FICTION-CRITICISM IN INTERWAR ENGLAND: JUDGMENT, GENDER, AND THE PLURALIST PUBLIC SPHERE

BY

CECILY R. GARBER

DISSEASON

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Kirkpatrick Professor Vicki Mahaffey, Chair
Associate Professor Hina Nazar
Associate Professor Jim Hansen
Assistant Professor Andrew Gaedke
ABSTRACT

It is tempting to say that intellectual writers in early twentieth-century Britain produced popular journalism for outlets like *Good Housekeeping*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Daily Telegraph* simply to make money. However, this dissertation argues that such “side” work in fact played an important role in intellectual writers’ careers by giving them tools to produce topical, political literature. This study first examines the popular essays of Rose Macaulay, Aldous Huxley, and Virginia Woolf, all intellectually respected novelists in their day, to argue that their journalism crossed contentious lines in the period’s “battle of the ’brows,” or the battle between high, middle, and lowbrows for cultural legitimacy. This study then defines a genre I call “fiction-criticism” to describe novels like Macaulay’s *Potterism*, Huxley’s *Point Counter Point*, and Woolf’s unpublished “novel-essay,” *The Pargiters*, which all bear significant traces of their popular essay writing and occupy an overdetermined position in the literary public sphere.

Fiction-criticism’s status as accessible, intelligent, and conversant with high and middlebrow conventions allowed it to capture and speak to a wide readership from varying classes and cultural backgrounds. In doing so, the genre promoted dialogue between citizens with different tastes, outlooks, and even value systems and consequently worked to broaden readers’ political judgment. The project argues that cultivating political judgment was particularly important for women who were entering the public sphere through professions newly opened to them. To ground my understanding of judgment, I turn to Hannah Arendt’s seminal text on the subject, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, which draws a link between aesthetic judgment, a practice that these writers were cultivating, and political judgment, which effects how readers perceive and ultimately act in the world. This project concludes with a “coda” that demonstrates
the persistence and relevance of fiction-criticism in the twenty-first century, in J. M. Coetzee’s

*Diary of a Bad Year.*
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Clearly I owe many thanks upon completion of this project. My adviser, Vicki Mahaffey, is not only wonderfully knowledgeable about all things British modernist, but also warm and understanding, and has always offered both praise and criticism in the most constructive ways. Without her patience and insight, I would not have made it through this program. I thank Hina Nazar for introducing me to the primary theoretical framework engaged here and for providing valuable feedback on my writing about theories of judgment, both contemporary and Victorian. I have carried her ideas with me from my first semester in graduate school through to the end of this dissertation. Jim Hansen and Andrew Gaedke have also offered incisive comments and questions about this work, and I appreciate the time all my committee members gave to reading this dissertation on top of many other commitments.

I learned much about scholarship on the middlebrow from conferences organized by Kate MacDonald, at Ghent University, and thank her for feedback on my thoughts about Macaulay’s 1910s novels. I began toying with some of these ideas in eye-opening classes taught by Julia Saville, Matthew Hart, Ted Underwood, Catherine Gray, Joseph Valente, and by Vicki, Hina, and Jim as well. My experience at Illinois has been enriched by participating in the British Modernities Group, in its many meetings, seminars, and conferences. My fellow graduate students, including Claire Barber, Kathy Skwarczek, Carrie Dickinson, Esther Dettmar, John Lee Moore, Shawn Ballard, Heather McLeer, and the BMG’s founder, now professor, Christina Walter, make me proud to be in Illinois’s English program. Special thanks to my friends in the English department without whom I wouldn’t have made it: Stephanie Brabant, Ligia Mihut, Zia Miric, Thierry Ramais (and his lovely wife, lawyer Colleen Ramais), Erin Heath and friends working elsewhere at Illinois, Diana Jaheer, Harriett Green, and Anya Hamrick.
I am perennially grateful to my parents, Linnette and Randy Garber, who have supported my pursuit of this degree and all those leading up to it. I owe them far more than can be named in these acknowledgements. Just a handful of their essential provisions include: delicious food, warm and safe shelter, unconditional love, a running start at life, copious books, opportunities to learn about other cultures, travel to far away places, and education in so many ways. Finally, I want to thank my boyfriend, Benjamin Hsu, who has been a much needed balance and ballast in my life during these past three years of writing. From driving with me for 15 hours to Montreal, where I attended my first professional conference, to helping me produce elaborate and sometimes unusual vegetarian meals in Illinois, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, he has enriched my life, both inside and outside academia.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: THE EXPANDING PRESS, FRAGMENTING PUBLIC SPHERE, AND WOMEN’S NEW ROLES IN INTERWAR ENGLAND........................................1

CHAPTER 2: TASTE AND POLITICS: ROSE MACAULAY’S 1910S AND 20S NOVELS...............................................................31

CHAPTER 3: “HIGH MIDDLES” AND DULL WOMEN: ALDOUS HUXLEY’S INTERWAR ESSAYS AND 1920S NOVELS......................................................99

CHAPTER 4: MEDIATING MIDDLEBROW MEDIA: VIRGINIA WOOLF’S COMPLETE ESSAYS AND “NOVEL-ESSAY”...........................................155

CHAPTER 5: CODA: J. M. COETZEE’S DIARY OF A BAD YEAR..........................234

BIBLIOGRAPHY........................................................................................................258
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: THE EXPANDING PRESS, FRAGMENTING PUBLIC SPHERE,
AND WOMEN’S NEW ROLES IN INTERWAR ENGLAND

While they may seem like an odd threesome, Rose Macaulay, Aldous Huxley, and Virginia Woolf saw quite a lot of each other in interwar England, throughout the 1920s and 30s. Woolf’s diary is peppered with references to the two others, recording when they met at parties, dinners, luncheons, and teas. They were all born into what Noel Annan famously called “the intellectual aristocracy,” intellectual families prominent in the Victorian age that produced intellectual children. In their day, all were respected as highbrow novelists who also wrote popular journalism that was distributed to wide readerships. All were active pacifists in the late 1930s, a time when it wasn’t easy to maintain such a stance. To be fair, there were clear differences between these writers: though their social circles overlapped, they weren’t equivalent, nor did they write for quite the same publications. Many of their novels employ highly divergent styles. However, Macaulay, Huxley, and Woolf’s positionings as respected intellectuals and fiction-writers who contributed significantly to widely-read publications led them all at some point of the interwar period to produce pieces of work that had much in common, writings that I here call “fiction-criticism.” In studying together these writers’ largely neglected works that combine elements of journalism with more or less realist narrative, I aim to draw attention to the complications of cultural hierarchies and readerships in the interwar period, intellectual novelists’ engagement with a broad reading public, and the potential of such work to impact the thinking of a wide range of readers.

While technically fiction, the fiction-criticism studied here contains expository passages that sometimes, if not often, quote verbatim from essays the authors published elsewhere. The fiction follows somewhat in the tradition of nineteenth-century realism—it is not highly
experimental, yet it is more “talkative” than most realist fiction. Each of these novelists had elsewhere experimented to different degrees with aesthetic forms, yet in their fiction-criticism, they chose to write in relatively familiar forms. Such work combined imaginative and critical functions to engage a wide readership, as readable novels would, while pushing readers to recognize outlooks outside their own within interwar England, to consider multiple perspectives, and ultimately to broaden their judgment of the world around them. None of the writers considered here were involved in traditional politics until the 1930s, when the peace movement grew more active. However, I will argue that through their fiction-criticism, Macaulay, Huxley, and Woolf were significantly engaged with the contemporary world, encouraging political pluralist judgment in their readers at a time when the public sphere was understood to be divided and further dividing.

**Mass-market publications and the public(s)’s judgment**

Debates about the cognitive capabilities of the reading public and its role in politics proceeded with vigor on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the interwar period. On the American side, for example, Walter Lippmann and John Dewey famously disagreed about the ability of individual citizens to engage with multiple perspectives and make independent decisions. Lippmann argued that a small cadre of experts manipulated public opinion and public decisions and therefore “the private citizen [felt] like a deaf spectator in the back row” in the show of politics (32). In Lippmann’s account, the conditions of modern society prevented citizens from hearing and processing different viewpoints. Dewey, on the other hand, did not

---

1 Huxley was said to be an aesthete in his youth, Macaulay anticipated Huxley’s science-fiction dystopia in her own speculative novel *What Not*, and Woolf’s fiction is, of course, an undisputed member of the high modernist canon.
believe that the public was as easily manipulated as Lippmann thought. Dewey argued that to do their jobs, politicians and other public officials had to be capable of moving between the spheres of everyday citizens and policy-makers, themselves seeing multiple points of view. Dewey further argued that because of this movement, “methods of debate, discussion, or persuasion” and the ability of citizens “to judge what knowledge is given them” needed to be improved (50). He believed it was possible for citizens to exchange diverse viewpoints publically and to come to independent conclusions about them.

Debates like Lippmann and Dewey’s were fueled in part by the swift increase in mass-market media during the early twentieth century that threatened to dominate and direct consumers’ thinking. The press and its concomitant varied publications had been growing since the eighteenth century and had significantly expanded in the nineteenth, but it wasn’t until the turn of the twentieth century that the production of mass-market publications exploded. In Britain, not just the middle class, but the entire population began reading journalism, and during the First World War, the reading public became highly dependent on a variety of mass-market papers and periodicals. Citizens were thus reading more than ever before, mostly in the new forms of the tabloid newspaper, mass-market periodical, and bestselling novel. The effects of this new kind of reading were unknown, and they were often discussed in anxious tones. No one knew just how everyday readers’ patterns of thinking and acting would or would not change.

In the United Kingdom, worries about a fragmenting public sphere populated with citizens that might or might not be able to judge the increasingly diverse sources of information available to them were crystallized in Q. D. Leavis’s dissertation-turned-book, *Fiction and the

---

2 Ironically, worries about newspaper reading were expressed in language much like that used by those today who are wary of blog and internet reading that threatens newspapers, which are now considered intellectually valuable.
Reading Public, published in 1932. Leavis vigorously argued that the majority of the public was incapable of deciding for itself what it should and shouldn’t read, but unlike Lippmann, Leavis was in favor of a cadre of intellectuals leading the way. She bemoaned the displacement of an intellectual hegemony that had once controlled all readers’ taste in the early modern period by determining the limited number of cultural products suitable for distribution; modern-day readers could not be trusted to choose wisely among the variety of reading material available to them, she argued. Because readers were not properly guided in the interwar period, claimed Leavis, they had a poor mental life and worse, they were deeply divided and lacked consensus. The development of “several publics, loosely linked together, with nearly a score of literary weeklies, monthlies, and a quarterly, which serve to standardize different levels of taste” was a great cause of concern (21). Q. D. Leavis and her husband, F. R. Leavis, along with students and critics associated with their circle and their journal, Scrutiny, loudly trumpeted their desire for a cultured few to reassert control over cultural consumption to improve the public’s level of thinking.

While Leavis’ political stance may not have been widespread, many people were thinking about and debating the larger issues she addressed, i.e. divisions among the reading public. Arnold Bennett, for example, took a non-judgmental and purely practical view towards the increasing number of readerships at the turn of the century. In his 1898 “Practical Guide” to women journalists, he explained that “Each paper has its own public, its own policy, its own tone, its own physiognomy, its own preferences, its own prejudices” and urged aspiring journalists to study a publication’s particular readership before submitting work there (79). In The Commercial Side of Literature, a writing guide from the 1920s, author Michael Joseph explained how both authors and readers were divided into demi-publics, writing that “the gulf between the highbrow
[piece of literature] and the ‘bestseller’ is so wide that very very few can hope to bridge it” (8). Writers and readers alike were expected to fall into distinct camps with pre-determined expectations for producing and consuming culture. Fiction-criticism, I will argue here, aimed to cross some of those very wide gulfs.

The prevailing arbiters of taste, at least in terms of literature, began in the interwar period to be further divided between camps of writers who contributed to popular publications and academic critics who wrote for a more specialized audience. It wasn’t just the Leavises, but their arch rivals, writers like Bloomsbury member Desmond McCarthy who saw newspapers as “taste makers that shaped the blank slate of the public’s mind” (qtd. in Collier 15). Newspapers were thought to highly influence readers’ decision-making, and according to many intellectuals, not for the better. For thinkers of all political stripes, “degrading the press was the clearest way to signal intellectual seriousness and commitment to art,” as Patrick Collier has said (4). It was at this time too that literary criticism began to specialize and become a purview of highly trained university-based critics. The Leavises aimed to assert a new common standard through academic training and academic journals that would be distributed to the public. Others such as I.A. Richards laid the foundations for New Criticism and close reading, in turn becoming the basis of much modern-day literary instruction and study. These developments took place at a remove from everyday mass-market publications.³

The authors of fiction-criticism studied here fell between these two increasingly estranged camps of widely distributed publications and intellectual academic work, which gave

³ Allison Pease has argued that the most prominent of early academic literary critics including Richards and Leavis “decried the effects of the ‘sensational’ media” at the same time that they “appropriated the very techniques attributed to mass-cultural consumption—shock and sensation—into their lexicon of high-cultural, aesthetic values” (77). Thus they were not as removed from the mass market as they would seem upon first consideration or they conceived themselves to be.
them a vantage point from which to plan bridges to cross the widening gaps. Macaulay and Huxley were Oxbridge educated and Woolf, despite her claims to be “uneducated,” was incredibly well read. Yet none pursued higher degrees or any employment within universities. Woolf and Huxley were highly critical of academic criticism in their journalism, and all three writers sought to reach readers in a playful, conversational tone quite different from that being established by the academically oriented New Critics. This difference is likely why Macaulay’s, Huxley’s, and even Woolf’s criticism, which was highly regarded in its day, has largely fallen into obscurity or at best been little studied. Yet it is worth revisiting precisely because it offers ways to think about and judge literature that are different from methods favored by the academy both then and now. These authors’ criticism furthermore demonstrates how some writers of the interwar period were positioned to reach a number of different kinds of readers—contributing to publications as various as The Daily Mail, Good Housekeeping, TLS, and the Yale Review—and to encourage a broad readership to consider multiple perspectives. The writers of fiction-criticism studied here urged readers to move outside of comfortable ways of thinking while still writing in an amusing, approachable, and familiar style.

The new modernisms and modernism’s markets

For a long time, modernist scholars remained above the fray of the interwar period’s rapid expansion of cultural offerings, neglecting to study anything but “high” modernist texts that had accumulated intellectual credibility and often lacked obvious commercial impact. Yet with the advent of the “new modernisms” in the 1990s, more and more scholars have considered the role of modernist authors within the commercial marketplace and have even begun to consider the broader array of publications from the time, “high,” “low,” and in between. Andreas
Huyssen and Jennifer Wicke’s attention in the 1980s to modernist works’ relation to mass culture laid the groundwork for a number of studies on the markets of modernism in the 90s. Monographs and essay collections such as those authored and edited by Lawrence Rainey; Joyce Wexler; Kevin Dettmar and Stephen Watt; and Ian Willison, Warwick Gould, and Warren Chernaiik considered how mass-market forces impacted the production and reception of high modernist works. Scholars like Catherine Turner, Paul Delany, John Xiros Cooper, and Rod Rosenquist continued in that vein in the 2000s. Also in the 2000s, several scholars produced monographs on the impact of particular media on modernist authors: Mark Morrison wrote on little magazines, Patrick Collier on newspapers, and Todd Avery on radio. Volumes of collected essays have followed, with Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, and Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman bringing together work on modernism and magazines, and Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle, and Jane Lewty collecting additional essays on radio of the time. Collier and Ann Ardis have recently brought together essays on early-twentieth-century transatlantic print culture by scholars in not only literary studies but also communications and history. Scholars such as David Chinitz and Brenda Silver have produced single-author studies on high modernists’ relationship to high and low culture. Forging into new ground, Laura Heffernan and Allison Pease have examined modernist criticism, though no full monograph on the era’s criticism has yet been produced. This dissertation aims to address some of that gap in focusing on the criticism of three intellectual novelists who wrote for a broad audience, though areas such as the early New Criticism in Britain, more popular middlebrow criticism by writers like Bennett, Priestly, etc. might also be explored in monographs. Examining criticism and journalism in its own right, rather than as a supplement to more traditional literary material, a move in step with Ardis and Collier’s call in their 2008 essay collection, will offer insight into what most of the reading
public was consuming at the time—journalism—and new understandings of the period’s cultural productions.

**Middlebrow culture and modernist studies**

After new modernist studies’ first forays into “high” culture’s relationships with “low” culture, more attention began to fall on low culture itself, in works such as Maria DiBattista and Lucy McDiarmid’s volume of collected essays that consider high and low “moderns” together. Sean Latham’s focus on snobbery and the remove of modernists (and selected predecessors) from popular culture has been met by Faye Hammill’s study of writers who achieved celebrity and fame in the period, though not high culture credibility. Lately, more and more work on the markets of the modernist era has focused on culture that falls between high and low, i.e. the middlebrow. This is a term I will reference and engage throughout this dissertation not simply because middlebrow studies is a growing area of criticism, but more importantly because it begins to address additional complexities of interwar cultural production. Some works of fiction-criticism and journalism studied here fit well into schemas of the middlebrow, whereas others fit only uncomfortably but all share something with middlebrow values and the way that middlebrow culture engaged readers.

Scholarly attention to the middlebrow has been hovering in the wings for a long time, though it has only recently begun showing itself on the stage of modernist scholarship under that name. As early as 1991, Alison Light called for a broader conception of interwar British literature that moved beyond studying canonical “high” modernist works (ix). Yet despite writing about middlebrow authors (Daphne Du Maurier, Agatha Christie, and Ivy Compton-Burnett), Light avoided using the term itself. When at the end of the decade Rainey addressed
high modernism’s relation to popular culture, he posited that the “tendency to postulate a rigorous opposition between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture may be inadequate to account for the growing complexity of cultural exchange in modern society” (2). Though he noted the emergence of the term middlebrow in the early twentieth century, he did not explore middlebrow work in his volume on the institutions of modernism. In 2002, Ardis, while writing about both high and middlebrow work, similarly noted: “there is a great deal of work to be done on this other cultural space, a space that complicates familiar, easy oppositions of modernist high and low culture...the vast publishing world lying outside the modernist ‘submarket.’” (138, cf. also Hapgood and Paxton).

Since Ardis’ call in the early 2000s, significant work on the middlebrow has begun to emerge. Rather than simply listing the contributors to this new branch of interwar studies, I will begin to carve out how scholars in this subfield have defined middlebrow work and what this rather slippery term means for the purposes of this study. Vogue, for example, has been called by scholars both “the most avant-garde publication of its day” (Brosnan 2) and “middlebrow” (Marcus “Middlebrow” 159). Despite showing hostility to mass culture and comparing readers of bestsellers to Pavlov’s dogs (McAleer 92), Rebecca West shared the label (Light 2). Huxley, a central figure of this study, is called both an exemplary highbrow, maintaining “English culture to the highest level possible” (Murray 271) and a confirmed middlebrow (Humble 65). Such examples of conflicting uses of the term abound. In her study of middlebrow American women writers, Jaime Harker has explained that “Depending on context, middlebrow can mean middle class, effeminate, polluted by commerce, mediocre, or sentimental” (16). It was used variously in the interwar period and continues to be used so today.
At first glance, the distinction between high and middlebrow culture seems to rest on style, with highbrow works performing radical formal experiments and middlebrow works relying on more familiar aesthetic techniques, though employing only sparingly devices used by massively popular genre fiction. However, according to scholars of the middlebrow, style is more of a symptom or outward characteristic of the middlebrow than something that categorically defines it. Most commonly, scholars point to reception as defining middlebrow work, the consumption and appreciation of cultural work that falls between high and low while drawing from both. By definition, then, the middlebrow is a relative term. Nicola Humble, a pioneering scholar of the middlebrow, notes that “in some sense middlebrow is the ‘other’ of the modernist novel,” yet it is also “a brimming bowl into which recent revisers of the modernist canon have dipped for new plums” (24). The middlebrow is thus a moving target. For that matter, the relation of high and low brows is also relative; as a character in Macaulay’s novel Keeping Up Appearances says, “Everyone is somebody’s highbrow…[and] it is also probable that everyone is somebody’s lowbrow too” (192). The values of distinctions depend on cultural perspective and class position.4

The label “middlebrow” today is commonly seen as a term of judgment and condemnation, though scholars of middlebrow work are fighting to change that.5 Hammill, for example, cites Bourdieu’s definition of the middlebrow—work which uses “proven techniques and oscillat[es] between plagiarism and parody linked with indifference or conservatism” (6)—

---

4 A recent collection edited by Kristin Bluemel on “intermodernism” aims to examine understudied interwar culture that was “free from associations of high and low,” politically radical, and used non-canonical genres (Bluemel 3). While Macaulay is cited as an example of an intermodernist, I have chosen not to engage this term “intermodernism” because I am interested in the space between high and low that middlebrow work occupies, rather than work that is free of associations from both (which is a questionable proposition in itself).

5 Elizabeth Maslen has cautioned against using the term middlebrow because the word implies works that “are not worthy of critical consideration” (16).
as one that is too limiting (cf. also Humble’s objection to Bourdieu’s characterization of middlebrow as “docile” in relation to high culture). Along with Ardis and Humble, Hammill has argued the middlebrow can be “a productive, affirmative standpoint for writers affiliated neither with modernism nor pop culture” (6), one that is not necessarily closed-minded or conservative. The growing number of studies on the topic suggests it is well worth exploring.

In the interwar era, the connotation of “middlebrow” varied by context. Critics of the middlebrow characterized such consumers as muddled thinkers; *Punch*, for example, caricatured middlebrow readers as incapable of “independent discrimination” (Brown and Grover 11). Yet there were plenty of readers and writers to defend and actually champion their middlebrow credentials. J. B. Priestly reversed *Punch*’s characterization in his 1927 essay “High, Low, Broad,” claiming that it was high and lowbrows who were “incapable of exercising independent judgment” and were “slaves of fashion,” acting like “sheep like trailing about in herds” (166). The “broad brow,” as he proudly referred to himself, had a much wider and more eclectic taste, sampling from high, low, and everything in between. Arnold Bennett took a similar stance when he urged middlebrow readers to tackle *The Yellow Book* and Mrs. Henry Wood alike (Brown and Grover 5). In her essay collection on the “masculine middlebrow,” editor Kate Macdonald cites a 1930 issue of the *London Opinion* magazine that describes the middlebrow as comprising “the majority of decent men and women,” who “stand for balance, sanity, humour, the best of both worlds,” and as representing not necessarily the middle class, but bridging “all classes and ages and most activities” (8). Like Bennett and Priestly, the magazine cites the eclectic reading habits of middlebrow: “The middlebrow can be amused by say Aldous Huxley, without thinking him a

---

6 The middlebrow was similarly characterized in an American context; Joan Shelley Rubin cites the *Saturday Review*’s definition of the middlebrow as “simply the majority reader” who is “fairly civilized and fairly literate” (xii).
particular tin god, or having any kind of illusions about the kind of people he celebrates: but so it can by Edgar Wallace and P G Wodehouse” (qtd. in Macdonald 8). Positively defined, middlebrow is an inclusive term that embraces flexible standards rather than uncommitted or compromised ones.

If middlebrow consumers of the interwar era had rather heterogeneous taste, they also, according to some accounts, tended to appreciate guidance in cultural matters and embraced learning from vetted experts. Q. D. Leavis despised middlebrow readers because they relied on what she saw as mediocre institutions such as subscription libraries to guide their reading habits. While taking a more neutral stance, Robert Graves and Alan Hodges also defined what they called the “mezzo-brow” as “somebody who sought guidance in reading by subscribing to Book of the Month” (qtd. by Trodd 48). A significant source of scholarship on the American middlebrow is Janice Radway’s study of the American Book-of-the-Month Club from the interwar era to the 1990s, demonstrating how the link between book clubs and the middlebrow is still aligned today. Joan Shelley Rubin more broadly but in a similar vein defines middlebrow culture as “activities that are aimed at making high culture available to a wide reading public” (xi, cf. also Tracy) and cites a popular magazine that describes middlebrow consumers as those who “support critics and lecturers by purchasing their wares” (xii). Discussing the advent of the middlebrow in the 1920s, Stefén Collini cites the establishment of the BBC’s talks department that encouraged discussion and debate between contrasting views as an exemplary middlebrow institution along with the Book Society and Book Guild (113).

This way of learning about and choosing to consume culture was distinct from academic learning and criticism, coming through the marketplace rather than the university, and its commercial origins required it be palatable and pleasurable to paying consumers. Humble
explains that whereas the highbrow reader “conceived of himself as occupying a besieged fortress, resisting the onslaughts of consumerism,” middlebrow culture “is characterized precisely by its commodification” (28). Yet the middlebrow is distinct from bestselling or genre fiction, for example. Radway explains the balance middlebrow institutions struck between “fostering the operation of a consumer business on the one hand while preserving the ideological reign of cultural and literary distinction on the other” (183). Middlebrow culture aimed to be enlightening while also commercially viable. The most demeaning part of Woolf’s oft-cited essay on the middlebrow, which is extensively discussed in the fourth chapter here, describes the middlebrow as that which is “mixed rather nastily with money, fame, power, or prestige” (*Collected Essays Vol. VI* 180). While quite harsh, her words do get at the way middlebrow culture was fully immersed in the public sphere, embraced by consumers and well known to them. As I will later discuss, Woolf herself was not immune from charges of desiring money, fame, and prestige, though those were far from her only concerns in producing literature.

To make intellectually engaged culture more palatable and therefore commercially viable, middlebrow fiction often mixed genres and styles, drawing on elements of popular fiction, like romance and mysteries, realist fiction, and plain journalistic language while alluding to aesthetic techniques used in high culture (cf. Napper, Habermann, Tracy, Humble, etc.). In J. B. Priestley’s words the middlebrow novel is “the novel plus something else” (qtd. in Habermann 33). In this mix, journalism is often, if not always, categorized as an element of “low” culture that does not inspire critical thinking. In their study of “high and low moderns,” DiBattista and McDiarmid describe low culture’s “affinity for journalism as a mass medium that could convey information (if not prompt reflection)” (9). Collier likewise notes that journalistic language seemed to be the opposite of language used in high modernist works: “Newspapers use a
simplified language [whereas] modernism made use of various forms of radical new and complex language” (4). Vicki Mahaffey, too, explains that “Modernist literature demands that we approach it differently than other contemporary texts like newspapers” (ix). Journalistic language is generally quite simple, by necessity—for newspapers to be financially sustainable they must easy to read, quickly digestible—and different from high modernist works, yet my interest in this dissertation is to examine how the fiction-criticism here drew from its authors’ experience producing journalism and writing in plain language for a wide audience as it simultaneously held some higherbrow aims to prompt deeper thinking. In her introduction to modernist literature, Mahaffey describes “high” modernist literature as “deeply engaged with questions of how we categorize, define, identify, and interpret the multiplicity around us” (3). While taking quite a different shape and having a different reception than high modernist work in the interwar period, the fiction-criticism studied here tackled similar goals of identifying and interpreting multiple points of view. It is a goal of this dissertation to demonstrate how it is possible for creative work to adopt a journalistic style and also inspire critical reflection.

It should finally be noted that middlebrow culture has often in the past been characterized as politically conservative. Lawrence Napper’s study of middlebrow interwar British cinema and Ina Habermann’s study of middlebrow fiction, for example, discuss how middlebrow culture reinforced nationalistic sentiment during the interwar years, underscoring the middlebrow’s conservative associations. Mark Hussey and Melba Cuddy-Keane in their studies of Woolf and middlebrow culture, which will be further addressed in the fourth chapter, go further in defining middlebrow culture as inherently conservative. The nature of middlebrow

---

7 One example of a journalistic publication that was plainly written yet also aimed to inspire reflection and present new ideas was *The New Age* under the direction of A. R. Orage (cf. Wallace, Ardis “Democracy”).
culture to draw on preexisting aesthetic forms and to appeal to a wide range of readers does make it aesthetically more conservative than high modernist culture. However, I assert that it can at the same time inspire critical thinking, as critics like Ardis and Humble have argued. The middlebrow, like high modernism, is in some cases politically conservative and in others liberal. This dissertation aims to show that middlebrow work can do more than what it is commonly understood to be capable of, reinforcing familiar, widely accepted values; in fact, the middlebrow can inspire liberal, critical thinking.

**Arendt on judgment**

Literature scholars studying modernist marketplaces have sometimes turned to public sphere theory to help understand and articulate how modernist artists were involved with the consuming public. Rainey, for example, says that Jurgen Habermas’ work on the public sphere is the “background” of his own historical study of the institutions of modernist publishing, though he does not directly engage Habermas’ work in his criticism. Mark Morrisson does directly address Habermas’ theories, primarily to challenge them in the spirit of Nancy Fraser, Rita Felski, and others. I, however, am less interested in rational debate between competing voices in the public sphere and more interested in how interwar readers might have begun to understand the bevy of viewpoints offered to them in the proliferating media outlets of the era. Thus rather than focusing on Habermas’ work, I have turned to Hannah Arendt’s theory of political judgment, which considers the importance of shifting perspectives in forming political judgments⁸ and contributing to public debate.

---

⁸ Returning discussion of judgment to academic criticism is a much debated move. Hina Nazar’s monograph, *Enlightened Sentiments: Judgment and Autonomy in the Age of Sensibility*, thoroughly explores these debates and defends the use of the term.
While Arendt’s work on judgment has been infrequently engaged by literary critics, scholars in other disciplines have turned to it as an alternative to Habermas’s theories. Seyla Benhabib, for example, has cited Arendt when dissatisfied with the “rationalistic Enlightenment legacy” of discourse ethics, her field of inquiry, and seeking to “situate the moral self more decisively in contexts of gender and community” (Situating 8). She explains that “a weaker claim of rationality [than Habermas makes] might ultimately be more fruitful for a highly pluralistic world where differences of race and gender cannot be overlooked” (“Models” 107). Arendt’s work lends itself more effectively to the task of negotiating differences in a diversity of contexts. Lewis P. and Sandra K. Hinchman articulate how Arendt took “an anti-totalizing stance” when outlining her political theory because she “distrusted the Enlightenment moral epistemic subject capable of justifying ethics from a stand point outside of all social roles and historical traditions” (xx). What I am most interested in exploring here is fiction-criticism’s engagement with a number of socially and historically situated perspectives and viewpoints, and thus Arendt’s theory is profitably engaged.

While Arendt turned and returned to ideas about the public and semi-public sphere throughout her career, the work that best helps illuminate the potential political effects of the

---

9 Hina Nazar, from whom I learned about Arendt’s work, has extensively engaged these ideas in studies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British culture. Only one other modernist scholar, Christine Froula, has cited Arendt’s theory of judgment, though she does so in a limited fashion to examine the relationship between the actors and playgoers in Woolf’s Between the Acts. I more extensively engage the theory with a wider range of interwar texts.

10 For example, Arendt’s earliest published book was a biography of Rahel Varnhagen, who around the turn of the nineteenth century hosted a popular salon in Berlin, yet was also an outsider of sorts, being born Jewish in an anti-Semitic culture. Arendt was interested in her place within and without Parisian society at different points in her life. Arendt’s best known work, The Human Condition, examines the Greek polis as a model of human discourse and political action, and she returned to Greek models of public debate elsewhere. She was also taken with Thomas Jefferson’s celebration of localized council democracies (cf. Sitton), an interest that Huxley shared (Birnbaum 109-10).
novels examined in this dissertation is Arendt’s late lectures on judgment, edited and published after her death under the title *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. Arendt first grew interested in judgment upon covering Nazi and SS officer Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Israel in 1961-2. Arendt was disturbed by the “sheer thoughtlessness that predisposed him [Eichmann] to become one of the greatest criminals” of the war and of recorded history (*Eichmann* 287). By thoughtlessness Arendt meant how Eichmann simply did not consider the harm he was inflicting upon others when managing the deportations of Jews from ghettos into concentration camps. Particularly disturbing was the moral basis by which Eichmann justified his actions; he cited Kant’s categorical imperative as his moral code, interpreting moral good as doing that which the law of the land said was good. The way Eichmann clung to the “rule” or dictum Kant sets up in his second critique indicated to Arendt that rules of any sort were not sufficient to ensure sound moral and political action. They led people to cling to authority and avoid accepting personal responsibility for their actions. Arendt would eventually argue that it is the faculty of judgment, which requires imagination and spontaneous thinking, rather than strictly rational thinking, that guides people to take socially and politically sound action.

Arendt long insisted that she was not a philosopher interested in absolute truths but rather a political theorist who considered the way people behave in the public sphere. According to Benhabib, the political in Arendt’s work is the “multiplicity of perspectives” that is encountered by those who “engage in the foray of public contestation” (*Situating* 12). Judgment plays a special role in politics according to Arendt. In the essay “Culture and Politics,” she asserts that

---

11 More recent accounts of Eichmann’s life which have used archival material made available in the past few years argue that Eichmann indeed thought carefully about his actions, which tallied with deeply felt ideology. Because the focus of this dissertation is not the Holocaust and its aftermath but rather judgment and the public sphere, Arendt’s inquiries into judgment remain useful for the project at hand and this debate is not central to the questions posed here.
“judgment is perhaps the basic faculty. It enables man to orient himself in the political sphere and therefore in the world held in common” (Portable 198). This is because, as I will explain later, to judge necessitates considering perspectives other than one’s own. If politics is the coming together of people with diverse perspectives, judgment, for Arendt, is the faculty that makes such meetings productive, that gives meaning to such meetings.

Judgment and opinion are closely connected. A multiplicity of not just perspectives but also opinions is necessary to arrive at a just judgment in Arendt’s scheme. Facts and dictums of truth, unlike opinions, are “domineering,” Arendt says. Such ways of knowing demand consent from others. An assertion of truth claims authority by its own self-contained reasoning; public debate does not make such truth more or less true (Lectures 107). Opinions on the other hand must “woo” agreement with others to be valid; one who submits an opinion in a public arena must persuade his or her listeners to agree in order for the opinion to have any weight. In the essay “Truth and Politics,” Arendt explains how she arrives at an opinion and ultimately a judgment:

I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent... It is neither a question of empathy nor of joining a majority, but of thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger my capacity for representative thinking. It is this capacity for enlarged mentality that enables men to judge (Portable 556).

Arendt explains that judgment is an individual thought process, more rational than emotional; it involves neither practicing empathy with others nor conceding to other people’s opinions or ideas. However, a judge is not in isolation either because he or she considers perspectives and opinions other than his or her own to judge well. In Arendt’s words: “To be sure, critical thinking still goes on in isolation, but it does not cut itself off from all others” (Lectures 43). To
judge is to “train one’s imagination to go visiting” among other perspectives, she says (Lectures 43).

Arendt most fully developed her ideas of judgment in her late lectures that rather surprisingly interpret Kant’s aesthetic philosophy, his third critique, as his unwritten political philosophy. While Kant did not write much directly pertaining to political action and interaction, he believed “public deliberation provided training in the art of thinking for oneself and was a continual reminder to think one’s thoughts in the context of the public” (Good 13).

Enlightenment for Kant is famously learning to think on one’s own, independently from given authorities (“What is Enlightenment?”), but Kant equally valued sharing one’s thoughts in a public forum. Arendt interprets aesthetic judgment in Kant’s Critique of Judgment as a public act. Kant there argues that no one can judge something to be beautiful, that is, arrive at an aesthetic judgment, by engaging a pre-determined rule or theory of beauty. Each judgment of beauty must be conducted afresh, without any recourse to rules or conventions. All the same, aesthetic judgments are, according to Kant, generally valid; beauty is not subjective (contrary to popular wisdom, it is not in the eye of the beholder). Arendt uses the term “general” rather than “universal” when describing Kant’s theory of judgment because judgment is not conducted abstractly, as Kant’s pure and practical reasoning might be. Rather judgment happens in a particular context by a particular person in a particular time. Arendt explains that “impartiality” or the “generalized” nature of judgment is “not the result of some higher standpoint that would then actually settle the dispute by being altogether above the melee” but rather “obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account” (Lectures 42). It is by considering how others would judge something that a judgment becomes generalized and not just a subjective opinion. For example, someone looking at a flower would not judge a flower to be beautiful by referring
to some rule such as “all flowers that are red are beautiful.” Rather, when that person saw the flower he or she would need to consider what others who saw that particular flower would think; if others would believe the flower to be beautiful, then the judgment is valid. In the words of Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves, this “ability to look representatively is only tested in a public forum” (251). Taking the “enlarged mentality” or representative thinking that is the basis for aesthetic judgment for Kant to be political judgment as Arendt does may seem to be a bit of a leap, but the concept has been taken up by prominent thinkers such as Benhabib and those in Jennifer Nedelsky and Ronald Beiner’s edited collection of essays on Arendt and judgment. It offers a model by which to judge soundly and act responsibly in the political sphere.

Though Arendt’s lectures on judgment were not published before she died, nor was what she believed would be her magnum opus, Judging, which would have rounded out her multi-volume exploration of the Life of the Mind (which already including Thinking and Willing), critics in philosophy and political theory have continued to debate the implications of Arendt’s thoughts about judgment. Some believe Arendt’s political theory is impractical.12 Ronald Beiner, who edited the Lectures and is one of the ablest and most thorough scholars of Arendt’s work on judgment, criticizes Arendt’s decision in the Lectures to focus on judgment in the vita contemplativa rather than the vita activa, which was the focus of her earlier work (Lectures 91-92). He sees Arendt in the Lectures as retreating from practiced political life and focusing on the role of the historian, the observer of history rather than the active participant in history. Passerin

12 Feminist critics have questioned the focus in Arendt’s earlier work on a public sphere that brackets off from politics household and personal matters; they argue Arendt is perpetuating a long tradition of excluding women’s experience from the realm of political debate. Mary McCarthy famously asked Arendt at a conference what political actors would discuss if they did not discuss matters of day-to-day life, which Arendt said were not fit for a public forum, and Arendt was at a loss to respond (Sitton 319). Habermas and Benhabib who have both been inspired by Arendt’s work find her separation of the personal from the political to be untenable.
d’Entrèves similarly asserts that Arendt has two models of judgment, one of the actor and another of the spectator, which are at odds with each other (250). I read the Lectures as providing evidence for both active and contemplative judgment. On the one hand, Arendt says taste, that which guides judgment, is the concern of the “mere spectator” (Lectures 19) and she emphasizes that Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment “does tell one how to take others into account…[but] does not tell one how to combine them in order to act” (Lectures 44). In a few different passages, she discusses the role of the storyteller who is at a remove from political events and how that remove enables the storyteller to make a better judgment than an actor involved in the events. However, she also notes that “for Kant, the middle term that links and provides a transition from theory to practice is judgment” (Lectures 36). She explains that for Kant, judgment is grounded in a particular context, takes place in the active world, yet also by taking into account perspectives that are figuratively and not literally present, judgment involves the imagination and can think beyond the realities of the present moment. In this way, judgment is a link between the contemplative realm and the realm of action. Arendt argues in a later lecture that a “without this critical, judging faculty the doer or maker would be isolated from the spectator” (Lectures 63), implying that judging and acting are not mutually exclusive but rather both are necessary to live and act well.

When considering the novels that are the focus of this dissertation, I am not so much concerned with political action per se but rather with a looser definition of politics, with the interactions of people who hold a public world in common, and more specifically with the ways reading fiction can affect citizens’ perceptions of the public sphere and orientation within it. Margaret Canovan, an early explicator of Arendt’s work, asserts Arendt’s “ideal model [of politics] is surely too romantic to be helpful [i.e., practical], but her general conception of the
human condition really does help us to see the aspects of politics that tend to be unjustifiably neglected” (125). Arendt’s work is thus useful to consider when reading the novels examined here because it helps illuminate new and different ways that work like fiction-criticism engages with the public sphere. Arendt’s recourse to Kant’s aesthetic judgment makes her work on judgment particularly appropriate when critiquing aesthetic works such as novels that are at a remove from the active political world yet are also engaged with ideas formulated and exchanged there. Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, who recently (2007) edited a collection of Arendt’s writings on literature and culture, notes in her introduction to that work that aesthetic judgment “suspends involvement in all pragmata and grants access to political time” (xiii). Like Arendt’s ideal political judge, the fiction-criticism studied here observes the public sphere from a remove and provides space for reflection, yet it is not entirely disconnected from that public space.

In her early work addressing the limitations of Habermas’ seminal study The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Nancy Fraser articulates the difference between what she calls strong and weak publics (which, incidentally, Habermas has taken up and addressed in his own subsequent work). In a strong public sphere, individuals not only deliberate and debate, but they also act on conclusions at which they arrive; they have the power to effect ideas that are democratically determined. Weak publics by contrast deliberate and debate publically, but do not have the power, organizational capacity, resources, etc. to effect ideas for change. Arendt herself describes judgment in the sense of Fraser’s weak public sphere; in the essay “Culture and Politics,” Arendt asserts: “Judgment of taste and political judgment carry no obligations and cannot prove anything conclusively…the belonging together of persons…is what gets decided in judgments of the common world” (Reflections 200). For Arendt it is the coming together and exchange of different perspectives that is important; the efficacy of any one decision is not (she
points out that if efficiency is that which is most wanted in a political system, totalitarian governments are often the best choice). In that same response to Habermas, Fraser argues that collective decision-making, “subaltern counter public spheres” as opposed to individual decision-making, can be advantageous to groups not favored by the established political process (136), an idea that Arendt would not support. Arendt always favored the unique perspectives of individuals over group thinking. Her experience in Nazi Germany and occupied Paris surely affected her outlook on this matter, though critics have taken her individualism as evidence for a conservative or elitist streak in Arendt’s thought. This criticism is less relevant to the study at hand because here I am interested in the ways individual readers might think about the political world in which they live rather than any direct political action they might take.

Engaging Arendt’s theories with literature poses a few additional questions over and above the more general objections discussed above. Canovan points out that Arendt denied that politics is anything like artistic creation, despite her alignment of aesthetic and political judgment (“Politics” 184); this was because Arendt saw artistic creation as an isolated, individualistic pursuit, which did not require acting in concert or in a public space. In The Human Condition, she was suspicious of what she saw as private art, especially the novel, arguing that the rise of that genre sounded the death knell of public art and contributed to the deterioration of the public life which she idealizes in that text. Arendt writes that in “mass society [where people consume art individually], men have become entirely private, that is deprived of seeing and hearing others and of being heard and seen by them. They are imprisoned by the subjectivity of their own singular experience” (Portable 203). Plays, for instance, at least require a gathering of people and the exchange of ideas in a public forum whereas Arendt saw novels as being read alone in the privacy of one’s home; she could not have been thinking of serialized novels that were read
aloud in public houses in the nineteenth century or of institutions such as book clubs which use novels to inspire debate and exchange of ideas. Yet I would argue the novels that are the focus of this study stage a kind of public sphere within their plots and character developments. Though such a space is presented to the reader between the two covers of a book and was likely read in private settings during the interwar period, it brings to the reader points of view that might not otherwise be considered. Furthermore, most of the journalism considered here was at least initially presented to readers alongside numerous other voices in the widely distributed publications in which it first appeared. Thus Arendt’s objections to the widely-distributed modern novel might be set aside in this context.

Arendt’s work is actually in some ways stylistically similar to the fiction-criticism works discussed here that mix genres and modes of discourse. Benhabib has noted how Arendt’s style is “too ambitious and over-interpreted to be a strictly historical account; it is too anecdotal, narrative, and ideographic to be considered social science; too philosophical to be accessible to a broad public” (“Redemptive”115). It does not strictly follow the methodology of any one particular field and has made use of many. Likewise, Macaulay, Huxley, and Woolf’s works discussed here are conversational, provocative and philosophical to a degree that they cannot be classified as popular works of entertainment, though unlike Arendt’s work, they were accessible to a broad public. In the Lectures, Arendt cites Kant’s notion that “taste is the discipline of genius; it clips its wings...gives guidance...[and] brings clearness and order” to otherwise baffling work (62). It is as if Arendt and the modernist writers discussed here were working with taste in mind, working to bring “clearness and order” to the newness and innovation of modernist work, to make startling ideas digestible through a hybrid style. These writers drew from multiple discourses to reach disparate readerships with provocative ideas that encouraged critical thinking.
Women, writing, and judgment

The 1882 the Married Women’s Property Act declared that if the husband “is no longer the head of a wife …there seems no reason why wives should not have independent views, independent professions, society, interests” (qtd. in Delany 38). This proclamation was made just around the time mass-market presses began booming at a new level, and with it new opportunities for women to write for a broader public and share their views with new audiences (cf. Trodd 42). To what extent they actually did so and in what forms and forums is debatable. As Anthea Trodd has noted, it is a “truism” that “men predominated in literature and women in popular writing,” even if men’s writings still made more money overall than women’s did (31). Talia Schaffer has argued that in the late nineteenth-century both men and women widely believed women were taking over newly proliferating publishing houses, though this was not actually the case (24). Even if more women than ever before were writing for popular presses, men still held positions of power within publishing, making the larger decisions about what to print: “literary editors, magazine owners, publishers and reviewers were almost all men” (Lee “Grubb” 121). Thus women at the turn of the century and into the interwar period in theory had more opportunity to work, write, read, and participate in the public sphere, but whether their opinions could be fully voiced, trusted, and empowered was still uncertain.

Many writing guides and commentaries of the time understood women to be judged by different standards and women to use inferior standards of judgment. W. L. Courtney, for example, whom Woolf challenged in her criticism, began his study of The Feminine Note in Fiction (1904) by explaining that “women have a different point of view than a man,” and thus attack novel writing in an entirely different way (vii). He went on to explain that women’s point
of view is incapable of impartiality, or in Arendt’s words, generality: “It is the neutrality of the artist’s mind which the female novelist finds it difficult to realize” (xii). He explained that the consequence of women taking sides was to produce not great work like that of Shakespeare or Dickens, but “a pamphlet, a didactic exercise, a problem novel—never a work of art” (xii). In his guide *Journalism for Women* (1898), Bennett asserted that women “are not expected to suffer the same discipline [as men], nor are they judged by the same standards”; women were held to lower standards (10). It was politics in particular that Bennett claimed was beyond women, and as such made writing, unlike an apolitical profession such as medicine, an entirely different profession for women than for men (10). More progressive critics such as J. E. Spingarn might advocate the use of both masculine and feminine points of view together in criticism, but still characterized gendered perspectives as distinct. In his essay “The New Criticism” (1911), he explained: “The masculine criticism…may or may not force its own standards on literature but…at all events is never dominated by the object of its studies, [whereas] the feminine criticism… responds to the lure of art with a kind of passive ecstasy” (12). Spingarn underscored that these sides must be “mated” or else they “fall short of their highest powers” (12). All the same, his characterization shows how feminine perspectives were portrayed as unthinking, unassertive, and uncontrolled, in contrast to masculine perspectives. These examples show that at the same time that women were writing more for widespread publications, many prominent male writers and critics voiced their beliefs that women were incapable of making independent judgments and political contributions in their work.

Invaluable studies by feminist scholars have done much to recover women’s writing from the time that had been neglected for a number of intervening years. Bonnie Kime Scott, Shari Benstock, and Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace, for example, have drawn attention to women
writers who were important in the high modernist movements both in England and the Continent. Nicola Beauman, Anthea Trodd, Elizabeth Maslen, Janet Montefiore, and Maroula Joannou among others have examined both canonized “high” modernists as well as more popular writers of the time, even those considered middlebrow, though these critics do not regularly employ that term. These studies show how deeply involved women were in interwar literary production.

Scholars interested in modernist marketplaces have also considered gender within the “battle of the brows”—the battle of high, middle, and low brows for cultural legitimacy—and there is some question whether the term middlebrow is gendered feminine. Many have questioned how the middlebrow relates to women’s production and consumption of literature as opposed to men’s. While Hussey and Cuddy-Keane associate the middlebrow with “matey” male values in their assessment of Woolf’s work, Botshon and Goldsmith see middlebrow work as gendered female, which they say explains its neglect by critics. At this point, the balance of critical work on the middlebrow looks to be gender neutral. Studies of both the “feminine middlebrow” and the “masculine middlebrow” (cf. Humble, Macdonald) in early twentieth-century British culture have been produced in recent years, and major monographs on the American middlebrow by Rubin and Radway take the term to be gender neutral. However, Radway does note that more women than men belonged to the central middlebrow institution, the Book-of-the-Month Club and that its critics gendered the club female, comparing it to an overly attentive mother (211). Furthermore women writers of the time are more likely than men to be studied as both “middlebrow” and “high modernist,” suggesting women’s work is more often amenable to the label. It is precisely this mobility that provides women middlebrow writers with a broad perspective on interwar society, which I will further discuss in the next chapter on Macaulay. In each chapter throughout the dissertation, I turn to questions of gender after
discussing the journalism and broader location of the writers at hand within the field of literary production to understand how women readers and writers responded to the diversifying field of cultural production. Building on the now established work on women writers of the period, I show how women writers’ positions within interwar British society enabled them to make broad-minded judgments about the world around them and to offer a broad range of perspectives within their fiction-criticism. They furthermore provided much needed outlets for women readers to exercise their own views and form their own opinions.

Plan of the dissertation

In the next chapter, I examine four essay-like novels of Rose Macaulay, an award-winning and bestselling writer of the interwar period. I first argue that her earlier novels, *The Lee Shore* (1912) and *The Making of a Bigot* (1914), reworked key tenets of nineteenth-century aesthetic democracy, or the idea that citizens of a fracturing nation could better understand each other by appreciating art and culture. Under a modern guise, these ideas could address early twentieth-century concerns about confused standards and ever-multiplying belief systems. I introduce to modernist studies important conversations conducted by Victorian scholars about aesthetic judgment, liberalism, and civic society, and demonstrate how ideals of aesthetic democracy persisted into the interwar period. I then turn to Macaulay’s 1920’s bestsellers *Potterism* (1920) and *Keeping Up Appearances* (1928) to show how vital pluralist judgment was to women of the time who needed to be able to think and act flexibly if they wanted to cross borders in the “battle of the brows” and engage with different socio-cultural groups.

My third chapter studies Aldous Huxley’s interwar work, which has, much like Macaulay’s fiction, been largely neglected—*Brave New World* excluded. I begin by examining
his essays from the 1920s and 30s, which are initially highly critical of mass culture but grow increasingly amenable to middlebrow positions, for example, by frequently taking an anti-academic tone, criticizing the cult of high art, and praising emotional responses to culture. My illumination of Huxley’s overdetermined position as consummately cultured yet highly readable and even popular recasts scholarly definitions of the middlebrow and reveals the potential of middlebrow literature to cultivate critical judgment. I then analyze Huxley’s perspective on gender, which outside of articles on *Brave New World*, only one other literary scholar has addressed at any length. I argue that Huxley’s four 1920s novels, from *Crome Yellow* (1921) to *Point Counter Point* (1928), increasingly depict women as incapable of the kind of pluralist judgment that he encourages in his essays. His blind spots reveal challenges faced by women seeking intellectual autonomy and underscore the urgency and necessity of literature that encouraged women’s critical thinking and judgment.

The fourth chapter turns to the work of Virginia Woolf, who offers the period’s most direct intellectual middlebrow riposte to misogynist perceptions of and expectations for women in the public sphere. While Woolf is frequently cited as a scourge of the middlebrow, my examination of her complete essays contends that the outlook and style of her late criticism actually shares much with the middlebrow in its drive to engage a common reader and to balance pleasure with critical-thinking when reading and writing. Like Huxley’s, her popular criticism cultivates pluralist judgment, but unlike Huxley’s, it becomes increasingly attentive to women readers and women’s place in the public sphere. I study her posthumously published project, *The Pargiters* (1931-2), for which she coined the term “novel-essay,” to clarify and underscore feminist fiction-criticism’s political potential to help women participate in the public sphere, not
as providers of sympathy, as they were encouraged to do in the Victorian age, but as independent critics of the world around them.

I conclude with a “coda” that shifts discussion to a contemporary example of fiction-criticism, J. M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), to demonstrate the persistence and continuing relevance of fiction-criticism in today’s much changed media landscape. The most blatantly political novel of his career, *Diary* combines multiple narratives with short essays, making it exemplary of the genre. I suggest that this fiction-criticism continues to grapple with the question of reaching a broad audience while maintaining intellectual rigor, and thus remains an ideal form to broaden readers’ awareness of multiple perspectives and to spark political conversation. One of the most controversial aspects of Coetzee’s *Diary* is its treatment of its female protagonist, and my study reveals that while women’s contributions to the public sphere have increased both in quantity and diversity since the interwar period, inequalities remain, posing challenges for future writers and advocates.
CHAPTER 2
TASTE AND POLITICS: ROSE MACAULAY’S 1910S AND 20S NOVELS

In September of 1955, Rose Macaulay wrote to her friend that she had just seen television for the first time. Apparently she “didn’t think much” of it, even though the very first time she saw it, her name and words she had written were announced over the air (Last Letters 209). She’d been watching a show that by today’s standards seems rather highbrow, one in which contestants guessed who had written various quoted phrases and then afterwards debated the merits of the quoted ideas. When she heard her own words (which were roughly, Macaulay reports, “it is to the eccentrics that the world owes most of its knowledge”), she herself didn’t know where they were from, and neither did the contestants, though in the debate afterwards they seemed to agree that the idea was sound.

This incident economically suggests how Macaulay’s work was received in her lifetime: she was a subject of discussion in a rather brainy game show, a literary game show at that, but a game show all the same. Her work was judged by the show’s creators to be sufficiently well known to be recognized by the general public and worthy of public discussion, yet entertaining enough to hold an audience’s attention. Macaulay’s reaction to her publicity is characteristic too. She spends no more than seven lines discussing the matter and dismisses her own fame along with the new medium of communication. Macaulay was an intellectual writer and also a popular one, and in her own eyes and some of those of her intellectual peers, her popularity mitigated her intellectual credibility. Thus she turned away from the spotlight she received. Yet it is her work’s combination of intellectual precision and popular accessibility that makes it interesting in terms of today’s literary critical debates, as it suggests how middlebrow readers of the interwar period
could be considering the world around them as critically and carefully as those absorbed with the experiments of high modernism.

Despite being one of England’s most prominent “lady novelists” in the 1920s and 30s and at times the preeminent one, Rose Macaulay and her work have been largely neglected by modernist scholars, perhaps because her writing doesn’t fit easily into categories that scholars have developed to discuss literature of the period. Macaulay was a shrewd thinker, yet not an experimental writer, and it is this conjunction of traits that has made her work hard to place in academic discussions of modernist work. She didn’t write just one maverick novel-essay like Woolf; most of her novels are considered to border the essay genre quite closely, and she conscientiously avoided the kinds of aesthetic experiments for which Woolf and other modernists are famous. Macaulay has been called a satirist, a novelist of ideas, and also, though less commonly, an artist of deep feeling. Most critics who have acknowledged her significant contribution have valued her novels for their incisive commentary on social life in early- to mid-twentieth-century England and her scholarship for its thorough and insightful accounts of other times and places, though the most devoted readers of her work point readers towards its profound probing of religious and existential questions.¹ Early critics understood Macaulay to be “something of an institution to intellectual readers of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s” (Bensen 165), yet recent work on female middlebrow writers has understood Macaulay’s novels to be prime examples of British middlebrow literature between the World Wars (Humble, Sullivan). This chapter adopts earlier critical views that understand Macaulay as an intellectual writer while also acknowledging her affinities with the middlebrow. In doing so, it takes Macaulay as an example

¹ Monographs devoted entirely to Macaulay’s work have sought to make a place for it in an enduring canon by exploring more “universal” or timeless themes (cf. Marrocco, Benson, Crawford), though more recent scholarship of Macaulay’s work tends to value it for its social commentary on the time (cf. Collier, Sullivan, Port), as will be discussed later in the chapter.
of how the middlebrow can challenge readers, can acknowledge high, low, and in between spaces of interwar culture and expose readers to a number of diverse perspectives.

Because Macaulay is today a little known and read figure, this chapter will first situate Macaulay’s work in her time and within the academy. Then it will explore her collected journalism of the 1920s to understand how she communicated with her reading public in overtly expository form. Finally, the bulk of the chapter will examine two groups of Macaulay’s novels of the 1910s and 20s that are said to share much with the essay form and to be something like Woolf’s “essay novel” avant la lettre. In her earlier novels, Macaulay tested ideas of aesthetic liberalism, or eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussions about the democratization of good taste, in stories about very early twentieth-century society, whose citizens were at risk of estrangement due to ever more specialized and fragmented tastes. In doing so, she found new ways of making Victorian ideals relevant in modern times through a middlebrow form. In Macaulay’s 1920s novels discussed here, she directly addressed the position of middlebrow writers in a witty, intellectual manner and encouraged a variety of readers to critique their own reading practices as well as the world around them, broadening their perspectives and liberalizing their judgment. Perhaps even more importantly, she underscored how women who wanted to make their way in the professional world that had only recently been opened to them often needed to move with agility “between the brows” and in effect perfect moves made by middlebrow cultural productions. This fact indicates how the middlebrow need not be a necessarily conservative force, but one that enabled women to move in spheres that had previously been closed to them.
“Forever in transit”: Macaulay as mobile middlebrow

Macaulay’s contemporaries remembered her as a woman who embodied a number of roles and positions, a kind of social chameleon who loved to take up opposing interests and outlooks. Alan Pryce Jones, a writer, critic, and editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* from the late 1940s to 50s, wrote “nobody every zigzagged more either driving a car or walking through life” than Macaulay (qtd. in Babington-Smith 227, Emery 158). Rosamond Lehmann said Macaulay was perpetually exploring new places, ideas, and beliefs, and was “forever in transit physically, intellectually, spiritually” (qtd. in Babington-Smith 225, LeFanu 3). Virginia Woolf noted dinner party guests’ amusement with Macaulay’s playful discussion of what she called her “battling lizards,” her opposing tastes, temperaments, outlooks (qtd. in LeFanu 5). In a 1933 article on “Taking Sides” for *The Spectator*, a venue to which Macaulay regularly contributed throughout her career, Macaulay herself explained how “great is my pleasure in the antics of both armies in most battles. I could not be either a Roundhead or a Cavalier. I must be both” (qtd. in Emery 80). It was not that she didn’t want to take sides; it was that she wanted to participate on both of them. If Macaulay never saw military duty—to her chagrin—she did “fight” on multiple sides in the “battle of the brows,” or the battle between high, middle, and low brows.

---

2 In her diary and letters, Woolf recorded a number of both flattering and insulting remarks about Macaulay (their relationship was tenser in the 1920s and warmer in the 1930s) that frequently feature in introductions to critical discussions of Macaulay’s work. In this chapter I seek to locate Macaulay in a wider cultural field than her relationship to Bloomsbury and other well-known modernist circles so will not rehash the remarks, though they can be found elsewhere (cf. especially the biographies by Emery and LeFanu).

3 As an undergraduate, Macaulay studied history, specializing in the seventeenth century, a scholarly interest that she maintained throughout her life (she wrote a short biography of Milton, filled an anthology on “minor pleasures” with quotations from mostly seventeenth-century sources, and set the novel that she best loved writing, *They Were Defeated*, in Cambridge during the English Civil War); the allusion to Cavaliers and Roundheads therefore would be one Macaulay took seriously.
for cultural legitimacy in interwar Britain. She moved in a variety of literary circles, high and middlebrow, experimental and traditional, with equal aplomb.

Judging from Macaulay’s own depiction of middlebrow women writers in her novels, her familial background is not what one would expect a middlebrow writer’s to be. Macaulay’s fictional writers have at least some family that is lower-middle class and/or squarely middlebrow in sympathies and are generally without university education. Yet Macaulay herself had far more formal education than the “leading lady novelist” of today’s modernist studies, Virginia Woolf, and Macaulay came from an even more distinguished intellectual background. Macaulay was descended from the Conybeare family, members of which were scholars and tutors to royalty dating back to the Elizabethan age. She was related to Robert Herrick, Lord Babington Macaulay, and Julian and Aldous Huxley among other notable writers and thinkers. Her own father was a scholar and professor, lecturing at Aberystwyth University in Wales and later at Cambridge. Macaulay herself graduated from Somerville College, Oxford, thanks to the generous financial contribution of an uncle who paid for her tuition there. Though she did not pursue any postgraduate degree, she received an honorary DPhil from Cambridge late in her career. She won the *Femina-Vie Heureuse Anglais* Prize in 1922, a few years before Woolf, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize at the end of her career, in 1956, shortly after which she also became a Dame, an honor only one other woman writer of the time (Edith Sitwell) shared (Babington-—

---

4 As has been much cited by Macaulay’s critics, Noel Anon makes Macaulay his first example of what he calls the “intellectual aristocracy” in England at the turn of the century, a group of intellectuals who were descended from prominent and accomplished scholars, teachers, and writers and whose families had intermarried throughout the nineteenth century.

5 Macaulay’s parents paid for the secondary education of their daughters and sons, though the sons’ boarding public schools cost considerably more than their daughters’ high school education, and the immediate family had no additional funds for Rose’s university education. Rose was the only child of the family to attend university.
Yet Macaulay was never a complacent thinker or an unthinking affirmer of the status quo. Her intellectual upbringing and training pushed her to question, argue, and more than anything talk through issues from all sides. Jane Emery, Macaulay’s second of three biographers, underscores this point, explaining, “What pleased Rose most [at Oxford] was the pursuit of ‘the right judgement in all things’ and the talk talk talk that explored its nature” (67).

After Oxford, Macaulay continued to talk much and debate with prominent intellectuals of her time, but with more popular novelists too. Upon moving to London in her early 30s, she led an especially active social life. She was known as an excellent conversationalist, dubbed “the golden talker” by her one-time friend, flatmate, and confidant Naomi Royde-Smith (Emery 142). Royde-Smith, who was the editor of the Saturday Westminster Gazette’s “Problem Page” for which Macaulay wrote prize winning poems and parodies (as did Macaulay’s neighbor, Rupert Brooke, with whom she was friends), drew the young writer into her social circle and facilitated Macaulay’s first extended exposure to London society, at which time Macaulay became a center of Thursday evening salons (Emery 91). Those gatherings were populated largely by establishment figures not associated with high modernism, such as Hugh Walpole, Walter de la Mare, and Arnold Bennett, but also visited occasionally by more experimental writers such as Katherine Mansfield, John Middleton Murray, Wyndham Lewis, and Aldous Huxley and also

6 Perhaps Macaulay’s very acceptance by the establishment of English society has encouraged critics to consider her apart from modernist writers, who are in many ways defined by their rebellion against establishments of all sorts.

7 Emery describes how Somerville College at that time encouraged “strong individualism” and welcomed students from a wide variety of national, class, and intellectual backgrounds who could offer different perspectives (63); intellectual debate permeated all aspects of life and study there (69).

8 Macaulay had been friends with Rupert Brooke before the Great War and with him had attended various cultural events and explored the city, but Macaulay did not live in the city herself until she had published several novels. In 1913, which Macaulay called her annus mirabilis, she acquired a pied-à-terre there, thanks again to financial help from the same uncle who had paid her Oxford tuition.
younger upcoming writers such as Elizabeth Bowen (Emery 142).\footnote{Emery notes how some writers saw these evenings as creative gatherings, whereas others like Storm Jameson and Woolf saw them as meetings of the establishment and literary mediocrities.} Macaulay was also friends with Ivy Compton-Burnett and Compton MacKenzie, Rupert Brooke and T. S. Eliot, Storm Jameson and Evelyn Waugh, Rosamond Lehmann and Virginia Woolf. Emery has described Macaulay as having strong friendships with members of many literary circles, though identifying with none (78). She was a middlebrow writer in that she literally moved between circles of different brows.\footnote{Woolf’s thoughts on Macaulay as recorded in her diary offer frank insights into the many ways Macaulay could be seen in her time. In the early 20s, immediately after Macaulay’s first and massive bestseller, Pottermism, Woolf found Macaulay to be rather “harum scarum – humble – too much of a professional” (qtd. in LeFanu 147). To Woolf, Macaulay carried with her the air of the dog-eat-dog world of hack journalism that produced substandard and all too standardized writing. Woolf dismissed Macaulay’s primary social circle at the time, those who attended Royde-Smith’s salons, as middlebrow “riff-raff,” and asserted that Macaulay “won’t [ever] come to grips” with Bloomsbury, presumably because Bloomsbury was pursuing more radical aesthetic means to reach different ends. Yet Woolf also placed Macaulay “just on the on the intellectual side of the border” (qtd. in LeFanu 147). Woolf recognized Macaulay’s intelligence, and furthermore Macaulay’s gravitas, paying special attention to her fellow author’s “clear pale mystical eyes” and surmising that Macaulay might in fact be a mystic. At the time of Macaulay’s first meeting with Woolf, Macaulay’s novels were selling in the tens of thousands (Passty 13, Collier 146), which was ten times the number Woolf’s work sold then. Macaulay and Woolf’s worlds would overlap more in the 1930s, when Macaulay published several non-fiction volumes with the Hogarth Press and Woolf published more journalism in more middlebrow periodicals. Woolf’s record of their friendship exemplifies how Macaulay’s position was constantly shifting in various literary and intellectual circles.} Melissa Sullivan has recently argued middlebrow women writers of the interwar period inhabited “insider-outsider” roles, participating socially in highbrow circles, yet writing for middlebrow outlets due to either financial or gender constraints (“Press” 55). Macaulay might well be described as an “insider-outsider” both within her time and within modernist studies today, in that she is often cited in histories of the period and biographies of more studied counterparts, yet her work itself has been little studied.
Macaulay’s scholarly legacy

Macaulay was more widely respected and acknowledged among literary critics in the 1950s and 60s than she is today perhaps because she was then still alive and a contemporary author, but also because scholars then could accept her work as intellectual but not experimental without debate, unlike today when after years of defining modernism as aesthetically radical texts, scholars are beginning to recognize other kinds of writing as intellectually valuable. In 1956, W. R. Irwin distanced Macaulay from John Galsworthy but also John Dos Passos and W.B. Yeats, considering Macaulay more rigorous than the former but more resistant to experiment and artistic “vision” than the latter two writers (66-7). Irwin and Frank Swinnerton see her primarily as a commentator on her time, Swinnerton explaining that “a special type of novel” came to be associated with Macaulay’s name, one that was “comic” and “caustic,” critical of the world around her (600). J. V. Guerinot, among others, has described Macaulay’s attitude as “Cambridge,” meaning “ironic, bland, detached, celibate, urbane, rakish, scholarly, civilized” (112). Much like her contemporaries, many of her early academic critics saw her as a highly

11 Macaulay chafed at being labeled a contemporary satirist, arguing in a letter to her cousin that her prize-winning 1921 novel, Dangerous Ages was more than a satire, being centered on a “primeval problem” and enduring themes (Dearest 91). Later in her career, however, Macaulay would dismiss her abilities as a novelist altogether and her novels as slight occasions, not serious literature (cf. “Auto-obituary” and Personal Pleasures, both published in the mid 1930s).
12 Upon meeting Macaulay in his twenties, Anthony Powell remarked that she “seemed very chilly and Cambridge” (qtd. in Babington-Smith 233); to the generation just beginning to make its way at a time when Macaulay’s reputation was well established, Macaulay’s wit, intelligence, and sharp critical eye seemed formidable. See also Lockwood for a similar characterization (136). Although Macaulay attended Oxford, her family lived near Cambridge both when she was young and after she had begun publishing novels. One of her favorite novels of her own oeuvre, They Were Defeated, was set in Cambridge. Her father taught there, and the university awarded her an honorary DPhil. Therefore it was a place she was connected to and knew well. Most of her papers are now stored in the Wren Library at Trinity College, Cambridge.
educated commentator on modern society from which she was detached and by which she was amused.13

Yet Macaulay’s oeuvre clearly tackles more than contemporary satire, and critics in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s have sought to illuminate Macaulay’s treatment of enduring themes to make a place for her in the canon. Maria Jane Marrocco, who wrote the last unpublished dissertation to focus entirely on Macaulay’s work, does so by spending less time examining the bestsellers of the 1920s and more on Macaulay’s early and late works that were considered to appeal to those with specialized taste and to the establishment respectively. Jeanette Passty considers the theme of androgy, and Alice Crawford argues the “search for the whole” or “an ideal wholeness that involves the discovery of the perfected self” (15) is an idea that runs throughout Macaulay’s novels and contributes to understanding of identity and self-discovery.

Macaulay’s latest biographer, Sarah LeFanu, takes a different tack and bolsters Macaulay’s literary credibility by situating her popular novels of the 1920s in the company of much more radical literary experiments undertaken at the time. LeFanu explains that Macaulay pursued “formal experiments with structure and voice…notions of time, identity and consciousness” (4). In other words, LeFanu argues that Macaulay undertook experiments that modernist writers characteristically undertook. While Macaulay did pursue these experiments to a small extent, they were far less extensive in her work than in that of canonized modernist writers. In contrast to LeFanu’s biography, the most recent criticism of Macaulay’s work considers it to be middlebrow and valuable as such (cf. Humble, Collier, Sullivan), which is a visible result of scholars’ growing acknowledgement of a wide variety of texts produced in the

13 Her *Times* obituary describes her as a “novelist of lively and ironic intelligence, wide scholarship, and fastidious wit, and an intrepid traveler” who had used well her “intellectual heritage” and university education (qtd. in Emery 1).
interwar period. With modernist studies’ relatively recent attention to the marketplace for modernist works, it once again makes sense to look at Macaulay’s contribution to the public sphere of her time. Her work need not be marginalized in the academy because it was popular—without the publicity of an obscenity or censorship trial, for example—but rather can be studied to understand how it was possible for an intellectual writer to produce widely read and thought-provoking work.

**Macaulay’s place in middlebrow debates**

Considering Macaulay’s work in terms defined by Nicola Humble, whose voice has been the boldest in unpacking characteristics of feminine middlebrow reading and writing practices in the modernist period, demonstrates clearly how Macaulay’s work is profitably studied within the context of other middlebrow literature. Like other feminine middlebrow work that Humble studies, Macaulay’s novels pay “obsessive attention to class markers and manners” while maintaining a “feyness and frivolity” and detachment from the world they describe (Humble 5). Also characteristic of the feminine middlebrow as Humble defines it, Macaulay’s novels take advantage of “flexible generic boundaries”; Humble explains (in rather blunt language itself not free from judgment) that the middlebrow novel is “a parasitical form” that “straddles the divide between a trashy romance or thriller and a philosophically and formally challenging novel” (10). While Macaulay’s novels are far from romance novels or potboilers, they often involve a

---

14 Macaulay claimed that she made her second novel, *The Furnace*, “‘practically a love story’” in order to “‘make it appeal to the general public’” (qtd. in Emery 104), though Emery points out that in fact the love story is only a subplot of the novel. Macaulay’s American publisher Horace Liveright pushed her to write “‘a fine strong love-story for the American public’” in the 1920s after she had had a string of bestsellers with the firm, Boni and Liveright, though she refused (*Dearest* 86).
number of elements of more popular fiction.15 Humble describes how the feminine middlebrow novel “hold[s] its skirts away from lowbrow contamination while gleefully mocking highbrow intellectual pretensions” (12). Macaulay’s popular 1920s novels *Potterism*, *Crewe Train*, *Dangerous Ages*, and *Orphan Island* all mock modernist style, particularly stream-of-consciousness narrative and language play. In mocking such style they demonstrate familiarity with it and ability to manipulate it, but also underscore their difference from it. Aware of what is “higher” and “lower,” Macaulay’s middlebrow work defines itself against both, seeking to provide more intellectual stimulation than mass reading that is formulaic and escapist, but at the same time not harboring ambitions to alter the course of literary history. The middlebrow is also a place where elements of work from disparate brows may be found together. According to Humble, whose view echoes interwar voices quoted in the introduction, middlebrow readers appreciated a wide variety of writing, and their “hybridity of taste” went hand in hand with “daring disregard for conventional judgments” (8). Unlike many other critics of the middlebrow, Humble sees progressive potential in middlebrow work, arguing it allowed readers to grapple with and question the world around them while remaining respectable within it.16 Yet Humble’s work that concerns class, the domestic sphere, and family life does not devote much space to analyzing British middlebrow women writers’ treatment of the public sphere. Turning to Macaulay’s journalism as well as her essay-like novels sheds light on ways in which her

---

15 The plot of her longest bestselling novel, *Potterism*, is driven by both a twisted love story and a murder mystery. An unpublished play, *Bunkum*, archived in the Wren Library, is the closest Macaulay gets to a thriller, featuring a spy posing as a village’s parish priest; the play also devolves into a love story. Sensational events feature in *Keeping Up Appearances*, which involves a burglary, and *I Would Be Private*, which begins with a hit-and-run accident resulting in a man’s death, though the novel critiques the sensational coverage of the incident in the British press.

16 Humble also acknowledges middlebrow work can be conservative; she discusses both affiliations.
middlebrow work exercises readers’ political judgment and exposes them to many sides of the world outside the home.  

Casually Critical: A Casual Commentary

Macaulay’s first biographer argued that one aspect of Macaulay’s writing that appealed “much to the taste of middlebrow readers of the [interwar] period” was her “journalistic style” (Babington-Smith 104). Macaulay wrote copious journalism in which she honed a signature voice and from which she sometimes quoted verbatim in her fiction. Examining Macaulay’s more

17 Focusing on Macaulay’s status as a middlebrow writer would not be to her taste. Even if the consumption of her work by middlebrow readers was largely what allowed Macaulay eventually to live independently in London, she was not proud of it. This dislike perhaps paradoxically makes her even more characteristically middlebrow: Humble argues authorial anxiety about widespread readership is characteristic of middlebrow writers, who often disparage middlebrow readers in middlebrow literature. Macaulay said, for example, that she agreed to have her 1926 novel Crewe Train serialized in the women’s magazine Eve only because “they pay well” (qtd. in Babington-Smith 107); she wouldn’t have done so otherwise. Predictably, at the start of her career, before she had entered the public spotlight, she was more sanguine about earning money from her work: in 1919 she wrote to her cousin that she loved the Daily Telegraph “because they ask me to name my own terms and then fall in with them” (Dearest 39) and in 1920 praised her companion, Gerald O’Donovan, for not only helping her establish a relationship with her first commercial publisher, Collins, but more specifically for “wresting gilded terms” from the firm (Dearest 62). Yet after two decades of success and inheriting a substantial legacy from her uncle in 1937 that allowed Macaulay to support herself through other means, she published no novels for ten years (1940-50) and produced instead scholarly anthologies, travel writing, and literary criticism of both classic and respected contemporary authors. Her final novel, Towers of Trebizond, published in 1957, was again a bestseller, but one with particular status, as it was enjoyed by royalty and made her a Dame (Emery 318). Macaulay preferred to see the book’s success as one reviewer did, as “minority literature” which was “forced into being a bestseller…by good reviews, but would never be naturally so” (Sister 255). Incidentally, Huxley is also cited in this review as an example of such minority literature, as well as Rebecca West. By the 1930s, she was interested much less in sales than in the opinions of those she knew and of London critics (Emery 208-9). In an “auto-obituary” published in 1936, she predicted that upon discovering treasure on a tropical island and becoming independently wealthy, she would “confine herself to biography essays, travel books, poetry, and little monographs on subjects in which she took an interest not shared by the majority” (322), producing works that were “if not widely read, appealed to certain thoughtful and well-regulated minds” (323). If Macaulay had her way, it seems she would not have been so popular a writer, yet the popularity of her 1920s novels that were both intellectual and accessible makes them interesting to study.
ephemeral pieces of journalism reveals how Macaulay manages to get her readers thinking, judging broadly, and exploring the process of judgment even in the most transitory settings. Her first and only collection of essays, *A Casual Commentary*, was published in 1926, and like Virginia Woolf’s *The Common Reader*, it is largely made up of pieces that first appeared in newspapers. But unlike Woolf’s work, Macaulay’s pieces didn’t appear in one relatively venerable venue such as the *TLS*. Rather they appeared in a great variety of publications, though Macaulay does group them together in a surprisingly coherent manner. The title suggests Macaulay’s relaxed attitude toward her subject matter, yet she manages to perform careful critique while maintaining a casual tone. In the essay collection, Macaulay treats themes of writing and reading, but she does not review literature. Rather what ties the varied pieces of the collection together is their shared critique of the contemporary society in which Macaulay lived. The “speculations,” “inquiries,” and “problems” that appear in the section headings (e.g. “Some Speculations on Human Creatures,” “Some Inquiries,” “Some Problems of Life”) indicate how Macaulay approached what she saw around her with a critical outlook and encouraged her readers to question that world as well, with a light heart. Though she wrote in a highly readable and sometimes humorous style, she returned again and again throughout her 1920s journalism to her serious concern that members of interwar English society did not practice sound judgment or think critically or carefully about important social concerns.

Throughout *A Casual Commentary*, Macaulay explores how people are bewildered by the choices offered in various aspects of life and frequently fail to think carefully about them, consequently making haphazard decisions. In Macaulay’s perhaps best known essay,\(^{18}\) “What the Public Wants,” Macaulay worries about a lack of judgment in the reading public. She believes

\(^{18}\) That is, it is the best known today; it has been cited recently by Collier and Sullivan and anthologized in Bonnie Kime Scott’s 2007 publication, *Gender in Modernism*. 
that “there is a public that swallows, apparently, anything that it gets, and never says what it does not want, because it doesn’t know” (33). The unfortunate result of this lack of opinion and decision is that “editors have no choice but to pander to their own morbid taste” (33).

Macaulay’s joke that reverses a common complaint, blaming editors and not readers for the lowering of literary stands, suggests she stands on the side of the public. Yet Macaulay also believes that the reading public needs help thinking more critically and voicing independent conclusions. She bemoans in the essay “Problems of a Writer’s Life” that it “doesn’t matter much what [writers] write or what critics say” because readers choose books not on any merit in the book itself, but rather because lots of other people have bought it (200). She worries that readers generally do not think independently or consider seriously the number of choices available to them. In the essay, “How to Choose a Religion,” Macaulay begins by noting that people think more about what toothpaste to use than what religion to practice; they accept religion unthinkingly, taking up whichever one they happened to be born into (15). She is careful to say that she is not worried that people will fail to discover “true religion” (emphasis original), but rather that they’ll miss out on the religion “best fitted to their particular needs and capacities” (15). She notes that one could read up on all world religions and then choose one after extensive and thorough study, but she understands the method to be “laborious” and furthermore largely futile, for, she exclaims, “how few brains” are “qualified to apprehend, balance, and judge!” (16). Out of context she might seem to be assuming a superior stance, but Macaulay is actually siding with the public, as she does throughout the volume, using the pronouns “we” and “us” and thus including herself among those who choose not to pursue laborious methods. “Most of us,” she says, “are better fitted for a less deliberate and more impulsive method” (16). The tone is middlebrow, chummy, disavowing intellectual superiority, yet all the same the essay makes a
stab at a serious question. Thus Macaulay on the one hand sympathizes with the public, considering herself to be a member of it, and acknowledges the difficulty of judging, be it of religion or reading material. Yet on the other, Macaulay bemoans this lack of judgment, and the form of Macaulay’s essays and her novels work to change that.

Macaulay is not only worried about a lack of judgment amongst members of the public but also a lack of ability to see others’ points of view, a lack which this chapter will later demonstrate correlates directly with an inability to judge. A piece titled “Unknown Countries” is not about travel, as one might expect, but rather about how “human creatures” know so little about each other. She says in the essay that, “none of our manifold human ignorances is more abysmal than this ignorance of the lives led around and on all sides of us” (59). The ostensible aim of the piece is to bemoan how novels, which should provide a window into the way other people live their lives, in fact show so little about actual day-to-day business matters and duties; instead, they concentrate on emotions and feelings common to everyone, and thus reveal little about people that readers don’t already know. Later in the piece it becomes clear that the inquiry was inspired by a particular incident: Macaulay had met an undergraduate who had frankly informed her that “the wives of dons had but one interest and occupation—the collection of undergraduates for lunch and tea parties” and that the sole aim of dons’ daughters was to become wives of dons themselves (61). Herself being such a daughter, Macaulay took special offense and asserted that wives and daughters of university professors had varied interests outside their husbands’ and fathers’ lives, but the undergraduate would not hear her out (apparently he did not take notice that Macaulay herself was unmarried and had no desire to marry a don). Macaulay explains that the lives of women that the undergraduate saw “were so many foreign countries into which he had never set foot…He knew them to be many minds with a single thought,”
which was to serve tea to people like himself (61). Macaulay ends the essay by wondering what all the “ugly interesting human masks” populating the omnibus that she rides are thinking and more simply what they have done with their day (62). She is careful not to sentimentalize the connection with others, calling the faces around her “ugly” but also “interesting,” suggesting a desire for a cerebral and not emotional connection with them. The essay concludes rather inconclusively, stating, “no one knows” the lives of others and that the best anyone can do is “exercise our human prerogative of charity” (63).19 Macaulay’s takeaway point might be that people should not pretend to know everything about those who are different from themselves. In her own novels, Macaulay does not often provide extensive details of various professions, that is, she does not provide herself what she says she wants in others’ novels. Yet as will be discussed in the remainder of the chapter, her fiction does more than encourage complacent restraint from judgment by facilitating critical thinking about and better judgment of those different from oneself.

In the essays, Macaulay celebrates diversity of taste yet also communication between different points of view. In “What the Public Wants,” Macaulay refers to the public as “a hydra” with a “million mouths,” which is not the most flattering comparison, though again she does include herself when she speaks of the public, using the pronoun “we” when referring to it.20 At

---

19 Woolf too explores the narrow-mindedness of male undergraduates and their limited conception of the lives of dons’ wives in her unpublished work, The Pargiters, and also writes about how little bus passengers know of each other in her unpublished essay “Middlebrow” that dissect the divisions between low, middle, and highbrows in the early 1930s, both of which will be discussed further in Chapter 3 here. Another resonant passage by Woolf appears in Mrs. Dalloway, when Clarissa recalls her youthful theory about how little people know each other. In “Middlebrow,” Woolf suggests that the bus is a place lowbrows and highbrows can come together, by asking questions of each other; she is apparently more optimistic than Macaulay.

20 Collier discusses how this move sets Macaulay apart from other commentators of the time who figured the public as a shadowy and threatening other. He argues that Macaulay, by contrast, sees
first she “supposes” that the “million mouths” can all be fed by one common food, suggesting that the public share a common “appetite” (29). Macaulay concludes by explaining that different mouths favor different tastes, that “We [the public] are most beautifully omnivorous” (38), enjoying wit and irony as well as “vulgarity and tedious sentimentality.” While Macaulay might seem to be slipping away from a hard conclusion, her equivocation suggests that she is searching for a delicate balance between celebrating difference and communion. Macaulay acknowledges on the one hand the great variety of taste but on the other commonalities of taste too.

What is most important is that Macaulay supports preserving difference while facilitating conversation. In the essay “Into Thinking Alike Upon Religion,” she excoriates the “dull perverted aims to stamp out and flatten interesting diversities of temperament which lead to different paths” (159), that is, attempts to convert people from one faith to another. Macaulay was a devoted Anglican and deeply torn when she felt she had to leave the church for over twenty years because she was pursuing an adulterous affair. After her lover died, she began conducting close correspondence with a priest, returned to regular church attendance, and tightened friendships within her religious community, sometimes to the neglect of her literary friends (LeFanu 261). 21 All this is to say that Macaulay did not take faith lightly and deeply probed her own religious beliefs, yet all the same thoroughly respected those of others and most of all the diversity of religions. Macaulay concludes the essay by praising the meeting of the Church Congress in which denominations of every stripe met and exchanged views. She quotes a newspaper report on such a gathering that asserted “As to the results of the conference, none can

---

21 For example, around this time Macaulay became closer to her younger sister Jean, who was deeply religious, and T.S. Eliot, who was also Anglican, but saw much less of Victor and Ruth Gollancz, non-religious intellectual friends with whom she was formerly very close.
make answer...But all who were present must have gained much from an understanding of other points of view held by men every whit as sincere as ourselves” (163). She wishes heartily that diverse points of view should meet, but that “such bonds” formed at the meeting “shall not, even slightly cramp their style” (164). For Macaulay, consensus, or even clear conclusions are not an important end result. The exchange of and exposure to foreign points of view are what will ultimately improve the public’s ability to makes choices about any number of things, from religion to reading material.²²

If Macaulay directly expounds in her essays the necessity of considering other points of view in contemporary English society, the shape of her novels puts those ideas into practice,

²² Melissa Sullivan has recently argued that Macaulay’s attitude toward the public changes significantly with the venue in which she published. She asserts that whereas Macaulay is sympathetic to the plight of the woman middlebrow writer and the absurdities of cultural hierarchies when publishing her novels with middlebrow publishers like Collins, she is much more critical in her volumes published with the smaller Hogarth Press. At the same time Macaulay published her “casual” comments on contemporary issues, she published in Hogarth’s second series of essays “Catchwords and Claptrap,” in which she disdains the popular uses of particular words that neglect their long histories. Whereas in A Casual Commentary Macaulay always sides with the public, using the pronoun “we” to describe it, in “Catchwords” she resorts to phrases like “herd sense” (7) that are used by commentators such as Q. D. Leavis who vigorously argue that an educated few should assert their superior taste over the masses. But if Macaulay does take a somewhat different attitude towards the public in her Hogarth publication, she continues to believe in and argue for increased communication between different points of view there. At the root of her complaint in “Catchwords” is that when words are used sloppily, they no longer mean anything; nuances and resonances slide together. People don’t use words in their own particular way in order to express an original idea; rather, too many people tend to express the same hackneyed ideas again and again. Macaulay appears to be humble at the beginning of the book, explaining that “These discursive and random comments are the indulgence of a private taste” (5), and calling attention to her own limitations and less than public-minded judgment. A later book also published with Hogarth, Some Religious Elements in Literature, also begins casually and humbly, in a manner that Woolf herself often adopted in her own essays, particularly her later ones. Macaulay warns her readers that, “This little book makes no attempt to do more than dip into its enormous subject here and there”; Macaulay is clearly setting herself apart from scholars and marks herself as a more casual critic. Thus her attitude when publishing with Hogarth is in important ways similar to her approach when publishing with more commercial publishers. She therefore retains many affinities to middlebrow writers even when publishing more highbrow work.
exposing readers to a number of perspectives outside their own. Emery has pointed out that Macaulay’s novels are not driven by plot, but rather point of view (106), and the remainder of the chapter will explore the effects of that choice through her early work in the 1910s and later bestselling work in the 1920s.

Aesthetic Democracy for the Modern Age: Rose Macaulay’s Earlier Novels

If all of Rose Macaulay’s works are currently understudied, her early novels, those published before 1920, are especially so. Macaulay was not proud of her earliest fiction, and critical neglect of it may well be what she would have wanted. She asked that her first five novels be removed from the shelves of the London Library (Emery 102), and she begged Frank Swinnerton not to quote from her early work in his anthology of Georgian literature (LeFanu 68). Unlike Macaulay’s 1920s fiction which sustains a satirical tone that made it popular with modern readers, her earlier novels are generally more earnest and sometimes even moralistic, which is perhaps why they have been largely unstudied and were disowned by the author herself.

Despite this critical neglect and Macaulay’s own disavowal, they are valuable to read because they reveal how ideas about judgment circulating in the Victorian era could be tested in modern times and put to use in modern ways. Of late, the little if excellent work that has drawn attention to the once fêted Macaulay has focused largely on her fiction from World War I and the interwar period, and has understood her to be an acute commenter on the modern age. Yet Macaulay’s sharp eye and incisive wit highlight absurdities and contradictions of cultural conflicts in not only the modern era, but also the entry into it. The consideration of nineteenth-century ideas about judging in twentieth-century society within Macaulay’s earlier fiction

---

23 See particularly Patrick Collier, Cynthia Port, and Melissa Sullivan.
suggests there may be more continuity between the Victorian and modern eras than is apparent in studies of high modernist works; some of Macaulay’s novels show a fruitful relationship with the Victorian past rather than a primarily antagonistic one. Studying them can help modernist scholars understand how political concerns and potential solutions from both time periods overlapped more than is generally acknowledged and how ideas from the earlier period were carried on into the next.

*The Lee Shore* (1912) and *The Making of Bigot* (1914), Macaulay’s sixth and seventh novels, are particularly useful to examine in this regard because they are themselves transitional works, written after her “apprenticeship” period, when she was more fully indebted to Victorian style, but before she had firmly established a name for herself as a modern wit. *The Lee Shore* highlights much of what was untenable and abortive in mid-nineteenth-century aesthetic movements and late-nineteenth-century Aestheticism, but her slightly later work *The Making of Bigot* in fact suggests how some aspects of those practices could be made useful for twentieth-century society. More specifically, these novels show how aesthetic judgment that was at the heart of many important Victorian cultural movements could be made political in a way that could help modern readers confront and begin to understand an ever more multifaceted world that threatened to dissolve in a disarray of disparate and conflicting outlooks.

**Aesthetic Democracy in the Victorian Age**

When I argue that Macaulay picked up Victorian aesthetic ideals and tested them in twentieth-century society, I am suggesting that she picked up the project of aesthetic democracy

---

24 Throughout this part of the chapter, I capitalize Aestheticism when referring to the late nineteenth-century movement. I do not capitalize aestheticism when referring to earlier ideas that are indebted to aesthetic theory and were promoted by the Pre-Raphaelites, or when referring to both mid- and late-nineteenth century movements together.
whose origins have been traced back to eighteenth-century Britain, but whose influence was greatest at the height of the Victorian age. Aesthetic democracy refers to the idea that voicing, acknowledging, and understanding disparate viewpoints can be achieved and enhanced through acts of aesthetic judgment such as viewing and appreciating paintings, literature, architecture, etc. Earlier advocates of aesthetic democracy, various philosophers, cultural theorists, and critics, believed in a sensus communis or a common inborn aesthetic sense or taste present in members of all classes that helps citizens of different backgrounds and outlooks understand each other and work together (cf. Dowling). However, more recent thinkers working in the tradition, such as Hannah Arendt, have argued it is public debate about aesthetic or political matters rather than a “common sense” that brings disparate viewpoints into conversation. Within the past ten years or so, a number of Victorianist scholars have produced notable works on this topic that recuperate ideas of liberalism and detachment that since the 1980s have met suspicion in the academy.

Studies by Linda Dowling, Amanda Anderson, and David Wayne Thomas have invigorated thinking about aestheticism and Aesthetes in the nineteenth century, yet they all end with commentaries on Wilde, late Victorian culture, and/or the close of the Victorian age. I want to extend the conversation into the modernist period to demonstrate how these ideas do not die out, but rather are reworked by Macaulay’s earlier novels for a broad public in the early twentieth century.\footnote{In Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience, Jessica Feldman has shown how Victorian writers and thinkers shared much with modernists through their common emphasis on aesthetics and perception, though her primary texts are naturally Victorian rather than modernist or proto-modernist. Sean Latham has studied how conversations about aesthetics extend from the Victorian era to the modern period in his genealogy of snobbery that runs from W. M. Thackeray to Dorothy Sayers in Am I Snob?: Modernism and the Novel, and Faye Hammill’s Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History also looks at ideas of taste in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, my research is the first to consider ideas}
For Victorianist scholars invested in this subject, it has been important to show connections between cultural productions in the mid- and late-Victorian periods that have for a long time been considered to be markedly different from if not antithetical to each other. Such scholarship reveals how late-Victorian thinkers were not dismissing mid-Victorian ideas and inventing new ones, but rather reworking them under a different guise. According to Linda Dowling, for example, mid-Victorian aesthetes such as John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and William Morris, who are generally understood to be proponents of “Art for Life’s sake,” surprisingly have the same aims and agenda as those later writers and thinkers whom they disdained or who disdained them, the “Art for Art’s sake” advocates Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Dowling argues that both kinds of aesthetes, those from the mid- and late-nineteenth century, were (often unknowingly) inspired by the Whig tradition of aesthetic liberalism that stemmed from the Earl of Shaftesbury’s ideas about the sensus communis, or the common ability of all citizens of a nation to appreciate art. While Shaftesbury’s ideas were ineffective in his lifetime, they were embraced by mid-Victorian thinkers such as Arnold and Morris who desperately wanted to bring together a fracturing nation through appreciation of art and culture and, as Dowling argues, later by Wilde. Mid- and late-Victorian critics and artists have also been shown to value similar ideals of critical reflection, to both value situated detachment from the world around them, which is a process essential to both aesthetic judgment and a functioning democracy (cf. Anderson). Even the Victorian ideal of “many-sidedness” or the process of taking into account multiple points of view while thinking and reflecting, which has been linked to aesthetic appreciation as well as civic feeling, was advocated by writers and critics as apparently disparate as John Stuart Mill and Wilde (cf. Thomas). Thus Victorianist scholars have shown of aesthetic democracy, which concerns the politics of communication rather than exclusion, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
how thinkers from the mid- and late- nineteenth century alike were connecting the ideals of aesthetic judgment with democracy and harmonious civil society.

Yet they have not extended their studies beyond the late nineteenth century. Dowling argues that the paradox of establishing democratic communication and consensus between all classes on the narrow foundation of aristocratic taste that was available to only a few ultimately led to the demise of such beliefs after Wilde’s imprisonment at the turn of the twentieth century. For others, the modernist period is simply beyond the scope of their monographs. Yet aesthetic democracy lived beyond the end of the nineteenth century and through the early twentieth, shedding the ornamental and highly wrought surface that it had adopted in the decadent fin de siècle and continuing in the apparently quite different form of Macaulay’s early intellectual middlebrow fiction.

Aesthetics and Social Acumen: The Lee Shore

*The Lee Shore* is Macaulay’s most direct and extended engagement with aestheticism, and it is also the work that firmly established her place in the literary public sphere. When the novel was published in 1912, it brought Macaulay her first significant publicity: it won first place in a competition held by the publisher Hodder and Stoughton, earning Macaulay a picture of herself in the papers alongside a notice of an £1000 prize. The prize money helped Macaulay establish herself in London, where she rented a small flat with additional financial support from her uncle. Thus the novel directly increased exposure of her name and indirectly provided her with her first independent home in London, where she could more easily meet and socialize with other writers. The novel has been given little attention by Macaulay’s critics, published as it was

---

26 The prize was actually only £600, with £400 going to second place (LeFanu 95).
just before the work that is considered the first in her mature voice, *The Making of a Bigot*, and also after the earlier Edwardian novels that served as her apprenticeship. Yet *The Lee Shore* is an important work because it reveals the tensions present in Macaulay’s transition from dutiful Edwardian daughter to independent modern writer. While the work is sometimes heavy-handed—Emery calls it “didactically Christian” (147)—it hints at the form that she develops soon thereafter, which juxtaposes numerous positions and presents a multi-faceted view of the public sphere. In this way, *The Lee Shore* demonstrates the link between the kind of judgment Macaulay cultivates in later novels and the kind of liberal aesthetic judgment that was valued and cultivated in the Victorian period.

The novel is a comi-tragedy that satirically plays out the principles of the Art-for-Art’s sake movement in their most literal form, revealing the contradictions and socio-economic privilege that underlay Aestheticism. The novel’s protagonist, Peter, has exquisite taste that is intuitive and flawless, yet he completely fails at making his way in the world. In his childhood and adolescence he is trampled on the sports pitch, and in his early middle age, his various careers and marriage fail, and he is cut off from his best friends and only chance at love. While Peter makes excellent choices as to which objects he or others might purchase, he makes poor social judgments and has no moral backbone. In some ways he is the perfect dandy, caring little about practical living, useless at utilitarian jobs when he must pursue them, and always

27 The tone of Macaulay’s first five novels, *Abbots Verney* (1906), *The Furnace* (1907), *The Secret River* (1909), *The Valley Captives* (1911), and *Views and Vagabonds* (1912), was even farther from the witty, mordant style that commonly defines Macaulay’s work than the works considered here. Published by John Murray, they were generally critically praised but not big sellers. A reader for the firm noted “there is a limited cultured public to which [her second novel] would appeal,” explaining that it was “too good” to appeal to a mass market “yet not supremely good” (qtd. in Emery 103). Macaulay’s first novels were written when the author was in her twenties and very early thirties and often concerned fanciful subjects such as river nymphs, orphans living abroad, and jungle adventures. These were the books that Macaulay disowned and tried to remove from the London Library.
surrounded by beautiful objects that he appreciates for themselves, not for any practical purposes. Furthermore, he never condemns immoral action. For example, when his best friend, Urquhart, runs over a man in his car, Peter does not attempt to report the incident, as this would betray his friend, and he does not report the fraud that he knows his half-brother, Hilary, is running in Venice. When Peter encounters clear wrong he laughs and turns away. As the narrator says, Peter was “not…a reformer, or idealist, or a lover of progress, or even, according to himself, of liberty, but an accepter of things as they are and a lover of good things in the world” (44). He enjoys what comes to him without hoping to change anything. Yet he is no Lord Henry or even Dorian Gray; he is a failure in the world, to be pitied, not envied. Sarah LeFanu has called the novel “a response to…the materialism of late Victorianism” (96), and its Christian undertones condemn those who live thoughtlessly, insulated by their wealth. Yet the novel also critiques both mid- and late-Victorian aestheticism from the perspective of a modern artist who sees that these ideas are unfit for the modern world.

Macaulay pokes fun at both earlier and later aesthetes, the Art-for-Life’s sake and the Art-for-Art’s sake movements, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetes of the late Victorian period. Peter’s half-brother Hilary, a self-indulgent scoundrel, edits a magazine called The Gem, the title of which I believe is strikingly similar to the Pre-Raphaelite’s magazine, The Germ (January to April 1850), which distributed the group’s early ideas on aestheticism and examples of the practice. Readers of The Lee Shore’s The Gem are not aesthetes themselves with a fine appreciation of creativity, but rather businessmen who rely on others to tell them what is beautiful. The magazine purports to report on beautiful objects that are sold in Venice, where Hilary lives in a decaying palazzo-turned-boarding house. Actually, the objects that the magazine describes are fakes, though the publicity they receive makes them look legitimate in the eyes of
unwitting buyers, all moneyed tourists. Alice Crawford argues that *The Gem* is inspired by *The Magazine of Art*, which from 1881 to 1886 was edited by W.G. Henley, a lame poet whose life parallels Peter’s in some notable ways (49). Yet *The Gem* is not Peter’s production, as Crawford asserts; it is Hilary’s and as such is corrupt from its inception through its demise, even after Peter starts working for it and believes it has begun operating on purer motives. Alice Benson has noted that the poems Macaulay was writing while drafting *The Lee Shore* are littered with “remnants of Pre-Raphaelite style” (57), which suggests that the movement was present in Macaulay’s mind in the early 1910s and that allusions to Pre-Raphaelite productions in the novel would not be far-fetched.

Contemporary scholarship on the Pre-Raphaelite movement provides further evidence of such connections. In line with other scholars who have studied the commercialization of the Pre-Raphaelites’ work, David Wayne Thomas has explored how Dante Gabriel Rossetti supported himself by selling reproductions of his paintings to self-made industrial barons in Manchester. Thomas’s findings resonate with the function of *The Gem* in *The Lee Shore*; both highlight the ways in which wealthy self-made (not aristocratic) patrons were looking to increase their social standing by purchasing copied work that had been socially vetted by the artistically informed. As Thomas demonstrates, buying copies was still widely acceptable when Rossetti was selling his own reproductions, though the value of unique artworks was beginning to increase. By the time Macaulay wrote *The Lee Shore* fifty years later, however, the practice of selling copies was considered fraudulent and in bad taste. Macaulay pokes fun at the Pre-Raphaelite practice of

---

28 Henley is also known as R. L. Stevenson’s closest friend as well as a literary editor.  
29 Dowling has also discussed how rich industrialists cornered the market of Pre-Raphaelite paintings in her chapter on William Morris, which discusses Morris’s desire to produce art that was more widely marketable than that of the Pre-Raphaelites.
copying and selling work to self-made patrons, showing how high-minded aesthetic theories had been put to use for commercial profit and social advancement in the early twentieth century.

Even if the similarity between magazine names is a coincidence, Macaulay’s treatment of *The Gem* in *The Lee Shore* still playfully debases aestheticist ideals after their popularization. While the characters who succeed in life exploit beautiful objects for their social value, the character with fine taste, Peter, is heartlessly manipulated by a morally vacant schemer for the single purpose of making money to survive. Thus the idea and practice of aesthetic appreciation ultimately enables the dishonest to cheat those who have worked honestly, and to manipulate those with exquisite taste. When Peter’s employer, Leslie, a self-made man and autodidact, attempts to appreciate a trip to Venice by reading Ruskin, a vocal supporter of the Pre-Raphaelites and a foundational figure of the mid-nineteenth-century Art-for-Life’s sake movement, Peter insists that Leslie abandon the book and try to see the world through a less over-quoted point of view. Macaulay indicates that the time for those particular aesthetic ideas has passed, having become commercialized and commonplace.

The Art-for-Art’s sake movement, which rejected Ruskin, also comes under fire in the novel. In *The Lee Shore*, beauty does not ultimately win the day and is shown to be in itself insufficient to feed the body and soul. The characters with the most refined taste suffer the direst consequences. Urquhart, the Tory MP with conventional taste, whose thinking is insular and whose outlook is unsympathetic, succeeds in everything he does. The marginally more cultured Hilary and his wife must leave Venice after *The Gem* scandal breaks, and upon returning to London must struggle to make ends meet, but ultimately move to Ireland where it seems they will be able to survive. Peter, however, gives up his job out of shame, tries to save a working-class girl from a confidence man by marrying her, loses his wife when she leaves him for the
scoundrel after all, and then is separated forever from his cousin Lucy, his best friend and true love. The novel concludes with Peter wandering in Italy, living out of a cart with his small child. He is desperately waiting for “the lee shore,” a paradisiacal place where their troubles will melt away. The characters who “see everything,” Peter and Lucy, are destined never to get along in the world. They cannot successfully live on good taste alone.

Peter’s good taste goes hand-in-hand with his exceptional perception, which allows him to mix with many groups. He can judge their different standards well, which allows him to go about London meeting many different kinds of people. Yet his flexible and fine-tuned taste does not ultimately allow him to transgress class and socio-cultural boundaries. The mixing and mingling among various sets that happens early in the book is questioned at the end when Lucy asks, “Can anyone ever leave their world and go into another?” (271), by which she means: can anyone leave the milieu into which s/he is born and live successfully and happily in another? Lucy “doesn’t believe it can be done,” and the plot of the novel suggests the same. Lucy says she doesn’t feel comfortable being married to Urquhart because as a rich man, his taste is different than hers; she explains that the rich don’t make happiness for themselves “out of all the common things that everyone shares—the sunshine and the river and the nice things in the streets—but have a special corner of good things marked off for [them]” (272). She criticizes the privileging of exceptional and expensive objects, once the domain of the aesthete and dandy, in favor of “common things” and a common taste. Lucy’s comments underscore that exquisite objects are the province of the rich, not objects that are universally admired, and that those who appreciate them and those who do not are divided by the great gulf of means. Her comments question whether there is in fact a taste common to all and critiques suggestions by Aesthetes such as Wilde that people from different backgrounds are capable of appreciating fine things. If there is a
common taste, it is not for the refined living celebrated by dandies and late nineteenth-century Aesthetes.

_The Lee Shore’s_ treatment of aestheticism aligns with Linda Dowling’s account of aesthetic democracy, which argues that the movement took a turn, exemplified by Wilde’s work, that highlighted its contradictions and inconsistencies and revealed the aristocratic roots of the common sense taste that many nineteenth-century thinkers believed would unite all citizens. Dowling argues that this turn ultimately led to the demise of aesthetic democracy in Britain. _The Lee Shore_ appears to take this demise a step farther, showing that those who are best at aesthetic judgment not only fail to bring together disparate outlooks, but are also driven away from society. Yet the protagonist of Macaulay’s next novel, _The Making of a Bigot_, retains many of the characteristics of the failed Aesthete in _The Lee Shore_, but refigured to suggest that good taste is a valuable modern trait in a fracturing political world because it enables people to surmise what others like and therefore to imagine a variety of viewpoints. The character with good taste is a nexus through which different outlooks and attitudes are filtered and which in turn are made available for the reader to consider side-by-side. If _The Lee Shore_ shows that taste in the early twentieth century is no longer usefully employed to discern the superiority of art objects, Macaulay’s next novel reveals how it is useful to imagine the perspectives of others.

**Drawing the Line in Modern Life: The Making of a Bigot**

In _The Making of a Bigot_, Macaulay for the first time began to practice her signature style of satirizing the inconsistencies of the modern world by moving a protagonist through a variety of subgroups within society. Crawford has pointed out that the novel is Macaulay’s “first
conscious fiction of the contemporary English metropolis” (59). It reveals how nineteenth-century ideas of judgment can be useful in a more modern setting.

As in The Lee Shore, Macaulay takes stabs at Aestheticism, but in Making, she does so more openly, targeting the 1890s dandy particularly. The character Cecil is an obvious example; his parents wrote for The Yellow Book, which he was given to read as a child, and he absorbed its lessons thoroughly from a young age. As a consequence, he is an artist who is entirely self-absorbed and helpless in the modern world. When he attends a picnic organized by Eddy, the protagonist, Cecil arrives late, delaying the whole party’s journey. Upon settling into the train carriage, he insists on reading aloud the entire script of his latest play, which bores the others, though Cecil is indifferent to anyone else’s opinion. He fails to bring his own lunch though all were instructed to do so, and so he must be fed by everyone else (58-9). Macaulay bluntly indicates that the lessons of Aestheticism when learned literally lead to narrow-mindedness that drains rather than enriches society. Smaller stabs at Aestheticism include the dismissal of a Beardsley print that hangs next to a work by Duncan Grant (40) and disdain for the “smart paradox-and-epigraph-mongers” who are said to contribute little compared to more earnest writers (110). Macaulay severely criticizes the superficial and stylistic aspects of Aestheticism, but retains and praises some of its philosophic grounds.

Similar to Peter of The Lee Shore, Eddy shares some key characteristics with the Aesthetes. Like a close adherent to the principles laid out in the preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), Eddy has no strict or consistent “ethical sympathies.” But unlike Lord Henry, for instance, Eddy is not void of ethical sympathies; instead, Eddy sympathizes with everyone. He can impressively perceive every viewpoint that he encounters and understand it perfectly, yet he cannot stick to any one of them at the cost of shutting out another that would contradict it. The
narrator notes that Eddy’s eyes “chiefly conveyed a capacity for reception, an openness to all impressions, a readiness to spread sails to any wind” (44). He is therefore the perfect facilitator of the kind of discussion Macaulay likes to have in her novels, that between conflicting points of view. However, his very ability to see everything is what makes him so useless in the world.

The novel follows Eddy through a number of jobs, which exposes the reader to a number of different points of view. He first tries to be a clergyman, and though Eddy is good with the parishioners, he refuses to stop seeing his bohemian friends. The reader sees two different groups juxtaposed: young-artist types, some of whom follow the Bloomsbury-based neo-Impressionists as hinted at above, and church leaders who adhere to strict ideology. Eddy is eventually forced out of the clergy because he is open to believing too many different things, some of which aren’t compatible with the church’s creed. As Eddy thinks to himself, “Clergymen drew lines, they objected to people and things, they failed to accept” (79). The only thing Eddy fails to accept (that is, until the end of the novel) is the rule that one must draw lines somewhere. This characterization encourages readers to avoid drawing lines as well, as they never see much of one belief system before moving onto another. The plot later turns to magazine publishing, depicting Eddy’s attempts at reviewing. Although reviewing does not follow a strict ideology like religion, it too values firm judgments and opinions more than the free play of ideas. Arnold, Eddy’s friend who finds him the job, complains that Eddy excels at perceiving the way a novel works, but then is too generous in his final judgment; Eddy praises more than he should because he sees the perspective of the author as well as a critical reader (155). The novel still later shows Eddy running a Fabian boarding house (discussed further below), once again without the firm commitment to a particular ideology that would help him succeed. The plot points that move Eddy through multiple professions and show the reader multiple perspectives seem to underscore
the idea that Eddy must be more judgmental, to judge in the popular sense, not the aesthetic sense, to succeed in the modern world.

Yet the limitations of hardened viewpoints are also revealed through an episode that details the creation and demise of Eddy and Arnold’s magazine, *Unity*. Unlike other periodicals that cover a particular niche or take a clear political line, *Unity* is meant to take every line and put them together in one publication—it might have been better named *Diversity*. The paper is not nihilistic, believing in and standing for nothing; rather it means to take everything seriously. The narrator explains that the “frankly political and social” paper “dealt with current questions not in the least impartially (which is so dull), but by taking alternate and very definite points of view” (255). Eddy and Arnold seek out, though do not often persuade, the most prominent opinion holders to contribute to their magazine in order to give each point of view its best possible chance at being heard. Notably, *Unity* does not purport to offer truth or even an impartial opinion but achieves a kind of generalized viewpoint by presenting many points of view, each of which is asserted with conviction. This process, which shares much with the process of aesthetic judgment, is what the novel itself does in moving through different groups in modern society.

Predictably, Eddy’s enthusiasm for the project is balanced by Arnold’s skepticism of its success. Arnold doesn’t think the paper will be financially viable, explaining “the mind of the average potential reader…as a rule prefers, quite definitely prefers, one party or state of things to another” (257). Eddy thinks providing high quality content will be enough to attract a broad readership, but Arnold knows that “the majority cares for the bad unfortunately,” and bemoans the fact that the paper is bought only by intellectuals. “We can’t grow fat on that,” he says
In a meeting where Arnold and Eddy announce the folding of the paper, one contributor argues that *Unity* was unsuccessful because it confused its readers. He says on the one hand, “working-men” who are attracted to the “practical” or political side of the paper will be put off by the modernist verse and drawings the paper publishes, and on the other hand, “the clever people,” those of the smart set, the fashionable younger generation, will be “shocked” when encountering verse that working-men like; the paper is “not all of a piece, like *Tit-Bits*, for instance,” and confounds readers because “people like to know what to expect” (263). By 1914 the literary public sphere had been shaped into different readerships that had learned to expect consistency in a paper, and consistency with their point of view. *Unity* alone could not realistically bridge such divides. Yet the way Macaulay describes the goals for the periodical and its reasons for failure highlight the urgency of producing literature that did attempt to show new and different perspectives to readers who had become hardened in one outlook.

What is not sustainable in commercial journalism—the free play of ideas, or the consideration of multiple perspectives that is the basis of sound aesthetic judgment—Macaulay suggests can be cultivated and practiced in writing and reading fiction. The final scene of *The Making of a Bigot* depicts Eddy batting around options of what he will believe in and what career he will finally pursue when he is married and must support a family. In his “dark hours of self disgust,” he considers becoming a novelist because it is “the last resource of the spiritually destitute” (278). Macaulay continues in her mocking manner:

For novels are not life, that immeasurably important thing that has to be so sternly approached. In novels, one may take as many points of view as one likes, all at the same time.

---

30 An amusing but also instructive joke is the editors’ excitement upon receiving an ad for dog shampoo. They are happy because the new ad suggests that they are reaching a less intellectual reader and therefore a broader audience; before they were receiving ads for other magazines and pens, which were far less promising (262). The novel figures a broadly-based audience as the most profitable one, and the editors of *Unity* seem to be seeking out a middlebrow audience.
time; instead of working for life, one may sit and survey it from all angles simultaneously. It is only when one starts walking on a road that one finds it excludes other roads. (278)

While here Macaulay seems to be satirizing and belittling the importance of her own output in the public sphere, she also more positively points out how novels are different from life and as such useful in stirring reflection that direct political action tends to block. After deciding to become a newspaper reporter, Eddy despairs because his chosen profession will be different from those of “philosophers, artists and poets” who can afford to live at a greater remove from life and so see a fuller truth. He thinks that truth is not for “a common person” such as himself, that pragmatism and life are incompatible (293). Yet he reads the work of philosophers and enjoys the poems of poets and the paintings of painters, suggesting that those who work in the world and those who are able to see it more broadly interact. And it is his own interactions with different groups within the novel in which he is depicted that expose readers to a diversity of viewpoints of modern life and consequently broaden their judgment. What Unity aspires to do, The Making of a Bigot actually does: it earnestly considers a number of viewpoints prominent at the time, but it does so in a comic fictional form that would be more palatable to readers than a strictly expository political periodical. Although the novel was not a bestseller—Macaulay would have to wait another six years before publishing a novel that sold well—the style, as previous critics have remarked, is suggestive of her more lucrative future novels, and thus Making suggests the benefits that later novels likewise offer.

The Making of a Bigot not only promotes broadened judgment through its form, but it also indicates its positive political effects through a late turn in the plot. When Eddy agrees to temporarily run a Fabian boarding house as a favor, his open-mindedness is shown to be a boon
to the lodgers there, even if it infuriates the permanent director.\(^{31}\) Upon assuming the directorship, Eddy decides that he will expose the men at the house to as many different kinds of groups and activities as he himself has been exposed to: the high church and Christian socialism, the opera and music hall, rich radicals and the Primrose League.\(^{32}\) The secretary of the organization is disturbed by Eddy’s liberalism, as the men grow interested in causes other than Fabianism and sometimes miss house meetings to attend gatherings of other groups (157). The men at the boarding house act much like the public that Macaulay describes in her essay, “What the Public Wants,” where she asserts the reading public “swallows, apparently, anything that it gets, and never says what it does not want, because it doesn’t know” (Casual 33). The men of Making are likewise easily swayed by any strong holder of opinion whose path they cross. The portrait is not flattering, but it ultimately shows how Eddy actually has more faith in the men than their regular director and more effectively facilitates the men’s independent political judgment. In exposing the reader to so many viewpoints, Macaulay like Eddy suggests that he or she can decide for him or herself what values and perspectives are best.

Essential to sound aesthetic judgment is independence in judgment, the value of which the boarding house episode clearly emphasizes. Pollard, the secretary, insists that Datchard, the director of the house for whom Eddy is substituting, is a better director because Datchard “likes [the lodgers] to think for themselves” (157). Yet when Datchard returns to the boarding house, he excoriates Eddy for exposing the men to so many different ideas and causes, asserting: “One can’t let in that sort of influence without endangering the sanity of a set of half-educated lads”

---

\(^{31}\) Macaulay herself volunteered at a charitable boarding house after she graduated from university, largely to get away from her family’s isolated home in rural Wales. She was not gifted at the work and had trouble relating to the women who lived there. Emery argues that this experience instilled in her the belief that it is “patronizing to change the taste of others” (99).

\(^{32}\) The Primrose League is a Tory organization whose mission is “To Uphold God, Queen, and Country, and the Conservative Cause.”
It becomes clear that Datchard’s attitude is paternalistic; he believes the “sanity” of the men is delicate and must be carefully protected by those who know better. He says outright: “We want to make the club the nucleus of a sound Radical constituency. If there was an election now, I couldn’t say which way some of them would vote” (180). The men of the house aren’t then “thinking for themselves,” but instead given so narrow a view of the world that they believe whatever they are told to believe, the only thing to which they are exposed. It is not just Eddy’s charisma and enthusiasm that make the men so persuadable; the habits of the house encourage the men to take on the beliefs and allegiances of the house’s director. Eddy has more respect for the working men than Datchard; Eddy believes they can handle the plurality of the modern urban world and should be allowed to choose for themselves what causes to support and which principles to believe in. Because Eddy takes all causes seriously and sees truth in every group he joins or beauty or joy in every activity he pursues, he is not prone to fall into self-interested behavior and convince the men whom he directs in one limited direction; he is constantly looking outside himself for new and different stimulation and encourages the men to do the same.

33 The narrator explains that Eddy “did not in least want to change [the men’s] politics—what can be better than to be a Radical?,” but he did believe that “certainly they should see both sides. So both sides were set before them and the result was that they looked much less intolerant than before upon the wrong side” (164). That which the men initially couldn’t swallow, like Matisse, Shakespeare, and shows at the Savoy, they learn to appreciate because their friend who also likes “Harry Lauder, Victor Grayson, Kipling, and the Minimum Wage” likes those things too. The men respect Eddy, so they open their minds to new things when he suggests them. Eddy admits that his function bears some similarities to that of a benevolent dictator. He thinks to himself that influencing people *en masse* “feels rather like driving a large and powerful car, which is sent swerving to the right or left by a small turn of the wrist” (163). Eddy here sounds something like Wilde’s Lord Henry whose interest in his young charge Dorian looks more like manipulation than persuasion; Lord Henry compares steering the course of Dorian’s life to playing an exquisite violin. Yet the difference between Eddy and his Victorian precursor is that Eddy’s work has some positive outcomes for the community. In fact, he seems to be carrying out one of Matthew Arnold’s main precepts, acting as an apostle of culture and leading others to appreciate “the best of what’s been thought and said.” Eddy counters rigid British “Hebraism” or single-mindedness with a healthy dose of “Hellenism” and flexible thinking. The men are actually exposed to a wider, not narrower, view of society than they had been before.
Despite his shortcomings, it turns out that Eddy pushes the men to think for themselves more successfully than the founding director does. Eddy has a valuable role to play in modern society even if it is not recognized as such. He promotes a broad-minded liberal outlook that is needed in a world that is growing increasingly divided between different groups and interests. The novel that follows Eddy through so many different perspectives does the same.

Critics have argued that Macaulay is poking fun at Eddy, who is considered to be half mad by most people in the novel, and his failures suggest he is an antihero, not a character to be celebrated. Eddy’s belief in such widely divergent causes is in some ways laughable. But considering only the comic aspect of Eddy’s character fails to acknowledge the larger frame of the novel, the society in which Eddy lives, and the social situations in which Eddy is made to look ridiculous, which are criticized as well. Looking beyond a reading that too quickly sides with the limited viewpoint of society members, critics might see how the novel—in spite of its title—offers an alternative to bigotry or closed-mindedness.

Where direct political action fails, Macaulay suggests that novels may have a role to play. In *The Making of a Bigot*, the “terrorism” of a radical suffragette, which entails dousing the contents of a mailbox with ink, is shown to be absurdly ineffective. Arnold’s efforts to voice an anti-union opinion at a union rally cause the men there to literally trample him to death. The latter incident might be interpreted as an allegory depicting the threat of mob rule and the danger of mass politics to modernist art, as Arnold throughout favors modernist style. But it also reveals how necessary dialogue is. Macaulay’s novel allows readers to safely and peacefully consider a number of disparate viewpoints in one space and to prepare for such dialogue. The novel itself is arguably a political intervention, a work that facilitates a broader-minded understanding of the world. As a work of fiction that does not make direct truth claims, it encourages greater
imagination than a periodical like *Unity* would, and it allows readers to take intellectual risks without compromising their safety, as Arnold does. Macaulay’s novel is a space where readers can both imagine and think independently.

Thus we can see how in *The Lee Shore* and *Making of a Bigot* Macaulay dismisses the idea of the dandy, but retains the kind of detachment that the dandy favored, which critics like Anderson and Thomas have recently argued shares something with the detachment and reflection favored by liberal mid-Victorian thinkers. In the early years of the twentieth century Macaulay is not satisfied with strictly Aestheticist programs; she sees their contradictions and inadequacies and depicts their superficial trappings as outmoded. Yet she favors the aesthetic practice of judging impersonally, or in more contemporary terms, broadly and liberally. In many ways her work shares much with John Stuart Mill’s propositions for a liberal society in *On Liberty*, especially when Mill makes such comments as: “99 out of 100 educated men have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from themselves and considered what such persons may have to say; and consequently they do not…know the doctrine which they themselves profess” (72). In *The Making of a Bigot*, Macaulay does just that: she throws readers into the positions of all different kinds of groups, arguably in order to facilitate a better understanding of their own positions. Yet after the demise of both liberalism and Aestheticism in the early decades of the twentieth century, and in a world that was more culturally and politically divided than ever, introducing readers to a wide spectrum of perspectives proved difficult. Macaulay did not claim, as did nineteenth-century liberal aesthetes such as Arnold or Morris or even Wilde, that fine art could bring a fractured nation together. The title of her fictional periodical, *Unity*, suggests she might have wished it to, but saw that it could not. But she did make space in her novels for reflection on such disparate spaces. Thus I would
argue the ideas of aesthetic democracy inspired by thinkers such as Shaftesbury in the eighteenth century did not die with the turn of the twentieth, but rather lived on in a new form: Macaulay’s earlier novels and perhaps others like it, which have yet to be studied in these terms.

The Many Worlds of a Woman Writer: Keeping Up Appearances

Fourteen years after Macaulay reworked The Lee Shore’s Peter, a product of the Edwardian era, into the more modern Eddy of The Making of a Bigot, she created yet another character who would pick up and embody threads Macaulay had developed through these two earlier characters. This time, however, the body that voiced them would be a woman’s. Daisy Simpson, the protagonist of Keeping Up Appearances, who also goes by the names Daphne Sandomir and Marjorie Wynne in different social settings, is not only a woman, but also a member of the “lost generation” and as such faces different social pressures than her predecessors. While Collier and Sullivan have recently examined Keeping Up Appearances in discussions of the literary marketplace of interwar London, no critic has yet analyzed the novel in the context of these two earlier works. Doing so reveals how the ability to judge broadly as Peter and Eddy do in their milieus remains relevant in the ever-more fragmenting society of

34 When writing Keeping Up Appearances, Macaulay herself faced social pressures that were different from those she encountered in the 1910s when she was a writer fighting to make her name known. For example, Macaulay said that she “did [her] best” to make The Furnace, her second novel, “appeal to the general public” (Emery 104). She also wished The Lee Shore sold better, and despaired to her first publisher, John Murray, about ever reaching a broad audience: “I don’t think my books will ever really sell well” (Emery 136). By the late 1920s, when she published Keeping Up Appearances, she was almost too popular for her own liking. She had had a string of bestsellers, and as Alice Crawford notes at the beginning of her monograph on Macaulay, was celebrated as both intelligent and readable; reviewers of the 1920s used words like “most distinctive,” “brilliant,” and “irresistible” to describe her work (13). She was a publisher’s darling on both sides of the Atlantic and in some ways experienced the problems faced by the protagonist of this novel, who is herself a popular woman novelist and journalist, though Macaulay’s work had more intellectual credibility at the time than “Marjorie Wynne” does in the novel.
interwar London. Even more importantly, it shows how perception and refined judgment such as Peter and Eddy practice is essential to a professional woman’s survival in 1920s London, where she must navigate a number of disparate socio-economic circles. While Macaulay never herself claimed to be a feminist,保持 Up Appearances undoubtedly highlights social and political concerns specific to women, and I argue that it as well as Potterism, a novel which will be discussed in the following and final section of the chapter, has feminist implications for readers.

As both Peter and Eddy are capable of seeing many points of view and consequently being receptive to many different causes, Daisy too is capable of inhabiting many different roles and moving amongst many different circles. Like the earlier characters, she has exquisite perception and can judge the social registers of different groups remarkably well. She is compared to water (119) and a changeling (278), because like these elements that easily change shape, she regularly changes appearances, attitudes, and mannerisms when moving between different groups of people. In more pejorative terms, she might be considered a turncoat, and her shifting identities get her into trouble late in the novel. However, Daisy often needs to change her outward appearance (hence the title) to accomplish her goals; if she wants to move in certain circles, she must adopt different habits and outlooks. Unlike the male characters before her whose flexible viewpoints seem naturally suited to them, Daisy seems to be forced to change her

35 Macaulay said that before World War I, she “didn’t attend very closely” to the suffrage debates because although she thought women should not be denied the vote, she “did not think anything [she] could do about it was likely to be helpful” (Emery 72). Critics have accused her of being blankly anti-feminist after the war. Crawford has argued that Macaulay’s “Virago-fostered reputation” as a feminist is “at odds with…remarks in her own journalism” (89) and that after Macaulay began her relationship with Gerald O’Donovan who was conservative in many ways, Macaulay became more critical of women and even spoke out against them. Emery too points out that Macaulay made some rather damning comments in her journalism, such as when she reviewed Arnold Bennett’s book Our Women, and stated that “the intellectual superiority of most men is an obvious fact.” Yet Emery argues that such ideas asserted in her journalism are quite different from ideas about women found in her fiction, which are much more progressive (75-6), a stance with which I agree.
outlook and attitudes as she interacts with a wide variety of people. The fact that she goes by different names in different settings isn’t made explicit until about a third of the way into the novel, and as a result, readers are encouraged to think that the different sides of Daisy’s personality are actually distinct individuals leading unique lives. This stylistic choice underscores how moving between groups can be quite jarring for her, and it emphasizes how her lifestyle is arguably more fragmented than flexible.

When Daisy takes the name Daphne Sandomir, she is cool, calm, and cultured and moves in suitably chic London literary and political circles. Daphne is engaged to the son of a well-connected upper-middle-class family, the intellectual and cultural interests of which Daphne seems to be only too willing to adopt herself; be they political, scientific, or historical. Daisy, ostensibly Daphne’s half-sister, is a writer of popular novels, which are published under the pseudonym Marjorie Wynne. Daisy must scramble for success, writing to support herself in London and live apart from her less cultured family residing in suburban East Sheen. Thus as Eddy adapts to his different friendship circles, Daisy/Daphne moves through a number of different worlds and adapts to the requirements of each.

But whereas Eddy decides that he must relinquish observing the world from so many viewpoints in order to make a living, Daisy/Daphne holds so many different viewpoints precisely so that she can make her way in the world. Daisy makes use of both Daphne’s personality, which is “better equipped for facing the world,” and Daisy’s too, which is better “for reflecting on it” (2). Whereas at the end of The Making of a Bigot Eddy decides that he will relinquish the artist’s position of observing and reflecting on the world in favor of taking action within it, Daisy uses both reflection and action to pursue her goals. When Eddy decides to become a journalist, there

———

36 Peter’s last name in The Lee Shore is Magerison, which inspires the nickname Marjorie while he is in boarding school; this detail might further link Daisy/Daphne to the earlier character.
is some expectation that based on his social and literary connections and broad political outlook, he will report on matters of some importance. Though he chooses a life of action, it seems likely his work will involve a degree of reflection. Daisy’s acute reflections on the modern world, however, do not go into her journalism; they are what enable her to move socially, not professionally, in higher brow circles. In her journalism, she is forced to consider clichés and generalizations. When she makes attempts to write on more worthwhile topics, she is rebuffed and considers quitting, yet she cherishes her independence too, so keeps on earning the means that make her independence possible. Eddy most likely won’t have to make such a choice. Macaulay here suggests how the broad-mindedness and perceptiveness of an astute judge are perhaps useful for readers generally, but crucial for women with limited economic means and socio-cultural connections should they want to advance themselves in a man’s world.

Because Daisy/Daphne moves deftly between worlds, she serves as a translator in each world in which she is active. For instance, her fiancée’s family doesn’t know what “the postwar girl” is because its highbrow members don’t read what Macaulay calls “The Human Press,” which is chatty and witty and seeks to entertain and draw in rather than challenge its readers, and thus the fiancée’s family isn’t familiar with popular slang (26). Daphne, Daisy’s chic side, has “only just” heard of this creature, demonstrating the familiarity with the popular world appropriate to a young woman, but not intimacy, which would be unseemly. Daisy, by contrast, knows only too much about “the post-war girl” and the full “grotesque, fantastic gallery of women types in press: the Modern Business Woman, the Mother and her Baby, the Smart Woman” (26). She wishes she didn’t know these characters and wishes even more “to write on inhuman things such as books and religion, places, the world at large, about things which intelligent persons had heard of” (27). When Raymond, Daphne’s fiancé and a biologist, notably...
studying life from a scientific angle, reads the paper that Daisy writes for, he disagrees entirely with its characterization of Bloomsbury as an intellectual neighborhood (184); he says that it is a neighborhood like any other, and that he knows because he lives there; it is Daisy who must explain the distinction the neighborhood has received in the popular imagination, even if many of its residents are far from bohemian types. Raymond later says he needs a dictionary to understand the paper, but Daphne remarks that it wouldn’t help because the definitions of the words and phrases that he doesn’t understand aren’t in dictionaries, but only to be found in the popular press (193). Macaulay herself had a well-known passion for etymology, and the Oxford English Dictionary particularly.\footnote{After Macaulay’s flat was bombed in World War II, the OED was among the first books her friends gave her to begin making up the loss of her book collection (Emery 268, LeFanu 233).} She seems to be poking fun at the press for which she herself was increasingly wary to write.

However, elsewhere, the novel is sympathetic to lower brow points of view, echoing Macaulay’s attitude in *A Casual Commentary*. While on a train from Paris to Calais that is full of English passengers returning home, Daisy looks about and realizes the people around her are largely the public that reads the papers for which she writes. She dislikes them because “they are so different than the Folyots,” her fiancée’s family, but all the same she “doesn’t believe they like to read the silly stuff her editors make her write. They didn’t have such time to waste” (51). Daisy is torn between holding a snobbish view towards this reading public because she fears her association with them, and respecting and having sympathy for them. Her movement between the different worlds allows her to know both better than the higher or lower brows know each other in their more isolated positionings.

Middlebrow writing is often criticized for being morally spineless, not maintaining standards, and too easily giving into commercial demands. In a parallel vein, *Keeping Up*
Appearances associates the middlebrow with slippery unreliability that leads to an unhappy ending; Daphne breaks off her engagement with Raymond because she’s been so dishonest in switching roles and shifting between worlds. Yet the middlebrow is also shown to be an essential link between worlds that would not otherwise meet. Without Daisy, the Folyots and the Arthurs of East Sheen would have no contact with each other— and they do literally meet at the end of the novel— nor would they even know about the existence of the publications the other family reads. Worried that Raymond will discover Daphne’s writerly identity, she asks Raymond if he’d ever heard of Marjorie Wynne, her penname. To Daisy’s relief, he hasn’t, at which point she realizes that “she might write for fifty years and still he wouldn’t hear of her… The impregnable security of one class of writer from another class of reader is more than the security of snails from British cooks, of pigs from Jewish butchers, of the skunk from the squeamish hunter” (113-14). The readers and writers who would be most likely and willing to cross otherwise impregnable borders are middlebrow ones. Daisy says that what teaches her the popular register is “being a woman journalist; one gets into the atmosphere and picks it up” (194). If she wants to support herself, she must know popular topics of discourse and registers, and if she wants to move socially in highbrow circles she must be familiar with intellectual subjects. Therefore Daisy knows more registers than most, and the middlebrow novel that follows her journey shows readers what Daisy knows. The middlebrow therefore connects otherwise estranged populations, and professional women to whom middlebrow contexts are more open have a special role making these connections and exposing readers to viewpoints outside their own.

---

38 This happens not just at the end but also in particular incidents in the novel. For example, Daphne literally acts more bravely than Daisy at various points; whereas Daphne dives into the sea to rescue Raymond’s younger brother, Daisy in a later situation freezes in fear when the same young boy is confronted by a charging bull.
Critical vs. Popular Judgment: *Potterism*

More than any of her works, Macaulay’s 1920 novel *Potterism* reveals how Macaulay’s popular middlebrow fiction exposes readers to a constantly shifting multiplicity of viewpoints that makes possible broad-minded political judgment. It furthermore shows how women can and sometimes must align themselves with the middlebrow to gain access to traditionally male-dominated sectors of society, and like *Keeping Up Appearances*, *Potterism* underscores how women who need to occupy spaces of middlebrow production to advance professionally often facilitate communication across socio-cultural divides. *Potterism* was Macaulay’s first bestseller, and it is also, ironically, a scathing critique of bestselling fiction and journalism in which middlebrow publishing practices receive special attention. Reading *Potterism* out of context of Macaulay’s larger oeuvre might give one the idea that she was middlebrow writers’ harshest critic rather than an example of such a writer. Macaulay actually wasn’t a popular novelist when she was writing *Potterism*; it was her first novel with a more commercial publisher, Collins. However, she knowingly used techniques of mass-market fiction—melodramas such as a murder mystery and an illicit love affair—to push along the plot at a quicker pace than she had done in previous novels while maintaining a crisp tone to underscore her intellectual credibility. The combination of elements that provide entertainment and at the same time encourage

---

39 These aspects of *Potterism* were apparently inspired by a request from one of Macaulay’s brothers; Macaulay reports that he said, “For goodness sake write a book in which they stop talking & commit a murder or something” (qtd. in LeFaru 150). Yet in a letter to her cousin Jean Smith, Macaulay expresses discomfort with the melodrama in the book, worrying it is “too much out of keeping with the rest…Why I really put it in was, of course, to give them all an opportunity of talking, and something to talk about” (*Dearest Letter 17*). Thus Macaulay seems torn between pleasing her readers and maintaining her intellectual reputation.
detachment and reflection is characteristic of middlebrow work (cf. Humble, Habermann\textsuperscript{40}) and also what endows such work with the potential to affect a large number of readers’ thinking about the public sphere.

Before the first word of the story begins, \textit{Potterism} appears to present itself as a challenge for readers to tackle: the subtitle, dedication, and epigraphs are largely hostile to leisure readers, and these paratexts would seem to create more division amongst the reading public than communication and understanding of differences between it. Yet under the veil of this seemingly wry attitude, Macaulay actually demonstrates an appreciation of a variety of socio-cultural registers. Macaulay subtitled \textit{Potterism} “A Tragi-Farcical Tract,” distancing it from the novel genre and asserting that it will be polemical, intending to inspire or at least participate in debate.

The dedication underscores this sally and raises it a level, reading: “TO THE UNSENTIMENTAL PRECISIANS IN THOUGHT, WHO HAVE, ON THIS CONFUSED, INACCURATE, AND EMOTIONAL PLANET, NO FIT HABITATION.” Macaulay seems to address the novel to an elite audience, an uncomfortable minority that has “no fit habitation” in the modern world because it thinks more critically than most other people.

Like the dedication, the epigraphs stress both the value of critical thinking and the dearth of it in society, though notably the quotations come from a variety of intellectual and popular sources. Francis Bacon and Samuel Johnson discuss muddled thinkers in the second or third person, locating a lack of thinking in others, not themselves.\textsuperscript{41} The more popular sources, such as

\textsuperscript{40} Habermann has described middlebrow novels thus: “While their imaginary journey includes escapist entertainment, it is not intended to be the end but the beginning of a process of deliberation and development, partly conscious, partly unconscious” (35).

\textsuperscript{41} Francis Bacon speaks of the “Mindes of a Number of Men” becoming “poore shrunken Things” without the nonsense that fills them, which is “Vaine Opinions, Flattering Hopes, [and] False Valuations,” and Samuel Johnson is quoted as admonishing, “dear friend, clear your mind of cant…Don’t \textit{think} foolishly.” The friend he admonishes is Boswell.
W. S. Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan, on the other hand, speak of the “unintelligent” in the first person plural.\(^\text{42}\) The shift between first, second, and third person immediately pulls the reader through different positionings and points of view. Furthermore, the mix of popular and classical sources appeals not only to the intellect but also to humor and pleasure. The longest of the epigraphs, a quotation from Evelyn Underhill, who was herself a popular but serious writer, explicitly warns again the tendency to see the world only through one point of view: “We see the narrow world [that] our windows show us not in itself, but in relation to our own needs, moods, and preferences.” The remainder of the quotation urges everyone, author included, to be less egocentric, more disinterested, and more artistic. In this way, Macaulay signals how sources from different “brows” or socio-cultural registers can contribute equally to worthwhile conversation and from the first page of the book.

The eponymous concept of the novel, Potterism, is that which the epigraphs deride: self-absorbed and self-interested thinking that doesn’t consider other points of view. Giving primacy to this concept would again appear to encourage division among different kinds of cultural consumers more than communication between them, yet Potterism is ultimately shown to be thoroughly interwoven with that which seems to be wholly opposed to it, and its omnipresence demonstrates connections across individuals with seemingly disparate values and outlooks. The name Potterism comes from the Potter Press, founded by Percy Potter, who is the husband of Leila Yorke, a middlebrow novelist. Though critics have understood the Potter Press to be sensational (Benson 68) and have noted its similarities to the press empires built by Lord Northcliffe and Beaverbrook (LeFanu 149), close examination suggests it is more strictly middlebrow than those ventures. The Potter Press is described as “not so great as the Northcliffe

\(^{42}\) Gilbert’s lyrics read “On the whole we are/ Not intelligent—/ No, no, no, not intelligent.”
Press, for it did not produce anything so good as the *Times* or so bad as the *Weekly Dispatch*” (3); it is rather more middling, like everything touched by Potterism. The Potter Press newspaper is neither highly rigorous nor entirely inaccurate, neither apolitical nor politically radical. It is a little rigorous and mildly political, bridging extremes. Likewise, Leila Yorke’s novels are not in “the lowest division” but are far from the highest (3). Both Mr. and Mrs. Potter’s productions sell well and are enjoyed by many because they give their readers what they want to find. Potterism is associated with sentiment and emotion that appeal “over the head, or under the head, of reason” (13), as these are easier to digest than hard, colorless facts. Above all, Potterism aims to please. It is described late in the novel as infecting:

- every artist he thinks directly of his art as marketable, something to bring him fame;
- every scientist or scholar (if there are any) who fakes a fact in the interest of his theory;
- every fool who talks through his hat without knowing; every sentimentalist who plays up to the sentimentalism in himself and other people; every second-hand ignoramus who takes over a view or a prejudice wholesale without investigating the facts himself. (183)

Thus Potterism would seem to share much with middlebrow culture: it is involved in the market, out to make its way in the world, and ready to sacrifice ideals to do so.43 The aim of its perpetuators is to fit into society and never to stand out, which is achieved by judging right and wrong to be that which is popular or not. On the one hand, the novel criticizes this middlebrow attitude that has been associated with women’s habits of consumption and their susceptibility to advertisement, yet on the other, the novel shows how middlebrow attitudes are sometimes what allow women to gain more if not entirely equal footing with men in the public sphere, as will be explored later.

43 In their monographs on the middlebrow in early and mid-twentieth century American culture, Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway are largely sympathetic toward the often derided idea of middlebrow culture, but they are both disturbed by this “survivor” aspect of it, how it is prepared to sacrifice anything in order to make a commercially viable way, which leads to a perpetual sliding of standards. The middlebrow is associated with middle class consumption, and yet it can also appeal to those striving to move up the socio-cultural ladder.
The novel explores seemingly every angle of Potterism, never resting on one perspective of it, by telling the story through the voices of five different characters. Characters who rail against Potterism and characters who live by it each have their say, and the points of view which initially seem most extreme and one-sided are in themselves revealed to be more multifaceted than they initially seem. In this way the novel not only reveals how certain characters reevaluate their own preconceived notions and opinions, but it also moves forward in a way that encourages readers to question their own opinions too, and consequently broaden their judgment.

The plot of Potterism is never narrated from an impersonal point of view; instead, the story always unfolds from a particular perspective. The opening and closing chapters are narrated by “R.M.” which might be considered a detached narrator as s/he is not a character involved in the plot, though the alignment of the initials with Macaulay’s suggests a close relationship with the author, an embodied personality. And like the other narrators, R.M. uses the first person and so indicates his/her perspective is personal and therefore limited. It is true that because R.M. is not involved in the story, the opening and closing parts that s/he narrates are more distanced from the events at hand, but despite the distance, R.M. does not claim to tell the final truth and foregrounds the fact that there is more than one way to see the story. At the end of Part I, R.M. explains how the rest of the novel will be narrated: “I append now the personal records of various people concerned in this story. It seems the best way” (37). R.M. defers any detached authority in favor of more personal perspectives. Collecting information through a number of embodied perspectives moves readers away from determinate thinking that settles into easy application of rules or abstract ideology.
Closely examining the characters whose viewpoints seem to be most estranged from each other, Arthur Gideon and Leila Yorke, reveals how broad a panorama of opinion the novel paints. The character who most staunchly opposes Potterism, Arthur Gideon, is also a model of broadminded judgment. Gideon judges events carefully and from a distance, but at the same time acknowledges context and does not rigidly adhere to any one set of principles. Collier has pointed out that Gideon’s unwavering anti-Potterite stance is a dogma of its own kind (150), and it is true that Gideon is closed-minded when he dismisses all Potterism out of hand. Yet most of his judgments are surprisingly open-minded. He founds a paper, *The Weekly Fact*, that takes no absolute or predictable line. Gideon explains that the paper “might support autocracy in one state and soviets in another, if it seemed suitable” (41). He notes this attitude looks like that of “notorious politicians,” and in some important ways it is. His judgments are relative, not dogmatic in most cases.

Another character notes that Gideon is “full of twists and turns and surprises” (103), and his love for Jane Hobart neé Potter, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Potter and the epitome of what he rails against, shows how incalculable he can be. Gideon sees clearly Jane’s “commercial instinct” and “lack of fineness” (68), yet loves her all the same for her physical beauty—she is plump and healthy—and for her enjoyment and embrace of life—her Potterism that helps her get on. When he must choose between ideals or perfect theories and imperfect choices and a fuller life, he chooses life, and his idealism is tempered by experience.

In his love for Jane, Gideon models the capacity to reassess one’s prejudices. Early in the novel, at the close of Part II which he narrates, Gideon asserts that “there are some loves that the world…may well be lost for—the love of an idea, a principle, a cause, a piece of knowledge or beauty, perhaps a country; but very certainly the love of lovers is not among these; it is too
common and personal a thing” (69). He rejects sentiment and personal emotion as Potterism, as humbug, as “common,” and initially he refuses to let the love he feels for Jane and the twinge of love that he knows she feels for him interrupt her engagement to another man and the proper relations established by civil society. Yet at the end of the novel, when Gideon is engaged to Jane after her first husband has died, he promises to Jane that his trip to Russia to research his family origins will be short and that he will return promptly because, he says, “I want to get married…really much more than I want to get information or anything else. Wanting a person—that’s what we all want most when we want it all…Ideals simply don’t count in comparison. They go under every time if there’s a choice” (185). With these words he sounds much like Leila Yorke, Jane’s mother and exemplary representative of the older generation of Potterism, which Gideon is ostensibly doing his best to oppose.

The section of the novel that Leila Yorke narrates distills the qualities of Potterism that are so damnable to anti-Potterites such as Gideon, yet Yorke articulates what Gideon ultimately comes to believe in most fully, albeit in an overwrought form. Yorke begins her section by proclaiming: “Love and truth are the only things that count. I have often thought that they are like two rafts on the stormy sea of life, which otherwise would swamp and drown us struggling human beings” (73). She further compares love and truth to “stars” that “guide us at last into port.” The comparisons are hackneyed, language overly emotional, and themes predictable. She elaborates on the “undying love of a mother for her children,” “the love, so gloriously exhibited lately, of soldier for his country,” and “the eternal love between a man and a woman.” Yorke’s overblown adjectives and adverbs that appear for the first time in the novel feel out of place. Yet the main point of the gambit that opens her narration, that love and truth are “the only things that count” and are closely related as “twins,” is played out in the very novel which would seem to
rail against exactly such a kind of sentimental generalization. Much of the plot follows Gideon and his anti-Potterite friends as they pursue the truth in various industries—the press, ministry, and science—and as they fall in and out of love, with largely unhappy endings. The novel primes its readers to dismiss Yorke’s sweeping statements at the time they are narrated through the opening paratexts discussed above, the crisp, factual description of the setting and characters that begin the novel proper, and Gideon’s spartan narrative that immediately precedes Yorke’s and derides muddled thinking. Yet Yorke’s stance here is the same as Gideon’s before he dies, and it also articulates the primary elements that the plot of the novel revolves around. Thus as Gideon reassessed his own prejudices, the novel suggests readers would do well to question their own, and to question the value of the middlebrow in an imperfect society.

Macaulay further complicates judgments of what is of good and bad and right and wrong by having Yorke assert her beliefs in cold, hard truths just as Gideon does. As Gideon asserts his paper is made up of facts, Yorke too claims to rely on facts in her novels at the expense of readers’ pleasure. She states, “I want to be very frank and to hide nothing. I think in my books I am almost too frank sometimes; I give offence, and hurt people’s egotism and vanity by speaking out; but it is the way I have to write; I cannot soften down the facts to please” (73). Gideon’s stewardship of Weekly Fact runs on precisely these principles, that the paper won’t change any piece it runs simply to make the paper more appealing. Yorke additionally claims that she, like the Fact, doesn’t write for money (76), and she appears to believe whole-heartedly in what she says. Yorke may be unaware of her own limitations and express a muddled and inconsistent viewpoint. Her declarations may illustrate the insidious tendency of middlebrow attitudes to co-opt anything for their own profit once it becomes of interest to the public and is socially accepted. Yet Yorke explains that she is herself a satirist and suggests that she tells the truth as much as
Gideon, but in a way available to her as a woman brought up in late Victorian England. Yorke says that she “cannot restrain [her] sense of the ridiculous, even though it may offend those who take themselves solemnly” and says she is “naughty about such people and give[s] them offense; it is one of the penalties attached to the gift of humour” (73). Macaulay herself was a satirist attuned to the absurdities of life, making profitable use of her “humour” and her critique of society around her. When she wrote Potterism, she was nearly 40, just slightly younger than Yorke is in the novel. Through Yorke, Macaulay could be poking fun at her own limitations as a writer.44

The novel suggests that women at that time needed to pursue means other than cold, hard, intellectually respected journalism to make their voices known. It is no accident that the most successful journalists in the novel are men, be they commercially successful like Percy Potter or intellectually successful like Gideon. Having such different characters, Yorke and Gideon, articulate similar ideas in such different ways makes the reader question how much a different style and venue of publication really impact readers’ thinking. Yorke may not fully win over “unsentimental” readers, and I am in no way suggesting she acts on her declarations in the same way that Gideon does.45 There is undoubtedly real hypocrisy in her. The novel does suggest that some middlebrow work relies too much on sentiment and emotion to draw in its readers. Yet it

44 Macaulay indicated that she meant Yorke to be different from herself but at the same time taken seriously. She wrote to her cousin, “I’m v. glad you don’t think Leila Yorke farcically over-drawn… people aren’t really mere fools whatever they may appear” (Dearest Jean Letter 17). In the letter Macaulay worried that Yorke was too much a caricature; Macaulay felt that she didn’t know Yorke “from the inside” and didn’t portray her accurately.

45 Gideon dies in Russia while trying and ultimately failing to defend a Jewish family from pogroms and becomes “a placard for the Potter press.” His death then ironically produces nothing but a sensational headline of the kind he despises. He might therefore seem to be a tragic figure who represents the unsustainability of upright thinking and action in the modern world. Yet his way of thinking is honored in the form of the novel, which encourages broad-minded judgment like his.
also acknowledges the importance of personal connections to others and of respecting
differences inspired by different contexts. It pushes readers to reevaluate their own opinions.
Furthermore, the apparent overlap in Yorke’s and Gideon’s values makes readers think twice
about the means each gender has available for articulating such values in the public sphere.

The character of Jane Potter does more than any other to complicate readers’ opinions of
Potterism, and her story clearly demonstrates how women journalists in the interwar period could
participate in middlebrow cultural production to advance further in their careers than they would
without such an attitude. Jane is the daughter of Percy Potter and Leila Yorke, and the twin of
Johnny Potter, with whom she competes for achievements and status. Jane and Johnny’s parallel
characterizations draw attention to the different strategies men and women employed to succeed
in their time, which as children of Potters and Potterism, the twins are born to do. The Potters’
progeny are as middling as their parents: “clever without being brilliant, active without being
athletic, nice-looking without being handsome, keen without being earnest, popular without
being leaders, open-handed without being generous” everything being “proper to their years” (1).
They begin life equally, both being perfectly acceptable to the society in which they circulate and
successful in it, preferring to conform to it than change it. The twins paradoxically conform by
resisting: while they are undergraduates at Oxford, where the Potter Press and Leila Yorke
novels are thoroughly disdained, they join the Anti-Potter League to show how they too disdain
Potterism. Being Potters, the twins wouldn’t start the League, but they see that joining it will
increase their intellectual credibility in their present milieu where intellect is highly valued. Thus
from the first few pages of the novel when Jane and Johnny are introduced, anti-Potterism is
entwined with Potterism itself and the dance between railing against Potterism and relying upon
it begins. One character, Juke, who fights against Potterism with more integrity than the twins, notes that “A certain amount [of Potterism]… is part of the make-up of almost every human being; it has to be fought down” (14), and every character in the novel, with perhaps the exception of the woman scientist, Katherine, is shown to have some Potterism in him or her. Some characters are more self-aware of their Potterish tendencies, which makes them more reflective, more admirable, and better judges (e.g., Gideon). Yet the plot of the novel shows that those who embrace Potterism succeed, and those who refuse it are vanquished and sometimes extinguished. For women, it is seen to be crucial to their participation in the public sphere.

Both Jane and Johnny want to be writers, and though they proclaim that they are different from their parents, they end up following popular trends of taste as much as their parents do. For Johnny, an Oxford graduate who fights in the Great War, this first means writing poetry that unflinchingly reveals the war’s horrors. Considering *Potterism* was published in 1920, only a couple years after the end of the war, the novel is surprisingly harsh on this genre. Gideon dismisses such war poetry, saying “Everyone knows that school of poetry by heart by now; of course it was particularly fashionable immediately after the war. Johnny Potter did it much like other men. Any one can do it” (41). Gideon can take the liberty of saying this since he himself lost a foot while fighting and experienced the war’s horrors firsthand, though it must have seemed insensitive to call anti-war poetry hackneyed and sentimental to readers of the time. Yet the harshness of the stance perhaps suggests Gideon could use just a dash of Yorke’s sympathy.

46 The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of *Potterism* thought Macaulay overly critical of the sentimental throughout the novel (Benson 70, LeFanu 110). Yet as argued above, Macaulay relies on sentiment to draw readers into the plot and shows how even the characters most staunchly opposed to romantic love fall prey to it.
Jane of course does not fight, nor does she serve as a VAD, and so must turn to other ways to get in the literary swim. She is naively jealous of her brother’s ability to enlist, an attitude Macaulay shared (LeFanu 105), though unlike Macaulay, Jane wants to go for Potterish reasons, to be part of the scene everyone is talking about. In order to get to Paris once events on the battlefield have ceased, Jane agrees to be her father’s secretary and involve herself directly in the Potter Press because it is her only way of participating in the world-historical moment of treaty making. Katherine, a strict anti-Potterite, sees the post-war events from an extremely detached position, as “Fuss and foolishness. Greed and grabbing,” which is “infinitely common” and pursued by “all the vulgarest people.” She says she’d rather travel to Birmingham than Paris, rather make glass, which is “clean and useful,” than be involved in the sordid and self-interested politics of peacemaking (30). While Katherine’s attitude is not self-interested, it is absurd, and she is completely detached from the political developments that will shape the future direction of society at large. By embracing Potterism, Jane finally succeeds in getting across the Channel as her twin did years before. While in Paris, Jane catches the eye of Oliver Hobart, her father’s top journalist and unsurprisingly an exemplary Potterite, and decides to marry him because he is handsome and well-connected and as such will help her secure higher profile publications than she could on her own with the disadvantage of her sex. Jeanette Passty

---

47 Macaulay’s reasons have more integrity; her biographers have shown that from her childhood she longed to be able to participate in physically strenuous activities generally thought to be appropriate for boys and men; in particular, she wanted to join the Navy for many years and throughout her life cherished the motto “Dulce Periculum” or “Danger is Sweet,” which she had engraved on personalized bookplates. This is also the motto of the MacAulay clan from Scotland.

48 R.M. acknowledges that the war was “the worst period of time of which Europe has so far had experience” yet refuses to dwell on it “except in its aspect of a source of profit to those who sought profit; its more cheerful aspect, in fact” (19). The difference between Katherine and R.M.’s attitudes highlights how the wry approach of an intellectual middlebrow novel’s narrator is willing to explore a difficult topic, such as the profitability of pain, and thus confront a difficult topic from multiple angles rather than dismissing it out of hand as morally unsound.
has noted that at the same time Johnny publishes his first novel, Jane gives birth to her first baby, which Johnny takes to be a sign that she’s “dropped out” of the literary scene (Passty 119), though Jane insists she too will produce a novel, which she does on top of reviewing and other journalism.

But whereas Johnny’s novel is called *Giles in Bloomsbury*, Jane’s is *Children of Peace* (186). The titles alone suggest what sort of style each must write in if they want to be successful: Johnny is more bohemian, setting his novel in the neighborhood whose name is a byword for intellectual chic, whereas Jane is more sentimental and domestic. Her novel’s title resonates with one of Macaulay’s novels published four years before *Potterism, Non-Combatants and Others*, the main character of which is the child of a pacifist, if not of peace; the war was still going on when Macaulay published the work. Jane and Johnny’s novels are described only through their titles and marketing “blurbs,” but these elements are enough to clarify the difference between the literary paths open to men and women. Johnny’s novel is successful but not too successful to be considered trashy, entering its second impression a year after it comes out. Jane’s less tested work is sold as “A Satire by a New Writer” (186). The fictional subtitle of Jane’s book ironically echoes the actual advertisement for *Potterism* in the back of Collins’ 1920 edition, which begins, “Miss Macaulay’s witty, satirical vein was by no means exhausted by her clever study *What Not,*” the novel she published just before *Potterism*. Collins’ advertisement takes a Potterish attitude, asserting that the reader should pick up the novel in order to “make acquaintance with John Potter, Clare Potter, and Potters pere et mere” as well as Jane Potter, who is “the final portrait of the present day young woman”; the advertisement implies that knowing these characters will improve readers’ own social standing. Like Jane, Macaulay makes the best of the situation,
which ultimately allows her to bring together into conversation unlikely sectors of the public sphere.

Not admitting one’s Potterism is shown to have unhappy consequences for women. Katherine Varick, a scientist, is the only character in the novel who shows no sign of Potterism, and she is the least satisfied of all the characters. Part IV, which Katherine narrates, concludes with her confession that she has loved Gideon for five years, though she knows her love will never be returned. As Katherine says, Gideon’s “reason and judgment were bowled over by [Jane’s] charm” (104), and lacking charm, or in the words of Yorke, “flair,” Katherine is less attractive. She never fights to win Gideon in any way; she doesn’t make compromises or pursue her self-interest to gain personal happiness. The conclusion of Katherine’s chapter borders on pathetic: when she confesses that she “cared for Arthur Gideon more than for any one else in the world” she justifies herself by saying, “I saw no reason why I shouldn’t” and proceeds to articulate two precise ways that her feelings made life difficult—she had trouble focusing on her work at times and was often “rather degradingly jealous of Jane” (121). Furthermore, she seems to be entirely removed from decision making in the public sphere. She is a scientist and works at a lab, but the findings of her work are never discussed, much less shown to impact others. As a character Katherine is largely forgotten in the sections of the novel that come after the one she narrates. One exception is when, near the end of the story, Gideon asks Katherine what she thinks about recent changes to the Fact, which have made it easier to read and more popular under the co-direction of an editor who is more Potterish than Gideon. Katherine abstains from giving her opinion, saying, “I’m one of the Blue Books—not a fair judge therefore” (170). The response is curious, because at first glance, she appears to be the fairest of judges, especially considering how objective she is able to remain about Gideon’s interest in Jane. But it is
precisely because she is so objective, so unemotional about what goes on around her, so detached, that she cannot contribute to conversation about what should be done in the world. She may have the artist’s vision as described in the epigraph by Underhill, the vision that is selfless, that sees things outside of a narrow chamber of self-interest, but the novel suggests that her impact on the world is negligible, and her complete lack of self-interest and inability to voice her emotional connections results in silent suffering. Like Johnny and Jane, Gideon and Katherine serve as foils that highlight the different challenges men and women face in interwar society, but they illustrate what happens when men and women reject Potterism rather than come to terms or acknowledge it within themselves in some way. Katherine laments that Gideon is in the wrong profession for someone so committed to facts, believing that he should have been a scientist or scholar or something that involved less interaction with people, as he is perpetually disappointed as a journalist (170). Yet at least he is able to pursue journalism to an extent. Katherine wouldn’t have had a chance if she had to make her way as a writer.

Gideon succeeds in the public sphere while maintaining his anti-Potter perspective and avoiding compromises with public taste, at least for a time, because he has money—either from patronage or his own independent wealth. He notes himself that the Fact’s “good and solid excellence…was due to the fact that it had plenty of money behind it” (41). The Fact does not have to rely on readers’ subscriptions or advertising to fund its production, so it can print whatever its head editor sees fit. Later, when the paper has become too popular and compromised for Gideon’s taste and he (naturally) hands the editorship over to Johnny Potter, Gideon decides to go to Russia in order to study his family’s origins and also to better understand politics in England. He can give up his income at the paper because he has a private income. The women in the novel do not have the same luxury. Furthermore, because professions
were so newly opened to them in 1920, when the novel was published, earning for women had a certain dignity, a point developed in *A Room of One’s Own* which came out nine years after *Potterism*.\(^49\) Therefore women might well hold a different attitude than men toward patronage, and they also often faced a different socio-economic reality.\(^50\)

At points, the novel is clear to the point of being didactic when revealing differences men and women face. Collier has noted that Macaulay later looked down on *Potterism*, calling it a “heavy-handed sermon” (qtd. in Collier 147), but I would argue that its didactic nature is what makes it effective as an intellectual middlebrow work. It states some of its case quite baldly, making it easy for readers to pick up on primary points. For example, the novel asserts that Jane knows

She might be one up on Johnny as regards Oxford, owing to her slightly superior brainpower, but he was one up on her as regards Life, owing to that awful business of sex. Women were handicapped; they had to fight much harder to achieve equal results. People didn’t give them jobs in the same way. (2)

Jane is jealous that Johnny may become “a cabinet minister, a notorious journalist, a Labour leader or anything” and she cannot. She is determined that she will do more in the world than her mother; she “wouldn’t be put off with the second-rate jobs” (3).\(^51\) These didactic elements

\(^{49}\) Woolf is elsewhere less sanguine about commercial publishing, particularly in essays published earlier and later in her career, most obviously in *Three Guineas*, but she is more positive about it around the time she wrote *A Room*.

\(^{50}\) An example of this plays out in contemporary criticism; in *Institutions of Modernism*, Lawrence Rainey dismisses H.D.’s poetry as the inferior product of a “coterie,” too narrow in focus, too cosseted by her patron Bryher, and consequently not sufficiently engaged in the public sphere. Yet if H.D. had written more commercially viable poetry, such as Macaulay herself did (her poems were published in two volumes in 1914 and 1919 and collected in a third in 1927), H.D.’s work would not have the high modernist credentials that have until recently been essential to procuring scholarly attention. Male poets like Pound, however, seemed to have been able to work patronage in a more public sphere while producing highly experimental work.

\(^{51}\) Along similar lines, Jane says that she’d rather go to the 1917 Club rather than the University Women’s Club because the 1917 Club has a better lunch (another point explored in *A Room of One’s Own*) and furthermore attracts more of the people Jane wants to meet (64).
underscore and call attention to important political themes such as gender difference. Then the novel more subtly reveals counter-intuitive ideas, such as the way commercialized or self-interested practices are often part and parcel of higher-brow work that would seek to hold itself apart from such compromise. Potterism thus directly engages with polemics, but also allows for slower revelations suggested by complications of character development, exemplifying how an intellectual middlebrow production can engage readers in a number of levels of reflection.

Potterism encourages in the reader a kind of connection that is neither sympathy nor complete identification and adoption of another’s point of view, but rather a critical consideration of other points of view. By moving between R.M.’s and the characters’ perspectives, the reader moves both into the heart of the events at hand, observing the different stakes and interests of different characters, and also further away, allowing the reader to judge those personal perspectives from a distance. The novel facilitates the kind of pluralist political judgment Arendt advocates, ultimately providing the reader an opportunity to consider various perspectives before coming to a conclusion about what s/he reads. Potterism is a middlebrow novel that not only satirizes middlebrow work but also analyzes its strengths and weaknesses, making middlebrow readers critical of what they read.

Macaulay likely would not have reached tens of thousands of readers had she been more experimental in her form, and her more political points might have been missed if they had not been so clearly laid out. Potterism’s technique does share something with that of modernist novels when it foregrounds the way the story is told (i.e. when the narrator asserts that appending personal accounts is the best method to tell the story), and like modernist narratives, avoids narration through detached voices. Yet Macaulay’s work was clearly more accessible to middlebrow readers. In the sixth months following the first edition, the novel was reprinted.
twenty-seven times (Collier 146) and was a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic. Evidence in the 1920 Collins edition of the novel suggests Macaulay’s readers had capacious taste and enjoyed a number of different kinds of literature. If the subtitle, dedication, and epigraphs that precede the text invite only the most critical readers to begin the novel, the advertisements that follow the text seem to invite nearly anyone to read *Potterism*; the novel is advertised alongside numerous other very different titles, everything from Mrs. Humphrey Ward\(^{52}\) to Conal O’Riordan.\(^{53}\) The advertisements appeal to a range of readers’ interests: sentiment (“A dramatic and powerful story of a man with a passionate belief”), a sense of adventure (“It is a book that brims with youth, cheerful, lively, and full of zest”), as well as cultural capital (“His progressive steps up the literary ladder have been steady and sure”). While the tone of the summaries might well look risible to a modernist, as they did to Macaulay herself—she effectively parodies this advertisement style when describing Leila Yorke’s newly released fiction—the advertisements themselves show middlebrow readers’ flexibility of interests as well as their desire to read for self-improvement. The commercial success of *Potterism* indicates that middlebrow readers in the 1920s were not all complacently sopping up conservative ideology or repeatedly consuming the same style of narrative but were rather capable of thinking more broadly about diverse sectors of the public sphere.

**Seeing the other side: *Crewe Train***

The novel *Crewe Train*, which was published five years after *Potterism*, serves as a kind of fraternal twin to the earlier novel, being made of much the same substance, or novelistic DNA

\(^{52}\) Ward was a prolific writer who was extremely popular in the late Victorian period and whose reputation fell in the early decades of the twentieth century.

\(^{53}\) O’Riordan directed the Abbey Theatre and thus had higherbrow credentials than Ward.
so to speak, but having rather different external features. As is characteristic of all Macaulay’s novels, both these novels explore the confluence and interaction between disparate groups of people, but these two center more specifically on resisting conformity. Whereas the earlier novels discussed at the beginning of the chapter feature outsiders trying to fit into different social groups, _Potterism_ and _Crewe Train_ tell the stories of outsiders who want to remain outside of mainstream society, yet get dragged into imperfect social systems that they would rather shun. However, where Macaulay dedicates _Potterism_ to the “UNSENTIMENTAL PRECISIONS IN THOUGHT” etc., she dedicates _Crewe Train_ to “THE PHILISTINES,/ THE BARBARIANS,/ THE UNSOCIABLE,/ AND THOSE WHO DO NOT CARE TO TAKE ANY TROUBLE.” The book would appear to be addressed to a very different sort of reader. The title of the novel is taken from a music hall song that was popularized by Marie Lloyd, a fact which is announced in the novel’s frontispiece advertisement. The book therefore fully acknowledges its lowerbrow associations and its welcoming of readers of all stripes.

In some ways, _Crewe Train_ shares much with _Keeping Up Appearances_, which would be published two years later; both alternate between scenes in respectable and well-connected London society and in lower-middlebrow family life in the provinces. Unlike Daisy, however, the heroine of _Crewe Train_, Denham, doesn’t want to fit into any of the circles in which she finds herself; she’d prefer to run away from all of them. Even less like Daisy/Daphne who is an expert translator, Denham is hopelessly poor at reading the different standards set by each group she encounters. _Crewe Train_ has received attention in Humble’s account of the feminine middlebrow novel, where Humble explores the novel mostly for its depiction of the domestic sphere and women’s revolt against numbing and trivial homemaking duties. Humble further
argues the novel’s depiction of a cultured family is a parody of Bloomsbury social life, but I would argue Crewe Train more subtly depicts numerous shades of the middlebrow and a larger literary public sphere, showing divisions between all groups and subgroups.

Macaulay importantly and clearly positions the family in question as “not quite” Bloomsbury, but rather a more middlebrow version of that circle. The novel begins by introducing that family, the Greshams, who adopt Denham, taking her to the heart of London and away from rural Spain, where she had been living with her father until he died. The Greshams, “Besides looking well…were literary, political, musical, and cultured. So far as families go, they were alright in Chelsea, though, except Humphrey, they were not quite fit for Bloomsbury” (20).

It is true that Humphrey is mocked for engaging in exotic love affairs while at the same time pursuing serious study; the combination of passion and intellectual pursuit which is characteristic of Bloomsbury life looks silly when Humphrey pursues it. His “Sunday plays” too are mocked for their lack of popular appeal and impotence in the public sphere. But far closer to the center of the satire than Bloomsbury are Denham’s two families, the Greshams who live in London, and the Bartletts, who live in Torquay.

The Greshams have many attractive qualities about them and get along quite well, but are far from avant-garde in taste, and even a bit behind the times. The mother, Evelyn, is said to be shingled like a Beardsley woman, adopting the once radical fashion only when it has been made mainstream or at least hardly controversial amongst the circles in which she moves. Their flat is covered in Morris paper, and the son Guy is a dandy in the late nineteenth-century style. The

---

54 Humble draws a parallel between the “exotic” party the Gresham family throws in Crewe Train, which involves Buddhist Lamas and camels, with Leonard Woolf’s international activities (30, 60). This move seems to be a stretch, as the Woolfs’ have not been documented as having such gatherings, which are different than the largely conventional political work Leonard Woolf was performing with international organizations.
father, Peter Gresham, is an exemplary middlebrow publisher, successful and sociable, working on books that bring “kudos or cash, or both, as well as the necessary number of those other books which bring neither” (43). His success positions him somewhere close to Percy Potter, though his empire is not so large, and Gresham is not merely a commercial publisher. He brings out unsuccessful books, presumably experimental or avant garde books, but only in the “necessary number”; Peter does so because it’s expected of him, not because he believes that boundary-pushing literature is important in its own right. Peter is “bland, gay and shrewd” (40), and his family is “bright, finished, gay, polite…so merry, so chattering, so friendly, so kind, so expensively neat” (34). They are perfectly adjusted to the society in which they find themselves, sailing through it cheerfully and successfully, rather like the Potters. As middlebrows, they are to an extent open to the multiplicity of the world; they understand that “the world is many. The Greshams accepted that fact and liked it” (41). The only thing to which they object are Denham’s extreme departures from accepted social norms. As Denham observes, for the Greshams, “If you did not conform, you were not right” (49).

The other family Denham stays with, though less often, is the Bartletts, her maternal family that lives in Torquay. The father is a dentist and the mother a homemaker who attends book circles. Whereas the Greshams enjoy reading criticism as well as fiction and other kinds of literature, the Bartletts read only light material for reading groups. The Bartletts see that Denham has been living with higher society in London, as she’s been dressed and coiffed and outwardly made to conform to the Greshams’ standards, which impresses the Bartletts. These details indicate how the Greshams are higherbrow than the Bartletts, yet that does not make the Greshams “quite Bloomsbury.” Rather, the novel succeeds in showing the numerous calibrations of British culture between the wars. Even modernist style seems to be middlebrow in some way.
Arnold, an assistant publisher close to the Greshams who courts and then marries Denham, writes stream of consciousness fiction that is popular in his crowd and by 1925 familiar in the literary public sphere. Denham questions Arnold’s claims that the technique better captures reality than traditional narrative styles, and she asserts it is no closer to reality than that of the adventure novels that she prefers. Their conversation reveals that high modernist style by 1925 was thoroughly embroiled in the commercial aspects of production; Arnold seems to care more about the physical production (book wrapper, paper, binding etc.) and advertising for his book, which will make his name and fame in the right circles, more than he cares about the text itself (140). He does not object to publicity, but rather wants to see his book advertised in the lift of the tubes so that it might create “heated discussion” amongst the public (140). Macaulay seems to be skeptical that any novel can create such discussion, but at least more middlebrow productions had the chance of being read by a wider population.

By making the central character a confirmed lowbrow who is unfamiliar with the ways of English culture, Macaulay can interrogate the standards by which different classes and social groups live. Denham, an untutored onlooker, is perpetually asking everyone she meets, “Why?” She asks, Why wear one’s hair in a certain way? Why dress in another? Why take tea at a certain time and eat certain foods? Why go to shows? Why not live in a cave? She proposes her own standards which the other characters find absurd, but which the reader learns to sympathize with because the story is largely told from her point of view. And though the novel’s heroine is the lowest of all brows, the novel’s style is made to look higherbrow after the tone shifts into a florid, over-emotional and dramatic parody of middlebrow style, much like that of Leila Yorke. Evelyn Gresham re-writes parts of the story in a section called “Paul and Barbara” that retells, using pseudonyms, the story of Arnold and Denham’s courtship and marriage, with melodramatic
twists that Evelyn wishes would happen in real life, such as Arnold falling out of love with Denham and then in love with Evelyn’s own daughter. Macaulay’s foregrounding of style shares something with modernist technique; the novel makes clear that the story at hand can be told in a number of ways and that the author is making certain choices to tell it in the way she thinks best. Yet the style that is highlighted is not experimental, though it looks intelligent compared to Evelyn’s far more sentimental style. While the Greshams look like intellectual middlebrows compared to the Bartletts, Macaulay’s middlebrow novel looks considerably more intellectual than Evelyn Gresham’s, though it too clearly sets itself apart from experimental modernist fiction. Macaulay thus not only brings readers through a number of different socio-cultural registers, but questions each of their norms and assumptions using the form of a comic intellectual middlebrow novel that sold well and entertained its readers, but also pushed them to question conventions.

Macaulay’s placement as a middlebrow woman writer with a desire to both support herself and pursue intellectual interests exposed her to a greater number of sectors of the literary public sphere because she had to work in different parts of it to pursue her goals. She spent countless hours conducting research at the London Library to produce sound scholarship, where her memory was honored with a plaque and armchair, yet she also showed understanding of those who preferred to read adventure novels and dog breeding manuals, as in *Crewe Train*. *Potterism*’s Gideon notes how after the war, British citizens asked themselves, “What did we want this country to be?” and in response “Everyone shouted a different answer” (39). It was middlebrow writers, and particularly women middlebrow writers, who were best capable of hearing a multiplicity of voices, capturing the public in its varied forms, and bringing them all to bear on contemporary issues in digestible fiction that reached many readers. Not all middlebrow
writers were open-minded and many could be conservative, as critics have argued. But others such as Macaulay were in a position to capably perceive the multi-faceted nature of the public sphere, put it into fiction, and encourage middlebrow readers to practice pluralist judgment.
CHAPTER 3
“HIGH MIDDLES” AND DULL WOMEN: ALDOUS HUXLEY’S INTERWAR ESSAYS AND 1920S NOVELS

On many levels—critical, creative, and biographical—Aldous Huxley’s work and life shares much with Rose Macaulay’s. His creative output has been neglected by critics, though thanks to the enduring resonance of *Brave New World*, selected portions of it have received more attention. Like Macaulay, Huxley seemed to be everywhere in the interwar period, traversing a number of cultural circles, contributing bylines to a wide variety of publications, and as such, his contributions to the literary public sphere demonstrate the variety of the era’s cultural productions. He was an exemplary intellectual, but was also known to be amusing and witty. He produced journalism to support himself, but preferred writing fiction and non-fiction. Huxley was therefore a kind of intellectual middlebrow in some of the vexed and debatable ways Macaulay was, and is a ripe figure for critics to consider when examining the confluence of popular writing and intellectual work. Yet like Jane and Johnny Potter of Macaulay’s *Potterism*, Macaulay’s and Huxley’s different genders impacted not only the work they produced, but the way it was received, and studying the two authors side-by-side highlights the divergences. In his 1920s novels, Huxley like Macaulay portrayed a variety of perspectives when juxtaposing viewpoints of male characters, but showed far less range when capturing female characters, a point which has been largely neglected in studies of Huxley’s work.

Like the other chapters in this dissertation, this one first examines how Huxley traversed the complicated space of middlebrow production in his journalism in order to tease out what that space looked like and to understand how critical thinking and broad-minded judgment was encouraged in such a space. The chapter then considers Huxley’s novels of the 20s and the place of women in them to examine the challenges women faced in establishing themselves as
independent thinkers in the interwar period. Huxley’s women characters become increasingly abstracted, objectified, and relegated to the margins of intellectual thought. Huxley consistently sought out multiple points of view in his work and encouraged pluralistic judgment in his readers, in some works even more rigorously than Macaulay, but at the same time reinforced stereotypes of women and the status quo of sex inequality that understood women to be largely emotional creatures incapable of rationation. Studying his novels illuminates the need for intellectual middlebrow women’s work to offer counterarguments, or in Huxley’s own words “counterpoint,” against such limited characterizations, and to depict women as thinkers and encourage them to think carefully about the world around them.

Some introduction to Huxley’s life is useful because, like Macaulay’s, it is no longer well known, even by modernist scholars, and it helps place him within the larger sphere of interwar cultural production. Like Macaulay, Huxley has been cited as an exemplary member of England’s “intellectual aristocracy.” While his more immediate relations were famed for being learned—T. H. Huxley was his grandfather and Matthew Arnold his great uncle—the line of “ancestral” intellectuals begins on his father’s side only with his grandfather, whose own father was a provincial banker with little formal education (Murray 18). Another of his notable relations was his famous but not erudite aunt Mary Augusta Ward, better known as Mrs. Humphrey Ward, a popular novelist.¹ But though the claim of “intellectual aristocracy” might be

---

¹ Mrs. Humphrey Ward, who impacted Woolf’s early career and will be discussed in the following chapter, maintained a high reputation in the late Victorian era at the height of her fame, but appreciation of her work fell precipitously with the advent of the modern era. Woolf argues Ward could have produced much more intellectually engaged work, and describes how as a young woman she had plans to write scholarly histories, but was distracted by the success of her first novel and the money it brought her, and turned to lucrative popular fiction to support a lavish and socially engaged lifestyle.
exaggerated, Aldous Huxley and his siblings did face considerable pressure from his parents to achieve academic distinction, which he fully met. All three boys of the family attended Eton and Oxford, where they carried an air of intellectual distinction. Aldous won a scholarship to Eton and earned a first in English Literature while at Balliol College, Oxford, and there he also won the prestigious Stanhope Prize. These distinctions are ones which shaped his early career, and are also achievements that Macaulay and Woolf could not hope to earn, not having access to the oldest institutions of formal education. Yet like Macaulay, Huxley had no inheritance, and as a man, moving back in with his parents upon graduation was not the expected course of action.

Huxley supported himself first by teaching at preparatory schools (Repton School and Eton), and when his job at Eton was to be resumed by a teacher who had left to fight in the Great War, he turned to journalism.

Writing for magazines and papers allowed Huxley to live in London, where he, again like Macaulay, thrived on increased contact with intellectuals and artists that he had lacked while teaching at the preparatory schools (which Macaulay had also lacked while living with her family in the provinces). With the promise of a regular salary, he was able to marry the woman he had been courting via post. But he had no great love for journalistic work; in his letters, he slurried it as “stinking journalismus” (Letters, Sexton 201). Like Macaulay, he derisively claimed that professional journalists could claim expertise on any topic after a mere hour’s reading in the

---

2 Raymond Mortimer for one was highly impressed by Aldous’s scholarly credentials at Oxford, next to which he felt provincial and unprepared (Julian Huxley 117).

3 While at university, Huxley’s father had married a woman about Aldous’ age, with whom his father began a second family. For this additional reason, moving back in with his parents would have been uncomfortable.

4 Huxley met his wife, Maria Nys, at Garsington, the storied manor house owned by Phillip and Ottoline Morrell, who there gathered together young thinkers and the artistically inclined in a salon-like atmosphere. When Nys moved back to Europe, they kept in touch through letter writing.
London Library (CE II.66)⁵ and he found some of his assignments to be too silly for money (CE III.374).⁶ He developed a pattern of saving up his salary while in London and then quitting the grind of journalism in order to write fiction and book-length non-fiction while living on the continent, in Italy and then France.

After completing an exhausting stint writing for The Athenaeum under John Middleton Murray, Huxley urged his friend Robert Nichols not to seek out work on “better” journals such as The Nation and Statesmen—and The Athenaeum, it went unsaid—which paid terribly, and instead to write for more popular and less intellectual publications such as John O’London or Cassell’s Weekly which offered more lucrative remuneration (Letters, Smith 216). At the time of writing, Huxley himself had recently quit The Athenaeum to edit Vogue’s new magazine, House and Garden, which he called “fantastic hack work, happily well paid for” (Letters, Sexton 102).⁷ Even upon moving to California in the late 1930s, when he was finally able to live upon royalties alone, he continued to write journalism because it was lucrative (Bedford 360). Like Woolf, Huxley was drawn to write for big name magazines for their large paycheck; Huxley said he liked writing for Esquire because he was paid $1000 an essay (Murray 417). This indicates he did not hate journalism so much as to give it up when he could.

While his journalistic work reached an increasingly middlebrow audience, Huxley’s desire to write a highly popular play with a large payback grew stronger too. From the start to the

---

⁵ To simplify citation style, I use the acronym CE throughout the chapter to stand for Huxley’s Complete Essays. The Roman numeral indicates the volume number and the Arabic numeral indicates the page number.

⁶ While some of the topics Huxley was asked to write on were truly ridiculous, like “Why women are no mystery to me” or “Why marriage converted me from my belief in free love” (CE II.67), others to which Huxley objected were more intellectual, such as explicating the differences between Cambridge and Oxford (CE III. 374)—a topic which Macaulay would have been well qualified to write, but was not offered to her as a woman journalist.

⁷ Huxley also called Vogue “an American fungoid growth,” employing a phrase that Woolf would use to describe middlebrow literature almost ten years later in the early thirties.
end of his career, he never gave up writing drama, and though he had a few plays produced in London and even the U.S., he never landed the hit he was looking for. He did, however, manage to support himself and his family through publishing contracts, which freed him from a complete diet of journalism. His early agreements with Chatto and Windus were demanding—his first, for example, stipulated that he publish two works of fiction a year in addition to nonfiction for three consecutive years—but the assurance of substantial advances allowed him to write more of what he wanted: fiction and only the most profitable and appealing essays.

This quick biography suggests how Huxley’s place in the field of interwar British literary production is a knotty problem. He had a reputation as a highbrow among highbrows. The *New Statesman* in 1933 named Huxley “the compleat highbrow” (David Bradshaw, “Flight” 10) and Woolf made similar comments in her diaries (Murray 5). Leonard Woolf called Huxley “the perfect, pure, uncompromising highbrow” (qtd. in Julian Huxley 10), and Dennis Gabor explains that Huxley was popular among Hungarian intellectuals because they thought he was far brainier than any of his English peers (66). Young English intellectuals took him as an unspoken leader and liberator: Isaiah Berlin remembered Huxley as “among our major intellectual emancipators” (171) and others like Stephen Spender (19) and David Cecil (13) recalled how Huxley’s work freed their minds from stuffy social conventions. By Huxley’s early thirties, collectors were selling early editions of his books at a premium (Watt 101) and an American publisher had already put out a collection of critical essays on his creative work (Firchow “Aldous” 22). His early work was thus admired by young rebels, collectors, and academics alike, making him a credible intellectual.
Yet as Huxley reached the middle of his mid career, Elizabeth Bowen argued in a 1936 review that Huxley was not a “writer’s writer,” as some at that time would have him, but he was instead accessible “to anyone” (276). And even from his earliest highest of highbrow days, he was known to amuse (cf. Julian Huxley 33, Kuehn 23). In fact, his 1920s novels were initially taken as mere amusements by many critics and readers, not as serious literary work meant to inspire reflection. When Gertrude Stein told Hemingway that she thought Huxley was “a dead man” and questioned why Hemingway bothered to read him, Hemingway replied, “his books amused me and kept me from thinking” (qtd. in Meckier, Modern Satirical 45). Wyndam Lewis described the tone of Point Counter Point’s opening scene as “vulgar,” suited for “the dreariest of suburban library readers” and no better than a “newspaper serial” (Watt 238).

At Huxley’s centenary conference in 1994, a Huxley scholar admitted that when he was young, he had thought of Huxley’s work as “novelettes for servant girls” (Nugel 1), and Huxley, like Macaulay, apparently thought of himself as “just a dilettante with a gift of the gab” as he progressed in his career and gained more and more popular standing (Bradshaw and Sexton xiii). Yet with the publication of Those Barren Leaves in 1925 and especially Point Counter Point in 1928, Huxley was taken seriously by serious critics who saw that his work could be both amusing and reflective (cf. Hartley 41).

Much of the mixed language used to describe Huxley—as an entertaining and a challenging writer—well describes an intellectual middlebrow writer. Though Leonard Woolf saw Huxley as the perfect highbrow, Woolf also admired Huxley’s essays for being conversational: “gentle, leisurely, witty, humorous, imaginative” (Julian Huxley 37). The New 

8 “Reading a book by Aldous Huxley is like being entertained by a host who is determined that one should not suffer a moment’s boredom.”

9 Cyril Connolly too thought the scene shared much with stories from women’s magazines, though unlike Lewis he thought the novel as a whole was a great work of the age.
Republic said Huxley “stretched the word limit of middle articles,” indicating that his essays were improved versions of middlebrow “middles,” articles meant as a reprieve to newspaper readers after digesting the serious news and before tackling the opinion pages (91). Along similar lines, George Woodcock, a committed Huxley critic, labels one of Huxley’s earlier essay collections “jocular trivialities written for middlebrow magazines” (118).

Huxley undoubtedly took on the middlebrow’s role of educator or middleman who worked connections between brows to make high culture palatable to those who might otherwise be turned away. In 1931, precisely when Bradshaw argues Huxley was at his most elitist and aligning himself with H. L. Menken, *The New York Times Books Review* noted Huxley’s essay collection *Music at Night* lacked “original observation,” but said it “should be of immense help to an intelligent popular audience that is not familiar with ‘sources’” (Watt 193). He made classic primary sources palatable to a larger audience. Huxley was enthusiastic about a project that would record onto LPs classic texts read aloud to expose more people to such work (Julian Huxley 99-100), and he turned his own novel *Brave New World* into a musical because he thought his message might be better delivered in that way than in the novel, which took more time to read (Julian Huxley 117). As Laura Frost has recently pointed out, the scripts he wrote for Hollywood were literary; he worked on *Pride and Prejudice* and *Alice in Wonderland* (“Huxley’s” 464), bringing culture and heritage to a popular medium in intellectual middlebrow fashion. His first collection of essays was widely recognized for their “particular combination of lightness and learning” (Bedford 169), and his later works were both readable and well read, though he did trade in humor for sage-like wisdom as he grew older, particularly after he moved from Europe and the U.K. to southern California in the late 1930s. This chapter focuses on the years Huxley’s placement was most vexed, the 1920s and 30s, which were the years he was
considered a “compleat highbrow” and congenital essayist but also writing frequently for popular publications.

**Method for reading the Complete Essays 1920 – 1939**

Like Woolf, Huxley’s complete essays have only recently (2002) been published, making the early twenty-first century an ideal time to write about his journalism and non-fiction. At a 1994 conference held in the centenary of Huxley’s birth, Werner von Koppenfel asserted that “Huxley as essayist remains unknown in criticism of twentieth-century literature” (45), and more extensive work on his essays has yet to be done since then. In his lifetime and shortly after his death, it was said that he was “a mediocre novelist” but “a reporter of genius and a philosophic thinker acute and unafraid” (Watt 168), so the lack of critical attention is somewhat surprising. At the height of his influence as a critic, David Daiches trumpeted this appraisal of Huxley as a better essayist than novelist, and Harold Bloom has carried it on to this day, though Huxley’s defenders have taken George Woodcock’s stance that it is superficial to “dismiss Huxley as a mere essayist” (165). Joanne Woiak among others has pointed out how richly Huxley’s fiction and non-fiction are “cross-fertilized” (165), which suggests that the essays are valuable because they enable a better understanding of Huxley’s fiction as well as being thought-provoking in their own right. This chapter reads Huxley’s essays to examine the ways he communicated with a broad readership while maintaining a high level of critique and engaging readers in reflection and critical thinking.

10 Unlike Woolf’s volumes of essays, Huxley’s Complete Essays are not actually complete. See Meckier’s review of the first two volumes for citations of some of the gaps.
Huxley versus the masses

Early in his journalistic career, Huxley saw journalism as a waste, and through reading his essays, scholars can get a sense of the animus intellectuals expressed towards mass publications in the interwar years. “Every damned day,” Huxley wrote in Vanity Fair in 1925, “from forty thousand to a quarter of a million words have to be poured into the bottomless waste-paper baskets, the dustbins, the insatiable sewers of the world…However little there is to say, the pages [of newspapers] must be filled” (CE I.177). In 1920, while working at The Athenaeum, Huxley asserted that problem of his era was not so much that bad literature was being produced (“Ours is not the only age in which the portion of bad books to good has been overwhelmingly high”), but that the increased volume of production overwhelmed readers with a mass of bad and worse choices (CE I.15). Huxley furthermore argues that mass journalism is not only a waste, but a source of increased intolerance and animus. He claims that because literacy was more widespread during the Great War than during the Napoleonic Wars, a greater percentage of the population knew more details of the Great War, creating more bitter feelings about wrongs and losses which led to a sour and untenable peace (CE II.101, IV.223). Early on, he believed that commercial publishing did little to nothing to improve readers’ critical thinking and in fact sometimes impaired it with serious political consequences.

At some points in the interwar years, Huxley practically toed the F.-R.-and-Q.-D.-Leavis party line, arguing that universal literacy was a menace to the survival of good literature. Early on Huxley saw the increased leisure of the working class as detrimental, arguing the masses are “hungrily craving for distraction” and “are begging…to be given substitutes for thought” (CE I.168), and later in 1930 he assigned this danger specifically to popular literature in a short essay,
“Reading, the New Vice.” He makes the familiar arguments that “the cheapening of print has resulted in superficial and inattentive reading habits,” and that reading has become “a universal opiate and deadener” and “a respectable substitute for alcohol and cocaine” which makes no demand on attention and imagination like good literature does (CE III.48-9). He suggests a “four or five thousand percent tax” on paper to make literature as scarce a commodity as it was in medieval and early modern times. Dismissing journalism simply because it is popular, he says in another essay that he himself doesn’t read magazines with circulations over a million (CE III.77), and he continues to compare the habit of reading to addictions like cigarette smoking that feed a “hungry passivity” (CE IV.5) through the 1930s. His views in these essays are conservative and elitist.

Early in his career Huxley furthermore asserted the importance of an aristocracy to foster high quality arts and intelligent, independent judgment. Considering that he benefitted from Ottoline Morrell’s patronage while attending Oxford and in the years soon after, his stance is not surprising. In an early essay on “Aristocracy and Literature” Huxley asserted that “the most important function of aristocracy is to be so secure that it is impervious to general public opinion, so secure that it can tolerate eccentricity and be hospitable to new and unusual ideas” (CE I.22). He makes the same point in 1929, disdaining public opinion as intolerant and dull (CE III.208). He also poo-poos the modern respect for a work ethic, warning that without moneyed aristocrats who have full leisure, a class of unprejudiced and open-minded individuals will be lost; he claims the modern respect for work in all classes, even the upper class, has contributed to the decay of taste (CE III.371). This sustained critique of mass cultural productions throughout the 20s and even into the 30s might lead scholars to believe Huxley had no interest in reaching a

11 Huxley would later write about the vices of the moneyed class.
broad reading public. Yet he did, and his opinion is more nuanced than this first exploration of it would suggest.

**Huxley, sentiment’s champion**

In his essays, Huxley does not defend high art for high art’s sake, and he furthermore insists that the very stuff that made art vulgar to so many intellectuals of the period—sentiment—is essential to great art. He dislikes particularly the tendency of early-twentieth-century high art to avoid emotion at all costs, and he praises good art that can reach the masses. He distinguish between good and bad sentimentality, somewhat like Woolf does in her essays; he sometimes claims that good sentimentality, that which makes an audience or reader feel something, is a thing of the past, present in Shakespeare’s plays, but perverted in the present (e.g. “Our modern sentimentality is a corruption, a softening of genuine humanity” (CE I.126)). He is disgusted by the “ludicrous” tears and enthusiasm inspired by most modern plays, which he says are comparable to penny novelettes (CE II. 221). The “lusously colored chords” of popular music, he says, “flare out like posters…and hit one” (CE I. 316). He targets commercially oriented sentiment for harsh criticism.

Yet he does make a case for good sentimentality, as he sees it in Dostoyevsky’s fiction, for example. The Russian novelist’s kind of sentiment is effective because it more fully expresses reality; Dickens’s kind, on the other hand, is again “ludicrous” because it is a mere wisp of an idea, not real at all (CE III. 47-8). Like other modernists, most famously T. S. Eliot, Huxley praises Marie Lloyd, calling her “marvelous, rich, Shakespearean,” again alluding to the

---

12 For a short time when Huxley was the drama critic for *The Weekly Westminster Gazette*, he attended shows nightly, sometimes two in an evening, and this fulsome theatrical diet, which led to overwork and fatigue, likely contributed to Huxley’s low opinion of theatre.
greatness of Shakespeare’s work that was both popular and genuinely moving (CE I.222). He praises the painter Piero della Francesca over Sandro Botticelli because della Francesca’s work is “majestic without being at all strained” and “an affair of the masses” (CE I.212). It is “everywhere intellectual” but also provides something that people can relate to without specialized aesthetic training because it makes a grand gesture. “Good” art to Huxley is that which “most completely satisfies the fundamental needs of the human spirit” (CE III. 17). Thus Huxley gestures toward the need to reach a large audience through art, and to feel, not just to think in response to cultural productions.

Huxley in fact criticizes modern pieces that lack emotion, though not with the same rigor as he attacks “vulgar” art. He faults a new piece by the composer Busoni (Rondeau Arlequinesque) for “not bringing to the listener any particular emotion.” Despite its being “witty, dry” and “complicated, learned, and intellectual,” Huxley calls it “half-dead” (CE I.289). Huxley admits that he was excited to hear the work, but explains that cleverness is not enough to make art great or even good. His 1925 essay “Conxolus” satirizes highbrow taste and the game of distinction, explaining that “to acquire a reputation for learning at a cheap rate, it is best to ignore the dull and stupid knowledge which is everybody’s profession and concentrate on something odd and out of the way” (CE I.205). Huxley assures readers that “frequenters of cultured society terrified of being left behind in the intellectual race” will be convinced that those in the know of such intellectual oddities will be perceived as having “most exquisite taste” (CE I.207). He brings to light the shallowness and also the stupidity of accumulating knowledge for social purposes, but more than that he again underscores the value of emotional engagement with art. He complains high society prefers Bach to Beethoven simply because Beethoven is more emotional, and prefers musicians who play Mozart dryly rather than vividly. He surmises the
minor artist Conxolus would be admired by such highbrow audiences because his pictures offer “nothing charming”; instead, they are completely devoid of “emotional content” (CE I.208).

Huxley observes that regrettably, “Young people bore themselves when they might amuse themselves” (CE I. 209). Both at this early stage in his career and also later in the 30s, when he bemoans the fact that “great artists” of the present time have a “terror of vulgarity or the obvious” and shy away from great themes (CE 111.60), he urges talented artists to tackle what popular artists take on regularly, and to do it better. Though Huxley rails against mass productions at times, he also criticizes high art for not reaching the masses and for not making it easier to enjoy by engaging in sentiment and emotion.

**Popular opinion and critical judgment in the essays**

When Huxley distinguishes good from bad sentimentality rather than dismissing sentiment out of hand, he implies the importance of good judgment, which he elsewhere in his essays explicitly endorses. He worries people read too much and without care: “we are in danger of…reading too much and too quickly to be in a position to pass judgment on what we read” (CE III. 88). In his essays, Huxley returns many times to the power of advertisement. He also repeatedly compares commercial advertisement to political propaganda, noting thankfully that the former was considerably more refined and effective than the latter, but he worried that power-hungry political leaders would eventually learn to harness the latter just as effectively. He wrote against the conglomeration of media power, deploring the fact that “The whole English press is now in hands of four or five rich men [who] aspire to rule under cover of democratic institutions impersonally and without responsibility” (CE II. 223). He was convinced that the newspapers that claimed to represent “public opinion” actually represented the opinion of
newspaper owners who could, with the power of the purse, pressure writers into biased reporting (CE III.98). That a handful of powerful men would unduly influence readers’ judgment unnerved him. As a reader engaged with intellectual concerns, but also striving to reach a broad audience, his role became increasingly to call attention to the kinds of reading choices available to the public and to help readers form balanced opinions about what they read.

In the 1930s, citizens’ lack of independent and sound judgment was an acute and frightening problem given the political developments in Italy and Germany. Huxley despaired at German people “accepting fantastic certitudes of Nazi propaganda” because they find that “reason is dull” and “emotion is thrilling” and because “suspense of judgment” required for knowledge is “uncomfortable” (CE III.398). Like so many others, he was seeing the effects of poor judgment on the fate of whole nations, and believed that the ability to think and judge the political public sphere was essential to maintaining democracy. “Halfwits,” said Huxley, “fairly ask for dictators” (CE III.405). He also pointed out that “Even the most ruthless dictatorship needs the support of public opinion” (CE IV.252). If citizens have “free exercise of intelligence” then they will resist tyranny, he argues (CE III.287). Readers sometimes complained that Huxley’s political essays were too abstract (Holmes 198), but he did seize opportunities to reach readers on political matters. He wrote more directly about political events than Macaulay and Woolf, most likely because he was given more opportunity to do so by the journalistic outlets to which he contributed.

Huxley like other modernist writers disdained “the crowd” (cf. Collier’s Modernism on Fleet Street), but he also distinguished between crowds and groups, the latter of which Huxley argued were actually preferable to individuals in isolation. He defended individual difference in the face of pressures to conform; he “deplore[d] the reaction against individualism” in modern
life (CE III.222), but he also saw the importance of social interaction, especially on a small scale. Huxley explains that a group is not only smaller than a crowd, but has a higher quality “mental life”: “A crowd has a mental life inferior in intellectual quality and emotionally less under voluntary control than the mental life of each of its members in isolation. The mental life of a group…may in favorable circumstances actually be superior” (CE IV.196). Huxley asserts that in crowds, “emotion is orgiastic and dionysiac,” and then implies that in groups under “favorable circumstances,” individuals’ thinking is enhanced. Huxley’s 1920s novels revolve almost exclusively around small group conversation and so expose readers to this kind of exchange of ideas. As a critic, Huxley spells out in expository fashion why such exchange was important.

Huxley saw that the problem of judgment was a modern problem. The editors of Huxley’s Complete Essays assert that Huxley’s idea of modernity was “roughly equal” to that of Kant’s in his piece “What is Enlightenment?”: “freedom from customary bonds and ancient prejudices, from traditional and vested interest” (CE II.xii). The demise of arbitrary customs and traditions is for Huxley a positive development, yet like Macaulay, he also understands how in the modern era this development had been taken to an extreme. Judgment is difficult when there are “no rulers or scales by which to take measurements …or rather…an almost indefinite wealth of possible measuring rods, by a multitude of vague and incommensurable scales” (CE II.103).

Citizens were awash in more choices than ever with few means to sort through them.

In his essays, it is evident that Huxley, like Hannah Arendt, saw the potential of judgment to begin to fill the void that the crumbling of old standards and traditional values left behind and

---

13 For example, one of his essays details the benefits brought by the demise of extended family members’ cohabitation.

14 In a letter to his father, Huxley described his age as one “which has seen the violent disruption of almost all the standards, conventions, and values of the previous epoch” and was dealing with the aftermath of such disruption (Letters, Smith 224).
argued that taking into account other points of view helped broaden and strengthen judgment. In a 1925 essay, Huxley asserts the increased knowledge of the modern era “has enabled us to sympathize with unfamiliar points of view, [and] to appreciate conventions devised by people utterly unlike ourselves, which is a very good thing” (CE I.219); he praises the open-mindedness of the era, which rejects fewer styles, for instance, than earlier ones had. Yet he also says that the “hardest thing in the world is to understand and in doing so allow for and forgive other people’s tastes and vices” (CE II.68). He acknowledges that people tend to be set in their outlooks. He later notes that, “The man who will sacrifice the long formed mental habit is exceptional” (CE II.184), and that the “consistently thoughtful man” that is, the one who questions habits and assumptions, is a “most exceptional being” (CE III.181). “It is easier to live by fixed rules than judgment” (CE II.323), he says; people tend to fight against such variations of character, striving to be “monsters of consistency” (CE II.321). This tendency has not only personal but political implications. In a letter to his son, he argued that “democracy…begins on the level of personal relations, and co-operation, based upon...mutual not-judging,” which, he said “is the only satisfactory solution to the problem of acquired differences” (Letters, Smith 870). Here Huxley hints at how it is easier to begin to see other points of view in a smaller community (“democracy begins on the level of personal relations”), and how important it is to try to see other points of view before judging.  

---

15 This might have been a personal weakness; Huxley’s mother’s last words to her son before she died were: “don’t be too critical of other people and love much” (Bedford 58). In the last letter to his own son, his only child, Huxley gave similar advice, warning against the “family vice of too much judging”: “it is difficult for the Huxleys to remember that other people have as much right to their habits and temperaments as the Huxleys have to theirs” (Letters, Smith 870).

16 Somewhat counter intuitively, Huxley also develops a theory about how the self is divided and contains many sides within itself. He repeatedly uses the metaphor of a colony to describe how the self can exist in many forms within the same body (CE II.371, III.10). He returns several times to the concept of “Bovaryism,” first articulated by Jules de Gaulter, which denotes the
The question then for Huxley is how to acknowledge the diversity of others’ viewpoints and to see beyond one’s own. Throughout his essays of the 1920s, Huxley suggests that one way to do so is to travel (CE II.72, II.123). Frequently traveling himself and publishing travel writing, he believed travel could give more people a “liberal education” since it had become more affordable in the twentieth century (CE III.186). But an even more cost effective way to achieve similar results was by consuming culture and literature.\footnote{The editors of Huxley’s Complete Essays point out that he was strangely disdainful of universal literacy, which was achieved with educational reform; strangely because he elsewhere appears to promote the value of education for many. Huxley seems to despair mainly at the profit that press and other media barons made with the advent of universal literacy (CE III.212). He also disliked how education in its current state could be an inculcation of “rigid formulas” and discouraged students to accept or at least consider contradictory viewpoints (CE III.213). His opposition to middlebrow “short cuts to culture,” such as a list of “100 Best Books” recommended by professors, smack of elitism, knowing he was given years to fully immerse himself in school, first at a private primary school, then at Eton, then with private tutors, and finally at Oxford. Earlier in his career, when he was harried with ceaseless loads of journalism assignments, he understood how reading carefully and completely was a luxury; yet once he was able to support himself through regular contracts and advances for fiction, he appears to have forgotten this point.} He asserts that “Between the half-wits and the one-and-a-half wits, culture lovers and culture haters, there is a great mass of those who can be educated” (CE III.188). He believes the great “middle” ground of the population can be encouraged to think critically. The venues where Huxley published—everywhere from Good Housekeeping to Vanity Fair—as well as the high sales of his essay collections—one collection, Ends and Means, sold 6,000 copies in three weeks—demonstrate that he did reach a broad audience in his journalism. He wasn’t speaking theoretically about a broad readership; he directly addressed one.
Huxley believed that books and particularly literature had a special role to play in helping readers expand their thinking. He asserts that literature can “be used for emotional training” that helps broaden readers’ judgment (CE IV.283). He explains: “By playing the part of a character who is very like or unlike himself, a person can be made aware of his own nature and of his relations with others” (CE IV.283-4). He suggests that even watching plays can have a similar effect. Huxley understands and urges his readers to understand that getting outside of one’s own standpoint, imagining oneself in others’ places can benefit society by broadening individuals’ outlooks and improving their judgment.

**Huxley’s politics**

Huxley’s politics were often grounded in the writing of literature and readerly habits. Like Woolf and Macaulay, “thinking” and writing were Huxley’s most practiced modes of “fighting,” to quote Woolf’s own perception of her place in the political public sphere. Huxley was well removed from politics as a young man; his undergraduate set, the “smart set” at Balliol, was uninterested in politics until World War I, when most went to fight (Murray 43). Huxley, being blind in one eye, was unfit for service and stayed in England. Yet Huxley did actively involve himself in politics for one short period of his life, in the mid to late 1930s, when he worked diligently for the peace movement. He wrote the first pamphlet for Dick Sheppard’s Peace Pledge Movement, later Peace Pledge Union (Bedford 315) and until he left for the U.S. just before the beginning of World War II, played a prominent role with the organization. He was the moving force behind *Intellectual Liberty*, a periodical of the People’s Front, whose mission was to “induce people to forget ideologies for a little and settle down to the solution of specific practical problems” in order to promote “peace, tolerance, liberty” (CE IV.135). The People’s
Front for Britain had been organized for the purpose of defeating the National Government. Huxley wrote to other writers urging them to join in causes he believed in, as well as letters to the editors of publications such as The Left Review to express his political opinions (Letters, Sexton 316, Letters, Smith 423). David Bradshaw has noted that the in the 1930s Huxley adopted the habit “of joining organizations only to drop out almost immediately” (“Flight” 11), a pattern which mirrors Woolf’s involvement in political organizations, as will be discussed in the next chapter. He moved in and out of the Political and Economic Planning Group, Education of Progressive Societies and Individuals, and the National Council for Civil Liberties among other organizations.

Yet strangely, upon moving to the U.S. in 1937, all his previous political involvement ended abruptly, which upset many in the Peace Pledge Union (Bradshaw “Flight” 24). When asked to sign a petition against Hitler in October of 1939, after the Nazi invasion of Poland, he responded, “I do not feel that politics (except such politics are dictated by the need to ‘make the world safe for mystical experience’) are my affair” (Letters, Sexton 361). Considering the extent of his earlier involvement, his reply seems baffling, but his attitude then was one he maintained for the remaining twenty or so years of his life.  

Thus if scholars want to know more about Huxley’s political engagement, they would do well to look to his engagement with a wide readership in his essays and novels rather than in traditional politics.

---

18 In 1953 Huxley wrote a letter to Naomi Mitchison indicating that he had maintained his late 1930s stance: “I don’t like belonging to any organizations and have systematically kept out of them for many years” (Holmes 204).
Huxley and the middlebrow

Like Woolf’s, Huxley’s journalism shows how his cultural values share much with the middlebrow despite his higherbrow reputation. In one of his very first published essays, he admits that essays indulge in “literary gossip” but justifies his given medium by noting that it “occupies and entertains the mind…[it] is not merely entertaining; it is instructive too” (CE I.11). Huxley’s essays combine “learning and lightness,” making his work appealing to middlebrow readers who are looking to be educated. He believed in the instructive value of art, which as discussed in the introduction, is a middlebrow attitude. Even when he begins an essay by disdaining didactic art it (“the act of combining instruction with entertainment usually results in something monstrously boring” and makes good “jam” savor of “didactic powder” (CE I.233)), he ends the piece by affirming how valuable instructive art can be. In this case, he affirms the value of instructive concerts that teach the audience about the history of music as well as the specific pieces played. The essay appeared in Huxley’s regular *Weekly Westminster Gazette* music column, in which he had the previous week defended “good popular music” that “combined the comprehensibility and direct emotional appeal of the ordinary-popular music of commerce with ingenuity” (CE I.233). Huxley maintained this position into the 1930s, in one of his most celebrated collection of essays, *Music at Night*, where he asserted: “Artists are eminently teachable and also eminently teachers…they can transmit what they have learned with a penetrative force, which drives their communication deep into the reader’s mind” (CE III.51). Later in the 30s, once the BBC had become established as a notable cultural phenomenon and a symbol of middlebrow taste, Huxley repeatedly lauded its “praiseworthy attempts at impartiality” (CE III.433). He noted how it avoided merely trumpeting the opinion of the men in

---

19 As discussed in the introduction, one of the most often quoted definitions of the middlebrow comes from a *Punch* cartoon that targets BBC listeners as the quintessential middlebrows.
charge, as so many other stations did, and was therefore beneficial to fostering broad-minded judgment. He further praised the BBC’s promotion of culture: “The BBC has done much to popularize good music and intelligent talks” (CE IV.143). He emphasizes the importance of being “interesting” while also being more than “half-witted and subhuman.” Though many perceived him as a highbrow, Huxley promoted middlebrow values in his journalism from the early 1920s through the late 30s.

Like confirmed middlebrow writers, and like Woolf, Huxley disdained academic approaches to literature. He states in a collection of essays, *Proper Studies* (1927), that “few things are as depressing as the average literary thesis. It deals almost always with some humanly insignificant fact or person” (CE II.215). Writing to his brother Julian Huxley (another distinguished intellectual of the time), Huxley jokes that the “complete futility” of an idea that he has makes it “an ideal thesis for a doctorate” (*Letters*, Smith 241). The attitude persisted to the end of his life. Christopher Isherwood reports Huxley’s skeptical reaction to a meeting with literature professors in the 1950s; Huxley said, “They’ve invented their own absolutely unintelligible technical language because they feel they have to justify their existence by pretending that literature is a branch of science” (Julian Huxley 160). Apparently Huxley was not taken by New Criticism, and the feeling was returned by New Critics. Huxley’s own criticism roamed far afield from the new academic movement, as Woolf’s did, and that distance may be one reason why his essays have been so long neglected. Donald Watt, who edited Huxley’s critical heritage volume, notes that to formalist circles, Huxley was “a footnote” (30). Peter Firchow has surmised that this is because “Huxley’s work doesn’t lend itself to close reading like new criticism likes” (*Reluctant* 173); both his fiction and his criticism is more about the social milieu of the interwar period than bold aesthetic experiment. But it is for precisely this reason
that Huxley’s work should be of interest to today’s academic discussion of early-twentieth-century literary production.

Huxley’s desire to make money from his writing never waned. Like most other writers, Huxley had been eager to be paid for his work in his youth; upon getting his first poems published in The Nation, he wrote, “I think I shall write an ode to money” (qtd. in Bedford 65). He was “determined to make writing pay” (qtd. in Bedford 97). But even upon moving to California in the late 1930s, when he was finally able to live upon royalties alone, and his journalism and essays were in high demand, Huxley was still worrying about financial security (Bedford 360). Like classic middlebrow writers, Huxley wrote for financial gain.

Huxley didn’t favor aesthetic innovation for innovation’s sake, but saw its viability when mixed with more familiar forms. He argued for a middle way, something like Macaulay’s character Eddy from Making of a Bigot. “The only hope,” he wrote, for literature to endure “is to have a dual personality paper where good and vulgar are mixed; people will swallow the good if tempered with the vulgar” (Letters, Smith 174). Huxley says in the same letter that while he admires the latest number of a publication he’s recently contributed to, Art and Letters, Picasso print and all, he is convinced that it won’t last long. Huxley maintains distinct ideas of good and “vulgar” literature, but he does believe that a good number of people are capable of appreciating the good, and will pay for it too; they need only a bit of the familiar to be led to the less familiar. He suggests printing side by side prints by Mark Gertler, a modernist artist influenced by Post-Impressionism; a salacious drawing by Raphael Kirchener, who worked in the by then familiar Art Noveau style; and “an outgush of la Wilcox” or Ella Wheeler Wilcox, a popular and
sentimental poet. Huxley’s proposal really does sound something like Unity, the paper that mobile middlebrow Eddy founds in Macaulay’s Making of Bigot. Like Eddy, Huxley saw many sides of British literature and believed there was value in seeing them side-by-side, publishing them in one place.

Huxley himself did experiment aesthetically, but he didn’t do so radically. Rather, he combined familiar elements in new ways that were fairly easy to digest. Upon receiving recognition as a writer, he expressed dismay that he was perceived in Paris as a neo-Classical writer. He thought Classical artists denied life in favor of perfection and simplification, and he insisted that he wanted to maintain full contact with reality. He asserted: “I have a taste for the lively, the mixed, and the incomplete in art, preferring it to the universal and chemically pure” (CE III.27). He not only sought out hybrid productions to read, but also consciously produced hybrid work himself. When defending his second novel, Antic Hay, to his objecting father, Huxley wrote: “Artistically…it has a certain novelty being a work in which all the ordinarily separated categories—tragic, comic, fantastic, realistic—are combined into a single entity whose unfamiliar character makes it appear at first sight rather repulsive” (Letters, Smith 224). Huxley saw this hybridity as a kind of experiment that might not be palatable to the taste, yet notably it was not a typically high modernist experiment that reinvented conventions or reworked them in radical ways. Rather, Huxley’s novel combined them in somewhat recognizable forms.

Huxley’s greatest affinities with experimental writers of his time are found in his poetry, which he published frequently early in his career, but much more slowly in the 20s, and had ceased publishing by 1931. After putting out his first volumes of verse, Huxley was initially

---

20 Grover Smith, editor of the first volume of Huxley’s letters, presumes this ideal journal was actually Coterie, first published later in the year which Huxley wrote the letter, 1919, and to which Huxley contributed (174). It lasted two years, from 1919 to 1921, which was longer than Macaulay’s fictitious paper (which she wrote about in 1915).
classed with high modernists. When Richard Aldington predicted who among unknown artists of the time would become established in the future, he picked Joyce, Eliot, H.D., D.H. Lawrence, Proust, and Huxley (Watt 6). Huxley alone would be the name of this group that is not considered high modernist today. As an undergraduate, Huxley had been a leading figure in the Coterie literary group that met to discuss new poetry, where in 1913 he heard the very first reading of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (Firchow, Reluctant 144). In 1923 the New York Times Book Review aligned Huxley’s work with “The Waste Land” because of its “casual allusions to classical lore, devilishly clever garbling of familiar quotations, and the total effect of dissolution” (Watt 89). Peter Firchow has argued that Huxley actually employed many elements that have come to define modernist poetry before Eliot did; Firchow demonstrates that Huxley, for example, was using techniques of French symbolists before Eliot. Firchow also underscores how in the 1920s, Huxley’s critics thought the skepticism and cynicism in his verse shared something with Robert Graves (Reluctant 151). Huxley’s very early fiction, too, was considered high modernist; Raymond Mortimer saw Huxley’s first novel in the tradition of Flaubert’s modernist detachment and consequently disapproved of Huxley’s modern lack of moral values (66). Another early review was sure that Huxley’s aunt, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, the quintessential moralizing Victorian novelist, would disapprove of her nephew’s detached and highly modern work (Watt 11). Juliette Huxley, Aldous’s sister in law, also noted that reactions to the early novels were often full of bafflement (Julian Huxley 4), as reactions to high modernist works were.

---

21 Huxley’s early work was often aligned with other forbearers of high modernist work, the Aesthetes; one review saw Huxley as “a new Huysmans” (Watt 95) and another (Conrad Aiken’s) said his novels were “a delicious blend of the ‘90’s with the latest fashions” (Watt 125), though L. P. Hartley the same year (1925) insisted that Huxley was not an Aesthete and had something serious to say about society: “Surely as the most solemn moral philosophers, he is in search of the good life” (141).
Even some of his essays have been considered high modernist. The editors of the Complete Essays argue that “there is much in Huxley’s theory of art that resembles ideas in Woolf’s ‘Modern Fiction’”; they explain that both explore the interaction of the subjective mind and the world outside of it (CE III.xix). The editors say too that both Huxley and Woolf focus on the difficulty of portraying reality in literature. In re-written fables of the early 30’s, Huxley expresses some views consonant with some right-leaning high modernists such as Ezra Pound; the fables’ morals are that “the gifted must always be on their guard against the good who are their natural enemies” (CE III.6), and that a king is right to destroy half his people to save the better half from degeneration (CE III.8). Huxley apparently advocates for the survival of the best regardless of the rest, and indicates that art should not be moral, that it should exist only for its own sake. However, these opinions are exceptional, and as Bradshaw has argued, are not reflective of Huxley’s more liberal later career. Neither do they represent the larger arch of Huxley’s thought.

After his first youthful productions, Huxley maintained skepticism and even disregard of highly experimental work. While his first novel may have been compared to Flaubert’s, posthumous assessment of Huxley’s work has largely concurred with Robert Kuehn’s opinion that Huxley’s oeuvre diverges significantly from modernist forbearers, and is even “the very antithesis of the revered Jamesian novel” (2). Huxley disdained the idea of art for art’s sake and Aestheticism, which he called “pure modern products,” because they “make no contact with life and ideas around them” (CE I.172). He deplored what he called the “modern habit” of “emptying the primitives of their content and significance” and aestheticizing their look. And even if a few of his ideas about art overlap with those in Woolf’s criticism on modernist art, Huxley had no taste for the actual products of modern fiction that Woolf defends in “Modern Fiction.” He did
not like Woolf’s novels such as To the Lighthouse that exemplify the ideas proposed in her seminal essay, and in the same breath as he dismisses Woolf’s masterwork, he praises Graham Greene’s latest novel (Letters, Smith 330). Huxley criticized Woolf’s work for being too far removed from reality, mirroring Arnold Bennett’s criticism of Jacob’s Room that inspired Woolf to respond with her essays defining modern fiction in the first place. 22 Throughout the Complete Essays, Huxley calls Ulysses dull no less than five times and claims the time he spent reading it was a waste (cf. CE I.27, I.173, I.179, I.342, I.374). While Huxley found Joyce more “pleasant” than he expected upon meeting him in Paris (Letters, Sexton 222), the two men did not become friends. 23 Bernfried Nugel has noted how Huxley parodied both Joyce and Proust in the opening of Huxley’s mid-career novel, Eyeless in Gaza (124), which took a famously moral turn from which Huxley would never return. Sybille Bedford recounts a conversation Joyce and Huxley had in which, according to Huxley, Joyce asserted his belief in the “omnipotence of words” to which Huxley objected (216). The conversation demonstrates Joyce’s greater investment in the manipulation of formal aspects of literature, in other words, what has defined modernist writing for so long. Nicholas Murray, Huxley’s second biographer, attributes some of Huxley’s vitriol towards experimental writers to his involvement with J.C. Squire’s The London Mercury, which

22 Bennet for his part found Huxley’s work heartless and amoral. Of Point Counter Point Bennett wrote in a review: “The milk of human kindness is not in it” (Watt 175), but the two men were personal friends. When Bennett visited the Huxleys in Italy in 1927, Huxley wrote to his father that Bennett had been “in excellent form” and “the chief amusement of the last weeks” (Letters, Smith 282). When Bennett died in 1931, Huxley wrote a letter to The Times to do more justice to Bennett’s career than Huxley and others thought Bennett’s official obituary had done; he wrote, “Bennett’s was the head of a fine artist, a first rate critic of books and men” (Letters, Sexton 252). While Woolf also warmed to Bennett upon his death, Huxley’s relationship with Bennett was much closer and Huxley’s attitude more generous and appreciative.

23 For a time while Joyce was residing in Paris, Huxley lived just outside the city, so the two authors could have become closer, but they did not. Joyce apparently preferred Huxley to Huxley’s friend D. H. Lawrence, flippantly remarking that “at least Huxley dresses decently” (Nugel 119).
was hostile to the interwar avant-garde (103). It is also possible that Huxley contributed to the
*Mercury* because he was sympathetic to its views, but either way, he was, like many middlebrow
writers, openly skeptical of modernist work. While not entirely jettisoning its advancements, he
reworked its experiments in more easily digestible ways.

Huxley consistently expressed the desire to have more literature accessible to more
people. He disapproved of French publishers who turned books into luxury items; he believed
books should not be treated as exquisite objects, but rather should be available to all (CE I.75).
He also repeatedly criticized the “cult of high art” that valued high art for scarcity’s sake (CE
I.168). He disliked the culture game of one-upmanship as discussed above, and found regrettable
the recent invention of “a highly sophisticated, upper-class standard of value” which drained
works of substantial meaning and distracted attention from great art that is truly moving, “the
beautiful and the sublime” (CE I.220). While Huxley was forever an intellectual and his early
work had shared something with high modernists’, through the greater part of his career he
expressed views sympathetic to middlebrow consumers who favored emotional reactions to art
and to art that was meaningful while remaining available and accessible to many.

**Gender and Huxley’s journalism**

Huxley’s disdain for the bloodless cult of high art takes a gendered turn in both his early
and mid career. In a 1930 *Vanity Fair* piece, “Fatal Ladies,” Huxley declares his hatred of
“spiritual vampires.” He appreciates old-fashioned “vampires,” “adventuresses” who want
“money, ordinary excitements, or the common-place good time,” and who are happy with “pearls
and an automobile” (CE III.227). But he hates the “spiritual vampire” who “wants Higher
Things”; he says that such a woman is “out to assert herself on a Higher Plane…she is only
satisfied if she can persuade herself that she has a large soul and a large intellect—not to mention high ideals and a wide culture, and deep thoughts” (CE III.227). The very qualities that Huxley appears everywhere else to vaunt—engagement with serious culture and sustained thinking, intellectual investment in work concerned with more than mere bodily functions—he condemns when women, bucking stereotypes, embrace them. Huxley blames women for bad taste when they live by instinct and insults them when they try to live in any other way. He forthrightly decries the feminist movement for “disparaging qualities of charm and allurement” (CE III.228), and he concludes the essay by warning that once such “spiritual vampires” grow older and loose their looks, men will no longer be interested in them (CE III.229). He can conceive of nothing worse for a woman than being unattractive to a man; “heaven help them!” he says.

“Fatal Ladies” shares much with an earlier *Vanity Fair* piece that Huxley published in 1924, called “The Dangers of Work,” in which he bemoans the decay of the leisureed aristocracy with onset of the “modern mania” for work. Huxley claims the mania has left tasks associated with taste-making and aesthetic judgment, once largely the purview of men, now to women. He argues, “The modern mania for work has increased the power and importance of women in our society,” assuming women do not work and thus have more leisure in which to set aesthetic standards. His stance is ironic considering at this time middle class women were finally being allowed to enter the workforce, and he completely discounts work women did inside the house and the efforts of working-class women, who had always worked. Huxley insists women’s buying power is to blame for a modern taste for “the minor [and] the fashionable” and the premium placed on “sensation and immediacy over abstraction and logical thought” (CE I.371). Huxley argues that women’s control of taste has led to “the breaking up of standards, the de-intellectualizing of the arts, the exaltation of instincts at the expense of reason” (CE I.372). He
claims that “There is not a novelist or female reader of novels who does not talk rapturously of life with a capital L” (CE I.371). All women are alike according to Huxley; they are all instinctual, unintellectual, and attracted to the trivial. In his next installment for *Vanity Fair* just a month later, Huxley comments upon the “photographs of ravishing young female comedians,” which he says are the part of the magazine on which he “lovingly dwells” and spends considerably more time than the articles (I.373). He values women only for the sensual pleasure and perhaps amusement they provide. The vast majority of Huxley’s essays appear to be neutral so far as sex differences are concerned, but the few pieces examined here reveal that Huxley’s efforts to bring culture to a broad audience, to push a larger portion of the population to think for themselves, and to steer readers and culture consumers away from unchallenging mass-produced work while still providing entertainment were written with an unstated male audience in mind.

The editors of Huxley’s *Complete Essays* assert that “concepts, ideas, and values of his periodical publications spilled over into the topicality and the discursive energy of his ‘novels of social history’” (II.xi), making them good ground from which to further explore and discuss ideas developed in his fiction. In the late 1920s, one critic noted how Huxley along with Woolf combined fiction and essay forms most effectively (Watt 162), a point which has been underexplored since then and will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter. Yet Huxley’s novels offer an important difference from other novel-essays in this study: they make clear a

---

24 Both of Huxley’s biographers have written about how Huxley’s wife, Maria, was slavishly devoted to protecting him from domestic cares. They note how carefully Maria worked to hide the extensive work she did so he would not even begin to worry about practical matters (Bedford 118, Murray 368). Maria’s efforts to hide her work meant that Huxley likely had little idea of what work women did inside the house, much less outside of it. Furthermore, by all counts, Maria lived by her instincts. She said herself she could never care about intellectual matters and was very good with people. She therefore fits some of the stereotypes about women that Huxley reproduced.
dismissive attitude toward women as thinkers and participants in the public sphere and show how this genre can be used not just to promote thinking amongst women readers but to belittle it as well.

The form of Huxley’s 1920s novels

T. S. Eliot said that Huxley developed a variety of the novel all his own (Julian Huxley 30), and while he may have been voicing the opinion of many in his time—Huxley’s novels are different from most other fiction of the era—his fiction’s tendency to lapse into essayistic conversation shares much with the other fiction-criticism discussed in this dissertation. Like Macaulay and Woolf’s fiction-criticism, Huxley’s novels carry over many of the ideas of his journalism and present them through a variety of characters and perspectives. What is different about the form of his novels is their inspiration: Thomas Love Peacock’s early nineteenth-century novels of ideas. Peacock’s novels are not works of realism, but rather satires that juxtapose the different points of view of characters who are more types than living individuals. Lengthy dialogue makes up the bulk of these texts, which have little plot or occasion other than a country house party. The connection between Huxley and Peacock is not speculative; Huxley explicitly cites Peacock in his letters, noting how he seeks to expand Peacock’s form, in which Huxley continued working through the 1940s (Letters, Smith 600). 25 Huxley saw the limitations of Peacockian work; in a letter to Philip Wylie, a fellow writer, he described the difficulties of

25 While Huxley was drafting Crome Yellow, his first novel, he called it “my Peacockian novel” (Letters, Smith 198). His plans for his next novel were for a “gigantic Peacock in an Italian scene” (Letters, Smith 202), which wouldn’t be realized until Those Barren Leaves, his third novel, though Huxley’s second, Antic Hay, did expand the work he had begun in his first. From a critical perspective, Huxley was primed to write this kind of satire; as an undergraduate he had won the Stanhope Prize whose theme that year had been “‘the development of satire from restoration to revolution,’” and was a topic Huxley had apparently touched upon in earlier undergraduate work (Letters, Smith 72).
conveying intellectual ideas in the form of a novel: “In order to write Nightmare Abbey [Peacock’s second novel], one must be prepared to omit most of what is really interesting in life.” He admitted what he represented in his work was only a small slice of reality, and that the form he worked in was “middle-sized” and “non-geniusish” (Letters, Smith 600). He described his writerly position as one that fell “between two stools” of intellectual ideas and middlebrow technique (qtd. in Murray 377). Yet it was a form that worked well to juxtapose perspectives and the multiplicity of viewpoints in modern life.

Though Huxley’s novels look different from high modernist ones that thoroughly reworked novelistic conventions, he claimed that he too was attempting something new, producing a new form that described modern times better than Victorian realism did. He noted that the comic Peacockian novel that inspired his own work was a welcome alternative to realism for which “life is too short” (Letters, Smith 203). And he expanded upon the Peacockian novel, aiming to include a broader panorama of modern society by drawing on a greater mixture of genres and styles. He described his second novel, Antic Hay, as having “a certain novelty, being a work in which all the ordinarily separated categories—tragic, comic, fantastic, realistic—are combined chemically into single entity, whose unfamiliar character makes it appear at first sight rather repulsive” (Letters, Smith 224). The modifier “chemically” hints of criticism that addressed modernist work, such as T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Furthermore, Huxley’s claim that his own work is “repulsive” at first sight aligns it with high modernist experiments that take some getting used to because their formal qualities are so unfamiliar. Critics since have argued that Huxley was “shuffling the elements [of fiction] rather than making it [fiction] new in more imaginative and revolutionary ways” (Murray 157), but as
discussed above, more conservative, established realist writers of the time saw Huxley as objectionably modern.

Early in his career, Huxley’s aims for fiction seem to have been aligned with high modernists’ like Woolf’s. For example, in his letters, he repeatedly harps on the limitations of Arnold-Bennett style realism. Immediately after explaining that his first novel will be in the style of Peacock, Huxley wrote in 1921, “I am giving Realismus a little holiday: these descriptions of middle class homes are really too unspeakably boring. One must try and be readable” (Letters, Smith 202). The statement articulates avant la lettre an essential nugget of “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” which was published two years later; both indicate that novelistic description which simply accumulates concrete details, specifically those of “middle class houses,” is dull.26 Huxley specifically named and targeted Bennett three years later, in 1924, when he wrote to his brother that

The mere business of telling a story interests me less and less. I find it very difficult to understand the mentality of a man like Bennett who can spin out an immense realistic affair about life in Clerkenwell…The only really and permanently absorbing things are attitudes towards life and the relation of man to the world (Letters, Smith 228).

Early in his career, he distinguished his own work from classic middlebrow fiction.

Yet, like Macaulay, Huxley was concerned less than high modernists with capturing internal thought processes and new modes of thinking, and more with conveying the diversity of outlooks and attitudes externally expressed in the public sphere. In a letter to Ottoline Morrell who took offense at Huxley’s first novel because she (along with many others) thought it satirized herself, her household, and her friends, Huxley explained that he was “not a realist and

---

26 Woolf had published “Modern Fiction” in 1919 in which she hints at many of the ideas she would later develop in “Character in Fiction” and “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” so it is arguable who first articulated these ideas. Yet what seems most important here is the similarity of their critique of realist fiction in this moment.
[didn’t] take much interest in the problem of portraying real living people”; he claimed that the novel’s characters were “nothing but marionettes with voices designed to express ideas and the parody of ideas” (*Letters*, Sexton 107). Huxley liked to hear his characters talk and sought to develop a form that would allow for that. He put forth that he was not a “congenital novelist,” indicating that he was interested more in playing with ideas than in radically refashioning the form of fiction.

In addition to being Peacockian hybrids that are somewhat innovative but not in typically high modernist ways, Huxley’s novels are also romans à clef as well as novels of ideas more broadly. Both of these genres characteristically depict highly limited and most often elite sectors of the public sphere, which suggests his work would be of interest to a narrow demographic.

Philip Quarles, who critics consistently identify as the character most similar to Huxley himself, says in *Point Counter Point*, “The chief defect of the novel of ideas is that you must write about people who have ideas to express—which excludes all but about .01 % of the human race” (294). Quarles furthermore thinks there are even fewer people to read novels of ideas than are featured in them. Data of Huxley’s actual readership suggests that Huxley’s earlier work indeed appealed to a select few. Huxley’s first book of short stories, *Limbo*, which sold only 1,600 copies, “was pounced upon by the high-brows and literate young who were carried away by the cool bugle call of a new astringent voice” (Bedford 108). When the Bishop of London objected to his second novel, *Antic Hay*, urging censors to ban the book because it was a threat to public morality, Huxley’s publisher, Chatto defended the work saying that it would be “of interest exclusively to intellectual people” (qtd. in Murray 164).

---

27 In addition to producing journalism at this time, he was working at the Chelsea Book Club, which Bedford describes as a “high-brow book shop cum small art gallery” (109) where he mixed and met with intellectual Londoners.
Yet *Antic Hay* sold well, 8,000 copies, indicating Huxley was gaining wider appeal. Published five years later, *Point Counter Point*, which claimed novels like it would be of interest to less than .01% of the population of the human race, was a bestseller. Profits from the novel allowed Huxley and his family to substantially change their lifestyle by traveling around the world, building their own villa, and driving across the continent in a custom-made Bugatti. The book was picked by the Literary Guild to be a book of the month, and sales on both sides of the Atlantic broke 10,000 copies. *Point Counter Point* was thus popular and readable, and its selection as a book club choice indicates that for all its intellectual pretension it shares something with the middlebrow. Huxley’s work would become only more popular through the 1930s to the end of his life, though after the mid-30s, his critical reputation declined. An early critic of Huxley’s argued that though Huxley might have been writing about a limited portion of the British population, the intelligentsia and the upper class, the work itself spoke to a wider audience (Allen 374), a point which is born out by the sales of his books and the good living Huxley was able to make from them.

Huxley’s reworking of the Peacockian form was relatively easy to read, and I argue that as such, it had the potential to help a variety of readers broaden their viewpoints and grapple with judgment in an age in which many standards were questioned and cut loose. By contrast, previous critics have tended to emphasize how characters in Huxley’s 1920s novels fail to think in broad-minded terms. When Huxley’s first novel, *Crome Yellow*, was first published, Raymond Mortimer said that it voided “all capacity for moral judgment” (Watt 66). In response to *Point Counter Point* published seven years later, Cyril Connolly noted how the citizens of the “motely world” that Huxley described in his fiction were “united by a common inability to think their way through the confusion of their age” (Watt 159). Jerome Meckier, one of the first critics to
give Huxley’s work full attention after his death, argues that Huxley’s satirizing of individuals’ eccentricities ultimately underscores their narrow points of view and colored judgment, (e.g. scientists are ridiculed for seeing the world only through scientific inquiry, the sensual artist only through pleasure of the body, etc.). Meckier further argues that Huxley ultimately believed people to be irrevocably divided by these eccentricities; he asserts that Huxley offers an alternative to Bloomsbury’s ideas of communion and community and paints a more realistic picture of the modern era that is marked by division (Modern 99). Extensively discussing Huxley’s technique of counterpoint, Meckier explains Huxley’s novels challenge limited viewpoints or “eccentricities” in favor of a larger musical whole, but then he argues that such counterpoint ultimately obscures “how each individual in [novels like] Point Counter Point is… organically related to society’s central melody” (Satire 48). Therefore the effect of Huxley’s work according to Meckier is not to attempt to overcome the division between people, but to reinforce it (cf. Roston 46 for a similar view).

Yet I would argue that even if the characters within the novels can’t see past their own eccentricities, surely the author must be able to in order to represent their different points of view, as can the reader who is privy to so many perspectives. Meckier says that Huxley’s technique of counterpoint can penetrate private individual worlds whereas characters can’t (Satire 46) and describes the technique of counter point as “anti-ego” (Satire 126), but neglects to develop the idea that a number of collated perspectives may have some effect on the reader. Peter Firchow, another critic who did much to return Huxley’s work to academic discussion after Huxley’s death, understands Huxley’s early novels to be about “the necessity….of trying to bridge the gap between the individual homemade universe in which people live” but also, the “probable futility” of such an effort (50). Critics have thus hinted at but not fully considered the potential outcomes
of readers’ consideration of diverse perspectives side-by-side and its impact on readers’ judgment. Thus far I have cited largely older critics whose most important work appeared in the 60s or 70s because so little critical work has been done on Huxley since then, and what has come out has been focused on utopian studies and *Brave New World*. New theoretical models such as Arendt’s can illuminate how Huxley’s work is once again relevant to discussion in modernist studies.

**Critical approaches to gender in Huxley’s fiction**

The lack of attention to gender in Huxley’s work is striking. Some early criticism notes that Huxley’s work belittled women, but being written before the advent of women’s and gender studies, such comments are brief. Milton Birnbaum’s observation that Huxley’s women characters are seen “chiefly in relationship to the males” and “occupy a satellite position” in his novels (61) has been frequently cited in later criticism on *Brave New World*. George Woodcock, another critic who worked on Huxley in the early 1970s, has pointed out Huxley’s “chronic misogyny,” and more recently (2003) John Derbyshire has commented that Huxley “cannot get off the subject of flagellating women.” John Atkins (1980) more specifically says that Huxley’s works have “a great deal of intellectual snobbery, especially at the expense of women” (71). Yet exactly how Huxley belittles women’s intellectual capacity and its impact has not been fully explored.

Meckier has written a bit on women’s vacuity in Huxley’s novels, noting that “Huxley’s women…are virtual nymphomaniacs whose minds have never attained puberty” (*Satire* 38). He later puts forth the idea that the “bewitching females” of Huxley’s novels personify the “meretricious postwar [post World War I] reality” and argues that “the male-female dichotomy”
in Huxley’s work is “a paradigm of the fundamentally contrapuntal nature of modern life” (Modern 46). He further elaborates that “idealistic males” are paired with “vapid or heartless females [to] signify reality’s refusal to correspond with designs of mind” (Modern 68). Thus Meckier points out that in Huxley’s novels, mind and ideals are aligned with male characters and moral vacuity and stupidity are aligned with women, but he does not criticize this tendency, nor does he consider what this means for women at the time or women readers, which are my concerns here.

June Deery and Deanna Madden broke ground in 1992, when they published the first articles to give extended attention to gender in Huxley’s work. Both focused on Brave New World, which most subsequent criticism has done. Madden notes Huxley consistently depicts men as more intelligent than women, women as amoral and promiscuous, and males as spiritual beings distracted by women’s sensual temptations. I wouldn’t fully agree with her assertion that Huxley “deplores the loss of values that had characterized Victorian England” (295); evidence of his earlier attempts to sweep away so much Victorian moralizing weakens such a claim. Rather, as Deery suggests, his misogyny is more simply characteristic of his time. Deery asks just how different Huxley’s “brave new world” was from his own contemporary world, and concludes it wasn’t very in terms of gender equality. She notes it is the men who drive the helicopters and ask the women on dates. Sexual liberation for women, Deery observes, means “always having to say yes” (106). Most damning, Huxley depicts only one woman in the highest class of society (Alpha), and she is shown only in relation to a male superior. Laura Frost has recently (2006) turned to Brave New World largely to think about cinema history, but she notes in passing that

---

28 This point is ironic from a biographical perspective, considering Huxley’s wife drove him everywhere, as Huxley was half blind and not allowed to drive. Maria was known to be a highly skilled and capable driver.
Lenina, the novel’s heroine, or anti-heroine perhaps, is made to stand for the negative effects of mass culture (450), à la Huysen. Frost interestingly notes that in the musical version of the story drafted late in Huxley’s career (1956), Lenina is “less sexually aggressive and much more intelligent” (465). However, in Huxley’s later fiction of the 20s, women grow increasingly less intelligent.

The only contemporary critic to study Huxley’s women characters is Guin Nance, who was the only woman to be included in the publication associated with Huxley’s centenary conference in 1994. Nance generally writes about Huxley’s women characters in a positive light, but as the sole female contributor in the collection, she may well not have felt comfortable putting forth a more vigorous critique. Nance argues that Huxley’s femme fatales, the meretricious females about whom Meckier writes, are actually empowered, as they are allowed to adopt a masculine temperament un-ironically (150). But she opens by noting how Huxley has been a subject of feminist attack “since Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics” (145) and closes by describing the sexist cover of Bantam’s 1955 paperback, which describes “‘Huxley’s woman’” as one with “‘half closed eyes and that mysterious smile—conquering, feminine inscrutable’” (156). Nance concludes by asserting that women in Huxley’s novels should not be dismissed, even if they conform to types. She mentions such types but does not explore them in depth, which I will do here with a more skeptical eye.

If Huxley’s work shares much with other intellectual middlebrow work of the time, it offers an important contrast to the feminist intellectual middlebrow work considered elsewhere in this dissertation. Scholarship on male middlebrow work has considered its misogynist “matey” tone and conservative values in work of writers like J. B. Priestly (cf. Hussey, Macdonald). But more liberal intellectual middlebrow writers’ attitudes toward women as thinkers and
participants in the public sphere have not yet been considered. From his early adulthood, Huxley was exposed to women’s participation in intellectual life at a place like Garsington, yet even there it seems women were expected to amuse rather than seriously contribute, to work at “lightening the severity of the intellectual atmosphere” (Bedford 69). Huxley did little to counter such views; in fact he encouraged them under a modern guise that did little to modernize and advance women’s participation in intellectual life.

**Crome Yellow**

Published in 1921, Huxley’s first novel, *Crome Yellow*, set the aesthetic standard that Huxley’s later novels of the 1920s would develop and stretch. Their basic Peacockian form consists of a cast of varied characters, some intellectual, some eccentric, some innocent, some artistic, all gathered together in a single place, either a house or city, where they interact and converse. While others have studied the slow change in the novels’ form, the change in women’s roles in the novels has been little discussed until now. An early review of *Crome Yellow* noted that the women in the novel were less “real” than the men (Watt 69), which may well be so. However, compared to Huxley’s later work, *Crome Yellow* provides a more balanced and sympathetic depiction of women than any of his other 1920s novels. The character Anne in *Crome Yellow*, for example, exemplifies independent thinking and surprising, open-minded judgment. Her actions and comments change the protagonist’s views and are vital to the process of expanding readers’ thinking. Many other women characters in Huxley’s first novel also inhabit intelligent roles that the author would not reprise later in the decade. As such, the novel

---

29 Bedford calls the women “young girls” even though they were in their mid- to late teens and twenties, not much younger than Huxley himself. Peacock’s novels that inspired Huxley’s early work depict women similarly; in *Headlong Hall*, Peacock’s first novel, the sister of the protagonist is called in to bring gaiety to a household in disorder (63).
reveals more fully than any of Huxley’s others from the 1920s the political potential of the Peacockian fiction-criticism form.

Beautiful, assured, and witty, Anne is Denis the protagonist’s love interest, who repeatedly upsets his expectations of women’s behavior. Upon his arrival at Crome, the manor house where the novel is set, Denis imagines he will approach Anne, about whom he has been daydreaming, with the line, “‘You look adorable this morning’” (15). He imagines himself in the role of commenter and critic, but instead Anne is the first to speak and she says, “Why Denis, you look perfectly sweet in those trousers.” He responds with irritation, disliking her use of such child-like terms when describing him. This exchange brings to light Denis’s double standard regarding appropriate ways to judge men and women’s appearance. Later when Denis makes a comment about women being “the broad highway to divinity,” Anne again checks his limited conception of women by inverting his words: “I should like to see myself believing that men are the highway to divinity” (18). Later in the novel, after it is clear how attractive Anne is to many men, Gombauld, an artist character, accuses Anne of being a temptress, but she will have nothing of it. She exclaims, “It’s always the same old story about the woman tempting the man. The woman lures, fascinates, invites; and man—noble man, innocent man—falls a victim” (108). She expresses pity for Gombauld: “My poor Gombauld!” but points out how trite and tired his accusation is: “Surely you’re not going to sing that old song again. It’s so unintelligent” (108). Here Anne again challenges a stereotype that unreflectively structures male/female relationships in Huxley’s later novels, where women are cast as temptresses without comment. Finally at the end of story, Denis desperately wishes Anne would use some “womanly intuition” to discern that he doesn’t want to leave Crome but instead stay there with her; he wishes she would divine this thought and make an excuse for him to stay (151). But Anne acts like a rational mortal, not as a
spiritual ideal, and has no idea of his thoughts, so doesn’t react. Time and again throughout *Crome Yellow*, Anne brushes up against preconceived ideas about women, not only bringing them to light but also providing an alternative viewpoint and example of ways that women might behave.

Other female characters in *Crome Yellow* do not directly challenge stereotypes, but they are more nuanced, complex, and intelligent than women characters in Huxley’s later novels. Mary is an innocent, full of high ideals, and as such often the butt of jokes, but no more so than other characters in the story. She seems be blamed for Denis’ departure from Crome—she dogmatically sticks to a plan they made in the wee hours of the night, insisting that he leave and thinking that her firmness is doing him good, rather than making him miserable as it actually is. Sometimes she is a laughably earnest, mother-like character. But Mary is also shown to maintain a reciprocal friendship with Denis; she is shown both helping him and being helped by him in a way that complicates idealized Victorian gender roles. Toward the end of the novel, Denis and Mary talk frankly in a tower at the top of the house, where Mary has taken to dragging her mattress and sleeping. After the intense conversation, Denis imagines “his soul… embalmed in the sympathy that Mary had so generously poured” (147), which would suggest Mary is an angel-in-the-house figure. Yet Denis goes on to note that “it was not only in receiving sympathy that Denis found serenity…it was also in giving it. For if he had told Mary everything about his miseries, Mary...had told him in return everything, or very nearly everything about her own” (148). Mary is shown to be an equal participant in intelligent conversation, and both Denis and Mary are shown to be capable of providing sympathy and emotional support. Mary’s perspective is treated as legitimate and one that garners as much respect as others’ in the book.
Perhaps most surprisingly considering Huxley’s later depictions of women, the character who casts the most critical eye on the society presented in the novel is female. Jenny, a character who is half deaf and aloof, does the most to open Denis’s eyes to alternative ways of perceiving and judging the world. Jenny keeps a large red notebook in which she is seen periodically jotting and which is labeled “Private. Not to be opened.” One day, Denis is bitten by curiosity and opens the notebook, which he discovers is a running commentary on everyone who is living at or visiting Crome. Before reading Jenny’s notes, Denis had believed he was his own harshest critic, and could perceive more than anyone else around him, both about himself and others. Upon reading Jenny’s book that spares critique of no one, he finds “that crystal image of himself crashed to the ground, and was irreparably shattered” (120). Denis realizes that others can be just as critical and even malicious as he, and that if Jenny has been critical of him and others, then many others probably are too. The most detached observer and critic in the novel, Jenny is less naïve than the male protagonists and is an example of independent judgment. The novel not only exposes the reader to a number of viewpoints by moving between the perspectives of characters gathered together at the mansion, but it also shows through plot and character development how important it is to consider others’ points of view. Notably, female characters are vital to grasping this point.

The least admirable female character in *Crome Yellow*, the doyenne of Crome, Priscilla Wimbush, hints at Huxley’s later treatment of women in fiction. Many thought she was based on Huxley’s real life patroness, Ottoline Morrell. Lady Wimbush lacks real taste, engages in artistic and intellectual conversation only superficially, and has lost any looks she once had. She is a prototype of the “spiritual vampire” Huxley would later criticize in his “Fatal Ladies” essays discussed above. However, the satire is milder in *Crome* than in the later novel, *Those Barren*
Leaves, which depicts a similar character. Furthermore, in the company of more balanced and intelligent women characters, Mrs. Wimbush’s silly behavior is seen as the exception among women, rather than the rule. Women in Crome Yellow are largely types, as many characters in Huxley’s fiction are; the fiction is satirical and not realist. Not their interior consciousness, but rather their different behaviors and outlooks within a small group are of primary concern in the novel. Yet the behaviors and attitudes are varied enough to surprise readers and push them to consider different viewpoints, viewing the world more broadly.

**Antic Hay**

Huxley’s second novel, Antic Hay, is considerably longer than Crome Yellow and takes place across all of London. It depicts a greater variety of characters conversing throughout a wider range of scenes, though I argue that Antic Hay does no more to exercise readers’ judgment. Its greater reliance on stereotypes, especially depictions of women, makes it in fact less effective than Crome Yellow in broadening readers’ perceptions of interwar English society, despite its wider range.

The only really striking female character in Huxley’s next novel, Antic Hay, is Myra Viveash, a confident, outspoken, and beautiful woman who is and has been the object of many men’s affections. She would seem to be another version of Anne, but Myra conforms more to a limited type, one which she does not regularly confront and refute. Most critics understand Myra to be a fictionalized portrait of Huxley’s contemporary, Nancy Cunard, a writer and activist for social justice, and also an object of Huxley’s own fierce affections, which disturbed relations with his wife for a time. But if Huxley’s characterization of Myra is based on Cunard, his depiction is a mere shadow of the historical woman. Bedford notes how
Mrs. Viveash is not so much Nancy Cunard disguised, as Nancy dis-individualized, turned into a type, a type, what is more, representing but a fragment of her personality. There is no trace of her crazy idealism….none of her partisanship and her violence, no hint of any passionate involvement outside of a personal universe of ennui disillusion, lust, and a little art. It is rather remarkable that Aldous did not even attempt to explore the character of the actual Nancy, that he showed no literary interest except that which lent itself to generalization (144).

Notably nothing of the real woman’s involvement in social issues and politics makes it into Myra’s character; instead, she is characterized primarily as a sexually desirable object and selfish in her own desires, certainly no model for women’s independent judgment.30 In her first scene, Myra reminds the men around her that “there are other parts of anatomy” than “the kidneys” by throwing off her cloak to reveal “an arm, a bare should, and a slant of pectoral muscle,” i.e. cleavage, as well as the full of her back which is exposed in a halter top dress (52). She reveals her body in the conversation, but no thoughts that would add a meaningful perspective. Myra later tempts the protagonist, Gumbril to spend a frivolous afternoon with her, rather than keeping his previous engagement with his “true love,” Emily. This single action is blamed for Gumbril’s loss of his true love. Myra has lost someone she loved in the Great War, which adds some depth to her character, but it is achieved only by defining her in relation to a man, who appears to have been the only substantial ballast of her life. At the beginning of the novel, Myra insists that women have distinct personalities and should not be reduced to stereotypes (55), but the comment is relatively weak in its context, only a slight remark in a much longer conversation and an isolated example unlike Anne’s regular comments of similar ilk. More importantly, Myra herself conforms to the stereotype of a temptress, which leaves little room for critical reflection on the role.

30 Granted, when Huxley was writing Antic Hay, Cunard had not yet taken on her most radical causes, to work against racism and fascism in the 1930s and 40s, but even so, Huxley erases her artistic contributions (she wrote poetry at the time) and other attributes that would make her character more surprising or show the reader something new.
The two other primary female characters are no more complex, conforming to roles of innocent virgin and foolish mistress. There is Rosie, who is pretty but lacks intelligence and taste; her taste is repeatedly corrected by the male artists who take her as a mistress. For example, before meeting Gumbril, Rosie thinks that Arts and Crafts style furnishings are the highest fashion, but afterwards, she wholly adopts Gumbril’s disdain of Morris and his followers, understanding their work to be old-fashioned and Liberty style to be modern and far more interesting. She relies entirely on the men she meets to inform her of proper opinions and is incapable of judging on her own. Even her seemingly liberated view of marriage, her delight in pursuing extramarital affairs, is a derivative of a man’s position. She takes a lover only after her husband pursues an affair (with Myra). As a happy mistress who follows a man’s lead and does not question the limited options open to her as an uneducated woman, Rosie is too simple and predictable a character to offer any additional perspective to the reader. Her stereotyped depiction shuts down critical reflection and judgment rather than stimulating it.

Emily is the angel figure of the novel, Gumbril’s reputedly genuine love interest. She is married when Gumbril meets her, but her marriage has never been consummated, and when she spends the night at Gumbril’s flat out of necessity, they don’t have sex. Though he explores her body with his hands (“Under the smock he learned her warm body, lightly, slowly caressing”), he claims that “He did not desire her” in a sexual way (131). The most desirable and admired love object in the novel is a virgin who is ready to play the sacrificial role of Angel in the House. In a letter to Gumbril, Emily tells him that had they lived together, “I should have been your slave, I should have always been your property and lived inside your life…I’d have twisted myself into the threads of your life” (157). 31 Emily is more intelligent than Rosie, to be sure, but

31 This is actually what Huxley’s wife, Maria, did. See footnote 24 above for further details.
she is no more independent and is shown to be immature in matters of culture. She reads books from Boots (121) and wholly defers to Gumbril in matters of taste. The only woman who garners respect in *Antic Hay* says she wants to wholly conform to her love interest’s viewpoint, offering no perspective other than the will to adopt someone else’s. Her contribution to the larger conversation of the novel is therefore effectively negated.

Early in the novel, Gumbril fantasizes about having infinite empathy, finding it easy “to come to terms with everyone he met, to understand all points of view, to identify himself with even the most unfamiliar spirit” (15). If he had all that he wanted most in the world, he thinks, he would know “how everybody lived and what it was like to be a mill girl, a dustman, an engine driver, a Jew, an Anglican bishop, a confidence trickster” (15). The protagonist’s dream is an ideal that structures not only this novel, but all of Huxley’s novels of the 20s, culminating in *Point Counter Point*. Each attempts to present an outward view of a number of different characters. But Huxley increasingly fails to understand and depict women’s perspectives with any complexity. Bedford has claimed that *Antic Hay* was so popular and influential among young readers, to whom the novel’s air of detachment and biting view of life appealed, that “many young people began to see and judge in Huxleyan terms” (142). As such they might begin to question some Victorian mores of earnest living, but their understanding of women would be quite limited. It is true that all of Huxley’s characters are satirized and as such reduced and criticized. The novels do not aim to produce a highly nuanced view of any character. Yet as Gumbril’s musings suggest, the novels do aim to have readers think about different points of view, to think in a broader way. However, the novels shut down thinking in regards to women’s participation and contributions to the public sphere, rather than encouraging it.
**Those Barren Leaves**

Huxley considered his third novel, *Those Barren Leaves* (1925), to be a considerable improvement over the first two, and it is certainly longer and includes a wider range of characters and narrative styles. Yet its depictions of women are as limited as those in *Antic Hay* and are even more negative, and men take over even more of the serious intellectual work of the novel. Women characters are more varied than in *Antic Hay*, some even with artistic pretensions, but none with valuable, independent contributions.

The most outlandish character in the novel, Mrs. Lillian Aldewinkle, who is the owner of the Italian villa in which the characters in the novel meet and converse, notably resembles Ottoline Morrell, who Huxley had earlier parodied in *Crome Yellow*. Critics have noted how frequently those who benefitted from Lady Ottoline’s patronage returned it by satirizing her deficiencies; she seems to have received little gratitude for her generosity. So Huxley is not alone when he portrays this kind of character in exaggerated and unflattering terms. Still, his critique of the lady patroness unfurls in markedly gendered terms. The physical description that precedes almost anything Mrs. Aldewinkle does in the novel is relentlessly degrading. Though she is first introduced as “large, handsome, old-masterish,” the ensuing paragraphs spare no detail about her aging body: “The face…was old and worn beyond its years…the setting [of her eyes] was pouchy and crow’s footed. There were a couple horizontal wrinkles in her broad forehead. Two deep folds ran down from the corner of the nose, past the mouth, where they were

---

32. The second and newest collection of Huxley’s letters edited by James Sexton includes a number of previously unpublished letters from Huxley to Lady Ottoline that show the efforts Huxley made to patch up their friendship when the Morrells were offended by what they thought to be his presentation of Garsingtion in his first novel. In letters before *Crome Yellow* was published, Huxley conveys deep appreciation of the time he spent at their house, so the ungenerous fictional portrait is somewhat surprising.

33. Atkins has noted that Huxley “is especially guilty of malice in his treatment of women who have passed their [physical] prime” (79).
partially interrupted by another system of folds…that moved with the lips to the lower edge of
the jaw, forming a sharp line of demarcation between the sagging cheeks and prominent chin”
(16). Though Mrs. Aldewinkle is far from the only character over 35, which is the age Huxley
sets for the end of women’s beauty, she is the only one to receive such treatment. The young
women who are beautiful are also powerless, and the male characters’ facial features do not
receive nearly so much attention.

In addition to being defined by her exaggerated and somewhat grotesque looks, Mrs.
Aldewinkle is portrayed as overly enthusiastic about the arts and as lacking taste. More than any
other character, she fully embodies the kind of spiritual vampire that horrified Huxley. When
Mrs. Aldewinkle pursues “Higher Things,” she is shown to make herself ridiculous. One
conversation in the novel about feminism and women artists concludes by Mrs. Aldewinkle
“reluctantly admitting” that male artists are superior to women artists, though the judgment is
based on limited examples, comparisons between “Maud Valier White and Beethoven” and
“Angelica Kauffman with Giotto” (167). The history of women’s involvement in the arts is
dismissed with two rather minor examples, and Mrs. Aldewinkle is again the butt of the joke.
Other women do not even try to adopt a personal taste; innocent Irene prefers sewing
undergarments to making anything artistic, and Miss Elver is an imbecile, with literally a child’s
understanding of the world. The increased attention to women’s physical appearance together
with the disregard of women’s intellect and taste result in the easy dismissal of women’s
perspectives.

The only really intelligent woman in the novel, Miss Thirplow, has no money and thus no
power, and is without her own strong opinions and unique outlook. In fact, though she is a
novelist of some repute, well known for her work, she is shown to be constantly adjusting herself
to the expectations of others around her, never confident in her own opinion. She fears that because she is intelligent, “people might regard her as merely clever and unfeeling, a hard and glittering young woman” (37). She remembers when earlier in her youth, when she thought “hard glittering young women” were desired, she made just such an impression on another character in the book, Mr. Cardan (“inspired by her desire to please…Miss Thirplow had gaily entered into the part assigned to her” (45)). But she regrets showing her cleverness and detachment and resolves to act the part of kind-hearted, good-souled caregiver. She convinces herself that “she had such a good heart” and that “what matters is being kind and good, and having nice feelings” (46). Conforming to Victorian ideals of womanhood and wearing her sympathy as her public face, she reduces her own contributions to the society around her to “nice feelings,” while hiding her intelligence as much as possible in order to win favor from potential suitors and others in the house.

Miss Thirplow notably describes her novels much like Huxley described his own fiction. Any early reviewer saw this when the novel was first published (Watt 122), but the point has not been further explored in contemporary criticism. Miss Thirplow says she is “trying to do something new” in her novels by bringing together different genres and attitudes in one book, “lightness and tragedy and loveliness and wit and fantasy and realism and irony and sentiment all combined” (46). This quotation closely mirrors Huxley’s description of his aims in Antic Hay cited above. Unlike other female characters, Miss Thirplow’s perspective can offer something new to the reader. Yet she also is a stunted character, especially in comparison to the male character who resembles Huxley, Francis Chelifer. 34 Chelifer maintains distance from the hostess

34 While Chelifer is a writer with ambitions and promise, he earns most of his money by editing a hack trade publication, which critics have pointed out parallels Huxley’s position earlier in the 20s when he was earning his living from editing Vogue’s House and Garden.
and makes an effort to retain his own person; unlike Miss Thirplow, he is not absorbed by others’
tastes and impositions. Furthermore, Chelifer’s perspective is extensively explored in a long
section called “Fragments of an autobiography,” whereas Miss Thirplow’s perspective is
explored in day-to-day notes that describe activities within the house. The reader is given a
broader view of Chelifer’s activities and sees him in more varied contexts.

Mistresses figure in *Those Barren Leaves* much like they do in *Antic Hay*, but in the latter
novel, their characterizations are reduced even further. Frances Chelifer falls madly for Barbara,
a shallow but beautiful woman who Chelifer enjoys only when she is silent; Chelifer says,
“fortunately she had a great capacity for it,” i.e. silence (117). While looking at silent Barbara,
Chelifer speculates “on the profound and lovely mysteries behind her eyes” (118), reveling in a
stereotype like Denis does in *Antic Hay*, but without any correction from an intelligent female
character. Barbara is nothing more than a pretty body and an empty soul onto which Chelifer can
project his generalized notions and preconceived ideals. Though *Those Barren Leaves* is
considerably longer than Huxley’s first two novels, women play smaller and more limited
roles.35 Instead of offering more points of view, the novel offers fewer from women, and it
confirms preconceived notions rather than unsettling them.

**Point Counter Point**

Trailing considerably behind *Brave New World*, *Point Counter Point* is Huxley’s second-
most studied novel. *Point Counter Point* is longer and more complex than *Those Barren Leaves*,
and includes more differentiated points of view. It is the novel where Huxley most fully defines
what he wants to accomplish in writing fiction, and works hardest to achieve his goals, capturing

35 A contemporary TLS review notes that “Women in *Those Barren Leaves* make up the
harmonies and discords” and nowhere pick up the melody (Watt 109).
more angles of society than he had in previous works. In a letter to his father, Huxley explained that he aimed for *Point Counter Point* “to show a piece of life not only from a good many individual points of view, but also under various aspects such as scientific, emotional, economic, political, aesthetic, etc. I shall try to imply the other categories of existence behind ordinary categories in judging everyday emotional life.” (*Letters*, Smith 274-5). He brought to bear the ideas on judgment and the public sphere that he explored in his essays on his most ambitious Peacockian novel. While Huxley does bring to the page painters, scientists, aesthetes, and political leaders and shows how their lives are influenced by many disciplines, perspectives, and relationships, Huxley’s blindness to women’s perspectives grows still greater, despite the outward variety of female characters in the novel. Women are driven not by reason, aesthetic judgment, or artistic impulse, but instead by emotion, and they are defined by their relationships to men. In representing half of the population in this limited way, Huxley severely compromises the reach of his text and its ambitions to capture the diversity of interwar English society. *Point Counter Point* encourages some degree of critical judgment, but fails to offer a gender-balanced perspective.

As in *Those Barren Leaves*, women in *Point Counter Point* are shown to have no independent taste and are appreciated only when silent and sexualized objects of desire. The novel opens with a highly charged, even sensational scene, in which Walter, a writer, wants to leave for a party to chase after his latest love interest, but must first confront the disappointment and quiet rage of his live-in mistress, Marjorie.36 Even though Marjorie had worked as an interior designer before moving in with Walter, which required her to leave her job, any discrimination

36 Wyndham Lewis saw the opening as ruefully middlebrow (Watt 238), Cyril Connolly thought the end to be “sensational” (Watt 155), and D. H. Lawrence judged the whole novel to be “written by a talented adolescent” (qtd. in Meckier, *Satire* 33).
or taste that she might have used professionally is downplayed. Walter consider her work to have been “lady-like, artistic, amateurish…a little world of her own…a feminine world, with something of the girls’ school about it, where she could talk clothes and shop, and listen to gossip” (11). Marjorie is shown to be whiny and needy, and the most positive thing that is said about her is that she is “a sweet little innocent girlie,” according to Bidlake, Walter’s friend and a famous painter. Bidlake rants about Marjorie’s “terribly refined” taste, asserting that she has no idea what is truly fine. She is presented as a younger version of the “spiritual vampire” previously explored in the characters Lady Aldewinkle in Those Barren Leaves and Priscilla Wimbush in Crome Yellow, a woman who has no business involving herself in “higher matters.”

Bidle says he would prefer Marjorie to be vulgar, like his model, Jenny Smith, who he thinks is the “incarnation of beauty, the incarnation of stupidity and vulgarity. A goddess as long as she was naked, kept her mouth shut, or had it kept shut for her with kisses; but oh when she opened it, when she put on her clothes, her frightful hats!” (44). Again, women’s taste is mocked and another character asserts women’s mouths are best kept shut to be better admired as sexualized objects rather than participants in meaningful conversation.37

If women are portrayed as foolish when declaring any independent opinion, they are depicted favorably when accepting the opinions of men around them. The “heroes” or the most admirable and least hypocritical characters in the story, the Rampions, who have been called the

37 Other examples include the depiction of Mrs. Felpham, the patron of Rampion, another writer, who is said to have atrocious taste—she is a fan of J. M. Barrie’s plays, which Rampion finds appalling (100). Yet Mrs. Felpham’s taste for Rampion’s own work and subsequent patronage of it is not praised or shown to be admirable. Bidlake’s last wife, Janet, is said to marry for the love of art, for appreciation of her husband’s work, but the narrator makes clear that she does not really understand it. Miss Fulkes, a nanny, is shown to be incapable of serious reading herself in scene where she tries to read The Wealth of Nations, but fails to fix her attention on the text. Along with Smith, she turns away from Wordsworth, Tennyson, Longfellow, Carlyle, and Emerson in favor of The Mystery of the Castlemain Emeralds, which it appears she truly enjoys (189).
“only complete adults” in the novel (Meckier, *Satire* 32) do not have as equal a relationship as critics have previously indicated. Rampion’s wife Mary is said to have “shared most of her husband’s feelings” and “borrowed his opinions” (93). Mary Rampion can herself produce only feelings and not opinions, unless the opinions are mere copies of her husband’s. Neither does Beatrice, the platonic partner of Burlap, a magazine editor, have any taste of her own. Beatrice works like a dog for Burlap without complaining, writing scores of reviews that no one else has the stamina to write, and always slavishly follows Burlap’s lead and advice. Even Elinor Quarles, perhaps the most sympathetic female character in the book, who is also married to a writer and who does have some intelligence, defines herself through her husband. She finds herself in a position similar to Marjorie’s, in that she is dependent to the point of misery on the man her life. She says to her husband, “You’re protected by intellect and talent. You have your work to retire into, your ideas to shield you. But I have nothing—no defence against my feelings, no alternative to you” (74). When she decides after much deliberation to take a lover as her husband has done, she admits to herself that “her natural and habitual mode of thinking even about a possible lover was still in terms of her husband” (330). In having women repeatedly adopt men’s views, the novel not only reduces the total number of viewpoints it presents, but also reinforces the idea that women can’t think for themselves and would do best not to try.38

The only women who are reliably logical and independent in their thinking are said to behave like men. Hilda Tantamount, a colonial (a Canadian) and wife of a magnate, and Lucy Tantamount, her daughter, both manipulate men to their own advantage, not letting their feelings

---

38 The most capable woman in the novel, Rachel Quarles, a wife and mother, is an exemplary member of society: popular, reasonable, always acting purposefully and admired for it. Yet she is married to a hollow, self-aggrandizing man, who like seemingly all the other men in the novel is unfaithful. While she initially seems like a model of judgment and action, her choice to marry and defend such a man, quietly accepting what pains her, demonstrates that she lacks the ability to make difficult, critical decisions and take an independent stand.
get involved in relationships. When Hilda pursues an affair with Bidlake that reveals to her pleasures of sensual love that she had never before experienced with her scientist husband, she is said to have “discovered herself rapturously. But not too rapturously. She never lost her head” (21). Hilda keeps her head because she does not want to lose the mansion, money, or social position that come with her marriage. As perhaps the only woman who escapes censure or pity in the novel, she demonstrates that the ideal woman walks a line between feeling and not feeling that is so razor thin, it is hard to imagine a real woman balancing on it. Hilda’s daughter, Lucy, is more brazen and manly. She is said to have “pursued pleasures as a man does, without allowing her thoughts and feelings to be least involved” (151). She may not take her opinions from men, but she apparently has no real feelings for men, either. It is this that “excludes her” from “the possibility of slave holding” (151). The novel not only terms women’s romantic devotion as “slave holding,” it offers no alternatives between being a “slave” and complete independence that necessitates women acting like men. Women never express themselves freely as women, never offer a perspective from that particular position without criticism, pressure to conform to men’s views, or insistence that their behavior is “manly.”

Finally, when women do begin to make independent decisions for themselves, Huxley employs the language of rape, as if to punish them back into submission. Walter manages to sleep with Lucy by refusing to abide by her professed desire to spend the evening in a music hall or out on the town; instead he orders their taxi to her flat, and when she says this order “is a rape,” he jokes that “It’s going to be,” and the episode concludes by noting that, “it very nearly was” (199). It is said that Walter “took her by force” “full of hatred and desire” (202). When Everard Webley, a fascist organizer resembling Oswald Mosley, writes what is supposed to be a love letter to Elinor Quarles, he says that if she doesn’t give in to his request to begin an affair,
then he will “try the good old methods. I’ll do a slight Rape of the Sabines and then where will your remote superiority be?” (296). The plot of the novel suggests that women who think independently and seek to act apart from men’s desires are objects of violence and abuse.

All of this evidence pushes a reader attentive to the representation of women in the novel to question how fully Huxley achieved his original purpose of the novel, to represent not only an abundance of points of view but also multiple ways of seeing within society and within individuals themselves. In a section from “Philip Quarles’ Notebook,” the novel famously theorizes itself much in the same way that Huxley described the aims of the novel to his father as he was composing it. Notably the critical notebook that adds another layer of and avenue for reflection that is kept by a female character in Huxley’s first novel is kept by a male character in *Point Counter Point*. Philip Quarles, the writer in the book who critics have agreed bears the most resemblance to Huxley himself, describes that in his new project he wants to capture

> the essence of the new way of looking [which] is multiplicity. Multiplicity of eyes and of aspects seen. For instance, one person interprets events in terms of bishops; another in terms of the price of flannel camisoles; another, like the young lady from Gulmberg…thinks of it in terms of good times. And then there’s the biologist, the chemist, the physicist, the historian. Each sees professionally, a different layer of reality. What I want to do is look with all those eyes at once. (192)

Whereas differences between scientists’ perspectives are listed at some length in this passage, women are associated with only one “way of looking,” which is not professional but rather frivolous, “in terms of good times.” The novel as a whole plays out the limited representations women receive here.

Philip goes on to pride himself on his empathy. He thinks: “it was so easy…to be almost anyone theoretically and with his intelligence. He had such a power of assimilation that he was often in danger of being unable to distinguish the assimilator from the assimilated, of not knowing among the multiplicity of his roles who was the actor” (193). This passage bears some
resemblance to Denis’ presumptions in *Crome Yellow*, but without *Crome’s* Jenny character to remind him of the limitations of his imaginative powers. A reader attentive to gender issues can see that the novel itself offers a severely limited vision of women, casting them as a handful of types, cold hearted temptresses or dependent fools. Philip describes himself somewhat like Macaulay’s Daisy from *Keeping Up Appearances*, as a “liquid” personality that can “espouse all contours and yet remain unfixed” (194). Yet unlike Daisy who manipulates herself in different contexts to make her way through different social milieus after studying them carefully, Philip believes that as a novelist he can simply detach himself from one context or embodiment to better understand another. Analysis of women’s perspectives in *Point Counter Point* which so closely resembles the novel that Philip describes reveals this belief to be hubris.

The limitations of this novel with broad ambitions suggest how interwar English fiction-criticism studied here can only be as successful in showing multiple perspectives as its authors are open to representing them. If intellectual middlebrow writers have access to more vantage points in the field of literary production because they travel in a greater variety of literary circles, they may be limited in other ways. Women needed to understand male perspectives to succeed professionally, but men in the interwar era did not need to consider women’s perspectives to make a name for themselves. In fact, as Huxley became more successful, he more narrowly represented women’s viewpoints. Huxley’s increasingly misogynistic work throughout the 1920s reveals some limitations of popular intellectual fiction-criticism, and it demonstrates the need for the kind of overly feminist middlebrow fiction that Woolf aimed to produce in the early years of the next decade, the 1930s.
CHAPTER 4
MEDIATING MIDDLEBROW MEDIA: VIRGINIA WOOLF’S COMPLETE ESSAYS
AND “NOVEL-ESSAY”

Who’s Virginia Woolf afraid of? Middlebrows, apparently. Near the end of her essay “Middlebrow,” Virginia Woolf compares middlebrow culture to a “damp… and ding[y]… fungoid” growth” that clings to everything around her country house in Sussex. “‘What’s that?’” she calls out, spotting something in the garden. “‘Middlebrow on the cabbages? Middlebrow infecting that poor old sheep? And what about the moon? … Middlebrow at it again!’” (CE VI.475). She determines “middlebrow” is even “obscurring, tarnishing, and coarsening” the moon. It is an aggressive, invasive species, growing even more quickly than mushrooms on a damp summer evening. Modernist scholars know well how Woolf foresaw so many trends in literary history and criticism, and her (mock) worry here is equally prescient. Some of the refined, reflective work of this terrifically highbrow “lady novelist,” work that she produced just around the time she wrote her “Middlebrow” essay, has been found speckled and flecked with middlebrow characteristics. The insidious middlebrow might even claim it as one of its own.

While carving out ground for once-neglected texts that have been returned to academic attention, recent studies of middlebrow culture in the interwar period have consistently cast one icon of highbrow culture as a disdainful antagonist to their subject matter. With few exceptions, studies of middlebrow culture somewhere in their introductions call upon Virginia Woolf to

1 In his memoir Downhill All the Way about his and Virginia Woolf’s lives from 1919-1939, Leonard Woolf calls the “refinement and precocity” of small coterie presses “a fungoid growth which culture breeds on art and literature” (qtd. in Southworth 4). His use of the same word, “fungoid,” to make a very different point indicates the Woolfs’ attitude toward their own press, the Hogarth Press, with which they sought to reach a wider audience than a small circle of cultivated friends.
2 In an effort to simplify citation throughout this chapter, I’ve used CE to stand for Woolf’s Collected Essays, a Roman numeral to indicate the volume number, and an Arabic numeral to indicate the page number cited. Elsewhere, I use D to indicate Woolf’s diary and L for her letters along with the same volume and page number citation format.
testify as “high” modernism’s expert witness, quoting her essay “Middlebrow,” which predictably excoriates middlebrow values and habits of production and consumption (cf. Botshon and Goldsmith (4), Haberman (33), Humble (1), Napper (9), Rubin (xiii)). Yet some Woolf scholars have determined the posthumously published essay to be largely ironic and playful, which suggests that the “great divide” between Woolf and middlebrow culture is ripe for reconsideration. But while the historical and biographical circumstances in which the piece was originally written have been carefully researched, Woolf scholars have by and large affirmed Woolf’s highbrow status, leaving potentially fruitful connections between scholarship on Woolf and middlebrow culture unforged.

This chapter puts into conversation two important strands of scholarship on early-twentieth-century Britain, middlebrow studies and Woolf studies, in order to demonstrate how Woolf’s non-fiction shares a number of values with middlebrow culture as outlined by key critics of the middlebrow Janice Radway and Nicola Humble. Furthermore, these connections reveal how middlebrow writing had a special potential to impact women readers entering the public sphere as professionals for the first time. In this way, this chapter will show that Woolf is well read in context of other kinds of writers of the period, particularly women, from whom she is

---

3 In her monograph on reading practices and Woolf’s feminism, Anne Fernald explains that most historicist modernist studies of single authors and the marketplace have demonstrated that an author “fits into, or more often, attempts to subvert of challenge the cultural categories of high, low, and middlebrow” (Feminism 85). Yet this move, strangely, has not been explicitly made for Woolf. Fernald discusses Woolf as both an insider and outsider to the literary public sphere, using terms similar to those that Sullivan uses when describing middlebrow women writers as “insider-outsiders” in the modernist scene (Sullivan “Press” 55), but Fernald does not tackle Woolf’s place among or between the ‘brows explicitly; she rather outlines three phases of Woolf’s journalism, which grow increasingly estranged from mainstream journalistic practices. Brenda Silver’s Virginia Woolf Icon has demonstrated how Woolf’s public image has “an unusual ability…to transgress borders supposedly separating the academy from the intellectual sphere and the world of popular/ mass culture where she has also achieved star billing” (xvi). But while Woolf’s public image has received thorough attention in this regard, her work and her journalism in particular has not.
normally considered apart.\(^4\) The reconsideration of Woolf’s positioning in the “battle of the ‘brows” should bring an ever more expansive and complex perspective to the field that acknowledges not just neglected texts, but their relationship to canonized ones. Melissa Sullivan has recently (2010) begun to reposition Woolf’s work in the way I do here; by examining Woolf’s appearances in *Time and Tide* and her editorial work with middlebrow women writers publishing with the Hogarth Press, Sullivan argues Woolf’s work can be simultaneously high and middlebrow.

By contrast, I look at the six volumes of Woolf’s collected essays to develop a long-term picture of Woolf’s positioning in the “battle of the ‘brows” and then at her unpublished “novel-essay” *The Pargiters*, which I argue is her most middlebrow piece of writing and also one of her most overtly political. Woolf’s radical and/or liberal political work is more often than not aligned with her position as a highbrow, yet I demonstrate that she consciously sought out a more middlebrow form to impact the political thinking of many readers. Both halves of the chapter aim to not only correct what I believe is an inaccurate perception of Woolf in her time, but also show how middlebrow work could be used to stimulate critical thinking and broad-minded judgment. Woolf’s work that shares much with the middlebrow encouraged women who were trained to sympathize with others to adopt a more detached outlook on the public sphere that still acknowledged many of its different sides.

\(^4\) One of the first contemporary scholars of women writers in the period, Nicola Beauman, whose book *A Very Great Profession: The Woman’s Novel 1914-39* was published by Virago in 1983, does this without issue; Woolf appears in discussions of war, domesticity, etc. like any other woman writer. However, because of Woolf’s experimental “high” modernist credentials and isolated comments like the ones quoted above, she has increasingly been seen as exceptional or different from middlebrow women writers who have been recovered. Humble notes that it is possible to consider Woolf in a continuum of women’s writing in the period (27); however, she does not include Woolf in her study except as a “straw man” to define middlebrow writers against. The omission is understandable, as there are so many other women writers who need critical attention, yet Woolf is not as hostile to popular literature as Humble makes her out to be.
Reading and re-reading Woolf’s “Middlebrow” essay

There was no popular reception for Woolf’s essay “Middlebrow” because it was never published in her lifetime. However, as noted above, scholars of the middlebrow have frequently cited it and Woolf scholars have done a good amount of research on it in the past ten years. Melba Cuddy-Keane begins her indispensable inquiry into the essay by asking how an author who had so stridently championed values of the “the common reader” and published two monographs under that title could be so dismissive of middlebrow culture, which is, from at least one angle, democratic culture, available to all who wish to pursue it. Cuddy-Keane has carefully shown Woolf’s essay was written largely in reaction to provocations by J. B. Priestly, most obviously in a BBC talk “To a Highbrow” that was broadcast just before Woolf wrote her essay, and also in reviews of Woolf’s work which he had published around the same time. Cuddy-Keane argues Woolf’s “Middlebrow” essay does not detract from Woolf’s commitment to “common readers,” but rather affirms it. Her main point is that Woolf maintains higher standards for her readers and believes all readers’ thinking should be challenged, unlike middlebrow writers who encourage complacency; Cuddy-Keane explains that Woolf’s “supposedly difficult highbrow approach functions as an activist response to a pressing social need: the need to reject clichés, to shake off the nation’s “priestliness” [habits of slack cultural consumption like those condoned by Priestly] and to learn to think in flexible, relational, intelligent ways” (Public 64). However, Cuddy-Keane concludes her discussion by underscoring Woolf’s highbrow status and the value of such status in the modernist period, calling Woolf a “democratic highbrow”

5 Cuddy-Keane first explored Woolf’s “Middlebrow” essay in her article “Brow-Beating, Wool-Gathering, and the Brain of the Common Reader” that was later incorporated with additional argumentation into her book on Woolf and the public sphere.
throughout her book on Woolf and the public sphere. Mark Hussey similarly aligns middlebrow culture with complacency in his article, “Mrs. Thatcher and Mrs. Woolf,” in which Hussey identifies Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s values with Priestly’s middlebrow complacency in contrast to Woolf whose highbrow thinking is nimble and flexible. Both would agree that whereas middlebrow writing “subjects a reader to a harangue,” is preachy and didactic, highbrow writing “invites the reader to think” (Cuddy-Keane Public 22).

Yet Cuddy-Keane’s very serious reading of Woolf’s “Middlebrow” essay seems to ignore the playful tone of Woolf’s piece. Cuddy-Keane’s characterization of middlebrow discourse as “an insidious perpetrator of reductionism and discord” (Public 31) seems to miss Woolf’s joke about the “danger” middlebrow culture poses to unwitting cabbages and poor old sheep. In contrast to Cuddy-Keane and Hussey, Anna Snaith has argued that Woolf’s “Middlebrow” essay performs “a parodic deconstruction of the terms themselves [high, middle, and lowbrow] and the false and generalized distinctions they connote” (120). Snaith argues for a more subtle reading, one that looks beyond the face value of the piece and reveals not so much criticism of the middlebrow and a valorization of the highbrow but rather a critique of culture being divided into any “brows” at all. Like Snaith, Jane Marcus notes the piece’s ironies; Marcus argues that Woolf, who willingly wrote for Vogue and other mass-market publications to make money, is in the essay poking fun at her more snobbish Bloomsbury friends, who looked down on such publications. Yet like Cuddy-Kean, Marcus ultimately affirms Woolf’s highbrow status. Marcus claims that when Vogue published Woolf’s writing, the magazine “immediately ascended out of the middlebrow” (“Middlebrow” 159). Marcus uses Woolf’s essay as a hook to open a review of another book, and consequently she doesn’t have the space to explore how exactly such a readjustment of the field of cultural production works, but her assertion raises an important
question: does Woolf’s appearance in *Vogue* inspire the magazine to “ascend” from the ranks of
the middlebrow, or on the contrary, is Woolf’s work read as middlebrow when published in this
context?

Before moving onto Woolf’s collected essays and a broader assessment of her journalism
which offers a full answer to the question above, I will offer one more reading her “Middlebrow”
essay to emphasize how it is not as unequivocally critical of middlebrow culture as defenders of
the middlebrow have asserted. It is true that Woolf says things about the middlebrow in that
estory that appear to be vicious. She calls the middlebrow an “exterminable pest” (CE VI.475)
that “contaminates everything” and even dulls the tarnish of “the silver edge of Heaven ‘s own
scythe” (CE VI.475). But Woolf’s overly literary description of the moon in the final quotation is
just one example of how Woolf’s tone throughout the essay is exaggerated and silly, peppered
with laugh-aloud jokes about all the brows, and therefore her words are not to be taken at face
value. Certainly Woolf is encouraging her reader to think about cultural distinctions; the use of
humor does not preclude critical consideration. But she uses humor to highlight the absurdity of
the battle of the brows rather than to reify it. When at the beginning of the piece Woolf defines
the differences between the brows as she sees them, she scatters her commentary with words like
“obviously” and “of course” to underscore the fact that she is repeating accepted standards of
cultural hierarchies. Her imaginative metaphors that describe high and low brows “galloping after”
either ideas or the good life provide just one example of the fanciful language Woolf uses
throughout the piece that indicates she is having fun with those standards.

Surprisingly, that which Woolf surmises will result from the spread of middlebrow
culture does not seem antithetical to her worldview. She asks, “What will become of us if
middlebrow has his way with us, and there is only a middle sex but no husbands or wives?” (CE
VI.476). A central member of Bloomsbury and the author of Orlando, published just three years before “Middlebrow,” would surely not be arguing seriously for the strict maintenance of traditional marital or gender roles. After tossing up the idea of a middle sex, Woolf goes on to pose a question “with the utmost humility” to the Prime Minister: “What sir,” she asks, “will be the fate of the British Empire and of our Dominions Across the Seas if the Middlebrows prevail?” Woolf suggests middlebrow behavior threatens the virile strength of British economic, political, and military strength and urges the Prime Minister to read “an authoritative statement” from the BBC so that the nation may be warned and will presumably man up (CE VI.476). The future author of Three Guineas who was brewing up its origins in The Pargiters at the moment she was writing the “Middlebrow” essay would surely be for the dissolution of the Empire and not for “authoritative statements” from the bastion of male-dominated institutions. She would certainly not bow to imperial ideals with “utmost humility.” Consciously or not, what Woolf points to in identifying potential effects of a middlebrow “outbreak” is the democratic nature of the middlebrow, how it is potentially available to all, will take anything into consideration, and will happily mix and match where it pleases and holds nothing sacred, not even time-honored traditions. These values Woolf shares, though she most often shares them in a way that was not and still is not considered middlebrow today.

Furthermore, Woolf’s private and public voice often shares one value she claims to despise the middlebrow for: making money. As a woman, earning money was important to her sense of professionalism and place in the public sphere. Woolf appears to deride the middlebrow for making art “mixed rather nastily with money, fame, power, or prestige” (CE VI.472) and further explains that whereas highbrows make just enough money to live, middlebrows go on making more and more money, more than they need, to increase social standing and to purchase
goods that show off such standing. Yet scholars have shown how eager young Woolf was in her early days as a reviewer to establish a name for herself and, as a woman, to earn money by her pen (Dubino “Critic” 29, etc.). For example, she expresses great joy at fulfilling the “ambition of [her] youth…making money” (L I.180) and exclaims that what she wants out of reviewing is “a checque,” not intellectual challenge (L 1.154). She argued extensively about the value of writing for money with her Quaker aunt who eventually left her a legacy, some scholars say because Woolf’s aunt didn’t want her to have to write mass-market journalism (Dusinberre 24). The aunt called Woolf’s pieces for the papers “pot boilers” and urged Woolf to focus on more serious work (L I.210); Woolf wrote in a letter that “she [the aunt] thinks I am going to sell my soul for gold, which I should willingly do for gold enough” (L I.165) and concludes by stating “people do take themselves so seriously.” Woolf’s flippant attitude in these early letters shares much with the feminine middlebrow as Humble describes it; it privileges practical reality over intellectual ambition and values making one’s way in the world while maintaining a modicum of intellectual dignity.

Woolf’s desire for money did not diminish as she accrued more stature and financial security in the late 20s and 30s, when she earned well over the £500 a year that Woolf stipulated in A Room of One’s Own as the amount necessary to write independently. Woolf’s literary output is in no way comparable to that of a solidly middlebrow writer like Mrs. Humphrey Ward’s, for example, whose production of multiple novels each year supported the maintenance of a mansion, carriages, charitable organizations, and a lavish social life (CE III.380), yet Woolf always relished a check because it enabled her independence and sense of self-worth. The notes to the six volumes of Woolf’s Collected Essays are peppered with citations to diary entries and letters in which Woolf discusses the money-making aspect of her journalism. In 1923, for
example, she complains that she must sit at her books, working at reviews, and neglect the beauty of a May day “in order to make large sums of money” (qtd. in CE III.268). In 1927 she complains she doesn’t think writing articles is “worth it even for the money” (qtd. in CE IV.471). The modifier “even” shows how much Woolf values the money she earns from her pen. And by April of 1929, she is clearly proud that she is able to support seven people who work at the Hogarth Press with the dividends from her writing (D III.221). Feminist critics consistently point to the fact that Woolf connected paid writing with professionalization for women, most notably in *A Room of One’s Own* but elsewhere too. Woolf argued that receiving payment for writing dignified it, made it more than mere “scribbling.”

Elena Gualtieri has noted that Woolf’s praise of money-making in *A Room* is inconsistent with views in reviews and shorter essays that disparage the commercial nature of literary production (69). Outside the “Middlebrow” essay, Woolf does make damning comments on literature’s relationship with trade; for example, in an early review she says “the confusion of art and trade is always ugly” (CE 1. 117), suggesting art should always be free of trade’s taint. But the most negative comments of this sort come early in her career when Woolf was establishing her reputation and building up cultural capital. Mid-career she acknowledges the benefits of making money, especially for women. Very late in her career, in *Three Guineas* she attacks commercialization and extols the virtue of poverty, but not for reasons connected to middlebrow culture, rather in name of a more radical argument that will be discussed later. Woolf’s attitudes toward money-making could profitably fill a critical volume, but the main point here is that she

---

6 Fernald outlines three phases of Woolf’s journalistic career, in which she becomes increasingly more dissatisfied with institutions of journalism (*Feminism* 86), which might roughly correspond to the phases of Woolf’s attitude toward money-making in writing that I am thinking of here, though it seems to me in terms of Woolf’s attitude toward writing for money, Woolf was most positive in her midcareer.
herself earned considerable amounts from her writing, especially late in her career, yet she never gave up the most commercial aspects of it, the journalism. Rather upon accruing fame, she pursued writing for more mass-market and commercial publications such as *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* when invited to do so, while still publishing for radical papers and smaller presses as well as mainstream venues like the *Times Literary Supplement*. All this makes her criticism of the commercialization of the middlebrow look suspect, that is, just as much a joke that trades on received stereotypes as many other parts of the essay.

Had critics not so heavily cited the essay, the above analysis would be more or less moot considering that Woolf never published the piece and so never publically proclaimed the views in it, a point that critics who classify Woolf as an exemplary highbrow sometimes fail to acknowledge. Woolf did, however, say she would re-write the “Middlebrow” piece for later publication. I believe that “Three Characters,” another essay unpublished in her lifetime, is perhaps the re-draft of “Middlebrow” Woolf mentioned in her diary. In the essay, Woolf’s portrait of the highbrow is unflattering and bears some resemblance to the unenviable Mr. Tansley in *To the Lighthouse*. In “Middlebrow,” Woolf clearly states that she believes the brows are not aligned with class status, and she perpetuates that view in “Three Characters”; highbrows aren’t necessarily upper class or moneyed. The highbrow in “Three Characters” is from a poor family, has had to fight for his academic success, has won scholarships and fellowships all on his

---

7 Woolf’s husband Leonard convinced her not to publish the piece because he thought it was too much about herself and too much “a grinding axe,” that is, a piece written solely to take revenge against Priestly (D IV.129). Cuddy-Keane’s impressive research has demonstrated that is true by showing how the essay responds point by point to Priestly’s attacks on highbrow culture and on Woolf particularly. The historical framework that Cuddy-Keane uncovers helps to explain why Woolf opens and closes the essay by insisting—in jest—that her readers note her Bloomsbury postal code, a certified stamp of highbrow status. Woolf does so because Priestly attacked the relevance of highbrows in contemporary British culture. Woolf thought Leonard’s advice not to publish was “quite right” (D IV.129), which tallies with her earlier assertions in *A Room of One’s Own* that battles of ideas are not best waged in bitterness (cf. Marcus *Art* 91).
own merit, and because of his struggle and perceived sacrifice has turned out arrogant and in need of praise, and cannot easily enjoy the success he has won (CE VI.558). In “Three Characters,” Woolf balances her scales more equally, showing the undersides of all the ‘brows, which suggests this may well be the less personal, more even-tempered re-write of “Middlebrow.” She concludes “Three Characters” with marked animosity toward the middlebrow, bringing in her authorial voice for the first time in the essay and stating: “the most contemptible and most successful and most parasitic and best paid in all the state is the broad brow and him I most despise” (CE VI.560). Yet she does not seem to want the broad brow to change; the very last words of the essay are “I wish [him] to live precisely as he does live, in his Queen Anne villa for ever and ever” (CE VI.560). She suggests that the best punishment for a middlebrow is his own bad taste, and that the middlebrow should be left alone, ignored rather than attacked directly. Woolf directs her energy less toward condemning a specifically middlebrow way of writing and more toward painting parodies of all the brows and highlighting the absurdities of cultural hierarchies. Like “Middlebrow,” “Three Characters” was drafted, but never published. Woolf’s public, published voice shows an attitude quite different from that which appears when citing a few words of an essay that Woolf chose never to make public.

Method for reading the Collected Essays

As has been noted many times over, Woolf believed that her co-ownership of the Hogarth Press with her husband Leonard gave her freedom greater than any woman in England’s to write
and publish what she liked and thus fostered her experimental writing (D III.43).\(^8\) Yet Woolf published not only with her own press but also quite extensively for publications that were edited and produced by middlemen in the literary public sphere who sometimes held very different literary values than her own. Thus in publishing her essays she was more involved in the commercial publishing sphere than has been widely recognized. Gualtieri has noted how Woolf at times portrays herself as an amateur and outsider to the professional public sphere, as in *A Room of One’s Own* when she cites her aunt’s legacy as a gift that enabled Woolf to avoid writing for money (75). Yet at other times Woolf bemoans becoming “too much the professional and too little any longer an amateur” when she reviews literature (D III.210). But regardless of Woolf’s self-portrayal\(^9\), her collected essays show how thoroughly she was involved in diverse sectors of the literary public sphere, publishing regularly in newspapers that reached breakfast tables up and down the country, in subsidized intellectual weeklies, in socialist and feminist papers, in fashion magazines, in housekeeping magazines, in conservative and liberal venues

\(^8\) Though Woolf claimed to be more free to write than any other English woman, she never had as much freedom as some men had, a point which she makes herself in the manuscript notes to her 1931 speech that inspired *The Pargiters* (164). The 2011 collection of essays on the Hogarth Press edited by Helen Southworth has shown how the Hogarth Press was itself far from a coterie press that supported only art writing. Southworth notes in the introduction how the Woolfs made “efforts in the 30s to locate the press in a more mainstream literary market” than it had been in the 20s (19) and in her own article, Southworth examines the large amount of working class literature the press published in the 1930s with the help of John Lehmann. The Press often functioned for authors either as an avenue or an alternative to a more commercial press (8); either way, the Hogarth Press worked to maintain a moderately high distribution, enough to catch a good number of readers’ attention.

\(^9\) Naomi Black has warned against using Woolf’s private voice as recorded in diaries and letters when making academic arguments because in these private places Woolf was working out ideas rather than confidently asserting them, and because her private thoughts are at times quite different from her published public ones (14). It is true that in the mass of Woolf’s diaries, letters, and notebooks, a critic can find almost anything. In this chapter I have sought to avoid using isolated quotes to paint the picture of Woolf that fits my argument and aimed to reveal and represent as many different attitudes as I find in the private writings in order to offer as multi-faceted a view of Woolf as possible.
alike. Michael Kaufman has argued that these venues and their respective audiences had an effect on the style and content of her writing (137). He has demonstrated how Woolf’s style was considerably more open and conversational than T. S. Eliot’s, who published for smaller journals that pitched themselves for a particular cultivated audience. Eliot’s obituary for Woolf, which must be taken with a grain of salt as it reveals perhaps more about Eliot’s own values than Woolf’s, all the same provides one perspective on her place in the public sphere. Eliot cited Woolf as occupying a middle position: she

maintained the dignified and admirable tradition of Victorian upper-middle class culture—a situation in which the artist was neither the servant of the exalted patron, the parasite of the plutocrat, nor the entertainer of the mob—a situation in which the producer and consumer of art were on an equal footing, and that neither the highest nor the lowest. (qtd. in Goldman 114)

All this is to say that as a writer, Woolf was involved in a variety of aspects of interwar literary culture and did not share her voice only through the Hogarth Press, but rather her work achieved a wide circulation and readership in a number of venues that were “neither the highest not the lowest” and shared something with the middlebrow.

The Collected Essays reveal Woolf’s most public voice, which is thoroughly engaged with a diverse readership. In the first comprehensive study of Woolf’s work, Winifred Holtby predicted Woolf’s criticism would be remembered more than her fiction because it was better received in her lifetime (37). Woolf noted that upon the back-to-back publication of Mrs. Dalloway and the first Common Reader, readers were divided as to which they preferred, either

\[10\] I, however, might argue that it’s more of a chicken and egg issue and that we should ask if the place of publication affected what Woolf wrote, or if Woolf wrote for certain publications because they allowed or encouraged her to write in particular ways.

\[11\] This assertion is complemented by Leonard Diepeveen’s work that has demonstrated how Eliot carefully cultivated an audience for his poetry by publishing in particular venues that were not too popular but all the same had some regular circulation; Eliot wanted his work to be read by learned readers invested in intellectual work.
the novel or the criticism (D III.25, 29, 32, etc.), and it may seem strange today to think just as
many if not more preferred the criticism. This attitude changed when critics assessed Woolf’s
work posthumously. Rosenberg and Dubino have explained how Woolf’s essays were thought
too slight, too impressionistic for serious study after her death (Essay 4). Their point is illustrated
by the attitude that Mark Goldman’s study of Woolf’s essays, which was the first comprehensive
one, published in 1976, establishes towards its topic. Goldman must justify the coherence and
method of the essays to counter views like those of David Daiches, whom Goldman quotes:
“‘[Woolf] nowhere altered the face of criticism as she did the face of the novel, she extended no
critical frontiers, she attracted no disciples’” (1) and therefore her criticism was expendable
journalism. Naiomi Black (15) and Katerina Koutsantoni (1) have both noted Woolf’s essays
have received comparatively little attention even recently, in 2006 and 2009 respectively.

The publication of the final volume of Woolf’s collected essays in 2011 makes the
present moment a ripe one to consider her journalistic work as a whole. Though Goldman’s
inaugural study managed to examine the essays chronologically, it was no easy task, as the
essays have previously been published in collections arranged by topic or simply date of
discovery rather than date of publication. The Collected Essays provide a wealth of information
in footnotes, introductions, and appendices as well as cross references that connect Woolf’s
discussion of various authors, ideas, and approaches across her non-fiction oeuvre. Relevant
correspondence and diary entries as well as attention to different venues of publication are
invaluable in the six-volume set. With more readings of the Collected Essays, a more nuanced
picture of Woolf’s journalistic output as well as different phases of her career as it developed over time will emerge.\textsuperscript{12}

Caroline Pollentier has recently (2010) argued that Woolf wrote her essays in opposition to middlebrow “middles,” or popular essays of her day that were pockets of light reading in mass-market papers; “middles” were meant to let readers’ minds rest after trudging through more weighty politics at the front of the paper. Like Cuddy-Keane, Pollentier argues Woolf is a highbrow who distances herself from middlebrow culture. However, I believe the theoretical frameworks that Pollentier employs to make her point—Bourdieu’s struggle for cultural legitimacy (140) and Huyssen’s “great divide” (145)—push her to interpret Woolf’s essays too narrowly. When quoting directly from Woolf’s work, Pollentier pulls mostly from early essays that appear in volumes one and two of the \textit{Collected Essays} and that were first published before Woolf had established a reputation and thus was most eager to distinguish herself.\textsuperscript{13} Pollentier

\textsuperscript{12} Koutsantoni chose to focus her monograph on Woolf’s first and second \textit{Common Reader} because Koutsantoni noted there had been no study of those essential works as a whole, no serious examination of her more polished pieces that together suggest a particular theory of reading. She strives to avoid the “pick a quote” game that gives a limited and arbitrary view of Woolf’s critical attitudes. A study of the collected essays will clearly not produce as coherent a theory as Koutsantoni’s, yet the kind of study pursued here perhaps offers a wider and fuller view of Woolf’s full career in the literary public sphere.

\textsuperscript{13} There is evidence that Woolf disdained mass-market “middles” early in her career; in the 1918 review “Bad Writers,” which surveys essays by J. C. Squire, Woolf openly takes an imperial stance toward her subject, comparing essayists to court jesters who must amuse the sultan or else be executed, and she puts herself in the shoes of the powerful executioner. However, in “The Modern Essay” written four years later, Woolf is more generous to the essayist and to the pleasure s/he should provide. She writes, “The principle which controls [the essay] is simply that it should give pleasure” and that pleasure is “to string us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life” (CE.IV 216). Here Woolf argues that essays stimulate productive reading and thinking, that strong sensations, even a “trance,” can enrich life, not provide an escape from it. This idea speaks to the thesis of Walter Benjamin’s in “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and for that reason is perhaps, at least for those who side with Adorno’s opinion on Benjamin’s essay, troubled and inconsistent, but provocative all the same. Most importantly for this chapter, it shows Woolf was not consistently critical of popular essay-writing. Her defense of pleasure is further analyzed later in the chapter.
also claims that Woolf chose to publish in venues that allowed her to write longer and more reflective pieces, citing *The Yale Review* as an example of a superior publishing outlet (142). But Woolf published with *The Yale Review* relatively little compared to other publications and hardly more than she did with more commercial publications like *Vogue*. Furthermore Rosenberg has demonstrated how one essay, “How Should One Read a Book?” which Woolf originally wrote for a girl’s school, then re-wrote for *The Yale Review*, and finally published as the final essay in *The Common Reader Second Series* was in its final, most reflective version less like *The Yale Review* version and more like the school girl’s version. If Woolf did change her style for prestigious publications that allowed for a more intellectual approach, she ultimately chose to change it back to something more conversational in its most polished form. Koutsantonii has countered Rosenberg, arguing the three versions of the essay are more similar than Rosenberg makes out, which could also challenge Pollentier’s point that *The Yale Review* was a more suitable venue for Woolf’s highbrow publications. Either Woolf published in much the same tone and with much the same approach to a number of different audiences (school girls, intellectuals, and “common readers”) or she ultimately thought her ideas were better articulated when addressed to school girls and common readers than to intellectuals. Pollentier offers only “one moment” when Woolf “did momentarily qualify her critique of the essay market,” when she praises the demotic prose of Addison (146), and she does say that Woolf’s essays have “the potential to construct a sense of community by foregrounding the demotic value of daily life” (147). Drawing from a fuller range of Woolf’s career, this chapter will analyze many more moments in which Woolf considers the demotic and democratic value of the essay, and will furthermore take into consideration how she used that form in particular to speak to women participating in the public sphere.
**The literary pilgrimage: a test case**

Examining Woolf’s treatment of one middlebrow practice over time reveals how her attitude to cultural hierarchies changes; it demonstrates how she becomes increasingly accepting of middlebrow attitudes later in her life and career. Literary pilgrimages, i.e. pilgrimages to places where great or beloved authors once lived, worked, etc., are an example of middlebrow cultural consumption because they privilege the material trappings of literary production, the celebrity value of writers, the social distinction of cultural production and consumption over the simple substance of a work of literature. Furthermore the knowledge gained from a literary pilgrimage is not scholarly, hard wrought, or exacting; it is associated with leisure and pleasure.

One of Woolf’s very first essays describes a visit to Haworth, the Brontë family’s house in Yorkshire. She sent the piece unsolicited to the Anglo-Catholic newspaper, *The Guardian*, claiming to have dashed it off in a couple of hours (L I.194). The first sentence of the essay expresses ambivalence about the trip: “I do not know whether pilgrimages to the shrines of famous men ought not to be condemned as sentimental journeys” (5). She acknowledges that at least some of her associates and perhaps the readers of the essay find something “sentimental” about the activity, something that is predictable and un-intellectual and exploited by the market. Humble has shown how exploring the life of the Brontë family—even more than reading the classic novels—was a favorite activity of the feminine middlebrow (176-82) which may further explain Woolf’s alignment of the Haworth visit with the sentimental. And though at first she does not cast judgment, she soon asserts it is better not to make such journeys: “It is better to stay at home.” But Woolf ultimately argues the visit is justified when the visitor learns something about the author, when the visit contributes to a better reading of the books associated with the
place. Woolf turns her nose down at the “curiosity” and “reverence” shown by literary pilgrims, though her resistance to this stance comes through despite her ostensible objections and against her better judgment. She is “touched” by Charlotte Bronte’s personal effects, such as her shoes, that are preserved in a glass case (itself a museum practice to which she objects on aesthetic grounds but understands is necessary). However, Woolf’s stated attitude toward middlebrow activities, if not the emotional undercurrent of the essay, is hostile, and she is determined to show that she was suitably serious in her own pilgrimage.

Woolf again explores the literary pilgrimage in her early days writing for the *Times Literary Supplement* in the piece “Flumina Amem Silvasque,” which means “Let me adore the rivers and the woods” (CE II.163-4). She opens this essay much like the Haworth essay, by questioning the value of literary pilgrimages: “It is a proof of the snobbishness which, no doubt, veins us through that the mere thought of a literary pilgrim makes us imagine a man in an ulster looking up earnestly at a house front decorated with a tablet, and bidding his anaemic and docile brain to conjure up the figure of Dr. Johnson” (CE II.161). Woolf performs to a nicety the highbrow’s critique of middlebrow behavior: the middlebrow here is an “anaemic” thinker with a “docile” brain who has rather dull taste. And though Woolf calls this judgment snobbishness, her reference to Dr. Johnson’s house here does not obviously call up the common reader that she will return to again and again in her later career. Rather, Dr. Johnson’s intellectual might seems all the more distanced from the middlebrow’s meager capabilities. The Latin title of the piece serves to underscore the author’s own intellectual credibility. However, Woolf goes on to say “But we must confess we have done the same things dozens of times rather stealthily perhaps, choosing a darkish day lest the ghosts of the dead should discover us, yet getting some true pleasure and profit nonetheless” (CE II.161). Woolf recorded in her diary that she and Leonard did in fact visit
Dr. Johnson’s house themselves in late 1917 and found it very pleasant, “a fine, well kept place…the best part of London to look at” (Diary I.56). Woolf acknowledges that she is bashful about engaging in middlebrow behavior, but admits in a public forum that she engages in it all the same. The action is justified because it brings “true pleasure and profit,” she says, not crass social or intellectual capital or frivolous, thoughtless pleasure. It is justified because true relationships between readers and writers are “immensely personal” according to Woolf, who asserts that knowing more about authors’ most intimate spaces is “not gossip but revelation” of what the reader should know, being so close to an author (CE II.161). The knowledge will help reader and writer grow even closer and ultimately produce better literature; the trip is therefore not silly, but rather spiritual. She ends the piece, which is a review of *A Literary Pilgrim in England* by Edward Thomas, by praising both book and author, presumably literary pilgrim no. 1. Woolf’s praise at the end of a review is not always a sign she enjoyed or would personally endorse a book, but it does convey public respect for the values she finds there. In this early review she does give middlebrow behavior a modicum of credit, but only anxiously and when framed in highbrow terms.

Finally, late in her career, Woolf fully celebrates literary pilgrimages. In one of six pieces on “The London Scene” written for *Good Housekeeping*, Woolf begins with unqualified praise for such outings: “London, happily, is becoming full of great men’s houses, bought for the nation and preserved entire with the chairs they sat on…” (CE V.294). She reiterates the value of literary pilgrimages that she articulated years before in the TLS but without hesitation and with confidence: “it is no frivolous curiosity that sends us to Dickens’s house and Johnson’s house

---

14 For example Woolf ends her review of *Lay Sermons* by Margot Asquith, titled “The Governess of Downing St.” by claiming Asquith’s books are delightful to read, whereas in her letters she complains about how boring and tedious the work is (D III.140).
and Carlyle’s house and Keats’s house. We know them from their houses” (CE V.294). Again the reader and writer’s relationship is affirmed, but this time without any pleading of cause; here it is a simple statement of fact. Woolf’s confidence might come from the change of her audience rather than a fully-fledged change in her attitude; readers of *Good Housekeeping* presumably have less snobbery to swallow than *TLS* readers. Yet the very fact that Woolf chose to write for a wider range of publications as she accrued more cultural capital shares something with middlebrow values. Whether she agreed to do it to earn more money or to reach a new and wider audience or to write lighter and more whimsical pieces than she could for other publications, she published in new venues for reasons that share much with the middlebrow.

In the next few sections, I read the entire body of Woolf’s criticism as it appears in the *Collected Essays* to analyze more fully how her essays speak to middlebrow concerns as defined by theorists of the middlebrow. Beyond that intervention, I argue that Woolf develops ideas in her collected essays that outline how “common readers,” Woolf’s ideal reader that shares much with the middlebrow, can arrive at well-formulated and well-rounded judgments that help them approach not only literature in its many forms but also modern society from many angles.

**Against academic interpretation**

Critics of the middlebrow consistently describe it as harboring anti-academic attitudes toward cultural consumption. Janice Radway notes judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club use the word “academic” like most academics use the word “middlebrow”—that is, disdainfully (9). Humble likewise notes “it is the critic or abstract thinker who is the main target of middlebrow disapprobation: the creative artist in contrast is treated with autonomy and respect” (22). Woolf
bluntly and consistently distances her criticism from academic work, both in her newspaper and magazine contributions and in her books.

At the time of Woolf’s death, in 1941, New Criticism and the “Eliotic” criticism that preceded and continued to affirm it was taking hold in newly legitimized English departments. Woolf’s criticism, markedly different from the new school of academic criticism, was not taken seriously for many years. Looking back on her early TLS reviews, Woolf sometimes dismissed them; she saw herself playing the charming hostess at a tea table, “handing a plate of buns to shy young men, not reviewing a book” (qtd. in Gualtieri 28). Her Victorian upbringing that trained her to be a sociable and polite “hostess” might not have been frequently exercised in more Bohemian Bloomsbury gatherings, but by her own score, it did surface in the public voice of her first widely-published reviews, to her chagrin. Yet Gualtieri has noted that in her memoir “A Sketch of the Past” (printed now in the collection Moments of Being), written late in her career, Woolf thought better of politesse, asserting the “surface manner [of the tea table] allows one to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud” (qtd. in Gualtieri 28). The approach is something like that of the feminine middlebrow as described by Humble; both Woolf’s “tea-table” manner and the feminine middlebrow maintain civility and accept many social conventions, but perform a wry critique of the culture around them through jokes and wit (Humble 5).

If Woolf’s attitude toward the lightness of touch that she used in her essays changed over time, her objection to academic approaches to reading were firm from the start of her career and

---

15 Though professors of English and eventually English departments had been established at Oxford and Cambridge in the nineteenth century, they did not award degrees until later and were more formally expanded in the early twentieth century, when a more scientific and professionalized mode of criticism, such as that by I.A. Richards, was established (cf. Baldick and Parrinder).
remained so throughout it. The only work for which she ever produced footnotes, for example, was *Three Guineas*, in which she proposed ideas for university study that radically re-imagined scholarship, correcting for what she saw as its shortcomings. Though Woolf does not endorse all aspects of Canon Ainger’s or E. M. Forster’s criticism, for example, she does praise both men for adopting approaches that are not scholarly or professorial, but rather more familiar and conversational (CE I.83, CE IV.457). Conversely, Woolf never describes a professorial approach in a positive light. Woolf is highly critical of Prof. Walter Raleigh, a famous and beloved professor of English literature at Oxford in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because the kind of love and devotion he inspired in his students was not a love of literature, but rather a love of the professor himself and his personality and/or a love of the academic institution in which he taught. The academy’s privileging of its own mores and attitudes over the ideas, values, and delight found in literature itself disturbs Woolf. Woolf criticizes American academics as well, objecting when Columbia University asserts that a scholarly book written by one of its professors is “a contribution to knowledge”; she cannot see “that the students of Columbia...

---

16 Woolf wrote hundreds of reviews in which she developed theories of reading, as Cuddy-Keane, Gualtieri, and Koutsantoni among others have demonstrated and explored. But she distinguished her activities from those of an academic critic. In the pamphlet “Reviewing” published by the Hogarth Press in 1939, Woolf distinguishes between critics such Matthew Arnold and S. T. Coleridge who occupied significant cultural roles in their times and formulated fully developed theories about literature and reviewers who were “irresponsible” and “mostly anonymous” and who wrote with “less time and space [than critics] and whose complex task it was partly to inform public, partly to criticize the book, partly to advertise its existence” (CE VI.196). In this way she distinguishes herself from the critics and acknowledges her own implication in the marketplace but also her own closeness to the public, for it was her duty to speak with them about reading. It seems Woolf’s role was ultimately somewhere between the roles of a critic and reviewer as she described them, as she wrote both journalistic reviews and more extended pieces that developed theories of reading and approaching literature generally.

17 Cuddy-Keane has extensively discussed Woolf’s critique of Prof. Walter Raleigh, explaining that he distanced himself from literary criticism over the course of his career, despite great success, because he thought criticism effeminate and in his later days turned into something of a warmonger, championing what he believed were manly virtues (Cuddy-Keane *Public* 93-95).
University will love English literature the better for knowing how very dull it can be” (CE II.25). Many more examples exemplify this attitude. At one point she goes so far as to say “There is no connection whatever between…learning and reading” (CE II.55). Similar to later middlebrow critics, Woolf believes the university approach denies pleasure, making it not only distasteful but also unproductive.

While much has been written on Woolf’s anti-authoritarian resistance to the lecture format of teaching, which tends to “pour” knowledge into its listeners rather than challenging them to think, Woolf’s criticism of the boredom lectures that induce has been not been discussed, but does actually have some political importance. She says that the inevitable problem with institutionalized lectures is that they are always boring (CE VI.32) and states that the “true reader” is a young reader (CE II.55) because these readers follow their pleasure and curiosity rather than institutionalized standards of what is good or bad. By endorsing pleasure in reading, Woolf argues for the legitimacy and value of un-academic reading and reading in which anyone can partake.

Woolf stands by nonacademic reading practices not only in selected journalism, but also in both collections of essays she published in her lifetime, in which she consistently and more fully defends the practices of the “common reader.” Setting aside critics’ divided opinions about to whom Woolf is referring when she uses that term, 18 a close reading of Woolf’s introduction

---

18 There is some debate among Woolf critics about what exactly Woolf means by “the common reader.” Catherine Sandbach-Dahlstrom, for example, argues that Woolf is not referring to her intended readership, but rather explaining her own attitude toward reading; “the common reader” is therefore a stand-in for Virginia Woolf the critic herself (282). Others, however, argue Woolf is describing her ideal readership when describing the common reader (e.g. Briggs 301). Woolf saved a number of letters from working class readers throughout her career, which shows she did have a readership that didn’t receive a privileged education. She even received notes from working class readers of Three Guineas, which is ostensibly addressed to “the daughters of educated men”; one such letter objects to the way Woolf limits her audience in the piece, arguing
and explications of Samuel Johnson’s idea in *The Common Reader I* and *II* shows Woolf’s firm belief that readers need not be formally educated. She opens her first installment of *The Common Reader* by explaining how the common reader “differs from critics and scholars” because “he is worse educated” and furthermore isn’t a born genius to compensate for deficiencies in education (CE IV.19). It seems both nature and nurture have neglected him. Woolf further explains that the common reader should not become a teacher; s/he “reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others” (CE IV.19). The final essay of the second series of *The Common Reader*, “How Should One Read a Book?,” holds the line Woolf earlier established. The common reader, Woolf argues, brings “another kind of criticism” to a text that is “slow and unprofessional” and done for the “love of reading” alone. Woolf asserts common readers’ reactions are of great help to writers, who need to hear the voices of common readers in their ears as they write (CE V.582). Beth Rigel Daugherty has noted Woolf herself saved letters from readers who discussed the great pleasure they took in her work (qtd. in Sullivan “Keystone” 177); presumably, then Woolf’s praise of the common reader’s usefulness to writers was not a fanciful but quite practical suggestion of Woolf’s.

Woolf’s attitude differs considerably from other leading critics of the time, who are more consistent examples of confirmed highbrows. For example, the primary thesis of Q. D. Leavis’s study *Fiction and the Reading Public* is that readers in 1930s Britain experienced too much

---

working class women well understand Woolf’s position (Snaith *Public* 123). Woolf was writing for a large audience when producing the TLS essays, re-drafts of which make up the bulk of *The Common Reader* series. TLS readers were far from coterie readers, a more heterogeneous and simply larger group of readers than that of publications like *The Criterion*, for example. So, on the one hand the readers of Woolf’s reviews and essays might well be called common readers, but I also agree with Sanbach-Dahlstrom, and believe that Woolf is articulating her own reading position in describing the common reader.
pleasure when they read. Woolf vigorously defends the pleasures of reading, as will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, and she went out of her way to criticize Leavis’s view. In an extended article, “All About Books,” Woolf criticizes Scrutinies, a collection of essays produced under the guidance of F. R. Leavis, Q. D. Leavis’ husband who shared similar ideas to Q. D., for being unpleasant to read because it was stuffed with hardened, scholarly opinions (CE V.221). Woolf opens her essay by claiming that in contrast to the professors, she will merely “scribble for an hour or two about books,” underscoring her haphazard attitude, and concludes her assessment of Scrutinies’ serious approach by mourning how all trace of sentiment has been banished from it. “Where is love?” she asks, “Where is the sound of the sea and the red of the rose; where is music, imagery, and a voice speaking of the heart?” (CE V.223). She may be acting overly sentimental simply to prove a point, but all the same suggests that sentiment is preferable to dull rationality.

19 Leavis uses the word “herd” to describe the unthinking readers she finds distasteful, whereas Woolf uses the word with writers (CE IV.362), never readers.
20 Woolf’s attitude also differed from that of her friends and fellow artists whose criticism was more amenable to university teaching, at least superficially. Michael Kaufmann, for instance, has argued that Woolf’s critical approach is the antithesis of T. S. Eliot’s, citing Eliot’s comparisons of the critic to scientist (142) and his explicit statements that the critic should disengage from emotions and instead engage the intellect (144). A view of Eliot attuned to his long career might acknowledge how Eliot championed the intellect as a defense against the intensity of his own emotions, which he admitted as much himself later in his career. Mark Goldman takes something of this stance, arguing Eliot’s mid-career criticism looks quite different from Woolf’s, but that his later criticism no longer banished emotion, but rather advocated for a balance of reason and emotion. Goldman explains that whereas Eliot initially favored “understanding,” which was an intellectually rigorous approach that banished feeling, over “appreciation,” which relied on feeling and pleasure, he later argued both were necessary. Regardless of the nuances in Eliot’s ideas, though, it should be acknowledged that he did emphasize intelligence over sentiment more than Woolf did.
“These need no reward, for they have loved reading”

Experiencing pleasure mixed with learning is another important aspect of middlebrow cultural consumption that Woolf defends and explores in her criticism. Like middlebrow critics, Woolf says that more than incisive insights, she values strong feelings when reading. She especially values pleasure that instills a strong connection between reader and writer and that spurs self-improvement. Radway notes that what Book-of-the-Month Club judges valued most in their colleagues was a capacity for response; authentic feeling was valued far more than rigorous analysis (280, 292, etc.). Sullivan has also noted the emphasis on pleasure in the middlebrow press (“Press” 53), as has Humble, who further notes that middlebrow readers believed literature should not take itself too seriously, as its first duty was to provide pleasure (8, 47, etc.). Working on Du Maurier and Priestly, Ina Haberman notes that the pleasure of middlebrow fiction is tempered with a degree of contemplation; reading a middlebrow work according to Haberman is “the beginning of a process of deliberation and development, partly conscious, partly unconscious” (35). Radway talks of “entertainment and uplift” as defining the pleasure of Book-of-the-Month selections, uplift being a kind of “self improvement” (39). Middlebrow readers want to be pleased, but they also want to be nourished and are looking for something other than pure sensation and escapism.

Though critics of Woolf’s journalism have not explored Woolf’s affiliations with the middlebrow, many have acknowledged her appreciation of pleasure when reading. Mark Goldman, in the first monograph to address Woolf’s criticism, explains that Woolf’s approach

---

21 Radway notes that the Book-of-the-Month Club never picked a modernist work as its main selection for its readers, though it did list modernist literature as alternate picks for those with “special taste” (279), which indicates the Club’s taste was somewhat different from Woolf’s own. However, the Club’s and Woolf’s principles of judging quality literature overlap in significant ways.
employs “a creative balance between reason and emotion, sense and sensibility, the individual
critic and the impersonal method” (4). In more recent scholarship, Kate Flint has argued Woolf
employs a duality of emotional and intellectual responses throughout her criticism, switching
between the two. Anne Fernald has gone farther, arguing Woolf emphasized pleasure over
reason in Woolf’s extended essay “Phases of Fiction” that outlines her theory of the novel. In a
similar vein, Koutsantoni who analyzes Woolf’s Common Reader I and II aligns Woolf’s
emphasis on pleasure in the reading process with Montaigne, Barthes, and Calinescu and insists
Woolf does not want readers to seek edification or self-improvement in reading (56). Cuddy-
Keane, on the other hand, has complicated Flint’s position and others’ like Koutsantoni’s and
Fernald’s by insisting that discomfort is part and parcel of Woolf’s theorization of the pleasure of
reading and that Woolf tends to emphasize the discomfort more than pleasure (Public 171). I
concur with most other critics that argue Woolf’s essays openly and warmly affirm the value of
reading pleasure, but argue that Woolf welcomes pleasure because it generates critical reflection,
rather than precluding it. I furthermore argue that this attitude shares much with that of the
middlebrow critic and that Woolf’s theories of pleasure make valuable interventions in discourse
about middlebrow reading practices. Woolf values untrained and passionate responses to
literature while also emphasizing how such responses can lead to unconventional thought-
provoking judgments.

Woolf’s own style of writing reviews shares something with the middlebrow in that she
sought to make her criticism pleasurable to read. She said that when she was first learning to
review, she learned much from TLS editor Bruce Richmond who pushed her to “compress and
enliven” her reviews (CE I.xiv). Richmond’s advice suggests that TLS reviews were to be
pointed and not too florid, yet also lively so as to capture readers’ attention and not so long as to
wear it out. Her tone was judged approachable and pleasurable enough to be included in a 1924 issue of *The Highway*, an adult education magazine, that collected prominent writers’ opinions on criteria of a good novel. The other writers who contributed would without debate be considered middlebrow today: Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, Compton Mackenzie, and Hugh Walpole. Cuddy-Keane has argued that the tone of these writers’ responses is more dictatorial, which is evidence of their middlebrow status, whereas Woolf’s more open-ended approach is evidence of her highbrow outlook. Yet it is worth questioning Cuddy-Keane’s assessment of Woolf’s exceptional status. Would the editors of *The Highway* have invited Woolf to contribute if they didn’t believe that her thoughts would be as readable as the other writers’, if they believed her response would be difficult for readers to process? Would they have asked her to contribute if they thought her so very different from the other writers, so much a black sheep? The more interesting exception to note, I think, is that Woolf is the only woman writer to share her thoughts alongside the male writers. As a woman, it seems she was more mobile than both

---

22 While the *TLS* was thought to be a bastion of intellectual criticism in the U.S. at least in the modernist period (Kaufmann 137), it is possible to read it as a middlebrow production. While *The Times* itself was proud of its “exalted tradition of learning and authority, impartiality and independence” (May 5) and apparently paid little attention to the bottom line in the mid-nineteenth century, by the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century the paper needed to find ways to subsidize its operations, as subscriptions alone were not bringing in sufficient revenue. Though *The Times* claimed that it started the *TLS* because it had too many book reviews to run in the main part of the paper and the reviews were taking up too much space, Derwent May has shown the supplement was created to help draw readers to the paper and boost income (9). Editors dreamed up a periodical called *Literature* whose aim was “‘to protect readers from being overwhelmed by the continually increasing flood of books and to that end discriminate more carefully than is usual between books which deserve reviewing...and those which do not’” (8). The mission sounds remarkably similar to the Book-of-the-Month Club’s. *The Times* itself started its own book club in later years, though it was not as commercially successful as its reprints of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, another project that was developed to boost revenue (5). All this is to point out how the *TLS* was born out a need to boost readership and sales, without sacrificing too much intellectual credibility; its origins have more than a whiff of the middlebrow about them.
high modernist and middlebrow male writers, winning readers in a wider range of publications perhaps thanks to her “tea-table manner” that made critique pleasurable.

Woolf’s pleasurable writing repeatedly praised the value of pleasure in reading. Contra Cuddy-Keane who asserts Woolf champions difficult reading and also Humble, who has described Woolf as “particularly caustic about the excesses of trivial writing” (23), I argue Woolf praises all kinds of reading pleasures including those of light reading. In a 1924 TLS review of a study of Gothic romance novels, Woolf forthrightly states, “It will be an ill day when all the reading is done in libraries and none of it in the tubes” (CE III.305). She does not condemn the kind of literature that can be processed in a state of half-distraction, when the reader is harassed by and jostled among crowds. She does want readers to think, as I will discuss in more detail soon, but she also believes that feeling strongly about a book is an adequate reason for reading it. Woolf concludes the final essay of The Common Reader II by fancifully imagining that when common readers show up at the pearly gates on the Day of Judgment, God will say “‘Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading” (CE V.582). She emphasizes not intellectual understanding, but love of reading as an ultimate reward.

Throughout her collected essays, Woolf espouses enjoyment paired with mental enrichment, an approach that also shares much with the middlebrow. She even links pleasure with thinking well. Somewhat counter-intuitively, she suggests that readers’ strong feelings, even passion, are a catalyst to good judgment. In an early essay “Hours in a Library” (1916), she divulges her enjoyment of “bad books,” books that are quickly produced in quantity (CE II.58). Woolf doesn’t condemn reading these books; she argues that a taste for bad books will lead to good books eventually, but she does draw a bald distinction between good and bad and implies
one should eventually cease reading the “bad” literature. Humble parallels Woolf’s assessment of “bad books” with Orwell’s derogatory characterization of popular literature. Yet when Orwell discusses bad books, he separates “enjoyment” from “cerebration” (qtd. in Humble 24), which is an attitude notably different from Woolf’s. In “Hours in a Library,” Woolf not only dismisses the scholar, as she does elsewhere, but explains in more detail why the scholar’s approach is not useful: because he is searching for “a grain of truth upon which he has set his heart. If the passion for reading conquers him, his gains dwindle and vanish between his fingers” (CE II.55). According to Woolf, the scholar is motivated to find meaning in a work and pursue a kind of reading that will provide him professional rewards, but that very motivation interferes with pleasure, which Woolf later says inspires less determinate, more surprising conclusions. Woolf sets scholarly approaches against passionate reading and more interestingly, against disinterested and therefore sound judgment. She continues: “The specialist kills what suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading” (CE II.55). The scholar who has trained to see something specific in a work of literature will not be as “disinterested” as the amateur passionate reader who is more open to any idea a reading might offer. Passion draws a reader into a work and opens him or her up to it, priming him or her to make open-minded judgments about it. While Woolf’s assessment of academic reading may not be fair, the value she places on enthusiasm in reading as opposed to trained intellect is evidence of her democratic approach and the confluence of her values as a critic with middlebrow values.

Woolf’s link between pleasure and clear, “disinterested” thinking appears again in a 1919 review of *Avowals*, a memoir by George Moore. Woolf explains, “Enthusiasm… is the life-blood

---

23 Woolf’s essay furthermore takes its title from one of Leslie Stephen’s books of criticism and so in other ways is trading on a particular kind of highbrow capital.
of criticism,” and praises the “conviction and sincerity” that come with enthusiasm (CE III.116).

She finally asserts:

> Where there is warmth of feeling, everything else, it seems, easily follows—the nicest discriminations, the most daring conjectures, illuminations and felicities clustering one atop another like blue and purple soap bubbles at the end of a pipe and like bubbles breaking and vanishing. (CE III.116)

She energetically asserts that feeling is linked to precise discriminations—not ones fit for the ages, as they are built in a matter of moments and then burst like bubbles, but precise ones all the same. Woolf’s turn to whimsical, metaphorical language indicates how engaged she is in articulating this thought and how enthusiastic she herself is about sharing it. A letter to Roger Fry demonstrates how she practices what she preaches; the letter explains how she openly expressed in the review much “strong affection” for Moore’s work that was subsequently cut by the TLS editors (qtd. in CE III.119). In “Byron and Mr Briggs,” a 1920-21 extended essay that she drafted to introduce the essay collection that became The Common Reader but didn’t end up using in the final collection, Woolf further elaborates how exactly readers’ engagement with emotions leads to better judgments. In the piece, Woolf praises the “zigzag” reading done in youth, which skips from one type of reading to another, guided by “one principle” which is “emotion…so strong it has the power first to absorb us and then to send us, by a natural reaction, in search of a different sensation - a sensation that appears to complete the one originally felt” (CE III.488). She praises strong sensation because “By these means,” she explains, “we become masters of a vast body of emotions” (CE III.488). Woolf argues that developing a bank of emotions from which to draw while reading is more critical to a worthwhile reading experience
than learning a bank of critical terminology. By more fully exploring emotions, Woolf believes readers more fully understand literature’s riches.

Woolf is critical of pure sensation seeking when reading, a stance which is also typical of the middlebrow; as Humble says, the feminine middlebrow consumer “holds her skirts fastidiously away” from “contamination” of too-lowbrow mass-market culture. For example, immediately after praising sensation-seeking in “Byron and Mr Briggs,” Woolf turns and condemns it: she proposes that if emotional response were the only response that one needed to read well, then “to read the classics would be an emotional orgy, requiring no more effort than a shop girl makes who dreams as she listens to the band in Hyde Park of making love by moonlight at Margate: it would give no deeper satisfaction than that” (CE III.488). Her reduction of the shop girl to sentimental daydreamer, pathetically easy prey to industrially produced literature, is derogatory and relies on unflattering stereotypes. It furthermore suggests that though Woolf may love to talk with lowbrows on the omnibus—an assertion she makes in the “Middlebrow” essay that Woolf scholars frequently quote—she does not respect lowbrow cultural productions. In an essay titled “Bad Writers,” Woolf makes a similar point, using similar terms: “Bad books are written in a state of boiling passion…The bad writer seems to possess a predominance of the day-dreaming power, he lives all day long in that region of artificial light where every factory girl becomes a duchess” (CE II.328). Here a factory girl replaces a shop girl, but the emotional reaction Woolf condemns is the same. She does not approve of emotion that distracts its reader from reality, that fills a reader with trite, sentimental ideas and sets him or her

---

24 One more good example of this unfolds in a fairly long, reflective piece, “On Re-reading novels,” published in 1922, in which Woolf asserts, a “book itself is not a form you see but an emotion you feel” (CE III.340), emphasizing not the theoretical or formal elements of literature but the reaction it inspires. She again insists that a reader reaches a “conception” of the piece or a judgment by working “from the emotions outwards” (CE III.340).
“day-dreaming.” “Grown-up people” Woolf asserts, “need no feat of strength to rivet their attention; no catastrophe to surprise them” (CE IV.265). Woolf is therefore careful to distinguish instructive passion from sensational passion and wholesome enjoyment of plot from delight in catastrophe. And yet she admits too that it is unpleasant when reading “great writers” because from them “we sometimes get no emotion at all” (CE III.488). In this way, Woolf’s critique of emotion looks surprisingly middlebrow, ready to encourage pleasure, but also insistent that pleasure not be empty but rather lead to an instructive and ultimately critical reading experience.25

Woolf further expresses her appreciation of pleasure reading when she demonstrates how it is a long-standing historical phenomenon. She shows how texts that most readers consider to be classics could, when they were first published, engender the same kind of passionate reading that modern-day bestsellers generate. In “The Pastons and Chaucer,” an essay in the first *Common Reader* that was more polished and fully considered than her newspaper contributions, she describes how a certain fourteenth-century nobleman, John Paston, consumed Chaucer’s work much like working-class readers read bestsellers in the early twentieth century, to escape from a harsh or dull reality. Woolf writes that “Sir John [Paston] would sit reading Chaucer, wasting his time, dreaming—what strange intoxication was it that he drew from books? Life was rough, cheerless, disappointed” (CE IV.26). Files in the Mass Observation archive from the 1930s document how working-class readers had a similar attitude to reading. For example, one

---

25 Woolf was surprised at the warm reception of her own difficult novel, *The Waves*. She noted in her diary that the “unintelligible book is being better ‘received’ than any of them…How unexpected, how odd that people can read that difficult grinding stuff!” (D IV.47). Here Woolf takes a middlebrow stance, acknowledging that reading experimental work is not pleasant. Furthermore, she relishes the wider exposure she has earned—a notice in *The Times* proper, not the *TLS*, for the first time, though she is also “comforted” by the lack of sales of the novel, which might make her too popular—again a middlebrow reaction, as discussed in the chapter on Macaulay.
interviewed subject said, “At present I read [fiction] purely as a drug… I can’t bear my job and I’m unhappy in my personal life, and I absolutely stupefy myself with reading” (qtd. in McAleer 95). By framing her discussion of Chaucer, canonized, of course, by the 1920s, with the desultory and sensation-seeking reading practice of Paston, Woolf indicates that she is aware of how reading that is considered both “great” and “challenging” in one moment might once have been consumed as simple entertainment at another. In doing so, she makes relative the values of different kinds present-day of literature. While Woolf sometimes disdains reading practices of mass-market literature in her journalism, she also indirectly defends them in her more permanent collected essays. Most importantly, throughout her criticism published in newspapers, magazines, and books, Woolf consistently argued that a non-academic, pleasure-filled approach to reading could produce valuable thoughts, opinions, and judgments.

**Common readers as common critics**

The most important claim Woolf makes about reading for pleasure is that it empowers readers to make their own judgments. In “Byron and Mr Briggs,” Woolf explains, “The common reader is formidable and respectable and even has power over the great critics and masterpieces in the long run because he likes reading and will not let even [sic] Coleridge do his reading for him” (CE III.478). Woolf argues that because a “common” reader grows emotionally involved in and attached to a book, he or she is less likely to accept standards imposed on it by an outside critic; readers’ personal attachment and possessiveness of a book is productive because it encourages them to think for themselves. This assertion is closely linked to her explication of the common reader in *The Common Reader, First Series* as one who “is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole—a
portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of writing” (CE IV.19). In short, the common reader is to become a critic who imparts his or her own judgments. His or her judgments are not indelible judgments but rather “hasty, inaccurate, and superficial,” like the bursting bubbles cited earlier, yet they still “serve [a] purpose and round [a] structure” (CE IV.19). One outcome of pleasure, Woolf explains, is the ability to formulate an independent perspective.

Throughout her essays, almost like a refrain in her earlier reviews, Woolf asserts that a given author has a distinct perspective and then goes on to articulate what that perspective is. It is not just the canonized writers, such as Charlotte Brontë (CE II.28), Christina Rossetti (CE V.212), Defoe (CE IV.332, V.377), and Forster (CE IV.461), who have a distinct perspective, although Woolf insists that a writer must have one to be worth his or her salt. She also singles out Elinor Mordaunt (CE II.42), Harold Nicholson (CE IV.475), and Horace Walpole (CE III.71) as writers with distinct and worthy perspectives that readers should take into account. The perspectives of these various authors are what enable them to participate in public conversation.

Woolf uses the language of perspective throughout the entire body her criticism—words like “perspective” itself, “angle of vision,” “viewpoint,” “point of view,” etc.—but it is perhaps most prominent in the culminating essay of The Common Reader, Second Series, “How Should One Read a Book?,” which, like the opening essay of the first Common Reader, provides something of a distillation of the reading practices Woolf promotes (the number of times it has already been quoted in this chapter should give an idea of its importance in the body of Woolf’s essays). There Woolf explains that before readers adopt their own perspective and make a judgment about what they are reading, they should first try on the perspective of the author they are reading. This widens the reader’s initial perspective, takes the reader out of his or her point of view, and adds another viewpoint with which to compare his or her initial impression. In “How
Should One Read a Book?” Woolf walks the reader through three different writers (Defoe, Austen, and Hardy) to give examples of three different authors’ perspectives, modeling what she believes readers should do in order to read with rewarding results. As she explores each author’s point of view, she explains it has its own merit and is appropriate to its purpose. Woolf suggests this process provides two kinds of pleasures. The first allows the reader to “go visiting” and “meet” famous people, that is, great writers, by imagining how famous writers thought. Woolf makes the process of reading the classics sound a bit like making literary pilgrimages or in even less highbrow terms, like engaging in gossip or celebrity gawking. If an author is not great, but the work read is pleasurable all the same, then the profit is “pure pleasure”; literature may be “rubbish” yet can contain “beautiful humour and pathos” all the same (CE V.577). In acknowledging different kinds of pleasure, Woolf ultimately suggests that experiencing as many different kinds of pleasure as possible helps the reader and she does not condemn any kind of pleasure in particular. Yet she says that pleasure must be trained in order to inspire sound judgments about literature (CE V.573), if not by authorities, then by an accumulation of perspectives. Woolf suggests that readers should seek out these viewpoints not to adopt them themselves, but rather to add them to a collection of diverse viewpoints and broaden their own views, which may well be distinct from those s/he admires or at least understands. Woolf thinks of training not as an absorbing of rules or methods but rather an imaginative exploration of various points of view.

**Polyvocal and “creative” criticism**

In an early review of the Bayreuth music festival, Woolf notes that musical criticism is in the “happiest state” because it lacks tradition and standards; all critics are forced to work as
amateurs, or to put it in the language Woolf will later use, as “common” listeners (CE I.288). In an essay written a few years later, “Creative Criticism,” Woolf asserts, “there can be no doubt that to be free to make one’s own laws and to be alert to do it afresh for every newcomer is an essential part of any criticism worth having” (CE II.124). Later in her career she asserts in a similar vein that “the only criticism worth having at present is that which is spoken, not written—spoken over wine glasses and coffee cups late at night, flashed out in the spur of the moment by people passing who have no time to finish their sentences”; it “always” should be made “in violent disagreement” (CE IV.260). If criticism is spoken, it does not have the opportunity to settle into standards and rules; it is renewed constantly and spontaneously, in a rush or “flash” or “spur,” and is not highly rational and certainly not academic. It is instead produced in a social setting. In “How Should One Read a Book?”, Woolf explains that the rules a reader forms when reading a book, when adopting one perspective or another, are made only to be broken by reading new books (CE V.581). “The most important quality that a reader can possess,” Woolf asserts in that essay, is “independence” (CE V.573). Woolf firmly believes that a reader should not be beholden to any one school or outlook. She claims in the lecture/essay that she won’t continue until the readers agree to remain independent, and she furthermore urges readers to note the interrogative mode of the title. She makes clear that she is not proposing one standard way to read but rather a way to think about adopting different methods of reading and judging.

Woolf is a critic and therefore an authority, but she defines her critical role as not a settler of accounts but promoter of conversation, not as a gavel-striker who makes the final call, but a facilitator of others’ judgments. Both Cuddy-Keane and Koutsantoni have noted how Woolf

---

26 This attitude is reaffirmed very late in her career in Three Guineas: “Are not the best critics private people and is not the only criticism worth having spoken criticism?” (297).
admired Roger Fry’s criticism and the relationship he established between himself and his listeners and readers. Working from Woolf’s responses to Fry’s lectures in her diary and letters, Cuddy-Keane has shown that Woolf admired how Fry would make on-the-spot judgments of art works while teaching and in doing so demonstrate the process of judgment right before students’ eyes; Cuddy-Keane argues that Woolf strives to do the same in her own role as critic, to model a process of thinking and to encourage readers to think for themselves (Public 107). Koutsantoni has argued that in Woolf’s biography of Fry, Woolf admires Fry’s understanding of the critic as a mediator between the artist and the public that evaluates work so as to elicit a response from an audience (182); in this way the critic’s judgment does not decide an outcome and put an end to a conversation but rather promotes conversation. Both see that Woolf admires how Fry models the process of coming to a judgment in order to encourage members of an audience to form their own judgments. Specifically that process calls for taking into account a number of perspectives. In her monograph on Samuel Johnson and Woolf’s criticism, Beth Carole Rosenberg explains that, “critics are people who have read so much that there is dialogue between works occurring in their thought processes while they read” (67). Critics have adopted or at least tried on a number of perspectives over time, and they set those perspectives in motion as they take on yet another one, before they eventually come to a judgment. By emphasizing that readers should adopt different perspectives when reading, Woolf urges readers to become critics in the sense that Rosenberg articulates.

Koutsantoni has argued that Woolf in her essays wants to abolish middlemen in the literary public sphere, including critics, those whose work makes art palatable and available to the larger public, because such middlemen are quintessential middlebrows (181). Yet I would argue that Woolf is a middleman or rather middlewoman herself, if one of a particular sort, one
that shares something with the middlebrow, being both non-academic and wary of the mass market. Rosenberg explains that when Woolf repeatedly asserts that her own criticism is a modest opinion or a shifting attitude, Woolf does not mean to “emphasize the humbleness of the [critical] endeavor” but rather to underscore the value of an unfixed position and the process of making judgments, which to her is more important than the endpoint of a judgment (62). As Koutsantoni says herself, Woolf, “does not repudiate her own authority….nevertheless she is careful not to abuse such authority but instead expose it to her audience so as to enable [readers] to pass their own judgment” (39). Koutsantoni cites Snaith who similarly argues that Woolf “relinquishes neither authority nor subjectivity” in her criticism (qtd. in Koutsantoni 135); Woolf is an authority who admits her authority is limited, shifting, contingent, and furthermore is based on the adoption of many other points of view, not a fortress-like defense.

Woolf’s critical outlook has been interpreted in tandem with a number of critical theories, perhaps the most frequent of which is Bakhtin’s dialogism (cf. Rosenberg, Gualtieri, Cuddy-Keane, Koutsantoni). The concept helps Woolf critics articulate how subjectivity and selfhood “interconnect with the social matrix” (Koutsantoni 134), in other words, to understand how Woolf’s opinions are personal, yet are not formed in isolation, but are rather social and are intended to participate in interactive conversation. Cuddy-Keane aligns Woolf’s stance in the essays not only with dialogism but also Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia, and describes Woolf’s approach in a way that shares something with Bakhtin’s polyphony as well. She describes Woolf’s essayistic voice as “polyvocal” (Public 97), which sounds something like Bakhtin’s polyphony, in which a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses… remain independent” yet “constantly hear each other, call out to one another, and are mutually reflected in one another” (Problems 4, 62). Cuddy-Keane explains that Woolf in her essays
“adopts a focalization only to disrupt it” which persistently “alters the position of the reader in relation to the text” (139). Woolf will take on one point of view and then shift to another, requiring readers to do the same. Her strategy is different from academic discourse “which pits one view against another and assumes that the speaker’s view should prevail”; Woolf’s view is also more “self-reflexive,” more self-critical than English studies were in Woolf’s day (Cuddy-Keane *Public* 79).  

Her approach has readers compare views by guiding them through different standpoints rather than by openly praising or condemning different standpoints.

**Arendt, Kant, and Woolf’s extended essays**

While Woolf’s critics have examined key ideas that relate to judgment, such as distance and detachment, judgment itself has not been directly considered in tandem with any

---

27 Cuddy-Keane argues the time is ripe for Woolf’s method of criticism to be taken seriously in today’s academy, as it shares many of the values critics today esteem (195). I would question this claim by reminding critics of Woolf’s insistence that “the common reader” she values is one without training, whose judgments are haphazard, and whose tone is playful, which is hardly a model for the scholar today who must undergo years of apprenticeship and strive for solidity and perfection in their work. While I believe scholars of Woolf’s work would do well to spend more time with her essays, I cannot imagine them writing in a Woolfian manner or even adopting her method within contemporary academic writing.

28 In a chapter that explores the centrality of “moments of being” to Woolf’s oeuvre, Karen Schiff explains how Woolf, throughout her writing, argues that “One can only feel intensely if one is separate enough from a moment to experience it fully” (183). In a “moment of being,” or an especially rich moment impregnated with wonder, reflection, and revelation, distance from reality creates opportunity to activate faculties of apprehension and ultimately increased illumination. In a similar vein, Fernald has argued that “the pause” in the reading process, the moment after reading has ceased, “the moment just before judgment,” is “the crucial moment in Woolf’s account of reading[;]…the moment before a decision is reached is more important than the decision itself” (“Pleasure” 208). Fernald implies that a reader’s distance from both the immersion of reading and the finality of a judgment allows the richest thinking to take place. As Sullivan has pointed out, detachment and distance is not necessarily a trait of highbrow writing alone; Lady Rhondda’s “keystone public” or the middlebrow women readers that she targeted in her magazine *Time and Tide* enjoyed “intelligent detached commentary” in their journalism (“Keystone” 170) and detachment from everyday situations is a key feature of the feminine middlebrow described by Humble (5).
interpretive theory of judgment. Though theories of judgment are few, the one at the heart of this dissertation, Hannah Arendt’s *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, deeply resonates with much of the work on Woolf discussed above. As with the fiction-criticism analyzed in the previous chapters, the political implications of Woolf’s work are highlighted in new ways when engaging Arendt’s theory, particularly the political potential of judgment inspired by middlebrow reading practices.

Two scholars have recently invoked Kant and even Arendt’s *Lectures* in reading Woolf’s work to discuss its engagement with a sense of community. Vincent Pecora has recently written on Bloomsbury’s commitment to Kantian philosophy, which Pecora links to G. E. Moore’s influence on Bloomsbury men who graduated from Cambridge. Pecora argues Bloomsbury members used Kantian aesthetic philosophy to fashion a sense of community amongst themselves and to give them a sense of purpose in society much as Woolf’s ancestors of the evangelical Clapham Quaker sect used religion to fashion their own sense of belonging and purpose in the world. Pecora’s work provides historical evidence of Woolf’s exposure to Kantian ideals through conversations with her brothers and friends who attended Cambridge. Pecora does not, however, consider Arendt’s work on Kant’s aesthetic theory, as Arendt’s work is outside the purview of his project on religion and secularization. The only Woolf scholar who has, Christine Froula, has done so in her latest monograph on Woolf and Bloomsbury, in which she argues that Woolf and Bloomsbury members were deeply influenced by Enlightenment thought and sought to further that unfinished project. However, Froula cites Arendt’s work only briefly, engaging it to better understand the actor/spectator relationship in *Between the Acts*. Arendt’s theory helps Froula understand the diverse reactions of the audience members to the unusual pageant play and how exactly they form a community. No Woolf scholar has drawn attention to Arendt’s theory of
judgment in regards to Woolf’s essays and her “novel-essay” that is more directly engaged in the broader public sphere, which is the work of the final section of this chapter.

Judgment in the extended essays: A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas

Before addressing Woolf’s novel-essay, The Pargiters, I will examine Woolf’s book-length essays, A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas to demonstrate how Woolf’s preoccupation with judgment was not limited to a single unpublished work, but spanned a significant portion of her career and as such informs some of her most studied work. From the opening sally of A Room, Woolf begins to consider decision-making, opinions, and judgments. She says that she will fail in the first duty of a lecturer, which is to “come to a conclusion” and “hand you a nugget of truth” (4). Instead what she will offer is a mere “opinion” and also stories from many perspectives (“call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please” (5)). Her attitude towards truth here is more or less the same as Arendt’s when discussing judgment; Arendt too eschews the truth because she believes that it is domineering, that it commands obedience, that it is dangerous in the hands of authoritarian institutions and totalitarian authority. Arendt understands that truth claims, being a settling of scores, do not invite argument, and she therefore favors opinions because they ask for a listener’s engagement—they must “woo” listeners—and invite debate. Woolf is skeptical of truth claims because they have more often than not been handed down by patriarchal and biased institutions and express too narrow an understanding of reality. Both believe a variety of perspectives will give a fuller and ultimately more fruitful picture of history.

To an even greater degree than A Room, Three Guineas values opinion (as opposed to truth), pluralist judgment, and the language of perspective. Woolf opens Three Guineas with a
question that asks to be answered by an opinion, “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?” (153), after which point she compares different men’s opinions of war, one that is highly favorable and another that is highly critical. She emphasizes how disparate opinions can be and how truth seems to be hopelessly relative. “Is there no absolute point of view?” she asks (163). But rather than wallowing in relativism, she proceeds to make the point that more than one opinion is needed to come to any sound idea of a situation, particularly one as fraught as war. She explains that when it comes to considering the rightness or wrongness of war, women have a “bird’s eye view” because they are directly involved neither in battle nor in the politics and policy-making that lead to battle (181). Woolf argues that women’s opinions on war are more “impartial and disinterested” than men’s, or they should be anyway, because women are more distanced from war and have no reason to be loyal to institutions that promote war and that have also hindered women’s development in the past (189). From a woman’s point of view, war and the institutions that make war possible look very odd indeed. Woolf concludes Three Guineas by arguing that “Though we [women] look upon that picture [of wartime horrors] at different angles, our [women’s] conclusion is the same as yours [men’s]—it is evil...Since we are different, our help must be different…We can best help you prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods” (366). Woolf’s proposal resonates with Arendt’s discussion of the role of the spectator in Kant’s aesthetic theory: Kant values the spectator precisely because he is removed from events and has less self interest in their outcome and therefore can more easily take into account more perspectives and ultimately make a better judgment. Woolf, however, differs from Kant in that she proposes, at least at some points in the essay, that women might be more active in changing society than Kant’s spectator is in changing the course of history.
The steps that Woolf urges women to take to prevent war seem to shift over the course of the essay, being at first more active and in the end nearly inert. Early in *Three Guineas* Woolf proposes a new kind of educational institution for women, one that would engage students in opinion-making, not truth-finding. It would “teach the arts of human intercourse; the art of understanding lives and minds, and the little arts of talk” (200); it would teach arts that lead to exchange of opinions and debate and conversation. Woolf actually figures “independent opinion” as a “new weapon” and in fact “the only weapon” for women (209). Woolf figures opinion as a political weapon just as Arendt explores the potential of pluralist judgment in politics in hopes that these things may point citizens toward improved reasoning and ultimately resistance of totalitarian governments. \(^{29}\) Woolf understands that women’s distanced viewpoint from events as well as their opinions, which do not claim to be indelible truth, represent “only the surface” of the issue (181), but for Woolf engaging with the surface is sufficient. Arendt herself turns to Kant’s aesthetic theory because it is concerned with public appearances and surfaces; she is interested not in deep truth but rather how people behave in social situations and how they might best judge social interactions.

Woolf goes on to suggest new ways women can share their alternative perspectives and participate in the public sphere. She comes down hard on traditional means of popularizing ideas and the machinations of the commercial media; she argues that women who “sell their brains” are worse than those who sell their body because those who produce compromised opinions and disseminate them in the press “let vicious anemic and diseased progeny into world to infect and

\(^{29}\) Arendt’s work on judgment has been criticized for lacking real political teeth and not resonating in the working world of politics (for further discussion, see the introduction of this dissertation). However, my concern here is not to propose practical policy, but rather to illuminate the political consequences of readers’ cognitive processes when consuming particular works and for this purpose Arendt’s theory is useful.
corrupt and sow the seeds of disease in others” (290), affecting the minds of a great many rather than just the bodies of a few. Yet Woolf is not against communicating with the general public. Rather than demonizing the public, she suggests women should find “new ways of approaching” it, like “singling it into separate people,” that is, considering “the public” as individuals, “instead of massing it into one monster, gross in body feeble in mind” (297). She even suggests utilizing alternative ways to distribute ideas, using a private printing press to make hand-printed pamphlets, making cheap copies with “duplicators,” nailing up such notices on public poles (296). She argues that women would do well to distribute their ideas themselves, cheaply, in makeshift fashion rather than rely on institutionalized means.

Yet after pages of passionate argument, Woolf perplexingly ends *Three Guineas* by suggesting the best thing women can do to prevent war is ultimately to “remain completely indifferent” to men’s preparations for it (309). Women should not obviously object to war; they should make no fuss; they should completely ignore war-mongering. Woolf rails against “the coarse glare of advertisement and publicity” (322) towards the end of *Three Guineas*, a stance that on the one hand might seem to tally with her earlier condemnation of the commercial media, but on the other hand counters her earlier suggestion to distribute ideas through non-commercial means. Is not nailing a pamphlet to a public post providing publicity of a sort? It seems the point of having a different point of view would be to share it in some way, not to “remain indifferent” and passive, abstaining from action and reaction altogether. One of the four principles that Woolf endorses in *Three Guineas*, derision (the other three being poverty, chastity of the mind, and freedom from unreal loyalties) is meant to prevent women from losing their outsider perspective. Woolf argues that by remaining far from the limelight, by receiving no praise but rather scorn, and by choosing not to participate in public life, women can maintain their alternative
perspective. At the same time, however, *Three Guineas* itself is an impassioned polemic that seeks to change readers’ minds or at least to illuminate aspects of their lives in a new way. Woolf herself does not sit out from the game of politics, but rather writes and distributes a radical work as best she can. Her strident arguments are formulated to catch readers’ attention. Woolf’s proposal of an Outsiders’ Society that has no organization, no meetings, and no principles, that operates in “darkness” and “complete secrecy”\(^{30}\) is the most extreme example of Woolf’s admonition to inaction and derision, and has received little attention from political scientists like Naomi Black, arguably because it runs counter to productive processes for political change.

Woolf’s dilemma bears some similarity to that of the actor and spectator in Kantian philosophy that was discussed above: a spectator has a more impartial view of history because s/he is not involved in events, but at the same time the spectator has no effect on the events, whereas the actor has a limited viewpoint but can begin to effect change the world. Woolf’s essay plays out this dilemma, advocating the benefits of the outsider’s perspective, and then ultimately urging inaction to maintain that perspective. *As Three Guineas* is a persuasive piece of highly politicized writing that at one point offers ideas to change society, this poses an inconsistency between proposed ideas and practice. However, as this dissertation chapter later argues, in the mixed essay and novel form of *The Pargiters*, such inconsistencies inspire productive cognitive play.

---

\(^{30}\) This stipulation runs directly counter to Kantian ideas about ideal government which suggest that publicity is the best regulator of good behavior; if all actions are public, they are subject to others’ scrutiny and prevent self-interest from reigning, as the public, groups who will not benefit, will raise objections to actions that benefit only a few (Arendt *Lectures* 18).
Woolf’s politics

In the late 1930s, upon embarking on what would be her last novel, *Between the Acts*, Woolf wrote in her diary: “I am not a politician: obviously. Can only rethink politics very slowly into my own tongue” (D V.117). The words would be fuel for the early posthumous reception of Woolf’s work that understood Woolf’s contribution to literature as that of an exemplary modernist writer, an aesthetic experimenter, an artist who played with form but that was detached from politics and the messy everyday world.³¹ Her earliest biographer, Quentin Bell, infamously painted such a picture, giving the impression that Woolf was a delicate and sensitive woman not engaged in or deeply familiar with the nitty-gritty of political life. The idea held wide traction until the feminist angle of Woolf’s work was recovered in the 70s and 80s.³² In the hands of feminist literary critics, Woolf became the grandmother of feminist theory and a stridently political figure. Some critics today have expressed concern that Woolf has lately been cherished as a soothsayer of every trend in literary criticism, worrying that Woolf’s shortcomings and shortsightedness at times are overlooked, and that her many-sidedness has been reduced to turn her into a poster child for the latest critical fads (cf. Fernald *Feminism*). This may be more of a problem in some locations than others; the political value of her work has been understood differently on opposite sides of the Atlantic. Whereas North American critics eagerly embraced Woolf as feminist and beacon of progressive politics, British criticism until recently more frequently understood her to be an establishment figure detached from politics and hardly an icon for radical ideas.

³¹ Hermione Lee says that critics began to describe Woolf this way even in the 1930s (*Woolf* 679). Alex Zwerdling’s seminal study, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, published in 1987 was among the first to begin to counter this characterization alongside feminist critics such as Jane Marcus.
³² The image of Woolf as detached from everyday life arguably still lives in popular imagination today, à la the film version of *The Hours*. 
At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, about a hundred years after Woolf began publishing, critics can finally afford to take a more balanced view of Woolf’s politics. Hermione Lee, Woolf’s next major biographer after Bell and author of the standard biography today, has suggested that Woolf’s husband’s, Leonard’s, extensive and more conventional involvement in politics (helping create policy to found the United Nations, for example) made Woolf defensive and modest about her own role and interventions in politics (Woolf 682), which would account for statements like the one quoted above (“I am not a politician: obviously.”). Woolf’s more recent biographer Julia Briggs has argued that if Woolf did not cultivate a conventional political role for herself, then she at least strongly politicized space that was traditionally women’s, the hearth and the heart, and identified her writing as fighting (337). Yet Lee says readers might be surprised to learn how actively Woolf was involved in traditional political organizations, though Woolf never remained involved for long; a pattern developed whereby Woolf would grow more deeply absorbed into traditional political groups than she wanted, committing heart, mind, and time, and then withdrawing, jealous of maintaining mental and emotional energy for her boundary-pushing writing projects (684). Thus Woolf was politically active, but not in a long-term, committed way, except in her writing. Scholars have noted that Woolf’s literary work grew increasingly political through the 1930s, as did so many other writers’ did, and it is no accident that the remainder of the chapter turns to that part of Woolf’s career to draw out the political implications of judgment that are facilitated by her work.

33 Some examples of her involvement in include her participation on a committee to raise funds for the Cambridge Anti-War Council’s “Anti-Fascist Exhibition” (Lee Woolf 684-5), signing her name to a New Statesman & Nation letter that supported the International Congress of Writers in Defence of Culture (which she didn’t attend), and attending the National Peace Council in Westminster, which concerned colonial relations (Lee Woolf 686).
Woolf’s use of the word “facts” and her attitude toward them in her criticism can begin to indicate how her stance towards political involvement shifted over the course of her career. In her very early days as a reviewer, Woolf spoke positively of the facts she learned when reading women’s work; she notes in a review of Jane Welch Carlyle’s letters that the missives are “full of facts” that “did more to illuminate herself than most people’s feelings” (CE I.54). Here Woolf values facts over feelings when facts help readers access truth with integrity. In the case of women’s history, Woolf continues to be supportive of facts through the course of her career, and she most strongly defends their usefulness in her most strident feminist polemic, *Three Guineas*. However, she is in some cases wary of them in her feminist work. She opens *A Room of One’s Own* by explaining that fiction will sometimes do more to tell the truth or give a more complete picture of women’s history than facts will, because so few facts have been recorded about women’s lives and so many opinions about women are based on things other than facts (5).

When she describes the dinner scenes in that work, she insists that she will stick to the facts because they will win the respect of her audience and convince them of the disparity between men’s and women’s education (20), yet a page or two later she shifts her description of the scene outside the window from autumn to spring, as if testing to see if supplying consistent facts makes a difference in the point she wants to make. Yet again when reviewing a history of the revolution, Woolf again sees the value in facts; she claims that, “Facts are always disputable. They set one arguing. We find ourselves tempted to suggest alternatives” (CE III.280). Woolf values facts for specific and even counter-intuitive reasons; rather than confirming truth, facts

---

34 Another example of Woolf’s belief that fiction can tell more than certain kinds of facts is her early review of *Diana of the Crossways*. Woolf defends the novel against critics who accuse it of not being factual by arguing that the work does in fact convey “essential facts,” if it confuses “unessential facts,” and that the “truth” revealed in Meredith’s novel will become apparent to future generations if it is not seen by the present ones (CE I.63).
according to Woolf inspire argument. When they would squash argument or support institutionalized or patriarchal ideas, she scorns them.

It is precisely when Woolf most wants to stir up argument, to challenge people’s points of view, and to engage in the politicized public sphere that she bolsters her arguments by turning to facts. In *Three Guineas*, a text which she said was based on “countless” biographies, memoirs, and newspaper clippings, Woolf repeatedly turns to facts to show political realities that she wants to change, e.g., the horrors of war (she argues photographs of the Spanish civil war are “statements of facts addressed to the eye”) (164), the exclusion of women from Oxbridge (189), wage disparity between men and women in the same professions (217). As she does elsewhere, she acknowledges that facts are political and malleable in the hands of those who report them; she states, “if you want to know any facts about politics, you must read at least three different papers…and come to your own conclusion” (293). Woolf values facts because they inspire diverse opinions and debate within the public sphere.

The context in which Woolf most strongly condemns facts is in her defense of modernist fiction against more traditional realism. Woolf famously dismisses the value of factual detail in her modernist manifesto of sorts, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.”

35 Notably this piece did not originate as a review for the newspaper like so many other of her essays, but rather was initially given to a learned society in a privileged university, and while the tone it takes is democratic and infused with the language of Kantian judgment, it is also highbrow, exemplary

35 Here I refer to the essay published by the Hogarth Press in an independent pamphlet, which is very similar to the piece “Character in Fiction,” an earlier version of the essay that Woolf gave as a talk to the Heretics Society in Cambridge. The essay titled “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” originally published in 1923 and titled as such in the *Collected Essays* differs considerably.

36 Woolf opens “Character in Fiction,” the talk version of the piece, by proclaiming that “Everyone in this room is a judge of character” (CE III.421) and she urges her audience members to judge character as she has done throughout her talk. She later rhetorically asks,
of the “democratic highbrow” stance that Cuddy-Keane argues defines all of Woolf’s non-fiction work. Woolf targets the realist novelists Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells not only for being overtly moralistic (“in order to complete a realist book it seems you must write a check or join a society” (CE III.430)), but also for accumulating too much detail, for focusing too much on the surface of reality, and not getting to some deeper truth, or “vision” as Woolf calls it in her diaries.37 This piece, so central to modernist criticism, has come to define Woolf’s stance on facts and details in fiction and furthermore Woolf’s opinion of middlebrow writing—that she disdains it and defines herself against it.

However, her attitude towards the value of facts in fiction and even Arnold Bennett’s brand of realism shifted around the time she first conceived of The Pargiters. Just a couple months after Woolf first came up with the idea of a novel-essay (in late March of 1931), Bennett, the target of Woolf’s criticism, died. Woolf noted in her diary that the passing “leaves me sadder than I should have supposed” (D IV.15). To be sure she is not all praise after her one-time literary rival died; she continues to disparage his work, describing his literary point of view as a “shopkeeper’s view of literature,” and takes a shot at his “desire [for] hideous Empire furniture,” deriding the commercial, professional, and middlebrow aspects of his work. Yet she

“Who are the judges of reality?” (CE III.423) to imply that the judges are multiple and that everyone should lay their stake in judging what they see around them. She dismisses art that is too utilitarian and praises art that is interested in art “itself” (CE III.427) echoing the art-for-arts sake philosophy that stemmed from Kantian philosophy. Woolf models the process of making her own stance “general” or impersonal when she says: “I will put my view before you in hopes that you will make it impartial, judicial, broad minded” (CE III.427); she literally performs the process of political judgment Arendt describes, sending her judgment “visiting” around the room. Woolf concludes the essay by looking for some “common ground” between her and her audience members (CE III.434), describing such shared ground much as Kant describes the sensus communis.

37 Apparently this was one of Woolf’s private complaints about Joyce’s work too, that he amassed too many details in his work, that he stayed too much “on the surface” of life (Kaufmann 147), though of course in her published criticism she praises Joyce’s experiments with fiction and underscores the significant differences between his work and Bennett’s.
acknowledges he has “real understanding power as well as some gigantic absorbing power,” i.e. an impressive power to absorb facts and details of everyday life. She also wrote that she wished “him to go on abusing me and me abusing him” (16); she says she enjoyed the battles they waged over what principles make good literature. Well into the process of writing *The Pargiters*, Woolf noted that it was to be a “novel of fact,” a kind of work she hadn’t produced since *Night and Day* twenty years before (D IV.129). She explains: “I find myself infinitely delighting in facts for a change and in possession of quantities beyond counting” (she seems to have adopted some of Bennett’s “gigantic absorbing power”) and while composing, she “resists” each time she feels a “tug to vision” or turn away from details of realist fiction (129). She acknowledges the attitude is a “change” from her usual approach, even uncharacteristic, but is highly enthusiastic about it all the same. All of her early diary entries about *The Pargiters* brim with energy and she consistently remarks that she prefers to work on that project more than on others. To be sure the process was not always smooth sailing, as with the composition of all her works; she writes two years after embarking on the project: “fact-recording falls a little flat” and she is “suspicious” of the “didactic tone” of the work (D III.147). Yet soon after that entry she asks herself when thinking about the project, “How to give ordinary waking Arnold Bennett life the form of art?” (D III.161). She explicitly states that she is seeking to write a novel in the style of Arnold Bennett, though she does add the caveat that she wants to make her work more than a Bennett novel by adding “art” to it. As Woolf moved on with the project, she sought to stick not only to facts as she when she did when first setting out, but rather to balance “fact and vision.” The project eventually fell apart, into two pieces, *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, which might suggest Woolf’s dip into realism, detail, and fact was an exceptional and failed moment in her career that should be dismissed. Yet Woolf spent seven of the last nine years of her life working on *The
Pargiters and projects that came from it, which is no insignificant amount of time, and she might have returned once more to the realist vein had she lived longer. Regardless of such speculation, it is certain that studying her projects that are steeped in facts and realist detail broadens scholars’ understanding of how Woolf was perceived and how she perceived herself as operating in the public sphere.

The Pargiters versus The Years

The Pargiters, Woolf’s unfinished manuscript of a “novel-essay” and the draft of fiction that eventually became the published novel The Years, is the most overtly political writing Woolf produced up to the time she began composing it in 1931. The project has a long composition history—it evolved significantly over six years—which scholars have been slowly unpacking since the 1960s. According to Woolf’s diaries, the initial idea for the project came after giving a speech in January of 1931 to the Society for Women’s Service, a society that promoted professions for women. Woolf was inspired to write an extended essay, a kind of sequel to A Room of One’s Own (D III.6), which quickly evolved into a work that combined essay and fiction. This portion of the manuscript, which she and critics alike have called The Pargiters, is a hybrid work, a “novel-essay” that drew on Woolf’s talents as professional reviewer and critic as well as imaginative novelist. It begins by alternating between non-consecutive chapters of a realist novel and critical essays that explicate the craft of a woman writer, highlighting the challenges of the writing profession for women as well as various other socio-political challenges that women faced. After finishing what was to be the first section of The Pargiters, Woolf was unsatisfied with the results, and began incorporating into the fictional narrative the ideas that she’d previously been didactically discussing in the essays. The remaining three-
quarters of the hand-written manuscript is a more traditional novel, but still far different from the final published novel *The Years*, which came out in 1937. Scholars have an idea of the difference thanks to Grace Radin’s monograph on the evolution of *The Years*, from holograph to typescript to galley proofs, and Anna Snaith’s very recent (2012) Cambridge edition of the novel. Of the eight notebooks that Woolf filled with her first draft, most of the first two have been published as *The Pargiters*, edited by Mitchell Leaska in 1977, and two additional “chunks” (Woolf’s own words when she excised them from the final manuscript) from later sections were published by Radin in 1981. The remaining holograph and typescript is unpublished, but as Snaith has pointed out, both might well be incorporated into a rich digital genetic edition of *The Years* that would allow readers to sift through its many layers of composition (“Introduction” xcv).

I have spent a long paragraph outlining the different stages of *The Pargiters* before it became *The Years* to clarify my choice to focus here on what Leaska has called *The Pargiters* or the first part of the manuscript that looks most like a “novel-essay” with distinct fiction and essay sections. It happens to be the only part of the holograph that has been published, but I’ve chosen this work for much more than convenience alone, and chosen to discuss it, too, over the published novel. The novel-essay’s combination of distinct genres shares much with the middlebrow, as will be explicated later in the chapter, while at the same time, it is more radically experimental and politically forceful than *The Years*. Critics have already noted Woolf’s voice is much more polemical and strident in *The Pargiters* than it is in *The Years* (cf. Radin, Marcus, etc.); it is more oriented towards “facts” as outlined above. Just after finishing the section of the holograph now called *The Pargiters*, Woolf describes in her diary a desire to return to “vision” and integrate art into the more political form towards which she was working earlier (Radin 36), making it closer to her high modernist work than the “novel-essay” section. *The Pargiters*
section is at once an experimental work, a stridently political work, and a work for a broad range of readers, and as such raises the most challenging questions about Woolf’s place in the field of literary production and about the power of writing that speaks to middlebrow reading habits.

Though I am emphasizing The Pargiters’ difference from much of Woolf’s fiction, it can be well understood in the tradition of Woolf’s essays. The Pargiters furthers the project of investigating women’s opportunities in the public sphere that she began in A Room of One’s Own, which also blended fictional techniques with literary-critical ones to get at a different kind of truth and emphasized the shifting nature of truth by exploring a number of perspectives. On the other hand, The Pargiters radicalized the vision and mission Woolf had begun A Room and attempted something formally quite different and politically more strident. However, The Pargiters doesn’t make claims as radical as those in Three Guineas. The Pargiters is, then, Woolf’s in-between project that might well have reached as broad an audience as the novel which came out of it, The Years, which at times over the summer and fall of 1937 surpassed Gone With the Wind as the number one bestseller in the U.S. and landed Woolf on the cover of Time magazine (Snaith Years lxxxvii). It would likely have reached a broader audience than did Three Guineas, whose print run was much smaller, while at the same time offering a more obviously political reading experience than The Years.

Critical reception of The Pargiters

Gloria Fromm has argued that Woolf scholars in the 1970s and 80s who were looking to demonstrate that Woolf was politically active paid more attention to the draft versions of The Years than the novel itself, though critical attention then wasn’t all that much and since then has been quite little. Lisa Weihman has focused on a very small section of the work and drawn
compelling connections between the militancy of the character Delia in *The Pargiters* and *The Years* and what Woolf saw as shortcomings in Irish nationalist politics in the early decades of the twentieth century; Woolf thought the nationalists neglected women’s inequality and ultimately reinforced some of the imperial values against which the patriots were ostensibly fighting. Froula has recently argued that *The Pargiters* was for Woolf a kind of “talking cure” for the sexual abuse Woolf experienced as a child at the hands of her stepbrother, George Duckworth (214).\(^ {38} \)

Froula’s interpretive framework is largely psychoanalytic, though she cites Bakhtin’s genre theory as one way to interpret the hybrid form of the novel. This approach is more fully explored by Rebecca Stephens, whose main point is that the unpolished genres that make up *The Pargiters* “challenge those who would polish and contextualize women’s experiences into a palpable yet artificial form” (183). By refusing to fit into any one genre, *The Pargiters* allows women to conduct a different kind of dialogue about their own history from the late Victorian through mid-modernist period. I would argue that it is neither the unfinished nature of the text nor the roughness of the genres that is the most interesting and political part of the work, but the combination of two fairly conventional genres that generate powerful reading responses in readers that Woolf’s fiction didn’t often reach.

Jane Marcus is one critic who has argued *The Pargiters* is a more powerful text than *The Years*, yet she insists that in *The Pargiters*, as elsewhere, Woolf defined herself against the Victorian middlebrow.\(^ {39} \) To bolster her point, Marcus calls attention to Woolf’s dismissal of one

---

\(^ {38} \) Froula notes how the working title at one point was “A Tap On My Door,” which named the sound that would precede her brother’s entrance into her childhood room and signal coming abuse (222). Froula also cites as evidence Woolf’s use of reptilian metaphors to describe the project in its later frustrating stages, which she also employed when describing her abusive brother (250).

\(^ {39} \) Marcus’ studies of Woolf’s work in the 1980s aimed to make a case for Woolf as an experimental modernist author and to prove Woolf’s work was worthy of serious study, so it
“eminent Victorian” and quintessentially middlebrow novelist, Mrs. Humphrey Ward. Marcus notes how in letters to the feminist Margaret Llewelyn-Davies, Woolf mocked Ward for her “self-indulgence and righteousness” and declared that she hoped never to become anything like Ward, a high-minded reforming novelist who preached to her readership (*Patriarchy* 70-71). Considering Ward worked against suffrage, signing petitions to block women’s right to vote, Woolf’s distancing herself from Ward when writing to a prime mover in the suffrage movement, Llewlyn-Davies, makes sense. Marcus also cites Woolf’s review of a biography of Ward, which Woolf titled “The Compromise” to underline Woolf’s opinion that Ward had detrimentally compromised her life by spinning off dozens of sentimental novels to support a fashionable society life rather than pursuing the serious history writing Ward had originally aimed to produce (*Patriarchy* 46).

Yet I would argue that Woolf’s stance towards Ward’s life in *The Pargiters* is surprisingly kind, and that the facts of Ward’s life actually inspired Woolf to think creatively about middlebrow consumption while composing the novel-essay. Woolf early in the piece explains that the fiction portion of the project is based upon “scores of memoirs,” and Marcus cites Ward’s memoir of growing up in Oxford as Woolf’s source for Kitty’s life in the same university town; Marcus claims that Ward like Kitty had been told she had “an original mind” as a young woman (*Patriarchy* 54). It is hard to understand why Marcus is so hostile towards Ward considering that *The Pargiters’* narrator has a considerable amount of sympathy for Kitty, the character apparently based on Ward, who receives more attention than any other character in that section. The narrator of *The Pargiters* in the essay portions of text cites Mrs. Humphrey Ward’s memoir as an example of how useless women’s exposure to education was in the Victorian makes sense that she would take this stance. Now that Woolf has full modernist credentials (and then some), the time is ripe to reconsider her attitude to the middlebrow.
period; Ward complains about the limited nature of her education that prepared her only to run a household and survive in the social sphere, and did not encourage her to think for herself, much less to become a scholar or intellectual (112). Woolf sees Ward here as an ally, as another woman who decries the lack of women’s opportunities. In her speech that inspired *The Pargiters*, Woolf off-handedly cites Ward as the author of the first book Woolf ever reviewed for a newspaper. Woolf notes how she reviewed it with pleasure—proceeds of the review allowed her to buy a beautiful Persian cat—and that her own opinion of Ward’s book at the time was nothing compared to Ward’s influence over readers. While it is undeniable that Woolf is sometimes hostile towards Ward and certainly opposed to Ward’s political work and aesthetic ideals in other work, in *The Pargiters* Woolf is more sympathetic to Ward as Woolf tries to understand the circumstances that made Ward into the writer that she became and her subsequent place in the public sphere. Beyond that, I would even argue that just as Woolf was drawing from Arnold Bennett’s technique when crafting *The Pargiters*, she was taking something from Ward’s middlebrow techniques too.

What most immediately distinguishes *The Pargiters* from the published projects that stemmed from it is its combination of genres, which is a characteristic of the middlebrow. Humble has called the middlebrow a “parasitic” form that combines different styles and genres in a way that is easy to read (11, cf. also Haberman 33, Napper 9, Tracy 25-6, Sullivan 62, etc.). Elizabeth Maslen argues that slippage between realism and modernist experiment is what make the neglected women’s writing that she studies so interesting, but it is also a reason that they haven’t been studied much (16). She furthermore asserts realism isn’t necessarily conservative, but in fact can work to subvert expectations that are too easy or predictable (16, 23). Middlebrow works are thus not in the first wave of aesthetic or formal experimentation, but they often feed
off of such experiment in limited ways, being neither entirely conventional nor extremely or aggressively new. In her diary, Woolf notes how she wants *The Pargiters* to “include all satire comedy poetry narrative” (D IV.152); she explicitly sought to combine genres in the project and to try an approach to narrative different than those she had used before. It is true that her earlier extended piece of non-fiction, *A Room*, mixes fact and fiction not only by creating fictional characters, such as Judith Shakespeare, to make a point she couldn’t otherwise make, and by painting scenes that could fit into a novel, like those of the dining halls at Oxbridge, but also by framing the non-fiction work with fictional devices, such as a fictional lecture. However, *The Pargiters* is even more explicit in its combining of fact and fiction and furthermore separates the genres distinctly, into separate sections. This requires the reader to confront their difference side by side, making the reading experience of *The Pargiters* notably different than that of Woolf’s other works.

Fromm is right to say that critics turned to *The Pargiters* in the 70s and 80s to reveal an overtly political side of Woolf, yet they often concluded the work was a failed venture because it tried to combine genres. Leaska, for instance, quotes Woolf’s review of a biography that later became the title essay of the collection *Granite and Rainbow*, in which she asserts that “the truth of fact” and “the truth of fiction” are “antagonistic; let them meet and they destroy each other” (qtd. in Leaska xiv). However, Leaska leaves out from his discussion what Woolf immediately adds thereafter, that “the truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible; yet [the biographer] is now more than ever urged to combine them” (CE IV.478). Woolf’s point in her essay is that the art of biography is changing in the modern period: “the point of view of biography in the

---

40 While Woolf did give two lectures which ultimately turned into *A Room of One’s Own*, and received letters similar to those she describes in *Three Guineas*, the exact devices as she describes them in those works are embroidered and invented like fiction.
twentieth century is completely altered” (CE IV.475). She herself had done much to alter storytelling in the 20s when she wrote this review, and she would search for new ways yet again in the 30s while composing The Pargiters and The Years.

Anna Snaith has argued the distinction between the essay and fiction sections in the Pargiters was blurred to begin with and that Woolf “didn’t need the genre divide” to make the points she wanted to make (Public 110). Wiehman argues that in cutting out the essays from the manuscript, Woolf “repeals the lecturer’s voice” that she opposed and “replicates her stance against dictatorial writers” (37), shaping a non-authoritarian narration. Yet another argument might be made that polemic can invite responses rather than squelch it. In the remainder of this chapter I will argue that The Pargiters does invite broad-minded thinking and in fact trains readers, particularly women readers, to challenge their own thinking. As general editors of the new Cambridge editions of Woolf’s work have said, Woolf “resisted all notions of final judgement, religious, literary or political,” (Goldman and Sellers xix), and her writing in The Pargiters was no exception. Woolf explicitly said that through The Pargiters and The Years, she wanted to “catch the general readers [sic] attention” (qtd. in Snaith “Introduction” lxxxvii), and critics like Snaith herself have argued the earliest draft versions had teaching potential (“Introduction” lv). The remainder of the chapter unpacks how this text of hybrid genre was structured to broaden readers’ judgment rather than narrow it.

Killing the angel to make way for an angle

The opening section of The Pargiters is an essay that addresses an audience much like A Room of One’s Own does and is clearly inspired by and modeled after Woolf’s speech to the
Society for Women’s Service. Woolf scholars have long drawn attention to Woolf’s slaying of the Victorian “Angel of the House” in this speech, which represents Woolf killing off impossible ideals of Victorian womanhood. However, Woolf does not just make efforts to sweep away the past, but she also details cognitive processes that allow women to think independently. The speech that inspired the essay was about her life as a professional woman writer, and Woolf explains that the Angel got in her way when she first tried to write a review, or express her opinion in a public arena for the first time. The Angel tried to squelch that sally, pushing Woolf to sympathize with the opinions of men. To be sure, Woolf continues to underscore as she does in *A Room of One’s Own* that certain material conditions are necessary for women to write, but in *The Pargiters* and the speech that inspires it, she increases her attention to the social conditions that shape women’s thinking. Woolf asserts in the speech that the problem with the Angel is that she “never had a wish or a mind of her own, but preferred to sympathize with the wishes and minds of others” (*Pargiters* xxx, my emphasis). When Woolf does her best to slay the Angel in the speech, she does so in order to preserve her own angle on the world. Furthermore, Woolf shifts her emphasis from the “geniuses” of creation, that is, writers (the focus of *A Room*), which only a subset of women are, to the judges and critics of society, which all women are or at the least can and should be. *The Pargiters* encourages female readers to become critics and to slay the Angel as Woolf did herself.

Woolf’s speech was given to a group of aspiring women professionals to whom opportunities had been opened that had never been opened before to women. Briggs has noted

---

41 This was posthumously published with some editorial changes by Leonard Woolf as “Professions for Women.”
that Woolf set the fictional sections of The Pargiters in the past\textsuperscript{42} because she wanted to make young women of the 1930s aware of the generations of women that came before them who had fewer opportunities (Briggs 294). The lack of women’s voices in the public sphere or at least their powerless and secondary role there, which is depicted in the Victorian setting of The Pargiters, was in some ways different than the problems faced by the women Woolf addressed in her speech, who were ready to take a more public part in the new Georgian future. However, the impetus behind this early section of the project suggests that even Georgian women, who had more opportunities than Victorian women, needed to cultivate some distance between their own goals and the present context in which they found themselves; they needed additional perspective to cultivate a sounder political opinion and to act more sensibly and effectively in the public sphere. Woolf furthermore shows that men too could do with broadening their judgment, though the path to that outcome is less clear.

**The content of the form**

Throughout the novel portions of The Pargiters, Woolf shows how late Victorian conventions that regulated interactions among family members as well as between men and women in more public settings discouraged discussion and debate between the sexes and encouraged women’s silence and tacit acceptance of men’s opinions, women’s extension of sympathy, and the squashing of women’s independent opinions. These conventions of silencing women and girls are shown to operate at a very early age; they are even at the center of the

\textsuperscript{42} Woolf initially thought the novel sections of The Pargiters would span from the later Victorian past, from 1880, to the distant future, to one hundred years beyond the start of the piece’s composition or 2032, but in fact, The Years, the finished novel that came out of The Pargiters, came up only to the “present day” which at the time was 1937. The Pargiters novel-essay version of the text never made it past the 1880s.
second chapter that explores the perspective of five-year-old Rose Pargiter. In this chapter, Rose ventures out of the house alone at dusk because she wants to make a purchase at the toyshop and no one in the house has the time or energy to accompany her. Her brother, just a year or two older and her closest sibling in age, is absorbed in his studies, from which he actively excludes her, throwing a ball of paper at her when she peeks in his door (40). Influenced by her father’s stories of military service in India, Rose frames her mission to purchase a toy as a kind of imperial adventure, and she escapes the house and succeeds in her mission. However, upon returning home, she passes a man exposing himself in public, sending Rose rushing home in a panic, having abandoned all pretense of bravery and accomplishment. She mentions no part of the experience to anyone and that night is troubled by dreams in which the man reappears and threatens her. She awakens in a fright, and her nurse comes to comfort her, but when the nurse asks what is wrong, Rose can only say she is scared by the idea of a burglar. Rose is silenced because she has violated restrictions on girls and women’s movement in public, and furthermore has been exposed to the taboo subject of abnormal sexual behavior of which women in the late Victorian period were supposed to be ignorant. To speak of sexuality at all as a young woman, much less as a tot, was not possible at the time. Not even within the family does Rose feel comfortable expressing her fears and objections to what she has experienced. Hers is the first example of the way women’s opinions are silenced in both the private and public spheres.

Unlike this traumatic and perhaps exceptional experience, later examples of the repression of women’s opinions are shown to be part of the fabric of everyday life, in familial, semi-public, and public settings. The third and fourth fiction chapters and their accompanying essays, which focus on late adolescent development and early adulthood, both show and tell how “conventions that regulated intercourse between undergraduates and their cousins [i.e. young
men and women of a similar class], in the year 1880, were strict in the extreme” (82). The third chapter of *The Pargiters* that focuses on Edward, the beloved and successful son in the Pargiter family, who is in 1880 an Oxford undergraduate, demonstrates how these strict conventions lead to absurd ideas about the opposite sex. Edward cannot talk at any length, much less honestly and openly, to his cousin and love interest, Kitty, who in turn is not allowed to express opinions about matters that genuinely engage her, and so Edward cherishes the most conventional ideas of Kitty’s character and womanhood. The poetry he writes about her is so predictable and sentimental that his highbrow taste, cultivated and refined at Oxford, recognizes his love notes as lowbrow drivel that must be discarded. Kitty is resistant to Edward’s overtures, largely because she compares him to other real young men she has known, and in this way has a broader perspective and sounder judgment of his character than he does of hers. Had Kitty been freer to give her opinions and talk to Edward openly, it might have helped Edward broaden his perspective, but the conventions of conversation between Edward and Kitty in late Victorian England did not permit it.

Though Edward is outwardly accomplished in nearly every way, athletically, scholastically, and socially, he is shown elsewhere in the third chapter to be incapable of negotiating between different perspectives even amongst his male peers, whom he should understand better than young women such as Kitty. He interacts with his friends extensively and has the opportunity to know them intimately, yet his negotiation and judgment of individuals in his overlapping friendship circles is lacking. Edward has a number of different types of friends; much like Eddy in Macaulay’s 1914 novel *The Making of a Bigot*, he seems to be popular with everyone, and the different tastes of the different sets in which he runs are sometimes at odds with each other. But unlike Macaulay’s Eddy, Woolf’s Edward never negotiates between the
differing tastes or makes the least effort to bring them into fruitful conversation. When two such differning types, Gibbs, the son of a wealthy businessman who is interested mainly in hunting and sport, and Jevons, a feminized intellectual who is hungry for Edward’s attention, meet in Edward’s sitting room, they come up with little to say to each other and are clearly resentful of the other’s presence; each wants to engage Edward in his own interests. Rather than attempting to ease the tensions between them, Edward retreats to his room and closes the door on the awkward situation, somewhat smugly in fact; he is glad to be at the center of both their attentions, yet has no sympathy for the frustration his friends feel (73-4). Edward is open-minded in the sense that he manages to value both individuals who are so different, but he does not cultivate a liberal discussion between them; rather he abandons what might have been a challenging interaction for personal respite. If Edward had been trained to give sympathy, as women of his generation had been, he might have effected dialogue that in turn might have negotiated some of the differences between Gibbs’s and Tony’s views. On the other hand, encouraging the two to engage further might have resulted in further animosity and disagreement, but either way, the outcome would have been more engaging than the silence and complete lack of communication that resulted from Edward ignoring the differences. This scene suggests that sympathy is not essentially a bad quality and that men could stand to learn how to practice it better. For women, however, in the late Victorian period, too much emphasis had been placed on practicing and extending sympathy, and the overemphasis prevented women from forming and offering their own opinions in public and semi-public discussions of mixed sex.

While The Pargiters initially shifts perspectives in a balanced manner, moving from one character to another with each new chapter of fiction, both the fourth and fifth chapters are told from Kitty’s point of view. Woolf’s extended attention to and development of Kitty’s situation
suggests the political ends that Woolf had in mind while composing *The Pargiters* and the audience she wanted to reach. The young women professionals Woolf addressed in her speech might well have been figures similar to Kitty if they’d been born twenty or thirty years earlier. By seeing how Kitty’s opinions are received in different settings, young women readers of *The Pargiters* might see how their own opinions might have been differently received in the past and furthermore see how important it is to cultivate and assert their opinions in the present day.

In both the chapters and essays that focus on her, Kitty’s conversations with young men are depicted as limited in the extreme. As the daughter of an Oxford college Master, Kitty frequently converses with undergraduates who come to her father’s house for tea or a meal, but the conversation takes limited turns: Kitty talked with “rowing men about rowing and reading men about reading” (128). Kitty is expected to let the conversation develop as the male students wish it to, around their interests, and consequently the students learn little of her opinions on life in Oxford, and she in turn is bored by talk about subjects that do not interest her and activities she herself does not pursue. She responds to the need to welcome and entertain the undergraduates “as her mother did,” by sympathizing with their interests, letting their opinions guide the course of talk, and smoothing over silences with banter. Despite her lack of education, Kitty knows that the young men are less socially developed than she is; they are more self-absorbed and less capable of taking into account perspectives other than their own, as the chapter on Edward illustrates.

Young women’s conversations with older men might be more engaging because older men are more worldly and less self-absorbed, and the question of courtship and marriage does not hang heavy in the air. Yet even more than younger men, older men have fully internalized conventions of the Victorian age that limited expectations for women’s participation in public or
semi-public conversation. Mr. Tollemache, a scholar who dines one evening at the college Master’s house, provides a salient example. He believes that he, as “an old man of seventy,” and Kitty, as “a young girl of seventeen,” are “on quite different planes of thought” (122); he does not believe that they can discuss anything of importance. Consequently Mr. Tollemache either flatters Kitty by agreeing to her opinions without carefully considering them or else offends her by dismissing her ideas altogether, calling them “feeble”; either way he does not take her ideas or opinions at all seriously; he does not respect her point of view enough to give it real consideration. The fifth essay explains that what Mr. Tollemache wants from Kitty is “that restful sympathy which women know to give…which men can neither give nor take away” as well as women’s “art of pleasing” which “consists in entire self effacement” (123). Like Edward, Mr. Tollemache could himself afford to practice some sympathy in understanding Kitty’s position, and furthermore the variety of sympathy he desires offers no possibility for independent position-taking much less debate in which different points of view might meet and challenge each other. In 1880, there was no room for women’s opinions at a college Masters’ dinner table, much less in a more public forum.

Tony Ashton is the one undergraduate with whom Kitty can carry on easy and meaningful conversation. It is suggested that he is homosexual, in his doting upon Edward, his admiration of Edward’s athletic physique, his jealousy of any others who attract Edward’s attention, and in Kitty’s characterization of him as “queer,” “snaky,” and unattractive. Because of this implied difference, late Victorian hetero-normative conventions about conduct between young men and women don’t apply in the same limiting ways to his and Kitty’s conversation. Remarkably, Kitty “found [Tony], actually, taking an interest in her” when they talk (115). This interest is sometimes superficial, as when he wonders whether she “enjoys an ice” or not, but he
later asks more worldly questions such as “whether she would not like to go to America” (115). Kitty is impressed by his “sympathy,” which she has experienced from no other undergraduate. Here it is suggested that sympathy is necessary to carry on a conversation that has value, meaning, and/or interest to all involved parties. But the sympathy needed is of a particular kind. It is not the one-sided sympathy practiced by the Angel of the House, which never offers an original opinion, but rather the kind that takes into account others’ perspectives while at the same time maintaining the capability of offering one’s own.

The content of *The Pargiters*, the actions that unfold in the text, show how women’s opinions are silenced or stifled in 1880 by the expectation that they will provide sympathy; the development of characters and plot provides a clear picture of the injunctions women at the time faced against expressing their opinions and ideas. But *The Pargiters* does more for Georgian—and later—readers than offer important details and information, facts the readers should know, of which they might not have been aware; *The Years* after all offers much of the same. *The Pargiters*’ distinctive hybrid form does the additional work of providing an unusual reading experience that encourages readers to offer the opinions that the narrative details of the project show are clearly needed.

**The form of the content**

*The Pargiters*’ experiment with genre, the combination of Woolf’s critic’s voice with her novelist’s voice, might be thought to be one more modernist experiment that sought to stretch the possibilities of generic conventions and invent new modes of narration and description by combining old forms. Leaska reads the project as modernist, emphasizing the “splinters of memory, fragments of speech, quotes and passages left unnamed or forgotten” in the novel
portions of the work (xvii). His emphasis on narrative discontinuity and fragmentation aligns it with Woolf’s earlier experimental fiction such as Mrs. Dalloway and the paragon of modernist poetry, The Waste Land. Undoubtedly The Pargiters is generically innovative, and its changes in perspective are sometimes abrupt and forceful. However, reading The Pargiters manuscript and the published texts that came out of it, The Years and Three Guineas, makes for a markedly different experience than reading the highly disjointed, fractured “high” modernist texts cited above. Where high modernist texts leave it up to the reader to make connections between fragments, splinters, and unnamed allusions, The Pargiters more actively helps the reader by explaining in a conversational tone any abrupt changes in perspective soon after they are made. This is not to say the works are not allusive or at all challenging; I stand by Brigg’s assertions that the text is highly allusive (293) and Lee’s argument that The Years is Woolf’s most de-centered text (677). However, the reception of the books that came out of The Pargiters project was markedly different from those of more conventionally modernist novels, and The Pargiters particularly, more than The Years and Three Guineas, establishes a different relationship with its readers than Woolf’s high modernist texts. The Pargiters eases the challenges of experimental narrative that are typical of high modernism by employing realism and didacticism and in this way “teaches” its readers, like some middlebrow work. But The Pargiters does not let the reader slip into escapist sentiment or complacency, which is what Woolf complained consumption of middlebrow culture encouraged the public to do. Rather, this very “compromised” form encourages Woolf’s readers to critically judge the social sphere rather than bestow blind sympathy on actors involved in it. In this way The Pargiters does radical political work by arguing and making space for a new kind of conversation in which women can offer original, independent opinions.
Woolf asserts in her speech to the Society for Women’s Service that all writing—fiction and criticism alike—is necessarily a vehicle of opinion, which itself resides somewhere between truth and untruth. Woolf argues that unlike music and visual arts that are either more abstract or more pure and so more detached from the workings of the household (itself an arguable assertion though one beside the point here), writing necessitates direct engagement with and interpretation of the social world. She asserts: “You can’t even review a novel without expressing an opinion upon character, morality, human relations” (xxxii). Both fiction and non-fiction express opinions, according to Woolf. She goes on to explain that because all writing expresses opinions about the social world, the Angel of the House is more likely to interfere with its production than with the production of other arts such as painting or musical composition. While Woolf may not go so far as to say novels might happily “preach” to their readers, she is clear in her speech that writing conveys opinions and that it can work directly to change readers’ minds, else the Angel would not be so interested in the opinions writers offered.

This assertion that all writing is opinion may seem to be at odds with the narrator’s assertion in *The Pargiters* that the novel portion of that project is a “novel of fact” that will not draw on the readers’ sentiments or sympathy. *The Pargiters*’ narrator requests that the reader “acquit me of the desire simply to seduce and to flatter and to bring you round to my own way of thinking” (5). The narrator claims she will not persuade the reader to believe one thing or another, but simply lay out the way things were in 1880; she claims she will not give her opinion. The insistence on facts and distancing from sentiment in the statements here share something with the tone and theme Macaulay’s *Potterism*. The assertions emphasize a hard journalistic edge that shies away from the emotional appeal and development of suspense that make middlebrow reading popular. Yet at the same time, the novel portions of the project use familiar conventions
of realist fiction and do not unsettle the reader in the way many high modernist novels do; the novel portions help the reader more than the narrator admits. Furthermore, while the novel portions might not explicitly lay out opinions about what is right and wrong in the Pargiter family’s lives and the lives of their associates, the essay portions do not let the novel portions stand unexamined; they break down and dig into scenes and push readers to think about implications of the facts presented.

The first “essay” in The Pargiters, which in fact looks more like a speech than an essay, explicitly states the narrator’s role in the text: “it is part of a writer’s profession to be an outsider. She as a writer can see things not visible from the inside” (7). The lecturer’s voice is stronger here than in later essay sections, underscoring differences between writers and their readers early on. The narrator asserts that writers have a special role to play as outsiders because in other professions and social positions, being a distanced observer is not advantageous (8-9). The narrator promises to show her readers a perspective that is not obvious, something that they are not trained to see or something that readers are simply too immersed in to see objectively. Here, as an expert addressing her audience, the narrator clearly states her point rather than showing it, and so makes her message unambiguous to the reader. Yet later in the text, the narrator expects the reader to take on this role of the writer that she earlier declares is a writer’s specialty.

This point that the narrator states clearly in the first essay is shown through plot and character in the fourth and fifth novel chapters that explore Kitty’s life in Oxford. These chapters illustrate how distance from a particular context can provide a more comprehensive understanding and better judgment of it, and how an individual who is not a writer and in fact

---

43 This idea echoes that of the closing pages of Macaulay’s The Making of a Bigot in which the particular ability of writers to take multiple positions, to move between positions without deeply involving or committing themselves to any one of them, is explained.
has very little interest in writing can adopt something like a writer’s outside perspective. Though
the narrator notes that Kitty has more liberty than her mother, who is “an extremely competent
housekeeper” and devotes her days to the smooth running of the college Master’s household,
Kitty is largely limited by the conventions of her time. Kitty has inklings of a different sort of
life, but at the same time isn’t fully aware of how strongly the late Victorian conventions of her
household are stifling her potential contributions to a more public sphere. Despite being fed up
with the narrowness and airlessness of Oxford life, Kitty takes it for granted that the way she has
always lived and conducted herself as a young woman is the best way (151). Kitty’s later
discovery that there is “another point of view even in Oxford” is for her “a violent shock” (154).

The limited education Kitty receives comes from Miss Lucy Craddock, a scholar of
English history, whose work is dismissed by the Oxford dons, though Miss Craddock
passionately pursues it all the same. Miss Craddock notes that Kitty, when she does (only very
occasionally) put effort into her work, produces fruits of an “original mind” (101). The narrator
in the fifth essay concurs with Miss Craddock that Kitty “expressed, in very awkward English it
is true, her own opinion of Henry, and not merely repeated as girls mostly did, what she had read
in Froude or what she thought would please Miss Craddock herself” (117). Miss Craddock
believes Kitty could offer something different than the Oxford undergraduates precisely because
unlike them she is not carefully trained from early adolescence in public schools and then at
university; Kitty’s lack of that training is the very reason she would be able to offer an original
opinion. Kitty thus is first shown in the novel chapter to be capable of throwing off the mind-
dulling blanket of uncritical sympathy and thinking independently and then the reader is told this
is so in the essay portion that follows. The hybrid form draws out the point in multiple ways.
Kitty begins to broaden her mind and acquire a varied perspective on public life and in a way practices critical judgment by comparing attitudes and outlooks of different types of suitors: the young aristocrat who might marry her if only she was heir to a larger fortune, the farm hand whom she kisses illicitly and joyfully in the hay, Edward the too self-assured scholar who writes sentimental poetry. But that kind of judgment is limited, and, with the exception of conversation with Tony Ashton, a fuller practice does not come until she visits the house of Sam Brooks/Hughes/Robsons (all names Woolf gives to the family at one point or another) at the end of the draft of *The Pargiters*. When Kitty visits Sam Brooks’ house, her opinion there is taken seriously and she can for the first time engage in real debates. “Goes visiting” is a phrase that Arendt uses in her theory of political judgment to describe how a judge “visits” other minds, taking into account perspectives other than her own, and in the fifth chapter of *The Pargiters*, Kitty goes visiting both literally and figuratively in the sense Arendt articulates. She is invited to Brooks’ house because it is where her one female friend, Alice, lives. Alice perceives and functions in the world quite differently than Kitty. Alice is career oriented. She is not constantly playing host to distinguished guests and considering the merits of a variety of suitors; rather, Alice is driven to become a doctor, and the household in which she was raised has supported that decision. Alice’s home is void of the conventions which Kitty had assumed were the best and most reasonable ones throughout her life. Kitty notes that Alice’s father, Mr. Brooks, is “not polite.” He does not pick up her handkerchief for instance, but neither does he flatter her; he “talked to her as frankly as he talked to a man” (127). Furthermore academic degrees are little valued in the Brooks’ household, a complete contrast to Kitty’s home at the college. Joseph Wright, the historical figure on whom Sam Brooks’ character was modeled, “never had a day’s schooling” which Wright understood was to his advantage. In the final essay of the manuscript
that analyzes Kitty’s visit to the Brooks house, the narrator directly discusses Wright’s life as narrated by himself, quoting Wright’s assertion that he “developed an individuality which is unique in its kind” (154). In this way Kitty and Mr. Brooks can meet on equal ground; they both have had limited access to education and this lack, this outsider positioning gives them the potential be more original thinkers. Wright asserts in his memoirs: “I know lots of people who are learned, but at the same time positively incapable of giving birth to a new idea” (qtd. in The Pargiters 158). Yet an outsider status alone is not rewarding. Both working class men like Mr. Brooks and upper middle class women like Kitty needed to be given an opportunity to practice their thinking in a public space for it to be of any use; they needed to exchange their ideas with other people. The Pargiters shows readers how gaining distance from her environment allows Kitty to contribute to the public sphere in ways she had not previously imagined and it also explains to readers a similar point in the essay that follows, discussing the real life of Joseph Wright and making points in expository fashion.

The movement between explication/criticism and fictional scenes encourages readers to distance themselves from the events about which they read. Without the lecturer or critic’s voice, readers might sink pleasurably into the realist plot, but with the critical voice cutting in, readers are pushed to take an outsider’s stance towards the text, much like the critic’s own, and also the writer’s. The mixed-genre form of The Pargiters on the one hand encourages readers’ immersion into the lives and values of the Pargiter family by using easily digestible techniques of realist fiction to create a vivid picture of family life, yet on the other pushes readers away from immersion and uncritical sympathy by shifting to criticism of those lives in the essay sections. Literary critics who associate any kind of guidance in the text with “dictatorship” and fascist politics may be ignoring the fact that not all readers are highly trained as critics and that readers
may benefit from “on-site” training in reading fiction critically. Many women readers particularly did not have access to literature classes, even in the 1930s, a lack which Woolf’s criticism for “the common reader” began to address. Furthermore the critical voice in *The Pargiters* is hardly seeking to dominate its readers’ thought processes; though it asserts opinions it does not force the reader to accept any. Instead it encourages the reader to form her own opinion about what she reads.

**The Pargiters and political judgment**

The movement between critical and imaginative modes of reading furthermore brings to mind the movement between critical and imaginative thinking that is key to aesthetic judgment and political judgment according to Arendt. Though Arendt is careful to emphasize that she is not suggesting that readers should literally imagine perspectives of others when making sound political judgments, actually doing so can help readers to practice critical judgment and expand readers’ perspectives. *The Pargiters* helps readers acquire the pieces necessary to form critical judgments by shifting from perspective to perspective in each fiction chapter. The second chapter focuses on Rose, the third focuses on Edward, and the fourth and fifth focus on Kitty in different

44 Woolf’s task in the speech to the Society for Women’s Service is to outline the necessities and requirements of the writing profession to her audience, and in fulfilling this task, she distinguishes between the two kinds of writing she does, criticism and fiction writing, which themselves primarily engage her reason and her imagination respectively. She explains that “A novelist is not so conscious or so reasonable a person as the critic” (xxxvii) and suggests that the critic is more aware of the workings of her own mind, more in control of her thoughts, whereas a novelist lets her mind work unconsciously in order to encourage imagination. Where the critic uses evidence to back a point, the novelist is free to invent; when the critic must stick to the truth, the novelist has no such obligation. By writing a piece that includes both criticism and fiction, Woolf herself was exercising these two processes and in turn requiring her reader to do the same. Though T.S. Eliot did not write a hybrid text such as Woolf, his role as poet-critic who wrote essays explicating the processes at work behind creating and interpreting poetry, might be comparable in this regard. The dual processes explicated in the speech recall the dual processes of reasoning and imagining that Kant’s aesthetic and Arendt’s political judgment require.
settings. The first alone has a broader focus, relying extensively on dialogue to introduce the Pargiter family members in their own voices as they interact in their family home. In the final extant essay, the critical voice of the project makes certain the reader has noted a change in perspective; it begins by stating: “this change of perspective – this comparison between Tenbright Road and the High, between the Brooks and the Masters and Dons - added another question, of course to those Kitty was asking herself” (150). The critical voice makes obvious the narrative turn, pushes the reader to consider the implication of the perspective change, which is to generate further questions, not just in the character Kitty, but in the reader herself.45

It is by engaging both imagination and reason that readers will be able to better judge the public sphere; by both observing different perspectives located in particular contexts, imagining scenes of particular individuals, and maintaining a distance from those narratives and stories by engaging with criticism, the reader is at once immersed in real social contexts but at the same time not overwhelmed by them and therefore freer and more able to offer an original opinion or sound judgment about the context. On the one hand, the form of The Pargiters encourages readers to maintain distance from the material about which s/he reads, but on the other hand, it encourages a particular brand of imaginative projection that isn’t wholly distanced from the subjects at hand. The hybrid form of The Pargiters offers a valuable reading experience that encourages independent opinion formation and public debate among readers, particularly women who had historically not participated equally in public forums.

45 In the speech that inspired the later “novel-essay,” Woolf takes a similar position, urging her listeners to “Imagine what it is like to be a man. Put yourself in his shoes for a moment” (xxxxi). While Woolf is aware that the story of women in history has too often been told by men (a point she develops A Room of One’s Own, for example) she still urges the women she addresses to take a male perspective for a moment because it will help them distance themselves from their current situation. In the case of the speech, Woolf urges the women to distance themselves from potential bitterness when they consider the work they will have to do to establish themselves in professions in which women have not yet largely participated.
It is interesting that Woolf pointedly emphasizes how the Brooks, whose thinking is so admirable and so different, so much the product of an outsider’s perspective, have a “taste in art [that] was feeble conventional in the extreme” (137). The cancelled “feeble” in the manuscript suggests Woolf’s initial reaction to this narrative detail was condemnation for commercial, lowbrow, regrettable taste, but she notably replaced “feeble” with “conventional.” Where the Brooks disregard a nearly impossible number of Victorian social conventions, they stick to the conventions of art with which they were raised, those of the working class. When she visits the Brooks, Kitty is described as “frilled & flounced,” an opinion of Kitty’s dress the reader doesn’t see until Kitty visits the Brooks; no mention of Kitty’s dress is made in Oxford because there she must dress according to upper middle class conventions and there is nothing special to note about it in an upper middle class setting. The Brooks’ taste is considerably plainer; they see Kitty’s ornament as excessive. If any taste is condemned in *The Pargiters* it is not too conventional taste, but rather taste that places an emphasis on ornament and is detached from utility. While Walter Pater is explicitly criticized in the fifth essay for his low opinion of and prejudice against women (126), his emphasis on the “narrow chamber of the individual soul” is implicitly critiqued in the novel sections of *The Pargiters*. Kitty’s life is too narrow, her perspective is too limited; she cannot “burn with an eternal flame” though she has more opportunity than most women to devote her life to studying great artists and thinkers. Like late Victorian aesthetes such as Wilde, Woolf in *The Pargiters* critiques conventions of the Victorian household, but unlike such Aesthetes, *The Pargiters* does not condemn conventional art. Woolf instead turns to conventional art—through her use of realism and didacticism—as a way of getting her readers to actively consider Victorian conventions and their ramifications from different perspectives. Like Arendt,
Woolf’s writing invites reading to practice a new form of aesthetic judgment that is politicized for the 1930s.

Woolf does makes these moves in works other than the *The Pargiters*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, the narrative perspective shifts frequently between individuals of different genders, ages, and classes. This common ground between Woolf’s “high” and “middle” work suggests how both high modernist work and middlebrow work can be driven by similar aims and both seek to challenge readers to see multiple points of view. What is different is the reading experience that the *The Pargiters* offers and the kind of readers it might have attracted. *The Years* and *Three Guineas* both read differently than *The Pargiters*, and the published works sometimes result in opinion-making quite different from that which Woolf wished would result from her works. For example, John Maynard Keynes, a member of the Bloomsbury set, Woolf’s friend, and her sometimes intellectual sparring partner, loved *The Years* and thought it her best novel, but detested *Three Guineas* (Briggs 301). Woolf thought of these projects as different mediums that conveyed the same key ideas: women’s oppression in British society, the problems of imperialism and patriarchal traditions, etc. Yet the novel allows a wider interpretation than the non-fiction and was therefore interpreted in more myriad ways. The essay on the other hand makes its points so directly that those who objected to them completely rejected the book. A work that combines the openness of the novel with the direction of the essay has the potential to produce a different reading experience that stimulates both the imagination and reason, and in turn pluralist judgment of the public sphere, particularly by women who had not been encouraged to think about how they lived in such a way before. Woolf was not as afraid or disdainful of middlebrow writing as both scholars of the middlebrow and Woolf scholars make her out to be. Rather in the 1930s Woolf embraced the potential of this writing and attempted to
produce her own middlebrow work that would encourage readers to think carefully about the world around them. It is true that she never published *The Pargiters*, and that as she continued writing, she turned away from the fact-driven style in which she began her novel-essay, but she did for a significant time see its value. Thus might critics see the value of certain middlebrow works as well, and think twice about invoking Woolf as the middlebrow’s primary detractor.
CHAPTER 5
CODA: J. M. COETZEE’S DIARY OF A BAD YEAR

In this final chapter or “coda” of the dissertation I turn to J. M. Coetzee’s late work, with particular attention to his 2007 novel *Diary of a Bad Year*, to understand how fiction-criticism might function today. While Coetzee did briefly live in London as a young man, when he worked as a programmer for IBM, he was born and raised in South Africa and spent much of his life there, after a stint in the U.S. to complete his doctoral education and teach for a few years. He now lives in Australia. Coetzee’s work is thus removed not only by time but also geography from the other works considered here. He is certainly not a member of England’s “intellectual aristocracy,” having been born in a former colony and of Afrikaans ancestry. He also never made a living by writing journalism, though he currently reviews for the *New York Review of Books*. Instead, he has made his living by teaching at the university level, and most of his non-fiction, while not overly academic, is written more for an academically inclined audience rather than the mass-market. Winning the Nobel Prize has set his brow rather high in the eyes of the publishing world, yet like other writers discussed here, he has expressed distrust of academic work. In this chapter I will show how in today’s rather different publishing market Coetzee has both accrued ample intellectual and academic credibility and acknowledged that as a novelist he plays the role of entertainer as well. Most importantly, I will discuss how in *Diary*, the most overtly political novel of his career, Coetzee perhaps more literally than any of the earlier authors considered here combines fiction and criticism between the covers of one book to capture multiple voices and thus to provide readers ways to continuously reconsider different points of view and think carefully about what political opinions they hold.
The format and layout of *Diary of a Bad Year* is more distinctive than any of the books previously discussed and necessitates some explanation. Each page (excepting one at the end of the first part of the novel) is divided into multiple sections by black lines. Initially each page is divided into two sections, and then three after the first twenty-five pages of text. The novel is divided into two parts, the first named “Strong Opinions” and the second “Second Diary,” which contain slightly different combinations of fiction and criticism. The top section of “Strong Opinions” has short essays on political topics, e.g. “On the origins of the state,” “On Guantanamo Bay,” and “Second Diary” has essays on “softer opinions,” e.g. “On fan mail,” “My father.” The second section of each page throughout the first and second parts of the novel is the diary kept by the essays’ author, a character known as “JC” who bears striking resemblance to Coetzee; he not only shares many opinions that Coetzee has published elsewhere but tells the reader he has published the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The third section, which appears twenty-five pages in, is the narrative of JC’s secretary, Anya, a resident in his building with whom JC becomes infatuated and whose boyfriend, Alan, holds political views diametrically opposed to those of JC. The format of *Diary* is thus closer than any other text discussed here to that which Woolf aimed to produce in her unfinished draft of *The Pargiters*. *Diary*, however, is even more unusually arranged, combining essays and narrative on each page. It has been called by early reviewers a “postmodern stunt” and is formally innovative, yet it remains very easy to read and navigate.

What is perhaps most new about *Diary* is that its format encourages reading styles parallel to those made possible by new media or digitally published work; both offer more choices in reading than more traditional novels. Taking up *Diary*, one can read all the essays and then each of the narratives continuously beginning to end, or read each page in its entirety,
moving from essay to the middle narrative to the bottom narrative and back to the essay again.

One can mix and match approaches, which seems to be encouraged. Sometimes the essays reach a nice stopping point on a page, but at other times the essays and narratives spill over into the next page, requiring the reader to either abandon a thought or scene mid-sentence or skip one section and return to it later. This formal arrangement alone requires readers to reflect on their reading strategies and the perspective on which they choose to focus, JC’s “published” perspective, his rather less dignified private perspective, or the perspective of Anya and/or her boyfriend. Furthermore, an under remarked aspect of the text is the way the different perspectives reflect on each other within the text, which further encourages the reader to consider how each “strand” or section of the text relates to and complicates the others. One of the most obvious examples of this is page 50 of the text, on which the top essay considers the shame that passes from one generation to the next after committing unspeakable, inhumane deeds, e.g. the Holocaust. In the middle section, JC and Anya discuss how Alan doesn’t want children (thereby implying they won’t pass on any shame), and in the bottom section, Alan explains JC is from South Africa (thus as a citizen of Afrikaans descent, presumably a bearer of shame in his own eyes), as well as intimations of Alan’s shameless behavior to rob JC electronically, which becomes clear later in the text.

Some early reviewers favored one section over the others, claiming “the real story” was in either the fiction or the non-fiction. Those favoring the essays argued that the narratives below were too schematic to merit serious attention (cf. Wood, Begly), whereas those favoring the narrative found the essays didactic and dry (cf. Gee, Jones). Yet Coetzee’s real achievement, I argue, is in his combination of two distinct narrative perspectives on each page alongside essays that are linked to both the plot lines and character development. This format encourages
movement between thinking and feeling in unprecedented and compelling ways that reveal the importance of pluralist political judgment while encouraging it in readers.

**Coetzee’s modernism**

Though Coetzee’s late novels may be far removed—by 100 years—from some of the earlier work discussed here, his oeuvre has frequently been discussed in terms of modernist predecessors. Critics have regularly cited Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka as influential, as Coetzee wrote his doctoral dissertation in linguistics on Beckett and quite clearly references Kafka in central works like *The Life and Times of Michael K*. More recently (2012), David James has explored Coetzee’s engagement with Ford Maddox Ford, on whom Coetzee wrote a Masters thesis while living in London and studying at the British Library. James argues that Coetzee has been equally influenced by earlier modernists, Impressionists such as Ford and Conrad, and more importantly that Coetzee has carried on the modernist legacy of formal innovation with more openly emphasized political aims. Graham Bradshaw has pointed out that the whole novel, which concerns political reflection and the distractions of female beauty, might be a playing out of Yeats’ poem “Politics” (“How can I that girl standing there/ My attention fix/ On Roman or on Russian/ Or on Spanish politics?....”) (18). The reading seems plausible.

---

1 Recent critics have also argued that Coetzee’s work is moving beyond modernism or is distinct from it. Rebecca Walkowitz, for example, describes *Diary* as a novel that is “born-translated” like other contemporary texts whose language “veers away from the modernist emphasis on linguistic experimentation” (570). Benjamin Ogden describes *Diary* as adopting some of the experimental energy of modernist works, but pushing the form in very different directions: “*Diary of a Bad Year*, I believe, is very much what a novel might look like if the entire genre of the novel were to ‘roll back.’… It affords us the freedom to ‘debate the question without restraint’ of what we would wish to retain of the old novel form if it were not an ineluctable reality” (473). Ogden’s points are further discussed at the end of the chapter in relation to *Diary*’s format and digital media.
To the voices that have drawn attention to the affiliations between Coetzee and earlier modernists, I would add that his late work seems to wrestle with many of the concerns of the interwar fiction-criticism discussed here. Though Coetzee may be perfectly unaware of Woolf’s unpublished project *The Pargiters*, *Diary* really does seem to be a fuller playing out of the concepts she explored there, the combination of criticism and fiction in one text to inspire a new kind of thinking in readers. The main difference between Coetzee’s and Woolf’s projects other than *Diary*’s combination of criticism and narrative on a single page is that Coetzee reverses the relationship that Woolf explored; whereas Woolf’s original intention was to use essays to complicate the narratives, *Diary* uses narratives to contextualize and complicate the essays.

Several reviewers and scholars have described the technique of *Diary* as “counterpoint,” which is of course the term Huxley adopted to describe his fiction-criticism (cf. Spencer, Gee, Barra).\(^2\) The counterpoint or the playing of distinct “melodies” or voices together is made especially obvious by the particular format of *Diary*, but it has been a long-term project of Coetzee, as evidenced not only by his earlier novels, but also by earlier essays and interviews collected in *Doubling the Point* (1992). In a discussion about confession in Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Rousseau, he explained that “there is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer’s seriousness whether he does evoke/ invoke those countervoices in himself” (65). Notably, in this earlier essay collection he aligns novelistic counterpoint or Bakhtinian “countervoices” with “seriousness,” not light writing. One critic has asked why Coetzee bothered to write *Diary*, which seems to reproduce in more schematic form many points

---

\(^2\) Graham Bradshaw develops a slightly different musical metaphor, comparing each page to a score that groups together different instrument types such as percussion, woodwinds, fiddles (17).
of view that he has previously explored (Barra). I argue that Coetzee published this work to
explore his long held idea of counterpoint in a new form, one that engages readers in an
explicitly political and complex play of opinions that more or less requires readers to think about
what they’re reading without posing narrative difficulties.

Coetzee’s late work has explored shifting perspectives in multiple forms, through novels
that combine essays with fiction and novels that are called fiction but read like non-fiction genres
such as essays and biography. Coetzee’s character Elizabeth Costello of the eponymous novel
(2003), like Huxley’s Philip Quarles, is said to be able to “see into others.” Costello herself
sometimes says this, as in her lecture on “The Lives of Animals” and sometimes her son, John,
says so too; for example, he explains to an admirer of his mother that “My mother has been a
man, she has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into existences. I have
read her; I know it is within her powers” (22). However, the novel itself, bringing essays and
speeches into the fictional text, is not largely about character exploration, but the delivery of
ideas and expository prose through the mouth of a novelist. Even more recently, Coetzee’s 2009
novel Summertime recounts from five fictionalized perspectives a middle part of Coetzee’s life,
when he returned to South Africa in his early 30s and began publishing. Whereas the other
novels in this series of fictionalized memoirs that all bear the subtitle: “Scenes from Provincial
Life”—Boyhood and Youth—are told strictly from the third person, Summertime takes the form
of a series of five interviews between a putative biographer of Coetzee and five people who
knew him at this time of his life. These accounts are bookended by scraps of Coetzee’s
“notebooks.” As in Potterism and The Pargiters, Summertime’s narrative literally shifts between
characters, and more than simply shifting between perspectives, it likewise draws up the specter
of criticism within fiction. It does so through the interjections of the interviewer and his
conversations with his interviewees that discuss the benefits of constructing a biography in this way. For example, the biographer character says he is not interested in “coming up with a final judgment on Coetzee” but rather telling a story “from several perspectives” (217). Summertime’s form delays and cultivates judgment on the subject at hand by always offering another perspective on the same subject (and other seemingly tangential subjects too). The interviewer later asks another subject, “Which would you rather have: a set of independent reports from a range of independent perspectives, from which you can try to synthesize a whole; or the massive, unitary self-projection comprised by his oeuvre? I know which I would prefer” (220). Coetzee avoids confirming any singular opinion in the novel by not having the interviewer explicitly state which he prefers, but the form of the book makes clear that it is the former. I have chosen to focus primarily on Diary in this chapter rather than other works because it focuses more directly on political matters, is the most radical shape of fiction-criticism among these works, and has not yet been fully explored in terms of readerly judgment and its implications in the digital age.

**Coetzee and the essay**

Coetzee has written far fewer essays for the popular press than any of the other authors discussed here. David Atwell in a 1992 interview noted that Coetzee had at that point written for Vogue, Reader's Digest, and the New York Times Magazine and suggested to Coetzee that Coetzee had “tried to narrow the gap between lowbrow and highbrow” (104). Coetzee in response tried to slip Atwell’s characterization, explaining: “In the mid-1980s I slipped too easily into the role of commentator on South African affairs… I am far too bookish, too ignorant about the lives of real people to set myself up as an interpreter, much less as a judge of the lives they set to live” (104). Thus he denied the relevance of his popular journalism and involvement with
popular culture, and soon thereafter he stopped writing for journalistic venues for many years. In another interview the same year, he discussed his mistrust of journalists who interviewed him, saying “If I had had any foresight, I would have had nothing to do with journalists from the start…[There is] a philosophical cleavage between myself and the journalist” (65). His essays were frequently published in academic journals and his essay collections until 2001 were published by academic presses (University of Cape Town, Yale, Harvard, and Chicago). In the late twentieth century when the academic and popular journalist were far more disparate figures than they were in the interwar period, Coetzee seemed to have chosen the side of the academic. The choice makes sense considering that unlike the other authors considered here, he was an academic, albeit an unusually titled “Professor of General Literature,” at the University of Cape Town.

Yet since 2001 Coetzee’s essays have been put out by trade publishers (Penguin and Viking) and are subtitled “literary essays,” suggesting they are amenable to those interested in literature, but not necessarily academically trained (it is hard to imagine a tenure-track literature professor subtitling any work “literary essays” in the twenty-first century). In his later fiction, he has shown a softening towards the popular journalistic point of view. The character Elizabeth Costello who shares some marked similarities with Coetzee (though not as many as JC of Diary) is described as having written “nine novels, two books of poems, a book on bird life, and a body of journalism” (1). Throughout the novel, Costello shuttles between roles of academic lecturer and shipboard entertainer. The first lecture she gives in the novel is to an audience at what she sees as a somewhat subpar university, which Costello and her son John agree is staffed by “lightweights” (7). She gives her second lecture aboard a cruise ship, a gig for which she willingly signs up, fully understanding it is a “a light affair.” There she thinks of herself there not
as a writer, but as an “entertainer” (52). The third and fourth chapters recount lectures Costello gives at another fictional university, lectures which were in reality delivered by Coetzee in the envelope of fiction at a Princeton University in 1997 as the prestigious Tanner Lectures. The novel also discusses Costello’s appearance on television: “All the quaintnesses that she refused to present [at an earlier academic lecture]…are allowed to come out” before the television audience, for whom she discusses encounters with celebrities among other things (20). The novel thus complicates any simple alignment of a Coetzee-like author with a highbrow stance; it shows how such a writer is treated and understood differently in different settings.3 I do not mean to equate Costello with Coetzee, but similarities between them call out for readers to make connections and comparisons between his life and hers. Costello’s own movement between academic and popular audiences seems to mirror Coetzee’s own, which has of late leaned more towards the intellectual journalistic in his reviewing for the New York Review of Books as well as his fiction-criticism.

Contemporary critics and reviewers have noted the essayistic turn of Coetzee’s late fiction without much praise for it. Zadie Smith, for example, looks down upon the development, explaining that in his “rather anemic late works…the essayistic…reign[s] supreme” (qtd. in James 132). In a review titled “Even Noble winners make mistakes,” Adam Mars-Jones likens Coetzee’s late fiction’s relationship to the novel to a hologram’s relationship to sculpture, that is a mere reflection, insubstantial. These comments bear some resemblance to comments about Macaulay and Huxley’s work, as a product of “weak” or less developed fictional technique that

3 The variety of contexts in which his work is received is evident on the dust jacket of the 2007 hardback edition of Diary. The first blurb is a quote from O, The Oprah Magazine. The second, from John Banville, notes “a new access of warmth and humor, and…a vivifying fondness for his characters.” The final blurb is from The Nation. This combination of sources suggests the book is marketed towards thinking readers, certainly, but ones who may also appreciate the “human” side of literature that Macaulay associated with the middlebrow.
still manages to reflect intellectual interests. Jonathan Lamb points out that Coetzee’s late novels sometimes quote verbatim from his essays previously published as journalism, a practice familiar to both Macaulay and Huxley throughout their careers, and to Woolf in her draft of *The Pargiters*. As Coetzee has begun to incorporate essays into his fiction, as in *Elizabeth Costello* and even more dramatically in *Diary*, his essays have become more readable to a general public rather than pitched at an academic audience, though his fictional technique is thought to be less artistically serious.

Though popular critics have been harsh on Coetzee for his essayistic turn, academic critics have read it as Tolstoyan, as the turn of a master novelist from the delights of realism to a more didactic discussion of moral and political concerns. Whereas Macaulay and Huxley’s essayistic tendencies categorized them as “uncongenial novelists,” this has not been the case for Coetzee in academic criticism. Perhaps this is because his essayistic fiction has come late in his career—as it did for Woolf—and because in *Diary* he explicitly discusses the late phase of Tolstoy’s career in which he abandoned realism and wrote stripped down didactic fiction. Critics have taken this as a cue to compare the later Coetzee with later Tolstoy, arguing it is not that Coetzee is writing less challenging and highbrow fiction, but more strongly arguing his points as Tolstoy once did. Julian Murphet has explained how the didacticism in *Diary* is complicated: “The author [Coetzee] wants to have his cake and eat it, his Tolstoyan will to *parrhesia* and yet retract it through Dostoyevskian compositional devices, decenterment and ironization” (74).

Drawing on Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony in Dostoyevsky (and the lack of it in Tolstoy), Murphet means that Coetzee wants to assert strong monological opinions at the same time that

---

4 Though scholars have generally been kind, Coetzee himself questions his—ostensibly Costello’s—affinity for realism in the opening chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, where he describes the writer’s lack of taste for creating believable fictional worlds.
he decenters them by placing the strong opinions among multiple other voices. While Coetzee’s narratives in *Diary* are so stripped down to seem ghostly at points, being very simple and even stereotypical, they still complicate the essays that are above them; they still manage to make readers think more carefully about the strong opinions that might otherwise go unchecked or receive less subtle consideration.

Coetzee himself has carefully and extensively reflected on the role of the writer as novelist and expository essayist in his late fiction. Elizabeth Costello, for example, ponders her identity as a novelist or a thinker when she muses, “Writers and thinkers, chalk and cheese. No, fish and fowl. But which is she, the fish or fowl? Which is her medium, water or air?” (10). Once again, I do not mean to take Costello as a direct avatar of Coetzee, but I do want to point out that Coetzee’s posing of the question by a fictional character that does resemble him raises the question of Coetzee’s own place as “fish” or “fowl,” novelist or thinker, or perhaps as a writer whose “natural medium” is between water and air, or is both. In the 1992 essay and interview collection *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee carefully articulated what he saw as the difference between writing fiction and criticism:

> The feel of writing fiction is one of responsibility to something that has not yet emerged…when I write criticism on the other hand, I am always aware of…a goal that has been set not only by the argument…but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself. If I were truly a creative critic, I would work toward liberating that discourse, making it less monological…but the candid truth is I don’t have enough investment in criticism to try (246).

Twenty years after that interview, beginning with *Elizabeth Costello* and then extending the effort in *Diary*, Coetzee seems to have made that investment. He explicitly combines the mediums of “water” and “air” to create new forms of reflective writing. Coetzee has worked at and I believe succeeded in making the genre of criticism “less monological” and more reflective.
Coetzee’s politics

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of *Diary* upon its publication was its direct and even strident engagement with contemporary political concerns. For many years, the standard line on Coetzee and politics was that for one living in South Africa under apartheid, he was an only obliquely political writer, and according to many South African critics, his fiction was infuriatingly lacking in political will and local, concrete critique. His work was not censored by the apartheid government because the government believed his novels treated “universal” themes, not ones politically threatening to the status quo in South Africa. To what extent the main body of work that Coetzee wrote while living in South Africa is political or anti-political is still a matter of debate. Since leaving for Australia, his fiction has become much more openly opinionated, especially in regards to politics. Jane Poyner explains, “In the later fictions Coetzee for the first time engages with the ethico-politics of the public intellectual” (169). That is, Coetzee may more freely talk politics in his later novels, but it is never in a simple, declarative way; he has always framed these more open political statements within narratives, complicating the question of his own stance and what stance he is promoting, if any.5

In *Elizabeth Costello*, *Summertime*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*, the politics of an author character who bears more or less—in all cases quite a lot—of resemblance to Coetzee are brought directly into the storyline. In *Elizabeth Costello*, the title character famously or infamously comes out with rather extreme opinions on animal rights in addition to thoughts on the politics of Negritude, for example, though the politics there are not brought to the surface as

5 One of the more radical readings of Coetzee’s recent more ventures into more openly political fiction is Ogden’s, who points out that the beginning of *Diary* resembles that of *Costello* in that both concern beginnings, *Costello* the beginning of a novel, and *Diary* the “origins of the state” (469). Ogden argues Diary might thus be read to understand how the crafting of literature is like the crafting of a state (469).
much as they are in even more recent works. One interviewee in *Summertime*, for example, describes “Coetzee”—he is named as such—in the 70s as not “apolitical but anti-political,” explaining that Coetzee thought “politics brought out the worst in people and brought to surface the worst types in society. He preferred to have nothing to do with it” (228). The essay portions of *Diary* are more or less a rehearsal of a whole gamut of political opinions by JC, author of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. There, for example, JC objects to the notion that one must either serve a government and implicitly support it, or revolt against it: “there is a third way, chosen by thousands and millions of people everyday. It is the way of quietism, willed obscurity, inner emigration” (12). Notably JC aligns his political stance with that of “millions” of others, claiming his stance is a rule, not an exception. Alluding perhaps to the oblique political power of his earlier work, he emphasizes how he and others use the mind and imagination to escape political situations they find undesirable. Later in the novel, in the second part called “Second Diary,” JC explicitly states “his brand of political thought”: he says “if pressed”—indicating he’d rather not—he would explain it as “pessimistic anarchistic quietism or anarchistic quietistic pessimism or pessimistic quietistic anarchism” (203). Once more, he confirms his lack of outward political will, his “quietism” and further indicates a dour of vision of the future as well as his impossibly idealistic ideas of politics. Assuming this description of JC bears some relation to J. M. Coetzee, it may seem strange that Coetzee has included any political opinions at all in his work.

He does so, it seems, to get readers thinking about how those who are not politicians can participate in politics. In a strong opinion “On Harold Pinter,” JC states that “When one speaks through one’s own person—that is not through one’s art—to denounce some politician or other, using the rhetoric of the agora, one embarks on a contest which one is likely to lose because it
takes place on ground where one’s opponent is far more practiced and adept” (127). In combining strong political opinions stated in expository form with two simultaneously running narratives, Coetzee seems to be bringing the agora into fiction, onto his own ground so he can comment in an effective manner. And yet as an author he does not depict one authoritative voice that “wins” an argument because that would go against what he has worked towards in all his fiction, to represent multiple voices, dialogue, and the questioning of authority.

Poyner has argued that this move turns critical attention back onto authors and intellectuals like Coetzee himself. She explains that “The metageneric play of the Costello lectures and Diary of a Bad Year self-reflexively strips away layers of intellectual authority to make Coetzee both accountable and not accountable to the ethico-politics his characters promote…It is the slippage between author and author-protagonist that energizes questions about relations between public intellectuals and the truths they promote” (169). While this is true, I would venture to say that Diary does even more than that. Its “generic play,” or combination of essays with two separate narratives, also encourages readers to think about their own political opinions from multiple angles and reflect upon how they have come to hold those opinions.

**Public opinion in Diary of a Bad Year**

Upon reading the first part of Diary, it is unclear whether Coetzee is interested in reaching general readers. JC, the author of the “strong opinions” seems initially to be dismissive of public opinion. In an essay on pedophilia, for example, he complains that “Public opinion …is simply not in the mood for fine distinctions” when it comes to the difference between exploring an idea through art and life; he portrays the public as becoming increasingly closed minded since the 60s, when the film version of Lolita was made (53). Yet fairly early on, Coetzee includes
alongside JC’s opinions others that are quite different. Anya, his secretary, comments unfavorably on the work JC has written: “All he writes about is politics. It makes me yawn” (26). Anya later tells JC, whom she calls “Señor C,” that the “know it all tone” he uses in his “Strong Opinions” “really turns people off” (70) and that he should lighten up his opinions so that others will be willing to read them. The bored Anya objects mostly to the subject matter and tone of JC’s essays, but Alan more directly argues against the political underpinnings of JC’s opinions, with some verve. Alan is portrayed as a formidable interlocutor, subscribing to highbrow weeklies and quarterlies and being teased for being an intellectual by his co-workers. Sue Kossew has compared the form of Diary to the model of “talkback radio,” i.e. what talk radio is called in Australia, explaining that such radio “represents a democratization of accessibility to the expression of ideas [that is] echoed in the text’s multi-vocal form” (122). While we know talk radio in the U.S. can be at times monological rather than dialogical, its form, like that of the novel, does offer the opportunity for disparate voices to offer different perspectives.

Later on in the story, JC appears to have taken Anya’s advice seriously, when a “soft opinion” on “mass emotion” appears in the “Second Diary.” JC articulates how he actively removed himself from such group emotion: “As a young man he never doubted the need for an artist to be disengaged from the mass for true art to emerge. My art has glorified this disengagement” (170). However, he then asks, “What sort of art has it been, in the end?, this art that is disengaged from public opinion and emotion, and answers: “Art that is not great-souled, as the Russians would say, that lacks generosity, fails to celebrate life, lacks love” (170). JC’s reconsideration bears some relation to Huxley’s thoughts on sentiment in art, how he saw its value and thought highbrow artists should not be afraid of engaging audiences’ emotions. The last page of the essay section of Diary returns to the standards that Russian novelists, particularly...
Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, have set for great work, which makes a writer “a better artist…not more skillfully, but ethically better” (227). JC seems to reaffirm the standards of those great works that tackle what has elsewhere been derogatively called “sentimental.”

JC takes up another topic suggested by Anya, love and romance, when he describes a poster of Robert Dosineau’s iconic photograph, “The Kiss,” in the “Second Diary.” Patrick Hayes sees this discussion as “sheer sentimental bathos” that “brushes over [the photograph’s] commercial context and its straightforward participation in mass emotion” (232). I would argue, however, that regardless of the content of the essay itself, its existence indicates an important change in JC’s thinking, or if not a change, a willingness to experiment with thinking in another way. Perhaps JC’s exegesis is not successful, unconvincing, but it shows how he has listened to an alternative opinion (Anya’s) and broadened his perspective.6

Coetzee’s feminism?

One of the most controversial aspects of the novel is its depiction of its sole female character, Anya. Through the musings of JC in his narrative running beneath the strong opinions, she is first introduced as nothing more than a sexualized object: she is described as wearing a

6 In another parallel to the other authors of fiction-criticism discussed here, JC is extremely critical of academia in this volume. In the earlier Costello, the title character makes several jabs at the academy as she travels to various universities and comments on the activity and personalities she meets there, but in Diary, the criticism is scathing. JC compares apparently paranoid prosecutors of potential terrorists to literary professors who vaunted critical theory and the hermeneutics of suspicion in the 1980s and 90s, arguing the theorists “bore away at a set of analytical instruments” in a way that their “students,” the twenty-first century prosecutors, “sensed could be useful outside the classroom” to create an aura of suspicion, to take nothing at face value (33). While this is perhaps another of the “too strong” opinions that could afford to be reconsidered in another light, it is notable that JC decides to soften some of his opinions by bringing more emotion into his text, but not by softening his position on academics. While this may not make him a middlebrow writer, it shows that he like the other authors considered here is more open to speaking to the public than to what they see as the ivory tower.
“tomato-red shift” that is “startling in its brevity” (3) and “thongs…of the kind that go on the feet” (6). Her “derrière [is] so near perfect as to be angelic” (8). JC goes so much over the top in his idealized description that it is comical; for example, he refers to Anya as a “celestial paramour” (11) that stirs in him “a metaphysical ache or least the post-physical kind” (13). It could be surmised that Coetzee is simply representing with some honesty the inner thoughts of an old man with erotic desires, but the way he narrates Anya’s thoughts, at least at first, is equally reductive, e.g., she thinks, “As I pass him [JC]…I make sure I waggle my behind, my delicious behind sheathed in tight denim” (25), and later “Wifey [of a third party] must have uneasy dreams about hubby succumbing of the lures of someone like me, racy, exciting, exotic” (27). The use of the word “exotic” by a postcolonial author to describe someone of Filipino-Australian descent is particularly galling. Even if the approach is humorous, slapstick—the impotent old man lusting after the beautiful young woman—it is disturbing to see a Nobel Prize winner depict a woman in such a way. At the same time, JC’s description is so blunt and schematic, it seems likely that it is intended to make readers think about—and question—the authority of the author of the “Strong Opinions” that run above these thoughts, to make readers consider the essays in a different light. Katy Iddiols has argued that the salacious details, such as Anya surmising JC has stolen her panties and masturbated in them, are intended to “make it difficult for his [Coetzee’s] readers to associate Coetzee with this figure” and to put some distance between JC and Coetzee (194). I would argue instead that these sorts details make readers think twice about what seems to be the highly rational, reflective, intellectual point of view presented in the essay section of “Strong Opinions.” As Poyner nicely states: “JC’s thoughts on Anya’s derrière below thoughts on state and citizenry threaten to test the moral high ground he takes in his public interventions” (172). That Coetzee, JMC, chooses to so closely
align his character JC with his own biography complicates matters all the more, suggesting that readers should question not just the fictional JC but the authority of the now famous and widely respected author himself.

Coetzee also seems to be engaging with Nabokov in *Diary* and his predecessor’s depiction of inappropriate sexual desires among other things. As Allen Barra has pointed out, Nabokov’s collection of reviews, interviews, and letters to the editor is titled *Strong Opinions*, the name of the first part of *Diary*, though Nabokov there proclaimed that he loathed politics in fiction. The fact that *Diary*’s “Strong Opinions” are so blatantly political, and far more political than anything Coetzee has previously published seems to be an open flaunting of Nabokov’s dictum. Yet Coetzee’s combination of fiction and criticism in *Diary* speaks affectionately to Nabokov’s combination of poetry and criticism in *Pale Fire*. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, JC defends Nabokov’s depiction of a man with detestable desires and is impatient with audiences that will not consider how art might comment upon social relations rather than simply enforce or discourage certain moral values. In his depiction of JC’s lust for Anya, Coetzee may be testing his own readers’ tolerance for the artistic representation of objectionable matters. The allusions to Nabokov get more interesting when Anya briefly adopts Humbert-Humbert style language play, e.g., “At first I was just supposed to be his segretaria, his secret aria, his scary fairy, in fact, not even that, just his typist, his tipista, his clackadackia” (28). The relationship between Anya and JC is in some ways the inverse of that between Lolita and Humbert; though JC and Anya are similarly distant in age, Anya is a grown woman, 29 turning 30 in the text, and quite sexually

---

7 In a 1992 interview recorded in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee said that at that time he had “no relation to Nabokov” left because he could not abide Nabokov’s refusal to acknowledge the politics and class inequalities behind the Russian Revolution; Nabokov only wallowed in nostalgia for the loss of his ancestral home and estate (28). Thus it seems Coetzee has long differed from Nabokov on the treatment of politics in fiction.
experienced—and she and JC never have any sexual relationship. More importantly, Anya is given about a third of each page, and sometimes two thirds, to state her point of view, unlike Lolita, whose speech is reported by Humbert. Most importantly, Anya’s opinions influence JC for the better, unlike Lolita who is influenced by Humbert for the worse. While Anya is the object of JC’s desire, she is shown to have quite a few desires of her own, to be creative, and most importantly to eventually provide a highly valuable point of view.

If Coetzee were objectifying a young woman in his narrative simply to reference and engage with the work another author (Nabokov) or to make a point about what art should be able to do, his depiction of Anya would still be worrying. In the first part of the novel, Coetzee’s picture of Anya might bear some resemblances to Huxley’s depiction of women in his 1920s novels in its flatness and adherence to stereotypes. What makes Diary more interesting, though, is the way that Anya’s character and her narrative develop throughout the novel as well as they way her voice vitally contributes to the “counterpoint” or interplay of voices there. Hayes has tried to recover a feminist perspective in the novel by arguing that Anya’s “crass and stupid flirtations” are “political achievements won by modern culture” (241). More convincing, however, are assessments of Anya’s “razor-sharp mind,” which emerges from her “purely material” introduction (Porter 193) and her own reassessment of her values and her place in the world as well as JC’s reassessment of his.

At the beginning of the novel, Anya consciously takes a subservient role in her relationship with her boyfriend, Alan, with whom she lives and for whom she plays homemaker. Anya explains in her narrative that runs at the bottom of each page, “I learned long ago that it is not worth the candle to get into an argument with Alan and win” (83), so she lets him win all the time. She says that they like to argue a lot “in bed” (84), so it’s not as though they aren’t having
arguments; she just has learned not to push her reasoning and rhetoric farther than Alan does his. When a bit later Alan chastises her for defending JC over himself, she describes his domineering reaction: “Alan gives me another of his sharp looks, a very sharp one indeed this time, like I am the boss and don’t you forget that. Whose side are you on, Anya? he says” (108, emphasis original). She replies “I am on your side. I am always on your side. I just want to hear how the argument goes” (108). It is made clear that she cannot take an independent stance, cannot, somewhat like the Victorian Kitty of Woolf’s The Pargiters assert her own opinion in her own home. The major difference between Anya and Kitty is of course that Anya should have more options professionally and could choose not to be a house-girlfriend; societal pressures for women to serve men at home have changed in the twenty-first century, at least in Australia where the novel is set. Yet the way Anya begins to open up and express her own opinions just as Kitty does is worth exploring further.

This line of Anya’s might have come directly from Kitty’s mouth: “I dutifully listen [to others’ opinions]. But what about me, who listens to my opinions?” (101). Anya is expected to sympathize, and she does sympathize with the men in her life, but she reaches a breaking point where she begins to yearn to assert her own point of view. In the second part of the book, the “Second Diary,” at which point Anya and JC have fought but made up after he offers a long apology, her voice in fact takes over JC’s narrative, the middle section of the page. The section is at first left blank and then only filled in with conversation between JC and Anya, not JC’s thoughts alone. Finally it is taken over entirely by Anya’s voice, as JC reads a letter that she wrote to him about her new life after leaving Alan. In the middle section where earlier in the text JC had been crudely fantasizing about her, she is later given space to explain her reasons for
breaking up with Alan, her new life in a new town, and her ability to consider ideas more fully and express herself more freely than she had before meeting JC.

If Anya is able to express her opinions more fully by the novel’s end, JC has more nuanced opinions than he did at the beginning of the novel, both about politics and about Anya, thanks to her influence. JC’s “Strong Opinions” are not titled as such idly; he explains that “My opinions were now so strong …there was no chance that a refraction through her [Anya’s] gaze could alter their angle” (125). Yet he does later say that “What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya is not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions…there are flickering moments when I can see these hard opinions of mine through her eyes—see how alien and antiquated they may seem” (136-7). Kossew and Paul Patton have pointed out that in the second part of the book, JC takes up some of the topics that Anya suggests or that come up in their conversation, such as “On the erotic life” and “On the mother tongue” (Kossew 119, Patton 54). Anya is still quite frank about her sexuality in the last letter that she writes to JC, explaining that she “never minded” his thoughts about her and even encouraged them, seeing herself as a kind of muse—helping his work in ways other than simply typing (208-209). Yet she is given a fuller voice, than say, one of Huxley’s women; her personality is multidimensional, and furthermore she finds a way to assert her point of view in ways that others listen and consider.8

8 Mid-narrative when Anya explains that she has “begun to feel crushed between him [Alan] and Señor C,” she compares them to “hard certainties on the one side and hard opinions on the other” (109). The “opinions” of JC or “Señor C,” as Anya and Alan call him, might be read as what Arendt would call “reflective judgments,” being based on discussion and persuasion, not facts, whereas Alan’s “certainties” might be read as “determinate judgments,” being based on economic facts that Alan believes are inarguable truths of contemporary life. But though JC’s might be more open to debate than Alan’s, both men are “hard” in their thinking and therefore hard of hearing any outlook other than their own. Whereas Alan does not change his perspective, it being based on what he sees as indisputable facts, JC does eventually change “his opinion of
The sections that describe Anya are often uncomfortable to read. The fact that the only woman in the novel seems to be a sexpot is not encouraging. Yet each of the characters is reduced, schematic, and unlikeable. JC is a dirty old man with fixed ideas and Alan is a sexist, amoral businessman set to commit fraud. Murphet in fact dismisses the narrative part of the book because the characters involved in the “love triangle” of sorts are so unoriginal and so neatly allegorical (78). Even if they are types, however, like the characters in the fiction-criticism discussed earlier, they still get readers thinking about and comparing different perspectives within the context of one narrative. The function of JC, Anya, and Alan is not to reveal depth of character but play of opinions. Against all odds, it seems there is a feminist bent to Diary because Anya is essential to that opinion play.

Judgment and new media

My first reason for including Diary in this dissertation was to consider how fiction-criticism has fared nearly 100 years after the publication of the earliest novel considered here. It should be clear that the questions engaging the authors of fiction-criticism in the early twentieth century still very much engage writers and readers today. It is possible that they are even more engaging considering new forms of media that are becoming popular. In any case, the media revolution at the turn of the twentieth century bears some resemblances to that at the turn of the twenty-first (for one thing, people certainly complain about the internet in ways much like earlier critics who complained about newspapers). Diary is a contemporary novel not just in its discussion of contemporary political figures and events but also in its references to contemporary...
technology. A significant element of the plot is Alan’s plan to rob JC by hacking into his computer and electronically diverting money in JC’s savings accounts. JC, though so averse to computers that he refuses to type up his manuscripts and hires Anya to do so, does have some engagement with technology; he discusses data mining (23), for example, though social media doesn’t enter into the picture. But *Diary* does more than simply reference new technologies and different ways they are used to inspire and thwart relationships. It is a novel exemplary of its times in that its form shares something with new media and digital publishing and the reading choices it offers, and as such suggests something about judgment in the early twenty-first century. Ogden has emphasized how the form of the book encourages readers to “exercise the freedom” to move in and out of the narrative and consume it as they see fit (474). He further explains that “This formal configuration…means that we can help create the novel, can “participate in its coming into being,” without becoming permanently subject to its logic” (474).

While Ogden does not reference new forms of digital publishing—his main concern is how the formation of a literary text parallels the formation of a government—the way he speaks about *Diary* illuminates how the novel gives readers options in a way that multi-media published on the web and elsewhere does. Readers of *Diary* can choose multiple paths to read through it, and perhaps more importantly help re-create the text by reading it different ways. The two narratives that run below the opinions and comment on the process of its creation function something like the comments section below an online article or story. New media allows for readers’ reactions to texts to be read immediately after, alongside, or even before the article itself is read, just as *Diary* allows us to see what Anya and Alan think about JC’s opinions, in addition to the author’s own self reflection. While of course there are vast differences between *Diary* and digital publishing it is notable how *Diary*’s form offers some of the choices that reading on the internet
offers. Digital publishing platforms such as Scalar, for example, which offer the option to view webpages with a text emphasis, image emphasis, or a balance of text and images, are just one example of how readers online can choose to consume “books” and texts.

This resonance is remarkable not simply because *Diary* is a member of the novel genre that has been around far longer than digital publishing and is in most cases quite different from new media found on the internet, but more importantly because it suggests something about judgment by readers in the twenty-first century. While we know only a very small portion of people who read articles leave comments on them, and that often comments are knee-jerk reactions or the tirades of trolls, they still promise to make non-fiction “less monological” to use Coetzee’s words, to not let an idea rest as it is, but to immediately show alternative perspectives on it. Drawing firm conclusions about all of new media and its relationship to judgment would require a dissertation of its own, but I would tentatively put forth that *Diary*’s loose relationship to new media suggests that the latter, like the former, will offer multiple points of view, expanding readers’ judgment. For such a novel, whose tone is frequently grim and whose characters are largely unappealing, it does offer hope in the early twenty-first century, not only for writers to experiment further with aesthetic forms that combine genres such as fiction and criticism, but also for readers to embrace choices in their reading and to broaden their perspectives when considering the world around them.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


-----.


-----.


-----.


Peacock, Thomas Love. *Headlong Hall and Nightmare Abbey.* London: J M Dent and Sons Ltd, 1929.


