between 'feminist' and 'feminine', the postfeminist ethos dissolves the distinction between the two' (Lazar: 2009, 381).

The traits outlined by Wells in terms of the success of contemporary women's novels rests on this postmodern contextual distinction. In a postmodern world whose grand narratives are no longer certain, postfeminism, 'becomes a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting universalizing patterns of thought' (Gamble 1998: 41); certainly chick lit has a part to play in this process, and issues of genre have been both enabling and disabling in this process. The fact that most chick lit books are confessional or semi-confessional, and are told

from the perspective of a first-person fallible narrator, places them in a long tradition of such works, which was particularly prominent around the same time that the Women's Movement began to emerge and which saw female protagonists 'recounting life stories which invited women readers to recognize their own lives therein' (Whelehan: 2005, 65), thereby meeting the demand for stories of "real" women and their everyday lives. Examples of these novels included Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1977), Verena Stefan's *Shedding* (1980), Anja Meulenbelt's *The Shame is Over* (1980), and Kate Millett's *Sita* (1977) (see Joannou: 2000, 104). Even Margaret Atwood has claimed that she considers one of her early novels, *The Edible Woman* (1969), to be chick lit (Modleski: 2008, xxvi). Interestingly, despite protests that chick lit cannot be feminist fiction, what made these early novels feminist were precisely the same characteristics that we see in today's chick lit: 'they expressed women's disappointment in men, unhappiness in marriage, insecurities about being alone, and the desire for exciting sex' (Modleski: 2008, xxvi). These novels, usually traditional in form, 'tantalized the readers with the promise of the kind of deep dark revelations of autobiography' (Whelehan: 2005, 63), a trait which is also witnessed in much of the first person narration of chick lit. In many of these confessional novels, 'the central character's understanding or knowledge of herself is often focused on sexual encounter, love, marriage, or divorce' (Joannou: 2000, 104). Particularly in the later novels in this genre, the candid discussion of women's sex lives became a notable feature; however, unlike the traditional romance fiction and similar to the chick lit genre, the sex scenes in these novels 'are rarely erotic and are in fact more often about sex which is abortive or unfulfilling' (Whelehan: 2005, 82). As with chick lit, the confessional novels also attracted criticisms of artlessness and naivety, among other things:

The woman's confessional novels of the 1970s have often been criticised for their lack of an ironic approach to subjectivity. They are not, in the main, "literary", that is to say that they do not signal to the reader that they are fictions of quality through the lexical surface of their

text. There is also a tendency within them to present male characters in a reductive and one-dimensional light. (Joannou: 2000, 104)

Joannou's final point here, regarding the confessional's often less-than-complimentary representations of male characters, is paralleled in much chick lit which, unlike the traditional, convention-bound romance, 'jettisons the heterosexual hero to offer a more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals' (Ferriss: 2006, 3).

It may be true that, as with any genre, 'not all of these confessional novels possess any enduring literary or other worth and in any case a form too often exploited rapidly becomes tired and loses its novelty value' (Whelehan: 2005, 66). As discussed below, the often overused themes and characteristics of chick lit have contributed to similar claims of chick lit being a largely clichéd and unoriginal genre. However, as Whelehan is also quick to point out, the confessional novel's use of certain literary techniques, rather than supposedly proving the talentlessness of the authors, could instead 'be interpreted as a deliberate strategy to expose those unwritten truths of women's contemporary lives rather than an inability to cope with more "sophisticated" and fashionable literary styles' (Whelehan: 2005, 65). Despite criticisms, it has been suggested that 'the extraordinary popularity of the feminist confessional blockbusters [...] rested on the fact that they shared the imperative to "tell it like it is" with other modes of writing, with which large numbers of women readers were already familiar' (Joannou: 2000, 105). Joannou cites 'popular fiction, family sagas, psychotherapy and personal-growth manuals, biographies of well-known women, and historical novels' (Joannou: 2000, 105), as examples of these other kinds of fiction which women are often seen to enjoy, and, in terms of contemporary women's fiction, we can certainly add chick lit to the list of fiction that "tells it like it is". As a further connection between the confessional novel and chick lit, this time in terms of the value and importance of the genres, Joannou describes the confessional novel, not merely as worthless and unsophisticated, but instead

reflects on the merits of the genre, merits which we can similarly easily connect and apply to the place of Keyes in terms of chick lit:

In that it is centrally concerned with women's subjectivity, is an accessible mode of fiction with a proven appeal to women readers, addresses questions about subjectivity, class and sexual politics that continue to demand our attention today, and has the potential to link subjective experience to broader currents of historical and social change, I would contend that the confessional mode of writing has not outlived its usefulness but is still of great strategic value to feminists. (Joannou: 2000, 106)

Speaking specifically in terms of the confessional novel, Whelehan continues to stress that the most successful of these confessional novels are those that 'possess the qualities of good writing and a slightly different take on the unofficial narrative formula' (Whelehan: 2005, 66). In the same way, this thesis aims to explore how Keyes is an example of how the characteristics and structure of chick lit may be both adhered to and, at the same time, adapted, in order to circulate deeper messages to a larger audience.

Of course, in generic terms, the autobiographical novel is an interesting case in point as it both restricts Keyes' room for manoeuvre, but also reinforces her connection with her readers. The literary confession is a public work about private thoughts. Often they are texts published posthumously. Of course, confession can have a religious connotation as well as a legal connotation, and, as a mode of address, it has a strong familiarity among readers. As K. Malcolm Richards has noted:

For our purposes here, it is important to note that the confession is not quite autobiography and not quite a legal or theological confession. It is a literary genre and, as such, provides a space to construct an identity that is rooted, in part, in an individual's public persona. The more public (and sensational) the persona, the greater the public interest in the confessions. What are confessed are private thoughts, however. So, in a way, the literary confession is both private and public. The confession is also a type of text that is often seen as less important than a work focusing on an individual's field of expertise. Thus, Rousseau's *Confessions* are secondary to his *Social Contract* (1762). (Richards: 2008, 25-26)

In this generic context, it is interesting to observe Keyes' own autobiographical confession of depression on her website, as noted in the first chapter, as this blurs the distinction between fact and fiction as it partakes in the same self-deprecating attitude as well as expressing the vulnerability and openness that is foundational in this genre of writing. I would also suggest

that it is part of that disturbance of ideological positions of which we spoke earlier, as the typical image of an author as being in control, as having 'authority' (the term from which the word comes), is to an extent deconstructed by this very frank admission of a lack of emotional control and of a desire to seek help through language and the various statements and quotations that she lists on her website. As one example, in the May 2010 newsletter posted on Keyes' website, she openly discusses her most recent bout with depression and her feelings of helplessness in extracts such as the following:

The medical profession call it 'a major depressive episode' but I've been knocked sideways by a multitude of feelings, not just depression but agitation, anxiety, terror, panic, grief, desperation, despair and an almost irresistible desire to be dead and it's gone on for a very long time. Every day for six solid months I've had to try really hard to stay alive. I've literally got through each day hour by hour, trying to hang on until the sun set and it was time to close the shutters on the windows and then I'd feel, Okay I've survived another day. [...]

I know I'll be criticised for saying all this, I know it sounds horribly selfish, when life is such a precious gift and many people desperately want to be alive and are denied it, but honestly, I've had no control over it.

[...] I'm well aware that I have an enviable life and there are bound to be people who think, "What the hell has she got to be depressed about?" But whatever has been wrong with me isn't fixable by an attitude shift. Believe me I've tried. (<http://www.mariankeyes.com/newsletter/May-2010?forumboardid=9&forumtopicid=9>)

Fictionally, Keyes presents similar feelings, this lack of emotional control, in sympathetic characters such as the title character from *Rachel's Holiday* who, after completing a rehab program to fight her drug addiction, eventually succumbs to her cocaine habit again, resulting in feelings of despair and helplessness, as the following extract shows:

But I had the bleakest feeling of comedown I'd ever had. Like I was standing right on the most desolate edge of the universe, staring into the abyss. Emptiness all around me, emptiness deep within me. All so horribly familiar. [...] I wished, longed, *yearned* to be dead. (Keyes: 1998, 604-605)

Similar feelings are described in *Sushi For Beginners*, as we learn that one of the characters, Ashling, suffers from severe depression. Realising that depression is often somewhat stigmatized and not taken seriously in society, she clearly relates the feelings of desolation and dejectedness that she experiences when she says:

I hate the world, I hate being alive, I'm on anti-depressants, my mother has to put the toothpaste on my toothbrush in the morning and now that she's gone back to Cork I don't know how I'll manage to brush my teeth. (Keyes: 2007, 357)

The response of readers to Keyes' admission of depression and addiction thus parallels the response of readers to many characters in her novels, such as those mentioned above, and this further blurs the reality-fiction distinction. Her own confessional admission also lends weight to her fictional portrayal of these symptoms, and clearly adds to the seriousness of the discussion in the novels. The sheer volume of responses to Keyes' discussion of her depression on her website's newsletter, for example, shows, not only her extensive readership around the world, but also that Keyes' readers seem to feel a sort of connection to her; they care about her, and they take the time to wish her well and to share their own similar experiences. In this sense, Keyes, through her fiction and non-fiction, has proven that she is able to reach readers through her words which, we assume, has added to the reasons for her enormous readership and her worldwide appeal. Her honesty in sharing what she is going through seems to make her seem more approachable, more "real"; she is viewed as "human", as just like us, rather than "celebrity" or "famous author".

In terms of the chick lit genre as we know it today, Fielding's *Bridget Jones* has, as mentioned earlier, often been cited as the original contemporary chick lit novel. However, Keyes' *Watermelon* was actually published the year before *Bridget Jones*, and contained all the features we typically associate with the genre today. *Watermelon* was immediately successful in Ireland upon its release in 1995, and then in Britain where it was picked as a Fresh Talent book. Other countries soon embraced Keyes' books, such as the success of her work in America since 1997, and she gradually gained, and maintained, a huge following, to the extent that her work has now been 'translated into more than thirty different languages and [is] appearing in the bestseller lists of countries such as the United Kingdom (*The Sunday Times*, *The Guardian*), Germany (*Der Spiegel*), the United States (*New York Times*) and Australia (Australian Publishers Association)' (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>), in a sense proving that not all chick lit

is merely “disposable trash” with no lasting appeal. Keyes' appeal has become so widespread that, at the time of writing, her website claims that more than twenty-three million copies of her books have been sold around the world to date. Some of her books have attracted the attention of Hollywood and other film and television studios around the world, with *Rachel's Holiday* being made into a movie, and *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* and *Watermelon* already being adapted into a television series and television movie respectively. Additionally, *Last Chance Saloon* was translated and released as a French movie in 2004 (<http://www.mariankeyes.com/About>). This obvious global appeal – as proved by Keyes' phenomenal worldwide sales, the translations of her work in over thirty languages, and the film and television adaptations – suggest that her work appeals to more than just her native Irish market. Keyes' distinctive style of writing has proven to have global appeal, as her fiction and non-fiction covers universal topics that people of many ages, backgrounds, and nationalities are able to relate to, a quality that has been recognised by, for example, the award-winning, internationally-renowned writer Zadie Smith who publicly ‘complimented Marian Keyes on her multimillion international sales and her ability to reach out to women all over the world’ (Nolan: 2006, <http://www.independent.ie/national-news/marian-keyes-praised-by-zadie-133621.html>, par. 4). Such universal appeal has, we can assume, contributed to the international success of chick lit; writers such as Keyes have broken down national boundaries as, although she writes predominantly about Ireland, her books contain experiences which readers all over the world can understand and share.

Keyes has been commonly cited as one of the ‘initiators of chick lit’ (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>), because her work is largely seen to meet with the general conventions of the chick lit formula. It is perhaps because of these “conventions” that chick lit may be said to be ‘indebted to women’s literature of the past – and, at the same time, completely independent of it’ (Ferriss: 2006, 5), as much chick

lit is seen as having acquired a somewhat fixed definition. I would suggest that the relationship between text and context means that this is actually untrue, as the postmodern world in which these characters live is a core factor of the genre, and is influential on issues of identity-formation among readers, for, as Ernesto Laclau has observed, all identity is equivalent to a 'differential position in a system of relations', or, to put it another way, 'all identity is discursive' and based on difference (Laclau: 1990, 217). Chick lit provides the discursive space for a lot of women whose access to high culture has been, for whatever reasons limited and whose symbolic capital, to use Bourdieu's terminology, has been lacking. The remainder of this chapter will examine these chick lit conventions as they appear in typical chick lit and in the work of Marian Keyes.

Typical chick lit characteristics

It has rightly been suggested that our attempts to classify chick lit become decidedly more difficult as we 'face the daunting prospect of determining what recent fiction by women featuring a female protagonist or a cast of women characters is *not* chick lit' (Harzewski: 2006, 31). This statement becomes particularly pertinent when we consider that the term 'chick lit' seems to have become 'a catch-all term for any text written by a female author about a female protagonist' (Smith: 2008, 137). For this reason, I feel it would be beneficial to outline the typical characteristics which are most frequently cited in descriptions of the genre.

Perhaps ironically for a genre that is described as being written by, about, and for women, the term "chick lit" was originally used, at least in part, by men, first in the title of *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995), an anthology edited by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell, though this did not refer to chick lit as we know it today, and was meant to be derogatory. The term was adopted a year later in *The New Yorker* article 'Hear Me Purr', by James Wolcott, who used the term "chick lit" in discussing the apparent trend of "girlishness"

evident in the writing of female newspaper columnists at that time. This is interesting, as well-known chick lit novels such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*, originated in such columns. When such columns were later converted to book format, the chick lit phenomenon, as we now know it, began.

Although the phrase "chick lit" is now used to describe an easily-recognised genre of women's fiction, some critics have correctly noted that this description could also be accurately applied to the vast majority of novels:

If 'chick lit' were defined as what women read, the term would have to include most novels, including those considered macho territory. A 2000 survey found that women comprised a greater percentage of readers than men across all genres: Espionage/thriller (69 per cent); General (88 per cent); Mystery/Detective (86 per cent); and even Science Fiction (52 per cent). (Chaudhry: 2006, <http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/2780>, par.4)

For this reason, an examination of the traits and characteristics that typically constitute the genre of chick lit would help to clarify and define exactly what kind of novels we mean when we use the term. While 'the parameters and definitions for Chick Lit are evolving daily' (Yardley: 2006, 4), with a wide and varied selection of sub-genres also appearing, there are still certain tropes and features that are commonly linked to the genre. Chicklitbooks.com, a website dedicated to novels and writers (and, of course, readers) of the chick lit genre, describes chick lit as follows:

Chick lit is a genre comprised of books that are mainly written by women for women [...] There is usually a personal, light, and humorous tone to the books [...] The plots usually consist of women experiencing usual life issues, such as love, marriage, dating, relationships, friendships, roommates, corporate environments, weight issues, addiction, and much more. ('What is Chick Lit?': <http://www.chicklitbooks.com/what-is-chick-lit/>, par.3)

Stemming from this definition of chick lit, there are countless variations in describing the genre. These range from the more basic definition of chick lit as a genre of novels that are usually 'written in the first person by hapless, overwhelmed narrators handling the perilous matters of sex, love, career, art, fashion, finance and friendship that make up the daily life of many contemporary working women' (Laken: 2004, <http://www.umich.edu/news/MT/04/Sum04/story.html?chicklit>), through to deeper, more extensive explanations of the genre. One

such definition is seen in *See Jane Write: A Girl's Guide to Writing Chick Lit* (2006), a type of "manual" for budding chick lit writers, written by author Sarah Mlynowski and editor Farrin Jacobs. In this book, chick lit is defined as:

[...] often upbeat, always funny fiction about contemporary female characters and their everyday struggles with work, home, friendship, family, or love. It's about women growing up and figuring out who they are and what they need versus what they think they want. It's about observing life [...] It's about coming of age (no matter how old the woman is – chick lit heroines can be anywhere from teenaged to beyond middle-aged). It's generally written by women for women. It's honest, it reflects women's lives today – their hopes and dreams as well as their trials and tribulations – and, well, it's hugely popular. (Mlynowski: 2006, 10)

Definitions such as this, while still describing the basic formula of the genre, are also broad enough to recognise that chick lit is a genre that has expanded to meet the needs of its readers and the demands of the market, and that minute, specific details can no longer be applied to descriptions of many of the novels, at the same time as 'preserving the most characteristic features so as to be recognizable to the reader' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 45-46). For instance, chick lit was once 'narrowly defined in that the protagonists depicted in these texts were young, single, white, heterosexual, British and American women in their late twenties and early thirties, living in metropolitan areas' (Smith: 2008, 2); in other words, the characters tended to mirror the lives of, not only the authors of the texts, but also the expected readers. However, the demographic for chick lit has expanded, and the genre now 'chronicles the lives of women of varying ages, races, and nationalities' (Smith: 2008, 2). Additionally, the characteristics of the genre have also stretched to incorporate many different areas, with the result that, as chick lit has now become such a diverse genre, it seems fair to say that it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the core formula, especially when we consider how 'hundreds of novels with very different political slants are published yearly under the umbrella of the genre's name adds up to the difficulty of pinning it down ideologically' (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>, par.1). That said, although there is no official 'consensus on what a book must feature in order to fit the genre [...] certain characteristics hold the increasingly diverse group of books, often

bestsellers, together' (Scanlon: 2005, http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/m/articles/fall_2005/Scanlon.htm). Although many recent chick lit authors have tried to expand the "traditional" formula by adapting it, or by interpreting it in a different way, for instance, many of the basic elements are still evident in some shape or form. In this sense, it has been suggested that chick lit, or any genre for that matter, should perhaps be thought of as a 'fluid, changeable continuum, where individual stories function as approximated adaptations of the abstract "formula"' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 46).

In *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* (2006), author Cathy Yardley presents a comprehensive "checklist" of elements that are typically found in chick lit. These include:

- (i) That the majority of novels are predominantly set in an urban location, with the idea of providing readers an insight into what is presumably 'a more exciting, fast-paced, high-toned lifestyle' (Yardley: 2006, 10).
- (ii) Most chick lit heroines work in occupations that are perceived as being extremely glamorous. These have typically included jobs in publishing, fashion, and advertising – 'the sort of positions that readers would love to experience vicariously' (Yardley: 2006, 11).
- (iii) Linked to the glamorous career is often, if not always, the evil boss, who always treats the heroine as poorly as possible. However, we are comforted by the fact that 'the evil boss always gets his/her comeuppance in the end, and it's immensely satisfying' (Yardley: 2006, 12).
- (iv) In traditional chick lit, the heroine always had a wonderful best friend who happened to be gay, 'someone who can go shoe shopping with them and commiserate on the sorry state of men in whatever city they're in' (Yardley: 2006, 12). It is worth noting that the gay best friend is one element of chick lit that has become so vastly overused that many chick lit authors now shy away from including it in their novels, to avoid being criticised for adhering to the same clichés.
- (v) Also inevitable to chick lit is that the heroine will, at some point, be involved with a man who is all wrong for her, but she fails to realise this until it is too late and she ends up nursing her heartbreak – at least until she realises (a) she is better off without him, and/or (b) who she is *really* in love with.
- (vi) Many chick lit novels include scenes where the heroine, accompanied by a gang of her girlfriends (and, of course, her obligatory gay best friend), 'goes on a man-hunting expedition to a bar, speed-dating event or Internet dating site. During the course of these adventures, she runs into one "Mr Wrong" after another' (Yardley: 2006, 13).
- (vii) A large number of chick lit novels revolve around the heroine's life taking a drastic turn for the worst, which the heroine must then work her way out of. Typically, this could involve the heroine losing her apartment, getting fired

from her job, breaking up with her boyfriend... Cathy Yardley calls this 'life implosion syndrome' (Yardley: 2006, 14), and it is referred to perfectly in *Rachel's Holiday* when the protagonist asks: 'Why was my life such a series of unpleasant events? Was there some sort of curse on me?' (Keyes: 1998, 152) and again in *Angels* as the protagonist wonders, 'What was it about me that I sometimes felt I'd been born without life's rule book?' (Keyes: 2002, 308).

(viii) Chick lit also traditionally contains 'not only a lot of brand name-dropping, but also a lot of references to pop culture occurrences – often without any accompanying explanation' (Yardley: 2006, 15). This is because it is assumed that readers will already be knowledgeable of these matters.

The broad similarities with the codes outlined by McRobbie is clear here – the world of work is the exception, but its treatment as an extension of the personal and emotional life of the character is similar to the problems encountered by the protagonists in the *Jackie* stories and problem pages. In a marked contrast to 'the solemnity of tone in traditional romances' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 57), chick lit is also recognised for the sense of humour evident in the novels. Although various novels may use humour to varying degrees, chick lit always has 'a funny tone and voice, but, more important, the characters don't take themselves too seriously, no matter how dire the circumstances' (Yardley: 2006, 4). Humour often appears to be used in chick lit as a type of coping mechanism, employed as 'an outlet for multiple frustrations experienced by the characters and as their way of dealing with personal insecurities' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 69). Unfortunately, the humour of chick lit is also one reason for the criticism it receives; as with much popular culture, the use of humour can often 'obscure the more bleak messages within' (Whelehan: 2005, 109). Attempts have been made, nonetheless, to prove the value that may be found in at least some forms of popular culture, particularly forms where humour is a noticeable factor. As one example, Robert Hurd's 2006 essay uses theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu to examine the popular American television sitcom, *Seinfeld*. This essay about sitcoms is useful for comparison with chick lit because, like chick lit, sitcoms remain at a relatively low cultural position in contemporary society:

In fact, the sitcom is dismissed as a popular genre not only because of its development on the least prestigious popular medium – television – but also because even within the hierarchy of television programs it occupies the most subordinate position. Television critics and viewers

have often viewed the sitcom as the most formulaic, repetitive, or mindless entertainment available. Sitcom writers themselves recognize that the sitcom has never had cultural prestige. (Hurd: 2006, 762)

If we replace the word “sitcom” with “chick lit” and the word “television” with “fiction”, the above extract would also accurately describe the position of chick lit: within fiction itself, and within the even the narrower category of women’s writing, chick lit is seen to occupy the most inferior position. Like the sitcom, chick lit has been dismissed as “formulaic”, “repetitive”, and “mindless entertainment”, and even chick lit authors themselves recognise that their work risks not being taken seriously, simply because of how it is marketed. And, like the sitcom, chick lit is often criticised for being about “nothing”. This ‘correlates to Bourdieu’s “negative value”’ (Hurd: 2006, 766), which implies that, in the case of sitcoms (and, in this case, chick lit), the plot or subject matter is diminished and the element of humour takes precedence. Hurd suggests instead that the humour in sitcoms such as *Seinfeld* may have more significance than detractors believe; he notes how, in ‘a genre that is defined by silliness, *Seinfeld* finds itself in the paradoxical situation of taking silliness seriously, not by becoming serious, but by jettisoning every noncomedic element’ (Hurd: 2006, 767). That is, rather ‘than minutely dissecting the “real world”, as is often supposed in discussions of the meaning of “nothing”, *Seinfeld* transforms it into humor’ (Hurd: 2006, 771). Similarly, much chick lit is recognised as being “witty, light-hearted” fiction about “nothing”.

Much like Hurd’s defence of *Seinfeld*, a lot of Keyes’ humour is located amid truly touching stories, not about nothing, but instead about a lot of serious issues which affect many women’s (and, in a sense, men’s) lives. In fact, the use of humour to discuss even such “dire circumstances”, as mentioned above, is a particularly noticeable factor in Keyes’ novels. One discussion of the genre notes how, while most chick lit ‘involves some type of self-discovery or self-acceptance, [...] there can also be a more specific theme underlying it all’ (Mlynowski: 2006, 113). Accompanied by her recognisable brand of humour, this notion

of a more serious underlying theme is where Keyes' fiction really comes into its own, as her trend of mixing humour and sadness/seriousness has appeared in her novels since the very beginning. As she comments in *Further Under the Duvet*:

In September 1995, my first novel (*Watermelon*) was published in Ireland and did very well. People talked about how funny it was. Even about sad things. In fact, *especially* about the sad things. [...] In the meantime, I'd started work on my second novel, a cheery little comedy about depression. (Keyes: 2005, 222)

Since then, the issues tackled in her work have included drug addiction, death and grief, rape, domestic violence, alcoholism, single motherhood, divorce, and Hodgkin's Disease. Speaking in terms of *Last Chance Saloon*, for example, Keyes says that, 'although it's a comedy, it's a comedy about a young man who gets cancer' (Keyes: 2005, 36). She has also stated that issues such as 'domestic violence cannot be addressed humorously, so I will be writing about it seriously and with respect' (Roncevic: 2005, 43). In this sense, it is not that Keyes is dismissing the importance and gravity of such subjects, but rather that she uses humour within the story as a way of *dealing* with these topics. This may have been a result of Keyes' strategies for dealing with personal problems in her own life, as she has revealed that she often used humour 'as a survival mechanism when life was tricky' (Roncevic: 2005, 43). Keyes believes that her mixing of humour and sadness has largely contributed to the success of her work, as she recounts that readers often tell her 'how well I'd captured their bleakest feelings – and how I'd made them howl with laughter' (Keyes: 2005, 223). Statements such as this correlate strongly with Modleski's view that the genre's popularity 'suggests that they speak to the very real problems and tensions in women's lives', and that authors' narrative strategies, such as the use of humour to discuss such problems and tensions, 'can tell us much about how women have managed not only to live in oppressive circumstances but to invest their situations with some degree of dignity' (Modleski: 2008, 5). Despite tackling such obviously solemn, even grim, issues, Keyes 'still manages to be funny about them, in

startlingly effective ways' (Yardley: 2006, 5). One example of this is evident in *Anybody Out There?* as the protagonist is trying to come to terms with her husband's death:

I went to work, thinking: Aidan is dead, Aidan has died. I hadn't actually realized it until now. I mean, I knew he'd died but I'd never believed it was permanent. (Keyes: 2006, 208)

As many of the issues which Keyes addresses are connected, to some extent, to feminism and women's lives – perhaps proving that chick lit is a genre which can, and does, 'evolve with the times to give women fiction that is relevant to their lives' (Mlynowski: 2006, 15) – this particular trait, namely how a typically humorous genre can be used to circulate more serious messages, will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

It has been suggested that the setting of chick lit novels is not merely a type of background for the stories, but can instead be a 'critical factor in constructing identity in that it allows a competent reader to make assumptions about the heroines' socioeconomic background and, consequently, about their social attitudes' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 68). Chick lit is typically associated with having an urban setting. This is said to be a crucial element of the plots' development because the city 'involves specific lifestyle practices connected with everyday realities of city life, such as nightlife, shopping, and many forms of services and entertainment [...] it is primarily represented as a promise, a place of social and personal opportunities and pleasure' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 146). While many of Keyes' novels adhere to the chick lit convention of featuring an urban location, be it Dublin, London, New York, or Los Angeles, she is also beginning to show that chick lit can 'not only survive but thrive in a rural setting' (Yardley: 2006, 20) by relocating some of her characters to more rural, and at times remote, locations. In *Rachel's Holiday*, for instance, the title character moves from New York back to her Irish hometown to attend a small rehab centre named The Cloisters. In doing so, the 'slower atmosphere only accentuates how crazed her previous life was and allows both Rachel and the reader to examine Rachel's life as if under a microscope, from a completely different perspective' (Yardley: 2006, 20). Similarly, in *This Charming Man*, one

of the protagonists, Lola, leaves her busy and stressful life in Dublin and relocates to a tiny village on the west of Ireland. Although rural, and more specifically Western, Ireland has often been represented as a type of “idyllic paradise” whose inhabitants live a quiet, peaceful, innocent, and often devoutly religious life, Lola soon learns that rural life can be just as chaotic as life in the city, a feeling which grows as Lola meets more and more of the area’s interesting and “colourful” residents, including the group of secretive cross-dressers mentioned in the previous chapter. In doing so, Keyes is helping to widen chick lit’s scope in terms of location, proving that it does not only need to be set in ‘glamorous cosmopolitan’ urban locations in order to be successful and entertaining (Yardley: 2006, 20). Here there is again that disturbance of an ideological position that a woman has to move to the ‘big city’ in order to be successful.

Typical chick lit is also often recognised for its use of first person narration, a device which helps to ‘craft the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to readers’ (Ferriss: 2006, 4). While such techniques have been used because it was once thought that they appealed to female readers, it is important to note that they also ‘link chick lit significantly with a large body of women’s fiction from earlier generations’ (Ferriss: 2006, 4), such as the confessional novels, while, at the same time, distinguishing the genre more specifically from the traditional romances that preceded chick lit. Chick lit’s use of first person narration often incorporates the inclusion of confessional-style devices such as diary entries, letters, and, more recently, emails and text messages to enhance the genre’s conversational style, as well as ‘short, often subjectless sentences, abbreviations, acronyms, shopping lists, and personal calorie and alcohol consumption statistics’ (Smyczyńska: 2007, 69). While it has been noted that these devices are now becoming somewhat clichéd within the genre’s structure, they are still effective because, in offering ‘an intimate engagement with and promising a closer insight into the heroines’ personal life and psychological

dilemmas, chick lit provides the fiction of an “authentic” female voice bewildered by the contradictory demands and mixed messages of heterosexual romance and feminist emancipation’, while chick lit’s apparent reliance upon the subjective voice, be it in the form of singular or multiple narrators, has been ‘interpreted as a postfeminist re-enactment of the consciousness-raising experiences of second wave feminism’ (Genz: 2009, 86). While Keyes’ early novels adhered to the singular first-person narrative style, many of her more recent novels have embraced the use of multiple narrators, which is often viewed as a somewhat more sophisticated literary technique which helps to lessen the more limited perspective of using a single first-person narrator. Doing so allows Keyes to maintain the subjective and intimate, confessional style of story-telling so commonly noted in chick lit, but at the same time being able to avoid the often ‘delusional, biased narration of the subjective perceptions of an individual’ (Pérez-Serrano: 2009b, 137). Instead, her readers receive a more nuanced and relative version of the story which allows for a more complex reading experience.

Of course, these characteristics of chick lit are continually evolving within the genre, as many authors are finding ways of tackling the traditional formula in unique, deep, and serious ways. As a result, while chick lit novels are no longer ‘excessively light, airy and frilly’ (‘What is Chick Lit?’: <http://www.chicklitbooks.com/what-is-chick-lit/>, par.7), clever (or, on the other hand, restrictive) marketing strategies ‘work to obscure novels that may deviate in important ways from the original formula’ (Modleski: 2008, xxii) and the typically fluorescent pink book covers are often, in fact, ‘truly masking meaningful, touching, hilarious at times and wonderful chick lit stories’ (‘What is Chick Lit?’: <http://www.chicklitbooks.com/what-is-chick-lit/>, par.9). Nevertheless, much of the criticism surrounding chick lit has been centred on the apparently formulaic and unoriginal structure, storylines and themes witnessed in the novels within this genre, which has rendered the genre open to criticism regarding how a selection of tropes and clichés have become ‘used and

abused to the point where they're not only unoriginal – they're unreadable' (Mlynowski: 2006, 73). Despite, or perhaps because of, the genre's undeniable commercial success, chick lit 'remains an area of literature that is often denigrated for its intellectual triviality, its retrogressive preoccupation with romance, and its questionable fascination with consumption' (Gamble: 2009: <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/gamble.html>, par.1). Keyes is all too aware of the criticism that chick lit is often subjected to, and she uses her fiction to refer to how the genre is often attacked by critics. In *The Other Side of the Story*, which follows the lives of two chick lit-style authors and their literary agent, one of the protagonists, Lily, writes a novel entitled *Mimi's Remedies* which 'becomes an immediate success, despite the fact that some critics are repelled by its sugary sweetness and the magical element which has a woman miraculously curing people's relationship problems' (Whelehan: 2005, 192-193). This portrays how chick lit is often, in equal measures, hugely successful and scorned by critics. In the novel, literary agent Jojo considers the reception a new chick lit-style novel may receive:

Despite its flaws the book was fun and would probably sell. Sure, the critics wouldn't even acknowledge it; books like this – 'women's fluff' – flew beneath the radar. Occasionally, to make an example to the others, they wheeled one out and 'reviewed' it – although the review had been written before they'd actually read the book – and they poured scorn with the ugly superiority of Ku Klux Klan laughing at bound black boys.

Different, of course, if it had been written by a man... Suddenly there would be talk of 'courageous tenderness' and 'fearless exploration and exposition of emotion.' And women who normally made fun of 'women's fiction' would read it with pride in public places'. (Keyes: 2004, 404-405)

The use of racist metaphors when speaking about critical reaction is interesting as clearly Keyes feels that her work is not taken seriously and that, while her generic conventions may be financially lucrative, they are also critically negative as they ensure that her work will not receive critical praise. I believe the comparison of chick lit reviewers and critics to members of the Ku Klux Klan is particularly striking, as it effectively portrays the prejudice which motivates many reviews of chick lit, resulting in the writers themselves feeling afraid of what may be written about them. *The Other Side of the Story* also features a number of different

authors, all of whom write within the general chick lit category, yet who all are shown to have different strengths and styles. Thus, the novel helps to act as a 'defence against accusations about the homogenization of chick lit' (Whelehan: 2005, 193). Additionally, *Watermelon* cleverly depicts how reading chick lit can, for some women, be akin to a guilty pleasure, the type of books that they secretly enjoy, even as they may hide the cover in order to prevent people noticing that they are reading a 'trashy novel' (Keyes: 2003b, 347), and even as they feel that they are "supposed" to be reading something decidedly more "literary":

I could have bought an "improving book", I suppose.

Something by one of that Brontë crew. Or maybe even a bit of Joseph Conrad. He was always good for a laugh.

But I wanted something that wasn't very taxing.

So, just to be on the safe side, I bought complete rubbish. (Keyes: 2003b, 343-344)

The irony of the Conrad comment may be lost on readers unfamiliar with the canon, but I would suggest that its inclusion here signifies that Keyes is addressing a readership who she feels may well be familiar with that canon. It provides a subtle suggestion that, contrary to the criticism of chick lit and its readers by detractors of the genre, not all chick lit readers are ignorant about literature as it is academically designated, and of course, as mentioned earlier, the chick lit genre has commonly been linked to "literary" genres of the past. Many of Keyes' observations about chick lit and its authors have almost certainly stemmed from her own experiences of being a writer. In her non-fiction, Keyes recounts the 'crippling insecurity' she often feels in terms of her writing (Keyes: 2001, 5), largely because of the amount of criticism chick lit, and its authors, receive. Keyes recalls how, on first reading reviews of her early books, she was 'genuinely baffled by how nasty they were' (Keyes: 2001, 5). However, she admits that she now accepts that there is always someone who will criticise something, especially as she has a suspicion that not all chick lit novels are even fully, not to mention carefully, read before being reviewed, suggesting some critics' preconceived notions that all chick lit novels will be "trash":

I've got better at accepting that I can't please everyone. I've also got better at accepting that critics are often happy to review books without going to the trouble of actually reading them: that became clear when one broadsheet described *Rachel's Holiday* – a novel about recovering from drug addiction – as 'forgettable froth'. (Keyes: 2001, 5-6)

Here we see the stylistic aporia, to use a term from Derrida, which is confronted by *Rachel's Holiday*. The bright cover, the confessional style and tone, while normatively used to discuss issues of the personal, as outlined in McRobbie's codes, here have been used to tell the story of drug addiction in a defamiliarising manner, a manner which is certainly capable of disturbing perceived ideological positions. Here, Keyes is juxtaposing a subject with a style that have never interacted before, and her annoyance at this not being realised, or accepted, by the critics is indicative, I would suggest, of a more serious purpose on her part in this book as well as in many of her other books. The remainder of this chapter will present a more detailed analysis of each of these most common chick lit traits, and will discuss the criticism that each has attracted in terms of its place in chick lit. Using this as the basis for the discussion, this chapter will address how Keyes uses these same themes in her work. In doing so, I will explore how Keyes' work may be limited by these themes, but will also suggest that she may be utilising the basic chick lit framework to push the boundaries of the genre, by expanding the typical themes to allow her to address a variety of, potentially more serious, issues to a wider audience.

Characteristics: The love plot

Although the various definitions of chick lit may vary slightly – sometimes the heroine's career is highlighted, while other definitions may emphasise the heroine's interest in fashion and image – the one factor that consistently appears in all chick lit definitions is the love plot, McRobbie's 'moment of bliss' (McRobbie: 1991, 94). Despite claims that relationships and romance play a secondary role in chick lit, and that the novels 'ostensibly focus on the themes of lifestyle and sexual adventures, rendering the issue of love less explicit'

(Smyczyńska: 2007, 113), readers are nevertheless aware of the genre's 'contradictory discourses in which love is perceived as an insignificant or undesirable aspect of the protagonists' lives, and still implicitly craved for' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 10). For this reason, the subject of romantic relationships, as they are discussed in the chick lit world, seems the ideal place to start in this enquiry into the genre's characteristics.

Of course, the love plot is also one of the main causes for the criticism of chick lit. Yet what is so wrong with a romantic novel in which the heroine falls in love (or, at least, in lust) with her Mr Maybe? Regardless of how some critics may disregard, or disapprove of, the central love plot in this type of fiction, however, there 'is no disputing the thematic dominance of love and romance in chick-lit fictions' (Kiernan: 2006, 207). No matter how often it is stressed that chick lit novels 'offer arguably more progressive alternatives [than traditional romances] to their female readers [...] they still ultimately emphasize that what a woman really wants is to find the right guy with whom to spend the rest of her life' (Mabry: 2006, 204). However, as Lisa A. Guerrero suggests, the heroines of chick lit may be helping to represent how many women actually feel in contemporary society; she argues that women now have so many facets to their lives – work, relationships, family, etc. – that many now feel under pressure to "have it all":

Part of the chick's appeal, both comically and tragically, is her paradoxical existence of being successful and independent in society while simultaneously being rendered 'less than' by that same society through media images and popular ideologies because she doesn't weigh 105 pounds, isn't married, can't cook, isn't married, doesn't have kids, isn't married, can't afford to dress in high fashion and still eat, and isn't married. (Guerrero: 2006, 89)

One of the most common ways of distinguishing between the contemporary genre of chick lit and the more traditional romances (such as those of the Mills and Boon variety, for instance), is the varying degrees to which they emphasize the heroine's desire to be married. In the case of traditional romances, the heroine's ultimate goal is, more often than not, to be married; indeed, a wedding or engagement is often considered to be the satisfactory conclusion to such novels. Romance novels have been criticised for this emphasis on marriage as the ultimate

goal for a woman, and it has been suggested that they should instead portray women as having, for instance, career, rather than marriage, aspirations. In their defence, romance novels were merely following in the tradition of the “love-novels” which had gone before them. Even though the themes of love and marriage were important in literature since the late sixteenth century, it was these ‘love-novels’ that started the tradition of ‘marriage as the *end* of the story, and the assumption of “living happily ever after” (Greer: 2006, 232). However, as the protagonist in *Watermelon* points out, there is a noticeable difference between the romance genre and chick lit:

What do you think this is? A Mills and Boon story?

I'm sorry but if that's the type of scenario you're interested in then I suggest that you read a different book. (Keyes: 2003b, 251)

The overt awareness of generic expectations is a factor of the narrative style of this novel. Again this is interesting in terms of genre, as for a lot of people, chick lit and the Mills and Boon books are very much the same species of text, and yet many chick lit novels ‘may be read as tacitly criticizing the hopes romances appear to offer women. In this respect, [chick lit] may be seen as the current form of antiromantic romances that date back at least a couple of centuries’ (Modleski: 2008, xxiv). Structurally there are strong generic differences, especially in terms of the ending. Novels in the chick lit genre typically moved away from the ‘ending-in-marriage’ trope, and most do not end with a wedding; ‘much more common are mutual declarations of love after a long and tumultuous period of misunderstandings, with future marriage likely but not guaranteed’ (Wells: 2006, 50). In many chick lit novels, while the ending may see the happy couple finally united and thereby provide ‘the reader with the pleasurable sense of a “happy ending,” there is no certainty as to the future of their relationship’ (Smyczyńska: 2007, 77-78). In fact, many chick lit heroines do not express much desire to find a husband in the near future. For many of the young women in these novels, marriage is not a main priority at this particular point in their lives, and may even be

akin to the 'kind of dream where you jerk awake in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, your heart pounding. A dream in the worst nightmare kind of way' (Keyes: 2006, 186). Viewing chick lit's apparent preoccupation with romance from this perspective seems to support Modleski's suggestion that, 'if romances are novels of illusion, upholding belief in the perfect man, perfect sex, and a life lived happily ever after, many chick-lit novels may be called novels of disillusionment' (Modleski: 2008, xxiv). Modleski continues her analysis of chick lit from this interesting perspective in the following extract:

What struck me upon first reading chick-lit novels is the amount of energy spent deploring male behaviour, describing bad sexual experiences, and even questioning the institution of marriage. Some of the literature reads, frankly, like the writings of a stereotypically "male-bashing" feminist. As the novels guide their heroines in the direction of Mr. Nearly Perfect, they often present scathing portraits of dysfunctional men and descriptions of bad sex and disastrous dates. (Modleski: 2008, xxv)

This is, of course, not to suggest that chick lit heroines do not want to be in a relationship or to get married in the future. Rather, while it is argued that 'marriage is not the ultimate goal, and very often is not the ultimate result in much of chick lit [...] it does occupy an idealized place in the minds of many chick protagonists' (Guerrero: 2006, 88); after all, for many women, 'the supreme adventure is still falling in love' (Greer: 2006, 211). In this way, chick lit may be viewed as an updated version of the romance novel in that it is a love story for the twenty-first century, in which the heroines have different views and aspirations for their lives, and where, often, 'the characters' drive for personal independence clashes with their dream of experiencing a "truly" romantic affair' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 26). Even their desire to meet a Mr. Right (or, at least, a Mr. Right Now) is not seen as such a priority that they are willing to do so at the 'price of rejecting other pleasurable aspects of life' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 58). As chick lit novels 'do not necessarily culminate in marriage, the books present a more realistic portrait of single life and dating, exploring, in varying degrees, the dissolution of romantic ideals or exposing those ideals as unmet, sometimes unrealistic, expectations' (Harzewski: 2006, 39). This sense of a more realistic view of relationships is particularly evident when we

consider how many chick lit heroines, 'although invariably longing for the Other – man, remains openly ambiguous about his actual value in women's lives' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 56). That said, in contrast to typical definitions of chick lit which often reject, ignore, or relegate marriage to a matter to be dealt with in the future, many of Keyes' novels do feature marriage, through the inclusion of characters who are either already married at the beginning of the novels, or who are engaged or married by the time the novels reach their conclusion. The explanation for this difference, as discussed in the previous chapter, could simply be due to the influence of the Irish society in which Keyes grew up, and in which many of her novels are set, because this is a society that prioritises and encourages marriage and family.

At the same time, however, the genre's relegation of marriage to an (optional) future goal allows Keyes to depict Irish women in a variety of ways. Rather than representing Irish women's lives as *only* leading to marriage and motherhood, the chick lit genre's lack of focus on marriage allows more options for the heroines, without them being punished or ridiculed for not getting married. For example, one of Keyes' heroines refreshingly shows that she feels no pressure to get married, stating that it is not her main goal in life:

Yes, once upon a time she'd wanted the ring and the dress and the babies – so shoot her. There were lots of things she had wanted once upon a time: to be a size 8; to be fluent in Italian; to hear that Brad had got back with Jennifer. None of those things had come to pass but she'd survived. (Keyes: 2009, 96)

Here, the societal imperative that urges women to marry and produce children is addressed and it is made clear that feelings of ideologically-induced guilt or failure are not normative but instead are created by the Lacanian mirror image which reflects forms of identity on women. In the afore-mentioned Mills and Boon genre, as well as in much romantic literature, marriage is the social enculturation of the moment of bliss. Chick lit, however, is noted for being a genre which represents single women, although it has been claimed that singleness is not necessarily portrayed in a positive light, and that, in much chick lit, 'singleness is itself seen as constraining' (Whelehan: 2005, 181). This may be influenced by the age-old stigma

that has been associated with single women; as Whelehan explains, 'it is made clear that, in spite of Helen Gurley Brown's revamping of spinsterhood in the early 1960s, these fictional heroines view the prospect with utter dread' (Whelehan: 2005, 82). This trend in much chick lit can be traced back to Bridget Jones who, some would say, became 'a generic term for desperate women still listening to their ticking biological clock, but single against their dearest wishes. Their other attributes, their careers, their higher education, their politics, all pale into insignificance in face of their signal failure to become part of a couple' (Whelehan: 2004, 31), and Keyes can certainly be seen as part of this perspective. Tara, in the appropriately-titled *Last Chance Saloon*, confirms this when she protests that her current relationship, despite being damaging and uncaring, simply must work, not necessarily because she and her boyfriend are actually in love, but rather because she feels she should not be single, that she is running out of time:

Fintan was mute with frustration. Love is blind, there was no doubt about it. In Tara's case it was also deaf, dumb, dyslexic, had a bad hip and the beginnings of Alzheimer's.

'And Thomas loves me,' Tara said firmly. 'And before you start telling me I could do a lot better than him, might I remind you that I'm in the Last Chance Saloon. In my decrepit, thirty-one-year-old state, I'd probably never get another man!' (Keyes: 1999, 12)

Similarly, in *Sushi For Beginners*, one of the protagonist's fears about being single appears identical to the worries of Bridget Jones and other chick lit heroines about ticking biological clocks:

The funny thing was, there was a lot to be said for hibernation. Once awake she was suddenly seized with an urgency about her age, the ticking of her biological clock and all the usual thirty-something, single-woman angst. The fuck!-I'm-thirty-one-and-not-married! syndrome. (Keyes: 2007, 232)

These characters are enculturated to see themselves as not fulfilled unless married, and the issue of the biological clock is always ticking away in the background of such utterances. So, in this sense, generic considerations seem to dominate some of the reactions and opinions of the characters.

However, Keyes also portrays women who are genuinely happily single. Early chick lit novels, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, have also been praised for their use of the term “singleton”, ‘in an attempt to get away from all the negative meanings of “spinster”’ (Whelehan: 2005, 181). For these women, singleness is not seen as a problem; chick lit, in this sense, celebrates the singleton, suggesting that ‘being single is something that can be enjoyed and enthusiastically preserved’ (Whelehan: 2004, 24), as many of the heroines embark on ‘a process of trial and error [in the dating world] before finding a suitable partner’ (Pérez-Serrano: 2009b, 137). Such heroines, like many contemporary women, now recognise that finding a lasting relationship is not necessarily a given, but rather that ‘getting involved in a permanent relationship is one of the difficult life choices that the characters have to make’ (Smyczyńska: 2007, 119). One of the problems that these women associate with being single is the eventual ‘difficulty of finding a man who is single, heterosexual, committal, manly, sensitive, successful, and attractive all at the same time’ (Guerrero: 2006, 88).

Many of Keyes' novels end with one or more characters finding themselves content in their single lives, a situation we can compare to Maroula Joannou's description of the single woman as ‘someone whose lifestyle was to be sought after’ (Joannou: 2000, 26), rather than the stereotype of the ‘mid thirties single woman desperate for a man’ (Levenson: 2009, 166). Singleness became a site of power for women, a way for women to express their individual identities, to explore their independence, and to follow their ambitions and aspirations. Keyes often portrays singleness as something that ‘needs to be learned, since it is not the same as being alone’ (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>). *Rachel's Holiday*, for instance, ends with the title character not only finally beating her drug addiction, but also freeing herself from the near-compulsive need to be in dependent relationships. Instead, Rachel discovers a sense of independence and self-reliance, and finally realises she does not need to constantly be in emotional relationships and would rather be

single. Another of Keyes' heroines renders singleness in such a positive light that she views any woman who is thought to crave a relationship too much as 'a despicable, needy-for-a-man wimp' (Keyes: 1999, 33).

Often young women look for a relationship, not because they feel that their lives are empty without one, but because of 'social censure and the fear of scrutiny by one's family' (Whelehan: 2005, 101), or even to prove to themselves that 'they are "wanted" as individuals and as women' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 79). For many of Keyes' heroines, they rightly feel that they have plenty of time to find their Mr Right; perhaps they will settle down one day but they are currently in no hurry to do so. Also, some have decided that they would rather be single than settle into a wrong relationship just for the sake of it. In doing so, Keyes is effectively portraying 'single women as individuals with a strong sense of dignity and, even though singletons are sometimes depicted in unflattering terms in chick lit, Marian Keyes makes an effort to get rid of this pervasive negative image and show the positive aspects of being single' (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>). This could be viewed as progress for how chick lit could develop as an outlet for portraying and celebrating women's increasing sense of independence and subjectivity. In a Derridean sense, as we have already noted, it is a both/and choice (Derrida: 1995, 161) as it portrays the complexity of the individual in a social context, as well as pointing towards different ideological positions that can be adopted by single women. It is also an interesting segue with postfeminist attitudes as set out by Stephanie Genz who speaks about 'the multiple subject positions of the postfeminist woman – a spectrum of identity that does not deny conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable "selves"' (Genz: 2009, 153).

Characteristics: The working world

When chick lit initially burst onto the literary scene, it was marketed as providing a more honest and realistic portrayal of the lives of modern women. Though the working world is an

area that was long closed to women, this is no longer the case for women in the contemporary world. As a result, chick lit may be regarded as a genre of fiction that chronicles women's journey inside the public sphere, as well as the private. Within most novels in the genre, the heroines' 'professional identities and workday experiences are certainly important to the texture of chick-lit novels, and sometimes central to their plot' (Wells: 2006, 54). Yet despite chick lit's potential for opening up more possibilities for women, the genre, even with its professional career-oriented plot, has received criticism for being ultimately as debilitating and repressive as traditional romances. One fault that many critics have found with the career plot in typical chick lit is that it does not provide readers with a realistic and well-rounded perspective on the working world. The heroines in most chick lit novels work in supposedly "glamorous" careers, usually the fashion, media, or publishing industries; in other words, 'the sort of positions that readers would love to experience vicariously' (Yardley: 2006, 11). Such professions are often viewed 'as shorthand for excitement and success' (Whelehan: 2005, 198), and are the cause of envy for readers who, at one time or another, may have longed to work in similar positions. And why not? After all, the heroine in Keyes' *Anybody Out There?*, for example, who works in New York City as the 'Assistant VP for Public Relations for Candy Grrrl, one of the hottest cosmetic brands on the planet', and which provides 'access to a dizzying array of free products' (Keyes: 2006, 22) – has 'The Best Job In The World™' (Keyes: 2006, 6). That this heroine felt the need to trademark the fact of her job being the "best in the world" serves to highlight just how much she loves her job; the trademark seems to make this statement "official". It is also an interesting example of how society can make our choices for us as the reflective symbolic order is what grants value to our choices: she did not feel that she could call it 'the best job in the world' without the societal and ideological trademark which shows that society feels the same about the job thus validating her position. The 'reflection of the subject, its mirror image, is always found

somewhere in every perceptual picture, and that is what gives it a quality' (Bracher: 1993, 36) and in this case, that mirror is her job, which is a change from the gendered norm of the mirror being the male gaze.

The problem is that, even though such careers are greatly glamorized and envied, the readers actually learn very little about the work that is carried out in such professions, often leaving them with an unclear perception of the realities of these jobs. Reasons such as this have resulted in the criticism chick lit often receives for lacking any depth, for dwelling on trivial and unimportant topics. Similarly, for all the *talk* of jobs and work in chick lit novels, it has been said that we rarely read of the heroines *doing* any actual work. Instead, it would seem to be that:

[...] the very fact of [the heroines] holding such a job, rather than any detailed description about what they actually do in it, is signposted as shorthand for glamour and achievements so that their disastrous personal lives don't make us write them off as dismally pathetic. (Whelehan: 2005, 210)

Additionally, for the chick lit heroines who do not begin the novel in the fabulously glamorous career of their dreams, we can rest assured that, by the novel's conclusion, the heroine's professional life will be in a state of near-perfection. It is usually a given that each chick lit 'heroine is ultimately rewarded by removal from the bad workplace and the discovery of a new, far more suitable career [...] where her talents are appreciated' (Hale: 2006, 103-104), and here the trope of the fairy tale can be discerned with its happy ending and idealised future.

Keyes is attempting to alleviate the preconceived, and often inaccurate, notions that jobs such as those in the media are always glamorous and exciting. *Sushi For Beginners*, for instance, is set partly in the women's magazine industry, namely the fictional *Femme* magazine. However, rather than portraying the job as equivalent to glamour and immediate success, as a whirlwind of celebrity-filled parties and designer freebies, the protagonist, Lisa, instead explains how 'Randolph Media rewarded hard work with poor pay, increasing

workloads, demotions and on-a-second's-notice redundancies' (Keyes: 2007, 4). Lisa also bursts the illusion that working for a magazine is always easy and enjoyable; she recounts the pressure and stress that occurs within the office every time a new issue is being prepared for print:

People slamming phones down, then shouting, were ten a penny in the magazine game. Besides, they were trapped in Deadline Hell – if they didn't get this month's issue put to bed by nightfall, they'd miss their slot with the printers and would be scooped once again by arch-rivals *Marie-Claire*. (Keyes: 2007, 3)

In this description of the workplace, the text is reacting to the contextual demise of the Celtic Tiger, and the dawning reality that unemployment would become the lot of a number of the more glitter-driven companies in the areas of media and publishing. Similarly, *The Brightest Star in the Sky* depicts the realities of working in the music industry. One of the main characters, Katie, is the head publicist for the fictional Irish record company, Apex Entertainment Ireland, and is quick to point out that such a job is not always as glamorous and exciting as people may believe:

Katie had been there for five years, welcoming visiting rock stars to Ireland, organising their interviews, hanging around backstage wearing a laminated pass, then – the most important part of her job as far as she could see – bringing them out on the piss. It was harder than it sounded, because she was the one who had to remain sober and coherent enough to sign for all the bottles of Cristal, get the artistes home to bed, then show up at her desk at ten o'clock the following morning after four hours' sleep. (Keyes: 2009, 29-30)

Katie reflects that, at thirty-nine, she is the oldest person working in her company, and is often made to feel "old" by her colleagues. In contrast to women who work in "normal" positions but crave exciting and glamorous careers, Katie, instead, wishes that she had never accepted the position with Apex Entertainment and that she had followed her original plan of working in an office job:

The killer was that she'd never meant to work in the music business. Oh why had she, *why*? Because she'd been wildly flattered when they offered her the job, that was why, so flattered that she'd turned a blind eye to the fact that the money wasn't as good as you might have thought. All she'd cared about was that they must have thought she was cool if they wanted to employ her. But she should have taken the job in the government press office instead. Old people weren't mocked in that industry; they were valued, revered for their wisdom. No one cared if you had big thighs. No one cared if you had facial hair (and you were a woman) (not

that she had). In fact, they positively *liked* fat ugly spokespeople in politics because they had more credibility. (Keyes: 2009, 37)

Here the negative side of the glossy chick lit image is offered to critique by this thoughtful character. The role of the other in identification is clear here – she has been flattered by the offering of a job, in a manner similar to that of the trademark mentioned earlier. In Lacanian terms, this is a norm of identification as ‘the subject recognizes himself [sic], by his typical identifications’ (Lacan: 2006, 74) and here Katie is remarking on the different images with she is identified – and her two mirrors are *Femme*, and other magazines like it, and the government press office. Lacan sees such identification as central to the way humans function in society. As he puts it:

It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he [sic] assumes [assume] an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity’s term, ‘*imago*’ (Lacan: 2006, 76)

Here we see Katie’s choice of reflective mirrors outlined, as well as her awareness of how different an *imago* she would be were she to look into each one. In this scene, Keyes is demonstrating the power of ideology to shape women’s self-perception.

Additionally, it is important to note that, while much emphasis is placed on the supposedly glamorous professions we often see in chick lit, very little attention is paid to the token few chick lit characters who hold more “normal” jobs, for example clerical and administration positions, even though such jobs arguably link the chick lit heroine closer to the average reader of the genre. If chick lit was intended to be a realistic fictional interpretation of contemporary women’s lives, why does it often consciously depict a lifestyle of which many readers can only dream? It can be argued that, instead of it expanding to become a positive genre of women’s fiction, traditional chick lit may instead be potentially damaging, by explicitly pointing out to women what they do not have. However, in keeping with what I see as her ability to work within the genre while at the same time transcending

many of its limitations, Keyes does tend to feature women who work in decidedly more “normal” jobs, as well as those in glamorous careers, such as protagonists who work in offices, in computer companies, full-time mothers, and, in *The Brightest Star in the Sky*, one of the main protagonists is a taxi driver, thus depicting the broad range of careers which women may undertake.

Another problem commonly associated with chick lit is that it has been criticised for being rife with clichés and overused tropes, which has led to the attack of chick lit novels by critics, who condemn authors for being unoriginal and unimaginative. The most common career-oriented chick lit cliché is that of the “evil” bosses and the bitchy co-workers, and it would seem that most traditional chick lit heroines encounter one, or both, at some point of the novel. In *Rachel's Holiday*, for example, the protagonist describes the “problems” she has with her boss, although it may be fair to say that Rachel herself may be at least partly to blame:

Work in the hotel where I was assistant manager had become harder and harder to do. There were times when I walked through the revolving doors to start my shift and found myself wanting to scream. Eric, my boss, had been very bad-tempered and difficult. I had been sick a lot and late a lot. Which made Eric more unpleasant. Which, naturally, made me take more time off sick. (Keyes: 1998, 20)

While the above passage may be accused of portraying a woman who takes little responsibility for her work, and who displays childish behaviour in, we assume, faking illness in order to take a day off, it is refreshing that Keyes not only places Rachel in a “normal” work environment (assistant manager in a hotel) but also refuses to glamorise the industry, displaying some women's real frustration and boredom in their jobs. It is also interesting that there is a level of self-awareness here, as the character is aware that her sickness may be a result of the unpleasant atmosphere at work, and may be a small gesture of empowerment in a position that could otherwise be seen as that of victim.

While many women face similar difficulties at some point in their working lives, the way such problems are dealt with in many typical chick lit novels often removes any sense of

realism. Rather than showing heroines who learn from their difficulties and become stronger as a result, typical chick lit novels offer an all-too-simple solution, usually with the heroines getting their revenge on nasty colleagues by conveniently moving to a much better position where everyone lives happily-ever-after. As readers, we 'can always feel confident that all evil work demons will get their due' (Freitas: 2005, 82), and that 'the evil boss always gets his/her comeuppance in the end' (Yardley: 2006, 12). While critics do not necessarily object to such happy endings in chick lit, they do protest that they portray an unrealistic view of the world of work.

One further cause for complaint regarding chick lit's treatment of modern women's working lives is regarding the age-old work-versus-relationship dilemma. For many years, feminists encouraged women not to confine themselves to "just" being a wife and mother. They urged women to get out of the home and into the work place, as a means of advancing themselves and becoming more independent. On the surface at least, typical chick lit novels initially seemed to show that women have achieved a sense of independence, and no longer feel the need to be validated in some way by being in a relationship, while acknowledging 'women's right to have a professional life, and in fact reflect patterns of employment of their time' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 44). However, on further examination, chick lit critics and reviewers began to notice that, while most chick lit heroines indeed have jobs, their main focus still seems to be on having a relationship rather than any form of a successful career:

Many writers extract substantial amusement value from office scenes and make sure that their heroines end the novel better off professionally than they began, but it is required love, not significant career advancement, that brings about the novels' conclusions [...] The world of work in chick lit is thus essentially window dressing; a backdrop to the real business of finding love. (Wells: 2006, 54-55)

That is, the working world of the typical chick lit heroine is often merely a means for adding bulk to the novel and giving the heroine something to do while she is waiting for Mr Right to inevitably come along and sweep her off her feet. Hence, the heroine's relationship will undoubtedly take precedence over any job because, as the title character in *Rachel's Holiday*

(1998) puts it: 'It was one thing to lose my job, because I'd always get another one. But to lose a boyfriend... well...' (Keyes: 1998, 17). Similar ideas are expressed in *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*, in which Lucy somewhat cheekily explains the priorities in many women's lives, as she sees it:

I mean, I was a young woman. I had few concerns in my life. Well, actually, I had plenty. But the *average* young woman would only seek guidance from a fortune-teller for two reasons – her career and her love life. And if she was having problems with her career, she would probably do something constructive about it herself.

Like sleep with her boss. (Keyes: 2003a, 22-23)

Such extracts may be seen as adding to the concern that the heroines of some chick lit 'still put the private before the public' (Fest: 2009, 61). Such characters are, however, not necessarily the norm in much of Keyes' fiction, where many protagonists are seen as placing at least equal, if not more, value on their career, such as Lisa in *Sushi For Beginners* whose husband, as mentioned in the previous chapter, threatened her with divorce for always putting her career first.

Keyes also tackles the problems that many women still deal with regarding their working lives, such as sexual harassment and workplace discrimination, though, as these are often viewed as feminist concerns, they will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

Characteristics: Family

I have already discussed chick lit's focus on romantic relationships; these, however, are not the only relationships on which chick lit heroines embark. In the majority of chick lit, there is also an emphasis on the heroines' relationships with her family and her circle of friends.

Chick lit is often described as portraying dysfunctional families and lovable, eccentric parents. The problem that many critics have with chick lit's representations of families is that the heroines' families are, more often than not, one-dimensional, predictable characters. The protagonist's parents and siblings usually only provide a mere background to the main

storyline, without ever being given a storyline of their own of any worth, or, indeed, even having their character developed to any real degree:

Family for chicks generally means a nuclear family that represents a certain measure of stability [...] Their parents are usually shown to be relatively reasonable, though often unreasonably expectant, people who don't need to be provided for and remain largely separate from chicks' everyday lives. Even in their lunacy [...] they are still portrayed as self-contained and comfortably removed from the central chaos of a chick's life. (Guerrero: 2006, 96)

It is precisely this element of 'lunacy' that appears to be the main purpose of family representation, in typical chick lit at least. Undoubtedly, chick lit's families add much of the comedy-value to the novels. One such example can be seen in the following extract from *Rachel's Holiday*, featuring the now-famous Walsh family who appear in many of Keyes' novels. Having just discovered that one of her daughters has been 'stealing' her tinfoil, Mammy Walsh is suitably annoyed. Readers cannot help but smile, however, when they see how genuinely oblivious this woman is regarding what is really the important issue here:

'She uses it to wrap the hash into little parcels when she's selling it,' supplied Helen helpfully.

'Mary, shut up about the tinfoil a minute,' said Dad, as he tried to formulate a plan for my rehabilitation.

Then his head snapped back to Helen. 'She does *what?*' he said, aghast.

Meanwhile, Mum was furious.

'Oh "shut up about it," is it?' she demanded of Dad. 'It's all very well for you to say shut up about the tinfoil. You're not the one who has to roast a turkey and goes to the press to get a sheet of tinfoil to cover the fecker with and finds there's nothing there only a roll of cardboard. It's not your turkey that ends up as dry as the Sahara.'

'Mary, please, for the love of God...'

'If she only told me she'd used it, it wouldn't be so bad. If she left the cardboard roll out I might remember to get more the next time I went to Quinns...' (Keyes: 1998, 22-23)

The fact that Mammy Walsh is obviously so much more distraught at the prospect of serving a dry turkey than she is at hearing that her daughter is a drug dealer leaves no doubt in readers' minds that chick lit's families tend to veer towards the eccentric, to say the least. The use of humour here to discuss a topic that has far more serious undertones is a classic of the chick lit genre, and part of Keyes' popularity is her ability to write this kind of comic dialogue.

That said, it may be argued that the families in a number of Keyes' novels have more to offer to readers. Particularly in the case of Keyes' Walsh family, the characters' parents have become almost as well-known and well-liked as the main protagonists themselves, and, as the novels progress, we learn more about the family members, and we follow their individual stories. Particularly notable is the mother of the family, commonly known as "Mammy Walsh", who Keyes describes as 'a supporting character (a mother, as it happens) [who] over time has developed a life of her own' (Keyes: 2005, x). Due to Mammy Walsh's popularity with readers, *Further Under the Duvet* contains "Mammy Walsh's Problem Page", and finally gets a voice of her own as she imparts her own brand of "wisdom". One notable, and relevant, piece of advice urges women to 'show what an independent, free-thinking woman you are by reading what you like and telling the feminists to stick it' (Keyes: 2005, 295), clearly an attack on the critics who describe chick lit as "anti-feminist", a phenomenon which will be examined further in the following chapter. By making the persona of Mammy Walsh almost extra-textual, Keyes is able to take issue with feminist critics while, at the same time, engaging in writing which, I would argue, can be seen as post-feminist in the sense of the term used by Sarah Gamble who sees postfeminism as embracing 'a flexible ideology which can be adapted to suit individual needs and desires' (Gamble: 1998, 36). Gamble explains the benefits of postfeminism by stating: 'its rejection of theoretical language ensures that it remains widely accessible, and its repudiation of victim status seeks to endow a sense of empowerment upon its readers' (Gamble: 1998, 44), and I would see aspects of the portrayal of the Walsh family as engaging in this process.

Elena Pérez-Serrano discusses the Walsh family in her essay about Keyes' fiction.

She says:

The most visible example of Keyes' defence of the traditional family takes place in the course of four novels: *Watermelon*, *Rachel's Holiday*, *Angels* and *Anybody Out There?*, which are related to each other by dealing with different members of one family, the Walshes. Each book is focused on one of the Walsh sisters, in a kind of 'tetralogy' with narrative continuity

where the course of events of one novel picks up on the previous one; in this way, the story constantly develops and, in some cases, provides closure to earlier episodes. The depiction of the members of this family extends over more than ten years, the actual time between the publication of the first one of the novels in this saga (*Watermelon*, 1995) and the last one (*Anybody Out There?*, 2006). In this interval, readers obtain a profound view of the personalities of the members of this traditional Irish family, their dynamic interactions, conflicts and agreements. (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>)

That we, as readers, learn about the members of the Walsh family in the various novels shows how Keyes is breaking away from the traditional chick lit criticism of the family members not having a story, or a life, of their own, but merely serving as a background to the rest of the story. As well as this, Keyes also presents varied and well-rounded views of family life.

Unfortunately, not everyone has a perfect, happy-go-lucky relationship with their family. Familial problems abound, at times perhaps more so than in any other relationship. Keyes portrays family strife to varying degrees, the problems ranging in seriousness between books. While, for some protagonists, 'family can be a mere embarrassing inconvenience' (Guerrero: 2006, 97), others have regretfully never felt close to their parents and have never formed any kind of solid and lasting bond with their family. In doing so, such novels are effective in commenting on 'the sense of a failure on the part of the parents in their parenting role as well as the subsequent feeling of insecurity and alienation experienced by the children' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 86). As an example of this, the eponymous heroine of *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*, for instance, has always felt that she has disappointed her parents: 'Poor Mum – nothing I ever did was good enough for her' (Keyes: 2003a, 93). Similar feelings are portrayed in *The Brightest Star in the Sky*, as Katie feels that, even 'when she'd been in the womb her mother had probably said things like, "Sit up straight, stop kicking, don't stick out so much, no one likes an attention-seeker"' (Keyes: 2009, 280). Such extracts appear to suggest that this noticeable lack of 'parental appreciation, which is an experience shared by many protagonists [...] may be at least partly responsible for their adult sense of emotional security' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 86). On top of this, some of Keyes' novels

also show how family strife can be caused by decidedly more serious pressures, such as protagonists who carry the burden of looking after alcoholic fathers, or mothers who have suffered from a breakdown. Both of these topics are covered by Keyes, and will be discussed further later in this chapter.

While portraying the range of tensions that inevitably form among families, Keyes also gives life to the old saying about blood being thicker than water. Her novels recognise that, regardless of the problems experienced within a family, it is commonly believed that family members will ultimately stand by each other no matter what; that familial relationships will ultimately prove to be more lasting and more durable than relationships of any other kind. Novels such as *Anybody Out There?*, for instance, further reiterate this assumption by the protagonist's straightforward description of her relationship with her sisters as being fiercely loyal and protective:

In fact all my sisters are loyal to the point of fisticuffs, so while it's okay for them to slag each other they'd kill anyone else who tried it. (Keyes: 2006, 55)

As well as demonstrating strong relationships between siblings, Keyes also depicts strong bonds between the protagonists and their parents. Even though many twenty-first century women, like our protagonists, have gained a sense of independence from their parents, for many, their parents' opinion of them still matters; they still undeniably want their parents to feel proud of them, sometimes over the most trivial matters. The protagonist of *Rachel's Holiday* describes this feeling perfectly in saying:

Ok, so I was a 27-year-old woman and it shouldn't matter if my father knew I was sometimes late for work. But it *did* matter. (Keyes: 1998, 7)

This leads us onto Keyes' portrayals of the actual family members themselves, focusing on the parents in particular, many of whom, as described earlier, have their own individual personalities, and have become important characters in the various novels. It is also an example of how women in our culture are often 'subject to her subjection to the Law of the Father' (Grosz: 1990, 181).

Take Keyes' "Daddy Walsh", for instance: mild-mannered and fun-loving Daddy Walsh is the father any girl could wish for. Of course, it is quite possible that Daddy Walsh is mild-mannered simply because he is both physically and emotionally drained after years spent being the only man living in a house full of spirited and highly opinionated women. In *Rachel's Holiday*, we certainly get a sense of Mr. Walsh feeling overwhelmed by his wife and daughters, even to the point of his dreading a phone call from one of them:

Of course I had no intention of going anywhere but by then I was really frightened. And not just by the talk of going home to Ireland and into a clinic, but because my father had *rung* me. *He* had rung *me*. That had never happened in the whole of my twenty-seven years. It was hard enough to get him to say hello whenever I rang home and it was one of the rare occasions when he answered the phone. The most he ever managed was 'Which one of you is that? Oh Rachel? Hold on till I get your mother.' Then there was the nothing except banging and bashing as he dropped the phone and ran to get Mum.

And if Mum wasn't there he was terrified. (Keyes: 1998, 5-6)

Outnumbered in a house full of women, Daddy Walsh stood no chance at playing the role of the stereotypically domineering father, the controlling ruler of the household. In this case, the book deconstructs the typical patriarchal image of the dominating father and the Lacanian mirror for the daughters in this context is their strong mother. As Lacan has noted, the patriarchal norm is that the father, in possession of, and standing for, the phallus, is the main agent of the symbolic order, and this is normally reinforced by the mother in traditional patriarchal family structures:

But what I want to stress is that we should concern ourselves not only with the way the mother accommodates the father as a person, but also with the importance she attributes to his speech—in a word, to his authority—in other words, with the place she reserves for the Name-of-the-Father in the promotion of the law. (Lacan: 2006, 482)

In the case of the Walsh family, this is clearly not the case as the father is not the centre of authority, though he is still in that symbolic role. In the Walsh family, the standard model of the family is being gradually deconstructed as it is the women who define the symbolic order in the family discourse. In this way, there is a gentle disturbance of ideology at work, and the humour makes the disturbance all the more effective, as the reader is put at ease in terms of

the subversion rather than being annoyed or disturbed by it. Indeed, in this, there are echoes of the weak but amiable fathers that we see in many of the books of Jane Austen.

In terms of generic norms, there is no doubt that some of Keyes' protagonists would certainly seem to fall into the category of "Daddy's Girls", and the following extract shows how, for some of these women, the relationship that they have with their fathers is better than even their relationship with their mothers:

At least I could console myself that I wasn't a complete failure, that one of my parents loved me. Dad was always good at cheering me up and making fun of Mum. (Keyes: 2003a, 95)

In the same novel, the protagonist, Lucy, finds out that her father is an alcoholic and she tries to look after him. Even though her father causes her hurt and desperation in his drunken state and his apparent unwillingness to help himself, both Lucy herself and the reader cannot despise him:

The worst thing was that Dad *looked* different to me. Like someone I'd never met before. I tried not to let it happen. I didn't want the man I loved to waver and disappear right before my eyes. I had to love him. He was all I had.

I kept sneaking looks at him, at all the things that had happened, all the signs. I tried to control it, just to look at a little bit of my life at a time, to dole out the unpleasantness in easy-to-manage, bite-sized pieces. I tried to protect myself, not to overwhelm myself with the loss of it all.

But I couldn't stop seeing him differently.

He no longer seemed loveable and cute and cuddly and great fun. But drunk and lopsided and slurred and incapable and *selfish*.

I didn't want to think that way about my father, it was unbearable. He was the person I'd loved most, maybe the only person I'd ever really loved. And now I found out that the person I had adored didn't even exist. (Keyes: 2003a, 618-619)

While we do not despise him, we certainly do see him as being disempowered, and no longer the figure of the symbolic order. Rather, while Lucy suffers in silence as she looks after her father on her own, we feel sympathy for both Lucy and her father:

I tried to give him less money. But he begged and cried and the guilt was so awful that I gave it to him, even though I really didn't have it.

I swung from feeling furious to feeling so sad I thought my heart would break. Sometimes I hated him and sometimes I loved him.

But I felt increasingly trapped and desperate (Keyes: 2003a, 628)

Here we see the Lacanian notion of the father as the protected and revered head of the family.

As Grosz has noted: 'the symbolic father is the (ideal) embodiment of paternal authority, the

locus from which patriarchal law and language come' (Grosz: 1990, 48). For Grosz, Lucy would be the example of the dutiful daughter 'who submits to the Father's Law' (Grosz: 1990, 150). So even a figure as weak and as needy as Lucy's father is given respect and, in this sense, the relationship is both generically and societally sanctioned. But there is also the generic norm of woman as mother and carer at work here as she almost assumes a maternal role as she doles out money to feed his addiction. This is far from the frothy shoes and shopping norm of chick lit, as here, again, Keyes is dealing with addiction through a fictional personal experience of it. Lucy, through the semi-autobiographical and confessional aspect of the chick lit genre, draws the reader into her experience and thereby creates an empathy with the character.

The theme of the daughter suffering in silence is repeated in *The Brightest Star in the Sky*, when Lydia's mother is developing Alzheimer's disease. Lydia has no one to turn to for help; the doctor refuses to listen to Lydia's concerns about her mother and Lydia receives no assistance from her brothers, who, in traditional patriarchal manner, assume the caring role to be "women's work":

Lydia brought each new set of problems to her brothers and laid them at their feet like a cat with a dead crow, and they responded to each offering with a variety of deflections: that Lydia was a drama queen; that Ellen was menopausal; that care of the sick was women's work.

'You should come home and mind her,' Raymond said. 'You're the only one with no ties.'

'Fecking Ronnie has no ties!'

But Ronnie was a man. (Keyes: 2009, 291)

The feeling of being trapped that was enunciated by Lucy is paralleled here, as Lydia is trapped by her gender expectations. The woman is traditionally the carer and may not always relish this role – the monosyllabic statement at the end of the quotation makes it clear that Lydia is not happy about being placed in that role, but has no-one else to take up the burden. This is a situation which will elicit sympathy from so many women who are not only expected to care for elderly relatives, but also to do so cheerfully and without complaint. I

think there is a wealth of meaning in that final statement, as being a man is the only reason why Ronnie does not have to 'come and mind' their mother.

Nor are all of Keyes' mother characters quite the domestic goddesses that traditional society wanted them to be. Historically, both in Ireland and worldwide, mothers were expected to portray the "perfect woman", looking after the whole family (usually while neglecting themselves in the process), nursing ill family members back to full health, cooking, cleaning, and generally making life easy on everyone else in the family – the original angel in the house. In *The Brightest Star in the Sky*, for instance, Lydia noted how her mother, on becoming a widow, remained strong for her children and to keep the household in order:

Even after Auggie died so unexpectedly and Ellen became a widow at the age of fifty-seven – and, worse, a widow with a mountain of debt to pay off – she didn't go greasy-haired and crying-at-the-kitchen-table maudlin. She just got on with things. (Keyes: 2009, 242)

We can again turn to the Walsh family to show how Keyes has provided alternative depictions of both the Irish and the chick lit mother figure. Far from being a domestic goddess in the kitchen at least, Claire Walsh fondly informs readers of her mother's cooking "skills":

The ability to cook skips a generation. I could cook. Ergo my daughter wouldn't be able to. God love her. What kind of start in life was she getting? And by the same token my mother couldn't cook. My mother and culinary delights were not the best of friends. In fact, it would be fair to say that my mother and culinary delights were barely on nodding terms. (Keyes: 2003b, 50)

Claire goes on to further explain her poor mother's disastrous attempts at cooking:

I'm amazed that none of us was ever hospitalised for malnutrition when we were younger.

My siblings and I would be summoned for our evening meal. We would all sit down and stare silently at the plate in front of us for a few perplexed moments. Finally one of us would speak.

'Any ideas?'

'Would it be chicken?' says Margaret doubtfully, poking it tentatively with her fork.

'Oh no, I thought it was cauliflower,' says Rachel, the vegetarian, rushing off to gag.

'Well whatever it is, I'm not touching it,' says Helen. 'At least you know where you are with cornflakes,' and leaves the table to get herself a bowl. (Keyes: 2003b, 51)

Enquiring minds will be relieved to finally find out that the dish in question was supposed to be colcannon! Mammy Walsh refused to continue to have her hard work at preparing a family meal insulted, and so finally went on a permanent strike when it came to cooking for her family:

So after several years of tearful evening meals and ever-increasing breakfast cereal bills, my mother, to everyone's eternal relief, decided to stop cooking altogether.

So, if any of her daughters or her husband told her that they were hungry, she'd take them silently by the hand and into the kitchen. She'd say 'behold the upright freezer full of frozen convenience foods', and flinging wide the freezer door, with several flourishes exhort them to survey the myriad delights within. Then she'd cross the kitchen with the would-be diner and say 'All hail the microwave. My advice to you is to befriend these two machines. You will find them invaluable in your fight against hunger in this house.'

So now you realise why I was so reluctant to take her up on her offer of soup. (Keyes: 2003b, 52)

Mammy Walsh's cooking strike may have more feminist undertones than we initially believe. Some Irish theorists have noted that, like the above Keyes quotation, 'a large number of stories focus on the wife refusing to continue performing domestic labour because she is not appreciated sufficiently' (Bourke: 1991, 205). The refusal of a wife to, for instance, cook a meal may initially seem trivial, but it is also a potentially 'important mechanism by which to enforce decision-making' (Bourke: 1991, 205). In other words, when a woman claims the right to make such a decision, in this case whether or not to cook a meal, she is increasing her power and authority within the household, something which would have been unheard of in previous years. Of course, it is also a transfer of a discourse from the public sphere to that of the private sphere – a discourse that has traditionally been associated with those who have less power or symbolic or social capital in society. The strike has traditionally been the main weapon in the armoury of trades unions, and it is a weapon that has been used to attain more power in the relationship between capital and labour. Here, it is an empowering discourse on behalf of the mother figure, as she is now valuing her private-sphere labour in terms of which are covalent with those of the public sphere. One can see this as a renegotiation of her role of working in the home, and as a gesture of independence which may result in the re-evaluation

of her relationship with her husband. In this sense, Mammy Walsh can be seen as part of a postfeminist paradigm, however unacknowledged, as her action is 'crystallised around issues of victimisation, autonomy and responsibility', and is challenging the 'definition of women as victims who are unable to control their own lives' (Gamble: 1998, 36).

In a similar sense, when another of her daughters was unwell, Mammy Walsh *tried* to play nurse, but, to her daughter at least, seeing her mother in this role just did not feel natural somehow:

'Okay, Missy.' Mum had never called me "Missy" before all of this. 'Take these.' She tipped a handful of pills into my mouth and passed me a glass of water. She was very kind really, even if I suspected she was just acting out a part. (Keyes: 2006, 4)

Depicting mothers in this way could have been disastrous, as if they, as women, are unable to even properly do the one job which nature intended of them (motherhood), so what chance would they have of succeeding at anything else? And yet these depictions seem to take on a different meaning. They are providing mothers, and thus women in general, with a voice, a personality, and an identity of their own. They are no longer silenced and left in the margins. Instead, they are given a place, a status, in society. There is a separation here between the person who is a mother and the duties that this person undertakes. The adequation between woman and home and family is gently dislodged in scenes like this and Keyes is adopting a subversive position between those two nations of which she spoke. Just as in the macro-society of Ireland, there is an ongoing transformation of values and roles, so in the micro-narrative of the Walsh family, there is a gradual redefinition of roles and of the values attaching to those roles. Just as there are now a number of different registers of value to decide what is moral or ethical in Irish society, so there are different registers of value to decide what being a good mother is.

Using the examples mentioned above, we can see how Keyes is helping to expand the role of family members in chick lit, by presenting families in a more well-rounded light,

portraying the difficulties as well as the closeness located in a family, as well as presenting family members in a more three-dimensional light, bringing them to life on the page. The following section will examine how Keyes also helps to expand the role of friends in the chick lit genre.

Characteristics: Friends

As well as women's relationships with their families, chick lit also emphasises women's relationships with their friends. While it is now commonplace to read about women and their circle of friends, it is important to note that this was not always the case. In fact, up until relatively recently, it was rare to read a piece of fiction in which two women were represented in relation to each other. In her 1928 text, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf discusses this situation of how women writers neglected to portray friendships among women for many years:

And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends [...] But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. (Woolf: 2000, 82)

Many years later, Russ reiterated this idea by stating that women in literature are never seen in their relationships with other women. Instead, these fictional characters 'exist only in relation to the protagonist (who is male)' (Russ: 1995, 81). One cannot help but wonder why this was such a common occurrence for so long. In extreme cases, it has even been suggested that society as a whole is often suspicious of same-sex friendships, causing people to feel the need to hide their friendships for fear of being ridiculed:

[Adrienne] Rich argues that heterosexuality is compulsory because only partners of the opposite sex are deemed appropriate, all same-sex desire must be denied or indulged in secret, and various kinds of same-sex bonding (including friendships) are viewed with suspicion. (Leitch: 2001, 1760)

One possible reason why female friendships remained unrepresented for a long time may be because men felt threatened by such relationships; they needed women to boost their egos

and perhaps believed a woman who indulged in friendships with other women would be liable to finding their own confidence and independence. As Levenson discusses further:

Perhaps this is why men often feel threatened by groups of female friends, resorting to calling female-only groups lesbians, or covens, as if we either must be either sexually attracted to each other or witches to wish to spend time without the menfolk. (Levenson: 2009, 10)

Thankfully, women writers soon saw the importance of recounting tales of women's friendships with each other, and many of their novels stopped prioritising women's relationships with men and started focusing on women's friendships with each other, which were often depicted as being ultimately stronger and more durable relationships.

Speaking specifically in terms of the twenty-first century, the period in which the majority of chick lit is set, female friendship is an important factor in the lives of many women. Perhaps this is because more women are moving away from their families to lead a more independent life and establish their own identity, or perhaps it is because women are now staying single for longer, but it has been noted that:

Female friendship is the essence of most noughtie girls' lives because it is the most stable thing we have. Relationships may come and go, families may have other underlying tensions, colleagues may move on, but our friends will always take our calls and will always make sympathetic noises [...] In one sense our friends are the only certain thing in our uncertain world. (Levenson: 2009, 9)

Almost every definition of the chick lit genre refers to friendships: it is an important aspect of the genre on which almost all chick lit novels focus to some extent. For some theorists, the focus on contemporary literature on female friendships is now so strong that many contemporary novels are now thought to 'deemphasize a central romance and highlight the female protagonist's non-romantic relationship with her close community of mostly female friends' (Ferriss: 2006, 10). Many theorists agree with this notion of prioritising female friendships, and insist that the all-female 'communities portrayed in many chick-culture texts are equally as important as the central romantic relationship – sometimes arguably more important' (Mabry: 2006, 202). This point is reiterated in Pérez-Serrano's essay, when she notes how, in much chick lit, 'friends are the first alternative that the protagonists resort to in

order to clear out their uncertainties, while partners are the originators of conflict' (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>). When we consider how chick lit is often described as having 'a huge community of readers, who not only loved them but identified closely with the main characters' (Whelehan: 2005, 6), we realise that the sense of "sisterhood" in chick lit began with the arrival of these novels, which are written by, for and about women, thus creating a sense of female community before we even open the covers of the books.

Keyes has recognised the impact that a strong support network of friends can have on a woman's well-being and confidence, and many, if not all, of Keyes' novels focus, to some extent, on the power and importance of women's friendships, often to the point where such relationships are the most stable and lasting relationships in the heroines' lives. These 'tailor-made surrogate families' may be so strong and long-lasting because they are made up of the heroine's 'group of closest friends, who have chosen each other and, as a consequence, know and understand each other at a much deeper level than biological families' (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>).

While theorists such as Levenson protest the importance of female friendships, she also recognises the sense of fickleness often associated with friendships among women, noting how sometimes women do not even *like* their friends:

Certainly female friendship isn't the nurturing, stable, supportive bubble some people might think it looks like. Within friendship circles there are constant battles going on for the alpha female position. We are delighted when someone's relationship is going well, but sometimes we secretly prefer the joy hearing about it when it has gone wrong. We bitch behind each other's backs, and can be incredibly two faced. (Levenson: 2009, 9)

This notion of insincere and unstable friendships is dealt with in some of Keyes' novels. Some theorists claim that, for example, 'a self-centredness comes through in the friendships of chick lit' (Guerrero: 2006, 97), which could, in turn, lead to insincere friendships. Theorists such as this believe that, while chick lit heroines *do* socialise with a large group of friends, there does not appear to be any real depth to the friendships; each person only really

wants to talk about themselves in their group. In some novels, we experience a sense of disloyalty among friends; the friendship is solid until one friend dares to do something that the other does not like, and immediately the friendship is ruined:

If I hadn't been so pissed off with Karen I'd never have taken part in the Great Bitching Session which followed.

It wasn't an honourable, noble thing to do, to bitch about my friend, flatmate and fellow female, and especially to do it with a *man*, but I was only human. (Keyes: 2003a, 540)

For anyone to turn against a so-called friend so quickly, one would have to question the actual sincerity of the friendship in the first place. I feel it is important to note that, even though chick lit novels *do* portray insincere and unstable friendships, they are by no means dismissing the support and love that *real* friendships bring to women's lives. But in reality, some women do find themselves, for a time at least, without the support of real friends and so, if Keyes is aiming to present a comprehensive and realistic account of contemporary women's lives, she must portray the bad points *as well as* the good. It is also important to note that even when women in chick lit novels are 'positioned as antagonists to other women, it is clear that they understand them' (Whelehan: 2005, 194). This may be viewed as an example of the relative progressiveness of chick lit; even when female characters are presented as rivals 'in a world full of commitment phobics and otherwise inadequate male figures it is still another woman who emerges as a positive figure and offers the main character her help' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 82). Additionally, as readers, we often learn the reasons behind an antagonist's aloofness and it is often the case that such attitudes are revealed as a 'façade behind which they hide personal traumas and problems in their own families, which makes them similar to the *everywoman* that the singletons represent' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 93). This alone helps to create a sense of a female sisterhood or community; that is, despite women's differences, there is still an inherent understanding between women which bonds them in some way.

On the whole, though, Keyes' portrayals of female friendships are from a positive perspective. In fact, the chick lit genre is linked so closely with female friendship that, for some people, the actual reading experience of a chick lit novel is 'nearly indistinguishable from a conversation with our best girlfriends. It isn't fiction as much as it is the comfort of community' (Guerrero: 2006, 91). In this "community" of friends, many women have, as discussed earlier, found joy and support; this community of friends has become, for many chick lit heroines, 'an alternative functional "family" of her own with her friends for support, while her real family become increasingly dysfunctional' (Whelehan: 2004, 25). For many women, it took a long time for them to finally feel part of a "sisterhood", but the results always make the wait feel worthwhile. Even in the case of women who take a bit longer to discover and form strong female friendships, many of Keyes' novels depict female friendships as durable and long-lasting. In this sense, her work is validating a community of women who can act in mutually-supportive roles. As just one example of this, the protagonist of *Angels*, Maggie, recalls how she met her best friend, Emily, and how their friendship has endured since their schooldays:

Gawky twelve-year-olds, we met at secondary school and instantly recognized in each other a kindred spirit [...] Despite our divergent lifestyles and living several thousand miles apart, my friendship with Emily has endured. We'd email each other twice or three times a week. She'd tell me about all her disastrous relationships, then she'd debrief me on my dull, married life, then we'd both go home happy. (Keyes: 2002, 45-46)

When Maggie's marriage breaks up during the novel, it is Emily, and not her family, that she turns to for help in getting through this hard time in her life. Similarly, in novels such as *Last Chance Saloon*, it is common to witness protagonists who are closer to a group of friends than they are to their own family. A number of theorists have commented on this situation, discussing how the contemporary woman's circle of close friends forms a new, alternative family for her. As A. Rochelle Mabry describes:

the 'urban family' often provides – or at least supplements – the emotional closeness and support expected from the traditional nuclear family. More important, the bonds of the urban

family are often as strong, if not stronger, than those of the romantic relationship. (Mabry: 2006, 202)

This “emotional closeness and support” provided by the urban family ‘can be such an attractive alternative that it can, at least momentarily, place question marks around the happy romantic conclusion’ (Mabry: 2006, 202-203). By placing such a strong emphasis on friendship rather than romantic relationships, chick lit may be viewed as helping to remove the stigma attached to single women by proving that romantic relationships with men are not the only relationships where women can find love, companionship, comfort, and support. In doing so, it is helping to move away from the traditional stance of women being “validated”, in some way, by their relationships with men. The genre suggests that relationships are plural and polyvalent in that the women should not feel in competition for the male gaze but rather should be able to form supportive same-sex relationships that can serve as a Lacanian mirror through which their own conceptions of identity can be reinforced.

While many chick lit writers pride themselves on writing novels to which readers can relate, they appear to assume that they only have one kind of reader: white, middle-class, heterosexual, because these classifications describe the vast majority of characters in the genre. Because of this, the question may be raised as to how realistic and representative of our society these novels really are? Is white the only skin colour? Is everyone heterosexual? What about when boy-meets-boy? Or, indeed, when girl-meets-girl? Are these relationships not deemed worthy of any recognition?

Popular culture, in many forms, has ‘witnessed the increasing popularity and mainstreaming of gay and bisexual characters and narratives that do not centre on heterosexuality’ (Genz: 2009, 125), an occurrence which is probably linked to ‘another social phenomenon of late modernity: a public discourse on homosexuality and its “coming out” of the sphere of taboo’ (Smyczyńska: 2007, 136). In many typical chick lit novels, homosexuality is visible, thanks to the much-used “gay best friend” cliché; however, it has

been noted that these men only serve the purpose of giving the heroine advice on fashion and relationships. This would seem to support criticisms that the presence of gay men in chick lit 'appears to be more of a gesture of political correctness than of a real breakthrough, as the representations are not only sketchy, but also highly stereotypical' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 136). In typical chick lit, these homosexual characters never appear to have any real plot-value of their own, such as the protagonist's friend, Dennis, in *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*, who has only a minor part in the novel, and on whom the protagonist relies for advice about her appearance:

I had to rush around and put on make-up and comb my hair because Dennis always scrutinised my appearance, telling me whether I had lost or gained weight, what my ideal weight should be, whether he liked or hated my hair and so on. He was worse than my mother, but at least he had an excuse – he was a gay man, he couldn't help himself. (Keyes: 2003a, 243-244)

Extracts such as this, and others in many chick lit novels, have been criticised for presenting homosexuality as largely one-dimensional and as lacking in any real depth. Some fear that such instances merely add to the contemporary 'queer chic' trend which sees homosexuality – as with race and ethnicity – as a type of commodity (Genz: 2009, 125). As another example of this trend, we can consider the stereotypically-camp minor character named Robbie in *Sushi For Beginners*:

With a loud clatter the door opened and a dapper-looking young man beamed around the office. 'Morning campers!'

'Who's that?' Ashling wondered, taking in his streaked hair, tailored magenta pants, see-through T-shirt and the tiny leather jacket he was peeling from his body.

'Robbie, our new boy. Mercedes' replacement,' Jack said. 'He started on Thursday. Robbie! Come and meet Ashling.'

Robbie fluttered a hand to his almost-naked chest and affected surprise. 'Little old moi?!'

'I think he's gay,' Kelvin hissed.

'No shit Sherlock,' Trix said with withering sarcasm.

Robbie solemnly shook hands with Ashling then, with a gasp, fell on her handbag. 'Very Gucci! I think I'm having a fashion moment.' (Keyes: 2007, 355)

The gay best friend of much chick lit, it is said, is similar to:

An accessory as essential to a character as her cosmopolitan and designer handbag. These men serve to give the heroine advice on fashion, relationships, and entertaining, but never have a real plot of their own. [...] In chick lit, sexuality is simple and never questioned. Some

characters are homosexual, but most are heterosexual. The novels relegate any character that blurs the gay/straight binary to a passing role. (Lynch Cooke: 2007, <http://dissertations.bc.edu/ashonors/200552/>, chapter3)

Likening the gay best friend to a type of accessory is evident in novels such as *Last Chance Saloon*, in which one of the protagonist's notes how these 'were the days when a gay best friend still carried kudos and novelty value' (Keyes: 1999, 107). See *Jane Write: A Girl's Guide to Writing Chick Lit*, a handbook for aspiring chick lit writers, discusses the by now overly-used "gay best friend" cliché. It encourages budding authors, not necessarily to rid their novels of these traits completely, but to re-think how they use them and to try to update the trends; as they say, 'we're not saying your protagonist absolutely can't have a gay best friend, but he has to be different from all the gay best friends that have existed before him' (Mlynowski: 2006, 79).

Keyes' *Last Chance Saloon*, in particular, is a perfect example of how a common chick lit characteristic can be cleverly updated. In this novel, the gay best friend, far from being a mere "accessory" who has no real existence apart from offering fashion and relationship advice, is instead one of the main protagonists. Instead, Fintan, a homosexual male, is one of the three characters who tell the story, and we learn as much about him as we do either of the two female protagonists. Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, readers eventually learn that Fintan is suffering from Hodgkin's Disease, a form of cancer, his story is initially, and perhaps ultimately, about his relationship with his two best friends and his boyfriend. In this novel, which is centred on friendships, readers see a clear example of the importance of friendships in the lives of many people:

That was another reason that Fintan and Sandro worked so well. Fintan came as a package deal with Tara and Katherine – love me, love my friends – and Fintan had once dumped a potential love interest because he'd taken violently against Katherine. (Keyes: 1999, 91-92)

Taking into consideration that we have already seen how Keyes also uses Fintan's story to both criticise stereotypical views of homosexuality, as well as how she tries to normalise homosexuality, we see that her clever updating of the gay best friend cliché, to allow the gay

best friend to actually take the place of a major character in the novel, proves that traditional chick lit clichés can be re-worked and updated successfully.

Characteristics: Image

Chick lit is often discussed in terms of its apparent preoccupation with fashion and image, specifically women's weight. While this is just one of the areas of chick lit that provokes criticism, as critics express concern that the genre's focus on 'shopping, fashion, and consumerism leads to an arguably obsessive focus on skin-deep beauty' (Ferriss: 2006, 11), defenders of the genre may suggest that an investment in fashion is actually an accurate reflection of our consumer-based culture (Ferriss: 2006, 4). Additionally, it is important to note that an emphasis on female beauty and image is not necessarily an unliterary one, as texts such as Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* mention 'attitudes toward beauty when encouraging women to write about what has long been considered unimportant' (Wells: 2006, 61). The issue of self-image is also one which some theorists would argue is really the main focus of the chick lit novel:

chick lit might seem at first to be a category of novels primarily concerned with finding a mate [...] And although this *is* a controlling feature of the genre, I maintain that in many of the books this quest for a partner is entirely secondary to the ongoing battle chick lit's heroines are engaging with themselves – particularly with regard to weight. (Umminger: 2006, 240)

In their representations of the 'modern woman', typical chick lit heroines tend to be extremely fashion-conscious and mindful of their appearance, indulging in intensive skincare rituals and the latest cosmetics. They desire to look as trendy as possible, often placing fashion before their own comfort:

Sitting herself in the chair, she tucked her Patrick Cox-shod feet neatly around each other. The shoes were a size too small – no matter how many times she asked the Patrick Cox press office to send a size six, they always sent a five. But free Patrick Cox stilettos were free Patrick Cox stilettos. What did an unimportant detail like excruciating agony matter? (Keyes: 2007, 4)

The mention of Patrick Cox and other designers is a trait which is commonly associated with chick lit, as many critics of the genre refer to the amount of 'brand name-dropping' (Yardley:

2006, 15) – usually in the form of ‘recognizable, distinctive, coveted high-end brands’ (Van Slooten: 2006, 227) – which is evident in many novels in the genre, as well as providing ‘the temporary illusion of decadently and stylishly “having it all”’ (Van Slooten: 2006, 220). Such circumstances are often criticised in chick lit for provoking feelings of anxiety and envy in readers who may not be able to afford the same “luxurious” products as these heroines who are supposed to be “just like them” and yet who are never shown to suffer the consequences of such extravagant, and often irrational, spending (most notably in Sophie Kinsella’s *Shopaholic* series). However, Keyes’ extract above changes this by *not* portraying the protagonist as constantly spending money on luxuries and never suffering from financial crisis, but instead as indulging in such luxuries only when they are provided as “freebies” from her job; the fact that the shoes are the wrong size does not matter to the protagonist, as perhaps she realises it is the only chance she may have to own such designer shoes.

Much traditional chick lit also adds to women’s image concerns by portraying men who appear to be:

far too superficial and shallow ever to love a woman for her imperfect self. In these fictional worlds no man is strong or deep enough to love an overweight woman, not publicly at any rate. Thus all the characters remain trapped (or willingly ensnared) by a culture that values surface first, substance second. (Umminger: 2006, 249)

Critics worry that portrayals such as these present a negative perspective to women, who read that, for instance, no man could *possibly* love a woman who does not meet society’s standards of aesthetic perfection. Ironically, Keyes presents the opposite as untrue; that, although some women may feel that no man will be attracted to them unless they possess certain standards of beauty, and put in the time and effort to achieve it, *Sushi For Beginners*, for instance, portrays a woman who loses all attraction for a man simply because he obviously takes care with *his* appearance:

She could barely squeeze into his bathroom because it was so crammed with skin-care products, shampoo, mousse, setting lotions and cologne. This did not endear him to her. *What a girl*. She curled her lip in contempt. [...] And she was prepared to bet that his hair was

probably dyed too, from some nondescript brown to its current ebony. Suddenly she went right off him. (Keyes: 2007, 224-225)

Critics also express concern over the frequent discussions in chick lit regarding the heroines' obsessions with their dress size. Chick lit often features characters who are not only obsessed with how they look but apparently eternally dissatisfied with their appearance, 'reflecting the dominant image of the "bulimic personality," striving – successfully or not – after the media-constructed bodily ideals' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 161). The typical chick lit heroine, it is said, is:

weight-obsessed. She relentlessly counts every calorie, measures her thighs, and attempts to sweat off alcohol units and Cadbury Milktray in desperate excursions to the gym. She is convinced she would be more lovable, successful, fashionable, and sexy if she could just conform her body to a size that would allow her to fit into jeans meant for a twelve-year-old girl. (Freitas: 2005, 33)

In chick lit, we witness a wide range of concerns regarding weight, such as women who are mildly self-conscious of their 'flabby bits', and who believe that the perfect figure would give them confidence and allow them to feel that bit sexier. At the other end of the scale, chick lit also portrays characters who hate their bodies so much that they would risk their own health to achieve 'perfection'. Speaking specifically in terms of *Bridget Jones*, Whelehan notes how, in chick lit terms, in order to be 'sexually powerful, the lot of the successful single girl is self-sacrifice, so that self-discipline in matters of diet, exercise, social networking, interior design and fashion are all equally important. This of course is the self-discipline that Bridget Jones so notoriously lacks' (Whelehan: 2000, 142). Conversely, Tara in *Last Chance Saloon*, displays this self-discipline that Bridget, perhaps fortunately, lacks, resulting in her adopting worrying and dangerous exercise and diet habits, all in the name of appearing attractive to her ungrateful boyfriend:

After work Tara did a step class, and was delighted when she almost fainted. She had to sit on the bench for fifteen minutes before she could stand up without her knees buckling. When she got home, Thomas smacked her on the bum and said, affectionately, 'You're not bad, for a fat lass!'

That night, she went to bed trembling with hunger and overexertion. All in all, it had been a very good day. (Keyes: 1999, 198)

Such characters are presented as 'victims of BDD (Body Dysmorphic Disorder), and therefore are constantly on diets, feel obliged to regularly attend fitness centres and incessantly judge their own attractiveness against other women' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 160-161). In this sense, the body has become almost a fetish, to be punished until the pain becomes almost a sense of pleasure through penance. The construction of identity through the Lacanian mirror is a factor here as 'the reflection in the mirror indicates an original noetic possibility, and introduces a second narcissism. Its fundamental pattern is immediately the relation to the other' (Lacan: 1991, 125). By seeing the body as an other that is a desired goal of the self, the body becomes almost an object to be improved and shaped and Tara's pleasure at nearly fainting is an example of this. It is amusing in this context, but can have serious consequences as the search for the perfect body-image can have lasting and tragic consequences for many women in the shape of anorexia and bulimia, issues which Keyes addresses in her work.

Lisa in *Sushi For Beginners* similarly displays almost compulsive behaviour in terms of achieving "perfection", describing the sheer volume of treatments and regimes that she regularly undertakes in the quest for beauty, despite the fact that she is undoubtedly harming her body in the process:

Lisa was clear-eyed about her looks. In her natural state – not that she'd been in that for a very long time – she was a pretty enough girl. But with huge amounts of effort she knew she'd upgraded herself from attractive to fabulous. As well as the usual attention to hair, nails, skin, make-up and clothes, she popped huge amounts of vitamins, drank sixteen glasses of water a day, only snorted cocaine on special occasions and every six months had a botulism injection in her forehead – it paralysed the muscles and gave a lovely wrinkle-free appearance. For the past ten years she'd been constantly hungry. So hungry that she barely noticed it now. Sometimes she dreamt about eating a three-course-meal, but people do the oddest things in dreams! (Keyes: 2007, 68)

Related to this, chick lit has frequently been criticised for discussing women's battles with their weight, especially in the context of the often humorous and light-hearted manner of discussing serious and potentially fatal eating disorders. We witness this in the above extracts

where Tara exercised and starved herself to the point of physical and mental exhaustion and potential illness, and where Lisa starves herself to the extent that she finds herself *dreaming* about food, and how another of Keyes' characters felt the 'warm glow of being mistaken for an anorexic' (Keyes: 1998, 81). In *Last Chance Saloon*, one protagonist even wishes that she was bulimic, regretting that she was unable to make herself vomit to lose weight, seemingly "forgetting" that bulimia is a dangerous and potentially life-threatening illness:

Seconds later, when the pie was a mere memory, guilt arrived. How she hated herself for her weakness. Briefly she thought about asking Mr. Cafolla for the key to the bathroom and trying to make herself puke, but whenever she'd tried it in the past it just hadn't been a success. Hardly worth the effort. She had no idea how bulimics managed it. She took her hat off to them. Maybe there was some trick of the trade that she didn't know about. (Keyes: 1999, 125)

Chick lit critics worry that, when such extracts light-heartedly discuss excessive dieting and exercise without portraying the full extent of the dangers such actions can have, it is, in effect, normalising such compulsive and dangerous behaviour and reinforcing the stereotypes that have surrounded notions of women's beauty (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklitter/perezserrano.html>).

It is important to note, however, that chick lit's discussion of women's weight and image problems does not mean that these novels are encouraging, or even condoning, such behaviour. Many of the novels' heroines 'frankly admit to the drain of energy and resources demanded by this pursuit [of beauty and "perfection"], even as they persist in it' (Wells: 2006, 61), such as in *Sushi For Beginners* when Ashling 'repaired to the bathroom to stand in the bath, her legs fizzing with noxious white stuff as she waited for the hairs to burn off. She sighed. Sometimes it's hard to be a woman' (Keyes: 2007, 197). In doing so, these novels are merely providing a portrayal of 'a culture that disdains and suppresses female hunger, makes women ashamed of their appetites and needs, and demands that women constantly work on the transformation of their body' (Bordo: 1993, 2370). The tone may be quizzical and

humorous, but the topic definitely is not, and the tone may be seen as a way of broaching the topic in a non-threatening manner.

Keyes, I would argue, is also helping to change the conventions of 'traditional beauty', which, contrary to the teachings of the beauty myth, are often unrealistic, unattainable, and often not even what many people truly want themselves or other people to look like. In their attack on the debilitating effects of the beauty myth, which will be examined further in the next chapter, feminist theorists encouraged women to revel in their own uniqueness, and to accept that we are all beautiful in our own ways:

There is no *one* ideal for all women's bodies nor *one* definition of what it means to be beautiful. All women are different; no woman is perfect, and, inevitably, how we envision what our bodies could be and should be will change over the course of our lifetime. We have different skin colors, body shapes, fashion senses, and relationships to our bodies. Some of us are more comfortable with a more naturalistic style of body and beauty, and some of us take joy in plucking, primping, and stylizing our looks for hours at a time. (Freitas: 2005, 47)

An example of this call for the appreciation and admiration of various body types is reflected quite effectively in the earlier quotation from *This Charming Man*, in which the protagonist admires Nkechi, the Nigerian woman who, to the surprise and admiration of the Irish women, seems to delight in accentuating her 'really quite large bottom' (Keyes: 2008, 32). In her own way of attacking and over-ruling the influence of the beauty myth, Keyes often portrays untraditional heroines like Nkechi: female characters who do not necessarily meet the stereotypical ideas of what is beautiful, yet who are still shown to ooze confidence and appear highly attractive. Look at the following extract from *Rachel's Holiday*:

One was a dumpy young woman called Francie who talked loudly and incessantly, running all her words into each other. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She had shoulder-length blonde hair with two inches of dark roots on show, a gap in her front teeth that you could drive a truck through and cheap foundation several shades too dark, badly smeared on to her face. She was overweight, her hem was hanging and her skirt was red and way too tight.

My first thought was what a mess she was. But within seconds she knew everyone, was throwing cigarettes at them and had in-jokes and intimacy up and running. To my great anxiety, I saw that she was undeniably, if inexplicably, sexy. I got that familiar sick fear that Chris would shift his attention away from me.

She carried herself as if she was a goddess. She didn't even seem to notice the round bulge of her stomach through her awful pencil skirt. It would have had me suicidal. (Keyes: 1998, 522)

This is in complete contrast to how the beauty myth taught women that they could never be the 'heroines' of their own story if they were not remarkably beautiful (Wolf: 1991, 61). By inverting this idea, in proving that funny, interesting, intelligent women are just as attractive, if not more so, Keyes is effectively helping to portray healthier, more positive role models for contemporary women.

Chick lit has also been criticised for not portraying heroines who are comfortable and accepting of their looks, as this is seen as a sign of how women's confidence is still being suppressed by the beauty myth:

A heroine who is completely free of care about her looks and happily self-accepting is nowhere to be found in chick lit, an absence that suggests that such a character is too unrealistic to appeal to image-conscious women readers. (Wells: 2006, 59)

However, in another attempt at fighting these debilitating effects of the beauty myth, Keyes has also shown a tendency to portray women who *are* confident with their looks and happy in their own skin. It is worth noting that much of Keyes' fiction is not so unrealistic or idealistic that they lack credibility, by assuming that this confidence in one's self-image is the norm. The following extract, in fact, shows that total confidence is often such a rarity that it can be surprising to witness first-hand:

Of course I'd be delighted if I woke up one morning and found I'd miraculously lost half a stone during the night – who wouldn't? But nevertheless, I was speechless. I'd never before come across a woman who claimed, by her own admission, to be in good shape – I thought it was simply Not Allowed. That you say it about everyone else, whether it's true or not, while berating yourself for being a hippo/heifer/Jabba the Hutt, even if you've been on the grapefruit diet for the past month. All right, maybe it's dishonest, but it somehow seems less offensive. (Keyes: 2002, 157)

Considering such extracts' claims that many women feel that they are "Not Allowed" to admit that they are attractive, chick lit seems to suggest that 'dissatisfaction with one's own body is a naturally feminine quality; often the protagonists regarded by their environment as attractive lead themselves to believe otherwise and try to "improve" their appearance and conform to the idealised criteria of beauty' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 161). However, Keyes also portrays women who *are* beginning to feel confident about their appearance. In doing so,

Keyes may be seen as aiming to set a more positive example to women regarding their self-image. She reminds women that, despite what the beauty myth has told them, there is in fact no single ideal standard of physical beauty, and that many other factors, such as personality and confidence, also contribute to how attractive a person appears:

Cecily was very taken with Jojo; she'd been watching her since she'd arrived. Jojo was a big girl – bigger than Cecily could imagine being in her worst Maltesers-filled nightmares – but she was gorgeous [...]

But it was the way Jojo seemed so comfortable in her own skin that most entranced Cecily. To the point where she'd wondered tentatively about cancelling her gym membership. Even – dammit! – eating whatever she wanted. If it worked for this Jojo, why couldn't it work for her? Occasionally this happened to women around Jojo. While they were with her, they saw through the advertising industry's lies and believed that size didn't matter, that it was intangibles like *joie de vivre* and confidence that counted. (Keyes: 2004, 142)

In portraying more 'untraditionally beautiful' female characters, and in showing women who are confident about their looks, Keyes is helping to portray healthier, more positive role models for women. She is also expanding the generic boundaries of chick lit. She does this in a number of other ways; for example, rather than beauty and image creating rivalry and resentment among women, some of Keyes' work also shows women who openly admire and appreciate other women's appearance, such as in the above extract, helping to reinforce the feminist appeal for female support. Additionally, chick lit has been criticised for portraying women who are, as Pérez-Serrano says:

[...] rarely effortlessly beautiful; instead, they always feel too tall, short or fat (being too thin is rare, as it would fit the stereotype), or have too much cellulite. This leads them to cease to be owners of their own bodies and become part of the patriarchal system through the male gaze, and as a result, the female body, instead of being the physical expression of the inner self and a reason for proud self-acceptance, becomes a trap in which the character is caught, which she can only disguise and modify in order to attract Mr. Right. (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>)

Keyes is also aiming to dismantle this aspect of beauty myth by portraying women who openly refuse to mould themselves into a carbon copy of a male fantasy, and yet are still in a happy relationship where they are adored by their boyfriend, reinforcing the notion that women should dress for *themselves*, and not try to meet the image of the male ideal:

I was impatient now. I undressed to my bra and knickers and put on a robe and, unexpectedly, noticed my underwear. Black cotton pants, plain black bra. (Two different blacks.) Nothing

wrong with it, but it wasn't much... fun. Would it have killed me to buy nice stuff? Technically, no. But I suppose I didn't really approve. I was a real woman so why should I dress up like a male fantasy? (Keyes: 2008, 156)

Similarly, Keyes portrays women who have been affected by the beauty myth, who have hated their image for no reason other than that the myth's picture of what they 'should' look like did not match the reflection they saw when they looked in the mirror:

We wasted so much time torturing ourselves and worrying about the size of our bums. [...]
The obsession with the largeness of our bums was matched in intensity only by the obsession with the smallness of our chests.
It was so sad!
Because we were beautiful.
We had such lovely figures.
And we had no idea. [...]
Maybe I should have started to enjoy the way I looked, bad and all as I thought it was. Because one day I'd wish I looked like that again. (Keyes: 2003b, 119-120)

Rather than remaining controlled by the lies of the beauty myth, we can see how some of Keyes' heroines show an awareness of feminism's advice of accepting ourselves *as we are*, rather than adhering to the male fantasy ideal and trying to mould our bodies into unattainable, and potentially dangerous, shapes and sizes. This awareness of the beauty myth's lies is a step in the right direction towards tackling the problem, and will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Keyes utilises the general chick lit format and conventions in her own work, and how she, at the same time, adheres to these conventions while stretching them to incorporate a variety of different situations. Keyes, as discussed earlier, is fully aware that chick lit is often unfairly and inaccurately ridiculed and criticised, despite the fact that the genre has noticeably evolved and broadened its scope in recent years. In her own way of helping to evolve the genre from its earlier, more formulaic, roots, she makes full use of, for instance, the love plot, by representing women who have varying views on marriage and singleness, while refraining from condemning any of these women for their views, and thus

presents a decidedly more realistic and well-rounded scope of contemporary women's relationships. In terms of Keyes' discussion of the working world, she not only moves some of her characters away from the chick lit cliché of working in supposedly glamorous careers in fashion and the media, but, even when she does place her characters in such industries, she presents a more realistic view of these careers, by describing the pitfalls as well as the positive aspects. While much chick lit has been accused of rendering the protagonist's family members as one-dimensional characters, family has an important role in many of Keyes' novels. As well as portraying various types of familial relationships, some of Keyes' families, most notably the now-famous Walsh family, have become almost as well known as the protagonists themselves, and readers have grown to love them as they get to know more about them. Similarly, Keyes describes friendships from a variety of viewpoints, and we observed how she took a much-used chick lit characteristic, namely the gay best friend cliché, and updated it by placing the gay best friend in the role of one of the main protagonists. Finally, while Keyes may be guilty of following the chick lit conventions of discussing fashion, image, and, in particular, weight, she also attempts to provide more positive descriptions, by portraying heroines who are comfortable with their appearance, even if they do not match conventional depictions of what is considered "beautiful".

This chapter also mentioned how the sense of humour evident in chick lit may be used to discuss deeper, more serious issues, a trait that Keyes has become renowned for. The following chapter will examine how Keyes uses the chick lit genre to discuss issues of importance to feminist theory and women's studies, and circulating these issues within the chick lit and broader popular fiction framework may allow these issues to reach a much wider audience.

Chapter Three

Marian Keyes as a Feminist Author: Keyes' Gender Context

Although we have not yet reached the end of the road, feminism can now allow itself a little celebration and a little laughter. (Walter: 1999, 7)

Himself likes football. That's because he's a man. I don't like football. That's because I'm a woman. Although I pretend I love it. That's because I'm a *modern* woman. (Keyes: 2001, 93)

It has been said that much popular culture 'has, as its primary motive, commercial success, and as its primary function, entertainment. At the same time, however, every popular culture artefact, like any other cultural artefact, can be seen to make some kind of statement' (Mintz: 2006, 157). As such, this final area of study focuses on the feminist context of Keyes' novels and non-fiction. This thesis has already examined how her work often makes reference to issues that have affected Irish women, both in the past and the present, and, of course, Keyes' position as a chick lit author clearly places her in the middle of a genre that publishes fiction written largely by, about and for women. As Keyes writes within such a strongly woman-centred framework, it seems appropriate that the feminist aspects of her work are also taken into consideration. However, as feminist theory is too extensive a genre to cover in one chapter alone, and as Keyes' work has only emerged since the 1990s, it seems more fitting to narrow the scope of the feminist perspective of her work. As such, this chapter will focus on third wave and post-feminism, the most contemporary waves of feminism and those which have been associated with chick lit and the period in which it is written and set.

This chapter will examine a selection of texts from a number of theorists commonly associated with third wave and post-feminism, such as Judith Butler, Natasha Walter and Naomi Wolf, with the aim of highlighting some of the key areas of concern with regards to these strands of feminism, many of which are also issues in a lot of chick lit novels. It will

then explore these issues in terms of Keyes' texts, to determine Keyes' personal views on feminism and to investigate how she presents the same issues in her fictional worlds. In doing so, this chapter will examine how Keyes' work presents a certain parallel to some issues raised by contemporary feminist thought.

Contemporary feminism: An overview

The two most contemporary strands of feminism have become known as third wave feminism and post-feminism. Though there may be some similarities between the two, the sometimes negative portrayal of post-feminism in the mass media has been rejected by many third-wavers, who prefer to distance themselves from negative connotations and who view the third wave as the antithesis to post-feminism, largely by acting in what many third wavers feel is a 'stance of resistance to popular pronouncements of a moratorium on feminism and feminists' (Genz: 2009, 158). The third wave may even be viewed as a type of 'response to what one might call the cultural dominance of "postfeminism"' (Siegel: 1997, 52). Due to the discrepancies in how these strands of feminism are defined, to the point where there is currently no fixed definition on which all theorists agree, this chapter will largely discuss the two in conjunction with one another, due to the fact that there are undeniable similarities between the two, and also due to the fact that both strands of feminism may affect women's lives simultaneously. However, I believe it is important to firstly outline the various ways that they have been described and the priorities and concerns of both strands of feminism.

The third wave is usually seen as being 'embraced by a generation of younger women to announce that feminism is a space they already inhabit and not a process they have yet to engage with' (Whelehan: 2005, 169). These women undoubtedly 'see their work founded on second wave principles, yet distinguished by a number of political and cultural differences' (Genz: 2009, 156). In this sense, while the third wave sees itself as being 'inextricably linked

to the second, it is also defined in large part by how it differs from it' (Genz: 2009, 158). It is often thought to be principally focused on undermining the notion of a "fixed" female identity which the first and second waves were seen to suggest, and, as such, some theorists have focused on the notion of women's 'multivocality' as a key feature of the third wave (Siegel: 1997, 51). Such a definition of third wave feminism would seem to dispute any notion of feminism being able to 'speak to concerns and issues of "the next feminist generation," [as] these voices cannot, of course, speak for an entire generation' (Siegel: 1997, 50), reiterating the notion of difference among women. This emphasis on the differences between women is further rooted in the knowledge that, even as we can refer to third wave feminism as a 'stance or a practice, [...] a third wave feminist is not so easily defined' (Siegel: 1997, 54). Deborah L. Siegel further outlines the possible reasoning behind third wave's focus on individuality in the following extract:

Because the third wave is about how to practice feminism differently, to broaden and deepen the analysis of gender in relation to a multiplicity of issues that affect women's lives, third wave theory places differences among women at the center of the project. While such a focus bears the risk of obscuring commonalities, solidarity inheres in the reality of commitment to *being* the third wave. (Siegel: 1997, 69)

Women discussing feminism in the third wave era, which is thought to have begun around the mid-nineties, often refer to a type of generation gap between feminists, which can result in younger women feeling stifled by the seemingly 'rigid codes of feminist behaviour. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the world had changed beyond recognition for these young women and second wave feminism's solutions would not allow them to navigate the complexities of their own lives' (Whelehan: 2007, xvii). As a result, although the impact of the second wave undoubtedly changed the world considerably for women, the women after this period required a contextually-situated version of feminism to suit their changing lives. Therefore, while the second wave largely addressed the personal lives and relationships of women, the third wave focused extensively on, 'the miasma of the mass media, celebrating its contradictions as well as its possibilities' (Pilcher: 2004, 147). Importantly for this study of a

chick lit author, the third wave, as with post-feminism, 'locates itself within popular culture and understands a critical engagement with the latter as the key to political struggle' (Genz: 2009, 159), which is in contrast to the second wave's somewhat negative view of the potential of popular culture in a feminist work. Other theorists are, however, quick to point out that, although the third wave may be a somewhat updated version of feminism, which correlates to contemporary women's lives, this does not mean that the third wave is ignorant of the strands of feminism that have gone before it. While some detractors of post-feminism criticise it for supposedly undermining the second wave, the third wave is, by contrast, often defined as a 'budding political movement with strong affiliations to second wave feminist theory and activism' (Genz: 2009, 156). As such, rather than the third wave aiming to present itself as an independent, separate entity from earlier feminism, it is instead seen as a continuation of these earlier strands, aware and grateful for all they achieved, while evolving to suit women's changing lives. The third wave is thus viewed as being both 'marked by a desire to renew feminist commitment as well as distinguish itself from its second wave precursor' (Genz: 2009, 157). As Siegel explains further:

Regardless of how, when, and under what circumstances one becomes a part of the current wave of feminist activism and scholarship, what unites practitioners in a third wave of praxis is a pledge to expand on the groundwork laid during waves one and two; a commitment to continue the feminist legacy of assessing foundational concepts, particularly the category "women"; and the courage to embrace the challenge of moving feminism, as a political movement without the fixity of a single feminist agenda in view, into the next millennium.

[...] Given that greater awareness of "the feminist movement itself" is a hallmark of the third wave, that awareness ultimately shapes the third wave personal narrative. (Siegel: 1997, 56)

It would be naive, and inaccurate, to assume that there is only one definition of the third wave. In fact, it would be impossible to define third wave feminism in just one way; it has numerous definitions and areas of concern. However, Pilcher and Whelehan describe third wave feminism as:

The feminism of a younger generation of women who acknowledge the legacy of second wave feminism, but also identify what they see as its limitations. These perceived limitations would include their sense that it remained too exclusively white and middle class, that it

became a prescriptive movement which alienated ordinary women by making them feel guilty about enjoying aspects of individual self-expression such as cosmetics and fashion, but also sexuality – especially heterosexuality and its trappings, such as pornography. Moreover, most third wavers would assert that the historical and political conditions in which second wave feminism emerged no longer exist and therefore it does not chime with the experiences of today's women. (Pilcher: 2004, 169)

As Whelehan sees it, third wave feminists have 'reinvented the wheel' by updating the aims and concerns of the second wave to suit a rapidly changing society, while at the same time adding 'new features and specifications which are designed to challenge those who thought they knew what feminism was' (Whelehan: 2007, xvii). In this sense, we are again reminded of Siegel's claims that contemporary feminism is an extension of earlier feminisms, for 'just as the third wave cannot afford to deny its past if it is to lead us all into the future, so the second must come to see the efforts of the third – however incomplete – as the joyful exertion born of its labours' (Siegel: 1997, 66). In describing contemporary women's lives, then, the third wave subject 'seeks "to be real", to tell "the truth" about life in the third wave, and to speak as part of a collective voice "from the next feminist generation"' (Siegel: 1997, 51), statements which are often similarly heard in terms of chick lit's heroines who, authors claim, are representing "the truth" about many "real" contemporary women's lives.

Similar to the third wave, post-feminism may be described as a strand of feminism for a younger generation and it is, as with the third wave, often thought to suggest that the aims and concerns of second wave feminism are no longer relevant to today's women. Originating within the media in the 1980s, post-feminism has often been viewed 'as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement' (Gamble: 1998, 36). Post-feminism, in this sense, 'signals the "past-ness" of feminism – or, at any rate, the end of a particular stage in feminist histories – and a generational shift in the understanding the relationships between men and women and, for that matter, between women themselves' (Genz: 2009, 3). At the same time, this "post-ing" of feminism involves a process of resignification that harbours the threat of backlash as well as the potential for

innovation' (Genz: 2009, 65). Post-feminism, 'which has confounded and split contemporary critics with its contradictory meanings and pluralistic outlook' (Genz: 2009, 1), is difficult to define, as theorists tend to disagree over post-feminism's "characteristics", resulting in one theorist's definition contradicting that of the next. Of course, it is important to remember that feminism, in a general sense, is also not easy to define, and so perhaps the lack of concrete definition for post-feminism can also be related to the movement on the whole. Elena Pérez-Serrano explains it as follows:

[...] feminism is a multifaceted movement with social, cultural, political and individual concerns, among others, that has been given several different interpretations. Feminism cannot be framed within a precise set of tenets and a homogeneous political agenda. This derives from the fact that there is not one single ideological line in feminism but many, as it is a set of movements that has been evolving for centuries, even before Charles Fourier coined the word in 1837. Since its earliest manifestations in the late 12th century, feminism has adopted different perspectives, types and meanings, and even today, when one refers to the concept 'feminism', it is necessary to specify in which sense we are using the word. (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>)

Pérez-Serrano then highlights the problems resulting from this lack of a clear definition for post-feminism; she speaks of how:

Since the emergence of the term, scholars have been trying to provide a working definition of what post-feminism entails, and although at face value, from an etymological point of view, post-feminism would be 'what comes after feminism,' considering the constant ambiguities into which the movement falls, it is difficult to establish, firstly, to what degree post-feminism defends women's position in society and secondly, whether this movement is feminist at all. (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>)

Some theorists would claim that post-feminism signals the "end" of feminism; that it celebrates a 'climate where young women are successful and independent, and less likely to espouse "dangerous" feminist ideals' (Whelehan: 1995, 240). In fact, some claim that post-feminism signals 'a backlash against feminism and its fight for equal rights, [which are] represented as having apparently only made women miserable' (Isbister: 2009, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/isbister.html>). Similar complaints have been made in terms of chick lit heroines, where critics worry that, 'although the eponymous protagonist can be a role model for women on the grounds of her independence and intelligence, her neurotic

obsession with appearance and boyfriends is not only a misrepresentation but also a clash with emancipation, or a symbol of a backlash in the history of the feminist movement' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 60). Some critics of post-feminism have reported a narrow and exclusionary membership 'in terms of class, age, race and (to some extent) sexuality, whereby the ideal postfeminist subject is seen to be a white, middle-class, heterosexual girl' (Genz: 2009, 8), which is almost identical to claims of chick lit's similarly narrow depictions of women. Additionally, the ideal post-feminist woman has also been 'characterised as feminine, intelligent and career-directed, whilst also successful in love and domestic spheres' (Isbister: 2009, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/isbister.html>), which has sparked worries about the perceived post-feminist insistence that women can now "have it all", as some people feel that such an insistence puts immense pressure on women who strive to perfect every area of their lives, resulting in 'disappointment following the recognition that "having it all" is a demanding and complex undertaking' (Genz: 2010, 101). Keyes has stated that contemporary women do not have it all, insisting that we are 'too busy doing it all, to have it all' (Keyes: 2005, 150), before arguing that, in the pursuit to have it all, contemporary feminism seems to be an exhausting movement:

But most of us haven't the energy to be active feminists: we're knackered, holding down demanding jobs, getting our roots done, fighting low-level depression, trying to do Pilates, doing school runs if we have children or agonizing about when the best time to have a baby would be, if we haven't. (Keyes: 2005, 150)

Post-feminism is therefore seen as affirming the potential of "having it all", while at the same time stressing the struggles and stresses that occur while seeking "it all". Keyes recognises these struggles in a number of her novels, from protagonists who reflect how life, in general, is 'hard for the modern woman' (Keyes: 2007, 228), to others who describe in more detail the sheer extent of the stresses in many women's lives as they struggle to "have it all", as in the following extract from *Rachel's Holiday*:

'I'm fine,' I said slowly. 'I'm perfectly happy except for some things in my life that need to be changed...'

Like just about everything, the thought forcibly struck me. My love-life, my career, my weight, my finances, my face, my body, my height, my teeth. My past. My present. My future. But other than that... (Keyes: 1998, 253)

Extracts such as this represent how chick lit is effective in openly portraying women's struggles in twenty-first century society. In doing so, chick lit may be said to create 'a level of realism that many middle-class western women readers may recognize as their own: trying and failing to achieve the dream of having a career, amazing friends, Mr. Right, familial and financial success – and looking fabulous while doing so' (Isbister: 2009, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/isbister.html>), once again stressing the problematic nature of attempting to "have it all".

As Whelehan describes, some theorists also suggest that women 'no longer need to be liberated from the shackles of patriarchy because they have already "arrived"' at equality' (Whelehan: 2000, 3), though others, such as Natasha Walter, are quick to point out that this taken-for-granted status of feminism is both a strength, in that we are now in a position to enjoy the benefits of what earlier feminism gained for us, but also very much a weakness. As Walter fears, we are often now 'in danger of forgetting all the unfinished business that feminism can help us to solve, and it means that our sense of outrage and injustice about the continuing oppression of women can feel like old hat' (Walter: 1999, 43), resulting in feminist issues often being neglected for fear of accusations of needlessly "complaining". In describing post-feminism from a negative point of view, some theorists have noted how 'modern feminism has reinterpreted equal rights as equal wrongs, with men and women having to lead identical lives even if this includes violence or irresponsible behaviour we would more normally associate with men' (Levenson: 2009, 96). In her study of how many young women are embracing *Playboy*, soft porn and other areas of what she terms "raunch culture", Ariel Levy criticises how post-feminist seems to mean 'resurrecting every stereotype of family sexuality that feminism endeavoured to banish' (Levy: 2005, 4). By

defining Female Chauvinist Pigs as 'women who make sex objects of other women and of ourselves' (Levy: 2005, 4), Levy protests that, in the post-feminist era, it is no longer men who are repressing women, but women themselves:

But just because we are post doesn't automatically mean we are feminists. There is a widespread assumption that simply because my generation of women has the good fortune to live in a world touched by the feminist movement, that means everything we do is magically imbued with its agenda. It doesn't work that way. [...] It is worth asking ourselves if this bawdy world of boobs and gams we have resurrected reflects how far we've come, or how far we have left to go. (Levy: 2005, 5)

Levy asks why post-feminism, from this perspective, is considered to be 'the "new feminism" and not what it looks like: the old objectification?' (Levy: 2005, 81). In *Overloaded* (2000), Whelehan discusses the emergence of the "ladette", the British equivalent of Levy's "female chauvinist pigs". The ladette, Whelehan explains, 'offers the most shallow model of gender equality; it suggests that women could or should adopt the most anti-social and pointless of "male" behaviour as a sign of empowerment' (Whelehan: 2000, 9). If we are to accept the ladettes and the female chauvinist pigs as the representatives of post-feminism, 'the future for feminism and female empowerment looks bleak' (Whelehan: 2000, 9).

In discussing her early knowledge of feminism, Keyes reflects on how she had once thought, like many women, that 'all the hard work had been done and that now everyone was lovely and equal' but that the last thing she 'wanted was to be called a feminist' (Keyes: 2005, 148). She then admits that it took 'a mortifyingly long time for it to dawn on me that actually all the hard work had *not* been done and that now everyone was *not* lovely and equal' (Keyes: 2005, 149). Such a realisation has resulted in more positive examinations of the positive potential for post-feminism, and of how it can continue the work of earlier feminist strands. This realisation emerged for Keyes around the same time as the term "post-feminism", a term that she once, like many of us, found hard to define, but which now seems to have taken on more definite contexts as the inequalities in society become increasingly apparent. As Keyes recalls:

In the meantime a new word had been invented for women like me – ‘post-feminists’. I wasn’t really sure what it meant but when I looked around I saw that we went to the gym a lot, we bought plenty of shoes and most of us still had crappy, badly paid jobs – but apparently it was our fault now, not the system’s.

Not true, of course: the glass ceiling really exists. And as well as equality in the workplace, we’re still waiting for affordable childcare, recognition of the value of work done by home-makers, humane treatment by the courts of rape victims (why are so many judges such senile old misogynists?), a focus on domestic violence... the list goes on. (Keyes: 2005, 149-150)

Nowadays, claims that post-feminism signals that feminism is no longer relevant to women’s lives need not be viewed as entirely negative, but rather as an acknowledgement that society, and women’s place in it, has changed and so feminism must also update itself accordingly. Theorists such as Natasha Walter are critical of a society which encourages women to believe that ‘anything feminist is irrelevant to the needs of ordinary women, and belongs to some tiny, ghettoised, loony-lefty group’ (Walter: 1999, 53). Such theorists have recognised that there are many issues in contemporary society which prove that women still suffer discrimination – that any talk of women’s power and equality is really about ‘potential rather than reality’ (Walter: 1999, 3), and that post-feminism is a movement which is in a position to address these issues, and, therefore, as having ‘the potential to re-engage feminist discussions rather than shutting them down’ (Isbister: 2009, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/isbister.html>).

In one recent feminist text, *The Noughtie Girl’s Guide to Feminism*, Ellie Levenson protests that feminism is still an issue in the twenty-first century because, in so many ways, ‘there is some form of inequality caused by being a woman, whether it is walking down the street alone at night or the bill being presented to the man in a restaurant’ (Levenson: 2009, xiii). She reminds those who believe that feminist issues are now in the past that, despite all the progress feminism has made so far, ‘we’re not there yet. We’re campaigning to be equal, not less unequal’ (Levenson: 2009, xv). This view echoes the words of earlier theorists, such as Natasha Walter in *The New Feminism* (1999), who asserts that, rather than feminism being irrelevant for contemporary women, instead it is ‘still here, right at the centre of these new

lives. Because beside women's freedom lies another truth: the truth of their continuing inequality' (Walter: 1999, 3). Such writers seem to be suggesting that feminism has changed, to the extent that this 'new feminism looks and sounds very different from feminism at any other time in history' (Walter: 1999, 170). Described as such, post-feminism may instead be viewed more positively as 'the continuation of the feminist agenda within the academy and adapted to new times: the contemporary version of the traditional women's movement' (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>). Thanks to the efforts and successes of earlier feminist movements, feminism has now become so inherent in many women's minds and mentalities – a kind of 'common sense' attitude (Genz: 2009, 167) – that it is now an almost automatic response to gender injustice; it has 'once again become as much a culture as a cause' (Siegel: 1997, 63). The contemporary feminist, Walter asserts, is 'a confident creature, who both embraces and exceeds old notions of femininity. She may be feminine in her dress, or feminine in her desire for marriage and children, but she is feminist in her commitment to equality' (Walter: 1999, 184), supporting the notion that, in contemporary versions of feminism, some women may 'resist being labelled (or labelling themselves) as feminists, but they still endorse feminist objectives of gender equity' (Hall & Salupo Rodriguez: 2003, 883). Being a feminist is, effectively, more about beliefs and attitudes than whether someone subscribes to an overtly feminist agenda; as Keyes feels, 'as long as you believe you're entitled to the same rights as everyone else (i.e. men) you're a feminist. See, that's not so bad, is it?' (Keyes: 2005, 150).

Walter reflects how even those women who are reluctant to identify as feminists are often shown to 'act exactly like feminists, to further the cause of inequality either in everyday life or in organisations and protests' (Walter: 1999, 35). In contemporary society, as suggested above, feminism has 'become part of the mainstream and common sense of today's consumer culture to the extent that, at times, those ideas are expressed in a form that does not

necessarily correspond with “traditional” feminist methods and critiques’ (Genz: 2009, 36). This thesis would suggest that one such form can include chick lit. That post-feminism does not, unlike the third wave, appear to be ‘motivated by a desire for continuity and a need to prove its feminist credentials’ (Genz: 2009, 162) does not necessarily mean that post-feminism is ‘apolitical and anti-feminist’ (Genz: 2009, 162), as has been suggested, but rather that post-feminism is merely addressing feminist issues in a different way. This is important in terms of bringing any credibility to feminist analyses of chick lit and other forms of popular culture. When we consider how post-feminism’s ‘rejection of theoretical language ensures that it remains widely accessible’ (Gamble: 1998, 44), this provides a direct link with suggestions that chick lit’s sheer accessibility means that it has the potential to bring aspects of feminism to a wider audience than has otherwise been possible. Theorists such as Walter seem to share Keyes’ view that being a feminist is not about wearing a particular label, but about beliefs and behaviour:

Alongside this swell of campaigning, there are women who are not necessarily conscious activists, but who seek full respect as human beings and try to live their private and public lives without being pressed into one mould by the sexism around them. When these women make free choices – whether those are choices about what magazines or books they are going to read, what toys they are going to buy for their children or what behaviour they are going to challenge at work – they too have the potential to change the status quo. (Walter: 2010, 237)

Taking such statements into consideration, some theorists would argue that post-feminism is not in any sense a form of anti-feminism; instead post-feminism may be thought to consist of ‘an often unconscious internalization of certain basic feminist goals, with an accompanying depoliticization and individualization of them’ (Walters: 1995, 137). Some advocates of post-feminism applaud how it discards previous ‘notions that feminism is necessarily anti-feminine and anti-popular and that femininity is always sexist and oppressive’, and instead insists that ‘feminist and feminine characteristics can be blended in a new, improved mix’ (Genz: 2009, 77). In a positive sense, Levenson refers to this as “pick’n’mix” feminism, ‘where you take the parts of feminism you fancy from each thinker or movement. This

pick'n'mix idea is ideal for noughtie girls [i.e. women in the twenty-first century]. We choose the bits of feminism we feel comfortable with and reject other bits' (Levenson: 2009, 209). This form of feminism clearly echoes Whelehan's notion of the 'DIY feminism that has become the trademark of the third wave' (Whelehan: 2007, xviii-xix), and both appear related to the notion of "identity politics", which Natasha Walter describes as 'the idea that your political ideas arise directly out of your own experiences, and that as your identity differs from another woman, so will your feminism' (Walter: 1999, 63-64). One could see this as a continuation of Hélène Cixous' claim that there is 'no general women, no one typical woman' (Cixous: 2000, 161), which serves to highlight contemporary feminism's translation of 'feminist social goals and political ideas into matters of individual choice or lifestyle' (Genz: 2009, 36-37). In terms of post-feminism, then, the 'implicit assumption is that feminism no longer needs to be enforced politically as it is now up to individual women and their personal choices to reinforce those fundamental societal changes' (Genz: 2009, 14). In this sense, contemporary feminism may be seen as focusing more on the individual woman's own needs and desires – a 'return to the I' (Genz: 2010, 101) – rather than focusing on women as a group with similar situations and goals.

While this apparent focus of post-feminist film and writing on the personal sphere has been criticised by some for failing to 'relate the process of confession to a wider context of female discrimination and social inequality' (Genz: 2010, 101), this chapter aims to explore how chick lit, despite its focus on individual protagonists' lives, also examines wider social problems, such as sexual harassment in the workplace. I would argue that it is an enactment of the 'return to the I' of which Genz speaks, and that it enunciates this tenet of post-feminism through the medium of popular culture. Walter further outlines this highlighting of the individual in contemporary feminism in the following extract:

The new feminism can look for solidarity without putting pressure on women to dress in the same way or speak the same language or dream the same dreams. There are many shades of

feminism, a whole spectrum of ideas alongside a simple commitment. The commitment is straightforward: equal rights and opportunities for women. (Walter: 1999, 76-77)

By defining contemporary feminism in this way, theorists such as Whelehan, Walter and Levenson are cleverly showing how feminism can be accessible to all, by allowing women the *choice* to follow their own path, which was, after all, one of the basic aims of feminism as a theoretical practice in the first place.

Post-feminism is also thought by some to legitimize 'a conservative backlash within feminist thought [...] which announces a return to the sanctity of the "private", and emphasis upon the family and childcare' (Whelehan: 1995, 241). In *Material Girls* (1995), Suzanna Danuta Walters insists that the 'major postfeminist paradigm has precisely been this work/family duality, which condemns feminism for helping to create the double-day/second-shift syndrome, yet completely overlooks a more radical critique of either work or family' (Walters: 1995, 122). Defined in this way, post-feminism appears to create 'an image of a movement both victorious (the myth that we have achieved equality) and failed (look what feminism got you: double duty, burnout, and the explosion of your biological clock)' (Walters: 1995, 139-140). It is worth noting that this is one of the few instances where it is feminists, rather than men, who have 'been positioned as the cultural oppressors of "normal" women' (Whelehan: 2000, 4). Levenson's text, however, presents a glimmer of hope for contemporary feminism:

Hopefully one of the good things that will come out of being a young feminist in the noughties will be that we have identities separate to that of our partners or our children and that the way we view ourselves is far less centred on beauty than in the past. (Levenson: 2009, 22)

In *The New Feminism*, Natasha Walter asserts that feminism is by no means over, but is instead a part of the everyday life and attitudes of women all over the world. Post-feminism, in this sense, should not be viewed as 'the (illegitimate) offspring of – or even a substitute for – feminism', but instead as a concept which is 'addressing the paradoxes of a late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century setting in which feminist concerns have entered the

mainstream and are articulated in politically contradictory ways' (Genz: 2009, 6-7). It has been suggested that, if feminism as a movement has to evolve in order to remain relevant to contemporary women's changing lives, so too must the format in which feminism is presented. This movement of feminism into the popular realm, and an examination of how feminism appears in popular culture, may prove beneficial in order to make feminism as accessible, and as relevant, as possible:

If there are to be further productive changes in the way feminism is perceived and enacted in public areas, it is crucial for feminist scholars to continue to research popular postfeminism. Importantly, exploring representations of popular postfeminism opens up avenues for finding out what women outside of the realms of academic feminism, those for whom it seems popular postfeminism is an active pleasure, are experiencing, thinking about and hoping for in their lives. (Isbister: 2009, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/isbister.html>)

It has been said that 'the intersection of "feminism" and "popular culture" has never been anything other than troubled' (Shiach: 1991, 333), and, in terms of contemporary literature at least, one form of this intersection can be seen in chick lit. There have been many people who have been quick to dismiss the idea that a genre such as chick lit can effectively discuss feminist issues, and, indeed, some texts 'can undeniably be considered conservative, retrogressive and even anti-feminist' (Genz: 2009, 9). Such views have meant that the potential for popular texts to be political and innovative, as well as entertaining, has often been ignored, as Whelehan suggests:

The problem with many early responses to these texts was the generally casual dismissal of the 'popular' as not being worthy of closer scrutiny. Therefore the possibility that there might be any radical potential in writing genre to communicate politics is never really considered, so strong is the assumption that commercially viable fiction is incapable of carrying within it weightier themes. This is disappointing, given the commitment to make feminism as accessible as possible in the political domain. (Whelehan: 2005, 96-7)

Perhaps inspired by such viewpoints, Modleski refers to feminist film critic Claire Johnston who 'argued for a strategy combining both the notion of film as a political tool and film as entertainment' (Modleski: 2008, 96), which is what this thesis is suggesting in terms of chick lit and other forms of popular culture. As such, while popular feminist writers have often

criticised the work of academic feminists for being inaccessible, and while academic feminists have often neglected to take the work of popular feminists seriously, some theorists have rightly recognised that 'those of us currently writing and coming of age as feminists inside and outside the academy can no longer afford to remain on different sides of the fence' (Siegel: 1997, 69), a stance which has encouraged the study of the feminist potential of genres such as chick lit. Walter recognises that contemporary feminism works from inside societal structures, 'throwing up feminist breakthroughs in different and diverse places – the Labour Party, *Vogue* magazine, Sara Thornton's appeal hearing, one woman's home, another's place of work, a conversation overheard on a bus or the lyrics of a pop song' (Walter: 1999, 33). Considering this chapter's examination of the feminist dimensions of Marian Keyes' work, Walter's statement of how feminism can now be located in all areas of society seems all the more relevant; after all, if feminism can be located in *Vogue* or a pop song, then surely we can find it in abundance in the pages of a woman-centred novel. Additionally, in referring to a 1991 reader-response survey carried out by the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain, Walter discovered how those respondents who referred to themselves as feminists 'were more likely to be under than over 35' (Walter: 1999, 35). As chick lit, in its original format, is often marketed to those under and around the age of 35, it again provides an encouraging viewpoint from which to examine the feminist potential of the genre. Chick lit emerged amidst the 1990s' "Girl Power" sub-strand of post-feminism, often connected to the pop group, Spice Girls, and which 'combines female independence and individualism with a confident display of femininity/sexuality' (Genz: 2009, 77). "Girl Power" feminism is often seen to incorporate 'an emphasis on feminine fun and female friendship with a celebration of (mostly pink-coloured) commodities and the creation of a market demographic of "Girllies" and "chicks"' (Genz: 2009, 79-80). All of these aspects have also been attributed to chick lit, although often in a largely negative sense. Nevertheless,

in her essay, Siegel discusses the need for academic scholars to write more publicly accessible texts, stating that, 'when academics do not popularize academic work, others are more than willing to popularize it for us' (Siegel: 1997, 69). This chapter will look at how some chick lit authors – in this case, Keyes – may also have recognised this need, and are now using the genre to make feminism a more accessible discourse.

Relationships and the biological clock

Chick lit, as we have already seen, is undoubtedly often centred on a young woman's search for the perfect relationship. However, this has often resulted in some chick lit heroines 'wrestling with a nascent feminist consciousness set against their quest for The One' (Whelehan: 2005, 5). This may largely be because of the common misconception that feminism is 'a movement of women who are personally hostile and vindictive towards men' (Walter: 1999, 144), and thus, many women feel that to be a feminist and to like men are two conflicting attitudes. Walter asserts that, while feminism's apparent hostility towards men may have had the effect of strengthening the movement and bringing women together in the first place, it also had the damaging effect of alienating those women who feel that they enjoy men's company too much to qualify as a bona fide feminist, as well as the men who wanted to support the women's movement. Walter fears that unnecessarily concentrating on hostility towards men has had the result of making 'many people forget that feminism is simply an argument for sexual equality, and that equality is now desired by most men as well as almost all women' (Walter: 1999, 149).

Keyes addresses this misperception of feminism in her work. New mother Claire, in *Watermelon* (1995), feels this confusion all too strongly. She reveals how being married and having a family is what she has always craved, despite an underlying feeling that "feminism" would disapprove of her weakness for men and relationship stability:

I always wanted to be boring and settled down with a man, but because that was considered to be the most insulting thing you can say about someone, that is that all she wants is to be settled down with a man, I'd done my level best to hide it. Few people knew my shameful secret. (Keyes: 2003b, 298)

Claire, is expressing her choice here, and is almost confessing this 'shameful secret' as she sees it as a choice which is not really sanctioned by feminist ideology. Similar embarrassment at wanting a man is displayed in novels such as *Last Chance Saloon* as Tara, after revealing that she hates not having a man in her life, quickly adds that it is not something she is 'proud of' (Keyes: 1999, 322), again suggesting that some women feel that a relationship is something particularly anti-feminist, and so they should not admit to the desire for one. In Claire's case, her 'shameful secret' is something which she decides she has to bury, and her attitude about wanting and needing a man in her life is something that she resolves to change. Part of this resolution involves her decision to ensure that her daughter is aware that she does not need a man in *her* life:

I handed Kate over to Dad and he held her expertly. Immediately Kate stopped crying. She lay placidly in his arms, clenching and unclenching her little starfish hands.

Just like her mother, I thought sadly – putty in men's hands.

I really would have to nip this in the bud with Kate. Get some self-respect, girl! You don't need a man for your happiness! Every other mother would be reading their little girl stories about engines that could talk, and wolves that meet their comeuppance, I would read my child feminist diatribes instead, I decided.

Out with *The Little Mermaid* and in with *The Female Eunuch*. (Keyes: 2003b, 61-62)

And yet, despite Claire's best intentions and her guilt and shame at her desire to be in a relationship, she cannot deny what she really wants. The following extract demonstrates how, even when a woman protests that she craves independence, 'she none the less makes a place in her life for man, for love. She is likely to fear that if she devotes herself completely to some undertaking, she will miss her womanly destiny [of being a wife and mother]' (de Beauvoir: 1997, 391):

Loath as I am to admit it, I felt less of a human being without my husband and his fat salary.

I hated myself for being so insecure and so dependent. I should have been a strong, sassy, independent, nineties woman. The type of woman who has strong views and who goes to the pictures on her own and who cares about the environment and can change a fuse and goes for aromatherapy and has a herb garden and can speak fluent Italian and has a session in

a flotation tank once a week and doesn't need a man to shore up her fragile sense of self-esteem.

But the fact is I wasn't. [...]

I was perfectly happy to be a home-maker while husband went out to earn the loot.

(Keyes: 2003b, 200)

When Claire later assures readers that she does intend to change her views about marriage and relationships (Keyes: 2003b, 240), we realise how much the inaccurate perception of feminism as being about "man-hating" still exists in many minds. The contradiction between what is seen as ideological feminism, and the lived realities of women's lives, is certainly developed in Keyes' writing. Claire is probing her own situated position within the gender-norms of society and doing so in a genre which would have a wide popular readership. The confusion registered by these characters as to the 'correct' mode of response to relationships and equality is part of a debate which I outlined in the opening section of this chapter. It is in a different register, but the issues being teased out, between the demands of feminist ideology and issues of equality, and the practical lived emotional and somatic lives of women, are similar. While this may exemplify Shiach's notion of the connection between feminism and popular culture as 'troubled', I would argue that it also allows for a democratisation and popularisation of the issues which are at the core of women's experience of the multiple demands of life in the private and public sphere in the noughties.

Many of Keyes' novels also portray women who remain in relationships even though they are no longer happy or fulfilled by them, despite the fact that, as Germaine Greer has suggested, remaining in an unhappy relationship has the potential to be more emotionally damaging than separating from a partner. Greer states that it is society which 'has created the myth of the *broken home* which is the source of so many ills, and yet the unbroken home which ought to have broken is an even greater source of tension' (Greer: 2006, 265). One common reason for this situation is that, although there appear to be no guarantees that a marriage or relationship will remain happy and fulfilling, many people – women in particular – continue to strive for "true love" and remaining in a bad relationship is often viewed as

preferable to being alone. This desire to remain in a relationship, no matter how damaging or unhappy the relationship is, could be related to the notion of security, and 'it is assumed that women especially need to feel secure, reassured of love and buttressed by the comforts of home' (Greer: 2006, 271). Tania Modleski feels that chick lit's representations of women remaining in relationships for the sake of being in one may not necessarily be as anti-feminist as we are often led to believe, but that the novels may instead be portraying more realistic accounts of relationships: that they may be descriptive as opposed to prescriptive. Chick lit, Modleski states, places great emphasis 'on the fact that there is no such person as Mr. Right [... and] the basic point of some (by no means all) of these novels is about the necessity of "settling" – not that such a term is likely to be used' (Modleski: 2008, xxiv).

More recently, as mentioned in the previous chapter, much chick lit, and women's popular culture in general, has focused more on the notion of the "biological clock", and on women's feelings that time is running out for them in terms of getting married and having children, which has often resulted in depictions of women in unhappy or damaging relationships, just for the sake of being in one. Novels such as *Last Chance Saloon* (the title itself is indicative of this ongoing trope), contain characters who are trapped in relationships where they are treated poorly, but they are afraid to be alone, for fear that they are getting "too old" to start a new relationship. As Tara fears:

I'm too old to start again, she often thought, gripped with nauseating panic when she woke in the middle of the night. I haven't got *time*. This one has got to work. (Keyes: 1999, 36)

As well as some women's confusion regarding their seemingly anti-feminist desire to be in a relationship, similar confusion is often felt regarding their right to decide whether to have children, an issue which has been much-discussed in feminist theory. Contemporary feminism has protested that whether to have children or not should be a choice and not an expectation, that for 'some people children are our whole reason for being here, or if not the

reason then certainly the answer to a fulfilling life. For others, children are something to be avoided, the easiest way to ruin a nice and ordered existence' (Levenson: 2009, 169).

Keyes' novels portray a range of views about motherhood, from women who admittedly love their role as mother, such as Clodagh in *Sushi For Beginners*, who admits that, although being a mother may not always be easy, 'at times like this she wouldn't change her life for the anything' (Keyes: 2007, 81), to women who confess to being 'terrified by the thought of having a baby', who spend 'many happy hours perplexed by the notion of natural childbirth' (Keyes: 2002, 172). However, Keyes also portrays women who feel shame at the thought of anyone knowing that they do not feel ready to become a mother – and perhaps never will. One protagonist seems to feel that, despite what many women believe feminism has taught them about the right to choose motherhood (or not), she believes that the reality is that society expects women to fall into the role of motherhood, and that a refusal of this role means a woman will not be "doing" her gender "properly":

I didn't want children. And of all the shameful things a woman could admit to – breast enhancement, sex with her boyfriend's father – this was the most taboo. (Keyes: 2008, 141-142)

Similar feelings are portrayed in *This Charming Man* as one of the protagonists, Grace Gildee, admits that, despite feeling that she *should* want children, she has never been able to convince herself strongly enough of this desire:

Oddly – or maybe not, I didn't know – I had heartfelt sympathy for women who couldn't get pregnant, because I knew what it was like to be unable to control my own body. I wanted *to want* to get pregnant but never got it. (Keyes: 2008, 142)

As a journalist, Grace recalls how she tried to express such views in her columns, perhaps in the hope that some women readers would be able to identify with such feelings, but instead all she found was that readers poured scorn on her for her apparently deviant and abnormal views. She explains how she 'tried to write columns crusading for women like me, but judgement always rained down like bricks and I got tons of letters telling me I was "unnatural", I was "a freak", I was "feminism gone mad"' (Keyes: 2008, 143). Extracts such

as these help to reaffirm many women's fears that 'they will be judged harshly if they do not create a good home for their families' (Walter: 2010, 222), or, indeed, if they feel that they do not want a family in the first place. However, Walter insists that to 'be honest about how mothering does not necessarily come naturally to all women is not to downgrade the bonds of family life and the happiness they bring' (Walter: 2010, 222), but is instead disproving the myth that motherhood, and the desire for it, should come naturally to all women. Rather, such extracts help to portray that motherhood aspirations are not necessarily inherent in all women, just because of their gender, but instead are unique to each person.

In showing women as each having individual desires, and not as all wanting the same things in life, in depicting women's individuality, as well as their honest feelings on a variety of topics which women would often feel embarrassed to voice in public, including motherhood, Keyes' novels are demonstrating, not only that all women have different views on marriage and motherhood, but also they are also helping women to understand that there is nothing *wrong* with them if they do not want the same things as any other women, and that they are not alone in these feelings. In doing so, such novels highlight both the third wave's and post-feminism's return to individuality among women, a stance which casts doubt on 'a singular and uniform conception of the feminist movement, emphasising instead the multiple varied ways of being "feminist" and understanding "feminism"'. Doing so, it is hoped, would allow society to finally embrace the 'multiple subject positions of the postfeminist woman – a spectrum of identity that does not deny conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable "selves"' (Genz: 2009, 153), in this case by embracing 'new feminism's acknowledgement that heterosexual relationships and feminism are by no means mutually exclusive' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 172). In this sense, post-feminism can be considered as a movement of feminist pluralisation and diversification, making room in its ranks for a more diverse notion of "we" (Genz: 2009, 28), as it 'rejects the notion of a universal and singular conception of "Woman"

and instead foregrounds the individual differences between women' (Genz: 2009, 107). Additionally, Walter reminds us that, when any woman freely admits that she craves marriage and motherhood, this is not, as some once thought, an anti-feminist viewpoint, but rather a positive and important step forward in contemporary feminism, which has dissolved the distinction between "feminist" and "feminine" (Lazar: 2009, 381). Walter feels that, for too long, many women have, perhaps inaccurately, felt that they need to turn their back on the domestic sphere in order to fulfil the feminist role, but that, instead, feminists, in any form, 'should remind us of the joy that domestic life can bring to men as well as women' (Walter: 1999, 235). If popular feminism can, as mentioned earlier, incorporate popular culture texts, including chick lit, then the Keyes protagonists who admit a desire for domestic life are, in fact, helping to remind us of the joy that Walter speaks about, as well as opening 'the feminist realm for the articulation of "other" voices and identities' (Genz: 2009, 28).

Sex and the single girl

Another reason that so many women remain in unhappy relationships could be due to the age-old stigma that has been associated with single women – another testimony to the conflict between the theory of feminism and the practice of real-life. Yet the image of the single woman, particularly the single career woman, has become a common trope associated with chick lit and similar film and television products, to the extent that the singleton, as it has become known, has become a recognisable feature of contemporary society. The single women of chick lit have even become a type of cliché, as one protagonist explains in an extract that could sum up the storyline of many typical chick lit novels:

[Tara] trudged on through her life. Sometimes she'd catch a glimpse of herself. A thirty-something woman with a good job – even if she was as poor as a church mouse it wasn't the fault of her job – who worked hard, went to the gym daily, bought nice clothes, hadn't a hint of a man on the horizon, and who filled in the gaps with good friends and white wine. She felt like a cliché and a failure. (Keyes: 1999, 503-504)

Nevertheless, despite the volume of singletons appearing in chick lit, Whelehan explains that, for many of these fictional heroines, they appear to view the prospect of single life 'with utter dread' (Whelehan: 2005, 82). Tara, in *Last Chance Saloon*, confirms this when she expresses her fear 'that boyfriendless women in their thirties became eccentric, more and more so as they continued further into their single state' (Keyes: 1999, 31), while another of Keyes' heroines, on considering the 'culture of the thirty-something single person', reflects on her perhaps irrational fears that 'a thirty-something woman had a better chance of being abducted by aliens (I think) than receiving a proposal of marriage' (Keyes: 2002, 56), which we can again relate to the notion of the ticking biological clock. Such extracts present the sometimes contradictory nature of the chick lit singleton who, while initially 'presented as independent working women enjoying financial and sexual freedom – and as such can be seen as more empowered and emancipated than their romantic forbears – they are also portrayed as neurotic and preoccupied with finding a mate' (Genz: 2009, 85). It is this very contradictoriness in chick lit heroines that make them appeal to many contemporary women 'who are unwilling to renounce their joint aspirations for job and romance, their feminist and feminine values' (Genz: 2009, 86). Chick lit, in this sense, helps to articulate contemporary women's search for a sense of "identity" among conflicting 'feminist notions of empowerment and agency as well as patriarchal ideas of feminine beauty and heterosexual coupledness' (Genz: 2009, 89).

Often young women look for a relationship, not because they feel that their lives are empty without one, but because of 'social censure and the fear of scrutiny by one's family' (Whelehan: 2005, 101). Novels such as *Last Chance Saloon* go a step further by showing women who feel even the staff of their local shops pity them for buying what they clearly perceive to be meals for the single person:

Eventually [Katherine] decided she'd better eat something but, as usual, she had nothing in. Listlessly she traipsed to the corner shop and uninterestedly picked up some things. But as she

went to pay for was drawn to look at the paltry items languishing in the bottom of her basket. A frozen lasagne. Serves one. A single apple. The smallest carton of milk in existence. How pathetic. What a massive advertisement that she was alone. How the checkout man would pity her. (Keyes: 1999, 203-204)

However, despite extracts such as this, for many of these modern heroines, they rightly feel that they have plenty of time to find their Mr Right. Perhaps they will settle down one day but they are currently in no hurry to do so. As Lydia, in *The Brightest Star in the Sky*, comments, while she is not necessarily opposed to the idea of marriage, or at least long-term relationships, she feels that she is currently too young to even consider such commitment, preferring to experience living her life first, a view shared by many women in the twenty-first century:

Lydia fully understood. If she was having to get married at the age of twenty-six, she'd be frantic with fear. She couldn't understand why Poppy was signing up for it. She was so young, there were so many years left in her life and she'd have to spend every single one of them with Bryan, who was nice enough but could Poppy sustain an interest in him for the next fifty years? The thought of having to do it herself made her insides go cold with terror. (Keyes: 2009, 191)

This changed perspective on the single state as a fashionable and glamorous lifestyle choice may have arose from the changing status of marriage, which, although once an ultimate ideal for most people, 'now came under serious questioning' (Walter: 2010, 85). As Walter points out, although women who did not marry were once marginalised and seen as a social problem, in contemporary society, it can be heard 'even in mainstream culture that women could be entirely fulfilled without marriage, and even that women who stayed in marriage had somehow compromised' (Walter: 2010, 85). From this perspective, chick lit developed as a genre which seemed to celebrate the single woman's life, albeit in a nuanced way. For some theorists, the chick lit singleton is seen as the embodiment of the utopian post-feminist woman who 'is unwilling to compromise on her job and relationship ambitions and, despite discouraging setbacks, perseveres in her attempt to realize her utopian project' (Genz: 2010, 108). The post-feminist woman's utopian project is of course, as mentioned earlier, 'her determination to "have it all"' (Genz: 2010, 114), and, in portraying heroines who juggle

relationships, career, family, friends, and appearance, the chick lit genre appears to be effectively portraying this contemporary struggle. Previously, the notion of “having it all” held somewhat negative connotations. The aim of having it all often suggested ‘walking a tightrope between professional success and personal failure, between feminist and feminine empowerment’ (Genz: 2010, 99). Now, rather than portraying the single career woman as ‘too feminist to be feminine’, and as being ‘bound to end up single, unloved, and fraught with neuroses’ (Genz: 2010, 104), the post-feminist singleton of much chick lit instead holds the arguably more positive position of being ‘unwilling to compromise on her joint desires for job and romance, her feminist and feminine values [...] simultaneously fulfilling her public and private ambitions’ (Genz: 2010, 99). As the examples from Keyes’ work show, the complications of the interaction of the demands of the body, the prescribed role in the private domestic sphere and the challenges of the public sphere are articulated in all their uncertainty by her characters.

I believe that it is also important to note, however, that, although these characters show little or no inclination to settle down just yet, this does not mean that they are childish air-heads who shy away from responsibility. On the contrary, many of these single women are depicted as capable and as exuding maturity; these novels often ‘refuse the ending which needs a man to wrap it up’ (Whelehan: 2005, 112). As an example of this, it is worth considering the earlier quotation regarding Claire Walsh from *Watermelon* who eventually accepts her single state and decides to get on with her life rather than waiting for a man to sweep her off her feet. After accepting that her marriage is over, Claire realises she has good things in her life that she can be thankful for – her daughter, her family and friends, her job – and decides that, whether she meets someone new or remains single, she will still be content with her lot (Keyes: 2003b, 565).

We often forget that feminism is just as relevant for single women as it is for women who are married and have children. If a single woman is viewed as 'not filling the roles historically regarded as women's most important roles – wife and mother – then feminism for her should be about ensuring she is not seen as a lesser person for this, either by other women or by men' (Levenson: 2009, 168). It is significant that Keyes portrays single women in a new and more positive light. They are resilient enough to cope with whatever life throws at them, and they remain positive at the end. What Keyes' single women show is that "happily ever after" does not necessarily have to equate to being "in a relationship"; chick lit 'jettisons the heterosexual hero to offer a more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals' (Ferriss: 2006, 3), helping to place chick lit as a socially aware genre. While issues of the body clock and the imperative to be in a relationship are factors in her work, Keyes also writes, as the above extract from *Watermelon* demonstrates, about the single life as a valid lived-experience for women, and not just some kind of extended period in a relationship shop-window, a perspective which has strong post-feminist overtones.

A study of modern relationships would not be complete without the topic of sex entering the equation. Historically, 'female sexuality has been masked and deformed [...] Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity' (Greer: 2006, 17). This notion of 'passivity' has long been linked to the prototype of the ideal woman, and, from it, evolved the double standard which said that sex 'was edifying for a man, immoral for a woman' (Levy: 2005, 59). Traditionally, women could only be categorized in two distinct ways – as angels or as monsters. The so-called "angelic" women were those who abided by this idea of passivity, and, without question, allowed themselves to be treated as objects by men. All others were "monsters" and, as such, had to be punished for refusing to conform to societal expectations.

Opinions differ regarding who is to blame for this ignorance and for this refusal to take account of female sexuality. Surprisingly, feminism itself has been blamed for the rejection of a female sexuality. It has been argued that, for all its good intentions, feminism's aim to stop women being objectified unfortunately seemed to mean that 'talking about sex in feminist terms meant talking about anything but the dread act itself; simply to address the "problem" of sex might risk reaffirming the status of women in Western society as primarily "sex objects", defined by lack of a penis/power' (Whelehan: 1995, 164-165). Additionally, a lot of feminist work has been criticised for primarily focusing 'on the "negative" side of sexuality at the expense of considering ways in which women may explore their own desires in the will for a utopian future for female sexuality' (Whelehan: 1995, 142). In this sense, feminism was often viewed as spoiling women's fun, particularly for contemporary women who are 'dissatisfied with perspectives which seem to tell them only what is wrong with female sexuality, rather than what is right, [and] may choose to dub feminists old prudes' (Whelehan: 2000, 30).

However, many chick lit novels 'directly respond to the limiting views of female sexuality' (Smith: 2008, 88), and much contemporary feminism suggests that women can 'enjoy sexuality on their own, freewheeling terms' (Walter: 1999, 114). Keyes also portrays how society is radically changing in terms of women's new-found sexual freedom. Nowadays, sex, for many women, is no longer 'the scary taboo, nor the uncomfortable duty, that it was for so many women in previous generation, but a reliable, freely chosen source of physical pleasure' (Walter: 2010, 92). Indeed, chick lit presents female sexual pleasure 'as an unquestionable element of a heterosexual relationship and skilled sexual partners are appreciated' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 131), while waiting until the wedding night has become such a rarity that women tend to wonder if something is drastically wrong if a man tries to be

a gentleman and does not expect them to sleep with him straight away. As Anna, in *Anybody Out There?*, recalls:

At this stage I'd seen Aidan about seven or eight times and not once had he tried to jump me. Every date we'd gone on, we'd had just one kiss. It had improved from quick and firm, to slower and more tender, but one kiss was as good as it got.

Had I wanted more? Yes. Was I curious about his restraint? Yes. But I kept it all under control and something had held me back from getting Jacqui in a headlock every time I came home from an unjumped-on night out and tearfully agonizing: What's his problem? Doesn't he fancy me? Is he gay? Christian? One of those True Love Waits gobshites? (Keyes: 2006, 108-109)

Undoubtedly, that women can now be sexually active and experienced without being condemned is something to be celebrated. However, while women may indeed have more sexual freedom nowadays, it is still not without its problems. A large part of this problem is that, now that women have been allowed more sexual freedom than ever before, it is now taken for granted that *every* woman wants wild and inventive sex, and that they are ready and willing to go to bed with whoever is convenient. Levy describes this situation best in saying:

Because we have determined that all empowered women must be overtly and publicly sexual, and because the only sign of sexuality we seem to be able to recognize is a direct allusion to red-light entertainment, we have laced the sleazy energy and aesthetic of a topless club or a *Penthouse* shoot throughout our entire culture [...] We skipped over the part where we just accept and respect that *some* women like to seem exhibitionist and lickerish, and decided instead that *everyone* who is sexually liberated ought to be imitating strippers and porn stars. (Levy: 2005, 26-27)

Levy states that sexuality is a complicated, fundamental part of what it is to be human, and she urges us to remember that 'different things are attractive to different people and sexual tastes run wide and wild' (Levy: 2005, 44), rather than adhering to the myth that 'sexiness needs to be something divorced from the everyday experience of being ourselves' (Levy: 2005, 44). The problem, as Levy and other like-minded theorists see it, is that we seem to have forgotten 'that there is a category of people, most people in fact, who actually quite like sex, and that it is possible to do so without being a sex fiend' (Levenson: 2009, 39). Far from wanting to partake in sexual gymnastics every night of the week, *Watermelon's* Claire Walsh could be speaking for many women when she makes this "shocking" revelation:

While we're on the subject of sexual shenanigans I've got a confession to make.

Wait for it.
Here it comes.
I enjoy the missionary position.
There! I've said it.
I'm made to feel so *ashamed* of myself for feeling that way.
As if I'm terribly boring and repressed.
But I'm not. Honestly.
I'm not saying that it's the *only* position that I like.
But, really, I have no objection to it whatsoever. (Keyes: 2003b, 363)

It is interesting that Keyes chose the missionary position in this example, as it is the position often associated with women's passivity in sexual intercourse, the idea often being that the woman has no choice but to "lie back and think of England" (or, in this case, Ireland). However, when Claire reveals that she *prefers* this position, its cultural signification changes, as it is blatantly stated that this is Claire's *choice*; by expressing what she chooses, she therefore becomes active in the situation, again helping to equate chick lit with feminism's assertions for women to achieve progress by taking control of their own lives and voicing their concerns, aspirations, and desires. Doing so effectively presents how the women's movement has worked to allow women to speak out about their sexuality, which has 'allowed women to talk about physical realities and lay claim to their own desires and pleasure' and, importantly, to do so with an honesty that had rarely been seen before (Walter: 2010, 86). For Keyes, there is a qualitative difference in Claire's liking for the missionary position, and her adopting it as a free choice, and women of a previous generation who were forced to adopt this position which became a signifier of passivity and lack of choice and power.

As many women have realised, the problem is no longer about winning the right to sexual freedom. Because feminists spent so long fighting for women to have the same sexual rights as men, many women now feel a sense of hypocrisy when they would prefer to choose to say "no" to sexual advances. Walter explains that such feelings have long occurred, though in varying ways, as, while women once were expected to remain virginal until marriage, nowadays women who do not indulge in sexual relationships may now sometimes feel stigmatised. This would seem to suggest that, while women's lives may have changed, the

expectations placed on women to adhere to current trends of expressing sexuality has effectively stayed the same, to the extent that women still feel that the notion of *choice* has been forgotten. As Walter puts it:

I do not want to exaggerate the changes in our society by suggesting that all individuals' real lives fall in with the dominant cultural mood. Just as in Jane Austen's time there were women who had sex before marriage and lovers before marriage, so there are women now who hold themselves in readiness for their one true love and seek to remain eternally faithful to him. But just as in Austen's time the promiscuous woman was presented in the dominant culture as marginal and to be condemned, so now a girl who has decided to delay sexual activity until she finds a true emotional commitment can be pushed to the margins and silenced. (Walter: 2010, 87)

The title character of *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married* identifies with these feelings, as she says:

In theory, I knew that it was my right not to go to bed with anyone I didn't want to and to change my mind at any stage in the proceedings, but the reality was that I would be far too embarrassed to say no. (Keyes: 2003a, 187)

While the sexual revolution and the separation of intercourse from reproduction brought new freedom to women, it also, as extracts such as this show, 'brought benefits to men by releasing them from some responsibility for their sexual acts. Women soon realised that it was freedom only to say "yes", not to say "no"; they were "frigid" if they said no' (Viney: 1989, 61). In *The Female Eunuch*, Greer reminds us that feminism urged women to embrace the right to express their own sexuality; this, however, 'is not at all the same thing as the right to capitulate to male advances' (Greer: 2006, 10). Nevertheless, this has continued to be a problem as, even in Walter's 2010 text *Living Dolls*, she worries that 'any questioning on this hypersexual culture will only be seen as prudishness, since liberation has become so associated with overtly sexualised behaviour' (Walter: 2010, 82). In this knowledge, it seems that a possible aim of post-feminism should be to re-imagine the progress of the sexual revolution to remind women that displays of sexual behaviour are allowed but not compulsory. If we have merely traded repressed sexuality for almost mandatory over-

sexualised behaviour, then, as Walter rightly asserts, 'what we see when we look around us is not the equality we once sought; it is a stalled revolution' (Walter: 2010, 9).

It has been said that a 'chick lit novel without a few satisfying – or, alternatively, ridiculous – sex scenes is hard to find' (Wells: 2006, 50). One thing that chick lit does, and does well, is describe its sex scenes from the woman's perspective. Feminists have noted that 'in almost all literature that the sexual protagonist is the male' (Hayes: 1990, 117-118), and that, at no stage in romantic fiction, does the woman take the sexual initiative with a man' (Hayes: 1990, 132). Chick lit has reversed these claims by depicting the *female* as the sexual protagonist, and as portraying women who are happy to take the initiative. In this sense, Keyes may be echoing Walter's claim that contemporary society 'fields many sexual personae for women to admire, heroines that women themselves have constructed, and none of them are victims' (Walter: 1999, 114). As such, whether women remain virgins until their wedding night (though this is admittedly rare in much typical chick lit), or whether they indulge in multiple extra-marital sexual relationships, the women of chick lit are rarely, if ever, punished for their sexual behaviour, reflecting how society's own views of women's sexuality are gradually changing. Most notably, perhaps, since the end of the twentieth century, 'the distinction between a slut and an independent woman has broken down' (Walter: 1999, 123), although admittedly this distinction may be realised more slowly in some areas than in others. It is huge progress for feminist thought that chick lit has developed as a genre of fiction that shows women as seeking and deserving pleasure as much as men, a perspective that would have been unheard of until very recently. The problematics of attitudes to sex and relationships are part of the core post-feminist dilemma. What the theory, and Keyes' work, has been tracing is the paradox between having the freedom to live a single, independent life and, at the same time, acknowledging the personal and social desire to be part of a relationship, and all of the ensuing issues having to do with independence and

agency. I would argue that Keyes' writing, in parallel with post-feminist theory, acknowledges the aporia which this involves. Niall Lucy defines aporia as 'a Greek term denoting a logical contradiction', and the term is used by Derrida 'to refer to what he often calls the "blind spots" of any metaphysical argument' (Lucy: 2004, 1). To be happily single yet not be averse to a relationship, to be sexually liberated yet profess to liking the missionary position, to be unsure of the demands of situations is central to the postfeminist dilemma, and this has been summarised by Derrida:

You have to reconcile this demand for equality with the demand for singularity, with respect for the Other as singular, and that is an aporia. How can we, at the same time, take into account the equality of everyone, justice and equity, and nevertheless take into account and respect the heterogeneous singularity of everyone? (Derrida: 1997, 5)

This notion of 'both/and' is a fundamental feature of Derrida's thought or, better put, of his characteristic style' (Hillis Miller: 2007, 279), and I would argue it is also an aspect of post-feminist thought as well as being implied in the complex and nuanced position of some of Keyes' characters as they attempt to navigate the ideological realm of women in the contemporary culture. I would suggest that the positions adopted by Keyes' characters are a popular cultural enunciation of the same dilemmas and aporias that are being explored in post-feminist and deconstructive theories.

The post-feminist working world

In tracing the career options and possibilities available to women throughout history, we cannot help but once again stumble upon the association of women with the home. The place of women in the workplace has long been considered to be of secondary importance, 'not only to the work of men, but also to what was seen, until comparatively recently, as women's true vocation – domesticity' (Hayes: 2001, 190). Even when the working world opened to include women, it was still a common assumption throughout society that, for women, marriage was 'a most honourable career, freeing her from the need of any other participation

in the collective life' (de Beauvoir: 1997, 167). Until relatively recently, and perhaps to a point even today, it was the common assumption 'that "home-making" is something to which women naturally aspire' (Whelehan: 1995, 53). This direct association between women and the home even goes so far as to suggest that, for "normal" women – women who married and had children – maintaining the household was to be their proper destiny; indeed it became an identity in itself, to the exclusion of all others' (Whelehan: 1995, 7). This supposed *entrapment* of women in the potentially constraining and debilitating roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, was blamed, by much feminist theory, on 'the often-invisible force of patriarchy [which] dictated that a woman's natural place was in the home raising children and caring for her husband' (Eaton: 2000, <http://www.feminista.com/archives/v4n1/eaton.html>, par.12).

Women were encouraged to remain in the home by a number of outside forces. While the family became the main source of this pressure, this idea that women's "natural" place was in the home was further reinstated by images portrayed in various forms of media, including television, film, literature, and advertising. Media representations of the "happy housewife" promoted the patriarchal-approved ideal image of femininity (Thornham: 1998, 213), while the "backlash" elements of post-feminism appeared to tell women, not only that they could not really expect to "have it all", as had been promised to them, and that they must instead choose between career and home, but also tried to 'make the choice for them by promoting wedded life and domesticity as a full and fulfilled existence' (Genz: 2009, 55). Hollywood traditionally 'maintained its support of oppressive social roles for women' (Walters: 1995, 140-141). Along with other media forms, it told women 'to get back in the kitchen and obey her master,' and that any 'wayward behaviour' was deemed suitable for punishment by society (Walters: 1995, 140). Media images of happy housewives and domestic bliss became 'increasingly glamorized and correspondingly difficult to live up to.

Unless, that is, the role was adopted as a full-time occupation' (Whelehan: 1995, 7). Far from being the positive images they claimed to be, however, these stereotypical representations of women severely limited the options and possibilities available to them, and instead served only 'to mire women further in that [domestic] realm as the only one available to them' (Walters: 1995, 85). The Women's Movement recognised that many women were feeling dissatisfied and unfulfilled at their near-forced confinement to the home and 'confirmed that housework was drudgery' (Whelehan: 2005, 93). The movement then began its work of encouraging women 'to look critically at their own lives and expectations' (Joannou: 2000, 7), and to find a life for themselves outside of the home. This resulted in 'the radical rethinking of motherhood as the sole fulfilling role for the adult woman' (Walters: 1995, 120). Because of this, the vast 'majority of women no longer expected to marry young and to spend the rest of their lives as housewives with no paid employment' (Joannou: 2000, 7). While many contemporary feminists would not go so far as to suggest that women should deny their maternal instincts and give up child-bearing altogether (Natasha Walter refers to Ada Nield Chew and Shulamith Firestone as two early feminists who suggested that women do just this), they still often 'assume that the career woman is the only real feminist' (Walter: 1999, 230), though this has proven problematic as, again, it seems to limit women's choices and neglects to account for those women who do want children. Walter suggests that, rather than associating domesticity solely with the restrictive models of the angel in the house, if we 'revalue the domestic sphere, alongside working life, we can transform the organisation of work' (Walter: 1999, 232). Nevertheless, as many women have begun to seek and undertake work away from their home and family, the post-feminist working world is an important area of examination.

Of course, not every woman now works outside the home, but many do, and the world of work 'is no longer an alien mystery, as it was to women at the beginning of the [twentieth]

century' (Walter: 1999, 256). In fact, the world of work has expanded so much to include women, that the acceptance of women into the workforce is perhaps the most marked difference between the experience of women of different generations; Walter perhaps puts it best in saying, if 'our mother worked she was unusual, if our daughter does not, she will be extraordinary' (Walter: 1999, 208). Nevertheless, while it is now commonly accepted that women, as well as men, have the right to pursue a career or family, or both, it was not initially without its problems. Within the working world, men and women are often said 'to make up two castes; other things being equal, the former hold the better jobs, get higher wages, and have more opportunity for success than their competitors. In industry and politics men have a great many more positions and they monopolize the most important posts' (de Beauvoir: 1997, 20). This has largely occurred because of how 'traditional stereotypes encouraged people to believe that women will lack the authority and competence of men in certain areas' and so 'the pursuit of power is seen as peculiarly male' (Walter: 2010, 210). From a post-feminist perspective, there has been much focus on the:

Work/family duality, which condemns feminism for helping to create the double-day/second-shift syndrome, yet completely overlooks a more radical critique of either work or family. (Walters: 1995, 122)

For many women, an attempt to balance 'home and a highly pressurised working life is too difficult to sustain, in sharp contrast to the successful male, for whom marriage and family life is seen as a positive bonus in terms of both emotional and practical support' (Hill: 2003, 211). Thus, for all feminism's good intentions in attempting to open up a world of possibilities for women, it ironically came instead 'to be blamed for the perceived personal and social cost of women "having it all" [...] women can be encouraged to blame feminism for the increased burden of entering careers while maintaining the home' (Whelehan: 1995, 229), and it was understood that the notion of *choice* is not always a guarantee of happiness. For many people, feminism came to be portrayed as 'a movement both victorious (the myth

that we have achieved equality) and failed (look what feminism got you: double duty, burnout, and the explosion of your biological clock)' (Walters: 1995, 139-140), which serves to highlight the 'impossibility and undesirability of being Superwoman as, in the attempt to juggle job and family, they jeopardise their feminine appeal and sign up to an exhausting existence filled with pain and guilt' (Genz: 2009, 55-56). Once again we are in a post-feminist aporia where the desired objectives for women to have access to in the public sphere have many different consequences and where there are more issues to be confronted in the adequation between the public and private spheres.

Those women who did pursue a career, despite society's disapproval, also received criticism. Still largely outnumbered by the women who chose to remain in the home, career women were considered to be selfish, and they were seen as damaging to the "natural" order of women staying at home to raise a family while men go out to work. Regardless of whether a woman has a husband and children, or is single and seen to be focusing solely on her career, many working women have suffered condemnation, seen as 'a figure of evil and a neurotic psychopath [...] She is the epitome of Otherness and insanity, standing in direct antithesis to the virtuous housewife and threatening the traditional family unit' (Genz: 2010, 105). So, while it was perfectly acceptable, and usually expected, for men to go out to work and maintain their role as the family breadwinner, women's priorities had to lie with their home and family, or, 'at the least, be informed by a recognition of their "natural" obligations to their families' (Whelehan: 1995, 52). Women who consciously viewed their career as being of equal or more importance than raising a family were seen as a threat to societal norms; 'working women were vilified, made into monsters who destroyed their children and caused their husbands to run off with other women, and summarily punished for their deviant ways' (Walters: 1995, 138-139). As Whelehan explains further:

Women with careers would continue to be seen as oddities, and by the late 1980s they were often portrayed as selfishly putting their own needs before that of their family. There would

be no straightforward way for women to gain access to the top of their professions without the perception that their success had cost them dear in personal terms. (Whelehan: 2005, 141)

Such circumstances are explicitly referred to in novels such as *Sushi For Beginners*, in which one of the protagonists, Lisa, a highly ambitious woman who had for so long prioritised building a career for herself, reflects on whether her ambition had cost her too dearly at the expense of other areas of her life:

She'd never really considered what she was sacrificing as she'd rocket-launched herself away from her roots. The rewards had always seemed worth it. But sitting in Kathy's kitchen, she could see no evidence of the glamorous life she'd constructed for herself. Instead she was walloped by what she'd forfeited – friends, family, worst of all Oliver, and for nothing. (Keyes: 2007, 359)

Extracts such as this appear, at first, to be articulating the largely pessimistic view of single, career-oriented women as being 'abject and deficient, selfish and emotionally stunted, and ultimately regretful about neglecting their essential roles as wives and mothers' (Genz: 2009, 55). If we are considering chick lit as a genre that features characters and stories with which readers can identify, extracts such as this are worrying in that they may be construed as a type of warning to women to stay in the home, as too much of an interest in ambition and career may prove costly to one's personal life, thus reiterating earlier calls for women's "natural" affinity for domesticity. However, I would argue that what Keyes is doing here is emphasising a singular reaction to a situation, and voicing the problems and aporetic aspects of the experience of women in our culture. She is not saying that this is a paradigmatic reaction to the conflicting demands of the private and public spheres but, rather, that this is a single reaction.

Although many people may like to believe that women no longer face discrimination in the workplace, many women could not help but feel that they were unwanted or, perhaps worse, merely a novelty in a male-dominated environment, where men were frequently given preference for promotion and more senior positions, all factors which have worked to hold women back. In her non-fiction, Keyes reflects on the notion of women being akin to

“novelties” in the workplace, realising that, despite the fact that women now have access to the working world, it may be quite some time yet before full equality and acceptance is achieved:

Now and then [...] men will let a woman or two into the higher strata of the workplace. Just for the novelty value, of course. Sort of like getting a pet. And in case you're thinking I'm overstating things, just take a look at the business-class section on any plane: you'd break your neck on all the grey-suited testosterone swilling around in there.

But, the odd time, the very, very odd time it happens that women are more successful than their male partners; even to the point where men take over the role of stay-at-home wives and become househusbands.

And men don't like it; at least that's the perceived wisdom. The rule states that men are the hunter-gatherers and if their spouse has some spare time to help out with the berry picking, then well and good, but they must never forget who the *real* providers are. (Keyes: 2005, 138)

This is, in many ways, a fictive parallel of the points which we have been making and it illustrates that Keyes is acutely attuned to the aporetic nature of gender relations in contemporary culture. Related to the issue of wages, for instance, it has been estimated that ‘women get paid on average just eighty-three per cent of men's salaries; in effect we get paid until the end of October, then work the rest of the year for nothing’ (Levenson: 2009, xiv). A woman's sexuality was often cited as the reason for resisting women's rights to equal pay and equal opportunity: it was thought that child-bearing and rearing ‘were factors that would interfere with a woman's ability to hold down a job outside the home; her child-bearing and rearing would suffer if she worked outside the home’ (Viney: 1989, 57).

The working world ‘is often cited as the area where the separate spheres of men and women are most apparent. Certainly there were clear boundaries between what was considered to be male or female work’ (Hayes: 2001, 189). That is, many women have discovered that, ‘although all kinds of work are theoretically open to them, certain areas are much more open than others’ (Walter: 1999, 17), alluding to the idea that, while society now allows women to enter the workforce, it often maintains expectations of women's “place” within it. In *The Brightest Star in the Sky*, for instance, Lydia, who is a taxi driver, despairs

over the amount of times her customers question her about being a “female taxi driver”, as if, as a woman, the job must be somehow different for her than it is for her male colleagues:

‘What’s it like?’ the fare asked eagerly. ‘Being a female taxi driver?’

Her mouth tightened. What did he think it was like? It was exactly like being a male taxi driver, only with gobshites like him asking unanswerable questions at some ungodly hour in the morning. (Keyes: 2009, 44)

Her reaction here is a typical post-feminist one which questions the assumptions that provoked the questions in the first place. Feminists considered the implications resulting from the, perhaps limited, range of professions deemed *suitable* and *appropriate* for women. While men had the entire range of professions available to them, limited only by their own particular preferences, women were, for a long time, given the choice of entering only a select few careers, which were considered to be typically *feminine*:

Historically, the nursing profession has been regarded as suitable women’s work, requiring care and similar domestic skills which are the desired moral attributes of the ‘good woman’ in the home [...] Similarly, in lower and middle schools where most women teachers are to be found, the caring and socializing aspects of the work take preference over the educational role. (Whelehan: 1995, 50)

This trend, which saw women typically obtaining employment in specific, “domestic” roles, ‘follows the course of the role that she plays outside industry: she is almost always ancillary, a handmaid in the more important work of men’ (Greer: 2006, 132). This statement acquires further relevance when we consider how, even in occupations such as nursing, which are typically dominated by women, it tends to be the situation that ‘the important posts are held by men’ (Greer: 2006, 146). Placing women in traditionally “domestic” careers allows for society’s justification for women typically earning less than men, and reaping less financial benefits, as most of these domestic and caring tasks that are associated with women ‘are not valued in monetary terms’ (Hill: 2003, 206). We can once again turn to Whelehan, who explains:

Since domestic labour has no exchange value, women’s domestic skills gain low financial rewards when transferred to the labour market. The masculine ideal of a ‘woman’s place’ perpetuates and covertly justifies the unequal value ascribed to men’s and women’s work. (Whelehan: 1995, 50)

Feminism has criticised that men exploit, or at least *appropriate*, women's unpaid domestic work and benefit from it; and they also suggest that, while not taking responsibility for or performing much of the domestic work themselves, men 'thereby gain an advantage in the labour market, being "freer" than women when it comes to selling their labour power to employers' (Pilcher: 2004, 32). Additionally, it has been noted how the responsibility for this unpaid household work has remained with women, 'even when their men partners are themselves unemployed [...] or when both partners work full time' (Pilcher: 2004, 32). Further studies have suggested that, when both partners are in full-time employment, 'a solution increasingly favoured is to pay someone else (usually a woman) to do the housework' (Pilcher: 2004, 33), again asserting the notion that housework and similar duties are "women's domain".

Thus, until relatively recently, many women who chose to enter and remain in the working world could 'expect no promotion, no significant remuneration and no widening of her horizons, for the demands of the household must still be met' (Greer: 2006, 253). Women's ties to the home and family were so strongly believed that, as well as having to prove themselves to be more than equal to their male colleagues, even when a woman displays commitment to her job and arranges childcare facilities while she is in work, it has been noted that, ironically, such women may experience prejudice by their employers for apparently putting their career first, 'suffering a social censure of their "selfishness" in wanting anything for themselves' (Whelehan: 1995, 221). Related to this is the notion of the "family wage", which provides justification for retaining women's pay at a lower level by dictating that 'a man's earnings are presumed to be sufficient to support the entire household' whereas women's wages 'are deemed an additional "luxury" despite the fallacy of the breadwinning wage in today's society' (Whelehan: 1995, 50). The assumption that women earn less than men has become so inherent in society that, at worst, 'pity is evinced for men

whose wives are more successful than they are' (Greer: 2006, 140), and, at best, 'men who are willing to play second fiddle to their more successful female partners are still regarded as exciting novelties – and here's the tricky bit – by women as much as by men' (Keyes: 2005, 142). This situation was maintained in spite of the knowledge that many families did not fit this assumed model:

Single female parents are left close to the poverty line, or a woman's wage may be the sole or main support for a family with an unemployed or casually employed male partner. Yet the logic of the man's 'right' to a breadwinning wage still carries enough weight to be summoned by political parties and the labour movement alike. (Whelehan: 1995, 50-51)

In novels such as *The Other Side of the Story*, the "family breadwinner" is the woman, and, as a result, it is the woman who fears for her family's financial security and wishes her husband would make more attempts to provide for their family:

[Anton] made countless references to how hard I worked, to the fact that any money coming in was generated by men and that if it wasn't for me we would have nothing.

It frightened me because even though at that precise time, all of our income was being produced by me, I had not considered that situation to be a permanent one. In fact, I was poised constantly for Anton, with all his ideas and energy, to suddenly start generating enough money to keep us safe. I did not enjoy the feeling that everything – from our home to our food – depended on me. (Keyes: 2004, 473)

When this protagonist, Lily, later leaves her husband because he is unable to provide for their family, and when we consider how depictions such as this present the woman as being almost afraid of the prospect of being the sole earner, it seems appropriate to suggest that the image of the ideal family still largely presents the male as the breadwinner and the female in the role of carer/nurturer. But the thoughts of the character sketch out a new role for women, as she is now in the position of taking full financial responsibility for the family and has to take this into account in all of her other decisions, a role traditionally associated with a male breadwinner, which may be seen as another example of how Keyes tenuously expands the boundaries in terms of the representations of women in popular culture. There is, after all, no concept of a "working father"; a man's career is rarely shown to interfere with his role as husband and father. Work, in this sense, 'is man's identity if we think of the ways in which

the breadwinning role has developed historically, so unemployment or anxiety about employment threaten their sense of self' (Whelehan: 2000, 115). On the other hand, there are mothers and then there are "working mothers"; a mother is never seen to be unemployed, or is considered to not have to worry about unemployment, as she is automatically linked to her "natural" role as wife and mother. As we mark the increase in divorce rates, as well as evidence of more single-parent families, such as Claire in *Watermelon* and Jacqui in *Anybody Out There?*, it is 'clear that single mothers need an equal opportunity to be "breadwinners"' (Pilcher: 2004, 46).

Despite all of the problems women encountered in trying to find a place for themselves in the working world, they never stopped their efforts to achieve their rights. Still today, career aspirations and professional success are one of the main priorities for women all over the world. After all, many 'women still need a room of their own and the only way to find it may be outside their own homes' (Greer: 2006, 361). Keyes tackles the problems which many women still deal with regarding their working lives, where they are often still expected to 'conform to workplaces designed for, by, and to accommodate men' (Freitas: 2005, 83). One major problem for women, then, is how to be successful in a male-dominated world. Some women 'who have arrived at positions of power in a man's world have done so by adopting masculine methods' (Greer: 2006, 130). That is, some women decided that the best way to get along with men was to act like men, referring to de Beauvoir's exploration of psychoanalytic theory which stated that 'man is defined as a human being and woman as a female – whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male' (de Beauvoir: 1997, 83). This has largely occurred because of the way that masculinity and femininity are often seen as mutually exclusive, which operates against women who seek power; as Walter explains, taking traditional stereotypes into account, 'a man seeking power

enhances his masculinity, but a woman seeking power reduces her femininity' (Walter: 2010, 211).

Women who continue to seek power regardless have been referred to as "loophole women", exceptions in a male-dominated field whose presence supposedly proves its penetrability' (Levy: 2005, 94). Unfortunately, while it may seem beneficial to act like a man in order to achieve professional success on the same terms as men, it means that women are still not able to use their feminine qualities to achieve equality:

It can be fun to feel exceptional – to be the loophole woman, to have a whole power thing, to be an honorary man. But if you are the exception that proves the rule, and the rule is that women are inferior, you haven't made any progress. (Levy: 2005, 117)

This also results in double-standards in the workplace – men are allowed, or even expected, to act a certain way, while a woman who acts the same way is criticised. Grace Gildee in *This Charming Man*, for instance, notes how she is called 'Sugarfree' by her colleagues because she has 'a reputation for being acerbic', though she realises that, if she was a man, she would 'simply have a reputation for being straight-talking' (Keyes: 2008, 122). Similarly, in *The Other Side of the Story*, we see a "loophole woman" facing this same problem:

Olga Fisher was one of Lipman Haigh's seven partners – the only woman [...]

Olga was in her late forties, single, wore pearls and elegantly draped scarves and because she negotiated good terms for her authors she was known as a ballbreaker. If she were a man, Jojo thought scornfully, they'd simply call her 'a great agent'. (Keyes: 2004, 143)

Keyes also pays attention to the battle women have regarding which should take precedence – work or family. Traditionally, women's careers 'were supposed to be temporary launch pads, abandoned when the "career" of motherhood was embarked upon. Women who wanted both a family and a career had a difficult time juggling work with their domestic and "true" identity' (Whelehan: 1995, 7). Unusually, many Irish chick lit heroines choose to pursue their careers over anything else, regardless of what else they have to sacrifice in the process, because they believe the 'rewards had always seemed worth it' (Keyes: 2007, 359). This represents how many women who reach the top of their profession often do so at the expense

of their personal lives. Such novels question whether women can, by nature, be “too ambitious”, serving to highlight how rewards and success in the workplace ‘are still associated with masculinity rather than femininity’ (Walter: 1999, 227), and once again starkly presenting how women’s opportunities may never be equal to men’s, largely because of the age-old, and much-discussed, association of women and the home:

She left, sunk deep in a crisis of the soul. Was Mark right? Was she too ambitious? But that description was never applied to men – in the same way it was impossible for a woman to be too thin; it was impossible for a man to be too ambitious. A man would never have to choose between his ambition and his emotional life. (Keyes: 2004, 559)

In questioning the “appropriate” level of ambition for a woman, extracts such as this may be seen as reaffirming Walter’s suggestion that ‘art often questions [women’s] attraction to power, and shows that culture and everyday life, the personal and the political, are not always identical’ (Walter: 1999, 197). However, rather than such extracts condemning or fearing women’s ambition, they instead appear to be questioning society’s negative opinions of female power, in a sense highlighting how society tends to encourage inequality. Such extracts also dictate how it is traditionally seen as men’s “right” to be the main earner, the breadwinner in the family. They demonstrate how, while women are now told that they are entitled to make the “choice” to embark on a career, there are still questions as to how much of a choice women *really* have, as ‘unlike the male experience of work, women’s choices often have to, at the least, be informed by a recognition of their “natural” obligations to their families’ (Whelehan: 1995, 52). In doing so, such novels appear to dispute some contemporary feminists claims that ‘women’s failure to achieve real equality, especially in the higher echelons of society, is down to the fact that women are not sufficiently eager for worldly power’ (Walter: 1999, 65).

Instead, as well as portraying women who question the extent of their own ambition, such extracts also portray how women are often held back from achieving powerful positions in the workplace because of society’s ideas of how women should still prioritise their home

life. In suggesting how such situations can be rectified, Walter places some of the blame for many women's sense of conflict between home and work on the post-feminist claim of "having it all". While Walter agrees that this is the generation in which women can have it all, she suggests that we cannot have it all *at the same time*, as there appear to be very few people who can 'simultaneously answer the demands of their ambitions and of their families or their private lives' (Walter: 1999, 231). Walter instead aims to amend the "having it all" concept to make it more achievable, by suggesting that women can have it all at different times (Walter: 1999, 231), thereby allowing the potential for women to successfully juggle public and private life, while still having the time and energy to enjoy both, and avoiding the 'double-day/second-shift syndrome' (Walters: 1995, 122).

Further to these concerns of inequality in the working world are issues of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination, both of which are addressed by Keyes. Sexual harassment is one issue that has been targeted in feminist theory. As women moved from the home and into the workplace, patriarchy similarly moved from the private arena to that of the public; whereas women were once confined to the home, it has been said that they now have 'the whole of society in which to roam and be exploited' (Walby: 1990, 201), and nowhere has this been more apparent than in the working world. It has been noted that many women feel they have no choice but to 'endure sexual harassment to keep their jobs and learn to behave in a complaisantly and ingratiatingly heterosexual manner' (Rich: 1980, 1769). Women are advised to "get the joke" when it comes to much harassment in the workplace; 'unless offence can be "proved" in a nebulous way it is assumed that such messages are harmless and not to be taken seriously' (Whelehan: 2000, 69). Wrong as it may be, it has been recognised that the workplace is a social institution in which 'women have learned to accept male violation of their psychic and physical boundaries as the price of survival; where

women have been educated – no less than by romantic literature or by pornography – to perceive themselves as sexual prey' (Rich: 1980, 1769).

Keyes presents the topic of sexual harassment in an original way. While she portrays lecherous bosses and slimy male colleagues, she goes a step further by showing just how much the problem of sexual harassment, and the battle against it, has changed and has systemically affected the working world, in that it is now recognised as a serious issue, 'as an abuse of power rather than simply a messy personal experience' (Walter: 1999, 58). In *Last Chance Saloon*, we see men who fear sexual harassment claims so much that they worry that even light-hearted flirting may be interpreted the wrong way:

He'd always thought that sexual harassment was done by older men, who held a position of power and abused it for sexual favours [...] It had never occurred to Joe that his enthusiastic wooing of Katherine might be viewed in such a light. He'd just thought he'd been *flirting* with her. He felt dirty and disgusting – and rejected. (Keyes: 1999, 185)

It is interesting that *Last Chance Saloon* switches to the male perspective here; it is something that is rarely seen in typical chick lit, but serves effectively to highlight how men can suffer from such false claims. We are also shown women who abuse the power of such claims, who wrongly and unfairly cry "sexual harassment" just as a way of getting rid of unwanted, but nonetheless harmless, attention:

Savouring her sour triumph, Katherine turned her attention to the figures on her desk. To be fair, she thought, it wasn't exactly *harassment*, as such [...] She stuffed down the unpleasant feeling that true victims of sexual harassment wouldn't have been one bit impressed with her accusations. But at least she'd managed to get rid of him. (Keyes: 1999, 185)

In passages such as the one above, Keyes is highlighting the potential damage that can arise from misused power. Ironically, the Women's Movement was fighting against men abusing their supposed power in society; in passages such as this, we see women abusing the power they have earned, and the 'resulting victimisation of innocent men' (Whelehan: 2000, 18). Levenson explains this state of affairs further by insisting that women must only report cases that they truly believe are harassment or discrimination, rather than any situation with which they are unhappy, such as if a female employee has 'been having a relationship with a male

colleague and it ends messily, sometimes they cry “sexual discrimination” to cause trouble’ (Keyes: 2004, 552). I see this as an example of the value of Keyes’ writing as she posits the dual nature of responsibility in such cases to a very large audience, and thus is introducing post-feminist concerns with equality and justice in a way which is accessible to all her readers. In Derridean terms, she is stressing the singularity of each event and of the need for each instance to be interpreted within the overall paradigm concerned. Otherwise, Levenson fears, they risk the possibility of *no* genuine harassment or discrimination cases being taken seriously, which would prove detrimental to all that feminism has achieved:

We’re lucky that we’re in a position now where institutional sexism at least is largely viewed as unacceptable. To maintain this, and to stop sexism wherever it occurs, we need to name and shame perpetrators and make a fuss where it is happening. But we must also be careful not to shoot ourselves in our collective foot, and call everything that isn’t how we want it to be sexist, or we undermine our demands. (Levenson: 2009, 11)

Once again, we see the adequation between the concerns of theory and Keyes’ own concerns, as the issues of sexual harassment are taken on a singular basis, and there is no suggestion of a non-differentiated consensus on this issue.

As well as sexual harassment, Keyes also addresses sexual discrimination in the workplace in the context of the notion of the ‘glass ceiling that still stands between [women] and the top echelons of society’ (Walter: 1999, 16). In *The Other Side of the Story*, literary agent Jojo, after missing out on a promotion, faces the harsh realization that complete equality between the sexes may not yet be achieved in the workplace:

Then Jojo got it and surprise, more than anything, made her blurt, ‘It’s because I’m a woman!’ She’d heard about this but never thought it would happen to her. ‘It’s the glass ceiling!’

Right up to this minute, she wasn’t even sure she’d believed in the existence of glass ceiling. If she’d thought about it at all she’d suspected it was something lame-duck female employees used to salve their pride when their more deserving male colleagues got promoted over them. She’d never felt part of a sisterhood: it was up to each woman to do it for herself. She’d always thought she was as good as men and that she’d be treated on her own merits. But guess what? She was wrong. (Keyes: 2004, 548)

Extracts such as this are effective in highlighting how ‘there is still a great dragging weight of inequality on the backs even of powerful women; a knowledge of injustice; an anger’

(Walter: 1999, 15), reminding us how, although women are undoubtedly becoming more powerful in the workplace, there is still a long way to go before complete equality is achieved. To further stress this point, when Jojo decides to sue her employers on the grounds of sexual discrimination, she is advised not to proceed for two reasons. Firstly such a claim is considered very difficult to prove, and secondly, the taking of such a case is perceived as making a female employee's working life extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible:

‘There isn't a pattern of you being passed over in favour of him or another man?’

Jojo shook her head.

‘So this is a one-off, which will make it harder to prove.’

‘I'm not sticking around, waiting for it to happen again!’

Eileen smiled. ‘Fair enough. Now, things you should know: even if you win, the tribunal doesn't have the power to order an appointment. In other words, no matter what the decision of the tribunal, you won't make partner. [...] Some other things. This is a tribunal, not a trial. It's meant to be accessible, in other words, there's meant to be no need for legal representation, but in practice, most people do. But because of that, they don't award costs. So Jojo, even if you win, you could be looking at a bill for ten thousand, twenty thousand, even more. Any compensation you receive could be wiped out by legal costs. And that's if you win.’

‘What are the chances of that?’

Eileen thought about it. ‘Fifty-fifty. Even if you win, it may be difficult for you to continue working there. And if you lose, you'll find it impossible. And probably very difficult to find employment in another agency – you might have acquired a reputation for being difficult.’

‘For what? Doing the right thing?’ (Keyes: 2004, 552; see also pp 551-554)

Extracts such as these effectively portray the unfortunate situation that ‘too many women are aware that using the legal processes around equal opportunities may win you the case but lose you your career’ (Whelehan: 2000, 33); whether women silently endure the harassment or discrimination, or whether they voice their mistreatment at the risk of losing their job or of being ridiculed or ostracised within in, women remain the victims in such situations. Despite all of the gains achieved by women in the public sphere, there would still seem to be a structural inequality between the genders that places all of the positive weight on the male side of the argument, if ever a dispute or issue of contention arises.

When taken in conjunction with the previous example of the male fear of charges of harassment, we can see the nuanced image created by Keyes of the demands of the contemporary workplace in terms of sexual politics. Keyes is careful to sketch out the full

complexity of gender interaction in the workplace and never offers simplistic solutions. When we consider that women in real-life find themselves in similar situations on a regular basis, we are disheartened to realise that the workplace may be an area in which, even today, women continue to find themselves being silenced. However, even though chick lit depicts such negative, and often sexist, elements of the workplace, the very fact of their inclusion in the novels may be seen as potentially feminist; they provide a way of discussing such issues that have affected women, rather than rendering them invisible and silenced. As Elizabeth Hale declares:

Its failure to depict the *reform* of the workplace should not be taken as novelistic failure, or even as the failure of girl power. Rather, it offers a broader, darker, and even more realistic set of boundaries for chick lit to operate within. (Hale: 2006, 117)

Keyes also highlights the common confusion regarding feminist teachings. Just because feminism told women that they *could* go to work and be ambitious and successful, many people understood this as meaning that women *must* be ambitious and successful, which is ironically forgetting the element of choice altogether. Indeed, one can draw a parallel with the attitude to sexuality explored in the previous section. As Walter reminds us, while women do want equality, many would rather not get it 'on the understanding that we must jettison everything, always, from the old feminine way of life' (Walter: 1999, 242). Passages such as the one below, rather than adhering to the pessimistic view 'that equates postfeminism with an anti-feminist and media-driven backlash characterised by a rejection of feminist goals and an attempt to turn the clock back to pre-feminist times' (Genz: 2009, 51), instead present this element of *choice*; a woman who *chooses* to remain in the home is in a very different, more feminist-friendly, position to a woman who is confined to the home without being given a choice in the matter. As well as this, we are also presented with women who feel that feminism has misled them, in terms of having careers. They heard feminism urging women to

get out of the home and into the workplace, and were excited and enthusiastic at the prospect.

But when they arrived in the working world, some women found it was not so great after all:

As soon as Clodagh knew she might have a job, she didn't want it. Making tea and answering the phone, where was the fun in that? She did it at home all the time. And a radiator-supply firm? It sounded so dreary. In a strange way, getting a job and then finding she didn't want it was almost worse than being told she was unemployable. Though not much given to introspection, she vaguely realized that she wasn't actually looking for a job – she certainly didn't need the money – she was looking for glamour and excitement. And the reality was she wasn't going to find them at a radiator-supply firm. (Keyes: 2007, 239-240)

Clodagh then refuses the position she applied for and realises that she is happiest at home, looking after her family. From a post-feminist perspective, such extracts seem to address the notion of “new traditionalism”, which ‘centralises a woman’s “choice” to retreat from the public sphere and abstain from paid work in favour of family values’ (Genz: 2009, 58). While some critics have found new traditionalism to be problematic, worrying that it symbolises a return to confining women in the home, others have favoured its re-evaluation of the domestic sphere as ‘a domain of female autonomy and independence’ (Genz: 2009, 58).

According to Walter, women’s fight for equality in the workplace is vital, ‘partly for the individual woman facing up to her future, partly for the interests of women more generally, and partly for society at large. It is a battle that this new generation of young women is ready to fight’ (Walter: 1999, 183). From a feminist perspective, even while acknowledging that inequality undoubtedly still exists in many areas of the workplace, contemporary women can also celebrate how far we have already come and revel in the knowledge that we need not apologise for striving for power and equality. Many women have, after all, been ‘cracking the glass ceiling in many different places’ (Walter: 1999, 170), and, as Walter states on a further optimistic note, we can now ‘see that changes sometimes create stress and uncertainty, and yet hold on to the underlying truth: we’ve never had it so good’ (Walter: 1999, 197). By expressing these aporetic perspectives on the liberatory qualities of work, and also looking at the stresses that working outside the home can cause, Keyes’ novels are arguably providing positive and important visions of women’s experiences

in the professional world. One can see her characters as mimetic embodiments of the points being raised by the post-feminist theorists who have been rehearsed in this discussion. We are provided with an account of women's desires and their problems; of what they have already overcome and what they have still to achieve.

The body

It has been said that 'it's difficult for a woman to tell her story without reference to her experience of the body' (Freitas: 2005, 38), and theorists such as Judith Butler have asserted that, 'for feminism to proceed as a critical practice, it must ground itself in the sexed specificity of the female body' (Butler: 1993, 28), while other theorists have observed several recurring themes to be found in women's writing concerning clothing and the body (Peterson: 1992, 333). These trends in specifically women's writing are evident because fashion and body image have long been concerns and issues typically associated with women:

As women, we care about our bodies, care about beauty, and often use fashion to express who we are in the moment, transforming ourselves from one image to another by putting on an outfit, much as if we are putting on a new self. (Freitas: 2005, 48)

The quest for beauty is made harder still as women realise that there is not only *one* aesthetic ideal to which they much conform, but that 'different cultures and eras have emphasized different features and body types' (Weissman: 1999, 25). Additionally, because fashion and image trends are regularly changing, image-conscious women must also endure constantly updating their personal style, so as not to appear hopelessly out-of-date. The cycle, it seems, is never-ending.

That said, regardless of the particular trends of any time or place, the one constant 'is that physical beauty is of the highest importance. The female body is acclaimed for its appeal' (Weissman: 1999, 25). Aware of this, women continue to embark on this never-ending quest for "ideal beauty", and are, in fact, now 'spending more time on the management and discipline of our bodies than we have in a long, long time' (Bordo: 1993,

2363). Many women have become so preoccupied with this obsessive pursuit for beauty that it 'has become the central torment of many women's lives' (Bordo: 1993, 2364). Contemporary women are aware that society expects them 'to look expensive, fashionable, well-groomed, and not to be seen in the same dress twice' (Greer: 2006, 65-66), and so they feel compelled to mould their bodies into a form of the elusive "beauty ideal". In her non-fiction, Keyes reflects on the unattainability of the beauty ideal, using the example of models and the negative influence they have on "real" women, and how detrimental such unattainable ideals can be to women's self-esteem:

We live in look-tastic times and are bombarded with unreachable standards of beauty. Unformed adolescent girls are being used to sell clothes to thirty-something women. Images of models are photographically enhanced so their skin is inhumanly translucent and their bodies drastically elongated and thinned down. Indeed, Cindy Crawford was quoted recently as saying, 'Some mornings even I don't wake up looking like Cindy Crawford.' On my good days I know none of it is real but, even on my best days, I can't help trying. Or at least having the decency to feel wretched when I fail miserably. (Keyes: 2005, 121)

Similarly, Walter reflects on how the role models in the media, that women are often encouraged to emulate, are 'often women who are well known to have chosen extreme regimes, from punishing diets to plastic surgery, to achieve an airbrushed perfection' (Walter: 2010, 2). This again stresses how unattainable the beauty ideal is, as even the women we are trying to emulate have gone to drastic measures to look a certain way, and clearly it is an aspect of her writing which is significant for Keyes who is well aware of the power of texts to create the 'look-tastic' times in which we live. For many women, the Lacanian mirror is a harsh taskmaster and the sense of Cindy Crawford misrecognising herself in the mirror is a telling one.

It is decidedly ironic that, while the image of "bra-burning" has long been firmly connected to feminism, the image of the naked breast, on the other hand, is firmly placed in men's territory, such as "lad's mags" and pornography; women, strangely, have long felt uncomfortable at the sight of another naked female form:

It appears that only the pneumatically uplifted breast is an object fit to be looked at, whereas the glimpse of a naked breast underlines how uncomfortable we remain with the 'naturalness' of nudity, as well as showing how far removed we are from the contours of the real female form. Naked breasts proliferate in tabloid newspapers, lad mags and soft porn, yet the breast of, for example, a prince's consort can unleash the wrath of a nation, seen as it is to symbolically compromise her virtue. (Whelehan: 2000, 3)

Because of this, while men feel free to view the female breast 'as plaything and chief erotic curiosity, women will continue to have a faintly bewildered relationship to their breasts and, as a result, their body as a whole' (Whelehan: 2000, 2). Greer supports this view when she remarks how men's apparent fascination with women's breasts has caused women to worry needlessly that their breasts do not meet with some fictional "ideal":

The degree of attention which breasts receive, combined with the confusion about what the breast fetishists actually want, make women unduly anxious about them. They can never be just right; they must always be too small, too big, the wrong shape, too flabby. (Greer: 2006, 39)

This is merely one problem that feminists have associated with images of women. In fact, feminist theory has engaged in a wide and varied discussion on the topic, made all the more varied because different theorists have tended to differ in their views on the subject. Younger feminists, for instance, in 'their willingness to embrace the outward signifiers of femininity, such as the use of hair colorants and lipstick [...] often differ radically from their older counterparts' (Joannou: 2000, 34). As a result, while some feminists have hinted at 'a total rejection of all conventional standards of feminine beauty and sexual attractiveness' (Whelehan: 1995, 41), others have argued that this would inevitably lead to women's repression as beauty is 'correlative with fundamental meanings of what it is to be a "woman" in women's contemporary existence' (Whelehan: 1995, 218).

Even women's writing's references to fashion have gained mixed opinions from feminist critics:

Fashion has been dismissed by feminists as frivolous, as inculcating women with a debilitating femininity and making them the unwitting dupes of capitalism. But feminist condemnations have coexisted with claims that fashion provides women with a means of expressing identity. (Ferriss: 2006, 10)

Regardless of feminists' own opinions, however, the issue of women's image continues to be a focus of feminist theory simply because women's preoccupation with their image has not waned. Stemming from this knowledge, some contemporary feminists have examined women's preoccupation and fascination with image, 'not to mock and criticise it, but to show the pleasures and the mutual respect it gives to women' (Walter: 1999, 90). Natasha Walter has stated that she believes that great pleasure can be found in the pursuit of fashion and beauty, though she stresses that 'there is a huge difference between taking pleasure in such pursuits and believing that the only route to confidence and power for a woman lies through constant physical vigilance' (Walter: 2010, 67). In discussing the pleasure many women find in fashion and image, Walter claims that such interests may be akin to 'a skilled and enjoyable occupation, and a good spectator sport' (Walter: 1999, 94). She claims that women appear 'easier about taking on or rejecting the images around them than they once were' (Walter: 1999, 91), suggesting that contemporary women are largely becoming more comfortable about their own appearance and no longer feel compelled to conform to the current "ideal". In this sense, Walter continues, we can witness a variety of attitudes towards image and beauty among women; as Walter states, some women 'may be oppressed, others may be revelling in it, others may be creating it, others yet may be ignoring it' (Walter: 1999, 91).

Indeed, this chapter, and those which preceded it, provide examples in Keyes' fiction of a variety of viewpoints among her heroines; as with Walter's claim, some of Keyes heroines have an interest in their image while others are more comfortable and confident with the natural look, while yet others appear unconcerned about appearance at all. In this diversity of perspectives she is giving voice to post-feminist ideas of difference and disparity, and making the point that post-feminist theory often focuses on the singular experience as opposed to attempting to attenuate differences between women in order to create a category

of women which is undifferentiated, and functions as the other idea of a binary opposition. Post-feminism is a more nuanced discourse and Keyes' writing parallels this. Much like third-wave feminism, post-feminism challenges the notion of "universal womanhood", and 'embraces ambiguity, diversity, and multiplicity in transversal theory and politics' (Kroløkke and Sørensen: 2005, 2). Hélène Cixous sums up this idea when she states that there is no general, or typical one woman (Cixous: 2000, 161). Sarah Gamble explains the benefits of post-feminism by stating that 'its rejection of theoretical language ensures that it remains widely accessible, and its repudiation of victim status seeks to endow a sense of empowerment upon its readers' (Gamble: 1998, 44). It is for such reasons that this thesis can be categorised as taking a post-feminist approach.

Despite claims that 'the battle over appearance is an old one, and not worth the angst it once engendered' (Walter: 1999, 95), it is undeniable that some aspect of women's image makes an appearance in feminist thought on a regular basis, and so it is an important aspect of study. Feminism's early focus on images of women was based around 'a description of the stereotypical representations of women and how these stereotypes limited women's options and possibilities in the "real world"' (Walters: 1995, 42). This largely stems from the fact that, while women's images may indeed be *represented*, women themselves rarely have any say in how these representations are formed. This means that, more often than not, these images of women 'that stare at us from the glossy pages of the women's magazines or from the glowing eye of the television screen are not of our own creation. They are, in more senses than one, truly "man-made"' (Walters: 1995, 22-23). Feminism expressed concern that these, largely male-constructed, representations of women would become 'stereotypes which damage women's self-perceptions and limit their social roles' (Thornham: 1998, 213). In such media representations, feminists observed how:

women's bodies are often fragmented, shown as discrete body parts that are meant to represent the whole woman. Women are urged to think of their bodies as 'things' that need to

be moulded, shaped, and remade into a male conception of female perfection. The fragmentation of the female body into parts that should be 'improved' or 'worked on' often results in women having a self-hating relationship with their bodies. (Walters: 1995, 56)

The media has virtually *brainwashed* women that the images they portray are society's "ideal", to the point where "real" women are now 'often apologetic about their bodies, considered in relation to that plastic object of desire whose image is radiated throughout the media' (Greer: 2006, 292). Walter feels that images of "real" women have largely been neglected in the media, and that the dominant 'image of female sexuality has become more than ever defined by the terms of the sex industry' (Walter: 2010, 3). The fact that these images are constructed as male fantasy, rather than as "real women", appears forgotten as more and more women strive to conform to these non-existent ideals. In *The Second Sex*, for instance, de Beauvoir noted the strict "rules" that women's bodies had to conform to in order to be perceived as "beautiful":

If the fashion of flat chests and narrow hips – the boyish form – has had its brief season, at least the overopulent ideal of past centuries has not returned. The feminine body is asked to be flesh but with discretion; it is to be slender and not loaded with fat; muscular, supple, strong, it is bound to suggest transcendence; it must not be pale like a too shaded hothouse plant, but preferably tanned like a workman's torso from being bared to the open sun. (de Beauvoir: 1997, 292)

These rules seem loaded with contradictions – how does one find the balance between being tanned but not too tanned, or slender but not overly so – and are vague enough that the "ideal" may never be achievable, thus allowing the beauty myth to continuously tell women that they are "lacking", thereby trapping them in an endless battle with their image.

Even something as seemingly innocent as the Barbie doll has been attacked by feminists for portraying an unrealistic and unattainable model of the "feminine ideal". Since its creation in 1959, the Barbie doll has become, not only a highly recognised and thriving product, but also a 'model image that women have continually viewed as superior, unrealistic, or quintessential [...] and has therefore attempted to become an ideal' (Weissman: 1999, 10). As the Barbie doll came to be viewed by many as 'a representation of a physical

image that we could never become' (Weissman: 1999, 33), considerable discussion was thus sparked:

concerning the appropriateness of the body shape and proportions of the Barbie doll. The concern has been about the possible influence that this doll has had over women, and how they perceive their bodies in comparison to the doll. It appears that her shape is the 'cultural ideal'. (Weissman: 1999, 34)

Of course, Barbie's physical characteristics are indeed impossible to attain: 'her legs are disproportionately long; her waist is improbably small and her breasts are pneumatically taut' (Whelehan: 2000, 56). Nevertheless, it is interesting, even unbelievable, to think that women would even consider comparing 'their personal image to less than that of a one-foot mould of plastic' (Weissman: 1999, 56). Yet regardless of the fact that something as trivial as a Barbie doll can become a representation of a beauty ideal, it is nevertheless telling of the power that media representations and cultural ideals of beauty have over women, as well as how they are often the root of 'the damaging path to acceptance that they [i.e. women] begin to follow' (Weissman: 1999, 35-36).

The way in which women relate to these cultural ideals, and the reason that so many women continually strive to obtain 'a match to the "perfect" standard of an image' (Weissman: 1999, 35), stems from the notion of 'the stereotype'. The stereotype 'is the dominant image of femininity which rules our culture and to which all women aspire' (Greer: 2006, 18). Additionally, 'men welcome the stereotype because it directs their taste into the commonly recognized areas of value' (Greer: 2006, 67). Nevertheless, the notion of the female stereotype has been criticised by feminist theorists due to the demands it is seen to place upon women 'to contour their bodies in order to please the eyes of others' (Greer: 2006, 40). Here the Lacanian mirror is societally back-lit and projects a series of misreflections at women which can be seen to exercise a form of social and gender control. It is sadly more than a metaphor as some women, suffering from anorexia or bulimia misrecognise their

body-image in a mirror, constantly seeing a fat person and, as a result, damaging their bodies with purgative and dietary regimes which, sadly, can result in death.

Directly related to the stereotype is the idea of 'The Beauty Myth', made famous by Naomi Wolf's 1991 book of the same name, which has since become one of the most well-known critiques of the beauty industry. The beauty myth is centred on how any 'woman who desires to be beautiful is trapped in the confines of the structured definition of what beauty should comprise' (Weissman: 1999, 24). It comes into action as the 'facade between the outward visual presence and the inner destruction that is created and reinforced by the culture and the media' (Weissman: 1999, 24). Wolf describes how the beauty myth works in the following extract:

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless.

None of this is true. (Wolf: 1991, 12)

Wolf is critical of a society that, because of the influence of the beauty myth, feels 'the need to defend itself by evading the fact of real women, our faces and voices and bodies, and reducing the meaning of women to these formulaic and endlessly reproduced "beautiful" images' (Wolf: 1991, 18). She views the modern woman's preoccupation with beauty as merely a new way of oppressing women. The emphasis on women's beauty, she believes, is simply saying that what 'women look like is considered important because what we say is not' (Wolf: 1991, 106).

Wolf argues that, since the sexual revolution provided women with more freedom than ever before, patriarchal society needed to find another way to "control" women. An emphasis on beauty and image filled this need:

Sex within marriage, for procreation, was acceptable, while sex for pleasure was a sin; women make the same distinction today between eating to sustain life and eating for pleasure.

The double standard that gave men and not women sexual license has become a double standard in which men have greater oral license. (Wolf: 1991, 97-98)

In addition, Wolf claims that, while there were initially problems when women's entrance into the workforce created more pressure for women as they undertook the Second Shift (also known as the "double-day"), this new preoccupation with image that women were urged to indulge in, created an extra "Third Shift" for women:

The beauty myth is the last, best training technique to create such a work force. It does all these things to women during work hours, and then adds a Third Shift to their leisure time.

Superwoman, unaware of its full implications, had to add serious 'beauty' labor to her *professional* agenda [...] Women took on all at once the roles of professional housewife, professional careerist, and professional beauty. (Wolf: 1991, 26-27)

The impact of this "Third Shift" has, undoubtedly, resulted in women's exhaustion and even agony as they struggle to maintain an image that is always acceptable by the ever-changing criteria of "beauty":

In the name of beauty, women have crippled their feet, broken their ribs, inflated their breasts, deflated their thighs, and lifted their faces and rears. They have fainted from corsets too tight, fallen from heels too high, developed cancer from too much sun, died from too little food – often to find that the ideal that they were trying to achieve had been revised. (Lehrman: 1997, 66)

The further implications of such an emphasis on maintaining an "ideal" image should be clear. Women's self-image and, thus, their confidence, are drastically affected, as women become more and more critical of their own appearance. At best, this results in women constantly trying to adapt their natural appearance in the attempt of meeting the largely unattainable, cultural ideal:

It is a commonplace observation that women are forever trying to straighten their hair if it is curly and curl it if it is straight, bind their breasts if they are large and pad them if they are small, darken their hair if it is light and lighten it if it is dark. Not all these measures are dictated by the phantom of fashion. They all reflect dissatisfaction with the body as it is, and an insistent desire that it be otherwise, not natural but controlled, fabricated. Many of the devices adopted by women are not cosmetic or ornamental, but disguise of the actual, arising from fear and distaste. (Greer: 2006, 293)

A strong emphasis on outward appearance can also be a lot more dangerous than encouraging women to colour their hair, or wear padded bras. Feminist theorists who focus on the beauty industry have expressed concerns at 'the way the slimming and beauty industry have caused

women to do acts of violence to their own bodies' (Whelehan: 1995, 217). In the opening pages of *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf comments on how, 'inside the majority of the West's controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret "underlife" poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control' (Wolf: 1991, 10). Wolf refers particularly to dieting and 'fashionable thinness' as having an extremely debilitating and harmful effect on women (Wolf: 1991, 196). In discussing the potential risks of a weight obsession, she claims that, 'a certain point inside the cult of "beauty", dieting becomes anorexia or compulsive eating or bulimia' (Wolf: 1991, 127). Wolf continues on to describe how, in such an instance, the beauty myth works at oppressing women and, thus, sustaining patriarchy:

The anorexic may begin her journey defiant, but from the point of view of a male-dominated society, she ends up as the perfect woman. She is weak, sexless, and voiceless, and can only with difficulty focus on a world beyond her plate. The woman has been killed off in her. (Wolf: 1991, 197)

The beauty myth is detrimental to women's well-being in that it controls women and sustains patriarchal values. Theorists such as Wolf are concerned that women will continue to damage their bodies and destroy their self-confidence until 'our culture tells young girls that they are welcome in any shape – that women are valuable to it with or without the excuse of "beauty"' (Wolf: 1991, 205).

In terms of how society's emphasis on female beauty is in fact damaging to women's lives, feminist theorists have also commented on another outcome of the beauty myth, that is:

Competition among women. When women are reduced to the embodied equivalent of objects competing for shelf space in some consumer-based economy where men choose the newest, shiniest, thinnest, blondest models, a profound mistrust of 'lesser brands' or envy of 'designer models' develops. (Umminger: 2006, 246)

Speaking truthfully, it is not only men who comment on women's appearance; women as well as men also 'have a sense of the value placed upon women's appearance and have problems avoiding making judgements based on it from time to time' (Whelehan: 1995, 219).

The following extract from *Rachel's Holiday* demonstrates how women are often described

according to their appearance as this is the first thing that people notice, and this self-consciousness about appearance has led to feelings of being “judged” for how women look:

I wasn't thin.

Although it wasn't for the want of trying. I spent plenty of time on the stairmaster at the gym. But no matter how much I stairmastered, genetics had the final say. If my father had married a dainty little woman, I might have had a very different life. Very different thighs, certainly.

Instead, I was doomed for people always to describe me by saying, 'She's a big girl.' Then they always added really quickly, 'Now, I'm not saying she's *fat*.'

The implication being that if I was fat, I could at least do something about it. (Keyes: 1998, 2)

Such extracts effectively present how strong the impact of the beauty myth is; that it is immediately noticed when someone does not necessarily meet society's “ideal”, to the point that, often without meaning to, we make judgement on this, or, from the other person's point of view, become paranoid that our appearance is being judged and seen as “lacking”.

Feminism urged women to support one another, as a form of female solidarity, which naturally threatened the patriarchal order, which feared that any strength women obtained would lessen the control that patriarchal society had over them. However, because they recognise the value placed on appearance, women often unintentionally find themselves judging other women based solely on their appearance, as Levenson comments:

Despite the fact that sisterhood is about not judging other women, I bet most of us do it a lot of the time. How many of us can open a celebrity magazine and, looking at the women pictured, not judge them in some way? (Levenson: 2009, 12)

Systems such as the beauty myth work to restore patriarchal control partly by creating competition among women, thus fracturing any bonds they may have formed. This is seen to work in a number of ways. Firstly, the beauty myth aims to create tension between various groups of women, such as women of different ages. As men and women age, they are evaluated by different standards: while men are valued in terms of their success, for instance, women, who have typically been judged in terms of their appearance, are threatened by the ageing process:

Men's value depends less on how they look and more on what they do, particularly economically [...] signs of ageing in men are less heavily penalised than they are in women. In men, wrinkles and grey hair may be valued as a sign of experience and be described as 'distinguished'. In contrast, women are more strongly encouraged to conceal signs of ageing on their faces and their bodies, due to the importance of youthful attractiveness to women's sexual candidacy. (Pilcher: 2004, 35-36)

Because of this, the beauty myth subtly encourages older women to feel jealousy towards younger women's youth, and young women to fear aging, thus avoiding any connection with older women:

Youth and (until recently) virginity have been 'beautiful' in women since they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance. Aging in women is 'unbeautiful' since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken: Older women fear young ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all the female life span. (Wolf: 1991, 14)

In doing so, women's support networks are limited in size as women tend only to associate with women of their own age.

A further related way in which the beauty myth attempts to limit female support networks is by creating distrust and jealousy among women because of their looks, which has the result of lessening the possibility of women associating freely with other women. The following extract, from *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married*, shows unnecessary animosity between women because of their looks:

I was sure that a lot of the animosity was because Megan was tall and tanned and gorgeous. While Meredia was short and fat and not gorgeous. Meredia was jealous of Megan's beauty, while Megan despised Meredia's excess weight. When Meredia couldn't buy clothes to fit her, instead of making sympathetic noises like the rest of us did, Megan barked, 'Stop whinging, lardbucket, and go on a bloody diet!' (Keyes: 2003a, 4)

This focus on appearance is very much extrinsic in terms of value as attractiveness is a transitive quality – one must be attractive to someone else and in this case it is predominantly the male gaze that decides on the qualities that make Meredia attractive or not. Instead, the patriarchal beauty myth teaches women to immediately view other women, not as potential allies, but as rivals:

The unknown woman, the myth would like women to believe, is unapproachable; under suspicion before she opens her mouth because she's Another Woman, and beauty thinking

urges women to approach one another as possible adversaries until they know they are friends. (Wolf: 1991, 75)

Regardless of *how* it works, it is troubling to note that the beauty myth has worked against feminism by dividing women from one another, especially as feminism spent so long encouraging women to support one another. Wolf explains this divisive aspect of the beauty myth:

Rivalry, resentment, and hostility provoked by the beauty myth run deep [...] It is painful for women to talk about beauty because under the myth, one woman's body is used to hurt another. Our faces and bodies become instruments for punishing other women, often used out of our control and against our will. (Wolf: 1991, 284)

In some shape or form, the concept above has more than likely been felt by every woman at some stage. We only need to consider any of the contemporary women's magazines to recall how they seem to delight in showcasing 'embarrassing snaps of celebrities' weight gain and poor clothes choices' (Walter: 2010, 68), which seems to imply that women enjoy being able to criticise others for their appearance. At its simplest, most women can relate to comparing some aspect of their own appearance to that of another woman and feeling inadequate in comparison, sometimes resulting in harmless feelings of jealousy towards the other. This is directly connected to Wolf's commentary on how the beauty myth has worked to divide women from one another.

It is important to note that extracts such as the one above are relatively uncommon in Keyes' novels in general. *Rachel's Holiday* demonstrates how judging someone by their appearance alone can often provide no insight into that person and, also that such surface judgements are invariably at variance with an opinion formed on a deeper and less surface-driven criterion:

Chaquie admitted that she had never felt at ease with her friends, that she was afraid they'd realise that she was the fraud she felt she was.

I looked at her, at her lovely skin and her golden hair and her perfect nails and was in awe of how successfully she had reinvented herself. I would never have believed there was so much pain and insecurity rampaging about below her sleek, glamorous surface. (Keyes: 1998, 384)

In this extract, the protagonist, Rachel, is sympathetic towards Chaquie when she learns what she has gone through in her life during a group rehab session. The fact that she feels sympathetic and perhaps even guilty for assuming that someone as beautiful and glamorous as Chaquie had a perfect life, works to show how the beauty myth misled women into believing that stereotypical beauty is all that matters.

It is interesting to note that women's emphasis on achieving the 'ideal' image is important only in relation to *themselves*; women do not place the same emphasis on men's attractiveness, though much feminist criticism on the topic has argued that men *do* place an importance on women's appearance. It is said that no man 'wants a girl whose beauty is imperceptible to all but him' (Greer: 2006, 67). In fact, theorists such as Wolf not only criticise, but also seem to pity, men who "choose" a woman for her beauty alone. When a man does this, Wolf says:

He sabotages himself. He has gained no friend, no ally, no mutual trust: She knows quite well why she has been chosen. He has succeeded in buying a mutually suspicious set of insecurities. He does gain something: the esteem of other men who find such an acquisition impressive. (Wolf: 1991, 174-175)

A man's attractiveness, on the other hand, is often less of a requirement for a woman's choice of a potential partner. It is not, as Wolf explains, that women do not admire an attractive man, but that they understand that there are more important characteristics which should take precedence:

A man is unlikely to be brought within earshot of women as they judge men's appearance, height, muscle tone, sexual technique, penis size, personal grooming, or taste in clothes – all of which we do. The fact is that women are able to view men just as men view women, as subjects for sexual and aesthetic evaluation; we too are effortlessly able to choose the male 'ideal' from a lineup; and if we could have male beauty as well as everything else, most of us would not say no. But so what? Given all that, women make the choice, by and large, to take men as human beings first. (Wolf: 1991, 153)

Wolf goes on to further explain how, for many women, regardless of a man's level of physical attractiveness, it is *personality* that has the power to attract a woman – or, indeed, repel her:

Women understand that there are two distinct economies: There is physical attraction, and then there is the 'ideal'. When a woman looks at a man, she can physically dislike the idea of his height, his coloring, his shape. But after she has liked him and loved him, she would not want him to look any other way: For many women, the body appears to grow beautiful and erotic as they grow to like the person in it. The actual body, the smell, the feel, the voice and movement, becomes charged with heat through the desirable person who animates it [...] By the same token, a woman can admire a man as a work of art but lose sexual interest if her turns out to be an idiot. The way in which women regard men's bodies sexually is proof that one *can* look at a person sexually without reducing him or her to pieces. (Wolf: 1991, 174)

Women's fiction, including chick lit, has long recognised that many women grow to love a man, not because of his looks alone, but because they have spent time getting to know his personality. In this sense, it is enunciating the very points being made by Wolf, in fictional form. In Keyes' novels, one such example of this can be seen in *Angels* (2002):

There are some men who are so good-looking that meeting them is like being hit on the head with a mallet. Garv, however, isn't one of them; he's more the sort of man you could see day-in, day-out for twenty years, then just wake up one morning and think, 'God, he's nice, how come I never noticed him before now?' (Keyes: 2002, 9)

Similar views were also noted in the previous chapter, as one protagonist from *Sushi For Beginners* actually admits that she is turned off by a man who spends too much time and attention on his appearance.

If women are so aware that personality is ultimately more important than appearance, and know it is foolish to judge others on appearance alone, then why are so many women so hard on themselves about *their own* image? Why do so many women damage their bodies in an attempt to reach 'perfection'? Many theorists have commented that, rather than this stemming from any real negative opinions that women actually have about their own image, it may instead be because men were traditionally 'one of the most imminent and powerful reasons that women yearn to be beautiful' (Weissman: 1999, 22). For many years, women have largely served to boost men's ego, 'as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size' (Woolf: 2000, 37). Therefore, when a man was envied and admired by other men for being seen with a beautiful woman, he felt pride, admiration, and respect. In this context, woman has acted as a Lacanian

imaginary mirror for the ego of men down through the centuries, as a woman's beauty is part of a man's own sense of identity and worth. As a result of this, women learn that the 'self is given value, identity and meaning in being desired and loved by another' (Hargreaves: 1988, 292). Thus, women become conscious of how they appear in men's eyes, nervous of any criticism or even of being overlooked altogether. For many women, any worth that they are seen to have 'is defined by a man's level of attraction' (Berger: 1977, 46), an idea which is developed more fully in the following extract:

It is of crucial importance how a woman appears to a man, and the appreciation of herself is granted only by her acceptance from the dominant male. She now begins to graciously stand in the light of the eyes of men, and allow their watchful glance to measure and calculate her worth. (Weissman: 1999, 20)

In *Rachel's Holiday*, the title character confirms that some women may feel that they need to be stereotypically beautiful and slim in order to attract a man. In this novel, Rachel promises herself that 'Monday would be the day I'd get myself organised and start exercising. Once I was making myself skinny and beautiful I'd feel more hopeful about winning Luke back' (Keyes: 1998, 195). Nevertheless, while it may be undeniable that men focus much admiration on a beautiful woman, there would seem to be some differences in what men and women each define as being 'beautiful'. In an attempt to combat such damaging attitudes, feminist theory has asserted that, while the 'emaciated body of the anorectic, of course, immediately presents itself as a caricature of the contemporary ideal of hyper-slenderness for women' (Bordo: 1993, 2367), we often 'find that the male preference for cuddlesome women persists' (Greer: 2006, 38). However, it may be argued that 'this preference does bring the argument back to what men want – cuddly women – rather than what it is women want for themselves' (Levenson: 2009, 114). Men, it is argued, largely admire the beautiful features that a woman *naturally possesses*. At the same time, however, while women go to great lengths to 'improve' their natural features, most men express utter bewilderment at the extremes women go to in their beauty regimes – or, perhaps worse, many men may not even

notice the *effects* of such regimes. At extreme levels, some men may notice that the eternal pursuit for beauty affects women's whole personalities, causing them to partake in strange and irrational behaviour:

Let's say a man really loves a woman; he sees her as his equal, his ally, his colleague; but she enters this other realm and becomes unfathomable. In the krypton spotlight, which he doesn't even see, she falls ill, out of his caste, and turns into an untouchable.

He may know her as confident; she stands on the bathroom scale and sinks into a keening of self-abuse. He knows her as mature; she comes home with a failed haircut, weeping from a vexation she is ashamed even to express. He knows her as prudent; she goes without winter boots because she spent half a week's paycheck on artfully packaged mineral oil. He knows her as sharing his love of the country; she refuses to go with him to the seaside until her springtime fast is ended. She's convivial; but she rudely refuses a slice of birthday cake, only to devour the ruins of anything at all in a frigid light at dawn. (Wolf: 1991, 170)

Wolf sees such occurrences as being the fault of the beauty myth, which will not allow women to feel comfortable in their natural state. Even when a man tells a woman that he loves her *for who she is*, the beauty myth reminds the woman that "who she is" is lacking, so that women will continue using their energy on 'personal appearance improvement', thus keeping her under patriarchal control:

He loves her, physically, because she is who she is. In our culture, though, the woman is forced to throw his gift back in his face: That is supposed to be less valuable than for him to rate her as a top-notch art object. If his loving her 'the way she is' were considered more exciting than his assigning her a four-star rating, the woman could feel secure, desirable, irreplaceable – but then she wouldn't need to buy so many products. She would like herself too much. She would like other women too much. She would raise her voice. (Wolf: 1991, 171)

Wolf urges women not to let the beauty myth win. She assures them that, when they are loved, they are loved both because of, *and* regardless of, how they look, and so they should spend less time worrying excessively about their appearance, thus submitting to patriarchal control, and should instead focus on *enjoying themselves*:

The idea that adult women, with their fully developed array of sexual characteristics, are inadequate to stimulate and gratify heterosexual male desire, and that 'beauty' is what will complete them, is the beauty myth's Big Lie. All around us, men are contradicting it. The fact is that the myth's version of sexuality is by definition just not true: Most men who are at this moment being aroused by women, flirting with them, in love with them, dreaming about them, having crushes on them, or making love to them, are doing so to women who look exactly like who they are. (Wolf: 1991, 177-178)

On a related note, *Rachel's Holiday* also recognises that some women are now realising that their sexual attractiveness to a man is often down to more than just the "perfect" figure and face; the protagonist here states how she becomes less aware of her own apparent bodily flaws the more she realises how attracted her boyfriend is to her, in a sense providing Rachel with feelings of power:

To my surprise I didn't feel fat and hideous, the way I often did in bed with a man. I held the balance of power because I knew Luke was dying for me. (Keyes: 1998, 143)

Despite the difficulties historically faced by women writers, authors such as Keyes are developing new forms of writing in which the female body is finally honestly represented. The chick lit heroine, in her aim to become a positive role model for women, is one to whom real women can easily relate:

She is Everywoman, with quirks and problems that are believable yet larger than life. She's confident yet insecure. Smart but naive. Lovable yet flawed. (Mlynowski: 2006, 64)

In being 'lovable yet flawed', the chick lit heroine can become a positive, healthier role model for contemporary women because she is 'wanted and desired, not despite but because of her imperfections' (Genz: 2009, 90). She tells women that it is perfectly acceptable if they are not 'perfect', as this ideal level of perfection does not actually exist.

The beauty myth had fooled us all, but chick lit heroines are here to tell the truth, and we see this in a variety of Keyes' characters, from Rachel, in the above quotation, who realises her boyfriend loves her no matter what she thinks of her appearance, to Maggie, in *Anybody Out There?*, who relishes being a mother because, for the first time in her life, she feels that she can forget entirely about how she looks (perhaps because of her children's unconditional love?) (Keyes: 2006, 16), to Claire in *Watermelon* who finally realises that time spent worrying about appearance is time wasted, and that everyone is beautiful in their own way even when, sadly, they 'had no idea' (Keyes: 2003b). Such instances abound in Keyes' novels, and, because they are often voiced by the protagonist, we are empathetically located within her perspective, as opposed to looking at her like an object. This means that

the notion of woman as object of the male gaze, or scopic drive, is deconstructed here by woman as the enunciator of her own identity: she is the subject of the enunciation as opposed to the subject of the enounced. Hence the beauty myth is deconstructed as we hear the voice of the narrator as opposed to seeing her and judging her on that surface level. In this sense, the narrative form of the genre, with its first-person fallible narrator, is an ongoing deconstruction of the beauty myth as we see the character and personality of the narrator before we ever see her physically.

Wolf described her vision of what a society free of the beauty myth will look like:

Women will be able thoughtlessly to adorn ourselves with pretty objects when there is no question that *we* are not objects. Women will be free of the beauty myth when we can choose to use our faces and clothes and bodies as simply one form of self-expression out of a full range of others. We can dress up for our pleasure, but we must speak up for our rights. (Wolf: 1991, 273-274)

I think that the generic field of popular culture, and the specific instance of chick lit, underlines Wolf's point. When chick lit novels portray 'untraditional beauties' in a positive light, a process of readerly emancipation from the strictures of the beauty myth is set in train. When a chick lit heroine is confident with her appearance, the reader feels some degree of freedom from the beauty myth. When chick lit breaks patriarchal tradition by repressing and discussing *all* aspects of the female body, even those experiences which have typically been censored, there is a sense of liberation from the beauty myth:

A generation ago, Germaine Greer wondered about women: 'What *will* you do?' What women did brought about a quarter century of cataclysmic social revolution. The next phase of our movement forward as individual women, as women together, and as tenants of our bodies and this planet, depends now on what we decide to see when we look in the mirror. What *will* we see? (Wolf: 1991, 291)

If Keyes' novels are any indication, we will see a future in which women's bodies – in fact, *all* aspects of women's existence – will finally be represented as they should be.

Gender performativity

As already discussed, a preoccupation with beauty and appearance has traditionally been typically associated with women. Feminists such as Naomi Wolf have criticised the emphasis on female appearance, arguing that, although preoccupations with beauty and image are typically associated with women, female beauty is, in fact, 'what the female orgasm used to be: something given to women by men, if they submitted to their feminine role and were lucky' (Wolf: 1991, 173). Despite feminists' protestations, however, a focus on appearance has become so inherent in our society that, as mentioned earlier, we now tend to find ourselves focusing on and, consciously or not, making judgements on appearance, particularly in relation to women. Such a strong emphasis on image and beauty has permeated through our society so that it is no longer, for the most part, only women who attend to their appearance. Now it is becoming more and more common for men to care about their skin, hair, and clothes, to the extent that entire skincare and hair-care ranges are now being developed, marketed, and targeted towards the male population. So we can now wonder if men, too, will become subject to the tyranny of the beauty myth in their turn, as the performativity of gender becomes more overt in their own cultural context.

We can link this idea of what were previously considered to be interests and issues specifically connected to one sex now being shared by members of both sexes to Judith Butler's concept of *gender performativity*, which views gender as 'a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real' (Butler: 1990, viii). Butler attempts to rid gender of any stable and inflexible attributes and desires – in other words, to remove any rules associated with a particular gender – and suggests that an individual's particular gender performance 'destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates' (Butler: 1990, viii). It is also important to point out that this is 'not (necessarily) just a view on

sexuality or gender. It also suggests that the confines of any identity can potentially be reinvented by its owner' (Gauntlett: 1998, <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-butl.htm>, par.13).

Butler's theory of gender performativity intended to show that the gestures, acts, and enactments associated with gender are "performed" in the sense that:

The essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler: 1990, 136)

Anxious to remove any idea of stability from these gender performances, rather than implying that an individual can only "perform" their gender in one fixed way, Butler claims that each person can take on any number of gender performances; gender performances, she argues, are 'what you *do* at particular times, rather than a universal *who you are*' (Gauntlett: 1998, <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-butl.htm>, par.8). Butler thus asks us to view gender as 'both intentional and performative, where "performative" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning' (Butler: 1990, 139). While Butler may have been one of the earliest theorists to define the concept of gender performativity, she insists that it is not a new idea by any means, but rather that it is something that people have been doing naturally for a long time:

Butler argues that we all put on a gender performance, whether traditional or not, anyway, and so it is not a question of whether to *do* a gender performance, but what form that performance will take. By choosing to be different about it, we might work to change gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. (Gauntlett: 1998, <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-butl.htm>, par.10)

Butler describes how gender performativity is further complicated by the fact that each individual usually has more than one gender performance in which to participate at any given time. As she explains:

Further, the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once. (Butler: 1999, 185)

Butler, however, is not overly idealistic or unrealistic about the potential results which can occur when one performs a gender outside of the societal norms. She recognises that society has expectations of how each person is supposed to act, of the performance they are supposed to put on:

In other words, act and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality. (Butler: 1999, 173)

Connected to this, Butler discusses how people who fail to perform their gender “correctly” according to society’s standards are punished in some way. In order to avoid this punishment, society encourages individuals to conform to its expectations of “correct and acceptable behaviour”, what Butler refers to as “discrete genders”:

Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right. (Butler: 1999, 178)

We are here reminded of the reference from *Sushi For Beginners*, in the previous chapter, in which Keyes presents one example of how gender is “performed” in the form of a male homosexual character arriving at the protagonist’s workplace. Rather than this character, named Robbie, performing society’s expected role of “man”, instead, with his flamboyant clothes (he wears, we remember, magenta pants, a see-through T-shirt, and a tiny leather jacket) and way of speaking, as well as his obvious interest in fashion, he performs the role of a stereotypically camp character who, on spying the protagonist’s Gucci-style handbag, admits to experiencing a ‘fashion moment’ (Keyes: 2007, 355). Even extracts as simple as this one serve the function of showing gender performativity in action. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler mentions how society functions by setting standards/requirements of, for example, behaviour to which all individuals are expected to “naturally” conform. Those who do not follow the rules are punished, ignored, or ridiculed. Butler says that ‘all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and that all margins are accordingly considered dangerous’

(Butler: 1999, 168). As Robbie's dress and actions are accepted by the other characters, and eventually by the readers also, Keyes is helping to demonstrate gender performativity on Butler's terms; as there are no punitive consequences attached to Robbie performing his gender role differently to other men. Rather, each individual is allowed, even expected, to perform their gender as they please, without repercussions.

Of course, extracts such as this may be seen as an overly optimistic, utopian vision of a society where all gender performances are accepted without question and without fear of punishment for deviating from the norm. Others may argue, on the other hand, that such extracts set a good example of a society in which people are free to express their own individuality. In a similar sense, Butler goes on to discuss the concept of gender performativity in perhaps its most literal, and often taboo, form: that of drag/cross-dressing. According to Butler, all 'gender is a form of "drag" [...] there is no "real" core gender to refer to' (Klages: 1997, <http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/butler.html>, par.13). She explains that the 'performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed' (Butler: 1999, 175). Butler is aware that drag, and its acceptance as a recognised gender, is not without its own set of difficulties. Cross-dressing has been assigned a marginalised position in society and, as explained earlier, all marginalised social structures are considered to be potentially dangerous. The following extract from *Gender Trouble* explains the problems often associated with drag:

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities. But the relation between the 'imitation' and the 'original' is, I think, more complicated than that critique generally allows. (Butler: 1999, 174-175)

Despite its currently marginalised position in society, Butler sees drag as a potentially positive force in terms of gender performativity. While attempting to dismiss the idea of there being a fixed, true gender identity, Butler views the acceptance of drag as a way of achieving

this, in the hopes that it would encourage fluid, changing, and varied gender performances for all:

I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. (Butler: 1999, 174)

Regardless of Butler's assertion that drag can have a positive effect, it has retained a marginalised and taboo position in society. Keyes has, however, not shied away from discussing this topic. As mentioned in Chapter One, *This Charming Man* features a sub-plot in which one of the protagonists, Lola, befriends a group of secretive cross-dressers, and, as she helps them to choose clothes and express themselves (she is a stylist by profession), her residence becomes a type of "safe house" where these men can perform this other part of their gender without fear of ridicule.

Admittedly, Lola only befriends these men unwittingly at the beginning, and, like many people, she initially feels uncomfortable being in close contact with anything or anyone who deviates from societal norms, and then feels even more uncomfortable in case she appears judgemental or politically incorrect:

'Where can I change?' he demanded, back to his man's voice.
Change?
'Change into my dress.'
Dress?
'Yes, my dress!' Tapped his briefcase in exasperated fashion.
Oh God. 'You have trannie clothes in briefcase?'
'Cross-dressing, cross-dressing, I am sick telling you.'
Didn't want him to change into dress. Wanted him to leave. But couldn't say that because feared he would think was judging him. But not judging him for being trannie. Simply didn't like him. (Keyes: 2008, 271-272)

However, the more Lola gets to know these men, the more she understands their situation, and she becomes increasingly compassionate and protective towards them, to the point where their cross-dressing is less significant to her; it is merely another facet of their personality.

In a further attempt to render cross-dressing unexceptional, Lola also realises that there is no specific “type” of man who indulges in cross-dressing, and that even the most unlikely of men may partake in it:

Trannies gone. Thinking about evening's strange revelations, to wit: Rossa Considerine a tranny. You would NEVER think it to look at him. When he's a man, looks like he doesn't even comb his hair. (Keyes: 2008, 313)

This extract is a very clear example of Butler's hope for a fluid, changing gender performance. It shows how individuals do not have to rigidly adhere to one fixed gender identity, but can change their performance as and when they desire. It also demonstrates how Keyes, in her work, addresses issues that are of central import to post-feminist ideology.

Ironically, the gender performance of the cross-dressers in *This Charming Man* helps to articulate to women the often irrational and unnecessary behaviour that many women have towards their own image:

He looked up. 'Have you any snacks?'
'Snacks? Like what?'
'Cheese straws.'
'*Cheese straws?* Where would get cheese straws in Knockavoy?'
'Okay. Any crisps? Peanuts?'
'Probably not.'
'Check!'
Grumpily went into kitchen. Located half-bag of greasy peanuts in back of press.
'Found peanuts, but God knows how long they've been –'
'Put them in bowl – nice bowl – and offer them to me.'
Muttering to self, 'What your last slave die of?' returned to kitchen and tipped them into dish, but not very nice one, just out of spite.
'Peanut, Noel?'
'Natasha.'
'Peanut, Natasha?'
'Oh cannot! Watching figure!'
'But you asked for them!'
Then understood. Was fiction. Obligated to join in. 'But you have gorgeous figure, Natasha. You did not have dessert all week and you did Bums, Tums and Thighs class this morning.' Getting carried away. Feeling mildly hysterical. 'Be naughty girl. Have peanut. And another little drinky!'
Sloshed more rosé into his glass.
'Oh! You are very bold! Will have another drink if you will join me.' Wicked twinkle in his eye – so much blue eyeshadow! 'Go on, Lola, one little drinky won't kill you.'
Is this way girls behave? Is this what he sees? (Keyes: 2008, 275)

In its portrayals of gender performances – from men who take an interest in their appearance to cross-dressers – Keyes is attempting to represent *all* aspects of contemporary society.

Sympathetic and understanding extracts, such as the ones above about cross-dressing, are also helping to reduce narrow-minded opinions towards anything with a marginalised status in society. She is making the point that popular culture can give voice to issues which have hitherto been the province of theoretical discussion. By enunciating these issues in such a generic forum, it becomes clear that chick lit has a role to play in a post-feminist project of continuing to reimagine gender boundaries in ways which are liberatory and emancipatory to both women and men in our contemporary culture. I am not claiming that there is an intellectual parity between writers like Butler and Keyes, but there are enough overlapping concerns and opinions to suggest a form of adequation between their outlooks and value-sets.

Conclusion

Chick lit and contemporary feminism are noticeably similar in that they both recognise that the contexts and lives of contemporary women have changed considerably, and that there are still ongoing difficulties in many areas of women's lives. Chick lit and contemporary feminism both present a realisation, albeit in different forms, that 'while women have reached social positions and objectives that were unthinkable at the beginning of the twentieth century, they are still victims of inequalities that prove that patriarchy pervades their lives, conditioning the way they live and the choices they make' (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>). Nevertheless, since chick lit's explosion onto the literary scene, there have been critics who have disputed any notion of chick lit's feminist potential, such as Pérez-Serrano who states: 'chick lit is representative of some of the discourses of feminism, self-consciously denouncing negative aspects in contemporary women's lives, but it is not a feminist genre per se due to its lack of political intent' (Pérez-Serrano: 2009a, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/perezserrano.html>). Perhaps critics have been slow to embrace chick lit's discussion of feminist issues because of its notable sense of humour; for many detractors of chick lit, 'feminist means serious, and

chick lit's humour marks it as unserious' (Ferriss: 2006, 9). Chick lit has similarly been 'censured for failing to move out of the protagonists' personal sphere and relate the process of confession to a wider context of female discrimination and social inequality' (Genz: 2009, 87). Yet I believe that a genre – any genre – does not, to use the old cliché, need to beat its readers over the head with "political intent" in order to be effective. To insist that something must be overtly political in order to be, in this case, successfully feminist, is comparable to disputing certain feminists' credibility due to trivial and irrelevant aspects of their lives; for example Naomi Wolf has been criticised for being 'too pretty' to be a feminist (Walter: 1999, 74). On a related note, Natasha Walter asked the following: 'why do we fail to consider the ends that these women might help us to attain, and instead become excessively hung up on the means that they use and the lives that they lead?' (Walter: 1999, 75). In a similar sense, why is it assumed that a genre of popular women's fiction cannot discuss and circulate important feminist issues, as clearly Keyes is an example of an author who is making important attempts to do just that? Walter suggests that, in the search for contemporary and accessible feminist outlets, 'we have to go beyond the most obvious vignettes [...] to try to see what impact feminism has had on other women and whether it is true that feminism, today and in the past, has had little effect on most women's lives' (Walter: 1999, 199). It has, after all, been suggested that the reason that post-feminism is both 'conflict-ridden but also exciting and compelling is precisely that it does not conform to our definitional frameworks and our preconceptions of where the boundaries of academia, politics and popular culture should be' (Genz: 2009, 9). In terms of literature, and popular culture in general, chick lit may provide one such alternative outlet to discuss and depict the changes that feminism has undoubtedly created for women, and the areas that are still left unresolved and that still cause problems for women in many areas, highlighting and disproving the misconception that the struggle for equality is far from over. Keyes' format – the chick lit genre – undoubtedly

allows such issues to both reach a wide audience and also to become accessible to women who may not have any other formal knowledge of feminist ideas, or, indeed, those women who may be uncomfortable identifying themselves as “feminist” and ‘yet are interested in thinking about the real gender issues that affect them’ (Isbister: 2009, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/isbister.html>). Award-winning author Zadie Smith has publicly hailed Keyes as “‘one of the most important feminists’ in modern writing’ and, in an open letter addressed to Keyes, Smith wrote: “‘Whether or not you fancy the label ‘feminist’, I think you’re one of the more important ones, because you have a massive audience – much bigger than mine’”, therefore recognising how chick lit’s global appeal and huge sales has the power to allow its messages to reach a much wider audience (Nolan: 2006, <http://www.independent.ie/national-news/marian-keyes-praised-by-zadie-133621.html>, par. 6).

Tania Modleski insists that ‘it is time to begin a feminist reading of women’s reading’ (Modleski: 2008, 25) and, taking popular culture, such as chick lit, into account when determining the feminist potential of such genres would also allow for the possibility of a inclusionary and ‘multifaceted postfeminist landscape that crosses the boundaries between popular culture, academia, and politics’ (Genz: 2009, 18) to finally come into being.

I would like to leave the last word of this chapter with Keyes herself; although Keyes identifies herself as a feminist, she is also aware that there are some people who she feels embody a more “snobbish” feminism, particularly regarding the potential of feminist thought in popular culture, who refuse to see how chick lit can potentially address serious, feminist-related issues. To those people, Keyes has the following to say: ‘Show what an independent, free-thinking woman you are by reading what you like and telling the feminists to stick it’ (Keyes: 2005, 295).

Conclusion

Much of the charm of these novels is thus located in their fresh and comic perspectives on Irish women, their men, and the domestic and family dramas that shape their lives. These fictions are also grappling with the contemporary social and economic realities of Irish life. (Cremin: 1999, <http://www.iol.ie/~iwc/kcremin.html>, par.21)

Early in this thesis, it was noted how both popular culture and woman-centred literature were alike in that they were either subjected to harsh criticism or else were ignored altogether. When the genre in question is both popular and woman-centred, as is chick lit, then being ridiculed and dismissed as worthless, trivial, and unoriginal seems inevitable. Misconceptions such as these stemmed from ‘a critical double standard in popular cultural analyses, whereby those forms perceived as “for women” remained on the cultural trash heap at the same time as forms broadly seen to be “for men” became objects of study within the academy’ (Tasker: 1991, 329). Popular culture theorist Ray B. Browne asserts that ‘it is a grave mistake to assume that all creators of the popular arts achieve no worthwhile standards’ (Browne: 2006a, 79), and so, in undertaking this thesis, I aimed to question whether chick lit really is as narrow and trivial as some would suggest, or whether the genre may have previously underrepresented and understudied value. To do this, I used the example of Irish author Marian Keyes to examine if and how she uses the conventions of chick lit to speak about more serious issues.

The thesis was divided up into three distinct sections whereby each section presented a discussion of the main elements of Keyes’ work in a specific contextual framework. Examining both her fiction and non-fiction, Chapter One examined the place of Ireland and, specifically, the societal role of Irish women in Keyes’ work. It examined the status of the Irish family – including everything from the sanctity of marriage and motherhood for women

as well as the difficulties that ensued as women moved out of the home and into the workplace – as well as issues regarding women’s sexuality and the body, homosexuality and race in Ireland. Although many of these issues were once similarly prevalent in other countries and cultures, Ireland’s somewhat belated development means that, for many people (particularly women), they are still an issue, as change in different areas has often proven to be slow and challenging. This chapter, then, aimed to show how Keyes not only presents an accurate reflection of life in contemporary Ireland for many women, but how she also, in a sense, documents Irish women’s history, both by reflecting on how times have changed for women throughout the years, and also by showing how some attitudes still exist which limit women. Keyes is also successful in offering fictive scenes which depict women breaking away from traditional constraints and moving forward in a way that suits them, such as presenting a variety of opinions on marriage and motherhood while not condemning any views that differ from the expected “norm” and instead highlighting the notion of *choice*.

Chapter Two focused on Keyes contextual placement as a chick lit author; on how her novels fit the conventions of this genre. It examined how she makes use of common chick lit traits and often altered them in some way. In some of Keyes’ novels, the love plot, for instance, may mean that a relationship has broken down and the woman ‘undertakes a journey of self-discovery in which she must come to terms with her adult life and redeem her future, [though] not through the convention of heterosexual union’ (Cremin: 1999, <http://www.iol.ie/~iwc/kcremin.html>, par.32). Similarly, Keyes often takes a common – and criticised – chick lit cliché, such as the eccentric family or the gay best friend, and presents an original development of it. In *Last Chance Saloon*, for instance, the gay best friend is not relegated to a minor role but is, instead, one of the protagonists of the story, while the Walsh family, featured in many of the novels, have become almost as well-known as the books themselves. In doing so, this chapter suggested that chick lit may not be as limiting as is often

perceived, and that, while still working within the genre's conventions, Keyes is an example of an author who shows that there is potential to transcend the genre's limitations through a more innovative use of these generic tropes.

Finally, Chapter Three explored Keyes' writing in terms of its feminist context. This chapter examined how both the third wave and post-feminism can, and has, drawn on 'popular culture to interrogate and explore twenty-first-century configurations of female empowerment and re-examine the meanings of feminism in the present context as a politics of contradictions and ambivalence' (Genz: 2009, 162). To do so, this chapter examined her frequent references to contemporary feminist issues, including women in the workplace, relationships and sex, and the body. Drawing on the work from feminist theorists such as Natasha Walter, Naomi Wolf, and Judith Butler, the chapter also showed how, in her fictive scenarios, Keyes depicts the positive changes that feminism has made in women's lives, as well as the areas which feminism still needs to challenge, such as sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Through her characters, she also presents the confusion felt by many women in these post-feminist times, particularly regarding the mixed feelings about whether to prioritise a career or a relationship. In presenting these contradictions in her work, in showing the good as well as the bad in terms of women's lives, Keyes is again writing an accurate and realistic portrayal of contemporary life that many readers will be able to identify with.

Additionally, rather than merely talking *about* feminism, Keyes instead shows it *in action* by presenting actual examples of women's repression as well as how feminism has helped their lives, which shows how chick lit, and popular culture in general, may be effective in being able to circulate political issues to a wider audience than pure theory would be able to, and in an arguably more reader-friendly format. Her mimetic as opposed to diegetic presentation of these issues allows readers to empathise with the existential, lived

consequences of these dilemmas. This point can be directly linked to popular culture studies which praise its ability to simplify ‘complex issues for an audience that otherwise would not even be aware of an issue or might not be interested in following its finer points’ (Harmon: 2006, 70). As Harmon continues, although this “popularization” of complex matters is a process often (and easily) maligned by experts,’ and, indeed, the feminist potential of chick lit has been highly doubted by some, it is important to remember that, ‘in a world where no one can be an expert in everything, such popularization often represents the only opportunity most people have to try to understand the issues and events that affect them’ (Harmon: 2006, 70). If chick lit is able to transmit feminist issues, to open readers’ eyes and minds to what is still a very current issue, then that can only be a positive aspect of the genre.

Detractors of popular culture may question the purpose, the worth, of studying chick lit, a genre which, as we have seen, has been subjected to more than its share of criticism. I would, however, like to quote Roger B. Rollin who cited an important reason for studying of any form of popular culture:

If, as academicians, we can convince insecure colleagues and suspicious deans that it is important to study a phenomenon which engages millions of our fellow citizens – including not only most of our students but most of those same colleagues and deans – then it should be easy enough to satisfy their queries as to the methodology for such a study with the simple answer, “historical.” (Rollin: 2006, 242)

Popular culture, as Rollin insists, is historical; it *is* part of our history. This study of Keyes, for instance, is important in terms of how she represents both Irish women’s history and the conditions that Irish women live in today. It is important in terms of placing chick lit in terms of its place in not just popular culture but, more specifically, women’s popular culture and women’s literature. And it is important in terms of its place amidst contemporary woman-centred texts. Any form of popular culture is worth studying because it represents ‘the voice of the people – their likes and dislikes, the lifeblood of daily existence, their way of life’, and, in undertaking an objective and non-judgemental study, we often discover that ‘much of the popular culture is to be appreciated’ (Browne: 2006a, 76). In terms of this thesis, when a

genre of texts has the power to chronicle the lives of women all over the world, to record the nature of women's lives in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, how can the importance of studying such texts be accurately disputed? In examining these three distinct yet connected contextual areas, this thesis has shown that Keyes is an example of how chick lit may be worth more than is typically realised on seeing the novels' sparkly pink covers; it suggests that that her novels, far from being nothing more than 'light-hearted relationship stories, in fact tackle serious social and personal concerns' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 30). We should remember that such covers and characteristics of chick lit have meant that many such authors have found themselves 'at the mercy of the marketing strategies of their publishers and the reception of their work would be profoundly influenced by its packaging' (Whelehan: 2005, 120), which has resulted in many talented authors being unfairly dismissed.

Yet when we consider that, within the distinctively chick lit-style covers of her books, Keyes discusses everything from feminist issues to Irish history to contemporary aspects of Irish culture, then the boundaries of chick lit seem decidedly more stretched and permeable than when the genre first appeared. Of course, this is not to suggest that all chick lit writers are writing such culturally significant texts, though this is also true of any genre. However, other writers are making similar statements in their work, albeit perhaps to a somewhat lesser degree. In terms of other Irish authors alone, Kate Thompson and Marisa Mackle have both discussed domestic violence, while Colette Caddle has discussed the problems of being a homosexual in Catholic Ireland in one of her novels. If other writers continue the trend of using popular culture to discuss important issues, it will inevitably become more difficult to criticise the texts and hopefully more serious attention will be paid to them. In terms of chick lit's decidedly woman-centred approach, which allows writers to bring women's issues into the public arena, authors such as Keyes prove that the genre has definite potential to 'evolve with the times to give women fiction that is relevant to their lives' (Mlynowski: 2006, 15).

A study of this kind has the potential of expanding to incorporate a variety of different areas. Remaining with woman-centred popular culture, women writers are emerging *en masse* in a number of different popular genres, for example crime and supernatural/horror fiction. Taking the example of crime fiction, for instance, it was once the case the female characters appeared as helpless victims at the hands of the perpetrator, who was male, and had to wait, and hope, to be rescued, also by a man. Nowadays, however, a new series of crime novels are being released by female authors, such as Tess Gerritsen and Karin Slaughter, to name just two, who have promoted women characters to the roles of detectives, doctors, even criminals, therefore removing them from their formerly silenced, objectified role and providing them with an important sense of subjectivity. Again because of their link with the popular, many such texts have gone largely unexamined in any serious, academic study. I believe it would be beneficial to the theory of both popular culture and feminism to undertake a study of these other genres from a woman-centred perspective, to witness how they are speaking of women's issues and the impact they may be having on popular culture and women's literature in general.

Discussions of chick lit have often been divided between people 'who expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism, to represent women's struggles in patriarchal culture and offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women, and those who argue instead that it should portray the reality of young women grappling with modern life' (Ferriss: 2006, 9). But why cannot chick lit do both? In his discussion of the study of popular culture, Roger B. Rollin stated that "'excellence" and "importance" have never been synonymous' (Rollin: 2006, 243), and so, despite the criticism, ridicule and dismissal of chick lit as being a worthy literary form, this does not mean that the genre cannot be used to address worthwhile subjects. One discussion of Keyes' novels, for instance, describes their 'highly contradictory function: while appearing to offer a fantasy

that allows readers to escape the everyday, they in fact re-imagine everyday feminine concerns which subtly question the powerful fantasies of the maternal informing Irish culture' (Cremin: 1999, <http://www.iol.ie/~iwc/kcremin.html>, par.35), which seems to disprove the misconception that the popular and the political cannot work in harmony.

Taking such statements into consideration, this thesis has attempted to adhere to the suggestion that chick lit novels can no longer 'be dismissed as entirely regressive, as in employing these particular narrative modes, they do effectively rework and document certain aspects of the lives and dilemmas of modern women; they are therefore convincingly "realistic"' (Smyczyńska: 2007, 58). I hope that this thesis has demonstrated how it is no longer possible to label *all* chick lit as trivial and unoriginal, as it is evident from this study of Marian Keyes that there are chick lit novels which are making important points about what it is to be a woman in the twenty-first century. Feminism has, after all, come to be defined by the fiction, films and other forms of culture that attempt to portray or challenge feminist views, and surely, as Imelda Whelehan insists, it is better to 'acknowledge "feminist" interventions wherever they appear rather than try to section them off into two wings of writing – one from the party faithful and the other of the writers who may also have enjoyed commercial success with their works' (Whelehan: 2005, 73). If, as Natasha Walter suggests, woman-centred revolutions have always 'relied on women's articulacy' (Walter: 1999, 109), it would seem counter-productive to the contemporary feminist movement to continue to dismiss any genre that is focused on describing women's lives.

There are numerous possibilities as to why Keyes' novels may seem more overtly woman-centred than what might be termed typically chick lit books: perhaps it is because of Irish literary fore-sisters, such as Edna O'Brien, who was among those who started the trend of speaking honestly and overtly about women's lives. Or perhaps it is because Irish women have been repressed for many years in many aspects of their lives, and today's writers, such

as Keyes, recognise that chick lit's strongly woman-centred approach finally allows for these areas to be voiced and addressed to a primarily female audience, to a popular audience who are not intimidated by the genre or by the discourse which is reader-friendly. Kathy Cremin highlights this when she suggests that Keyes' popularity stems from the fact that female readers, particularly Irish female readers, 'get pleasure from reading narratives which are centred on sympathetic Irish women characters; where women's lives and women's issues are prioritised; where the heroines are shown to succeed and women's experiences are validated' (Cremin: 1999, <http://www.iol.ie/~iwc/kcremin.html>, par.19). Cremin, as noted in Chapter One, even cites Keyes herself as linking 'her popularity to the fact that she is narrating a different kind of Irishness' (Cremin: 1999, <http://www.iol.ie/~iwc/kcremin.html>, par.18), which would reiterate the earlier idea that her novels are showing how the lives of Irish women have changed dramatically in some areas and not at all in others. It is also true to say that her characters are representative of much of the life-experience of her readers, and of the embedded real-life situations which these readers encounter. Reading fiction may well allow for readers to identify aspects of their own lives in this fictive Lacanian mirror and perhaps such a process is helpful in terms of reflecting on their own lives.

Tania Modleski insists that the 'price women pay for their popular entertainment is high [in terms of criticism and ridicule], but they may still be getting more than anyone bargained for' (Modleski: 2008, 25), and, in terms of this study of Keyes, this thesis has explored how she is utilising the chick lit genre to address important political, societal, and individual issues and concerns regarding contemporary women. As she goes from strength to strength in terms of her themes, the ways she depicts women, and how she speaks to and about the issues they face, Keyes looks set to carve an exciting path for chick lit to potentially develop as a powerful form of fiction for present and future generations of women.

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