Reading the Feminine Middlebrow:

An exploration of the 1920s romance novel

An Honors Thesis for the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Preface

In 2011, Macy Halford of *The New Yorker* covered an interview of Zadie Smith, wherein the author insisted on being called a reviewer rather than a critic for her *Harper's* New Books column. Malford praised Zadie Smith as a literary figure "working in the grand middlebrow tradition", as she proudly made the distinction between "all-powerful and hoity-toity judge-type (the critic) and the sort of fellow-traveler (the reviewer), who approaches a book in a spirit of camaraderie and aims to represent that book in a piece of writing as carefully crafted as the book itself." This middlebrow classification was later deemed offensive by Halford's readers, who called for an explanation. In response, Halford defended her use of the "fraught term" as a positive ode to publications like *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*, often themselves "viewed as prime examples of the middlebrow": "[They are] magazines devoted to the high but also to making it accessible to many; to bringing ideas that might remain trapped in ivory towers and academic books, or in high-art scenes, into the pages of a relatively inexpensive periodical that can be bought at bookstores and newsstands across the country (and now on the Internet)." The contemporary debate offers an important glimpse into the misunderstood concept and subsequent denigration of the middlebrow category, which has persisted since the term's emergence in the 1920s. It is a topic I similarly stumbled upon within British academia, while studying romantic women's novels with limited scholarly treatment due to their middlebrow positioning. This project is about rewarding such books the attention and contextualization they so thoroughly deserve. Playing into the position of critic, I seek to study the reason behind this continued lack of engagement and regard. On the other hand, as both comrade and reviewer, I hope to illustrate

the complexities of the affective, accessible female writing of the 1920s, re-salvaged and valued anew.

Emergence of the "Middlebrow"

In today's scholarship, the 1920s are largely considered the height of canonical modernism, as famous authors like Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield released broadly criticized texts including *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *The Garden Party* (1921). Their increasingly complex styles and themes led to the relegation of other more accessible women writers and the social phenomena scholars often refer to as "the battle of the brows." A stark classist division grew between high modernist culture and popular culture, which was increasingly associated with highbrow imitation. Novelists such as Rosamond Lehmann, E. Arnot Robertson, and Elizabeth Von Arnim are only slowly emerging from their classification as "middlebrow" romance novelists denigrated in their time as authors of "joyous extravagance [taken] too seriously" (The Enchanted April: *The Bookman*), "characterized by tried and proven techniques and an oscillation between plagiarism and parody" (Bourdieu 128). As similarly economically privileged authors with early romance novels published in the heart of the 1920s, Lehmann, Robertson, and Von Arnim should be uniquely regarded as pioneers of a critically inclined romantic middlebrow genre, rather than mere unsuccessful mimics of the characteristically modernist style. Understanding this distinction is vital in moving away from both the marginalization of popular intellectual culture in the 20th century, and its lack of treatment in the 21st.

The term "middlebrow" made its first appearance in the December 1925 issue of *Punch*. A satirical news round-up titled *"Charivaria"* claims: "The B.B.C. appear to have discovered a

new type, the 'middlebrow.' It consists of people who are hoping that someday they will get used to the stuff they ought to like" (*Charivaria* 673). This attitude towards intellectualism and its prescription of what one "ought to" engage with is similarly illustrated in another *Punch* article five years earlier, titled "High-brows, ltd.", in which a comical business proposal asserts the need for an intricately designed museum trip ending with the dispersal of a certificate which "may come to be accepted as carrying complete immunity, for at least a month, from every form of intellectual treat…thus in less than 2 hours, you are now free to spend your holiday exactly as you choose" (*High-Brows, Ltd*.) The proposal appears to nearly parody the unposted letter of Virginia Woolf, titled "Middlebrow" (1932), which most infamously began the debate around browed artistic engagement. In the scathing response to a review which failed to regard her work as highbrow, Woolf both revels in her appreciation of the lowbrow ("I love lowbrows; I study them."), upholds the highbrow ("We highbrows read what we like and do what we like and praise what we like."), and denigrates the middlebrow as "the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters…in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige" (*Middlebrow)*. A similar perspective is perceivable in T.S. Eliot's *London Letter (1922)*; unsurprisingly so considering his relationship to the Woolf's through Hogarth Press: "The middle classes, in England as elsewhere, under democracy are morally dependent upon the aristocracy, and the aristocracy are morally in fear of the middle class which is gradually absorbing and destroying them" (*London Letter)*. Here, Eliot chooses to address class anxieties beyond the desire to ascend, pointing to the 1920s rise of the middle class and resulting upper class apprehensions. Such regard for class interestingly corresponds with the life of Eliot himself, who refused the "cursed funding" from the Bloomsbury group in order to maintain his

position as a bank clerk, as he was "actually very interested in the minutiae of everyday life" (Flood).

The most famous response to Woolf's essay on the Middlebrow came from *Harper's* editor Russel Lynes 27 years later. The satirical essay not only draws on Woolf's pompous position but parodies the very socio-cultural notions of taste and its supposed levels: "And the highbrow sees as his real enemy the middlebrow, whom he regards as a pretentious and frivolous man or woman who uses culture to satisfy social or business ambitions…It is part of his function to as a highbrow to protect the arts from the culture-mongers, and he spits venom at those he suspects of selling the muses short" (Lynes 149). The essay concludes in a vastly recreated chart,

Lynes' Analysis, 154

distinguishing the hierarchies of American taste in terms of miniscule categories, like those of "salads" and "useful objects." The chart garnered massive attention after its release in 1959, as people began to identify their own class standings based on the chart in a sort of mass draw to social classification and competition (Scott). Although the piece was notably American and of the later post-war period, it does suggest a continued, global sense of class anxiety, bolstered by the categorical rigidity that the separate "brows" promote. Here, I am choosing to neither advocate for this extreme method, nor condemn its value. Rather, I seek to dip back into the socio-cultural context of the early to mid-20th century in order to inform a unique conclusion on the intersection of reading, class, and its categorization.

Contemporary Literature Review

Tracing the concept of the "middlebrow" from its early satirical usage to these later critiques illustrates the evolution of a term which, as Nicola Humble has asserted, "…is not a fixed designation, there is no such thing as 'middlebrow literature'. It is a category into which texts move at certain moments in their social history," but which, at its core, "is a useful category only when it's irritating or shameful to some people" (D'hoker and Humble 260). Essentially, the history of the "middlebrow" is that of denigration and categorical rigidity. Woolf condemns the authorial desire for recognition, while Eliot denotes the middlebrow writer as a sort of highbrow copycat. Yet, neither regard the difference in reading context or literary style which distinguishes the pointed highbrow reader from the affected middlebrow consumer and their distinct texts. Fielding draws upon this in her own crucial work: "As these writers described how the novel might be made to endure beyond its reading, how it might be rendered a formal object rather than a reader's experience, they imagined it as an intellectualized form, whose primary function

would be epistemological, not affective." This contrasts what she considers the middlebrow prerogative: to "open itself up to, not to protect itself from, its readers…court[ing] the affective relationship that readers so deeply desired" (Fielding 8). Unlike the complex academic commentary which notable modernist works reward, in such "middlebrow" texts, "to interpret a work is to tell the story of reading" (Culler 64). The proliferation of such texts across lending libraries and book-of-the-month clubs "resist[ed] the facile glamorization of the housewife…engag[ing] in a thoughtful, often lyrical, witty reclamation of domesticity and the home. They simultaneously privileged and critiqued the home and homemaking, at times resenting the demands of the family on the 'domesticated female'…offer[ing] women writers a pattern with which to write or against which to write" (Briganti and Mezei 64). Yet, as female authors gained popular recognition, they were paradoxically relegated from academia for precisely those "elements that have given them that label – domestic setting, concern with courtship and marriage, the 'lucid' prose and wit" (15). Literary analysis of the complex commentary that the middlebrow form allows is thus vastly underrepresented in contemporary criticism. This begs the question: if popular female novelists who reached the commentary of "highbrow" authors like Woolf and Eliot were relegated for cultural and classist reasons rather than on the basis of their literary merit, what lies untouched in the lines of such academically dismissed texts? The romance genre emerges as a field particularly relegated for its feminine associations, and thus particularly deserving of new and closer treatment.

The topic of the feminine middlebrow novel and its relation to modernism has been thoroughly handled in the work of scholars including Nichola Humble, Laura Marcus, Hillary Hinds, and Ann Ardis. Yet, more often than not, critical work around the feminine middlebrow, like that of Nicola Humble, engages with female novelists as either parenthetical afterthoughts or

cultural phenomena merely on the outskirts of modernism: "I shall focus on works written by and for women where were generally considered to be middlebrow: the authors considered include Stella Gibbons, Rachel Ferguson, E.M. Delafield, Margery Allingham, Nancy Mitford, Rosamond Lehmann, and E. Arnot Robertson" ("Chapter 5" 101). Humble's studies, however, are particularly astute and commonly used within most contemporary literature on the subject. Her most unique work addresses a cultural perspective around distinctions between highbrow and middlebrow reading practices:

> The more serious point that arises from this contention is that the distinction between high and middlebrow is primarily one of context rather than content… Upright, rigid, physically unable to relax, the scholar engages with his reading from a bodily position of alertness, hostility, separateness from the text. In marked contrast, the leisured reader lolls, relaxing into his book and chair, spine curled, virtually fetal. ("Sitting Forward", 48).

Such shorter works of Humble, including the above essay "Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading" and her chapter in *The History of British Women's Writing*, prioritize the context of reading over that of textual interpretation. Thus, If Humble were to apply her own principles to her reading of middlebrow fiction, she would undoubtedly take on the academic's position of "alertness" and "separateness" from the texts which she attributes to the highbrow reader. In this way, the reader-based literary theory she utilizes seems to place her at a similar distance from the reader she upholds, prompting her to stand apart and take notes on the phenomena of the reading process rather than engaging as a middlebrow reader supposedly would. Humble thus demonstrates the contemporary association of textual distance and academic engagement that this study attempts to overturn. Her work raises questions around the proper way to read, including whether or not academia can and should discuss the vulnerable engagement which the middlebrow text calls for. Thus, although I consider Humble's work

around the topic valuable and inciteful, I will merely use it as a jumping point for my own argument, which grants more weight to the affective quality of the text rather than the classification of the genre itself.

Carmen Callil of Virago press is, in this way, a fundamental player in growing contemporary criticism around the middlebrow. Virago press, a feminist publication house founded by Callil in 1973, published works of Lehmann, Robertson, and Von Arnim in their 1978 series of "Virago Modern Classics", which aimed to "amplify the widest range of women writers and elevate voices from all backgrounds" as well as "demonstrate the existence of a canon of women's writing" (*About Virago*). The term "Virago" is defined as a "domineering, violent, or bad-tempered woman; a female warrior," corresponding with Callil's interest in feminism as "celebration rather than victimization." Callil's approach to publishing emphasizes the importance of proliferation over politics: "The market that I wanted to reach was not primarily feminist. Rather, I wanted to present feminism to a mass market" (Simons and Fullbrook 185). While Callil's discussion of the marketable and political certainly exaggerates the delineation between the two, it does emphasize the importance of making understudied literature accessible to the reading public. Rather than listing middlebrow authors parenthetically and categorically, such texts demand close readings which unveil the complexities of their unique literary contribution. Only with the help of Virago press have these texts become readily available at all, making the work of Callil a project which deserves to be followed by similarly apt scholarly treatment around the texts themselves.

Finally, it is important to note the parallel confusion that has historically accompanied the names of each of my chosen novelists. In my research of Rosamond Lehmann, various databases

had more entries for *Rosamund* Lehmann than the former (and correct) spelling. In her work on Lehmann, Pollard refers to this continued frustration, quoting a letter to a colleague of hers, Cyril Connolly, which concludes: "Much love, RosamOnd. Not, oh not, with a 'U'!" (Lehmann *April 21st, 1972*). Elizabeth Von Arnim, on the other hand, was born Mary Annette Beauchamp and later became German countess, Countess Von Arnim. The anonymous publication of her first diary-novel, *Elizabeth and the German Garden,* provoked much speculation around "Elizabeth's" identity. With subsequent novels, "Mary's identity became synonymous, to the reading public, with that of the fictional author of the diary, 'Elizabeth'" (*A Note on the Name*) and her books through the 20th century were said to be "by the author of *Elizabeth and her German Garden.*" Regrettably, she later married Earl Francis Russell and took on yet another name, signing a letter to Huge Walpole in 1926: "I am forever and ever your loving friend Elizabeth, once Beauchamp, late Arnim, and now very unfortunately Russell." Finally, E. Arnot Robertson was born Eileen Arbuthnot Robertson. Her parents had hoped for a boy to name Arbuthnot before their expectations were curtailed. She later shortened the middle name to a less redundant "Arnot" (Blanch 150), and thus christened her penname. This title, however, led many reviewers to believe she was male. As a *Times Literary Supplement* article notes, "Mr. Robertson has a refreshing way of writing, and a mere sketch of his plot does not do justice to his pleasant humour and clear thinking." Such comparable mistakes in the history of each female author suggests a trivialization of their individual contributions. Even a miniscule misspelling, like that of Rosamond, diminishes the weight of the novelist's title in regard to her work and renders scholarly engagement that much more difficult. Von Arnim, for example, is referred to in the Bodleian Archives & Manuscripts as "Lady Russell," thus relegated to the name and legacy of her husband. Her penname quite literally became the name of her created character,

demonstrating the marketability of a women writer's personal involvement in her own text. Robertson herself was haunted by the name of the male child she never was, to the point of her own misgendering and subsequently skewed reviews. In any case, each case of female misnaming is demonstrative of a wider issue involving gendered regard: often a result, in part, of the traditional elimination of female lineage in favor of the male patronymic, which can be further seen in the cases of authors like Mary Shelley and Virginia Woolf.

Outline

This project, given its primary focus on the texts at hand, is structured around close readings of the romantic middlebrow works of Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Von Arnim, and E. Arnot Robertson, as well as an examination of each novel's reviews from their initial publication to now. First, I briefly introduce the literary theory guiding my textual engagement, bolstered by the work of Rita Felski, Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus. This section furthers the discussion around accessibility in literature and the power of the text itself – granting more direct purpose to the readings which follow. In reading Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*, I focus on middlebrow features including the female's turn to interiority, parallel stylistic and emotional evolution, and the resistance of the romantic ideal. My close reading follows the protagonist, Judith, as she overcomes urges of self-denigration and male idealization to conclude in an independent state of self-awareness. Next, my reading of *The Enchanted April* focuses on the irony of the female-only utopia proposed by the vacation novel. I explore how the "comedy of manners" (Brown) allows for a conclusion at once gratifyingly positive and deeply disappointing, further illustrating how the middlebrow genre checks the ideal of ultimate female content apart from patriarchal constraints. Finally, my treatment of Robertson's *Cullum* follows another female protagonist,

Edith, as she uniquely *descends* into gendered norms, triggered by a whirlwind deceptive romance which erodes her strong will and self-assurance. Ultimately, the protagonist's newfound emotionality comes to coexist with her initial rigidity, resulting in a story of female evolution that strays significantly from it's supposed romantic exterior. My conclusion then discusses the contemporary relevance of the middlebrow genre as a model of parallel nuance and stylistic accessibility vital to the evolving academic, literary, and critical realms.

THEORIZING MIDDLEBROW READING

Reading the feminine middlebrow genre from an analytical standpoint, much like any academically driven textual engagement, is a process of both restoring historical context and locating contemporary relevance. The ease and lighthearted consumption permitted by the middlebrow text should then be notably regarded as an imperative, timeless quality of the popular genre rather than a source of denigration. Even further, the simplicity of style and language should not be taken as a reflection on the weight of the genre's thematic content, as we'll later see was often the case for readers and reviewers of the early 20th century. Looking at such novels from the historical distance of the contemporary moment raises a set of interesting questions: *What made these texts "popular" in light of rising modernist trends? What could the accessible middlebrow style accomplish that other texts couldn't?* And perhaps most importantly, *how did popular female middlebrow authors utilize their positioning to assert subtle thematic nuance and commentary on the female state?* These questions require not only close, considerate engagement with the novels, but the application of reading methods and literary theory which embrace accessibility and affective capacity as revealing virtues within fiction.

I have chosen to engage with each of my chosen texts individually and in order of popularity, although it does stand to be noted that each novel was quite popular among female readers of their time according to reviews and articles across publications including *The Spectator, The New York Times Literary Supplement, The Bookman,* and *Vogue.* The purpose of this separation is that of deliberate and specific engagement with each text, progressing towards the more obscure work of E. Arnot Robertson, whose novels have received little to no scholarly engagement. Rosamond Lehmann, on the other hand, only began to gain academic recognition

far after the height of her literary career. Additionally, biographical information around Robertson, Von Arnim, and Lehmann suggests that each woman was relatively well-off and well-educated, signifying the use of the romance genre for means beyond that of financial gain. This is particularly relevant, as it suggests a level of privilege which would've allowed for personal investment in the writing process rather than a reliance on financial success alone. Lastly, my chosen texts are all an early (if not the first) novel in each author's literary career, published in a period of mass popular literary output, which implies a certain consciousness of contributing to a growing British literary tradition and a parallel authorial search for a means of asserting one's own enduring voice. Thus, *Dusty Answer, The Enchanted April,* and *Cullum* can be grouped and analyzed as novels with primarily artistic intentions, translated into a genre which each author acknowledges to be stereotypically feminine and is actively commenting upon. As Plock notes when discussing Rosamond Lehmann, while Virginia Woolf "insisted that she was unaffected by the demands of the market and that her work was impervious to both the attractive lure of the world of modern commodities and the intellectual influence of other writers…the [middlebrow] desire to revolutionize novelistic conventions, as well as the concurrent need to obey the dictates of the literary marketplace both determined Lehmann's literary productivity at the outset of her career" (Plock). Unfortunately, such work was often "popularly regarded as a feminine artifact, produced by women for women" (Stewart) and deemed autobiographical and personal rather than artistic in nature. As Von Arnim notes in a 1926 interview with Nash's Pall Mall Magazine when asked about her personal life: "They can find all of me in my books— the best of me—what my mind means. What do the outward things matter, my married life, my uneventful years, my personal habits?" Hence, while background functionally situates our authors in the moments of their novels' creation, it also easily

perpetuates the biased tendency to find personal connections between the female novelist and her work. Although it was often thought otherwise, these popular romantic novels effectively illustrate a strain of feminine artistic intent rather than offering any assumed personal anecdotes which would effectively relegate the text at hand.

More important still than the *selection* of these novels is the way in which I am attempting to *read* the collective works. If the often stereotypically feminine writing styles of Lehmann, Robertson, and Von Arnim can be said to impact the breadth and quality of their scholarly and journalistic treatment, they can equally (and in conjunction) be seen as a factor in the reading process. Looking back on earlier discussions, the work of Nicole Humble asserts a connection between the physical positioning of the reader and the class-conscious genre, with the middlebrow text allowing the reader to "sit back" while the modernist text is read at a desk with pen in hand. As Virginia Woolf illustrates in her essay titled "Middlebrow," the reading process of the middlebrow text was more negatively thought to be one of partial distraction and indifference: "And I read a page here, and I read a page there (I am breakfasting, as usual, in bed). And it is not well written; nor is it badly written. It is not proper, nor is it improper — in short it is betwixt and between" (Woolf, "Middlebrow"). Here, the author does not speak of a specific middlebrow text, but the collective works of the genre. In contrast, according to Heather Fielding, modernist texts "tend to reject the viewing or reading experience as a component of the work of art…. the work is defined by its autonomy from its beholder, who is irrelevant to the meaning and value of the work" while "the middlebrow novel aimed to open itself up to, not to protect itself from, its readers. It courted the affective relationship that readers so deeply desired." (Fielding 8). Woolf's interpretation, ironically enough, does not necessarily disagree with that of Fielding. Her middlebrow reading is physically integrated into her daily activities,

like eating breakfast. She is not actively taking notes in margins, but physically immersed in passive engagement with the text itself without prying into larger questions of what it is, what it's doing, why it exists, etc. In stepping back from such existential questions and purely intellectual readings, the middlebrow reader can be seen as a model of relaxed and affective reading while the middlebrow author, in turn, becomes a purveyor of everyday experience. Woolf should certainly not be considered a fan of the middlebrow genre, but her dismissive essay does demonstrate a perhaps unintentional participation in what Rita Felski describes as a process of "remaining on the same plane as the object at hand, rather than engaging in defamiliarization" (Limits 6) and what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus coined as "surface reading."

Rita Felski's work around literary criticism and theory is particularly salient to the intentions of this project given that my chosen novels have not been thoroughly read, criticized, or even acknowledged as valuable works within academia. In *Uses of Literature* and *The Limits of Critique* she advocates for the use of "asymptomatic reading" to recover "through engagement with forms such as melodrama and the sentimental novel, lost histories of aesthetic response" (Uses 10):

> Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible…a respect for everyday perceptions is entirely compatible with a commitment to theory; such perceptions give us questions to pursue, not answers…it grants the sheer range of aesthetic response: individuals can be moved by different texts for different reasons. (Uses 12, Limits 15-21)

Felski encourages criticism and engagement which embraces the affective nature of the text without prescribing underlying "symptoms" to arresting moments which indicate important and overlooked truths about the texts themselves. When reading these middlebrow works in consideration of Felski's theory, I am not proposing that the original readers of these texts have

missed something that I am now, as the “critic”, able to bring to light. Rather, I am attempting to illustrate stylistic nuances that were never addressed due to the dismissal of the genre as academically valuable and defining what these choices make uniquely possible. I am advocating for the reading of these texts as objects "looked at rather than looked through", or texts that maintain resonance outside of the prevailing modernist style of the time. My close readings are not entirely dependent on the historical context of the middlebrow - they are simply readings that grant weight where weight is due, while acknowledging the popular novel's potential value to both the intellectual and the casual reader in its stylistic choices and attention to affect.

The work of Best and Marcus resonates most in their attention to genres— “Certain kinds of forgotten literature do not need to be decoded to be understood” (7)—which call for readings that render the texts as actors rather than mere members of their literary period:

> Surface reading, which strives to describe texts accurately, might easily be dismissed as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are. We want to reclaim from this tradition the accent on immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value), for we understand that attentiveness to the artwork as itself a kind of freedom…We think, however, that a true openness to all the potentials made available by texts is also prerequisite to an attentiveness that does not reduce them to instrumental means to an end and is the best way to say anything accurate and true about them…. We want to suggest that, in relinquishing the freedom dream that accompanies the work of demystification, we might be groping toward some equally valuable, if less glamorous, states of mind. (Marcus and Best 16-17)

Essentially, what the academics call for is a turn from symptomatic reading, or the hermeneutics of suspicion: a critical technique which asserts that “what a text means lies in what it does not say...and by disclosing the absent cause that structures the text’s inclusions and exclusions, the critic restores to the surface the deep history that the text represses” (Best 4). In the context of the feminine middlebrow, the concept of textual or authorial repression would suggest an underlying subversive storyline able to be teased out by a seasoned critic. Yet, each of the novels

I've selected purposefully utilize feminine stereotypes and cliches of the romance genre in order to illustrate the evolution of female characters within the gendered context of the period. In my readings, I choose to focus on what the usage of feminine stereotypes can directly achieve rather than remaining skeptical of authorial intentions. As contemporary readers, the pressure to jump to criticism or over-reading can push us away from the significance of a work within its period, while reading it within this "discursive context can illuminate textual features that are obvious, but which critics have overlooked" (Best 8). Much of my treatment will draw on these stereotypes and the evolution of the texts' gendered themes in order to illustrate the nuances of a genre displaced from any extensively studied trends. In line with the concept of surface reading, this project will openly acknowledge gendered clichés in order to explore how popular female writers of early 20th century utilized their rigidly gendered position and the romantic framework to illustrate significant transitions and capabilities of the popular feminine voice. Simply put, much of my analysis will not attempt to attribute alternative meanings to characters and scenes which are, at times, stereotypical for the charged purpose of being such.

This is also not to say that this is a project which rejects the value of critique or scholarly interpretation, as the work of Best and Marcus is often criticized as doing. Rather, it is a project which acknowledges the inevitable question of literary value, ranking, and classification as a force which hinders academia's scope of engagement. By closely engaging with these texts, I am not attempting to expose, destabilize, or unmask the genre as a radically new group of texts, nor am I proposing that the middlebrow serves to criticize or imitate the highbrow. Rather, I am uncovering readings that were not necessarily hidden, but needed an opportunity to be tracked down and described. In this project, I am attempting to make that platform. The surface, then, is not so much the literal meaning of the text, but the idea that these appealing themes and styles

were not present "on the surface" of the texts until I brought them to life or demystified their presence. Here, I am just as much a reader as I am a critic, and using this technique allows me to uncover affective readings and interpretations that may be clouded by more skeptical engagement. Rather than attributing my own critical intentions to these texts or attempting to define the middlebrow genre as implicitly feminist, I wish to read these novels most effectively as a woman reading women, understanding what fell through the cracks in processes of denigration and misconstrued readings.

Approaching the topic of the feminine middlebrow within an academic context is somewhat paradoxical. The time period, as previously discussed, is most noted for its highbrow modernist texts and their renowned authors—names that recur almost incessantly in academia, like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce. The middlebrow text, by definition, is a work popular in all places *except* that of academia. Therefore, proposing that the genre may be relevant in a period already known for its overflowing canons may provoke criticism. Yet, the power of the middlebrow text lies in its *lack of* any authorial conscriptions, which pressure the writer to either derail narrative expectations or propose a new style entirely. While highbrow modernist texts are often *discussed* in light of their authors and their signature styles, middlebrow texts are *experienced* purely through affect and literary immersion. With no pen in hand to take notes, the novel before the reader is just that: *a novel*. This is perhaps another reason why the middlebrow genre is so often excluded from academic treatment. It could be considered rather frivolous or overly simple to analyze a text by embracing its open use of feminine and romantic stereotypes. Yet, when the popular female novel is acknowledged based on the very fact of its popularity, a vital weight is granted to the *writing* of the author rather than the author herself. Plunging ourselves into the holes of academic treatment, perhaps we can begin to

understand why literary criticism is so often pervaded with names and influences rather than sensations and public, widespread reactions. In the literary realm of early 20th century, it proves particularly important to illuminate the writing of women, read by women, and rarely criticized by anyone at all. The values and inevitable flaws of criticism around this topic will be discussed in more detail later on, but for now suffice it to say that this project will embrace the processes of deliberate, affective reading and textually focused engagement, rather than intellectual engagement with canonical texts in theory.

ROSAMUND LEHMANN'S *DUSTY ANSWER*

The daughter of an editor and founder of Granta magazine, Rosamond Lehmann was born to an affluent, well-educated family and went on to study at Cambridge. Patricia Craig attributes to her the achievement of making "the romantic novel respectable": rather than utilizing an intensely plot-driven narrative, she is said to illustrate the "truth about certain kinds of female experience at a particular time" (Craig 162). Gillian Tindell further considers *Dusty Answer* a novel which utilizes irony and perceptiveness to mask its alienation from the stereotypical romantic sensibility (Tindall), yet Lehmann herself unforgivingly referred to the piece as an "impassioned but idealistic piece of work" and later described her protagonist, Judith, as "a revolting character now, soppy", undoubtedly influenced by her early negative reviews (Lehmann and Coe 1-2). Such discrepancies in attributed literary merit point to a misreading of Lehmann's intentions by critics including Katherine Pfaltz, who notes how her literary techniques are, "while not as striking as Woolf's or [Dorothy] Richardson's, nevertheless modern in approach" (Pfaltz 66). While Lehmann had notable connections to the notoriously modernist Bloomsbury group through her brother John Lehmann and second husband Wogan Philips, her interactions with Woolf are described as precarious: "Lehmann was unsure how to respond to the older woman's combination of teasing and flattery" (Bigman). Implied is a lack of cohesive dialogue and relation that would suggest Lehmann's direct inclusion in the Bloomsbury group. Even further, the apologetic letters of Lehmann to Isaiah Thomas express a certain gendered self-consciousness pervasive in much of her personal writing and self-criticism, reflected in phrases like, "I didn't feel you'd want a stupefied looking female spoiling the

conversation." ("To Isaiah Berlin"). This attitude shows a significant departure from the confident experimentalist tone engaged in by the likes of Woolf. *Outside Modernism*: *In Search of the English Novel*, argues for the importance of the realist middlebrow text as a "subtle literary form which had the power to open up issues of class, gender, sexuality, war, race, and cultural heritage for readers' experience" (Paxton and Hapgood 8). With this noted, *Dusty Answer* should be read in dialogue with the modernist tradition, but not necessarily in conjunction, given its use of interiority and emotional evolution as an aspect of the feminine experience rather than an abstract stylistic tool. Lehmann's usage of the traditional romantic framework, which offers commentary dependent on its own narrative subtleties, should rather be analyzed as an influential component of a uniquely resistant and stylistically accessible feminine middlebrow tradition.

The female bildungsroman is a genre historically regarded for its attention to emotional evolution– a subject which *Dusty Answer* approaches through its treatment of various interpersonal relationships and their development across time. The first of five parts witnesses the lonely childhood of Judith Earle and her early encounters with the Fyfe cousins next door: Julian, Charlie, Roddy, Martin and Mariella. Judith's voice here is one of adoration to a point of childish but intense idealization: "One day they would all like her better than anyone else: even Roddy would tell her everything. Their lives, instead of remote and serious, would revolve intimately round her. She would know all, all about them" (24). The initial crack in this fantasy occurs when her first love, Charlie, dies on the front as she has foretold: "He was only a shadow anyway, a romantic illusion, a beautiful plaything of the imagination: nothing of importance" (46). Retreating into isolation for relief from memories of the "weak and spoilt, selfish" boy, Lehmann suggests that the female experience is one of inevitable and condemnable personal involvement in the lives of others. Judith's continued moments of self-deprecation illustrate not

only her intense emotional capacity, but the inner shame she manifests as a response to it: "It was unbearable, she must slip away and hide from the shame and shock of her own perception of the suppressed hysteria" (60). The source of Judith's shame is quite literally her own perception: the fact that she is *not* indifferent towards the trivial arguments of the Fyfe's, even when they involve something as small as an overly excited puppy: "…let that damn fool noisy puppy bully him and pester him and smash his nerves…[Julian] stared with naked antagonism at Mariella, and the air seemed to quiver and grow taut between them" (59). The hyper-dramatic nature of such interactions has an unnerving effect on both the audience and our protagonist - who is made particularly uncomfortable amongst the family she holds so highly. As Humble states, "Emotional outpourings, rather than sexual experience, are the new taboo" (*The Feminine Middlebrow* 212). The phrase "suppressed hysteria" points to the intensity which Judith experiences in response to such mild tiffs, making the reliability of her narration unclear in such moments. We are left to question: was there any "hysteria" to be suppressed, or is Judith attributing her own emotional intensity to the interactions around her? The dramatic language is certainly utilized for narrative effect, yet it primarily offers a clearer picture of sensitive Judith herself rather than the actual insignificant events at hand. In any case, the reader is left with a deep-set sense that something has gone terribly wrong for Judith, when very little has truly occurred. In her work on female disappointment and the middlebrow, Hillary Hinds attributes such reactions to:

> The popular estimation of disappointment as small-scale, muted, and ephemeral, and its consequent dismissal as insignificant, [which] may be indicative of its status as a particularly feminine ending, the whimper of the dying fall rather than the bang of despair or disillusion. In other words, the *self-effacing character of disappointment, and the effacement of the self that disappointment itself effects, might both point to a particular cultural relation with the feminine* (Hinds 299, italics added).

Simply put, the exaggerated emotional response of the female is often considered constant, insignificant, and worthy of denigration—more akin to the stereotypical female swoon than the crushing moral dilemma of the male figure. Whether Lehmann is projecting her own internalized female-deprecation onto the text or critiquing the hyperbolized image of the suffering female is unclear. Still, in either case, the trope of female self-silencing and subsequent retreat reveals itself as an aspect of the feminine middlebrow, wherein the female author consciously illustrates and, to an extent, upholds, the denigrated voice they find themselves within.

The initial tone of *Dusty Answer* captures the mindset of a terribly forlorn young woman experiencing the mystery of the male species with an "aching and terrible intensity." (164) Judith's sense of detachment from herself is manifested through images of clouds and masks, drawing attention to both her own urge to self-silence and her distinct lack of confidence within male-driven environments. Yet, Lehmann's contribution to the middlebrow tradition is that of illustrating the possibility of female progression and ultimate independence. Thus, Judith's early unconfident state is an initial reflection of the burden of self-diminishment, rather than a trait of the character herself:

> Half-dazed, she saw shadows of men standing round, appearing and fading as in a dream, felt dream like touches of men's hands; heard unreal voices bidding good-evening to Judith; was conscious of dim confusion of movement towards the house. Did her own face rise so wanly against the darkness, deep-shadowed under the features, a firm-cut austere mask? Beneath the masks the hidden eyes held now and then a straying gleam from the fairy-lanterns. It was all so clearly a sleeper's dream that to speak audibly seemed a vast effort. (95)

Lehmann hints at various patterns within such dream-like states, the most obvious of which is the overwhelming male presence within the scene. The voice of Judith, from within this uncomfortable atmosphere, contradicts her own inclusion into the crowd, noting that her metaphorical mask is wane and austere while her voice has been willingly rendered inaudible. In

such scenes, she is merely an observer, taking on a sort of female gaze that opposes the concept of "the male gaze" as it is conceptualized by feminist critics. Laura Mulvey coined the male gaze to describe a state of heterosexual scopophilia in "a world ordered by sexual imbalance…split between active/male and passive/female", wherein "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their experience coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 809). Judith's gaze, on the other hand, incites an intense emotionality, commonly associated with the female reaction, as well as her own self-imposed withdrawal from the scene, or a form of Mulvey's female passivity. This gendered form of observation effectively accomplishes two things. On one hand, Judith narrates as a sort of intuitive and empowered fly-on-the wall, able to attribute stereotypically feminine emotional weight to scenes which, from the "active male" point of view, would harness little narrative value and result in a loss of the female voice. On the other, Judith's perception contributes a great deal to her own subjugation as passive entity, reflected in further self-denigrating statements throughout the first half of the book. The man primarily functions as the unattainable, perplexing main character within her constructed scenes, while her own "trivial femininities" stand as "an inept background to his elegance…now there seemed something graceful, foreign, curious in the lights and shades, in the forms of flowers, books, and furniture; as if he has left his impress upon them." (152) The melodramatic tone of these pervasive sentiments suggests the presence of some irony on Lehmann's part. At this point in the novel, the Fyfe cousins have scarcely been individually characterized, so Judith's obsession appears as more a product of her own insecurity than a reflection of their actual merit. The pity which the reader is lead to feel is real and sympathetic, yet Judith's hyperbolic phrases and juxtapositions between the extreme and trivial result in a certain distance from the severity of her suffering: "You might write a book

now, and make him one of the characters, or take up music seriously; or kill yourself…She saw herself as a tiny person walking firmly away and not once looking back. There were plenty of other things to think about…Strawberries and cream for supper. Good." (231). Dessert for dinner and the prospect of "two new frocks…a visit to London next week, and a play" symbolize a return to Judith's initial triviality soon after an emotional, but not pivotal, heartbreak, while the exaggerated suggestion of suicide offers a brief, darkly humorous glimpse into her state of mild crisis. Perhaps, in becoming self-aware of her own emotional intensity, Judith chooses to trivialize her own suffering and only lightly address darker sentiments. Lehmann presents this initial state in order to illustrate the enduring impact of Judith's self-silencing, while rendering her later evolution that much more striking. Such marked female evolutions should undoubtedly be considered a significant aspect of the feminine middlebrow genre, used tactically by Lehmann to comment on the volatility of the female state.

Judith's relationships are all approached with a certain alienating emotional severity which distances the reader from a protagonist who often lacks the traditional draw of authenticity. In particular, the hyper-idealized figure of Robby triggers Judith's intense emotional mutability: her narration fluctuates between the dream like settings of her romantic encounters and moments of her own gendered deprecation, bolstered in one scene by the judgmental gaze she imposes on a group of female students: "He had vanished and left her stranded among creatures who dared to assume he was still alive…Nearly all plain, nearly all with a touch of beauty…But just a herd, when all was said: immature, tidy, all dull, and all alike, commonplace female creatures in the mass." (110) Yet, Lehmann subtly suggests that Judith is not entirely content with this judgmental state of mind, foreshadowing her character's later empowerment. As Humble asserts in her interview by Elke D'hoker: "The feminine

middlebrow…is very much concerned with the shifting meanings of femininity in the period," suggesting a trend towards self and gender exploration in the feminine middlebrow novels of the period which uniquely includes unabashed female deprecation for the purpose of reflection. Lehmann is undoubtedly contributing to this tradition by initially allowing Judith to reflect on her own insecurities while progressing toward a more introspective conclusion, suggesting the necessity of regarding one's own gendered performativity prior to internal growth. Or, as Judith Butler stated, the ability to regard oneself as "an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts…compelled by social sanction and taboo" (270-271). Both Mariella and Jennifer, function as female figures for her to emulate—they possess a similar self-assurance that Judith gains only after her episodes of romantic turmoil. The tone in which she speaks about Mariella here stands as a stark contrast to her descriptions of the "herds of women": "Amazing, terrifying, admirable creature—thought Judith—who, when life pressed too heavily upon her, could resolve life into airy meaninglessness; could pause, as it were deliberately, and recharge her life with vitality." (178) The qualities she admires in these women are those of nonchalance and self-assurance—exact qualities which she herself cannot seem to grasp. Comparing Jennifer, her possible lover, and Roddy, she describes a similar admiration for their ability to turn away from trivialities: "There was Jennifer laughing, talking, letting the eggs get burnt while she did her hair… all around and about the extravagant incongruous brilliances, the divine crudities…life went on weaving uninterruptedly: weaving uncoloured trivial things into secure fabric." (153) If Judith's perspective towards the students is read as her general deprecation of feminine trivialities, these encounters function as glimpses into a different aspect of womanhood, in which trivialities are seen as just that: trivial. Notice, in her descriptions of Mariella and Jennifer, "meaninglessness" is "airy" while "crudities" are "divine". Judith is essentially admiring the very detachment which

would allow her to leave behind her own male obsessions and trivial concerns with "tact" in order to dissolve into a similar state of mindless being, wherein eggs may get burnt while life is recharged with more broad content.

Judith's emotional transition seems to begin at a bracing moment of physical touch between her and Robby. Although the encounter is described romantically at points, the harshness of other descriptions suggests a revelation of sorts:

> Down came his stranger's face to her. She felt his mouth hard, and her own terribly soft and yielding. The pressure of his lips was painful, alarming—a contact never dreamed of. She drew back and saw, in the mirror opposite, her own white-faced reflection, one hand to its mouth.
>
> "Tonight, "he said very low, "shall I come and fetch you in the canoe? We'll go down, down-- to the islands. Just us two. Shall I come?"
>
> She nodded, speechless.
>
> "Late. Be waiting for me about eleven." He added, in his usual, careless voice: "Not unless it's fine, of course. There may be thunderstorm."
>
> She went out of the room, into gold deeps of light and the evening shadows. (218)

Lehmann supplements this chapter's conclusion with various moments of foreshadowing and a general tone of discomfort. At the point where Judith is finally given attention by her distant lover, we are led to feel like something is very wrong. Not only is Judith again rendered completely silent, but she has a literal moment of self-reflection. While looking at her own traumatized face in a mirror, Judith seems to realize that, up to this point, her very nature has been "soft and yielding", or self-reductive, while her and Roddy's romance has been wholly unequal and fraught from the start, despite her efforts to compel an idealized version of heterosexual love. The prospect of thunderstorms and her continued silence lead up to the dramatic end of their relationship, which characterizes the fundamental difference between Judith's romantic nature and Roddy's severity. She laments: "I was so romantic and idealistic about you—you've no idea…" while he responds, "Didn't I say I was never to be taken seriously?" (229) In this moment, we see Judith's romantic ideal betrayed, and she is left

watching Robby walk away with a "graceful and noiseless tread." Here, the reader's sympathy fluctuates between a clear "I told you so" moment and a degree of genuine empathy. It is a scene that anyone who knows heartbreak has experienced some semblance of. As readers, however, rather than regretfully watching the loss of Robby, we see the stereotypical romantic novel and its naïve feminine ideals erode before our very eyes. Ultimately, Lehmann proposes an utterly romantic yet clichéd moment—the proposition of a moonlit boat-ride—while garnishing the scene with an uncomfortable, resistant tone that seems to comment upon the inauthenticity of the genre given the gendered power dynamics at play.

The second half of *Dusty Answer* bears a significant change in the voice and attitude of Judith. Her final relationship with the most unassuming of the brothers, Martin, is presented as superficial and somewhat strategic, as Judith comes to regard and utilize her stereotypical female position: "He loved to have her beside him, behaving nicely and looking pretty, shewing interest, and smiling when it was seemly…It would be such an immense easing of the burden if only so much insincerity as was implicit in the acquiescent body was required, without the lies of the lips and mind." (248) As Judith passively interacts with her supposed lover, the audience witnesses her turn to indifference: a quality which she earlier admired in the likes of Mariella and Jennifer. Judith's thoughts turn from the trivialities of her superficial relationship in order to contemplate her own inner contradictions. This is a significant turn from our protagonist's initial inner dialogue, which found her completely self-removed: "It was his laughter that left her out, making her feel heavy and unhumorous. If only he would teach her to play with him, how quick and apt he would find her!" (91) In this earlier scene, Judith is driven by the judgments of those around her, acting in order to craft a desirable image of herself. While Judith maintains the urge to please others, the inconsistencies between her feminine semblance and the "lies of the lips and

mind" begin to trouble her for reasons she still doesn't quite understand. Again, without outrightly describing Judith's transition, Lehmann builds upon the nuance of a female character who evolves not only through events and emotions, but through inner and outer dialogue:

> "No, no," she answered lightly. "I've finished with falling in love. I was in love once."
>
> "When?"
>
> "Years ago! It doesn't amuse me. I reject it. Never again..." She felt her lip start to curl and quiver and stopped: then added in the same bantering tone: "Foolishness. That's what it is. And as far as you are concerned, it would seem almost incestuous"
>
> "Don't use horrid words," He sat up, amused but startled.
>
> "Well, it would. Not that I disapprove at all of incest, in theory. Yet I must confess my instincts against it."
>
> "And so's mine," said Martin firmly, "Let's have no more nonsense..."
>
> He bent forward and dismissed the nonsense with a hearty kiss.
>
> That was the last straw. Her mood, stretched finer and finer in the preceding few minutes, snapped...God! — to go mad, crack-brained, fantastic, happy mad; or to be stretched upon a rack in physical anguish which precluded thought. (250)

In this stretch of interaction, Judith begins to test the limits of her new-found self-assurance in the company of a male she does not hold as highly as her past lovers. Her speech is hasty and blunt, with a "bantering tone" that points to the lack of weight she attributes to her words. Leaving behind her former overwhelming concerns around "tact," he takes on a certain male callousness earlier projected at her by Robby: "Didn't I say I was never to be taken seriously?" (229). Martin, in turn, dismisses her unexpected irrationality as "horrid" and "nonsense", just as Judith dismisses romance as "foolishness." Her yearning for "physical anguish" or madness further illustrates inner conflict with her feminine façade. In order to achieve balance, Judith seems to suggest that she would either require the intense emotionality of her former self, or physical pain to match her inner anguish. Recalling the earlier image of the masked and hazy perception, Judith's insecurity in the 2nd half of the novel no longer stands strictly between her feminine self and male-dominated society, but between the imposed mask of femininity and her

seemingly contradictory self-regard – which functionally resists the conventions serving the interest of the patriarchy.

Judith's transition can be further witnessed through descriptions of her perception of the outside world, which comes to incorporate a unique attention to imagery and nature as entities that stand apart from social impositions. Often, these moments occur in times of solitude, wherein her experience of the outside world is granted a new sense of beauty:

> The tiny brilliant green water-plants and cresses grew up from the mud and pebbles and spread their leaflets below the surface in delicate array, motionless as if under glass. Oh, to slip into the water and become something minute and non-sentient, a sort of freshwater amoeba, living peacefully among their thin spun tangle of whitish roots— now at once, before Martin notices her disappearance! He would peer and peer into the water, with his red anxious face; and all in vain. In the shadow of his face her unimpressive form would be but more obscured; and, unmoved, she would stare back at him. (250)

The juxtaposition of the natural world and Martin's off-putting presence is witnessed physically before Judith, but applied to a sort of dream world, in which the presence of maleness is barred from her "obscured form...as if under glass." Judith herself is detached from the shadow of his "red anxious face", existing independently as a non-sentient entity below the surface, able to stare without being stared *at* in yet another moment of escaping the male gaze in favor of the vivid female gaze. Later, she turns from a natural setting which she admires, simply because Martin is walking in it. It fails to encompass the same physical detachment from Martin which she experiences in the stream: "She stood and saw the fresh garden filling with light and shade; and thought: 'Poor Martin's crying'; and shut the door on him and the sun and the screaming of the birds" (258). The sensory harshness of the final image, which Judith shuts the door on, suggests a *lack of* detachment which granted the former image its otherworldliness. The pity with which Judith watches Martin leave becomes associated with the environment she witnesses. In closing the door, the environment is rendered somewhat violent. The unexpected "screaming

birds" are left behind without any semblance of romantic imagery, and the reader is left dumbstruck. Such a hasty chapter conclusion appears markedly different from the long-winded prose of previous sections, perhaps to foreshadow the death of Martin or Judith's coming independence from the emotional influence of the world. In either case, Martin's unbarred presence in the natural setting comes to counteract Judith's newfound freedom of perception, which embraces the natural world rather than humanity and its interactions. Rather than passively accepting the presence of others, she allows herself to react with genuine resentment, which literally alters her perception of the natural scene. Finally, towards the end of the novel, when each relationship has been left behind, her interaction with nature becomes that of bittersweet triviality. Lehmann seems to suggest that Judith's life has taken on a certain simplicity, with her heart unburdened by its former intensity:

> The flower petals seemed to caress her cheek as she stooped to them, the stalks to yield gladly and fall towards her. They loved and welcomed her. She chose, picked, stroked them, held them against her face with voluptuous delight in their color, form and texture. It was thrilling, living alone and gathering flowers.
>
> She looked around her, up at the sky. The evening was like Jennifer. (281)

This realization lends itself to varied interpretations. While a loss of romantic motivation certainly dims the power of Judith's narration, it also allows for a certain aloofness in the judging reader, who Lehmann consciously acknowledges as a purveyor of the feminine romantic ideal: "What would people think of her, wandering about alone? How should she explain her presence to inquirers?...She smiled, thinking suddenly that she might be considered an object of pity, so complete was her loneliness." (302). Through this line, our empathetic judgments are quickly checked by a narrator who has become alienatingly self-aware of her audience, responding to implied concerns of the reader in search of a romantic ideal. In this way, Lehmann suggests that Judith's newfound independence is not only from romantic attachment, but from the

stereotypical genre itself. Such a conclusion is not wholly rewarding for readers in search of a romantic ending. Rather, it illustrates an effort to diverge from gendered expectations within the romantic genre, which middlebrow authors like Lehmann embraced in order to incorporate nuance in work that inevitably sold to romance readers.

The popularity of such texts as *Dusty Answer* suggests a proliferation of acceptable social standards perpetuated by the romance genre which veil the direct challenges offered by the feminine middlebrow author. Whether this popularity came about for the author's intended reasons is another question entirely, and one which I will approach next in my examination of Lehmann's popular reception and literary reviews. In the most unusual review of Lehmann, in 1927, Harry Salpeter writes of Lehmann: "She is tall, not too slim, with grateful bearing and a reserved smile that sheds more light on an already illumined face." (*New York World*). Another physical observation attempts to sway a superficial impression long since made: the fact that she "is, undoubtedly, the most beautiful writer I have ever seen" did not "mean that she need be soft in personality or compromising in her artistic creed." Salpeter's introduction immediately places its reader within the perspective of Mulvey's male gaze, creating an appealing visual of Lehmann that will come to overshadow the later impression of the text itself. Even if a positive review follows, left is a sense that this is not so much the result of Lehmann's artistic prowess, but her striking feminine image translated onto the page. Others, like Hugh Walpole, had less regard for the text itself, noting how it is "clever and interesting, but not promising…the things in this book that are best seem to be remembered rather than imagined" (6). Again, Walpole seems to both assume Lehmann's autobiographic involvement in the text and diminish its artistic value based on this assumption. Still others, like Valentine Cunningham, are outright in their diminishment: "It is, of course, inevitable that this emergent sisterly writing should be as

obsessed with male lovers and wonder-brothers as Ms. Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*" (Cunningham). The other mention of the novelist refers to her diminishingly as "John Lehmann's sister, Rosamond."

This is not to say that all of Lehmann's reviews had such gendered implications. Most were both glowing and hopeful for the emerging author's future career (Warner), such as that of Marjorie Grant Cook, who describes the novel as "an intense, self-conscious, vivid book that slowly takes ahold of the half-reluctant reader" (352). Arnold Bennett describes the novel mildly as "honest, accurate in observation, sympathetic, successful in its characterization, agreeably written, sufficiently picturesque, and on the whole convincing." Yet even Bennett's criticism has a somewhat dismissive tone, evoked by tepid adjectives like "agreeable", "sufficient", and "convincing" *(Times Literary Supplement)*. Overall, reviews of Lehmann's novel note degrees of artistic success without regarding the intricacies of her style beyond its inherent attention to emotion, described in a 1927 edition of *The Spectator* as "too sad for popular taste" with a "prevailing note…of frustration and tragedy." Left unmentioned is the irony of Judith's emotionality, revealed in moments that reflect her overtly gendered position: "She knew better than to interfere, or to speak except when spoken to…That was in his eyes one of her most admirable qualities." (248) Any mention of Judith's emotional complexity is similarly absent from reviews, disregarding the novel's almost anti-romantic conclusion.

Later reviews after 1940, however, reflect an increased regard for the narrative strategies at play in *Dusty Answer*. Notably, the conclusion of the novel is further examined for its "unabashed romanticism of lush, lyrical prose…countervailed by an all too clear-eyed message: that love means pain, and that from our inescapable aloneness comes strength" (Garman). By the novel's final pages, Lehmann is quite candid about Judith's personal evolution, illustrating a

complete retreat to interiority as she wanders Cambridge in the final chapter—a location laden with memories of the Fyfe cousins: "The dream had obsessed her whole life with the problem of its significance, and now she was rid of it." For a brief moment, Judith "seemed to wake up suddenly", seeing "Roddy himself passing in the street outside" (301). Yet, she allows the image to pass as a mere reflection, demonstrating a degree of power unseen till now: "She could have seen him, and, instead, her eyes had not wavered from his reflection. A shadow laid on a screen and then wiped off again: he had never been much more; it was fittingly symbolic that she should have allowed him to pass thus for the last time from her eyes" (301). Here, the image of Roddy's shadow recalls the initial representation of Judith's distance from male-dominant environments, wherein the male occupied "the mask behind which he guarded his personal pleasures and savoured them in secret" (94). Yet now, she does not look back with intense curiosity—he passes *from her* eyes. The third person narration used throughout the novel no longer describes Judith as an individual intimidated by the exterior world. Rather, the reader experiences the missed interaction through Judith's confident interior perception. She is "certain that she would never see him again," (301) and now returns to a world in which "there was nothing more to fear or desire." (302). Without the compelling forces of fear and desire, the protagonist is able to completely withdraw into her own interiority. Thus, Lehmann's shift of narrative tone from emotional absorption to objective interiority corresponds to both Judith's achievement of self-regard and the erosion of the romantic ideal, in which the woman could exist only passively under the pressing social restraints of the patriarchy.

With this utter change comes a striking (if not somewhat disappointing) claim for the empowered state of solitude. Judith recognizes about the Fykes that "from the outside, [she] had broken in among them and taken them one by one for herself', that "she had been stronger than

their combined force after all" (302). This trajectory is a stark contrast to the progress of the classic romance novel. Instead, Lehmann chooses to rewrite Judith's story as a triumph over romance and its idealism. She describes this change as being "rid at last of the weakness, the futile obsession of dependence on other people" (303). The voice here is almost hyperbolic in its insistence on complete independence, making the simplified and gendered readings of early critics particularly surprising. Still, ending on such a note seems unaligned with both Lehmann's overarching style and the expectations of the typical romance reader. Instead, Judith ends in a "light uncoloured state" with "no-thought and no-feeling," while Lehmann implies a breadth of life to be had in proposing "what next?" Judith then steps back to accept the importance of active felt emotion. Life will go on apart from the melodrama of the Fyfe's, "But not quite yet" (303). At this moment, Lehmann seems to justify the emotional tone she has utilized thus far as a vivid aspect of youth and its volatile passions, while recognizing Judith's retreat to interiority as an act of female empowerment and growth. Within the middlebrow genre, this retreat allows Judith to refuse the prescriptions of dominant culture and embrace the authenticity of her own unencumbered perception. Rather than appearing tragic, however, the open-ended conclusion suggests that Judith's lack of feeling should be seen as a jumping off point, from which her future emotions will be rightfully grounded in self-worth.

Through *Dusty Answer,* Lehmann offers a vital glimpse into a defining facet of the feminine middlebrow novel: the evolution of female perception. Yet, as a novel that is rightfully regarded as a bildungsroman, there is an important distinction to be made between the classification of the traditional origin story and the feminized popular novel. Judith's retreat to interiority stands apart from the traditional bildungsroman by focusing on the evolution of perception rather than that of age or moral standards. This effort is notably more complex and

subtle than the event-based plot of the expected bildungsroman. While Lehmann does choose to usher Judith through varied relationships, tragedies, and interactions, true transition only occurs when the protagonist realizes that romance and trivial passions never truly contributed to her processes of internal growth. The final lines of the novel, towards this end, merit repeating:

> "She was a person whose whole past made one great circle, completed now and ready to be discarded.
> Soon she must begin to think: What next?
> But not quite yet." (303)

The denigrating reviews of critics and the scarcity of scholarly treatment of *Dusty Answer* risk the loss of Lehman's powerful message. Ironically enough, the very trivialization of the novel as a simple romance seems to fall in line with the story's conclusion. Lehmann encourages her readers to acknowledge the trivialities of life and youth as an aspect of the traditional romance—the emotions we feel so strongly and briefly, but which ultimately fade under the light of self-worth and emotional independence. As Judith wanders the streets of her past, very little has literally changed apart from the clarity of her perception and the stability with which she is able to evaluate her interior world. Part of this change is the ability to not only leave behind the past but admit to the constructed nature of the feminine romance novel and its expected trajectory. The protagonist leaves behind such trivial idealizations of the male in order to exist more authentically, disregarding the social pressure to reach some cliched romantic and heteronormative ending. For readers of the middlebrow, this nuanced message is not necessarily hidden beneath stylistic complexity. To find it simply requires one to regard the possibility of a new middlebrow genre, in which the female retreat to interiority within the romantic framework functions as a form of resistance against gendered expectations.

ELIZABETH VON ARNIM'S *THE ENCHANTED APRIL*

Elizabeth Von Arnim wrote *The Enchanted April* (1922) 20 years after her first two novels, at the age of 56. As earlier noted, her first name shifted with each of her marriages and with the popular connection of her identity to that of the narrator in her debut novel, *Elizabeth and the German Garden*. Elizabeth, then Mary, was born into an artistic and cultured family in Sydney, Australia and later educated in the Royal College of Music before she married into the Prussian aristocracy (Walker). Written by such a consistently well-traveled individual, *The Enchanted April* is often considered an Italian travel novel, boasting vivid imagery of the Portofino countryside and its leisurely afternoons and firefly nights. It is often included in suggestive, light-hearted lists such as "What to Read for a Great Escape this Summer" (Grady) and "18 of The Best Feel-Good Classic Novels" (Fuggle) and was made into a quite successful film in 1991, which makes up the bulk of the title's criticism. Yet, the vast majority of Von Arnim's personal publicity addresses her association with two prominent authors: her cousin and artistic competitor, Bloomsbury orbiter Katherine Mansfield, and science-fiction author H.G. Wells, with whom she had a brief affair (Keates). The notable lack of literature around her novels themselves illustrates an overwhelming concern with Von Arnim's personal affairs which, as we similarly saw with Lehmann, often pervades content around the female middlebrow writer. Yet, unlike Lehmann, Von Arnim is not regarded anywhere within the scope of experimental modernism, suggesting a complete detachment of her work from the academic fiction of the period in favor of the popular literary realm. By the publication of her third novel, *The Enchanted April*, the novelist's earned popularity did not lead her away from the

romantically vivid style that some trivialized as the makings of a perfect beach read. Von Arnim's upper class standing and the text itself reveal intentions and themes that stray past the trivial and merely profitable, prompting this study to disregard the advice of an aforementioned 1923 review from *The Bookman*, which encourages its reader to not "take [the novel's] joyous extravagance too seriously" and rather simply "enjoy the humour and shrewdness of good writing."

The first half of *The Enchanted April* proposes a fairly radical and utopian setting to its readers: that of a female-only holiday sponsored by several women discontent with different aspects of their lives. As Cathleen Schine notes in her introduction to the 2007 edition: "[Von Arnim] writes about women rebelling against the world of men, yet she is so sensitive to the subtle differences of one woman's happiness from another's that there is never even a hint of polemic" (*x*). Initially, we find two middle-aged acquaintances, Rose Arbuthnot and Lotty Wilkins, seated at separate tables in a women's club in London. Lotty picks up the *Times* to find an ad for a small castle in Portofino in a moment indiscreetly labeled as the turning point: "That was its conception; yet, as in the case of many over, the conceiver was unaware of it at the moment" (Von Arnim 3). A dream-like thought comes to Mrs. Wilkins, and an idealistic tone quickly takes over her perspective of the scene: "…absurd as it seemed, a picture had flashed across her brain, and there were two figures in it sitting together under a great trailing wisteria that stretched across the branches of a tree she didn't know…" (12). Von Arnim then steps back and grants us some background on Mrs. Wilkins: a housewife overshadowed by her respectable, intelligent husband and hindered by his thrift, "which, like moth penetrated into Mrs. Wilkin's clothes and spoilt them" (4). Although Lotty Wilkins has never spoken to esteemed Mrs. Arbuthnot, who is a member of her church, she is driven by a strange "impulse she wonders at

even while obeying it" (7) and approaches her as the hypothetical second woman in her fantasy. Of course, Mrs. Arbuthnot happens to be reading the very same ad. Rose herself is characterized as a "patient and disappointed Madonna", with a "sad face…though evidently efficient…there was much in her way with the Sunday School children that was automatic" (6). Naturally, to her, the notion of merely acquainted women renting an Italian castle together is "unbalanced" and "away from her compass points of God, Husband, Home and Duty" (14). Her anxious mind pulls her between thoughts of duty, desire, and the dismissal of Mrs. Wilkin's "impetuous, odd talk…blown about by gusts, impulses" (15):

> Surely she couldn't, she wouldn't ever do such a thing? Surely she wouldn't, she couldn't ever forget her poor, forget misery and sickness as completely as that? No doubt a trip to Italy would be extraordinarily delightful, but there are many delightful things one would like to do, and what was strength given to one for except to help one not to do them? (15)

The excerpt illustrates a clever intersection between dramatic irony and gender-based humor. Arbuthnot mentions "her poor", which refers to her charitable employment. As Mrs. Wilkins describes, Arbuthnot "analyzed, classified, divided and registered the poor" (5), which is a humorously unsympathetic description in itself. Above, however, the wording could just as well refer to her own "misery and sickness", hinting at her apparent discontent. The rapid, stressed tone further reflects Mrs. Arbuthnot's sense of wrongdoing for having even considered acting, as a woman, for oneself and with one's own money. Her repetitive wording and the somewhat ridiculous final sentiment shows an effort by Von Arnim to reflect on the subtle irony of the situation at hand. The deep existential crisis Mrs. Arbuthnot and many of the other characters experience when considering the possibility of a female-only vacation brings to the table important points on the self-imposed restriction of females. Although the 1920s lens would make this prospect slightly more daunting, the ironic tone Von Arnim utilizes allows the audience to at once note the validity of these fears and chuckle at the women's dramatic reactions. The method,

if closely read, comes across extremely effectively, and is unsurprisingly a major stylistic feature throughout the novel.

On the other hand, Von Arnim's treatment of the financial hindrances that precede this trip immediately suggest that the author, despite her use of irony, is not approaching this radical concept frivolously or dismissing its difficulty. As Kimber notes, "Despite the humor with which von Arnim tempers her narration of the marital and financial issues the women face, it is a difficult process for these women to escape the patriarchal bourgeois values within which they have been formed" (Kimber et al. 8). Unlike the texts of Lehmann and Robertson, the four female vacation-goers, apart from Lady Caroline (who I will next introduce), are married or widowed. Their positions are not as much determined strictly by youthful emotion as they are dependent on realistic material surroundings, with the Italian castle functioning as a symbolic setting of happiness apart from the hidden disappointments of the domestic world. Mrs. Arbuthnot "had a nest-egg, but to suppose that she would ever forget her duty to the extent of drawing it out and spending it on herself was absurd" (15), while Mrs. Wilkins must conceal the purchase under false pretenses in order to avoid the scolding of her husband: "What he would say if he knew she was renting part of a medieval castle on her own account, Mrs. Wilkins preferred not to think. It would take him days to say it all; and this although it was her very own money, and not a penny of it had ever been his" (28). Departure is not only a difficult process, but a *guilty* one, described by Rose Arbuthnot in terms of an affair: "she felt happy, and she felt guilty, and she felt afraid, and she had had all the feelings, though this she did not know, of a woman who has come away from a secret meeting with her lover" (21). The trip seemingly provokes a sense of anxiety and secrecy in all the women – particularly those with a standing or legal connection to prescribed spousal roles.

Unsurprisingly, as the vacation reaches fruition, it's concluded that two other women will need to be brought on to mitigate the costs of the castle - which proves daunting without the help of their husbands. The onboarding process appears somewhat easier for the two women later recruited to join: Lady Caroline, a single, beautiful and miserable young socialite, and Mrs. Fisher, the excessively grumpy widow who often comes across as caricature: "Mr. Fisher was dead; let him remain so. She had no wish to be told he was walking about the garden" (35). The two relate in the fact that their money truly is *only theirs*, in contrast to the former two women, who maintain a delicate balance of dependence on their male significant others. Still, it stands to be noted that their initial reserved and privileged characterizations still allow for similar feminine anxieties that hinge upon the inauthenticity of their comfortably independent positions. Although the two women seek isolation on the vacation, they are soon led to question the true meaning of contentedness, and whether this corresponds with the lives they are expected to lead. Mrs. Fisher's character rests upon an exaggerated attachment to the past that does not include any particular sense of mourning for her husband. Rather, her sentimentalism is manifested in a distinct hatred for the modern generation:

> Hardly anything was really worthwhile, reflected Mrs. Fisher, except the past…Those friends of hers in London, solid persons of her own age, knew the same past that she knew, could talk about it with her, could compare it as she did with the tinkling present, and in remembering the great men forget for a moment the trivial and barren young people who still, in spite of the world, seemed to litter the world in such numbers. (92)

Her observations are undoubtedly hyperbolic—literally referring to the tragic failure of the war to diminish the younger generation. When in Italy, she takes it upon herself to become the traditional spokesperson for tact and female delicacy in the group: "I shouldn't trouble my head if I were you with considerings and conclusions. Women's head weren't made for thinking, I assure you" (109). Yet, the humor does not come without purpose. With Mrs. Fisher's goal

established (as she twice repeats, to "sit by the sun and remember" (34, 92)), she is situated as the voice of pessimism in paradise. Her character becomes not only a symbol of what the younger women should stray from, but the pinnacle of female stagnancy and self-imposed discontent. Essentially, if San Salvatore can change Mrs. Fisher, it can presumably change anyone. Lady Caroline, on the other hand, is the youngest, most naïve of the group, yet maintains an ingrained sense of her beauty's hindrance:

> No icy stare could come out of eyes like that; it got caught and lost in the soft eyelashes…and if ever she was out of humour or definitely cross—and who would not be sometimes in such a world? —she only looked so pathetic that people all rushed to comfort her, if possible by means of kissing. It was more than tiresome, it was maddening. Nature was determined that she should look and sound angelic. (66)

The conundrum of Caroline's character is ironic by nature as well as entirely gendered. She exudes a parallel cynicism to Mrs. Fisher yet finds herself trapped inside the body of an outwardly delicate woman. The two can be seen as foils of each other—their troubles are innate rather than imposed, and although they maintain a higher degree of financial independence than Mrs. Wilkins and Arbuthnot, they are equally discontent as a result of their stereotypical positions as old widow and enticing socialite. For Mrs. Fisher, this is a self-imposed result of her age and detached sentimentalism, while for Caroline, her appearance alone provokes a constant sense of inauthenticity. Ultimately, their outwardly comfortable positions function as mere superficial projections of happiness, brought to light by the revelatory isolation which their privilege allows. Von Arnim, then, chooses not to make a major distinction between the social positions of the upper-class women and their individual struggles, suggesting that the feminine condition is the inevitable source of discontent for all four travelers, which the female-only utopian setting has only further revealed.

The reviews of *The Enchanted April* seem to overlook any usage of irony and fall for the very idealism with San Salvatore provokes in its summer residents. Early reviewers in particular approach the text with misconceptions stemming from the book's romantic genre, while later articles only somewhat acknowledge the complexity of Von Arnim's narrative. A 1922 review in *Country Life*, for example, is a work of pure flattery that seems to completely overlook the novel's unromantic wit: "No trace, this time, of bitterness in the wit, of worm in the flower. A triumph of only delicacy and dexterity. That is the main thing, that utter sweetness which never becomes saccharinity because of the fresh, buffeting April wind of laughter blowing about every page." In *The Bookman*, "San Salvatore works its magic and courses of true love again run smoothly." The *New York Times* is slightly less forgiving, attributing to the novel "some cleverness, occasional touches of charm, and a great deal of sentimentalizing" (Field 17), while all of the early reviews in some way critique "the more than believable sweetness" (*The English Review*) and "free use of coincidence" (*Bookman*) within the novel. Each reviewer seems to take a parallel, light reading of Von Arnim's notably style, regarding her past romantic work as a framework through which *The Enchanted April* should be considered. Yet, lost in this method is the acknowledgement of Von Arnim's growing ability, in this third work, to incorporate vivid, natural imagery, accessible prose, *and* narrative complexity simultaneously, allowing for a novel that at once presents and critiques the bourgeois ideal of female independence and self-sufficient happiness. Again, we see the hindrance of the middlebrow classification on the reading process itself, which led many of the novel's implications to be lost until after Virago's edition of the text was released in 1991.

Reviews after this date illustrate a newfound respect for the novelist in line with growing scholarship around middlebrow female authors. In a piece by Petronella Wyatt for *The Spectator*,

she writes: "Von Arnim, however, might as well have written 'She sees what we can't see because it isn't there.' This is what love is actually about: mammoth deception…Love demands an emotional suggestibility, a herculean capacity for illusion" (33). Wyatt's tone is undoubtedly hyperbolic, yet it also functions as one of the few accurate readings of Von Arnim's irony. Lotty Wilkins can be seen as a spokesperson for emotional suggestibility, with the setting of San Salvatore as the ideal place for deception and illusion, left behind with the "crowning fragrance of the acacias" (Von Arnim 247) as the women return to the reality of their lives. Yet, most reviews of the Virago version have similarly idealistic readings of what is pejoratively deemed a "good fairy story" (*Contemporary Review)*. Thus, on the whole, increased scholarly attention following Virago's republication suggests a shift in perception towards female middlebrow writing without a significant change in actual textual engagement. Again, while public readership continues to favor and lead to the republishing of these middlebrow novels, scholarship remains limited due to the outdated academic subtexts around such romantic works.

Von Arnim can be seen to stray from the expected trajectory of the "vacation novel" in regarding the invisible price tag of a seemingly innocent escape into isolation, and how it particularly implicates the dependent wife:

> Holidays, of course, were good, but ought they so completely to blot out, to make havoc of, the realities? It couldn't be healthy to forget her prayers, and still less could it be healthy not to mind…In this place she was indifferent to both the things that had filled her life and made it seem as if it were happy for years (146).

The language here is not only precise, but self-reflexive. The things that had filled the life of robotic church-goer Rose Arbuthnot, before Portofino, made life *seem* happy, while in reality, they were simply never questioned. "To make havoc of" implies a negative change, yet here, the boundaries between happiness and discontent are blurred by what is considered "healthy," or socially acceptable. When Rose seeks solitude on the castle grounds and expresses annoyance

towards the other women, she considers how she is newly "assailed by every sort of weakness: vanity, sensitiveness, irritability, pugnacity" (188). Yet, what she deems "acid" is merely emotion stemming from an inner desire to voice her most guilty and selfish sentiments, left unsaid in her usual stifling life, which revolves around teaching Sunday school and catering to her husband. These initial minor reactions climax in a later emotional outpour regarding her husband's treatment: "She would have it out with him. This separate life, this freezing loneliness, she had had enough of it, Why shouldn't she be happy? Why on earth—the energetic expression matched her mood of rebelliousness—shouldn't she too be loved and allowed to love?" (223) The scene witnesses a major shift in Rose's tone and character when compared to her pre-vacation attitude— that "true joys are to be found only in daily, hourly, living for others…She wanted to shut out everything that would remind her of beautiful things, that might set her off again longing, desiring…" (16) The evolution of Rose, in this way, should be seen as a complex reflection on the female experience. Firstly, and not unlike the message of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* Von Arnim suggests that complete material and emotional independence is needed to fully realize one's position in life. She does not imply an inherent connection between revelation and holiday. Rather, and as a second vital conclusion, she notes the complexities behind that which we believe to be happiness, and the inner discontent often harbored under the guise of patriarchal normality. Yet, all of this rising tension and power is seemingly pulled out from under the reader at the end of the chapter, when Rose's husband, Frederick, *does* choose to arrive at San Salvatore. Although Rose is unaware of it, he has actually come to charm young and popular Caroline and was unaware of his wife's presence at the very same castle. Amid her kisses and Frederick's bewilderment, the reader has one of two reactions: that of relief and pleasure or disappointment and confusion as they remark, *seriously?!* The text does not reward

any one reading, but it does utilize this contradictory moment to provoke a strong reaction across the board, allowing the reader to vicariously experience Rose's newfound self-assurance and feel particularly frustrated as it quickly erodes under her husband's false pretenses. The reader is left with the sense that the revelatory effect of San Salvatore is only temporary – dashed as societal expectations of the happy wife rush back into the picture alongside the husband.

The character arc of Lotty Wilkins, the jubilant yet under-appreciated wife who initially discovered the ad, is triggered by the *idea* of San Salvatore alone, allowing for a streamlined evolution that ends on a similarly disappointing note for the reader. Initially, she considers herself "the kind of person not noticed at parties…practically invisible; her face was non-arresting; her conversation was reluctant; she was shy." (5) Immediately, when picturing the rental of the Italian castle, she is "as luminous and tremulous under it as water in sunlight when it is ruffled by a gust of wind. At this moment, if she had been at a party, Mrs. Wilkins would have been looked at with interest" (12). It can be surmised that Mrs. Wilkin's unhappiness stems from stagnancy and boredom. Her days are preoccupied with menial tasks, like "going to Shoolbred's on her way home and buying some soles for Mellersh[her husband's] dinner" (5) and being "blotted out" (6) behind her husband at social gatherings; "the Tube to Hampstead, and dinner, and to-morrow the same and the day after the same and always the same…" (8). A newfound sense of content comes about when she herself takes the initiative of a main character, rather than functioning as a mere wife at hand: "There are miserable sorts of goodness and happy sorts—the sort we'll have at the castle, for instance, is the happy sort" (21). Yet, her attitude in the Italian setting begins to approach cliché, hinting at an overbearing sense of idealism:

> "You mustn't sigh in heaven," said Mrs. Wilkins. "One doesn't."
> "I was thinking about how one longs to share this with those one loves.," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

> "You mustn't long in heaven," said Mrs Wilkins. "You're supposed to be quite complete there. And it *is* heaven, isn't it, Rose? See how everything has been let in together—the dandelions and the irises, the vulgar and the superior, me and Mrs. Fisher—all welcome, all mixed up anyhow, and all so visibly happy and enjoying ourselves." (78)

Mrs. Wilkins notion of this "heaven's" value is complex and telling. Although the comparison of the castle to heaven itself is an undoubtedly idealized perspective, if not the *most* idealized comparison, she seems to draw a distinction between completeness and happiness. San Salvatore is complete with flowers, varied personalities, the good and the bad, yet all are only "visibly happy." They simply mustn't ask for more than the ability to enjoy oneself. When Mellersh does decide to visit his wife, it comes as no surprise to the reader that his purpose are not wholly genuine: "He knew all about the Droitwiches [Lady Caroline's family], their wealth, their connections, their place in history, and the power they had of making yet another solicitor happy by adding him to those they already employed…He was not a man to lose time when it came to business…Besides, he actually felt amiable—very. For once, Lotty was really helping him" (158). Regrettably, his arrival is revealed to be a ruse for business connections rather than "a definite wish for reunion" (149), as the other women comes to assume. In a similar manner to Rose's storyline, Mrs. Wilkins comes to feel an appreciation for her husband that is unknowingly and ironically misplaced. In this context, her earlier regard for completeness seems to suggest that, in this place, happiness can be feigned in order to achieve some semblance of joy by the conclusion of the story. Unfortunately, the reader is not awarded the same blissful ignorance as the women themselves. What truly comes about is yet another ironically incomplete conclusion. As the women begin to detach from the idealized haze of the castle's isolation and re-enter their positions within the patriarchy, the reader is left feeling duped by the misleadingly romantic tone and setting, which seemingly led nowhere but right back home.

Mrs. Fisher's transition is primarily based on her lonely observations of budding relationships towards the end of the novel, which prompts the start of an unlikely female relationship between her and Mrs. Wilkins. The pairing contributes to the irony of the work's conclusion by rounding out the general tone of idealization and theme of conclusive companionship. Yet, the connection is illustrated as perhaps the most genuine in the novel, as it comes about against all odds and without the influence of prescribed gender roles: a true result of authentic trust and admiration. Lotty or Mrs. Wilkins, as the ever-meddling character in the story, perceives Mrs. Fisher's grievance as that of "wanting her husband" (190), while none of her internal dialogue actually points to this conclusion. In reality, her change begins when the younger husbands and bachelors arrive at the castle, triggering a sense of youthful or motherly excitement that Mrs. Fisher is not entirely keen to pursue: "There were many things she disliked more than anything else, and one was when the elderly imagined they felt young and behaved accordingly…If, after all these years, she were now going to be deluded into some sort of unsuitable breaking out, how humiliating" (178). This response, given Mrs. Fisher's prior characterization, is expectedly and humorously morose. Her newfound amiability towards Briggs, the owner of the property, is equally pointed and detached:

> Mrs. Fisher too was gracious. This was this man's house. He was a man of property. She liked property, and she liked men of property. Also, there seemed a peculiar merit in being a man of property so young. Inheritance, of course; and inheritance was more respectable than acquisition. It did indicate fathers; and in an age where most people appeared neither to have them nor to want them, she liked this too. (200)

The inner tone echoes that of the earlier Mrs. Fisher, yet the other women observe its outward expression in bewilderment, "for Mrs. Fisher amused was a new sight, not without its awe-inspiring aspects, and had to be got accustomed to" (202). This distinction implies a somewhat unconscious, begrudging transition by the old woman, initially triggered by the sentimental draw

of traditional maleness and later translated into appreciation for the other women, such as when Lotty briefly kisses her: "A queer little trickle of warmth filtered through the frozen defenses of Mrs. Fisher's heart. Somebody young kissing her—somebody young *wanting to* kiss her…" (203). Finally, her stubborn attachment to the past is eroded by a desire for new, present love, or what Lotty describes as the "loneliness of age" (245): "Her great dead friends did not seem worth reading that night…No doubt they were greater than anyone was now, but they had this immense disadvantage, that they were dead" (245). Instead, Lotty finds that she herself can be the other half Mrs. Fisher so desperately needs, and the two conclude in a tender state of platonic affection: "This time Mrs. Fisher actually put up her hand and held Mrs. Wilkin's cheek against her own—this living thing, full of affection, of warm, racing blood; and as she did this she felt safe with the strange creature" (245). The tone here reflects a tender, if not unfamiliar admiration for the young other, based purely on affective response between females, and therefore significantly more sincere in the context of the middlebrow novel.

Finally, the transition of Lady Caroline, the young beauty of the group, takes an unexpected and gendered route with the arrival of Mr. Briggs, the owner of the castle. As touched upon earlier, Caroline's outwardly pleasant demeanor is her ultimate vice— standing at odds with the critical and introverted persona she truly occupies. In San Salvatore, she often reflects on her unfortunate relationships with men, or what she deems "grabbers." Plagued by the hovering gardener, Domenico, she reflects on her state of discontent:

> He watered and tied up all of the things that were closest to her; he hovered closer and closer; he watered to excess; he tied plants that were as straight and steady as arrows…All she wanted was to turn round one of these [chairs] round with its back to Domenico and its front to the sea towards Genoa. Such a little thing to want. One would have thought she might have been allowed to do that unmolested. But he, who watched her every movement, when he saw her approaching the chairs darted after her and seized one and asked to be told where to put it. (89)

Von Arnim's anxious tone and use of words like "molested", "hover", and "arrows" suggest a certain violence in this moment, wherein Caroline cannot escape from a sense of impending danger or, at the very least, mental breakdown. Her wishes to "get away from being waited on, being made comfortable, and being asked where she wanted things put" (89) certainly come across as ironic expressions of privilege or a lack of gratitude that cannot be dismissed. Yet, much of her anxiety seems to stem more from a lack of physical boundaries than a resentment of service. This is visible in her first encounters with her later partner: "A deep melancholy invaded [Caroline]. The symptoms of the incipient grabber were all there and only too familiar, and she knew that if Briggs stayed her rest-cure might be regarded as over…the tyranny of one person over another! And she was so miserably constructed that she wouldn't even be able to frown him down without being misunderstood…" (207). She is pushed to actually flee from the interaction, as "she saw no reason why she should sit there in order to gratify Mr. Briggs's desire to stare" (211). As readers, then, we are frustrated when such self-regard from Caroline turns to self-criticism, as she deems herself a "spoilt, a sour, a suspicious, and a selfish spinster" for denying the prospect of love "applied to her in excess" (238). Even further, she develops a baffling admiration for Briggs himself, seemingly only based upon his ownership of the house and the sense that she *owes* him for her moments of content. Her almost instant attitude change makes even the ambivalent voice of the omniscient narrator weary: "She too continued to look at Briggs, and with that odd air of almost appeal. Most unwise. Most" (243), while Mrs. Wilkins manifests the relationship in her ever-idealized sort of way: "'It's useless minding,' she said. 'I shouldn't struggle if I were you. Because…I see them being the Briggses,' finished Mrs. Wilkins" (247). On one hand, Caroline has supposedly found love with someone who very much admires her. Yet, the rapid transition to a conclusive state with the former "grabber" comes

across as both ironic and bittersweet— a moment of settling for one's discontent in order to round out an inauthentically utopian premise.

Much like the plot of *Dusty Answer*, the distinct arc of each woman remains at the center of Von Arnim's middlebrow work. Yet, unlike Lehmann's novel, the transitions witnessed are laced with irony that renders them relevant only in the utopian setting of San Salvatore, leading to multiple deceptively disappointing conclusions. *The Enchanted April* conceals the irony of its utopian premise using a style which Erica Brown refers to as the "comedy of manners", allowing the female novelist to "to express humour while appearing to stay within acceptable constructions of femininity" (19). This style is similarly an aspect of what relegates authors like Von Arnim to the classification of "middlebrow" and what can uniquely and "skillfully be used to create complex and challenging novels" (15). It is also what has perhaps led to a consistent misreading of the conclusion of *The Enchanted April*. Although the novel is scarcely addressed in contemporary scholarship (only in the work of Erica Brown, Noreen O'Conner, Gerri Kimber, Isobel Maddison, and Todd Martin), even less has been done around the irony accompanying the novel's closing, including whether or not we can truly view the work as light-hearted and feel-good given the departure from San Salvatore and its assumed repercussions in the domestic space. Lotty Wilkins, for example, is similar to Judith from Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* in her excessive emotionality and idealism: "As though justice can really be distinguished from vengeance. It's only love that's any good. At home I wouldn't love Mellersh unless he loved me back, exactly as much, absolute fairness." (119). Such conclusions, if read critically, lead us to the blind naivety of Mrs. Wilkin's voice, which functions as a guiding force to the rest of the women and leads them to other falsely idealized paths. In reality, Mrs. Wilkins herself is unaware of her husband's selfish business intentions in coming to San Salvatore: "He was so

much obliged to her, so much pleased with her, for making him acquainted with Lady Caroline, that he felt really fond of her" (174). Lady Caroline, on the other hand, settles for one of her many intense admirers rather than searching for attraction that does not include personal invasion and obsession. "Ashamed of her churlishness" and "overcome by the sudden realization of all she did owe him" (242), her attitude towards the castle's owner, Mr. Briggs, turns from hatred of his "termination to get hold of and engulf of other people" (214) to a regard for Briggs, "The only one to go away unblessed" while she had had "the most leisure, peaceful, and thoughtful time of her life; and all really thanks to him" (241).Thus, the inappropriateness of this pairing is left unquestioned in favor of the idealized conclusion which the setting seemingly compels: "San Salvatore working its spell of happiness" if only Caroline "could quite believe in its spell," (200) or simply persuade herself to accept it. In the case of Rose Arbuthnot, the irony of her ultimate happiness is only visible to the reader, who is aware of her husband's arrival for the sake of Caroline rather than Rose herself, and under a false name no less: "But she did not see his stare, for her arms were round his neck, and her cheeks was against his, and she was murmuring, her lips on his ear, 'I knew you would come—in my very heart, I always, always knew you would come—'" (225). The false basis of this reuniting is particularly striking to a reader who recognizes its dramatic irony: the fact that Rose believes she has manifested Frederick's coming, while in reality, he was not even aware of where she'd gone.

The final paragraph of novel is particularly whimsical and natural, emphasizing the final visage of San Salvatore as the happy pairings return to their former lives:

> The last week the syringa came out in San Salvatore, and all the acacias flowered. No one had noticed how many acacias there were till one day the garden was full of a new scent…Indeed, the whole garden dressed itself gradually towards the end in white and grew more and more scented…When, on the first day of May, everybody went away, even after they had got to the bottom of the hill and passed through the iron gates out into the village, they could still smell the acacias. (247)

Here, Von Arnim is uncharacteristically un-ironic, leaving the reader with glittering imagery of the Italian villa at its best and brightest. Following a pointed reading of the novel's loaded conclusion, one can't help but feeling swindled by a final image that bolsters all the idealism of a setting that has, in reality, altered so little in the lives of each woman. It is tempting to read the smell of the acacias as an overwhelming, not entirely positive force—a symbol for San Salvatore's enduring idealism. Some may embrace this reading. Others, perhaps in search of a lighthearted get-out-of-jail-free card, may relish in the grace of conclusivity— that of gates closing and lingering summer scents. In either and any case, the story wraps in a moment which the middlebrow novel can so effectively achieve: that of pensive beauty, ironic appreciation, and confused discontent. The four women will all return to male-centered worlds that may seem more redeeming than before their trip. Yet, the reality of the story's deeper, unfortunate subtext remains with the affective reader despite the comfortable framework of the romantic vacation novel.

E. ARNOT ROBERTSON'S *CULLUM*

The final author in this study, E. Arnot Robertson, is perhaps most remembered for her jarringly direct mannerisms and shockingly unromantic perspective. The daughter of a surgeon, she was educated in France and Switzerland before joining the staff of *Answers* magazine by the age of nineteen. Her first novel, *Cullum*, was published in 1928 and received popular regard across various publications. Turning to film criticism in the 1950s and 60s, she was particularly outspoken on the topic of screen representation, believing that the "male fantasy is wedded to produce outdated images of womanhood" (Bell). In 1947, she filed a lawsuit again Metro-Goldwin Mayer, who found her reviews "unnecessarily harmful to the film industry", and although she did not win, many consider "the moral victory hers: passionately individualistic, she was in part fighting 'sentimentality, over-statement, tradition, patriotism, cruelty, the self-regarding eye' as well as frivolity" (Beauman). Although these events followed the publication of the majority of her novels, they illustrate patterns of Robertson's outspoken, opinionated behavior which perhaps led to the polarizing nature of her work - often criticized for its sexually explicit components. Still, this did not prevent their inclusion in "some of the most distinguished bestsellers" of the 1920s, described as "books which leave [Robertson] fancy free, which don't require to be constricted by climate or any other conditions" (Blanch 47). The artistic intentions of Robertson, although difficult to assess with certainty, seem to be motivated by efforts of social criticism that have perplexed romance readers despite attracting much popular attention: "It is not comfortable reading. Once again Arnot Robertson proves herself a very unromantic novelist" (Billington). Yet, as Billington so aptly introduces: "It survives the sixty years since its first publication, not so much by careful construction or great use of language, but by the unromantic

directness of its passion and as a heard-headed portrait of the kind of man who is on an eternal request for the next woman" (*vii)*. Ultimately, *Cullum* can be seen as a romance novel utilizing the affectivity of the genre to tell a tongue -in-cheek story of how the ideals of heterosexual love and female independence can fall apart at the seams. The middlebrow guise of the romance novel provided an idealized framework for Robertson to write *against*, in turn utilizing and overturning the constricting social expectations she so thoroughly resented.

The plot of the novel is straightforward: Robertson's protagonist Esther Sieveking lives an independent life revolving around her own hobbies and interests, resenting the many balls and dinners she must attend as an attractive debutante in an affluent family. She then meets and become infatuated with Cullum Hayes, a glamorous and romantic young author who is later revealed to be a deceptive charmer and cheat, leaving Esther in an intense state of disarray. Yet, Esther is notably unlike the female characters of *The Enchanted April* or *Dusty Answer*. She is introduced as abrasive and uncouth – a young, aspiring writer living in the English countryside who remains far more interested in foxhunting and her horses than the affairs of others: "Most human affairs are fascinating, unless one is concerned with them oneself. The less one had to do with people personally, the better for one's peace of mind" (Robertson 47). Early on, she often anticipates the agent of her own romantically driven downfall, suggesting that her independence from social constraints is unsustainable: "I don't want anyone to come close enough to be able to play on my feelings if they choose" (47). Esther's voice is almost humorously critical of emotion, to the point of subtle contradiction: "It is a very different thing to observe dispassionately the emotions of other people, and to share them" (47). Robertson proposes that there are two sources of this stifling resentment, both intertwined and separate: the gendered position of the female and the romanticized narrative of marriage. Much of Esther's early inner

dialogue, similarly to our earlier novels, comments on the female expectation of tact and simplicity. However, unlike Judith in *Dusty Answer* or Mrs. Arbuthnot in *Enchanted April*, this is a position she questions in a confident, clever tone. The ridiculousness of certain gender norms is merely a joking matter to Esther. There is little sense of impediment or genuine frustration early on:

> I was again amused at the ball-room solicitude of the men who bumped into me and anxiously asked if I was hurt: most of them, at different times had seen one or other of Father's beasts bring me crashing down at a jump, and had ridden on without even looking round to see if I was badly injured or not; but for that one night they behaved as though I had suddenly become a fragile flower" (Robertson 102).

Her positioning is blunt enough to be read as a defense mechanism, covering genuine feelings of resentment. Yet, other moments of observation suggest that Edith's generally pessimistic tone should be read for exactly what it is, such as the moment when she witnesses the milkman's name carved into a pillar: "It is strange that this repellent human weakness for carving names in unsuitable places springs from the blind instinct which produces great works of art" (72). The protagonist is no nihilist—she recognizes "great works of art." Rather, her dismissal is aimed at the human instincts which motivate the frivolity of graffiti. In the case of the ballroom scene above, she observes the irony of the dance floor interaction, and in turn, the irony of prescribed gender roles. Edith's initial perspective can be described as that of a distant fascination with tact in social interactions, perhaps because her attention to physicality and non-human animals comes about naturally and without societal constraint, allowing for the most vivid imagery of the novel: "The next day, which was Saturday and a hunting day, the wet, warm ground under the mare's flying hoofs was instinct with new life, and from it rose to me as I rode the good smell of fertile earth after rain…Both of us were dirty, weary, and at peace with the world" (34). Such brief

moments of natural retreat incapsulate a uniquely contented, authentic version of Esther, which only comes to light prior to and following her relationship with Cullum.

Edith's interest in social interactions runs parallel to that of Robertson herself, who maintained that "people, not things, will always be at the centre of [women's] thoughts. I think that will always be so. I don't think you can ever change that" (Bullington 2). In this way, Esther's rebellious nature can be seen as an initial state for Robertson's exploration of romance and the female experience, as her perspective transitions from distanced and observational to personal and involved. Recalling the retreat to interiority of Judith in *Dusty Answer*, this change occurs in reverse, as her arc quickly transitions in and out of romantic captivation. As a form of teenage bildungsroman, *Cullum* illustrates a nontraditional and inevitable *descent* into gendered norms, rather than a lifting of societal veils, as Lehmann and Von Arnim executed. Initially, we see Esther exploring the limits of tact, learning through observation and tests what is acceptable for a woman in the climate of the 1920s. This is particularly salient following a formal dinner scene, wherein Esther reveals her lack of "understanding for the respectability of tongue cultivated in the kind of drawing-rooms where many things may be hinted but not said" when she discusses her dog, "called Justice because she has had so many miscarriages" (23). Robertson seemingly anticipates the criticism she receives around the novel when Cullum explains: "Blasphemy, being mental, is permissible…the mildest obscenity, being physical, isn't" (25). The scene illustrates the irony of social permissibility and discretion which Esther continuously questions: "Why, for instance, is it permissible in society for a woman to have a breast, but not breasts? You can decently mention anyone laying their head on their mother's chest as long as she doesn't have two" (100). Such posed questions, although lighthearted in the eyes of the contemporary reader, were considered quite radical coming from a female

protagonist. Here, Edith's early interactions with the socially constrained world allow for her early glimpses into the contradictory nature of various social norms.

The first-person voice and observations of Esther promote this maintained fascination with the gendered nature of her interactions. She witnesses a man's criticism of her "enormous appetite, which was not at all suitable for a young girl" (126), listens to comments like "I don't mind your lass coming, Hayes, because she isn't disturbing; you can easily forget she's a woman," (169) and tolerates blatant generalizations: "Women do live in the past, it seems. It's never finished for them. A man lives more in the future; that's why the majority of us can turn to entirely new adventures without much regret for what we leave behind" (173). The irony of this final statement becomes clear when we regard Cullum's incessant infidelity. Ultimately, the character of Esther seems to maintain a voice that is at once uniquely outspoken and silenced by its own gendered position. Yet, at moments, this position allows her to observe other women's interactions via the emotional distance of the female gaze and inwardly respond with impressions of gender she considers herself beyond. This most notably occurs while she observes an interaction between Cullum and an unnamed "girl":

> He laughed, with a quick backward jerk of the head, at some observation he made to the girl by his side; she frowned in a puzzled way, not understanding his play on a word, and being very much a woman, smiled at him and not what he had to say, but at twenty-two he could not be expected to notice the difference. He would be an exceptional man if he *ever* noticed the difference. (19)

Here, Edith seemingly expresses pity for the other woman, implying that the source of the girl's confusion is the fact that she is "very much a woman". Although this is likely driven by a sense of female competition, the parallel judgment of Cullum as an unexceptional man suggests a more general regard for the gendered social norms at play. Why, then, do these critical comments only come about at a distance, rather than aloud within every moment of subtle dismissal that Edith

experiences? This is perhaps a choice on Robertson's part which functionally maintains the status quo within the story. Robertson disguises any overtly critical implications by using a protagonist who questions social norms only when they do not actively impact her own romantic inclinations and social interactions, allowing the story to move forward without extensive attention to the denigration occurring. The constant critical environment of the female position thus maintains its consistent, unchanged weight on Edith, while rarely being recognized aloud.

The emphasis on marriage in Edith's environment serves as another catalyst for her growth as a young woman. While her views around female independence are often dismissed among other characters, the very critiques she proposes foreshadow her later romantic failures: "I looked on marriage as a stupid, rather sordid business, the common-place tomb of the high adventure of love" (Robertson 113). Cullum voices a similar, if not vaguer, sentiment: "It's only the unsatisfied sort of love that lasts, it seems. Love is always sentenced to death by its fulfillment" (115). Here, we can presume that "fulfillment" refers to the act of marriage - the supposed legal actualization of love. Earlier in the novel, in similar words, Edith ponders the marriage of her friend Judith as a positive yet naïve life path: "Yet, from the individual point of view she had been wise; the happiest of women are those who fulfill the natural vocations of women and want nothing more; but there is more in life than happiness; contentment is not a compensation for everything" (99). Although her voice is not entirely pessimistic, she seems to view the union as a waste of opportunity and life, "putting aside the probability of fine achievement as an artist…because she wanted to be this man's wife, and possibly the mother of his children, to the exclusion of all other interests" (98). In such scenes, Edith's brash tone is traded for that of pity and disappointment, as if she is vicariously experiencing the end of independence. Robertson provides such touching moments of realization in anticipation of the

protagonist's own encounters with romance, wherein she is shown firsthand that female dependence and the subsequent loss of selfhood is the black, diseased vein of innocent love. The pinnacle of this loss of dependence, in her eyes, is the institution of marriage: a path which, even under the influence of Cullum, she never truly approaches. This is a significant decision on Robertson's part. The rejection of this institution is seemingly the only early moral stance Edith maintains within her whirlwind romance, perhaps reflecting on Robertson's own position.

Midway through the novel, as Edith and Cullum's relationship gains speed, Robertson diverts to a very literal chapter that seems to fall out of line with the rest of the novel. Edith begins a new job in journalism, in which she works editing papers "written to appeal to the less educated class of office-girls," or what could implicitly be considered middlebrow writing. The language Robertson utilizes is notably like that of earlier treatments of the feminine middlebrow:

> Those productions of cheap paper must have strained many of the eyes that read them, in ill-lit trains on the way home and in bed after work, but they *brought romance into drab lives*…If the office boy proved fickle, the reader had the consolation of believing that hers ranked with the great tragedies of modern life, as reflected by her favorite literature (148, my emphasis).

Edith's thought description is not explicitly critical, nor does it uphold the deep value of the genre. Rather, she writes about the romance novel as a means to an end: the female reader reads of love gained and lost in order to put words to what they themselves live through. Although presented here in a somewhat more superficial light, much of the chapter seems to anticipate the romantic idealization that Edith herself experiences. In this way, her journalistic employment can be seen as a metanarrative feature of the novel, which depends heavily on the theme of feminine ideals and their falsity. As Edith expresses in her most vulnerable state, "Desire in the eyes of a beloved man is the most wonderful sight earth holds for a woman…the embodiment of my impossible ideals" (208-215). The placement of the chapter, as it corresponds to Edith's growing

dependence on the image of Cullum, should not be understated. In accepting her new position and the value of the romantic genre, Edith is increasingly pulled into the gender norms that mark a turn from her critical, outspoken nature. At this point, Robertson brings Edith into a middlebrow publication in order to literally subject her to the kind of texts she is actively playing a role within.

The change that comes about in the second half of the novel, when Edith embraces her stereotypically feminine sensitivity under the influence of Cullum's deception, further illustrates not only a regard for possible censorship of Edith's earlier abrasiveness, but the utilization of the middlebrow authorial position to question gender norms under the guise of the romance novel. What reveals itself is an entirely unromantic commentary on female dependence and the illusions of romance symbolized by the charade of Cullum. Unlike the aforementioned novels, Cullum himself functions as the voice of emotion which draws Esther into what Robertson believes to be her inevitable dependence:

> Between us we possess this thing, which the whole world yearns for. One day I shall be sole owner of it, for you, and all you have and all you are, will belong to me in spirit. How you have drawn the radiance out of everything I used to love! There's no intrinsic worth now in any beautiful thing I see; it is nothing but a background for my imaginings of you. (128)

Cullum's musings are hyperbolic, if not mildly off-putting. Much of his praise stems from a desire for ownership, which Edith does not wholly push back against. The brashness of her earlier voice stands significantly apart from the flowery, romantic language of the protagonist infatuated: "Cullum, whom I loved, was no longer a man to me, but Love incarnate, and I was conscious of no feeling save the touch of his hands, and his mouth" (133). Yet, much of her thoughts are tinged with irony, suggesting that her intense admiration is coupled with a self-conscious acknowledgment of her own self-silencing: "I think Cullum preferred these evenings

to any others; he loved good talk, particularly when he was doing most of it himself…When Cullum did nothing, he did it wholeheartedly" (166). In such moments, Edith narrates in retrospect, recalling moments that foreshadow Cullum's later deception. Yet, her direct, pointed observations of his nature are not so much critical as they are impartial: "Here was a man who, wanting me, still professed to wo wish for nothing more than the possession of his own mind made richer by schooled desire" (170). Her tone is that of acceptance, as if she is identifying the subtle flaws of Cullum in hindsight of her idealization, as well as her constant desire for more than the theoretical love he provided: "My reason, disregarding my vanity, saw the splendour of the far-off ideal, while my hurt vanity…prompted me to use every artifice that instinct taught me to stir the man in Cullum to the discomfort of a dreamer" (171). The illustration of their affair is unique in this way, as it incorporates the hesitance and realization of the later narrator together with the complete infatuation of the typical romantic narration.

There is no place this division of perspective is clearer than in the significant encounter between Edith and Cullum in the woods, following a minor accident on his motorcycle, that "according to him…were never his fault" (171). A moment of physical violence comes unexpectedly, triggered by Cullum's possessive instinct over Edith:

> Neither of us were playing as we fought; I was gripped by sheer, instinctive terror; the heritage, possibly, of some other woman's fear, long ago, among the trees from which these trees had sprung…Then the violence died out of him; he let me sink back on the earth, where I lay, beyond happiness or unhappiness or any feeling, with one arm over my closed eyes, trying to shut out Cullum and the whole world. (174)

The scene is comparable to the violent interaction of Robby and Judith in *Dusty Answer*— it is both sudden and revelatory; a demonstration of violent male desire that leaves the female partner in a state of numbness. Given her love for sport, the physicality of such interactions is not entirely foreign or unexpected. Still, in the case of her love affair with Cullum, much of their

admiration up to this point is innocently expressed through speech, letter, or thought alone. Thus, when faced with physical dominance and pain, she draws on the fear of "the heritage" of women to understand her reaction. The idealization of the relationship seemingly breaks down in such moments, wherein gendered frustrations and Cullum's sense of ownership is actualized. Edith in particular is rendered weak by acts of physicality she holds no control over. Considering the parallel scene in *Dusty Answer*, such violent scenes between love interests reflect the middlebrow attention to physical encounters, which function as significantly gendered moments presented as equally introspective and traumatizing for the woman involved. Unique to the genre is the ability to openly illustrate such moments and their complexities, then quickly move on with affect in tow.

As Edith's dependence on Cullum grows, so too does his idealization erode. Beginning with minor character flaws, like Cullum's cheating at cards, it becomes increasingly clear that the man is not what Edith has built him up to be. Yet, even in response to his lover's revelation, Cullum is superfluous and dramatic, as if to provoke emotional reaction from both Edith and the reader:

> I am a weak cad, but I wonder if you can understand how terrible it is for a man to live with the shadow of his real self always lying ghost-wise between him and the infinitely desired dream which is close enough to be touched…You made too high a pedestal for me out of your ideals, is it altogether my fault that I have fallen from it? (216)

Although unclear at first, Cullum's villainous, insincere nature is revealed through both irony and what could be considered dry parodic treatment of the romantic genre. As Cullum states, "the practical side of love, viewed impersonally, is the most comical thing that any ingenuity could conceive" (210). Such comments break down any remaining princely ideals, revealing the character of a man whose dramatic romanticism had unknowingly parodied the princely expectation from the start: "He was always good at realizing quickly what anyone would like

him to be, and adopting the role unconsciously. He had played up to my dreams very well" (215). It stands to be noted that Edith's "dreams" were not of marriage or nuclear gender roles, but of an intense state of romance independent of sex, which her close friends fail to comprehend when taking Cullum's side at the end of the relationship. Edith reflects on the gendered origin of her friend's disloyalty:

> She was kind to me, but Cullum had touched the maternal side [of her], which was a dominant factor in her pride in me. He appealed not only to that part of her nature, but to the woman's natural preference for the man's side of any cause…But I have none of that maternal kind of love which sweeps pride aside. (219)

Despite Edith's brief descent into romantic idealization, her heartbreak following his infidelity remains a product of pride and self-worth. Robertson emphasizes this in order to draw a distinct line between the two sides of love she approaches: gendered, maternal love of the male figure and emotional idealization. The former is a foreign concept to Edith, and its application is detrimental to her female friendship: "Before these two primitive instincts the artificial tie of friendship broke down…If it was only my pride that was wounded, as she said, then pride is more vulnerable than I had thought, for the scar did not heal with the passing of the days" (219-22). In the case of the latter, more emotional form of love, however, her reaction to loss becomes physical and passionate despite all efforts.

Edith's most dramatic response to Cullum's betrayal and turn to another woman is that of complete physicality encompassing an entire chapter titled "The Ditch-and-Rail Jump", which comes about not unlike that of the "jump the shark" plot device. Yet, this is not entirely unexpected giving her initial fierce characterization. Riding her horse in a whisky-induced state, she ultimately "spoil[s] irreparably the strong body that Cullum had loved" (241):

> It was the first time in my life that I had deliberately inflicted pain upon an animal and I enjoyed it with every faculty in me that could still feel joy or suffering…I wanted to ride out the agony in my mind, for the thing which I was running away from was overtaking

> me…in my ears echoed Cullum's voice saying unforgettable things…'Your body is so beautiful that I cannot bear the thought of it being broken. It's mine—' All my cunning of hand and heel and voice I used to madden the big beast under me, half mad as he was already with the smell and sound of the hunt, carried to him by the wind. (234-239)

The dramatic scene illustrates a return to Edith's brash nature, as well as it's translation into physical pain. It also represents an important, albite bittersweet moment of direct rebellion against Cullum's wishes. His command to "not spoil" the body that belongs to him is repeated twice in the span of three pages, and spoil she does, causing her to be hospitalized for some time after breaking her left hip and thigh. In this way, Edith chooses to translate her emotional torment into physical pain in an attempt to flush herself of any romantic idealization leftover, which renders her "glad for a moment, with a feeling of sullen pride" (241). Read through a superficial lens, the scene could be interpreted as a reckless display of passion, especially considering Edith's calls for Cullum when she arises in the hospital. Yet, considering the state of mind Edith finds herself within, as well as the choice to ride the dangerous "Lepper" horse, the infliction should both considered as both a rejection of Cullum's will and a form of self-punishment, further manifested towards the untrained horse itself. Edith's passion for intense, rugged sport and its meditative quality is destroyed along with the ideal of romance and its ultimate solace.

Robertson's early reviews regard the superficial nature of Edith and Cullum's love affair of the narrative without acknowledging the implications of Esther's character arc. A 1928 edition of *The Spectator* notes how "*Cullum* is a first novel of quiet dignity and well-restrained emotion…the dreamier side of [Esther's] nature is starved until Cullum Hayes enters her life" (Thomas 178). *The Bookman*, on the other hand, openly diminished the style of Robertson as that of "unsparing honesty and, unfortunately, with that insensitiveness that belongs to the hunting and dog-breeding fraternity" (229). Together, both reviews illustrate the gendered condition of

the female novelist, who can be read in strikingly distinct manners and is praised for the reading most fitting to the woman's expected demeanor. Here, this expectation is that of quiet dignity from a newly emerging female author. In a review particularly bracing to contemporary readers, The *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art* manages to directly implicate Esther in her own downfall: "Seriously or in fun, she was always ready to be kissed, and it is not surprising that this accessibility put her heart in jeopardy" ("An Artist in the Family 170).

Yet, later reviews from literary authorities including Hugh Walpole and A.S. Byatt overturn such diminishing readings of Robertson, describing her approach as that of "humour, courage and wisdom" turning from "pessimism and artificiality…in[to] this new world of adventure" from which "new genius should be born" ("Tendencies of the Modern Novel" 415). Byatt goes on to include Robertson in the grouping of "between-war writers who *did* express their sense of themselves and from whom my generation learned so much" (Byatt 9). Ultimately, unlike Lehmann and Von Arnim, Robertson's use of an openly unromantic protagonist within the context of a romance prompted critical denigration which overlooks the complex questions being posed around female dependency, social tact, and the validity of romance itself. As Billington aptly puts in her introduction to the novel: "It is not the romantic aspects of the novels which cause men to be over-critical but the very unromantic attitude to romance that threatens the male image of himself" (2). A final description of Cullum appears particularly relevant to this pattern in male reviews: "A man may make love to many different women, but I think in his heart it's always to Woman, not an individual but an idea" (268). The unromantic themes the novel draws upon seem to anticipate the very negative male criticism she receives from reviewers who either "make love" to the ideal of the romance novel or are threatened by the lack of romanticism within a pointedly feminine genre.

The final chapters of the novel are named appropriately after stages of recovery and acceptance: "Strain", "Surface Healing" and "Again." Robertson offers a touching, realistic perspective towards the healing processes of heartbreak and the recovery of independence. Ultimately, the reader understands that the romantic ideal Cullum represents is a farce aided by gendered power dynamics:

> What I miss most isn't Cullum, but what he stood for in my imagination. I've discovered, as many do, that a man or woman can afford to live without their ideal, their supreme satisfaction, whatever it is, as long as they believe that, somewhere, it exists…But to realize that the shrine at which I have worshipped is not only empty, save for a little dust, but has always been empty—Oh, that comes hard (268).

Here, the protagonist confronts both the emotional effect of romantic idealization and the power struggles that rendered her so vulnerable to his influence. In a final moment of bittersweet acceptance, after some years have passed and Edith is working as a journalist, she is one of the first people to see him after he has committed suicide, having been hiding from the police in a hotel, "a miserable place, with stained paper peeling from the walls" (283). His final resting place is anything but romantic, yet he is characteristically found writing a final lover letter to yet another woman. Edith reflects how "at the end he had been utterly sincere, as he had always been in his own strange way, and when he died his last thoughts were of his woman, Heloise, whom he loved" (287). The thought comes across as sincere: a mere observation of Cullum's all-encompassing but impractical sort of love. The question is not whether he loved Edith, in the end, but why their love turned volatile. Ultimately, Edith's stability proved incompatible with the intense and temporary romanticism Cullum offered: "I remembered nothing of the past, knowing only that here lay my youth and my dreams, dead with Cullum" (287). Still, Robertson chooses not to conclude on an idealistic note. Instead, Edith and her coworker casually discuss the writing of the obituary:

> ‘I’ll tell Parmentier’ (the news editor) ‘that you are on the story. How much space shall I ask him hold?’
>
> It struck me as curious that at this moment I must ply the profession in which Cullum started me.
>
> ‘About a quarter-column,’ I said, with laughter that made Ropes glance at me anxiously. ‘The story is worth just about that. But you take it. You can always make more of that sensation-stuff than I can.’
>
> ‘On no account, *mon vieux*! It is of course your story.’
>
> ‘Oh, I don’t want to work today,’ I said, ‘A friend, my fiancé in fact, is arriving from England.’
>
> ‘ Ah, in that case!’ he said, grinning, and hurried in. (288)

This conclusion, in true middlebrow form, appears superfluous, or perhaps even unsatisfactory. Yet, the symbolism of the scene is widespread. As Edith mentions, she is now the person of power in the industry Cullum introduced her to, while Cullum is dead and worth a mere “quarter column.” She even refers to his obituary as “sensation stuff”, illustrating a final regard for the idealized romanticism Cullum represented. As the novel comes to a close, so too does the sensational love story end, and Edith chooses not to write it, instead passing off the story to someone more equipped for its portrayal. In the end, his life was not *her* story to write, nor was her life an asset of his. We are left with the small fact that Edith is engaged now and therefore detached from the dramatic memory of Cullum, while the open-endedness of the final line suggests that the story of Edith will instead continue off page. The novel itself, then, is a simple preclude to Edith’ true story, perhaps deserving the title of *Edith* rather than *Cullum*.

Through *Cullum,* Robertson ultimately offers a unique glimpse into the feminine middlebrow in its varied forms. Unlike the two previous novels, the protagonist begins as rash and physical—everything but the light female character of the gender-normative romance. She is quick-witted and opinionated, yet constantly under the invisible weight of social expectations. Although short-lived, Cullum offers Edith an emotional escape from her own rigidity, opening her up to receive powerful love and simultaneous pain. This should not altogether be seen as a

negative relationship. Edith describes her state as being "happier than the gods allow" (272). Similar to how she labels the middlebrow publication she works within, intense romance and tragedy is brought into her life only to award greater value to a stable reality, free of emotional dependence and idealization. The final chapter sees Edith born anew and unwilling to write any further about the memory of Cullum. Robertson's accessible style thus offers a nuanced and subtle story that is undoubtedly a romance, yet shockingly unromantic at its core. Ironically enough, this reading only becomes available when the novel is truly read as more than a mere tale of *Cullum*.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to conclude this paper with any overarching comment about its intentions or achievements, given that there is so much more work to be done around the topic. The feminine middlebrow novels of the 1920s offer us only a glimpse into the vast amount of overlooked literature too often left aside for the canon-worship that pervades much of academia. Thankfully, contemporary resources like internet newsletters, online book clubs, audio books, and podcasts allow for the wider proliferation of intellectual material made more broadly accessible. In this way, the contemporary middlebrow has taken a somewhat novel meaning: that of bringing what is considered "highbrow" literature and information to readers from all walks of life. On the lowbrow end, as Phil Christman notes: "Everything that was once considered lowbrow is now triumphant. It is still common for people to talk of "guilty" cultural pleasures—TV, dance music—about which no one has felt guilty in decades, and to apologize for them with an enthusiasm that looks a lot like pride." While researching this topic, many of my peers sought answers as to what the middlebrow or highbrow would look like in today's climate. In 2000, *Slate Magazine* deemed the contemporary moment a sort of "golden age of middlebrow art", referring to shows like *Breaking* Bad, *Mad Men,* and *The Wire* as middlebrow (Haglund), while Halford referred to *Harper's* and *The New Yorker* as "prime examples of the middlebrow: both magazines are devoted to the high but also to making it accessible to many; to bringing ideas that might remain trapped in ivory towers and academic books, or in high-art (or film or theatre) scenes, into the pages of a relatively inexpensive periodical." Others, like Louid Menand of *The New Yorker* consider this an "age of unibrowism", or what John Seabrook refers to as "nobrow."

In some ways, the term appears irrelevant and overly refuted "in an era when the highest is as accessible as the lowest— in the sense that both are only a click away" (Halford). Why, then, have these terms not simply gone instinct? Why do we still see journalists writing about them, utilizing them, and being criticized for utilizing them (as we saw in the case of Halford)?

It is generally agreed upon that the value of the terms lie in their ability to "help delineate the varying aims of various artforms" (Haglund) and determine the level of proliferation that the content is allowed (Halford). Often, however, the term seems more valuable as something to be refuted: a reflection of both the misguided classism of past generations and the human instinct to classify, define, and denigrate— or what Christman refers to as the "democratization of culture." In closely reading *Dusty Answer, The Enchanted April,* and *Cullum*, I am inevitably taking part in this classification of value. I choose to draw out each author's use of irony, stereotype, caricature, and complex character evolution in order to somehow assert the worthiness of such accessible texts—wishing, in turn, to promote more conversation around those novels I deem valuable. As a reader and intellectual, this can be my prerogative. Yet, towards another end, I choose to work with texts I thoroughly enjoy reading in order to draw attention to larger questions of literary value. I was disappointed by the lack of criticism around these texts, primarily because I wished to know what others uncovered and noticed as they read them. The process of critique is a joint conversation in the academic world, but in the comfort of our homes, it has and always will be a subjective experience only bolstered by the readings of others. As Christman so gracefully writes:

> The best thing we can do for Homer, for opera, for the French New Wave, as well as for Jay-Z and *The Simpsons*, is to take the promises held out to the culture by the older sort of educational middlebrow, look carefully at them, and keep them. We would keep them by guaranteeing all people a decent school, free time, and a good nearby library, one they could walk through without immediately attracting the hostile attentions of a security guard. We could decide that there are in fact such things as beauty, goodness, excellence,

> and self-cultivation, and that we're willing to pay for them; we could stop indulging the adolescent boy's fantasy that the world of culture is a scrim drawn over an unremittingly Darwinian landscape. We could, having done all this, settle down to the task of talking with each other about the art we love in a way that attends to the specificity of that art. We could even do that now.

The feminine middlebrow and its origins offer a vital image of the beauty and intricacy lost when we choose to denigrate any sort of culture, and thus disregard the possibility of its subjective value. The continuance of this conversation also reflects on the continued forces of gendered stereotyping and classism, which maintain their hold over society in ever-evolving forms. While the accessibility of media has skyrocketed since the onset of the internet, female-identifying writers still only make up less than 40% of reviews in magazines including *London Review of Books*, *the Atlantic*, and *Harper's* (Bourrier), according to the 2019 Vida count, which documents the proliferation of women in literary arts. It is my hope that this project will drive more people to find similar literary examples of the silenced feminine voice, and, perhaps more importantly, to engage in reading them deeply and unabashedly, without regard for their academic reputation or lack thereof. Subjective reading can be a beautiful, revelatory process, and there is no boundary of intellectual worth that can check the value of its object in the eyes of the beholder.

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