The Contemporary Middlebrow Novel:

(Post)Feminism, Class, and Domesticity

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Abstract

This thesis examines debates about the value of women's writing and the definition, and perception of 'literary', 'popular' and 'middlebrow' literature that have taken place over the past twenty years. I argue that this contemporary preoccupation with literary value (which has its origins I suggest in the development of prize culture) has resulted in a disregard for the type of women's fiction which falls between what Winterson has described as the categories of 'art' and 'entertainment' – the middlebrow. Drawing on discussions of middlebrow fiction in the interwar period (Beauman 1983; Light 1991; Humble 2001), this thesis explores how recent work on women's fiction published in the early twentieth century can be used to find new ways of exploring the notion of 'value' in contemporary women's writing, and to open up discussions of how issues including class, nation, feminism and the home circulate within contemporary novels. Chapter One considers the work of Anita Brookner. It examines the connection between Brookner's novels and genre writing, exploring the representation of literary culture and reflecting on the position of the middlebrow reader. Chapter Two focuses on the novels of Joanna Trollope and the emergence of the Aga-saga in the nineties – a genre which I connect with the middlebrow novel of manners. This chapter challenges Deborah Philips's analysis of Trollope's novels as 'reassuring fictions' and argues instead that they emerge out of the conservative politics and the backlash against feminism that began in the 1980s. In Chapter Three I connect the work of Rachel Cusk to other twentieth century novels that have demonstrated a preoccupation with class, including Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and Nancy Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), and argue that Cusk's novels provide an important account of the changing nature of class over the past decade. Moving away from the perception of Cusk as the author of 'literary' novels, I argue that her writing is steeped in a literary tradition that is characteristically middlebrow.

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Introduction

The Contemporary Middlebrow Novel

This thesis examines contentious debates about the value of women's writing, and discussions of 'literary', 'middlebrow' and 'popular' literature, that have taken place over the past twenty years. I reason that at the root of these discussions is a concern about the kind of fiction that should be written, published and read by women. The emergence of literary prizes and the contemporary anxiety surrounding the validity of the various roles of literature – as intellectual stimulation or pleasant recreation for example – has resulted in the repeated disparagement and disregard for the type of women's fiction that falls between the categories of the literary and the popular – in other words, the middlebrow. In this thesis, the contemporary middlebrow novel – as represented by the work of Anita Brookner, Joanna Trollope, and Rachel Cusk – is posited as that which is situated between the literary novel, on the one hand, and the popular novel on the other.

I argue that the novels of Brookner, Trollope, and Cusk demonstrate a keen awareness of questions of form, and skilfully employ language. Yet, their writing is rarely experimental or philosophical like Jeanette Winterson, Doris Lessing, or Iris Murdoch, for example, who are commonly regarded as highbrow authors. The work of the three authors considered herein, tends instead to be written largely in the tradition of the realist novel. Brookner, Trollope, and Cusk do, however, make frequent references to high art, literature and culture, which serve to position them above authors of popular fiction. Significantly, their novels are also domestic in their focus. They take the home lives of the middle classes in particular – subjects which, over the past fifteen years, have been deemed uninteresting and unworthy of critical acclaim – and portray them in detail. There are a number of other contemporary female authors – Kathleen Rowntree, Mary Wesley, Elizabeth Jane Howard, Margaret Drabble, or Angela Huth amongst others – whose work is pertinent to the study of the contemporary middlebrow novel. This thesis focuses on Brookner, Trollope and Cusk, however, because they reveal something of particular interest about the construction and perception of middlebrow writing and culture. Brookner's novels interrogate the relationship between the middlebrow, the literary novel and the romance, and ponder the changing nature of the culture of reading in which the middlebrow is embedded. Using Trollope's fiction I explore the affiliation of the Aga-saga in the 1990s with the middlebrow novel of manners. With regards to Cusk, I focus on the metafictional nature of the middlebrow and reflect on its reliance on intertextuality.

There are, of course, also differences between these three authors. They are not interchangeable in terms of style, output, or literary credibility, nor have they ever been discussed critically alongside one another. Brookner – whose profound knowledge of literature and art history is woven through her novels – is perhaps regarded as the most literary of the three authors. She is followed by Cusk who is praised for her lyrical style, and finally by Trollope who is considered an accomplished author of English country novels. My categorisation of the work of these authors as examples of the contemporary middlebrow novel has been arrived at from taking both a top-down (from the literary) and bottom-up (from the popular) approach, with each author occupying a different position on the middlebrow scale. It should be noted that this thesis does not employ the delineations within the category of the middlebrow that are made by Q.D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932). These are middlebrow 'read as "literature"' and middlebrow 'not read as "literature," but not writing for the lowbrow market' (45). It does, however, implicitly address the issue of differences within this relatively broad category, by illustrating the different ways in which the middlebrow reaches towards both the high- and the lowbrow.

I explore the idea of the perception and reception of the contemporary middlebrow novel, specifically in relation to female authors, because it is the value of this kind of fiction that has been most contentiously debated in the popular and critical press. Of course, male writers have written about domestic life and continue to do so; many male-authored novels could be appropriately considered in a study of the middlebrow, including the work of P.G. Wodehouse, E.F. Benson, H.E. Bates, A.J. Cronin, James Herriot, Gervaise Phinn, and Alexander McCall Smith. When the routines of everyday life are discussed in male-authored fiction, however, they are often connected more explicitly with, or are framed by, 'bigger' issues such as politics or war. This subsequently marks this kind of literature out as 'serious' and literary as a result.[1] Additionally, while there are a number of male authors whose work could be positioned if not squarely within, then certainly on the periphery of the middlebrow, they are still *perceived* as more highbrow and are defended against the charge of being anything other. When Howard Jacobson, for example, won the 2010 Booker Prize for his novel *The Finkler Question* (2010), prize judge Andrew Motion was emphatic in his assertion that, whilst this may be a humorous book, it should not be seen as middlebrow. He noted that whilst 'the place of comedy in society has changed' (Brown, par. 10) *The Finkler Question* should not be seen as 'relentlessly middle-brow or easy-peasy [because it is

[1] Ian McEwan, for example, focuses almost exclusively on the domestic lives of the educated and cultured. Yet, these portraits of middleclass domesticity are considered to serve only as a backdrop to large-scale events, such as WWII in *Atonement* (2001) and the aftermath of 9/11 in *Saturday* (2005).

funny]. It is much cleverer and more complicated and about much more difficult things than it immediately lets you know' (Brown, par. 11). The political undercurrents of the middlebrow became clear here as great efforts were made to ensure that the difference between the literary novel (worthy of winning an award) and the middlebrow (with all of its negative associations of mediocrity) was maintained in the 2010 competition. In turn, of course, the judges' insistence that Jacobson's novel was suitably literary prevented the Booker Prize itself from being seen as middlebrow.

Drawing on discussions of middlebrow fiction in the interwar period (Beauman 1983; Light 1991; Humble 2001), this thesis provides a much-needed reassessment of the role of this oft-denigrated category of fiction in the contemporary literary marketplace, and sets out the ways in which middlebrow writing – through its depiction of readers and the act of reading, its metafictional references, and intertextuality – contains illuminating discussions of the changing nature of literary culture in the twentieth century. In what follows, I map the debates and issues that provide the theoretical foundation of the discussions of Brookner, Trollope, and Cusk and their relationship with the middlebrow. The first section focuses explicitly on the concept and definition of 'the middlebrow'. It documents critical work on this literary category, and draws on discussions of the middlebrow from across the twentieth century, to provide an explanation of how the term 'middlebrow' has been defined. I then proceed to outline the nature of middlebrow culture, examining its affiliation with the conservatism of middle-England and the middle classes, and its relation to different patterns of reading, including book groups. Subsequent sections map Britain's contemporary literary landscape, discussing current trends in the marketplace in terms of women's writing, and the role of prizes and cultural institutions in the organisation of taste, and the recognition of literary achievement and talent. I go on to discuss the relationship between gender and literature, exploring the role of women as both readers and authors, and examining the perception of domestic fiction and 'feminine' writing, with both of which the middlebrow is inextricably linked. The final section of the Introduction considers the relevance of these middlebrow novels – written by women, largely for women and about feminine concerns – to discussions of feminism.

'Neither Art Itself, Nor Life Itself': Defining the Middlebrow and Challenging the Boundaries of Culture

I contend that it has been the almost indefinable nature of the contemporary middlebrow novel – the fact that it occupies neither categories of literary and highbrow, nor commercial

and lowbrow, clearly or comfortably – that has led it to be largely overlooked by critics who have instead focused on texts that sit at one or the other end of the literary scale. Ironically, it is precisely the difficulty with which these texts can be positioned that makes them so valuable in discussions of literary value (that have been such an important feature of the literary landscape since the 1980s), and of questions of authorship and the ways in which texts are read and consumed. Where literary fiction has been of obvious critical interest for its language, form and allusions, and the popular novel for its entertainment value and its ability to both reflect and shape the ideas and tastes of its audience, those works that fall in between have been considered of little interest to academic study. Nicola Beauman's *A Very Great Profession* (1983), which explored the reading habits of ordinary middle-class women in the interwar period and considered authors including E.M. Delafield and Dorothy Canfield Fisher, was the first critical text to consider middlebrow fiction and remains an important work. This was followed by Alison Light's *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991) which considered the relationship between national identity and private life in the work of authors such as Agatha Christie and Ivy Compton-Burnett. Arguably the most important work to be published in this area over the past decade is Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (2001). This study groups together a range of different middlebrow texts within the chosen thirty-year period, and argues that they share a preoccupation with issues of the home, class, and gender. Whilst Beauman and Light only refer to the idea of the middlebrow in passing, Humble actively engages with the concept – applying it to over sixty novels – and outlines its varying definitions and associations.[2] Pursuing the idea of the middlebrow as a broad and hybrid term, and focusing on the 'feminine middlebrow' in particular – i.e. 'works largely read by and in some sense addressed to women readers' (14) – she works with texts from a range of genres including romance, domestic narratives, and children's literature, to consider how these texts were positioned in the first half of the twentieth century. Humble also examines how the work of middlebrow authors, such as Rose Macaulay and Rosamund Lehman, stood in relation to literary modernism against which the middlebrow has often been positioned.[3]

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[2] There has been a significant amount of work on the growth of middlebrow culture in America. Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) and Janice Radway's *Books and Reading in the Age of Mass Production* (1996) and *A Feeling for Books: Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-class Desire* (1997) examine the impact of book clubs and reading groups on American middlebrow culture. More recently there has been Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith's collection *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (2003) and Jaime Harker's *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship between the Wars* (2007).

[3] These studies are part of a relatively recent re-evaluation of women's interwar fiction, along with Maroula Joannou's *'Ladies Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38* (1995) and Jenny Hartley's *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War*

To date, there are no studies of the contemporary middlebrow novel, though the term 'middlebrow' is referenced by some literary critics. In *Marketing Literature* (2009), Claire Squires notes that whilst the majority of the examples that she features in her study of publishing and contemporary writing could be brought under the category of 'middlebrow', it is 'not a term used in contemporary publishing practice' (41). She avoids, therefore, using the term choosing instead to 'analyse the industry through its own terms rather than externally imposed ones' (42). Other studies of contemporary fiction have struggled to define, and consequently identify authors of middlebrow fiction and so have avoided discussing this category. In *Post-war British Women Writers and the Canon* (2010), for example, Nick Turner mentions the middlebrow only briefly; at the end of the study he notes that that 'the term "middlebrow" demands further analysis, which there is not space for in this book' (143). He goes on to comment that particular authors including Murdoch, Lessing, Brookner and Toni Morrison have been regarded as middlebrow in the past, but proffers no further examination of the term. In *Women's Fiction, 1945-2005* (2007), Deborah Philips, who explicitly engages with Humble's discussion of the middlebrow in the Introduction to her discussion of post-war women's writing, disputes the usefulness of the term and Humble's acceptance of it. Discussing texts which she argues 'uncomfortably straddle Queenie Leavis's neat divisions between the highbrow, the middlebrow and the lowbrow' (10), Philips argues that such distinctions are problematic, and, following Light, suggests that different forms of writing should be read in conjunction with each other, instead of being set in opposition. As Light explains:

> Rather than setting 'highbrow' against 'lowbrow', the serious against the merely escapist or trashy, I am drawn to look for what is shared and common across these forms […] and to see them all as historically meaningful. In any case, not only are such cultural and literary evaluations dialectical judgements – the labels of 'high' and 'low' only make sense in relation to each other – we need to realise that their provenance is always changing: terms such as 'popular' or 'mass' must open rather than close down historical enquiry. (*Forever England*, x)

Philips traces common themes in the novels of authors as wide-ranging as Marilyn French, Barbara Cartland, Mary McCarthy, Andrea Newman, Adriana Trigiani and Elizabeth Buchan, and brings them all together under the umbrella term of 'domestic romance'. She justifies their grouping by arguing that 'their settings are contemporary rather than historical, they are largely written within a realist tradition, and their focus is on personal relationships' (1). Whilst I regard Philips's aim to discuss literary authors in conjunction with popular authors as admirable, in that it encourages the reassessment of authors who

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(1997). The lives of mid-century middlebrow authors have also become of interest: Beauman's biography *The Other Elizabeth Taylor* (2009), for example, documents the life of 'one of the most important English novelists writing in the middle years of the last century' (cover).

have been largely overlooked by critics and do not feature in academic studies, her attitude to the legitimacy of different terms and their relative usefulness is inconsistent.

Philips rejects the usefulness of the 'brows' yet repeatedly refers to authors as 'literary' and 'populist' in her study without question or qualification; she argues for such novels to be read in conjunction with each other but does not specify the differences between them or how these terms should be used or applied. It remains unclear, therefore, as to why some categories – including 'domestic romance' – are acceptable whilst others are not. It is possible that Philips considers 'domestic romance' to be a more descriptive and therefore neutral term, and the word 'middlebrow' to be laden with questions of value and merit and is therefore used to make a judgement about the worth of a text. Yet, I argue, any label or category can be considered to be bound up with value given that each comes with an unavoidable set of associations. By describing the novels in her study as 'domestic romance', Philips brings to it all of the associations that go along with both 'domestic' and 'romance' (popular, overtly – or perhaps *overly* – feminine, and insular). Like these other critics, I acknowledge that 'middlebrow' is a problematic term, but I employ it as an essential part of a thesis that highlights a category of fiction which has been, and continues to be, both ignored and homogenised on account of its associations – namely that it is parochial and limited in its aspirations.[4]

The first occurrence of the word 'middlebrow' has been debated. In *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (1998), Lawrence Rainey writes that it is in 1906 that 'the first appearance is reported of the word middlebrow' (3). The OED notes that it was used in the British satirical magazine *Punch* in 1925. *The Middlebrow Network* maintains that 'the first documented usage of the term is in the *Irish Freeman's Journal*, 3 May 1924' ('Defining the Middlebrow'). Humble suggests that the term appeared nearly two decades after the appearance of the word 'highbrow' – 'a slang label for intellectuals which seems to have originated in America in 1911, and which, according to Robert Graves, was popularised in England by H.G. Wells' (9-10). Regardless of the exact date of its first appearance, it is clear from what studies exist that the term has largely been used in a derogatory manner. It suggests that something or someone is of limited or pseudo-cultural value or of mediocre status when compared with the 'genuine' culture of the highbrow which has been authenticated by intellectuals and other custodians of culture. The troubling nature of the middlebrow as a cultural description and of the popular perception of it having an imposter-like claim to culture and intellectual life was considered by Virginia

[4] Whilst 'middlebrow' may be regarded by Philips and others as an unhelpful term, its recent ubiquity also tends to suggest otherwise. *The Middlebrow Research Network*, for example, 'aims to stimulate research on the loaded and disreputable term' (*Middlebrow Network*), and conferences have been held on the topic (notably *Investigating the Middlebrow* and *Historicising the Middlebrow* in 2008).

Woolf in a collection of her essays entitled *The Death of the Moth* (1942). In a letter written but never sent to *The New Statesman*, Woolf wrote of her annoyance that a review of her book had failed to include the word 'highbrow'. She wrote to ask, 'at the risk of appearing unduly egotistical, whether your reviewer, a man of obvious intelligence, intended to deny my claim to that title?' (113) Referring to what she describes as 'the battle of the brows', Woolf explains what she understands the terms 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' to mean. The highbrow is 'the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea' (113). The lowbrow is 'a man or a woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life' (114). The relationship between these two categories was one of mutual dependence. 'Lowbrows need highbrows' (114), Woolf writes, and vice versa. Her identification with the highbrows and affection for the lowbrows is clear. She explains, however, that the 'busybodies' and 'go-betweens' who, in her view, constitute the middlebrows are those to whom she struggles to be cordial. The middlebrow, Woolf argues, is:

> the man, or the 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 […] If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat or half-crushed worm dares call me 'middlebrow' I will take my pen and stab him dead. (115-119)

Her horror at being described as middlebrow is clear and she discusses this form of culture as if it were a vice, tarnished by money and a lack of cultural integrity.

Running beneath Woolf's description is the idea that middlebrow culture is concerned almost with fakery, with creating the impression that you possess the right kind of taste without genuinely owning it; the motivation for choosing something emerges not out of liking or enjoying it, nor out of an appreciation of its artistic integrity. It arises, Woolf implies, from a desire to display *what is understood to be* the correct knowledge, the right skill of cultural acquisition, and the right objects to afford cultural capital. 'What are the things that middlebrows always buy?', Woolf asks:

> Queen Anne furniture (faked, but none the less expensive); first editions of dead writers – (always the worst); pictures, or reproduction from pictures, by dead painters; houses in what is called 'the Georgian style' – but never anything new, never a picture by a living painter, or a chair by a living carpenter, or books by living writers, for to buy living art requires living taste. (118)

For Woolf, the highbrow and the lowbrow are united in their lack of concern with 'getting it right' or affecting an interest in particular forms of culture. The middlebrow, by contrast, is only concerned with display, and consequently lacks the integrity of both the high- and lowbrow that sit on either side of it.

In *America the Middlebrow* (2007), Jaime Harker explains that, in the interwar period, when Woolf was writing, the term 'middlebrow' was clearly an insult, and depending on the context could mean 'middle class', 'effeminate', 'polluted by commerce', 'mediocre', or 'sentimental' (16). This meaning has persisted into the present day, with the current dictionary definition suggesting that the description is generally, and derisively, applied to someone of moderate intellect. Whilst these connotations remain, the middlebrow has come to mean something more specific in relation to literature. For Maria Bracco in *Betwixt and Between: Middlebrow Fiction and English Society in the Twenties and Thirties* (1990) the term:

> [s]erves to differentiate a certain type of fiction from the original and artistic aims of great works of literature and from the standardised techniques of writing which characterised a spectrum of fiction ranging from cheap romantic novelettes to detective stories. (3)

Joan Shelley Rubin (1992) and Janice Radway (1997) connect it to developments in self-education, and particularly reading groups. Humble, who herself acknowledges the problems of defining the middlebrow novel, describes it as 'one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual effort without undue effort' (11). I suggest that whilst these definitions are varied in the specific elements of the middlebrow that they identify, they share a sense of the middlebrow as something that challenges firm categories and the desire to maintain cultural boundaries. The fact that multiple definitions of the middlebrow have been devised illustrates in itself the slippery nature of this liminal category, which hovers at the margin between the high and the low, the artistic and the commercial.

Writing about the highly critical reaction to the establishment of the Book of the Month Club in America, which arguably marked the emergence of an organised middlebrow culture in the US, and the definition of the 'middlebrow' in relation to the 'academic', Radway argues that 'the scandal of the middlebrow was a function of its failure to maintain the fences cordoning off culture from commerce, the sacred from the profane, and the low from the high' (*A Feeling for Books*, 152). I suggest that it is precisely because of the way in which the middlebrow transgresses the boundaries between the 'literary' and 'generic' that it has provoked consternation amongst literary critics. Most significantly, it threatens to encroach on subjects and concerns to which the highbrow and intellectual claim to have sole access – to trespass and undermine the exclusivity of the highbrow and make it more accessible to those average consumers of culture against whom it has defined itself – that means that it has been neglected within the academy. Reflecting on the academic attitude to the middlebrow, Radway notes the way in which both she and her academic colleagues used the term to 'dispense with texts that we judged inadequate' (*A*

Feeling for Books, 9). Middlebrow texts in other words were those that were considered insufficiently literary in their style of language or yielded too easily to analysis. Literary texts according to Radway were considered to be those that required effort to consume – 'effort which included the supplying of intertextual references, the tracing of symbolic patterns, and the provision of a rationale for the narrative structure of the piece' (*A Feeling for Books*, 3). The perceived accessibility and ease of analysis regarding the middlebrow novel in Radway's account is what separate the highbrow texts of academia from the middlebrow tastes of the general reader. The intellectual gap between the high, middle and low are clear, it is suggested, and the mediocre nature of the middlebrow, as defined by academic institutions, means that these novels are rarely the focus of extended literary analysis or interpretation.

I argue that it is not the apparent yawning gap between the high and the middle, the academic and the general that has resulted in the dismissal of the middlebrow, but rather the overlaps between the two. It stems from the potential threat that the middlebrow poses to the authority of the academy and other cultural institutions to define, as the influential wardens of culture, what counts as intellectually valuable. Middlebrow culture, in this thesis, is taken to mean a form of culture, and systems of value and communication which are aside from academia and other 'official' bodies that are perceived to be legitimately able to identify and endorse cultural products, actitivities, and practices. In terms of fiction and literary connoisseurship, the development of middlebrow culture – in the form of book groups, clubs, magazines and more recently online forums – has threatened the position of the academic institution and the literary journal as the primary judges of what can be counted as 'literature'. Radway writes, and I agree, that '[d]espite the traditional claim that middlebrow culture simply apes the values of high culture, it is in fact a kind of counterpractice to the high culture tastes and proclivities that have been most insistently legitimated and nurtured in academic English departments for the last fifty years or so' (*A Feeling for Books*, 9-10). She concludes, highlighting the quasi-subversive potential of the middlebrow in terms of traditional authorities of culture, that 'more than anything else, it may be a competitor to English departments for the authority to control reading and to define the nature of literary value' (*A Feeling for Books*, 10). As a consequence of the increase in book clubs and newspaper book reviews throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the control over the general or popular consumption of literature, and the ability to make judgements about the novel or to legitimise particular authors or novels in many respects has become no longer the sole right of the academy or the intellectual, though they retain a significant authority.

Mapping the Middle: Middlebrow, Middleclass, Middle England

Many definitions of the middlebrow refer to it as a specifically middle-class form, and one which is largely produced by, targeted at, and received by middle-class audiences. In *Distinction* (1986), Pierre Bourdieu, for example, argues that what makes middlebrow culture is precisely its relationship with the middle class:

> What makes the petit-bourgeois relation to culture and its capacity to make 'middle-brow' whatever it touches, just as the legitimate gaze 'saves' whatever it lights upon, is not its 'nature' but the very position of the petit bourgeois in social space, the social nature of the petit bourgeois, which is constantly impressed on the petit bourgeois himself, determining his relation to legitimate culture and his avid but anxious, naïve but serious way of clutching at it. (327)

Bourdieu asserts here that something becomes middlebrow, not out of any inherent characteristic, but simply through its association with or proximity to the middle classes. Whilst I do not agree that this is *all* that is required for an object or practice to be placed in the category of the middlebrow, I acknowledge, like many other critics, the significant connection between the two. Indeed, Humble suggests that the very concept of the middlebrow emerged during the 1920s precisely because it was at this time that the suburban middle classes were expanding, and pursuing new leisure habits, including reading (74). With this expansion of the middle classes came an increase in home ownership, which, in turn, became 'a key way in which the newly middle-class could signify their position as "properly" middle class' and demonstrate their social achievement (Hollows 42). In terms of literature, the middlebrow novel was something that both appealed to and reflected this changing middle class. The borrowing, purchasing and reading of books became one of the dominant leisure activities. Private lending libraries became increasingly popular and there was also an increase in the provision of public libraries (which were used primarily by the working classes). Book clubs were established, including the Book Society (founded in 1927) and the Book Guild (founded in 1930), where a panel chose a selection of books each month and members were offered a reduction on the usual retail price. As Humble explains, 'there was a startling growth too in the cheap "tuppenny" libraries run from local department stores, newsagencies, and tobacconists, which turned over a meagre stock of 500 or so books at a time' (36).

The middlebrow novel also became a form in which the contradictions, suspicions and reformations of different categories of the middle classes were acted out, and became a record book of the changing nature of middle-class identity. The middle class was not a monolithic category, but one made up of people with a range of different identities, who occupied different positions and subsections, and were concerned with distancing

themselves from the others. The middle-class subject was constantly engaged in processes of assessment, definition and distancing. The result was that the middle class became a continually changing and unstable social group, and categories of class came to have very different meanings and connotations depending upon who was using them. Being 'middle class' consequently became predicated upon distinctions of 'that is me' and 'that is not me'. Differences used to distinguish between members included houses, income, profession, and education, as well discrepancies in dress, conduct, entertainment and leisure pursuits. The old middle class, who favoured traditional cultural activities, were positioned against the new, modern middle class who lived in the suburbs and were associated with new forms of consumption such as tinned food, the car, and domestic devices. The new democratisation of culture at this time was particularly concerning for those who had long held a middle-class position; they feared that they may be associated with those new members and were consequently at pains to find methods of distinguishing themselves against this rapidly developing group. The middlebrow novel was read by people across the middle-class spectrum, but they were largely produced by writers who considered themselves to be upper-middle class. The result was a novelistic form which performed 'a complex balancing act of attracting readers from the whole of the middle class, while writing of the modes and manners of upper-middle-class life' (Humble, 88). Those readers not positioned securely in the upper-middle class were able to read these novels, and aspire to the lives depicted in them, which, whilst not too far removed from their own, were sufficiently different for readers to consider them to be superior. Acquiring hints and advice on how to replicate the lifestyle of the upper-middle classes, 'the lower-middle-class reader was treated as if she was already conversant with upper-middle-class attitudes, manners, and prejudices, and because privy to this class's disdain for lower-middle-class "vulgarities", was presumed not to be guilty of such herself' (Humble, 89). The middlebrow novel consequently documented the nature of middle class as it grew, changed and developed over time, both reflecting the alterations in middle-class experience and simultaneously helping to shape them.

In terms of the second half of the twentieth century, the everyday domestic lives of the middle class continued to form the primary subject matter for middlebrow fiction from the 1950s (when Humble's study concludes) up until the present day. This is particularly true for female authors. Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Pym, Pamela Hansford Johnson, Elizabeth Jenkins, Nina Bawden, Drabble, and Howard, to name only a few, wrote steadily about the quotidian concerns of marriages, relationships, the home, motherhood, being alone, work and education from the 1960s onwards. Like their middlebrow predecessors, the three writers considered in this thesis occupy a middle-class position, are all university

educated and it is the position of the middle classes that their novels anatomise. The domestic lives of this social group are depicted in minute detail, and the particularities of their clothes, culinary preferences, gardens and furniture, as well as listening and reading habits are catalogued and analysed. It is, however, the fact that middlebrow authors write both from and about a position of privilege, whether in terms of finance, culture or education, that has contributed to their dismissal as narrow, unexciting, non-representative, or socially and politically unenagaged. Writing about what he perceives to be the demise of fiction concerned explicitly with class since the 1980s, Dominic Head explains that:

> An issue that often exercises critics is the identified 'middle-class' stance of novelists presuming to fictionalise elements of political reality. A recurring complaint has been that such writers […] treat issues pertaining to class in such a way as to reinforce the position of privilege from which they write. (242)

Head notes that Drabble is the author most referenced in this argument[5], which asserts that fiction written from a middle-class perspective gives the impression that such experience is universal – that all lives are classed as such and lived in such a way – and bolsters the privileged position from which these authors write, and the apparent superiority of the people and scenarios about which they write.[6]

This perception of the middlebrow novel as limited, and unfashionably narrow in its focus, began to develop most clearly I suggest in the 1960s and 1970s. During these decades some authors fell almost entirely from view arguably as a result of the changing political climate and the move away from more conservative scenarios of family life. Despite the success of Barbara Pym's previous novels, for example, Jonathan Cape, Pym's usual publisher, rejected her latest manuscript, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, in 1963. Other rejections followed with the result that Pym became silent for the next fourteen years, continuing to write but without being published. Pym speculated that the rejection was because her writing did not speak to the spirit of the age which was so bound up with a sense of social change, sexual liberation and burgeoning youth culture. In her autobiography *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters* (1984), Pym commented regarding the rejection of the manuscript:

> Three people who have read it tell me it isn't below the standard of my others (I'm incapable of judging now!) I did read it over very critically and it seemed to be that it might appear naïve and unsophisticated. (164)

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[5] Susanna Rustin, for example, notes that Drabble is 'the doyenne of the middle-class novel, describing the difficult choices faced by (mostly female) characters who might appear to have rather insulated lives' (par. 240).

[6] Author Jojo Moyes recently expressed self-consciousness about the privileged positions of her characters, and questioned whether 'drama played out over the scrubbed pine table' was passé (cited in Rustin, par. 9).

During the decades which gave rise to second-wave feminism, for example, depictions of genteel, educated ladies did not seem pertinent. The rejection of Pym was, I suggest, indicative of a turn away from the novel of middle-class experience more broadly at this time, towards more 'issue driven' fiction. This is reflected by the way in which critical discussions of the middlebrow tend to focus primarily on novels published in the first half of the twentieth century, with only a few scholars considering fiction produced later than that, including Niamh Baker (1989) who considers novels published between 1945 and 1960. Literary criticism of the 1950s and 1960s has focused instead on the novels of the Angry Young Men, working-class writers including Alan Sillitoe, Sid Chaplin and David Storey.[7] Equally, the 1960s and 1970s saw the production of novels by authors such as Lynne Reid Banks and Drabble about sexuality, single motherhood and the development and impact of feminism (driven by the emergence of feminist presses), the importance of which has been reflected in the scholarly texts concerned with analysing the relationship between feminism and literature published in both Britain and the US.

In addition to the post-1950 increase in fiction that explored different kinds of classed subject positions, and working-class life in particular, also came a shift in national focus. There was a move away from a sole concern with 'Englishness' to the idea of 'Britishness' instead. There was a growth in regional, and Scottish and Irish fiction, as well as Black British literature, and fiction that explored the relationship between Britain and the Commonwealth. In comparison to the literary expression of these, previously marginalised and disenfranchised, voices in literature, the concept of the English novel became seen as insular and conservative. The new focus on Black British literature in particular succeeded in drawing attention, as James F. English explains, to 'the relative homogeneity and insularity of Englishness proper, and thereby in recasting the English novel, in the contemporary context, as something small, local, perhaps dwindling into inconsequence' ('Introduction, 4). This shift was famously noted in *Granta*'s inaugural issue of 1979 which heralded 'the end of the novel [and] the beginning of British fiction' (cited in English, 'Introduction', 3). The popularity of Black British writing, and the flourishing of postcolonial literary theory within the academy, has resulted positively in female authors including Zadie Smith and Andrea Levy, amongst others, receiving significant critical attention. Those who were specifically white, middle class and English in their outlook, however – including authors of the middlebrow novel, in which a sense of Englishness continues to be a defining factor – were regarded, critically at least, with less interest.

[7] Ian Haywood notes, however, that 'the term working-class writer has always been something of an oxymoron because at the point at which this writer gets published, they must have moved away from their original circumstances' (Rustin, par. 13). When Sillitoe published *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), for example, he was friends with Robert Graves in Mallorca.

The ‘conservative’ focus of the middlebrow novel was similarly problematic in these years. Writing about the first half of the twentieth century, Light notes a redefinition of Englishness in the period between the wars. She explains that there was a move away from:

> formerly heroic and officially masculine public rhetorics of national destiny and from a dynamic and missionary view of the Victorian and Edwardian middle classes in ‘Great Britain’ to an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private. (8)

Light argues that after WWI there was an increased attachment to the conservative notion of home and private life with which in turn the image of the nation became intertwined. England, as a result, became a country of ‘private and retiring people, pipe-smoking “little men” with their quietly competent partners, a nation of gardeners and housewives’ (211). In the novels of Christie, Angela Thirkell, Daphne du Maurier, Taylor, Pym, Howard, and those of Brookner, Trollope, and Cusk on which this thesis concentrates, a particular form of English and notably middle-class domestic life is depicted. In many respects the image of Englishness in the first half of the twentieth century is represented by Celia Johnson’s character in *Brief Encounter* (1945). Judy Giles describes it as ‘the stiff-upper-lipped repressiveness of the middleclass woman who refused to “make a fuss”’ (‘Ideas and Ideals’, 5), and I argue that this image has persisted into the fiction of the second half of the century as well. Like Johnson’s character, many of the women in Brookner’s, Trollope’s and Cusk’s fiction are united both in their feelings of frustration and in their acceptance that they may never obtain whatever it is that they desire. In the same manner as their earlier counterparts, the lives they lead in England are punctuated with shopping, raising children, going to work (primarily on a part-time basis), cooking, and gardening. I argue, therefore, that the authors I examine here are writing in the long tradition of the English middlebrow novel, and that the perception of their work and subject matter as insular and old-fashioned can be connected to the devolved and increasingly globalised context in which literature is currently produced, and the turn away from the notion of Englishness.

It is important to note, however, that these contemporary middlebrow novels are not nostalgic *per se* for the kind of England that Giles describes. Rather I suggest that they are positioned on the cusp of past and future conceptions of England and Englishness. They invoke the essence of a particular kind of traditional middle-class Englishness, associated with propriety, practicality and domesticity, but also demonstrate a clear awareness and understanding of the limits of such a definition of Englishness and an understanding that society has changed. I argue that these novels look both forwards and backwards, assessing, describing and negotiating the different versions of English, middle-class domesticity that have arisen over the past thirty years. In 1981, Leavis lamented the

decline of the 'Englishness' of the novel, connecting it to changes in the landscape and sense of national identity that had arisen on account of social and political change:

> the England that bore the classical English novel has gone forever, and we can't expect a country of high-rise flat dwellers, office workers and factory robots and unassimilated multi-racial minorities, with a suburbanised countryside, factory farming, sexual emancipation without responsibility, rising crime and violence, and the Trade Union mentality, to give rise to a literature comparable with the novel tradition of so different a past. (*Collected Essays*, 325)

It is in precisely this climate, however, that the novelists in this thesis are writing, and whilst their work differs in many respects from that of George Eliot and Jane Austen, for example, whose novels Leavis considers in great detail, I argue here that they contribute significantly to contemporary notions of Englishness and the continuation of the English novel. While they are all novels of contemporary English life, the portraits of England painted by these authors are far from identical. Far from homogenous, a range of different visions of English domesticity are presented, mediated by questions of gender, class, and geographical oppositions of town and country, city and suburbia. Writing about the various symbols of England, including the eighteenth century's John Bull, the 'new gentleman' of the nineteenth century, and J.B. Priestley's 'little Englanders', Giles remarks that:

> [I]n more recent years it is harder to identify an image of Englishness which is not in some way negative: we have the football 'hooligan'; the 'enemy within' conjured up by Margaret Thatcher during the 1984 miners' strike; the 'lager lout' and 'yob culture' bemoaned by middle-England's Tory tabloids the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*; 'our lads' in the Falklands or the Gulf War. ('Ideas and Ideals', 5)

English life in Brookner's fiction, for example, is constituted by mansion flats in Kensington, trips to the National Gallery and the British Library, and a strong sense of morality. Trollope's fiction depicts an England of village fetes, the church, and academia. Cusk's later novels explore the perceived safety of suburbia for the married middle class couple.

The figures of the hooligan and lager lout, to whom Giles refers, as well as major political events of the past thirty years are largely absent from the work of these authors. The resulting impression, therefore, is perhaps of an insular, apolitical form of fiction. Yet, I suggest that the novels studied in this thesis are significant precisely because of what they leave out in their descriptions of contemporary English life, as well as what they choose to include. These darker issues and figures hang silently at the periphery of these narratives, ironically asserting their presence because of their conspicuous absence. The result is that it becomes difficult to read Brookner's novels of bookish women set during the 1980s – the decade out of which 'the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatisation and the private sector [and] the growing disparities of rich and poor [arose]' (Judt, 2) – without

pondering the ambitious, high-finance world of capitalism with which these women appear so out of step. Trollope's Aga-sagas set in country villages and small towns can be read through a lens of Conservative Thatcherite politics, though little mention of politics is ever made in these narratives. Within Cusk's novels, often set in suburbia, there is a comment on the free market and later on the terrorist threat that has been a dominant feature of the 2000s.

In addition to this broader consideration of middle-class English life, however, these novels also map the changing nature of 'desirable' forms of a specifically English femininity and womanhood over the past thirty years. The career woman of the 1980s with her high heels and briefcase is positioned against the quiet romantic heroine in Brookner's fiction. In Trollope's novels, the rural or small-town wife and mother is often the focus; consistent, I suggest, with the influence of the Conservative government in the late '80s and 90's. Cusk's fiction features the 'new housewife', a popular figure in contemporary culture. The unfashionable nature of the English novel and domestic fiction is arguably due to its perceived conservatism, and unchallenging approach to dominant ideologies regarding middle-class success, gender roles, and political opinion. These narratives are in many respects about 'getting things right' and the contemporary middlebrow novel is a fiction borne partly out the notion of 'supposed to'. Readers of middlebrow fiction are trying to read the right thing, characters are trying to lead the right lives, invoking some class markers and dismissing others, hoping that they are the right ones in order to ensure social acceptability. Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) opens with an anecdote about a letter sent to an American women's magazine regarding what to read. "'I venture to ask,' a reader of the *Ladies' Home Journal* wrote the critic Hamilton Wright Mabie in 1906, "if would be so kind as to give some idea how to start right to obtain culture?"'(1) The response to this was simply 'read only the best books' (Rubin, 1). The fact that middlebrow fiction of the past can be likened to a conduct manual providing readers with a template for living the correct kind of cultured life, is indicative of the extent to which the notion of 'rightness' runs through this kind of literature.

The novels considered in this thesis have a complex relationship with the notion of conservatism, both invoking the desirability of life centred round traditional values – firm class boundaries; heterosexual romance, marriage and family; clear demarcations between the feminine private sphere and the masculine public world – and also wrangling with the restrictions that this is perceived to involve. Indeed, a certain sense of subversion also runs beneath these narratives. Their characters often try to resist fulfilling the expectations that are placed on them, whether they are social, domestic, or familial. Broadly speaking, resistance proves futile and the status quo is upheld, but time and time again, the main

body of these novels focuses on characters' attempts to express their dissatisfaction with their lives. The hum of angry female voices in particular reverberates around these fictions. They are handled and depicted in different ways, more sympathetically in some cases than others, but they are present nonetheless, and attempts at subversion of varying degrees exist within these portraits of conservatism with which the middlebrow is associated. The female characters depicted in these novels are repeatedly shown to be in search of an alternative to the lives that they currently lead, and acts of resistance take different forms.

These moments of subversion carried out by female characters are rarely large scale or overtly revolutionary; they do not involve a cry for political change and do not stem from all-women organisations. When they are carried out, they instead tend to consist of individual acts of rebellion perpetrated by single characters and primarily within the domestic sphere. Dissatisfaction with the perceived restrictions of married life and heterosexual relationships, for example, is therefore often expressed within these narratives using extra-marital affairs. Women also change their appearance – adopting an alternative or bohemian style of dress or cutting their hair – to symbolise their rejection of a form of conservative femininity that they regard as being thrust upon them. The acquisition of, or refusal to give up, paid employment despite pressure to do otherwise is also a recurring feature in these narratives, signalling characters' resistance to being wives and mothers alone. The moral position of the novels themselves, regarding these examples of defiance and opposition, are varied however, and so I explore how they are either advocated or condemned by the narrative voices contained within the texts. So, it is important to note that whilst such acts of resistance and subversion are not major in terms of scale or intention, they are present nonetheless, and it is because of their inclusion in these narratives of women's experience that I argue the novels featured in this thesis are relevant to discussions of the impact of feminism on and within literature.

The Battle of the Brows: The Literary Novel, the Romance, and the Parameters of the Middlebrow

The emergence of middlebrow culture in the first decades of the twentieth century must be considered alongside the development of modernism:

> in one sense middlebrow fiction [of the first half of the twentieth century] is the 'other' of the modernist or avant-garde novel, the bugbear continually reviled by highbrow critics and literary experimenters as corrupting public taste and devaluing the status of the novel. (Humble, 24)

It was soon after 1900 that the categories of 'high' and 'low' literature were firmly positioned (Rainey, 2), and there was an opposition between the intellectual reader of modernist literature and the masses who consumed popular fiction as a result of their improved literacy.[8] Yet, the division between modernism and the middlebrow has not always been clear as novelists like Elizabeth Bowen and Lehmann, who were once considered middlebrow, have been absorbed into an increasingly feminised modernist canon. In terms of contemporary writing, the delineation of the middlebrow in terms of modernism does not of course stand. There is no contemporary version of the modernist movement against which the contemporary middlebrow novel could be measured. The popular or lowbrow has arguably always been easier to distinguish by comparison, on account of its close ties with genre (romance and crime, for example), rapid rate of production, and significant sales numbers. In the absence of the contemporary avant-garde, however, the definition of 'highbrow' is more difficult. Squires explores the circulation of literary fiction in contemporary culture, and significant space is dedicated in the study's Introduction to how the 'literary' can be defined. She notes that, in publishing, the 'literary' is defined in two ways, one formal and one contextual. The formal definition ultimately relies not on noting what the literary *is*, but what *it is not*. This is achieved by comparing it to genre fiction. She quotes Steven Connor, who claims that:

> Literary fiction is usually defined by negation – it is *not* formula fiction or genre fiction, *not* mass-market or bestselling fiction – and, by subtraction, it is what is left once most of the conditions that obtain in contemporary publishing are removed [emphasis in original]. (19)

If a novel is neither romance, nor science fiction, nor crime, for example, then, by a process of elimination, it is literary. The contextual definition of 'literary fiction', on the other hand, takes into account the circumstances of a novel's publication, in terms of its publisher and imprint. Squires writes that 'literary fiction is that published by literary imprints such as Hamish Hamilton, Jonathan Cape, Picador, Sceptre and Viking' (5). Other aspects of the book industry, including prizes (since the development of prize culture in the 1960s), and 'media coverage, bookshop designs and bestseller lists' (Squires, 5) play an important role in outlining the continually changing parameters of what can be considered literary.

Connor's formal definition – whereby literary fiction is that which is left after the possibility of genre has been removed – suggests that the literary exists outside of genre. Jim Collins argues, however, and I agree, that in contemporary culture, literary fiction has become a genre in and of itself. In *Bring on the Books for Everbody: How Literary Culture Became*

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[8] For more on the notion and perception of 'the masses' in this period, see John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (1992).

Popular Culture (2010), he argues that, partly as a result of the targeting of particular 'quality audiences' by publishers and in light of 'the interplay between aestheticism and its marketability, it is not surprising that literary fiction has become a form of category fiction' (246). In a culture consisting of significant numbers of literary magazines and supplements (e.g. *LRB*, *TLS*, *Guardian Review*) as well as prizes, an audience of informed readers with a significant awareness of literary value has developed, and successfully addressing that audience and providing that market with the requisite novelistic products has become an important aspect of publishing. Collins places novels such as Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) in this category of 'literary genre fiction' or what he calls 'Lit-lit'. Lit-lit is:

> [c]ategory fiction every bit as much as Westerns or bodice-ripper romances, but for a more cultivated readership (who would be appalled by the very idea that all these quality literary books were mere genre fiction). If a genre depends on a relatively stable, instantly recognisable narrative universe consisting of recurring locations, iconography, dialect, conflicts, and an overarching logic that justifies all the characters' actions no matter how baffling they would be to a nonfan [sic], then Lit-lit certainly fits the bill. (250)

Collins argues that, in terms of periodization, 'the action in the Lit-lit novel transpires either between the 1880s and the 1920s, or in a hybridized phantom universe composed of equal parts of the early twenty-first century and the late nineteenth' (250). Characters in Lit-lit can be diverse, but are often novelists or professors of literature, who savour cultural activities like going to the theatre and studying literature. Objects that are 'invested with intense significance [in these narratives] are books, manuscripts, and paintings' (250) and characters use 'frightfully articulate speech, accessorized with endless references to books, travel, classical music, décor, and haute cuisine' (250). Refinement and good taste are the themes of Lit-lit, as Collins describes it, and it is the reader with those qualities for whom they are intended. These characteristics are not the exclusive right of Lit-lit, however. I argue that it is when they are combined with a particular marketing approach that Lit-lit comes into being.

I agree with the idea behind Collins's argument that a generic category of contemporary literary fiction has developed, and I suggest can often be identified – something which Collins overlooks – by the way in which it is marketed: reviewed in literary supplements, discussed on the radio, their authors asked to write articles for broadsheet newspapers during the promotion of their book, and placed on longlists, and on occasions going on to win literary prizes. Significantly, Collins does not give any suggestion as to the typical gender of the Lit-lit author. I contend, however, that this is of prime importance because, in a UK context, authors whose work is so often marketed and received in this way, and could consequently be considered to be Lit-lit, are often male.

Women's writing, by contrast tends not be marketed in this way, because, I suggest, of the associations of 'women's writing' that I will outline in a later section. Women writers are reviewed with less regularity, and are recognised less frequently by the establishment that is made up of prize bodies and review panels, and so arguably occupy the Lit-lit category less often. Joanna Kavenna notes that:

> [i]n the UK, the *LRB* reviewed 68 books by women and 195 by men in 2010, with men taking up 74% of the attention, and 78% of the reviews written by men. Seventy-five per cent of the books reviewed in the *TLS* were written by men (1,036 compared to 330) with 72% of its reviewers, men. Meanwhile *Granta* magazine, which does not review but includes original contributions, featured the work of 26 female and 49 male writers in 2010, with men making up 65% of the total. (par. 3-4)[9]

If modernism and the avant-garde were the 'highbrow' against which the 'middlebrow' was positioned in the first half of the twentieth century, it is in relation to the fiction that appears in the *TLS* or the *LRB*, that receives significant levels of critical attention in the form of reviews and prizes, and whose authors are regarded as significant literary and cultural figures that the contemporary middlebrow novel stands. The contemporary highbrow or literary novel does not pose any significant challenge to the reader in terms of form or language unlike its modernist predecessors, but it does contain a reverence for cultural capital and aesthetics, and is marketed accordingly. It is this to which its audience responds, reaffirming their identities as consumers of serious fictions. Unlike modernist texts whose audience consisted of a distinct group of specialist readers, contemporary literary fiction, often endorsed by the Booker or reviews in quality newspapers and widely available in bookshops, can attract large numbers of readers. Squires argues persuasively that many of the 'literary' novels in her study of contemporary fiction – including Louis de Bernières's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1994) and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) – would be classified as 'middlebrow' according to Leavis's categorisation of literature in *Fiction and the Reading Public*. I argue however that in the absence of a contemporary equivalent to modernism or avant-garde fiction, and as a result of the expansion of the reading public, the middlebrow of Leavis's day has become the literary of ours. Publishers as opposed to individual authors or small publishing houses now exert the most significant influence on the type of fiction that is produced, and there is little room in the business of book buying and marketing for texts that are inaccessible, whether because of form, style or content, to the vast majority of the reading public.

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[9] *Granta*'s most recent issue, Spring 2011 (115), is perhaps intended to address this gender imbalance. Entitled 'The F Word', and focused on feminism, its contributors are all women and include Cusk, Helen Simpson, A.S. Byatt, and Francine Prose.

Given the thematic focus of the novels in this thesis on questions of femininity and domesticity, it is perhaps unsurprising that the contemporary middlebrow novels that I focus on can – and have in the case of both Brookner's and Trollope's work – be considered to share an affinity with romantic fiction. The romance has received increasing amounts of critical attention over the past two decades, as a result both of the turn within the academy towards a greater acceptance of the study of popular culture and genre; and a consideration by feminist critics of narratives which have largely been considered to uphold patriarchal notions of gender. Scholarship in this area has examined the ways in which romantic fiction is consumed by readers (Radway 1984; Radford 1986); tracked the development of the production of romance novels, paying particular attention to the Mills and Boon series (Dixon 1999; McAleer 1999); considered the changing nature and representation of romantic love in contemporary literature and film (Pearce and Wisker 1998; Pearce 2006; Philips 2006); and examined the relationship between the romance novel and chick lit (Whelehan 2005; Ferris and Young 2006). In its focus on narratives of femininity and domesticity, and those which are written by women, about women, and for the most part for women, I see this thesis as being part of that project of recuperation which has sought to increase critical interest in and around women's writing, as well as those texts previously dismissed for their bias towards feminine concerns. However, whilst marriage and romantic love often form aspects of the plot of these middlebrow novels, the search for, and acquisition of, love is not always the overriding theme as is the case in romantic fiction. The middlebrow novel and the romance novel share thematic overlaps – indeed references to romantic fiction are often made in the middlebrow novel – but they are not one and the same.

Taking this idea of reference to other texts and genres further, a major feature of the contemporary middlebrow novel is I argue a recurring display of metatextuality and a significant self-consciousness regarding its literary status. The contemporary middlebrow novel has a marked awareness of itself as a literary product and of the way in which literature, including the romance, has been divided into categories and subsequently valued and positioned. I examine how the work of Brookner, Trollope, and Cusk positions the novel as a material product which is created by the author, consumed, enjoyed or rejected by the reader, and analysed and reflected upon by the critic. Brookner's characters, for example, are often authors themselves, and her novels feature descriptions of how they go about the process of writing their novels or dissertations. Trollope's women are active readers, and some of Cusk's characters are students and teachers of literature. These novels are, in many respects, about readers and writers, and the process of producing and consuming texts. In their consideration of characters' relationships with reading and

writing, they also reflect on how literature both informs and is informed by the experiences of those who interact with it. Literature is shown to shape and reflect the expectations of life held by characters who are not only the subjects of the novels that we are reading, but are also often involved in the process of reading and writing themselves within the story, consuming novels that affect their own approaches to everyday existence. The figures of the reader and the author consequently exist on many levels within these novels: an author writes a novel that we ourselves read, about an author who is reflecting on her own reading experience, or even on the readers of the books that she herself has written.

Most significantly, it is through these metafictional references that these novels reveal an awareness of both contemporary debates about literary value (which are outlined in the next section) and their own position and status within them. The novels that I consider in this thesis all interact directly with discussions of women's writing – through their characters, their comments on how writing by women is perceived, or through their intertextual references to a female literary canon – and display an understanding of how they themselves are viewed as examples of women's novels. I argue that they use this awareness to stretch the limits of literary categorisations, comment on the notion of literary value, and question the conception of women's writing and domestic fiction as dull, and predictable. In their depiction of readers, and the manner in which they address their own reader, these novels also interrogate the perception of particular kinds of literary consumers – namely women and those who read genre fiction – as passive and unenquiring, and consider the different purposes of reading, which is considered later in this Introduction. This self-awareness is a defining feature of the contemporary middlebrow novel as I consider it.

The British Literary Landscape: Women's Fiction, Prize Culture, and Assessing Literary Value

The main area of growth in women's writing over the past two decades has been commercial fiction, and in particular the popular romantic novels focusing on the lives of single women in their twenties and thirties commonly known as 'chick lit'.[10] In addition to the promotion of women's commercial fiction by established imprints including Vintage and Viking, and the continued work of popular presses like Black Swan and Sphere, a

[10] Whilst chick lit novels which anatomise the relationships and shopping habits of young women are the most popular, this genre has enlarged to incorporate novels concerned with mothers (mum lit) and older women (hen lit).

number of new publishing brands focusing solely on these novels have been created.[11] Chick lit by British authors including Sophie Kinsella, Jill Mansell, Jane Green, and Allison Pearson feature regularly on paperback bestsellers lists and library lending records, and have been made into films, attesting to their popularity amongst readers. Yet, the reaction to the growth of women's commercial fiction amongst more established female authors – many of whom have been writing for over forty years – has been mixed. In 2001, Beryl Bainbridge, who was nominated for the Booker Prize that year, questioned the point of 'writing a whole novel' about a woman's search for a husband ('Bainbridge', par. 2).[12] Doris Lessing agreed with Bainbridge, and asked why women wrote what she perceived to be such 'instantly forgettable' books ('Bainbridge', par. 4).[13] The answer, Lessing proposed, was that, given the ubiquity of these novels in bookstores and supermarkets, authors assumed that writing this kind of fiction would guarantee that their work would be published.

The validity of popular fiction, the right of women to explore issues such as sex, the pleasure of shopping, or the pursuit of love, and to write in an accessible way, was defended, however, by Colgan.[14] She argued that these novels reflected the contemporary democratisation of writing.[15] Writing was no longer the preserve of the privileged few. She explained:

> Before [becoming a published author] whenever I daydreamed about writing a novel, I always dismissed the idea right away, as I thought all first novels had to be drug-like rites of passage [...] Now, no longer do you have to have been to the right university, or be the right person's daughter. Opportunities are here for young novelists that have never existed before. (par. 4-5)

For Colgan growing up in the 1980s, commercial fiction seemed only to take the form of 'shiny, brick novels covered in gold foil' (par. 3) such as those by Jackie Collins. It was only

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[11] *The Bookseller* reports that Avon, launched in 2007, 'delivers a dazzling array of debut and established authors [...] and aims to fast-track them to bestseller status' (Henderson, par. 14).

[12] Bainbridge occupies an interesting position in the literary matrix, which makes her comments here about women's writing especially interesting. Despite being shortlisted for the Booker Prize five times – more than any other author – she never won and became famous for being 'the Booker Bridesmaid'. After her death in 2011, the Booker Prize Foundation created a prize entitled 'The Best of Beryl'. The public were asked to vote for the winner of this prize out of the five Booker nominations that Bainbridge received. *Master Georgie* (1998) was announced as the winner.

[13] The success of the genre – and its identifiable typical cover format – has led publishers to rebrand the work of other authors whose output does not fit within this genre – including Jane Austen, Margaret Drabble and Carole Clewlow – in order to widen readership. Drabble greatly objected to this rebranding, commenting that 'I have a sense that my publishers have difficulty in selling me as a genre, whether in literary fiction, or women's fiction, or shopping fiction' ('Penguin "want to dumb me down" says Drabble', par. 5).

[14] Of course, 'the pursuit of love' is not a new theme for literature, as Nancy Mitford's novel *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) attests.

[15] Colgan's novels include *Amanda's Wedding* (2000), *Do You Remember the First Time* (2004), *Where Have All the Boys Gone* (2005), and *The Good, the Bad and the Dumped* (2010). Her website lists her interests as pink wine, Elle McPherson bras, stationery, pedicures and Kate Bush. It features a blog in which she publishes her thoughts on literary awards, other authors, novels she has enjoyed and disliked, and other observations ('About Jenny Colgan').

with the development of the chick-lit novel, Colgan argued, that young women like herself – 'who are the first generation to have grown up with education as a right; with financial independence; with living on our own and having too many choices' (par. 2) – could finally recognise themselves in fiction. Her defence of the genre was perhaps, therefore, to be expected. What is more surprising, I suggest, is that Jeanette Winterson also defended this form of commercial fiction, despite describing herself as 'unashamedly high art' (Jury, par. 5). The Oxford-educated author of *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *Written on the Body* (1992), and *Art and Lies* (1994), who was awarded an OBE for services to literature in 2006, defended the worth of novels such as Helen Fielding's bestseller *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). She asserted: 'let's have art or let's have entertainment. I don't like [novels that are] pseudo-literary […] where the sentences are just so incredibly bad and pass themselves off as high-minded and they're not – they're just bad' (Jury, par. 5). Bainbridge's comments raised significant questions about the worth of women's commercial fiction, and, combined with Colgan's response, touched upon a number of important issues about how women's lives and experiences should be reflected in fiction, the purposes of reading, and the generation gap between writers. What is most significant, however, about the reporting of these comments is the debate that they opened up about what kinds of fiction women should be producing, and whether some forms were more legitimate than others. It provoked a debate, in other words, about literary value.

This debate about the worth of contemporary literature – highbrow art versus lowbrow entertainment, and the positioning of books in terms of their literary merit – did not emerge with the increased interest in commercial women's fiction, however, and has not been limited to discussions of women's writing alone. Rather, it has been an increasingly dominant feature of the literary landscape since the late 1960s, and is both reflected in and fuelled by the emergence of a literary prize culture. The three most significant British awards for literature have been founded within the past forty years, with the result that the awarding of literary prizes has come to be one of the primary ways in which both novels and novelists are differentiated from one another in terms of their popularity, saleability, and literary value. The Booker Prize, arguably the most prestigious of awards available to British writers, was founded in 1969;[16] followed by the Costa (formerly

[16] The Man Booker Prize 'promotes the finest in fiction by rewarding the very best book of the year. The prize is the world's most important literary award and has the power to transform the fortunes of authors and even publishers […] The Man Booker judges are collected from the country's finest critics, writers and academics to maintain the consistent excellence of the prize ('About the Prize'). The Man Booker International Prize, established in 2005, 'highlights one writer's overall contribution to fiction on the world stage'. It is awarded every two years to a living author. (*Man Booker International Prize*).

Whitbread) Award in 1971;[17] and the Orange Prize for fiction in 1994. Clive Bloom explains that awards, and the Booker in particular, 'played an enormous part in defining contemporary English Literature during the 1980s and 1990s' (2). Not only did the sales of prize-winning novels increase dramatically owing to the widespread promotion and publicity, but their authors were also distinguished as literary talents and their works regarded as notable contributions to contemporary literature. In the literary culture of the late twentieth century, prizes and bestseller lists are extremely important in guiding the choices of the consumer, to the extent that if the public are to buy any fiction it will most likely be fiction that has been endorsed by an award. James Henage comments that that the 'care chosen [by Booker judges] in finding a winner will be rewarded with sales on a huge scale' (42). Winners of the Orange Prize have also seen their sales increase dramatically after receiving the award. Winning the award in 2003 for *Property* (2003) saw sales of Valerie Martin's novels increase tenfold ('Orange authors', 17). As Caroline Michel, former member of the Booker Prize Committee, explains, 'more than ever we have become a prize culture. Whatever we feel about prizes […] they matter. In a very competitive field, they lift the book ahead of the competition' (36). An article published in the *Guardian* in June 2011 questioned whether an award was 'the only way to guarantee an author's shelf life?' and whether winning an award ensured the publication of an author's subsequent work. Supporting Michel's hypothesis, it concluded that it was. It noted that the influence of prizes on both publishers and readers is so strong, that the winning of an award can 'make or break' an author's career and a number of 'pre-publication' prizes have been established.[18]

Critics have remarked on the importance of prize culture in both the reception and perception of the novel and in the marking out of a place for literary fiction in the marketplace. In his study of women's writing in the post-war period, Turner argues that 'increasingly, being a prize winner is the only guarantee of merit in the literary world, certainly in terms of booksellers, who use [prizes] as a stamp of quality' (6) and notes that it is through the awarding of literary prizes that 'accomplished and interesting writers can be

[17] The Costa Book Awards 'is one of the most prestigious and popular literary awards in the UK and recognises some of the most enjoyable books of the year by writers based in the UK and Ireland. The Costa Book Awards is unique in many ways, not least in having in having five categories: First Novel, Novel, Biography, Poetry and Children's Book […] One of these five books is selected as the overall winner of the Book of the Year […] It is the only prize which places children's books alongside adult books in this way' (*Costa Book Awards*).

[18] The 'To Hell with Prizes award', for example, gives publishers an opportunity to submit an unpublished manuscript. The winning author is awarded £5,000. Nick Duerden explains that in the UK there is also 'the Jerwood Prize and the Sceptre Prize, while both the David Higham and Curtis Brown literary agencies award bursaries in an attempt to fan the flames of a manuscript that would otherwise go overlooked. It can work wonders: in 2006 Joe Dunthorne won one for his manuscript *Submarine*, which went on to become both a novel and a film' (par. 10).

brought to public attention' (6). Nicci Gerrard, novelist and author of *Into the Mainstream: How Feminism Has Changed Writing* (1989), has also argued for the benefits of prize-giving, including drawing 'new readers into "serious" fiction and to give needed and deserved acclaim, financial assistance and encouragement to writers' (52). Others have questioned the validity of prizes. In *A Vain Conceit* (1989), a polemical critique of fiction in the 1980s, D.J. Taylor argued that the awarding of prizes created an illusion that 'contemporary writing is this country is frighteningly good [when] it is, in fact, frightfully bad' (14). He maintained that the 'bad thing is the way in which writers who either do not win prizes, or are never entered, disappear from view' (6).[19] English notes other criticisms; literary prizes turn writing into 'a degrading horserace of marketing gimmick' (*Economy*, 25) and only serve to bolster the position of authors whose careers are already successfully established. I do not agree with Turner's pronouncement that literary prizes guarantee merit. There is a greater validity, I suggest, to Squire's argument that literary prizes have a profound effect on the *perception* of literature and the *construction* of value and literariness. The difference between the approaches of Squires and Turner, is that Squires acknowledges the extent to which merit has to be recognised and agreed upon; it is not always self-evident. The list of qualities that a literary prize judge uses to identify a particular novel as being of merit, for example, is a list of the judge's or panel's own making, not necessarily of universal agreement. As Squires explains:

> Ostensibly, what every book award might claim to do is to recognise and reward value. A corollary part of this mission is, then, the promotion of the winner or winners: literary prizes can bring relatively unknown writers to public recognition, enhance the reputation of already established authors, turn the attention of the media to books, and so support the consumption of literature generally […] Moreover, awarding a prize to a book acts not only to indicate value, but also to confer it. Value is thus doubly constructed in the realm of literary prizes. (97)

Indeed, before the entrants are even shortlisted for prizes the process of value construction has already begun in the outlining of the terms and conditions of entry. It is here that the prizes' definition of worth can be first glimpsed.

As noted previously, although there are a number of prizes in existence, the Booker is considered the most influential in the construction and conferral of literary value. Unlike other prizes which may reward the best novel by a woman (the Orange Prize), the best first novel (the Costa Award), or the best romantic novel (the Betty Trask Prize), the explicit intention of the Booker is to award the *best* novel published that year. Squires explains that:

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[19] Ironically, Taylor has himself been nominated for the 2011 Booker Prize, for his Victorian mystery, *Derby Day* (2011). As to whether his opinion of literary prizes has changed since he made these remarks in *A Vain Conceit* is not known.

> [what] entry requirements do, be they stated in terms of the book's subject matter, genre, or author biography, is to indicate a series of relative 'bests'. It is in this comparative light that Booker's definition of 'the best novel' acquires generic implications. For the Booker is awarded to the best non-genre novel or, in other words, the best 'literary' novel. By not naming the category, though, what the Booker does is to confirm the 'literary' novel at the top of genre hierarchies. The phrase 'best novel' equates with 'best literary novel', and so it is implied that the winner of the Booker is better than the winner of the Arthur C. Clarke. (98)

In addition to generic implications, when the history of previous winners of the Booker is examined, the Booker's focus on the 'best' novel also has implications for gender. The number of men who have won the award greatly exceeds that of women. As of 2011, 28 men have won the Booker Prize, as opposed to 15 women. We cannot only assume, therefore, that literary fiction is regarded as being superior to genre fiction in this series of relative 'bests', but that, in light of these statistics, male-authored fiction appears to be recognised as being of worth more frequently than women. What constitutes the best writing in any given year is most often that produced by a man, and of course by rewarding the value of a particular book, value is simultaneously conferred on the writing that this book represents. This in turn impacts upon what will be perceived to be of value in the future, and so the cycle of recognition, and the rewarding and conferring of value goes on. Put more simply, novels about particular subjects written by particular authors, once awarded a prize, become the standard against which subsequent novels are judged and become indicative of the nature and form that a prize-worthy publication should take. It is on account of this process, I suggest, that the value of writing by women has been positioned lower both in the prize stakes and literary culture more generally, in favour of that by men.

The publication of long- and short-lists for literary prizes and the announcement of winners are commonly accompanied by a furore around the legitimacy of the awards system. Issues raised often include, which authors have been included/excluded, the size of the prize money and, most significantly for the purposes of this thesis, the nature of art and the value of literature.[20] What kind of novel is worthy of an award?[21] What value can be placed on particular kinds of writers and novels, and consequently on particular kinds of readers? It is in the context of these questions, and of the idea of the gendering of 'the

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[20] It is the amount of media coverage that literary prizes generate in terms of announcements that are made in newspapers regarding who has won or lost, and the free advertising for publishers that these reports constitute, that contributes to the substantial sales of prize-winning fiction.

[21] Yet it is often the scandal that accompanies prizes – and the Booker in particular with 'its seemingly magical power to attract the attention of the broad book-reading public and most of the most critically respected British novelists' (English 198) – that generates publicity and contributes to their success.

best', that the next section considers the perception of women as readers, writers and publishers in the literary marketplace.

Women Reading, Women Writing: The Value of Domestic Fiction, and the Role of Women in the Marketplace

In 2007, an article published in *The Bookseller*, entitled 'Men – an endangered species?', reported that 'trade publishing has a largely female workforce, with women at the top of some of the UK's largest publishing houses' (par. 1). At that moment in time female employees constituted 75% of the workforce at the Penguin Group and 70% at HarperCollins. The increasing importance of women's roles in publishing was reflected in 2004 when the editor-in-chief at Faber, Jon Riley, recruited Hannah Griffiths onto the editorial board with the specific aim of bringing more female writers onto the company's list of authors. Griffiths, who had previously worked for Virago, explained that her role was 'to acquire fiction which will appeal to women readers' and went on to comment that, whilst she was not limited to recruiting female authors, '90% of what is sent to her by agents is written by women – obviously influencing what she buys' (par. 13). Griffiths bought novels by Cusk, Miriam Toews and Erica Wagner, maintaining that she was not against what she describes as positive discrimination – commissioning female authors over male authors – if it corrected the imbalance. This growth in both the female publishing workforce and women's fiction lists is arguably a result of the success of houses like Virago. As Flora Alexander notes regarding women's writing in the 1980s, 'the establishment of publishing houses that specialise in women's writing has made a significant contribution to [the growth of women-centred literature] and mainstream publishers have also been developing women's lists, acknowledging the existence of a demand for women-centred material' (11).[22] Indeed, the forty years since the establishment of women-only presses has witnessed the growing popularity of women's writing – writing by women, for women and about women's experiences – which has become a feature of the mainstream publishing industry.

[22] Despite its early successes, Virago suffered difficulties in the 1990s, having been taken over several times. This may be the result of the increasing attention paid to women's writing by publishers who have the resources both to sign up new authors, and to appropriate already successful authors from other publishers. Many authors originally signed to Virago moved to other publishing houses, including Shena Mackay (to Heinemann), Bharati Mukherjee (to Chatto), Angela Carter (to Chatto), Lucy Ellman (to Hamish Hamilton), and Pat Barker (to Viking).

In *Fiction and the Reading Public*, her study of reading and publishing habits in the early twentieth century, Leavis commented on women's relationships with reading. Regarding the use of public lending libraries, she noted that 'it is significant that the proportion of fiction to non-fiction borrowed is overwhelmingly great [and] women rather than men change the books (that is, determine public reading)' (7). Female readers have continued to exert a profound influence on the book market in the twenty-first century and have played a vital role in the changes to the contemporary literary landscape. In *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (2002), Clive Bloom explains, for example, that 'the predominance of women readers […] meant that by the 1980s, although women represented only about a third of best-selling authors (in any year) and despite the dearth of female critics, more and more books used a female as a central character' (31). In 2006, women bought 188 million books in the UK to the worth of 1.23 billion pounds ('Women Drive', par. 2), and as increasing numbers of women obtained jobs in publishing, and female authors began writing not only across all genres but also becoming bestsellers, 'the symbiosis of market demand, publisher response and author commissions put female sensibility at the centre of the fictional narrative' (Bloom, 74). Yet, in the forty three years since the Booker began, only fifteen female authors have received the award, and in the thirty nine years since the Whitbread was founded, only twelve women have been awarded its prize for the best novel. The implication is that, given the amount of female-authored literature being published it is not the lack of writing by women available for consideration that has prevented female authors being awarded prizes, but either that their work is of an insufficiently literary standard or is about topics that did not warrant overt recognition. In terms of the publishing industry, the question is also whether – given the restrictions placed on how many books they can enter to competitions – publishers are submitting more male authors to prize bodies for consideraion than female authors. If this is the case, as it is likely to be given the limited entries publishers are able to put forward, does this gender bias come from attempts to second-guess the tastes of the judging panel? It was in light of the repeated overlooking and dismissal of women's writing by the major literary prizes, that the Orange Prize was established, with the aim of 'celebrating excellence, originality and accessibility in women's writing' ('Orange Prize for Fiction'). The prize also honours female critics as its judging panel consists only of women, distinguishing it further from other literary awards.[23] However, whilst the long-term success of the award has been undeniable, it has also provoked significant criticism and has raised questions about the

[23] For more on this see Britta Zangen, 'Women as Readers, Writers, and Judges: The Controversy About the Orange Prize for Fiction', *Women's Studies*, 32:281-299 (2003).

relationship between gender and literature, the literary value of women's experiences, and what it means to be a 'woman's writer'.

Author Tim Lott (winner of the Whitbread Award for Best First Novel 1999) described the prize as 'discriminatory, sexist and perverse', and argued that given the predominance of women in publishing houses and the fact that the reading public is comprised primarily of women, it is no longer possible to say that women are underrepresented, or discriminated against in the literary world – a notion which he maintains has been used to justify the existence of the prize (Reynolds, 'Tim Lott', par. 2).[24] When the prize was first founded Auberon Waugh nicknamed it 'the Lemon Prize', and Simon Jenkins argued that 'the Orange Prize demonstrates the wonderful longevity of discrimination, provided it's PC' (Bedell, par. 3). Significantly, many female critics and authors also objected to the all-female prize. Arguing against what she has described as positive discrimination, Brookner maintained that women could not achieve equality through 'special treatment', arguing that if a book was good it would be both published and favourably reviewed, regardless of the author's gender (Bedell, par. 10). A.S. Byatt also expressed concern about the prize, commenting that 'I am against anything which ghettoises women […] this is my deepest feminist emotion' (Macdonald, par. 13).

Whilst these objections were based on a discomfort about the separation of writers in terms of gender, other critical comments around the validity of the prize – and those most significant to the argument of this thesis – centred upon the 'narrow' domestic focus of the nominated novels. In 1999, only three years after its first award was given out, the Orange Prize was at the centre of a debate about the value of domestic fiction when one of its judges, Lola Young, allegedly described novels by British female authors as 'piddling' and 'parochial' in comparison with American writing (Gibbons, 'Piddling', par. 1). She identified two categories:

> There were ones by thirtysomethings, quite insular and parochial. Some were entertaining in their attitudes to sex, but you got no sense of the bigger picture. The more traditional novels were good on a certain level, but they tended towards the domestic in a piddling sort of way, which is very British. (Gibbons, 'Piddling', par. 2)

Young's comments attracted media attention and led authors including Amanda Craig and Maggie Gee to defend their work, and literary critic Elaine Showalter to discuss whether such feminine subject matter could be included in 'the proper stuff of fiction' as described

[24] Research carried out by Vida, an American organisation for women in the literary arts, in 2011 highlighted the gross gender imbalance in both the UK and US publishing industry and in literary reviews. Their feature on this imbalance, which displays a series of pie charts illustrating the gender gap, says 'we know women write. We know women read. It's time to begin asking why the 2010 numbers don't reflect those facts with any equity ('The Count 2010', par. 3).

by Virginia Woolf. On the tenth anniversary of the Orange Prize, Linda Grant, who has been described as 'dismissive to the point of rudeness about other women's writing' (Bedell, par. 14), asserted that she did not 'want to read any more books about young women coming to London and getting anorexia or copping off in Clapham' (Bedell, par. 14).[25] In 2008 the Orange Prize was criticised once again when another of its judges commented that women write too many novels about 'relationships and motherhood rather than sweeping epics addressing substantial issues' (Reynolds, 'Muriel Gray', par. 2). I argue in this thesis that these instances of objections to the prize – the separation of male and female authors, and the value of domestic fiction – are inextricably linked.

I suggest that the discomfort that many female authors felt at being set apart from their male counterparts, and about being regarded as a 'women's writer', arose from an anxiety about being seen to be solely concerned with issues traditionally specific to women, and, in turn, to be limited in creative output. Themes such as motherhood and homelife, as Grant's and Young's comments suggest, are not regarded as 'literary' topics. The identification of authors as 'women writers' and the allocation of work produced by women to a separate category – as opposed to within the broader category of contemporary literature – has made some authors uncomfortable to the extent that they have rejected the label completely. Margaret Atwood and Winterson, for example, have felt that the stress placed on their role as women has had a negative effect on their roles as authors, locking them up 'in their particularised female subjectivity' (Moi, 204). I contend, however, that the reluctance to identify as 'women writers' stems more from authors' desire to disassociate themselves from the stigma attached to writing about so-called 'women's' subjects, many of which feature in the middlebrow novel. Topics such as family life and the home have been dismissed as insular and largely unexciting, and the quotidian is not commonly regarded as a topic of serious and 'literary' weight. It is because of the alleged particularity of women's writing that Joanna Kavenna suggests it is still not considered to be of universal significance. Before concluding that women are still 'not the literary equal of men', Kavenna cites a study conducted by Lisa Jardine and Annie Watkins which says that whilst women read fiction written by both genders, men only read novels written by

[25] In 2005 a similar row was sparked about the role of female authors in the literary canon when Toby Litt and Ali Smith condemned female writers as being 'dull, depressed' and 'disappointingly domestic' in the introduction to a collection of poetry, short stories and extracts (Laville, par. 2). They argued that they had been misrepresented, maintaining that they were criticising a lack of 'risk taking' in the submissions (Laville par. 2). Craig points out that many female authors responded to Litt and Smith by citing 'the names of woman writers whose chosen subjects were the opposite of domestic; others described how the domestic could be sexed-up by making it part of a genre such as the gothic or the detective story.' She goes on to say that, 'what is peculiar […] is that none of them seemed to wish to defend the domestic as a subject which might be valid in its own right. I have been brooding about this ever since' ('In Defence of the Domestic Novel').

male authors (par. 5). So whilst the predominance of female readers has had a major impact on how the literary market has developed over the past forty years in particular, and the popularity of work by female writers amongst female readers is undeniable, the focus on the importance of the female reader obscures the fact that women's fiction remains largely ignored by half of the population. As Jardine and Watkins explain, 'fiction by women remains "specialist interest", with men finding it much more difficult to "like" or "admire" a novel authored by a woman'[26] (cited in Kavenna, par. 6). If, as the findings of Jardine and Watkins's study suggests, men prefer male-authored fiction to that produced by women, it is understandable that a female novelist may be reluctant to adopt the label woman writer and attempt to occupy a more gender neutral position, thereby keeping the politics of their sex away from their writing and, in turn, maximising her readership to include readers of both genders.

This question of the relationship between gender and literary weight was raised when Kingsley Amis – who was shortlisted twice for the Booker and won it in 1986 – commented regarding the Orange Prize, that 'if I were a woman, I would not want to win this prize. One can hardly take the winner of this seriously' (Macdonald, par. 11). It is not clear why Amis thought that the award could not be taken seriously; his comments suggest that it is either because the list does not include male authors, because the standard of work being submitted is not sufficiently high, or both in that the former necessarily results in the latter. Britta Zangen explains that, 'I can only assume that [Amis] believed as the Orange Prize PR put succinctly, "that anything that did not include men was automatically second-rate"' (283). Of course, the suggestion that winning a prize for which only women are eligible is less credible than being awarded one that judges women's writing in accordance with men's also implies that men's writing is the standard – as the previous discussion of 'best' suggested – both against which women should be measuring their work and upon which they should be modelling it if they are to be recognised as serious writers. Although the 'women and ideas and seriousness' problem, as Lesley Chamberlain describes it, has gained increased importance over recent years, it is not a new issue (par. 3). Discussions of the narrowness of women's fiction have become particularly prevalent since the mid-1990s and are drawing on much earlier debates about the same issues. Writing over fifty years ago, the American novelist and literary critic Elizabeth Hardwick maintained that female authors would be unable to write as well as men, or about issues of the greatest

[26] A notable exception to this is the author Jonathan Coe who has written of his love of work by women novelists, and of the novels featured in the Virago Modern Classics series in particular: 'I found myself drawn back repeatedly – almost perversely – to those bottle-green spines' ('My Literary Love Affair', par. 12). Why his passion for these books is 'perverse' is not clear but presumably because it is regarded as strange for men to like 'women's novels' or to read them at all.

importance, because their experiences were more limited. She asserted that 'if women's writing seems somewhat limited, I don't think it is only due to psychological failings. Women have much less experience of life than a man, as everyone knows' (180). Showalter described Hardwick's account of women's experience as 'a revival of the Victorian idea that female experience is narrow and insignificant, and that in deliberately opting to portray it the novelist diminishes her own potential and restricts herself to a cultural ghetto' (317). I maintain that the same can be said of this most recent critical backlash against women's writing.

Showalter acknowledges that to restrict women to writing about feminine or feminist subjects would not be a positive move, but she maintains, and I agree, that the repeated insistence that everyday and domestic matters are not worthy of further discussion is harmful to women in general and amounts to 'a rationalisation of the old self-hatred of women' (318). However, I suggest that for contemporary female authors, writing in the aftermath of second-wave feminism, the rejection of the idea of women's writing is due to the fact that it is no longer considered fashionable to use such gendered terms. Thirty years after the second-wave women's movement ceased to be active, when the oppression of women is supposed to have ended and gender equality has, it is repeatedly asserted, been achieved, the suggestion that women's experiences should be considered separately to men's, or else that female authors should be aligned with each other (as this thesis does) or have their writing considered in terms of their gender, is considered unnecessary and even undesirable. The idea that in the aftermath of second-wave feminism women could still be regarded as disadvantaged compared with their male counterparts, or that discrimination and oppression continue to be a problem, has become taboo. To be almost without gender, it may be logical to conclude, has become desirable, and for a woman to suggest that she is unhappy with her circumstances – which may be inextricably linked to her gender – is an anathema. In an article on the figure of the woman writer, Cusk addresses the discomfort that many female authors display in relation to writing about women's lives and experiences and some of their inherent specificities, and argues that simply by refusing to write about these things does not make them go away: 'If black writers cease to write about what it is to be black, we do not conclude that blackness no longer has any special features, or that racism no longer exists' ('Shakespeare's Daughters', par. 5). Exploring the idea of oppression as cyclical (it never disappears but is only reconfigured), and as something that can only be mentioned in times that permit it, she argues that 'in its ever-alternating phases of shame and receptivity, the possibility of its return always remains. Sometimes society is receptive to the language of oppression; at other times it is not, and oppression becomes a cause of shame' ('Shakespeare's Daughters', par. 5). Women's reluctance to write about

experiences of motherhood or domesticity, for example, and to produce 'women's writing', Cusk astutely suggests, is 'not because they are freer but because they are more ashamed, less certain of a general receptiveness, and even, perhaps, because they suspect they might be vilified' ('Shakespeare's Daughters', par. 5). Hardwick's suggestion that access to different kinds of experiences would enable women to write on an increasing range of subjects was correct, but what she failed to predict was that the topics that they had previously written about freely would subsequently be rendered off limits.

In terms of what kinds of plots are featured in women's writing, contemporary female authors tackle a range of subject matters including those that have been regarded as masculine. In the same article in which she ponders the continuing relevance of Woolf's idea that every woman needs a room of her own and £500 per year in order to write, Cusk notes that:

> When a woman writes a book about war she is lauded: she has eschewed the vast unlit chamber and the serpentine caves [that Woolf described as representing the story of woman and of female experience]; there is the sense that she has made proper use of her room and her money, her new rights of property. ('Shakespeare's Daughters', par. 8)

Indeed, it was only when Pat Barker departed from the themes of the domestic lives of working class women that constituted the plots of her first three novels (published significantly by Virago) and began producing novels that focused on male experiences of war that she gained significant critical acclaim, winning the Booker Prize for *The Ghost Road* (1995).[27] Yet, whilst this may be true for some authors whose work can be said to possess the 'ambition' that was arguably lacking in earlier examples of women's writing, many others have continued to focus their attention on the things that have always fallen within the apparently limited remit of female experience; primarily because they remain a central aspect of their lives, even when they are writing. As Craig comments:

> It does seem a little harsh to criticise those of us whose creative work is fitted around dirty nappies, domestic chores, broken sleep, the school run, earning money doing something else, and usually composed on the kitchen table, for failing to ignore these facts in our fiction. ('A Vicious Circle', par. 2)

Cyril Connolly remarked famously that 'there is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hallway' (116), yet many authors, and women in particular, have used the pram and what is represents – children, domesticity, shopping, cooking – as topics for their writing. The quotidian activities that have formed the routines of people across generations and have been held responsible for dulling authors' imaginations are productively used by

[27] For more on the depiction of domesticity in Barker's first three novels, see Lucy Gallagher, '"He had always believed that there were two sorts of women: the decent ones and the rest": The Female Body, Dirt and Domesticity in Pat Barker's *Union Street*', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 5.1 (2011), 36-51

these authors – and those of the contemporary middlebrow novel in particular – as opposed to ignored.

Emma Parker explains that the aim of the essays collected in *Contemporary British Women Writers* (2004) is 'to challenge misconceptions and glib generalisations about "domestic" fiction', to counter the idea that writing by British female authors is, as Young described, 'dull' and 'parochial', and to 'bridge the gulf between prize-worthy and 'piddling' literature' (6).[28] Parker's is one of the few detailed examinations of contemporary British women's writing that have been produced over the past twenty years (there has been a tendency to focus on American and Canadian women's writing), and of the perception of domestic fiction.[29] However, whilst it lists a number of lesser-known authors in its Introduction, or at least those who have received very little critical attention, Parker's collection still goes on to focus on the female writers who, if not always canonical, are already significant figures on the literary landscape. The essays consider authors including Maggie Gee, Susan Hill, Pat Barker, Fay Weldon and Emma Tennant, as well as popular novelists including Fielding. Whilst the volume claims to bridge the gap between the 'prize-worthy and piddling', there is little mention, either in Parker's collection or elsewhere, of what kind of fiction exists within this gap. In light of the inextricable link between domestic fiction and the middlebrow novel, this is surprising. Yet, like so many critical assessments of contemporary literary to date, it fails to consider the importance of the middlebrow novel.

Amateur versus Academic: Middlebrow Culture, Book Clubs, and the Pleasures of Reading

A consideration of the role of the contemporary reader plays a significant part in this thesis. I consider the influence of the reader on the contemporary literary landscape, and the ways in which it is possible for her to challenge the authority of the wardens of culture in terms of what is read, what becomes successful, and the way in which reading culture is organised. Word of mouth (the power of which publishers attempt to harness) is still one of the best ways of increasing sales, highlighting the influence of the reader and the effect

[28] For more on contemporary women's writing in general, see Maroula Joannou's *Contemporary Women's Writing: From 'The Golden Notebook' to 'The Color Purple'* (2000) and Ann Heilmann's *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing* (2007).

[29] Canadian authors such as Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro, and American author Marilynne Robinson have received significant critical attention. Munro won the Man Booker International Prize in 2009, amongst a range of others. Atwood has been shortlisted for the Booker on five occasions, winning in 2000. Robinson was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2005 and the Orange Prize in 2009.

that she can have on literary culture and the sales figures of particular novels (Squires, 64).[30] Robert McCrum, former Literary Editor of *The Observer* and former editor-in-chief at Faber and Faber, has argued that 'a book will only really sell on a large scale (as a bestseller) by word of mouth, a process that is like alchemy' (cited in Squires, 64). Whilst the sharing of recommendations and opinions about books between relatives and neighbours is not a new phenomenon, the possibility of readers being able to discuss books and exchange information has increased with the marked rise in reading groups and with the growth of internet communication. There has been a change in the reading culture of the UK within the past fifteen years alone, with reading becoming an increasingly shared activity – one to be enjoyed as part of a community as opposed to individually. In 1998, the still-active Radio 4 Bookclub was launched. Authors are invited to go before a panel of readers, drawn from groups around the UK, and respond to questions, comments and criticism. Following the success of Oprah Winfrey's book club in the US, the UK saw the introduction of the Richard and Judy Book Club in 2004, where 10 titles were chosen each year and authors and guests were invited to discuss the book choices on the show whilst viewers read along at home. In addition to private book groups, where members often take turns to suggest a book and hold a discussion about it in each other's homes, local libraries run book clubs, as do booksellers such as Waterstones, and there are online communities of readers and bloggers. While it is difficult to calculate how many reading groups exist in the UK, in her survey of reading groups published in 2001 Jenny Hartley estimated that there could be as many as 50,000; if the recent addition of programmes such as The TV Book Club, and the emergence of book group guides, suggestions for book group questions in the back of novels, and the emergence of novels based on book groups is reflective of an ever-growing market for reading groups, however, this number could be even larger.[31]

This phenomenon reflects the different ways in which contemporary reading culture is organised that are not necessarily connected to academic purposes of critique and analysis.[32] The book club is an important facet of middlebrow literary culture, though one

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[30] The success of Salley Vickers's *Miss Garnet's Angel* (2000) (a novel reminiscent of the work of Brookner and Pym) is an example the power of word-of-mouth recommendations. In the afterword to the Harper Perennial Edition of the novel, Vicker's explains that 'how readers choose books is […] a mystery, one which the word-of-mouth success of *Miss Garnet's Angel* suggests defies all prudent modern accounting or clever marketing. Now that's something we all of us – reader and author alike – might fairly be proud of' (5)

[31] There is an ever-expanding market of book group-related material, featuring in particular guides to organising and attending reading groups, including Susan Osborne's *Bloomsbury Essential Guide for Reading Groups* (2008), Michele Posner's *The Ultimate Book Organizer* (2008), Clare Double and Dan Duchars' *My Book Group Journal* (2007) and Ella Westland's *Reading Daphne: A Guide to the Writing of Daphne Du Maurier for Readers and Book Groups* (2007). There is also fiction centred round the book group including Elizabeth Noble's *The Reading Group* (2004).

[32] In *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Leavis links the rise of middlebrow culture with the emergence of the reading clubs. Discussing the formation of the Book Society and the Book Guild (modelled on the US Book of the Month Club set up in 1927), she notes that this kind of culture 'is still growing, from which the

which is still connected to the academy or other literary institutions that confer value, including prize bodies; simply on account of the way books are produced and consumed, passed from the publisher to the reader, the two are inextricably connected. Book groups do create their own practices and customs regarding reading, however, and form their own judgements which can differ radically from those that have been authorised by 'official' literary sources.[33] The purposes of being part of a book group can be varied. It can be a social activity where a group of readers – usually women – come together, not only to discuss a book, but to enjoy each other's company over a glass of wine or a cup of coffee. Richard Todd comments on the rise of the largely all-female reading group in *Consuming Fictions* (1996). He notes that:

> [t]en to fifteen years ago a fad sprang up, seemingly out of nowhere, and spread across much of Britain. The 'reading club' or 'reading group' was a typically middle-class and typically feminine phenomenon. A group of young to middle-aged to elderly women would take to hosting an evening, perhaps once a month, at which a previously agreed-upon title would be discussed, informally, unpretentiously, unacademically, and non-competitively. (34)

Todd describes the reading group as non-competitive and unpretentious, but the reading group can also function as a space in which to display cultural knowledge and accrue cultural kudos, both through the successful recommendation of books to other members, or else by showing an ability to analyse or understand texts. In this respect the book group can be a form of 'self-cultivation project' where readers are able to both display and acquire knowledge (Collins, 43).[34]

Todd characterises the relationship between literary authorities – such as universities, literary reviewers or prize judges – and the unofficial or unauthorised groups, such as the book club, as being one of opposition. The book group, he notes, is something that is not just informal, but specifically 'unacademic'. The focus on the casual nature of these groups, as Todd describes them, implies that they are amateur, and consequently inferior to professional, academic ways of approaching and reading texts in the classroom.

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quite unbiased observer might fairly deduce two important cultural changes: first, that by conferring authority on a taste for the second-rate […] (a) a middlebrow standard of values has been set up; second, that middlebrow taste has thus been organised' (23-24).

[33] Hartley notes, for example, the role that literary prizes play in helping book group readers to select book titles. Highlighting the interplay of 'official' recommendation and word of mouth, she writes regarding the problems of choosing a book for group discussion, 'how do groups choose what to read? The answer in most cases is 'with difficulty'' and goes on to quote a book group member who explains 'we often used to choose from the Booker list, but we have so often been disappointed in recent years that we don't bother as much now, but go more on reviews and […] personal recommendations' (45). Prize long- and shortlists might provide a source of literary suggestions and inspiration but the opinions that readers have about prize winning novels once they have read them can differ significantly from the judging panel.

[34] The increasing importance of displaying literary cultural capital and being able to 'talk the talk' of books is reflected in the emergence of popular manuals explaining how to approach and talk about literature including Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (2007) and Henry Hitching's *How to Really Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (2008).

Book club members may take their cues from 'official' literary culture, but they do not affect it. I argue, however, that this greatly underestimates the extent to which readers impact on the way in which literature is both received and perceived, which in turn affects how novels are written and produced. The attempt to enforce an opposition between the book group and the academic approach to reading reflects, I contend, an anxiety about the maintenance of strict cultural boundaries between 'official' and 'endorsed' approaches to literature, and those made by the everyday reader. Rather than the two having little in common, as Todd's comments imply, I suggest that it is in fact the overlap between the formal and informal approaches to reading – the fact that they both influence how literature is consumed – that has led to attempts to undermine their worth. In line with the image of the book-group reader as a threat to the authority of the literary scholar, Collins notes that 'self-cultivation projects, pursued outside the academy have met with as much condemnation as celebration, nowhere more obviously than in the wildly differing accounts of the benefits of the Oprah Winfrey Book Clubs' (43); and, I would add, the Richard and Judy Book Club in the UK. Collins goes on to argue that the

> advent of the chain store and web site bookshops, high-concept literary adaptation films and television book clubs have all changed the way in which one talks the talk of literary appreciation with a high degree of authority, largely by making reading a process of self-empowerment that no longer depends on acquiring the right sort of degree or professional training. (183)

If the book club is taken to be representative of middlebrow culture – indeed Suzanne Keen remarks that being selected as a book group choice is often sufficient to mark a novel out as middlebrow (103) – then there is an implication that it is not on account of the inferiority of middlebrow culture that it has been disparaged by the guardians of literariness (whether they be the judging panel of the Booker Prize or the literary scholar) but rather because of the threat that it poses to 'legitimate' cultural authority.[35]

The image of the book-club member is consistent with that of the 'general reader' or 'common reader' who stands, not necessarily in opposition to the academic or 'professional reader' (their participation in literary culture is shared after all), but is considered inferior to those who have specialist literary skills and knowledge. In the introduction to *The Common Reader 1* (1925), Woolf notes that

> [t]here is a sentence in Dr Johnson's *Life of Gray* which might well be written up in all those rooms, too humble to be called libraries, yet full of books, where the pursuit of reading is carried on by private people. The common

[35] I acknowledge that the judges of the Booker Prize are different kinds of 'guardian of literariness' to those scholars within the academy. The role of prizes, and in turn the juedging panel, in the process of promoting and selling books is just one way in the judge can be separated from the scholar. They are both, however, responsible for contributing to and upholding particular definitions of, and approaches to, literary value.

> reader, as Dr Johnson implies, differs from the critic and the scholar. He is worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously. He reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others. (1)

Here the general reader is identified as being male, but the general reader in middlebrow culture is most often considered female. The general reader indulges her passion for reading socially or in domestic spaces including the home, as opposed to in the professional, public spaces of the classroom or auditorium the private, traditionally feminine space of the home. Equally she reads for pleasure, and not to sharpen her critical skills, or to increase her knowledge which she in turn intends to pass on to someone else – a student or newspaper reader, for example. Of course, the description above derives from the way in which the figure of the female reader has been constructed over time, and not how women in their entirety read as a gender. I contend, however, that the condemnation of the book-club phenomenon – and of middlebrow culture itself of which such groups are indicative – is representative of concerns about the threat posed by the general reader (considered so often to be female) to the authorities of culture (considered so often to be male) and the way in which the middlebrow encroaches on territory considered to be highbrow.

More significantly, however, in terms of the focus of this section, it is also representative of a concern about the feminisation of reading and the contamination of literature and culture – which has traditionally been under the auspices of male intellectuals – by feminine tastes and sensibilities. If we take this fear of an encroaching femininity and return to the debates about literary value, domestic fiction, and women in the marketplace, outlined in previous section of this Introduction, it is clear that what underpins them all is a concern about the relationship between literature and gender, and specifically about the threat that femininity poses to a literary culture that has been inextricably bound up with male intellectual authority. Given the significance of the female reader in the marketplace as a primary consumer of books, and the flourishing of book-group culture, the dismissal of middlebrow culture and of the feminine subject matter of domestic fiction seems contradictory. Yet it is on account, I suggest, of the continued subjugation of the feminine by masculine culture, and the perception that it is less rational, more emotional, and therefore less intellectually rigorous, that literature endorsed by men (whether as authors, judges, or reviewers) continues to be privileged above that which is associated with women (whether because it is a book club choice, is about domesticity or motherhood, or is

acknowledged by an all-female panel).[36] The same can be said of anxieties surrounding the middlebrow, with its feminine associations of reading for pleasure (as opposed to simply to expand the mind), reading groups and informal meetings which stand in contrast to the apparently intellectually rigorous environment of the university.

The growth of reading groups also raises questions about why we read, and how these things are connected to the 'battle of the brows' as Woolf described it. In *How to Read and Why* (2000), Harold Bloom remarks that

> [w]e read deeply for varied reasons, most of them familiar: that we cannot know enough people profoundly enough; that we need to know ourselves better; that we require knowledge, not just of self and others, but of the way things are. Yet the strongest, most authentic motive for deep reading of the now much-abused traditional canon is the search for a difficult pleasure. (29)

If the academic approach to reading is concerned with critique and analysis, and prize judging is concerned with identifying which book is 'best' or most 'worthy', both the reading group and reading at home are most often associated with the pleasures of identification and immersion. It is in relation to the effects that particular novels have on their readers – whether they cause them to struggle to master the complexities of their language or form, or understand their themes, or else whether they encourage an immersion in story or identification with characters, that has marked a novel out as high-, middle- or lowbrow. Writing about the opposition between high- and middlebrow literature in the first half of the twentieth century, for example, Humble notes that 'reading for the highbrow was properly effortful work, and he [the reader] despised the development of a thriving market in escapist and entertaining reading matter' (28). Note that the highbrow reader is identified as male here. To read a difficult novel in order to expand the mind, for example, has been regarded as more virtuous than reading a more plot-driven novel for pleasure.[37]

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[36] The Orange Prize judging panel, which is all female, is interestingly positioned in this argument regarding the perception of how male readrers and female readers approach texts. Do they, one could argue, conform to the (masculine) principle of critique and analysis (as prize judges), or do they take a 'feminine' approach (as female readers) and focus on pleasure and emotion? An experiment in 2001, where an all-male judging panel shadowed the main judges, suggested that they were perceived as less rigorous and more emotionally-led than their male counterparts. The female judges were criticised by the male panel for 'their lily-livered deference to dull or soppy books by big name writers' (Gibbons, 'Sexes', par. 1). Discusiing the inclusion of Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven* (2001), Paul Bailey, the novelist and critic who chaired the alternative all-male panel, argued that 'it's not much more that a soap opera. Everything about it is weak [...] Every time we meet a new character there is a tedious description of who they are and what they are wearing' (quoted in Gibbons, 'Sexes', par. 4). He also claimed that the female judges were inclined towards 'worthy books about issues which we found anathema' (quoted in Gibbons, 'Sexes', par. 5). Bailey's comments highlight the fact that despite their role as judges of 'quality' writing, the female panelists were still perceived to be less analytic and exacting in their standards than men, and in turn to be flawed in their judgement.

[37] Trollope has suggested that the lack of prestige attached to her novels is because they are often read for pleasure as opposed to for the benefit of improvement. This she argues is reflective of 'Britain's inherent Puritanism…We feel we shouldn't enjoy things, especially reading, and we feel guilty if we do. But if

Some motivations for reading a novel are considered better than others, because of the effects that they reportedly have on their readers. In her study of the Book of the Month Club, Radway notes that it is a book's 'literary benefit' that marks it out as 'something good for you' (60), identifying the perceived relation between the 'literary' and the 'worthy'. Noting in *Empathy and the Novel* (2010) that 'key features of the reading experience receive positive emphasis' (ix), Suzanne Keen argues that

> [l]imiting the effects of reading to those enjoyed by highly educated consumers of serious fiction shifts the emphasis to more rarefied qualities of narrative such as defamiliarisation. However, middlebrow readers tend to value novels offering opportunities for strong character identification. They believe that novel reading opens their minds to experiences, dilemmas, time periods, places and situations that would otherwise be closed to them [...] They unself-consciously judge the success of novels based on how well they could identify with characters' feelings [...] Empathy shapes their recommendations and judgements about fiction. (ix)

It is not the case that immersion and the exercising of empathy are the *only* purposes of reading middlebrow fiction; different readers consume the middlebrow for different reasons. It is, however, vitally important to acknowledge the role of immersion and empathy as reading responses because they play a significant role in the formation of relationships between readers and their reading material, as well as the formation of reading communities.[38] These emotional responses to fiction in particular have largely been regarded as secondary to 'rational' responses to reading (concerned with critique, analysis and the struggle to understand) or are even considered to be entirely undesirable.

I propose, on the contrary, that middlebrow fiction illustrates the inherent difficulties of reader categorisation and the problem of positioning one response to reading over another, by virtue of the fact that it can be considered to contain two different kinds of writing and can have two different purposes. Its traditionally realist – as opposed to experimental – form and structure, and relatively accessible style, mean that it can function as a 'light' read, but its references to art and philosophy, for example, also mean that it can function as intellectually challenging literature, thus making its readership difficult to place. The cultural references afford pleasure to those who are sufficiently knowledgeable to recognise them. Yet, a failure to see their significance, or the reader's preference for plot and character, over a form of intellectual hide-and-seek, does not detract from the enjoyment or entertainment value of these novels – important aspects of reading that are often overlooked or dismissed. Keen argues that 'character identification [...] remains the

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something is frightfully grimy and black and makes you want to jump down a well – you know, 'grim lit, I call it – then we feel we're being improved by reading it' (Hari, par. 3).

[38] Keen notes that '[w]idely read popular novels give readers something to talk about and can contribute to the formation of those little ad hoc communities of fellow-feeling that arise when several who love a particular novel or novelist meet and share their enthusiasm' (xv).

single most important facet of response to fiction articulated by middlebrow readers' (60). The contemporary middlebrow novel unites the ideas of 'reading for pleasure', 'reading as a process of identification', and 'reading as intellectual stimulation', which have been largely regarded as mutually exclusive.

By situating references to literature, art and culture in novels that are not explicitly 'literary', but simultaneously allowing for pleasure through readers' identification with characters or simply an enjoyment of plot, these novels disrupt popular ways of thinking about the relationship between reader and text, and suggest that their predominantly female readers – oft accused, Rita Felski argues, of being 'sentimental' and 'undiscriminating' (31) – are far from passive or homogenous, but are instead a diverse group with varied reading habits. The middlebrow has been regarded as a passive and parasitical category of fiction which relies on both the low- and highbrow for its existence, but the inclusion of high art references in accessible literature results in a more dynamic reading process and suggests that there are a number of different reading positions 'inscribed' within these texts, and in turn that a number of different reading practices are constructed outside of them.

Feminine Fictions: The Woman's Novel and the Post-ing of Feminism

Critical approaches to the relationship between feminism and fiction have been largely consistent with those taken by critics to literature at large – an interest in literary fiction or, over the past fifteen years in particular, a focus on the popular novel. Feminist literary critics have analysed the writings of female modernist authors and the commercially successful genre writers. Yet, the middlebrow novel has received scant attention. This has been to the detriment, I argue, of feminist literary criticism given both the significant number of these novels that have been published over the past thirty years; the fact that they are consumed by female readers; and that novels of this kind are produced by female authors and focus almost exclusively on female experiences. In arguing for the relevance of these novels to feminist criticism, however, I am not suggesting that they are feminist novels. Indeed, I both acknowledge and broadly agree with the argument that simply because a text is written by a woman does not make it automatically relevant to discussions of feminism. Of course, definitions of 'feminist fiction' vary, and can be as wide ranging as fiction which seeks to further the feminist movement or quite simply fiction written by an author who identifies themselves as a feminist. Objections to the conflation of 'women's writing' and 'feminist writing' were made by Rosalind Coward in an extended, and well-known, response to an article by Rebecca O'Rourke on 'the relation of feminism to

criticism and publishing' (1). Coward considers when it is justified to apply the label 'feminist novel' to a text, and questions whether simply by virtue of the centrality that many novels attribute to women's experiences, or their focus on a female protagonist, it is legitimate to describe them as 'feminist'. She concludes that it is not: 'It is just not possible to say that women-centred writings have any necessary relationship to feminism. Women-centred novels are by no means a new phenomenon' (57). The position of this thesis on the relationship between women's novels and feminism does depart slightly, however, from Coward's. Where she asserts that these novels do not have any '*necessary relationship* to feminism' [emphasis mine] (57), I argue that, though perhaps not necessary, this kind of writing can nonetheless have a fruitful relationship with feminism on account of the varied extent to which it explores the experiences of the modern woman and considers issues which feminism itself has also considered important.

Despite Coward's assertion that they are not a new phenomenon, as previously noted, feminism did introduce many readers to these books (novels centred round female protagonists), encouraged authors to write about women's experience and increased female readership. In this respect the connection between feminism and both women's writing and reading is clear. Secondly, the fact that these texts are bought and consumed by many (female) suggests that their characters and plotlines are somehow relevant to their readers, or that these novels engage with issues that are of concern to them. As Philips argues regarding the female-authored and woman-centred novels considered in her study of post-war women's fiction – including the Aga-saga, the postfeminist novel, and the sex and shopping novel – this fiction focusing on female experience has remained popular: 'these are the novels and authors that are still to be found on the remaindered shelves, testimony to a onetime wide circulation and readership' (*Women's Fiction*, 1). As Joannou explains with regard to women-centred fiction, 'its appeal to women is always illuminating in relation to the specific historical context in which it was written' (*Contemporary Women's Writing*, 87). These novels should be of interest to feminist literary critics because of what they reveal about the different ways in which women read and live, and how their popularity indicates what is of concern to women at a given moment in time. Regardless of whether they can be described as feminist novels, they are written in a culture that is profoundly shaped by feminism, and by women who, by virtue of living in that culture, have been unavoidably influenced by feminist ideas. I do not suggest either that the three authors considered in this thesis are feminist writers or would identify themselves as feminists. Of the three authors whose work I examine, only Cusk has identified herself as a feminist. Indeed, much like the reaction to the notion of the 'woman writer' discussed previously, many contemporary female authors have sought to distance themselves from the label 'feminist

author'. This reluctance to bring gender politics to bear on their positions as authors may be due to several different factors. The negative associations that feminism has developed for many people – that it is extreme, angry, anti-men – may provoke a concern amongst authors that their writing will be tarnished as a result. Being a feminist author (like being a 'woman's writer') may be thought to restrict writers' creativity and to imply that characters and plots must be written in accordance with feminist principles. Alternatively, the reluctance to assume the label may stem from the perception that feminist fiction is 'bad fiction'. Gerrard, for example, remarks that feminist fiction is associated with writing that is 'angst-ridden, preoccupied with individual and often autobiographical suffering, "brave", navel-gazing, politically obvious and unsubtle' (107). There are examples, of course, of feminist female authors whose work has been highly regarded and formally considered innovative, Angela Carter being perhaps the most noted in a British context.

I argue that the authors and novels considered in this thesis are relevant to feminist literary critics and discussions of *feminism*. Yet, the title of my thesis describes the discussion that occurs in the chapters that follow in terms of *(post)feminism*. The title of this thesis and the heading of this section are the only places where I have positioned 'post' in parentheses before 'feminism'. The reason for this is that I do not consider the novels discussed here only in terms of postfeminism, nor only in terms of second-wave feminism, but in terms of both and position them in dialogue with one another. The definition of 'postfeminism' and what is often considered to be its uneasy relationship with the feminist movement is subject to ongoing debate. As Benjamin Brabon and Stephanie Genz argue, postfeminism 'has confounded and split contemporary critics with its contradictory significations, definitional ambiguity and pluralistic outlook. Commentators have claimed the term for various, and even oppositional, understandings and appropriations, ranging from backlash to Girl Power to poststructuralist feminism' (2). The addition of 'post' could suggest that feminism is over, and that the current climate is either one in which feminism is no longer relevant (because it has been successful) or irrelevant (because it has failed). The 'post' in this respect would signal a break with or disassociation from feminism. The hyphenation of the term – 'post-feminism' – as is sometimes employed, signals this separation most clearly. Alternative definitions have cited the relationship between the 'feminism' and its 'post' prefix not as one of rupture but of continuity. In this context postfeminism builds on the achievements of second-wave feminism. It may occur in the years after the main activities of the women's movement have ended, but postfeminism continues to draw upon the arguments it put forward. In addition to its temporal relationship with second-wave feminism, the ideological concerns of postfeminism have also been contested. Diane Negra suggests that postfeminism is characterised by a focus on the idea of the self – both in

terms of women having lost the self (often because of the effects of feminism's apparent rejection of femininity), and in terms of the process of regaining it. She notes that 'over and over again the postfeminist subject is presented as having lost herself but then (re)achieving stability through romance, de-aging, a makeover, by giving up paid work, or by "coming home"' (5). This reclamation of the self is motivated, Negra notes, by the idea that feminism, with its purported demonizing of women's domestic, romantic and feminine selves on account of their connections to patriarchy, has 'disturbed contemporary female subjectivity' (5) and women are now faced with the challenge of reclaiming it. Other discussions of postfeminism have taken issue with its perceived focus on the middle-class, educated female who has access to significant amounts of capital and is an active consumer. As Negra and Yvonne Tasker note, postfeminism 'works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer' (2). Consumption is a possible site of self expression, and through their choice and purchase of consumer goods, women are able both to foster their own sense of identity and to become active participants within the western capitalist economy, where empowerment is inextricably linked to the power to shop.

A rhetoric of pleasure and choice accompanies postfeminism in this context, whereby it is suggested that female empowerment can be said to derive from anything that gives women pleasure or which women choose for themselves – regardless of whether these things go against the 'traditional' tenets of second-wave feminism. This often involves an embracing of femininity. Within the last ten years in particular postfeminism has attempted to undermine the purported mutual exclusivity of feminism and femininity. Where other feminist critics regard this focus on femininity and consumption as an indication of the inherent political apathy of postfeminism – and the privileging of the individual over the collective – Genz argues that postfeminism is a positive force which seeks to combine feminist ideas of increased choice and empowerment for women with a preoccupation with largely traditional feminine pastimes such as shopping, baking, beauty regimes and fashion. Neither a break from second-wave feminism, nor a continuation of it, promoting neither feminine conformity nor feminist resistance, postfeminism reconsiders feminine roles and images and, Genz suggests, 'carves out a new subjective space for women, allowing them to be feminine and feminist at the same time' (*Postfemininities*, 344).

Returning to my own use of 'postfeminism' in this thesis, temporally the novels considered here were all published after 1980, in a period that has been described as 'postfeminist' because it occurs after the apotheosis of second-wave feminism in the 1970s. They are therefore postfeminist in that they are produced in an era in Britain in which there is widespread recognition of gender issues and the politics of women's roles as individuals,

partners, wives, and mothers, both at home and in the workplace. Aside from that, I put forward no firm definition of the term, but choose instead to draw on all of the above definitions and understandings with the intention of providing a more fruitful discussion of these novels than would be possible if only one account of postfeminism was brought to bear on them. Given that collectively the work of Brookner, Trollope and Cusk spans a period of thirty years also means that the aspects of postfeminist rhetoric with which they engage are often specific to the period in which the authors are writing. All three chapters, however, argue that in their depictions of domesticity these novels provide an important account of the impact and reception of feminism by the middle-class woman in particular, and give significant insight into the relationship between feminism and postfeminism. In her study of feminist fiction and the tradition, *Changing the Story* (1991), Gayle Greene connects postfeminism with the depoliticisation of fiction in the 1980s. What strikes Greene about

> well-known, widely read writers […] is the privatisation and depoliticisation of their concerns, the sentimentalisation of the family, the resignation to things as they are […] Far from opening up new possibilities, post-feminist fiction tends to nostalgia. (200)

It is this view of postfeminist fiction that this thesis interrogates, illustrating the ways in which the contemporary middlebrow novel is inextricably linked with feminist concerns and the politics of gender.

I conclude this Introduction by outlining how the rest of the thesis is organised. The chapters are arranged in broadly chronological order, and work through the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Chapter One considers the work of Brookner. It examines the connection between Brookner's novels and both genre writing and literary fiction, exploring the representation of literary culture and reflecting on the position of the middlebrow reader. Chapter Two focuses on the novels of Trollope, and the emergence of the Aga-saga in the 1990s, a genre which I connect to the middlebrow novel of manners. This chapter challenges Philips's analysis of Trollope's novels as 'reassuring fictions' and argues instead that they emerge out of the conservative politics and the backlash against feminism that began in the 1980s. In Chapter Three I connect the work of Cusk to other twentieth-century novels that have demonstrated a preoccupation with class, including Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), and argue that Cusk's novels provide an important account of the changing nature of class over the past decade. Moving away from the perception of Cusk as the author of literary novels, I argue that her writing is steeped in a literary tradition that is characteristically middlebrow.

Chapter One

'She had no idea of what made a book good or bad': The Novels of Anita Brookner

(Not) a 'Strong Booker Year': Challenging the Boundaries of Literary Fiction

The Introduction to this thesis highlighted the ways in which the contemporary middlebrow novel occupies a liminal position, between literary fiction on one hand and genre fiction on the other. This chapter considers the ways in which the novels of Anita Brookner – which, I argue, are constitutive of the contemporary middlebrow novel – negotiate and challenge different categories of literature. Brookner occupies an interesting position in the literary matrix. She has been considered variously as a literary author, inherently middlebrow, and a writer of romance fiction, and critics have struggled to agree upon where her work should be located. In this chapter I document the reception of Brookner's work and the perception of her as an author. Examining the confusion and anxiety that the novels of this author have provoked in reviewers and critics, I consider the ways in which the contemporary middlebrow novel blurs the boundaries between different kinds of literature. I begin by reflecting on the controversy around Brookner's winning of the 1984 Booker Prize, and examine how feelings that she was an unworthy winner reflect a concern about the middlebrow novel as 'pseudo-literary', as imposter-like, and as a threat to the integrity of highbrow literature.

When Brooker's fourth novel *Hotel du Lac* (1984) was awarded the Booker Prize, it was described by the judges as 'a work of perfect artifice'; they remarked that the novel was 'written with dry humour, minutely observed and always at a very low key [which gave it the] elegance and apparent simplicity of the 18th century' (Ezard, par. 2). Attesting to the influence of prizes on literary sales figures, the novel has sold 50,000 copies by the end of 1984 as opposed to average sales of 2,000-3,000 achieved by Brookner's three other novels. It was later adapted into a film starring Anna Massey and Patricia Hodge.[39] Since 1984, Brookner's status as a prize winner has been repeatedly capitalised on by publishers, with

[39] Massey and Hodge have both starred frequently in television adaptations of early twentieth-century and contemporary middlebrow novels. Massey played Miss Arbuthnot in the 2005 film adaptation of Elizabeth Taylor's novel *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (1971) and a character in the televised version of H.E. Bates' *The Darling Buds of May* (1958), which ran from 1991 until 1992, and Hodge played the role of Olivia in Rosamund Pilcher's *The Shell Seekers*, Stella in the 1985 version of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* (1938) as well as Anna Quayne in the 1989 adaptation of Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949).

her accolade featuring continually on most editions of her novels in an effort to promote her as a quality author.

Despite the novel's successful sales, however, the 1984 competition has subsequently been cited as the lowest point in Booker history, on account of the conservative nature of its winner, and the judgement of that year's panel has been regarded as both flawed and highly regressive. Richard Todd writes regarding the other nominations for the 1984 competition that

> [t]here was a widespread feeling that in a 'strong' Booker year only J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* (the Ladbrokes's favourite), and Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* would have made it to the shortlist, and that the others did not really deserve their place there. There were muted voices from the academic and quality-reviewing community endorsing the prize-winner, *Hotel du Lac* [...] but in general it was felt that the 1984 events represented a retrograde step in the direction of the small-scale, parochial type of English novel that seemed an unlikely advertisement for the new mood of the mid 1980s. (89)

As a domestic novel about a single woman's flight from her wedding to a small hotel in Switzerland, in which the height of suspense comes in her brief romantic dalliance with another guest, *Hotel du Lac* was perceived as unexciting, unambitiously small-scale, and too overtly concerned with domestic sensibilities. It did not seem in keeping with the experimental, philosophical or epic literature that the prize's panel had honoured in the past.[40]

Reporting Brookner's win, John Ezard wrote in the *Guardian* that, whilst she is 'full of talent of a rarefied kind', *Hotel du Lac* is not 'a novel of unique and original vision, as is Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, nor [...] was Dr. Brookner's novel likely to have been considered as brilliantly inventive as [David Lodge's] *Small World*, or the mix of fiction and literary biography which Julian Barnes produced in *Flaubert's Parrot*' (Ezard, par. 9-10). Having apparently failed to tick the boxes of originality, ambition, and ingenuity that were expected of a Booker Prize winner, it was unclear to many, in the aftermath of the announcement, as to why *Hotel du Lac* had won. When compared to *Empire of the Sun* (1984), the winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the favourite to win, which was concerned with the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbour and dealt with 'serious', large-scale issues, the decision seemed even more controversial. Brookner's novel did not seem worthy of the award.[41] Significantly, the result of the 1984 Booker Prize also failed to raise the status of

[40] Previous winners, for example, included Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982).

[41] According to the prize's website, 'the James Tait Black Memorial Prizes are Britain's oldest literary awards. Two prizes, each of £10,000, are awarded annually by Ediburgh University for the best work of fiction and the best biography published in the previous year. They are the only awards of their kind to be presented by a university and have acquired an international reputation for recognising excellence in biography and fiction that continues today' (About the award).The prizes have achieved an international

women's writing because instead of there being a celebration of Brookner's win, there was a focus on the complete omission of Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) from the shortlist – a testament, it was perceived, not only to the conservatism of that year's judges, but also to the failure of the establishment to recognise innovative developments in contemporary women's writing, and the dismissal of literature influenced heavily by feminist and poststructuralist narrative theory.

I argue that the controversy around Brookner's winning of the Booker stemmed from the challenge that her fiction (as an example of the contemporary middlebrow novel) poses to what have been regarded as stable cultural boundaries, and the way in which it does not adhere to expectations of what literary fiction should be. There are three primary reasons, I suggest, for the failure of her work to be fully accepted as a prize winner and absorbed into the canon of contemporary literary fiction. These are, firstly, the connection between Brookner's work and popular fiction, particularly in terms of its production, and its overlap with the romance novel; secondly, the domestic focus of Brookner's writing, which has been a feature of the woman's novel; and finally, the way in which these characteristics are combined with Brookner's literary writing style to produce confusing results, as evidenced by the debate around her prestigious prize win. In short, Brookner occupies a critically troubling position as a Booker-Prize-winning romantic novelist whose claim for literariness is undermined by her prolificacy. I contend, however, that Brookner's novels demonstrate an awareness of these categories, and the degree to which they complicate them, thus expressing a sophisticated understanding both of contemporary literature and of women's fiction in particular. This conscious display of understanding categories, including highbrow and lowbrow, literary and popular, as well as the different purposes of reading, is one of the primary characteristics of the contemporary middlebrow novel.

'A Novel Every Year': Popularity, Repetition and (Anti)Romance

In the thirty years since Brookner's first novel was published, she has produced twenty fourt novels, largely at a rate of a novel per year. The regularity of Brookner's creative output has been noted by Alfred Hickling, who comments that 'there are few certainties left in life. But one thing you can absolutely depend on is that every July a new Anita

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reputation for their recognition of literary excellence in biography and fiction. First awarded in 1919, previous fiction prizewinners include D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, Graham Greene, George Mackay Brown, James Kelman and William Boyd. Among past recipients of the biography prize are Lytton Strachey, John Buchan, Lady Antonia Fraser, and Quentin Bell.

Brookner novel will come out and put a dampener on the summer' (par. 1). Author Julie Myerson argues similarly that 'Brookner writes novels like women used to have children. Roughly once a year, they arrive with a mix of enviable ease and, it seems, raw biological necessity' (par. 1). In addition to the frequency with which they are produced, each time a new Brookner novel is published reviewers often regard it as identical to its predecessors in terms of both form and plot. In fact, her novels are reportedly so similar in type that Brookner has been criticised for writing the same novel over and over again. In her review of one of Brookner's later novels, for example, Maureen Freely writes regarding the author's annual publication:

> A novel every other year – that's what publishers want [...] It's all about brand identity. Stay out of the public eye any longer and even your most loyal readers begin to drift away [...] Even so, there ought to be a limit to the number of times an author can deliver the same goods, *Leaving Home*, we're told, is Anita Brookner's 23rd novel. In fact it's her first novel redrafted for the 23rd time in just about as many years. (par. 1)

Here, Freely touches on the relationship between prolificacy and profit in publishing, which is a central aspect of the system of production around popular fiction in particular.

Authors of popular fiction generally produce novels on a much more frequent basis than literary authors – generally once per year at the least – and their work is often part of a series or else has some sequential quality. Popular novels are commonly regarded as having similar narrative structures and to contain stock or often recurring characters. The covers of these books tend to be very similar, as if forming a series, and their titles are written in a font which often becomes associated with one particular author or else kind of novel. Visually, they are highly recognisable to consumers.[42] When all of these factors come together they create a brand identity with which readers become familiar; those who purchase these books are confident of the kind of reading experience that the product will deliver, and that their expectations will be met. Once an author's popularity has been established, their success continues for as long as they do not stray too far from readers' expectation. Whilst such an approach to writing may result in commercial success, it is considered largely counterintuitive to critical success, as Freely suggests:

> If you offer a steady stream of novels exploring roughly the same terrain in roughly the same way, and most especially if what you write lends itself to a book group, you can retire [and] spend the rest of your life blowing raspberries at the literary establishment [...] Who cares what the critics say if your books still sell? And who's to blame the publishing industry for tiring of lazy megalomaniacs and favouring authors who deliver the goods? (par. 1)

[42] The relationship between book covers, literariness, and consumer practice is explored further in the next chapter which considers the novels of Joanna Trollope.

Of course, Freely's tone suggests that she has significant reservations about the concept of the literary production line and the prioritising of finance over originality, which is inconsistent with a sense of authorial integrity. Significantly, many criticisms of Brookner's work stem not only from the perception that it lacks originality, but also that Brookner is unconcerned by this.

I propose that it is the perceived similarity in the formulaic production of both popular fiction and of Brookner's novels – resulting in the formation of a 'Brookner' brand identity – which has significantly affected the degree to which her work is regarded as literary. Many of her novels have similar titles (at least thematically), for example, *A Family Romance* (1993), *Friends and Family* (1992), and *A Friend from England* (1987), *A Closed Eye* (1991), *Look at Me* (1983), and *A Private View* (1994). They are all of approximately the same length (on average between 200 and 250 pages) and the majority of her early novels published by Grafton feature a woman's face (often in close up) on the cover, thus, visually, appearing undeniably alike.[43] The short length of time between the publication of each of her novels most likely stems from the fact that, as Brookner has stated in interviews, she writes quickly and publishes the first draft of her writing, often only making corrections to the final chapter, if at all (McCrum, 'Just Don't Mention'). The implications of this lack of editing and rewriting (often considered, through the equation of a long and intense writing process with literariness) to be 'essential' to the achievement of great writing and the production of serious literature, (but less necessary in popular or genre fiction) are either: that the first draft is highly accomplished and cannot be improved; or else that the creation of the work has a time limit which cannot be exceeded if the process of producing one novel per year is to continue. In terms of content, Brookner's novels are also said to explore 'the same terrain in roughly the same way' (Freely, par. 1). They are often stories of London-based, emotionally- and socially isolated, bookish women, seeking fulfilment and often engaging in ill-advised romances in the process of looking for love.

Indeed, the opinion that Brookner's novels are always the same exists to the extent that many reviews of her work start with jokes about the unlikely possibility of the author straying from her usual territory. Jonathan Coe writes that Brookner's twelfth novel is a 'frantically paced comedy-thriller' about two drag queens, before admitting that this is not the case:

> Well, we must all be allowed our little fantasies. Of course one doesn't stop to wonder, when picking up a new Brookner novel, what it is going to be 'about'. It will be about lonely women living in South Kensington. ('An Absence', par. 1-2)

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[43] Later editions published by Penguin often feature faded pictures of buildings and houses.

Charlotte Mendelson similarly writes that 'Brookner's new novel is the rags-to-riches story of Rusty an Australian stripper: a paean to excess, success, Malibu and men', following this with, 'I lie. Brookner's novels are the Fortnum and Mason's of fiction' (par. 1). Here, Coe and Mendelson highlight the extent to which Brookner's texts are considered to be similar, and the recognition of a somewhat unfavourable Brookner brand identity – one made up of books about spinsters. This perceived homogeneity, I argue, has contributed to critics' anxiety about recognising Brookner as a literary author (despite her accomplished use of language) and to concerns about her claiming the Booker. If experimentation and originality are considered the requisite elements of highbrow, literary fiction, the repetition within Brookner's writing therefore places it outside of this category.

In addition to her prolific output, the romantic preoccupation of Brookner's heroines has also established a connection between Brookner's work and the popular. In *Post-war British Women Novelists and the Canon* (2010), in which he surprisingly argues for the canonisation of Brookner, Nick Turner argues that 'much of the criticism of Brookner's fiction has arisen because it appears to be part of mass culture and all its inherent evils' (65). He maintains that Brookner's success 'as a writer of romance, has damaged her reputation in the literary field' (66). The 'damage' to which Turner refers is presumably due to the perception of romantic fiction as intellectually insubstantial and unchallengingly formulaic – each example following the same narrative arc of lost and rediscovered love – and of being concerned with feminine sensibilities, love and happiness. In *Forever England* (1991), Alison Light highlights the repeated disparagement of romance fiction.[44] She writes:

> Romance, as Ivy Compton-Burnett might have said, has gone though all its stages for the reader of today. To be hailed nowadays as a popular romantic novelist or even 'the last of the great romantic writers' is an ambiguous tribute, especially for the woman writer, bringing with it the suggestion of a 'genre', the bestselling 'formula fiction' of the boy-meets-girl variety. (158)

For Brookner's writing to be considered alongside romantic fiction is to position it in relation to low- as opposed to high culture, regardless of the standard of the writing itself.

Although a significant number of Brookner's novels feature plots driven by the heroine's desire for romance and domestic contentment, Turner considers *Hotel du Lac* to bear the closest 'resemblance to popular romantic fiction' (64). It is this novel, to return to the beginning of this chapter, that won the Booker, and which Brookner herself has

[44] Light reiterates this point again in her Preface to the third edition of *Twentieth-Century Romance and Historical Writers* (1994). She argues that 'the denigration of romance fiction carries with it a disparagement of feminine concerns, even of femininity itself. Recent feminist criticism has therefore proposed the idea of a sexual politics of reading: the notion that ideas about the proper role of women and ideological judgements about women inevitably colour literary judgements and are implicit in the canons of literary value' (xii).

described as 'a love story pure and simple' (Haffenden, 73). It may seem at first glance that these two descriptions – a romance novel and a love story – are the same thing, and that using the two descriptions in conjunction with one another is tautological. There is an important point to be made here, however, about the relationship between the two. Whilst there are countless love stories and novels about love, they are not all commonly described as 'romance novels'; they are not thought to have any affiliation with popular fiction, which the term 'romance novel' suggests and would afford them. Whilst Brookner describes *Hotel du Lac* as 'a novel about love', she addresses the perception of her writing as sharing a specific overlap with popular romantic fiction and the romance novel as highlighted by Turner. She does this by allocating a particular role to the heroine of this novel. The protagonist of *Hotel du Lac*, Edith Hope, is a popular romantic novelist, and it is through Edith that the novel voices many opinions about the status and reception of the romance novel. In doing so, this novel (and implicitly Brookner) demonstrates an awareness of how it is itself regarded.

It is through Edith, who writes in a similar manner to her creator, that Brookner addresses the perception of her own work as an example of romantic fiction and in relation to other, sexier novels. Edith makes humorous reference to the formulaic nature of the romance, for example, and its dependence on particular narrative twists and turns which the reader comes to expect, when, whilst writing her new novel at her hotel retreat, Edith senses that what she has just written is very familiar: '[She] wrote a few paragraphs of *Beneath the Visiting Moon*, then on re-reading them, realised that she had used the same device in *The Stone and the Star*, and crossed them out' (24). Although they were published in the 1980s Brookner's novels have nothing in common with the 'bonkbusters' or 'sex and shopping' romance novels which were being published at the same time. They are devoid of overt sexual references and feature reticent women who differed greatly from the savvy, career-driven women of Jackie Collins's novels, for example. Brookner's awareness that her own writing is aligned with the category of romance fiction (but not the kind that constitutes the bestseller) is also clear in a discussion Edith has with her literary agent:

> 'I like the idea of the new one,' said Harold after a longish pause. 'Although I have to tell you that the romantic market is beginning to change. It's sex for the young woman executive now, the *Cosmopolitan* reader, the girl with the executive briefcase'. (26)

Through Harold's comments about Edith's novels which, like her own, feature quiet, 'mouse-like' (27) women, Brookner signals her understanding that her writing is often considered old fashioned and dated compared to the work of her contemporaries, and out of sync with the popular literary market at the time. These metafictional references play a

significant role in Brookner's work, and will be considered in more detail later in this chapter.

Whilst the close relationship between Brookner's writing and romantic fiction has been noted, and they share many common elements (single women, often idealised men, romantic entanglements, a focus on emotion, a belief in the transformative power of love), it is important to note that novels such as *Hotel du Lac*, *Providence* (1982) and *Look at Me* (1983), do not adhere to what is traditionally expected of a romance novel. This is most obvious in the fact that they do not contain a happy ending. Indeed, this is often inverted, with the novels concluding with the heroine's disappointment. As Eileen Williams-Wanquet comments:

> Brookner's depiction of marriage is thus the opposite of that of the romance plot of the classic realist text. Instead of ending on a happy marriage, which harmoniously ties all the knots, these novels begin after the end of the marriage, which is retrospectively revealed to have been most unsatisfactory. (191)

In place of happy endings Brookner depicts dashed hopes, women returning to their lonely lives, the pressure of familial responsibility, and the unpredictability and cruelty of life. Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker, for example, describe Brookner's novels as making 'their own small protest by focusing on love affairs *which come to nothing* [emphasis in original]' (15). They argue that this is a strategy which

> belongs to the strong and powerful tradition of fictional 'anti-romance': all those courtship novels from the time of Jane Austen onwards which undermine the 'happy endings' of the main plot with insistences of loveless marriage or isolated spinsterhood. (15)[45]

I argue for the importance of this turn away from romance because, amongst other reasons which I shall consider later, it is this departure from the traditional structure of the romance novel that has separated Brookner's novels from their more popular counterparts, with which, despite the perception of Brookner as a writer of romances, they are rarely, if ever, compared. Her writing may be about the pursuit of love but her novels do not feature in studies of popular romantic fiction that have developed as a result of the renewed academic interest in popular culture.

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[45] For a more detailed account of the relationship between romance and *Hotel du Lac* in particular, see Maroula Joannou, 'Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac* as Generic Subversion', in *Fatal Attractions: Rescripting Romance in Contemporary Literature* ed. by Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker (London: Pluto Press, 1998), pp.84-97. Joannou argues for Brookner's feminist credentials owing to her critique of women's relationships both with each other and with men, and the ways in which she debunks cultural myths about femininity. She writes that whilst '*Hotel du Lac* evokes the formulaic elements of romantic fiction: the wealthy, married man; the sensitive adoring woman worshipping from a distance' (87), in terms of it being subversive, 'it is significant that Brookner's romantic novels provide the reader with neither a happy ending nor the conventional resolution in marriage that is the traditional outcome of the Mills and Boon romance' (95).

To return to the controversy surrounding the 1984 Booker, given the affiliation between Brookner's writing and romantic fiction, and the reaction to its success, it must be asked why *Hotel du Lac* was ever considered for the prize at all. The answer, I suggest, is on account of the formal characteristics of Brookner's writing, and for the fact that her work is infused with a significant number of artistic and cultural references which afford it a highbrow quality. In *Women Novelists Today: A Survey of English Writing in the Seventies and Eighties* (1988), Olga Kenyon notes that Brookner:

> [d]oes not deride novelists like Barbara Cartland who make millions peddling 'a belief in beauty which we all need'. Indeed Brookner takes formal risks in her proximity to romantic novelettes, but skilfully distances their sentimentality with devices such as flashbacks, irony, imagery and occasional withholding of information. (154)

Indeed, in spite of her affiliation with romantic fiction, it is for her skill in depicting characters' interiority, and for her use of language that Brookner has been praised, and which has contributed to an interest in her writing within the academy. As Cheryl Alexander Malcolm, for example, notes in her monograph on Brookner, 'action is minimal. So is dialogue. Narration is uppermost in importance, particularly as it allows entrée into the unarticulated thoughts and emotions of characters' (15). Whilst Brookner may write about romance, she does so in a more literary manner than other authors and is noted for her aesthetic style. She has spoken about what has influenced her work, citing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European literature as an inspiration, and certainly her formal, sparing prose style, for which she is noted, is reminiscent of the writing of Zola and Balzac. As Joannou remarks, 'Brookner's forte is elegant, understated prose which makes much use of intelligent dialogue' (*Contemporary Women's Writing*, 88). Her novels also include philosophical questions concerning virtue and morality, returning repeatedly to the question of 'how is it best to live one's life?'

Yet, for some critics of Brookner's work her writing style, and her allusions to Balzac amongst others, has been regarded not as 'literary' but 'pseudoliterary'; she has been accused of producing generic or formulaic fiction which masquerades as serious literature. In her review of Brookner's sixteenth novel, *Altered States* (1996), Natasha Walter takes the example of Brookner to lament the oft heralded 'death of the novel'. She remarks that Brookner:

> [e]mbodies something frail and decadent about contemporary literature, and yet her novels are admired because of their 'literary quality'. What does this consist of? It is a fake literariness, a mere use of literary form, a neatly framed plot and a style that bears no relation to the way people think and speak now. She uses this artificial hothouse style not out of daring, not to mark out new territory, but in order to hark back, to insist on the supremacy of the past. This is [...] the kind of writing that people who know nothing about literature think

is literature. ('A World Elsewhere', par. 6)

She goes on to comment on Brookner's over-reliance on vague allusions ('this fake style relies particularly on never using a concrete adjective or verb when an abstraction will do' [par. 7]), and suggests that her writing is representative of 'the dead end of English literature' in which 'a careful aura of literariness replaces literature', before concluding with regret that authors like Brookner are so lauded (par. 7). 'It is tragic,' she comments 'that we give so much respect to writers, like Anita Brookner, who really have nothing to offer us except a dusty masquerade' (par. 8). She does not explain why this is so, but Walter's comments imply that Brookner's writing is bound up with an outdated sense of what 'authentic' literature is; and, if such literature is to be produced in future, popular conceptions of what constitutes literary writing must be reassessed.

Walter's comments are extreme in their negativity. She finds little in Brookner's work to praise, and I disagree with her use of Brookner as representative of the decline of the English novel. What is significant, however, is that her ultimate criticism of this author is the same as that which has been repeatedly levelled at middlebrow fiction more broadly, namely fakery. In other words, Brookner's writing, like the middlebrow, is faking the literary qualities that it professes to possess. It is this issue, I contend, that was at the centre of the anxiety provoked by Brookner's winning of the Booker. For *Hotel du Lac* not just to have been shortlisted but to have claimed the prize clearly indicates that it was considered to have significant merit. The novel remained the same after it was judged to be the winner as it was before, yet this was not the case for the perception of its 'prize-worthiness', whereupon post-prize it was repeatedly disparaged. I suggest that this subsequent distancing of reviewers and Booker judges from Brookner's novel stemmed from a sense of having been duped, fooled into thinking that what they thought was 'literature' actually was not, and undermining their ability to discover the best novel of the year, as the Booker professes to do.

The 1984 Booker demonstrates how troubling the middlebrow – as Brookner herself has described her work (McCrum, 'Just Don't Mention, par. 5) – can be to purveyors of high literary culture, in the way that it threatens to encroach on their space. Through its invocation of cultural reference points and displays of literary knowledge the middlebrow novel trespasses on the territory that the highbrow reserves for itself. By embodying some of the characteristics of the literary novel, and blurring the boundaries between the two, the contemporary middlebrow novel destabilises both the notion of the highbrow, and the judgement of those whose role it is to defend it. There is an overlap between Brookner's novels and popular romances, yet they are not subsumed under the category of popular fiction by virtue of the author's approach to style and form. The

reaction to Brookner's status as a prize-winner suggests, however, that they are not literary enough either. The result, I argue, is that critics have been unsure as to where to position Brookner's work in the pantheon of contemporary literature. The rest of this chapter will consider in more detail the metafictional nature of Brookner's work – the awareness of itself as writing and of the value judgements that are brought to bear on literature – which is a recurring feature of the contemporary middlebrow novel. I argue that Brookner's deployment of metafiction draws attention very effectively to the figures of the female reader – both the characters who read within her novels and those who read Brookner's novels themselves – and the female writer. This chapter contextualises Brookner within the broader landscape of the middlebrow women's novel, before going on to use several of Brookner's novels to consider the nature of the middlebrow reader and to reflect more widely on the different functions of reading with which I suggest the middlebrow engages.

A Woman's Place: The Female Tradition, Literary Culture, and the Middlebrow Reader

Brookner has stated that literature is 'the source of everything I know' (cited in Stetz, 107). In discussions of influence, much has been made of the significance of the European novel to Brookner's writing, and her comment that she ultimately aims for a version of Enlightenment rationalism in her work has been repeatedly cited. Gisele Marie Baxter, for example, argues for a significant dislocation between Brookner and 'Englishness', and asserts that her personal background (Brookner is the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Poland) gives her a greater affiliation with Europe than England. In response to Elaine Showalter's comment regarding the influence of the past on contemporary women's fiction – that women writers 'have been profoundly influenced by nineteenth-century feminine literature, sometimes to the point of rewriting it' (302) – Baxter argues that Brookner's own cultural displacement lessens the appeal of this particular tradition for her (134). Indeed, Brookner's first two novels draw heavily on French literature, many of her heroines are embedded in a variety of cultures, and several of her novels, including *Family and Friends* and *Latecomers* (1988) deal explicitly with the experiences of European (in this case German) protagonists. Significantly it is with the work of male European authors that her writing is often compared. Whilst I agree that Brookner's writing draws inspiration from a range of sources, I depart from Baxter, however, by maintaining that Brookner's work enjoys an intimate relationship with the writing of other, primarily English, women writers. The 'feminine' literature by which I argue her novels are influenced is, however, not so much

that of the nineteenth century but of the early- to mid-twentieth century, when the idea of the middlebrow novel, and its affiliate the woman's novel, really solidified. In response to whether she objects to being categorised as a woman novelist, Brookner has commented on the validity of this kind of feminine writing, regarding it highly:

> Women have devoted themselves to a certain kind of storytelling, which is extremely valid and extremely absorbing; mainly to other women, but to men as well, I think. It's a quite different genre. It does limit itself, but it tends to go deeper. Also it's full of information. Women tend to read novels for information – and to learn about other women, so the novel fulfils a particular function if it's written by a woman for other women. (cited in Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk*, 22)

In addition to this defence of the woman novelist, Brookner has specifically praised the work of other – notably middlebrow – British female authors such as Elizabeth Taylor and Rosamond Lehmann, whose novels were concerned with the same issue of women's domestic circumstances as her own.[46]

Where critics have commented in the past on the relationship between Brookner and other women writers, it has primarily been with regard to the influence of Virginia Woolf. Isobel Armstrong, for example, argues, regarding *Hotel du Lac* in particular, that 'Brookner's work comes out of [Woolf's lyric novels] *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927)' (258) and that 'Brookner elaborates the strain of elegy in Woolf's fiction, associating the near-fatal misprisons and inhibitions of her protected and self-protected upper-middle-class women with a poetics of loss' (258).[47] She considers, rightly I argue, that *Mrs Dalloway* and many of Brookner's novels contain a similar element of social critique, and ponder women's sense of separation from the world. The two authors also share a common interest in the material world of the middle-class woman; clothes, meals, furniture, walks, trips to galleries, and lunches in cafes are all detailed in their novels. Whilst Armstrong notes the formal similarities in Brookner and Woolf – suggesting that Brookner is the natural stylistic successor to Woolf – Joannou has commented on the explicit Woolfean references made in Brookner's novels. Edith in *Hotel du Lac* explains that she is often said to look Bloomsburian – 'several people have remarked upon my physical

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[46] *Hotel du Lac* is dedicated to Rosamond Lehmann, with whom Brookner was friends. Lehmann's writing has been the subject of much discussion. She is now often spoken of alongside modernist women writers such as Woolf and Bowen. She was once deemed to be 'the greatest living woman novelist' in *The New Yorker* and when her first novel *Dusty Answer* (1927) was published, it was described as 'the kind of novel that might have been written by Keats'. Yet her later book *The Echoing Grove* (1953) was described by John Betjeman as 'very much a woman's book' (Mansfield, par. 2). She was rediscovered by Virago in the 1980s.

[47] Armstrong argues that Woolf is the common precursor to both Brookner and Angela Carter. She contends that 'Carter's work comes out of the possibilities for bravura fantasy in *Orlando* (1928) and the surreal critique of *Between the Acts* (1941)' (258) whilst Brookner's emerges out of the lyric novels. She comments that Brookner and Carter represent 'two antithetical traditions met in the competition for the [1984] Booker Prize' (256). Of course, as Joannou (2000) has pointed out in response to Armstrong, whilst Brookner was the winner, Carter was not actually nominated.

resemblance to Virginia Woolf' (8) – and later questions her own harsh attitudes to women in the following, telling comparison:

> [She] thought with shame of her small injustices, of her unworthy thoughts towards those excellent women who had befriended her, and to whom she had revealed nothing […] she bent her head, overcome by a sense of unworthiness. I have taken the name of Virginia Woolf in vain. (88)

It is somewhat ironic that as a writer of romantic novels Edith should associate herself with Woolf, but it is perhaps to distinguish Edith's work, like Brookner's, from the likes of Cartland or the writers of Mills and Boon novels.[48] An affiliation with Woolf affords Edith's writing a more significant literary quality, and also signifies, I suggest, an aspiration on behalf of Edith that she may be seen as a more credible and literary author. Alongside these direct references to Woolf, Brookner also includes implicit allusions to the author's work, including several references to *boeuf en daube* which, as Joannou remarks, 'is familiar to every reader of *To the Lighthouse*' (*Contemporary Women's Writing*, 86).

Significantly, however, Baxter notes that if these subtle references to Woolf go undetected, it should not affect the reader's understanding of *Hotel du Lac* because the novel is not based around one 'informing text' (133). She remarks that 'while *Hotel du Lac* gains richness and subtlety through an awareness of [subtexts] the reader need not be familiar with them to perceive what the Woolf persona as a popular icon consists of' (136). What Baxter highlights here is an important aspect of the status of *Hotel du Lac* as a middlebrow novel – the inclusion of references to high culture which aid both the novel's and the reader's claim to literary knowledge, but which are not essential to the appreciation or full comprehension of the plot. References to Woolf are often made by contemporary middlebrow women novelists, which rely, I contend, on her status as the most recognisable of the modernist authors. Woolf is, in other words, the middlebrow's idea of what high culture is; the ideal representative of high art for the middlebrow reader, which she feels able to reference confidently and comfortably.

Whilst Woolf's modernist writing is considered highbrow, Woolf herself has become a popular figure; her name and image have been reproduced on a variety of merchandise (including cups, teatowels, deckchairs, and postcards) and the covers of her

[48] For more on the Mills and Boon novels, see Joseph McAleer's *Passion's Fortune: The History of Mills and Boon* (1999) which traces the history of the imprint since its establishment, and its changing editorial policy. For an analysis of the depiction of women within these novels, and the ways in which the plots of Mills and Boon romances altered in response to changes in women's social position, see jay Dixon's *The Romantic Fiction of Mills and Boon, 1909-90s* (1999). Joanna Bowring and Margaret O'Brien's collection *The Art of Romance: Harlequin Mills and Boon Cover Designs* (2008) provides a record of the different designs used for the covers of these novels and how they reflect changes in social attitudes.

books are available as posters and wall canvases.[49] All of these things have served to position Woolf as a familiar and recognisable figure within the popular consciousness, despite her novels retaining a literary position. Regina Marler's study, *Bloomsbury Pie* (1997), documents the changing image of the Bloomsbury group and the ways in which its members became the focus of increasingly intense public interest in Britain and the US. She argues that since Michael Holroyd was given an advance of fifty pounds in the early 1960s to write a two-volume biography of Lytton Stratchey, 'Bloomsbury has exploded in the public imagination from a marginal and mainly academic field of enquiry to an almost mass-market phenomenon' (4). The extent of the widespread interest in this group of figures is reflected in the number of events and homages dedicated to them, as well as the thousands of visitors to Charleston and Monk's House each year.[50] Significantly, Marler notes that whilst 'the cult of Virginia Woolf is not the only curious product of the Bloomsbury boom [it may] in its extravagance be the central expression of [the] movement' (3). She suggests that the origin of Woolf's fame amongst contemporary audiences, many of whom would be unfamiliar with her writing, lay in the production of Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). Staged in New York in 1962, and in London two years later, before being made into a film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in 1966, the advertisements and press coverage of Albee's play all bore the name of Woolf, with the result that she became lodged in the consciousness of the public.[51] For the purposes of the contemporary middlebrow novel, Woolf and her writing are perfectly positioned reference points; Woolf's image is simultaneously both accessible and representative of high culture.[52]

It is clear, then, that Brookner admires the twentieth-century female literary tradition. Aside from her inclusion of Woolfean references, thematically her novels have a significant amount in common with works by female authors such as Lehmann, Taylor, Daphne du Maurier and Barbara Pym, in their exploration of the domestic lives and preoccupations of the female middle- and upper-middle classes. Finally, I want to argue on this point of Brookner's affinity with a specifically feminine literary tradition that she aligns

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[49] The photograph of Woolf taken by George Charles Beresford in 1902, for example, was for many years 'the best-selling postcard at the National Portrait Gallery shop, the image most often seen on T-shirts, posters, advertisements: the corporate logo of Bloomsbury' (Marler, 195).

[50] Monk's House was the country home of Woolf and her husband Leonard. It was from here that she walked to the River Ouse where she committed suicide. Charleston, the home of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, attracts 15,000 visitors each year alone (Marler, 4).

[51] The role of Woolf in popular culture will be explored further in my chapter on Cusk which pays particular attention to the use of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by contemporary authors.

[52] Woolf's husband is commonly regarded as responsible for the success with which her writing and image have been promoted. Marler notes that 'Leonard is the bridge between Bloomsbury itself ("a group of friends", as he mildly described it) and what would become the Bloomsbury industry. He corresponded with the earliest Woolf scholars, kept his wife's novels in print, endured insults and scepticism, navigated a sea of anti-Bloomsbury bias, and tirelessly promoted Virginia's interests' (23).

her work with women's writing through her novels' frequent depiction of female authors in various guises.[53] Again, it is *Hotel du Lac* that is most noted for its author protagonist, although the majority of Brookner's characters are writers of one form or another, and the novels provide extensive commentary on both the purpose and process of writing. Her protagonists are revealed to be intelligent authors who give great thought to their work, often choosing to explore experiences of everyday life. Addressing a popular criticism of the middlebrow novel, and certainly of Brookner's novels themselves – that they are unexciting – Edith resists her publisher's and agent's requests to bring her books 'up to date and make them sexier and more exciting' (181). Edith's comments act as a defence of a market in which women write for other women. As Margaret Diane Stetz aptly remarks, 'here is an extraordinary plea on behalf of the much maligned and despised "woman's market"' (96). In Brookner's third novel, *Look at Me*, Fannie writes stories based on her experiences of working in a library, and explains that

> when I feel swamped in my solitude and hidden by it, physically obscured by it, rendered invisible, in fact, writing is my way of piping up […] When I have ordered my characters, plundered my store of images, removed from them all the sadness that I might feel in myself, then I can switch on that current that allows me to write so easily, once I get started, and to make people laugh. (20)

Taking a cue from Fannie's comments above about why people read (in order to laugh, in this instance), I want to consider how the process of reading for women is represented in Brookner's novels, paying particular attention to the *purpose* of reading for her female characters, and the ways in which reading affects both their relationships with other people – friends, family, lovers – and their experiences of the world.

In the Introduction to *A Very Great Profession* (1983) Nicola Beauman explains that a particular scene in *Brief Encounter*, the 1945 film adaptation of Noel Coward's play *Still Life* (1935), inspired her study of the woman's novel between 1914 and 1939:

> In [*Brief Encounter*] the heroine, Laura Jesson, goes into the local town every week to do a bit of shopping, have a café lunch, go to the cinema, and change her library book. This is the highlight of her week. It was the glimpse of her newly borrowed Kate O'Brien in her shopping basket that made me want to find out about the other novels the doctor's wife had been reading. (1)

The scene is important in plot terms because it is on her trip into town that Laura meets Alec, the man who, for a brief time, becomes her lover. But its significance also lies in its drawing attention to Laura's enjoyment of reading and its important role in her weekly routine. The quotation from Jan Struther's *Mrs Miniver* (1939) that comprises the opening

[53] This comment on the female author is something that the novels of Brookner and Elizabeth Taylor share. Angelica Deverall in Taylor's *Angel* (1957), for example, is also a romantic novelist in the manner of Edith. As Baker comments regarding *Angel* and *A View of the Harbour* (1947), 'in nearly all Elizabeth Taylor's early fiction there is a portrait of an artist. [She] celebrates all those "women scribblers"' (148).

words of Beauman's study – 'three new library books lay virginally on the fender-stool' – similarly emphasises the significance of the library, and the reading process more broadly, in middlebrow culture. Reading, and places in which books are purchased, consumed, and borrowed, are essential themes in middlebrow fiction of the early twentieth century. As Nicola Humble comments, 'reading is a fundamental trope in these novels, which demonstrate a continual preoccupation with different types of writing and different readerly relationships to it' (46). I argue, through a reading of Brookner's novels, that this continues to be the case for the contemporary middlebrow novel. Reading remains an important and popular activity for Brookner's women, and plays as central a role in their consumption of middlebrow and middle-class culture as shopping at Harrods and Peter Jones, buying *The Times*, or listening to Radio 4.

Indeed, we gain significant insight from Brookner's novels into how women engaged with literary culture during the 1980s; her fiction contains significant dialogue about how literature – particularly that written by women – is produced, accessed, and consumed on an everyday practical basis. In Brookner's tenth novel, *Brief Lives* (1990), for example, Faye is asked to read a story for *Woman's Hour*, a radio programme which has provided a consistent platform for the promotion of women's writing for as long as it has been on air. Indeed in both E.M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) and R.M. Dashwood's *Provincial Daughter* (1961), the protagonists are enlisted to either write or read the *Woman's Hour* stories. In terms of publishing itself, *Hotel du Lac* provides an insight into the commerce of writing, and the pressures both to write for the market and to capitalise on consumers. The *process* of writing is consistently represented throughout Brookner's novels as well, as her characters put pen to paper to produce academic dissertations and romantic novels. It is the novels' depiction of what women read, where they get their reading material from, and the purpose that reading serves for them that I find most interesting, however. They provide insight, not only into the relationship between literature and the female reader – suggesting an awareness of the image of women as unsophisticated readers – but also, in a metafictional manner, into the perception of women's writing as overly emotive or insufficiently literary.

Brookner's characters inhabit libraries with startling regularity. In her debut novel, *A Start in Life* (1981), Ruth conducts her research in the British Library, Fanny and Olivia both work in a medical library in *Look at Me*, and the male protagonist of Brookner's ninth novel, *Lewis Percy* (1989), works as a librarian whilst he is waiting for his academic career to take off. Given the solitary, bookish image of both Brookner (a Professor of Art History) and her creations, it is perhaps unsurprising that libraries, quiet places in which one can think clearly, should feature so regularly. It is not their function as places of work that is

most significant, however, but their role as lending libraries, places where her characters (primarily female, aside from Lewis) go to take books out. Bookshops do appear – Rachel Kennedy owns a share of a bookshop in *A Friend from England* for example – but in terms of everyday reading, it is from libraries that Brookner's protagonists acquire their books. This is significant for two different reasons. Firstly, it has been noted that library culture and reader relations are frequently represented in middlebrow fiction in the early twentieth century. As Beauman explains, 'books from Boots [private lending library] were once as crucial a part of middle-class existence as country life, Harrods and proper meals' (13). I argue that the practice of borrowing books from the library, particularly by women, has continued to be a defining aspect of middlebrow culture in Brookner's writing. Secondly, the prevalence of the lending library in Brookner says something about the consumption of literature in the 1980s, prior to the expansion of the market for cheap paperbacks and the rise of online booksellers. The women in Brookner's earlier novels are acquiring and reading books before they began to be sold in such great volumes in supermarkets, and before the rise of television books clubs, both of which now have a profound influence on how books are produced, bought and sold, and on how culture is organised and circulated.[54]

In *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Q.D. Leavis identifies several kinds of literary institutions as being involved in the organisation of middlebrow taste. One of them, alongside review columns, book clubs and publishers, is the library. Indeed, not only did libraries manage and generally produce middlebrow culture, she regarded them as being distinctly hostile towards intellectual, highbrow literature, citing statements from the Book Guild for example that describe '"the highbrows" as precious, affected, and pedantic' (24-25). As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, the concept of the public lending library was first introduced after the WWI and proved to be extremely popular, in addition to private libraries such as the W.H. Smith library (established in 1860) and Boots (established in 1899, and boasting 500,000 subscribers by the 1930s). Each of these libraries tended to have its own particular kind of reader, as Beauman explains, and the library that different

[54] In *Marketing Literature* (2009), Claire Squires notes the rapid increase in the diversification of retail outlets for books since the 1980s. She remarks on the role of supermarkets in particular, not only as places in which customers can purchase books, but also as being responsible for the extension of the publishing industry beyond bookstores into the mass market and towards people who would not in the past have bought books and those who rarely, if ever, read. Sainsbury's, Asda, and Tesco all stock books, and Squires writes that, by 2004, supermarkets 'were estimated by the *Books and the Consumer* survey to have a 9 per cent volume share of books sold (high discounting in supermarkets, and their concentration on paperback sales, has meant that value in the same year was put at the lower figure of 5.6 per cent) (Book Marketing Limited, Books and the Consumer: Summary report on the Findings of the 2004 Survey (London: BML, 2005, 5). Although books have frequently been sold through non-conventional or dedicated bookselling venues in the past - Penguin Books achieved mass-market success through its sales in Woolworths, for example – the volume of sales through supermarkets in the contemporary period has been unprecedented' (31-32).

readers frequented was largely dependent on their class: 'Virginia Woolf did not go to Boots but to Day's or Mudie's […] Boots, on the other hand, was a far more broadly-based library, catering more for suburban shoppers than for fashionable ladies' (14). There are a number of different libraries available in Brookner's fiction, ranging from those of academic institutions like the library at the British Museum to those such as the one that Lewis visits to return his mother's books, the atmosphere of which is described in the following terms:

> He mounted the steps, pushed through the swing doors, obediently straightened his tie. Once again he succumbed to suburban peace, aware of a rawness round his heart which responded gratefully to the books, to the readers, to the sunlight through the windows, to the smell of polish. (50)

The importance of literary institutions in Brookner's fiction is additionally highlighted in this novel by the fact that it is in the library that Lewis meets Tissy, one of the librarians who helped his mother to choose her books, and who eventually becomes his wife.

Aside from being the moment of Lewis and Tissy's meeting, this particular description of the library is important because of its focus on the connection between reading and pleasure. Lewis's entrance to the library provokes a positive feeling, and he appreciates the sensory experience of his encounter with the books, polish and sunlight. The relationship between pleasure and reading has often been overlooked, or regarded as secondary to other purposes such as intellectual stimulation. While a character such as Ruth in *A Start in Life*, who lectures in English Literature, finds books a source of information, something to be analysed and critiqued, for other characters, reading – and reading *library books* in particular – is connected with leisure or comfort and is something that they enjoy. This is particularly the case for Brookner's older female characters. Going to the library and talking to the girls behind the desk provides Lewis's mother with company and reassurance whilst he is studying in Paris: '"She missed you," Miss Clarke [the librarian] went on inexorably. "She once said to me, 'I'm counting the days Madeleine'. But she didn't want you to know that"' (*Lewis Percy*, 50). We are also told that 'with the help of her reading […] she had lived a peaceful widowhood' (49). For Ruth's mother Helen in *A Start in Life*, library books provide some consolation when she ceases to receive offers of acting parts, as though her enjoyment of drama which cannot be indulged physically finds its outlet in the imaginings provoked by these books. Helen 'read a novel a day, preferring those that she had read before, and twice a week Mrs Cutler [the housekeeper] has to set out with her wheeled trolley for the public library to bring home six identical stories' (111). A similar dependency on library books is described in *Brief Lives*, as Julia likes her library books to be changed once or twice a week: 'Julia regarded a novel as she regarded a glass of whisky or a cigarette, as something to be consumed and endlessly renewed' (112). Her literary taste is

something that is indulged as if it were a vice, that, like a drink or cigarette, yielded physical pleasure.

As to the type of reading material that these characters borrow from the library, it seems to be largely genre fiction. Literary fiction is the focus of the academic work of Ruth and *Providence*'s Kitty, but in terms of the everyday practice of reading for pleasure, it is more popular, plot-driven novels that are preferred. In *A Start in Life*, Helen likes to read romantic novels which 'had to do with maidens in the nineteenth century, taking posts as governesses and losing their hearts to the rakish son who was also the black sheep of the family' (111). Her specifications regarding her reading material are 'nothing with an unhappy ending. And nothing set in the colonies' (41). Similarly in *Lewis Percy*, the protagonist's mother likes to read 'sober tales of love and loyalty that reflected the moods of women' (42). In *Brief Lives* Julia wants Faye to change her library books once or twice a week. To have such a rapid rate of turnover, the novels are presumably either short, extremely compelling, or composed of a light narrative which can be quickly and easily consumed. In fact, we are told that they are 'particularly violent and slapdash crime novels, the kind recognisable by the colour of the jacket' (111).[55] References to genre fiction are made again in *Brief Lives*, regarding Julia's enjoyment of stories about:

> confidence tricksters, small-time crooks, weak young men, in an English village setting [...] rural detective sergeants and aristocratic policemen, but [she] infinitely preferred the criminals to either of them. She liked the classes to be distinguished by their names, humorous or hyphenated. (111)

Mrs Pusey, a guest at the Hotel du Lac alongside Edith, is reading Vanessa Wilde's books (Vanessa Wilde is Edith's pen name), which notably enjoy the type of mass market success that Brookner's novels do not. However, whilst these characters enjoy their reading material – romance, crime, historical sagas – those around them, often the novels' main protagonists, bring an awareness of literary value to bear on these novels and look poorly on their friends' choice of lowbrow books. Regarding her passion for crime novels, Julia extols 'their merits and attempted to explain their plots' (111) but they go unappreciated by Faye in *Brief Lives*, who considers them interchangeable and filled with awkward and predictable plot devices; they are clearly not the type of reading material in which she herself would indulge. She is baffled that Julia should 'take them seriously, should actually discuss them' and thinks that they reflect the 'emptiness of her day' (111), as if being bored

[55] This may be an oblique reference to W.H. Auden's 'The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict' (1948). This is a well-known essay in terms of middlebrow reading, in which Auden explores the addictive nature of detective fiction and discusses the constituent parts of a detective novel including the milieu, the victim, the murder, the suspects, the detective and the reader.

or having an abundance of time could be the only reasons for choosing to read such novels.

It is difficult to assess what the readers of Brookner's work are supposed to take from comments like those in *Brief Lives*; whether we are to defend Julia's predilection for the apparently lowbrow, or else to agree with Faye's condemnation of it. Yet it is, of course, the unclear position of the middlebrow reader in the debate around the respective merits of high- and lowbrow fiction that is of interest. Middlebrow readers consume a range of reading material, and whilst their appreciation of literary writing is perhaps more readily invoked, it is likely that readers of Brookner's novels are familiar with the type of genre fiction described; especially, as previously noted, given the proximity of her writing to romantic novels. In terms of the metafictional nature of Brookner's writing, a comment like Faye's does more than attest to her character's intellectual position however; I suggest that it highlights an awareness in Brookner's fiction not only of debates around literary value, but also of how the author's novels have themselves been perceived. *Brief Lives* could be poking fun at readers like Faye who find genre fiction distasteful or inferior, and who have dismissed Brookner's own novels because of their apparent proximity to it. Alternatively, the purpose of its inclusion might be to dispel the view that there is any connection between these two kinds of writing at all. Brookner has herself described her work as middlebrow (McCrum, line 38), but Faye's comment is suggestive of a dislike of, or resentment towards, popular fiction with which Brookner's novels have been said to share an affiliation, and which have arguably (despite their many highbrow references) contributed to their middling position.

Other than *Hotel du Lac*, where we know that the author of Mrs Pusey's romantic novel is female, there is little indication in Brookner's other novels such as *Brief Lives* and *A Start in Life* whether the fiction that her characters are reading is written by men or women. Attention is paid primarily to the relationship between the reader and different perceptions of popular fiction, though the genre fiction that some of Brookner's character's consume, such as romantic novels and historical fiction, are most often associated with female readers. In *Lewis Percy*, however, specific consideration is given to the reception of women's writing in particular – and, significantly, by a male reader. Not long after Lewis's mother dies and he returns her books to the library, he makes a second trip there in the hope of seeing the librarian Tissy Clarke. Disappointed when she is not there, he nonetheless exchanges Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and *Ethan Frome* (1911), through which he has raced in order to have an excuse to return to the library, for two other books, this time by Elizabeth Bowen and Margaret Kennedy. Lewis's doctoral thesis considers literary representations of nineteenth-century heroism, so this choice is a departure from

what he thought of as his 'official reading' (53). Yet, he finds himself attracted to it because these were the type of books his mother loved, and by reading them he hopes to maintain a connection with her:

> He whiled away several evenings with what he thought of as his mother's type of book, and for a time he was soothed and charmed, although the moment at which he was forced to emerge from these tender fictional worlds was always harsh and painful. (54)

Lewis looks to these books for a comforting female presence after his mother dies and later explains that he 'was always seeking a home among women, reading their books in an effort to love and understand them better' (70). He takes his mother's copy of Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* (1924) to bed with him, and thinks to himself that 'it was all easier in books […] especially in books written by women. They knew their feelings so well. He was more than ever unsure of his' (75). For Lewis, whose grief after the death of his mother is clear, these novels and their consideration of emotion bring comfort at a time when he seems unable to make sense of his own feelings. Brookner has commented in the past that she has many male readers from whom she receives letters, and Lewis also appears to depart from the notion that only women read women's writing. As the novel progresses, however, he appears to retract his affinity with his mother's taste in literature, which he had previously acknowledged as his own.

Disowning his prior comments about the appeal of these books, Lewis begins to express a discomfort with this kind of fiction: 'to tell the truth, he had felt a certain distaste for all those women's novels with which he had comforted himself, and was at present immersed in [Anthony Trollope's] *The Eustace Diamonds*' (86).[56] Far from being comforted by the exploration of 'feeling' in these novels, he appears uncomfortable with the 'feminised' aspect of them, and returns to the reading required by his thesis. As is consistent with the image of the 'undiscerning' female reader, Lewis's mother may have enjoyed these books but Lewis decides that they are not suitable for him. His inclination towards 'all those women's novels' is posited to be a result of his grief, and the need to indulge his emotional state in the kind of literature that was similarly concerned with affect. Once this has subsided, however, he is concerned to reengage his intellect and distance himself from the feminine aspect of his personality that emerged after his mother's death and which found its concrete form in these library books. In addition to comments about the highbrow/lowbrow opposition contained in many of Brookner's novels, this text also

[56] This is a rather odd choice, considering that *The Eustace Diamonds* (1873) is primarily about a woman and her marriages (and how they are perceived by the upper classes), and that Trollope was (and partly still is) commonly regarded as middlebrow. Presumably the fact that he is a male author is sufficient to ease Lewis's concern about reading personal narratives, and to distance himself from women's writing.

engages with the image of the woman's novel and its reader. Despite Brookner's stated aspiration towards Enlightenment rationalism – she has said that she does like 'a rational world, rational explanations' (Haffenden, 63) – feelings and emotion (occasionally irrational) are central themes in her novels. It is legitimate to presume, therefore, that her writing has been the focus of a similar 'distaste' towards emotion to that which Lewis feels towards women's novels, and that Brookner's depiction of Lewis's attitudes is an acknowledgement of this. Stetz remarks, however, that 'the implied relationships in [Brookner's] novels between the characters and the readers are close, respectful ones, involving a mutual "befriending"'(98), and I would agree. Whilst the descriptions of popular fiction do not make her attitudes towards it entirely clear, given her oft-cited admiration of other female writers, and her acceptance of being described as a 'woman novelist', I argue that by including Lewis's denunciation of the woman's novel here, Brookner is not endorsing his distaste towards women who write or women who read, but is instead acknowledging common perceptions of these two things and, in doing so, how such perceptions have affected the ways in which her own writing has been regarded.

Although the novels that Lewis, Faye, Julia, and Helen consume are all different, they all provide some analysis of literature and comment on the process of reading. I argue that what unites Brookner's characters is the way in which they are all engaged in outlining boundaries within the broad categories of taste and cultural acceptability. In their assessment, conscious or otherwise, of both what makes for a good book and what is enjoyable to read, the characters in these novels engage in a contentious literary debate, to which the concept of the middlebrow – and the mixed opinions that it provokes – is inextricably linked. *Brief Lives* and *Lewis Percy* in particular highlight the subjective nature of reading and how the boundaries of literary taste are continuously patrolled in an effort to ensure that different groups – both of books and readers – remain on the right side of what appears to be, given the anxiety displayed by some of these characters, a tenuous cultural line. They illustrate how, through the maintenance of these boundaries – put in place largely by cultural institutions and those figures attached to them – people are able to create a distinct kind of cultural and intellectual identity through associating themselves with particular cultural objects. The intellectual 'highbrow', for example, maintains her status by continuously demonstrating her interest in high culture through the referencing of products which have been endorsed as 'literary' or 'academic' by those considered to constitute the cultural elite. These boundaries are continuously reinforced primarily through institutions', intellectuals', and often the upper-class's, delineation of which cultural products can be identified as 'us', and which 'them'. The middlebrow is the 'them' against whom the 'us' of academia defines itself, yet in its overlap with both high and low culture, as well as pleasure

and intellectual improvement, it also greatly complicates these divisions. Accused of masquerading as culture, the middlebrow tampers with the academic reader's claim to be able to define at all times what can be counted as worthy of attention. The controversy around Brookner's winning of the Booker illustrates this. It seems appropriate therefore that the anxiety around maintaining cultural delineations should be a feature of her writing.

In *Brief Lives* Faye is perturbed by Julia's enjoyment of 'slapdash crime' novels, but it is not the content of these books *per se* to which Faye objects, but rather the fact 'that a woman of her quality' – a woman of Julia's kind – 'should spend her time on these productions' (111). The superior nature of Julia's class position, compared with Faye's, who was once a 'poor girl' (36), is mentioned on several occasions throughout this novel. Julia remarks, for example, drawing attention to her own class identity: 'when I think of how the world has changed! […] We're all supposed to be cockneys now, aren't we all mucking in together. And this hatred of the upper classes! Well, I'll never be anything else' (90). Faye's confusion regarding Julia's preferred reading arises, I suggest, from Faye's perception that her friend has strayed beyond the boundaries of good taste (which she, as a perceived member of the upper classes, is presumed to know instinctively) and the fact that she has shown herself to be less selective than Faye's image of her had suggested. Here Faye equates 'culture' with 'class'. Julia's love of genre novels, with their 'shabby' plastic covers (112), is inconsistent with Faye's impression of her as a cultured woman, and she is disappointed with Julia's failure to exercise the good taste that is supposed to be a facet of her upper-class identity.

Faye notes, regarding Julia, 'hopelessly confused and confusing, she had no idea of what made a book good or bad but judged it by the actions it contained in the first and last chapters' (111). In reading genre fiction, Julia has failed to observe the boundaries of cultural taste which Faye thinks are supposed to exist between women like Julia – the arbiters of quality – and those others who lack the ability to distinguish between the good and the bad. Similarly, in *Lewis Percy*, the discomfort that Lewis feels after reading the 'books his mother had loved' (53) arises from the fact that these novels – by Bowen and Kennedy – do not fit with his notion of himself as an intellectual. The person who reads these 'women's novels' is at odds with Lewis's identity as a scholar; as someone who analyses texts professionally, and considers them with a critical eye, instead of reading them at leisure, for pleasure or enjoyment. These novels, concerned as they are with private life and feelings, are not the 'kind' of texts that a 'serious scholar' would, or perhaps should, read. Although he acknowledges after her death that his mother's taste is also his own, he appears relieved to return to his usual reading material which he uses for his thesis, as though, after a temporary departure from his usual form, his sense of his own identity (as a

professional literary analyst) has been realigned. The description of this character's experience of the women's novel also highlights something else, however; it puts a spotlight on how the process of reading itself is experienced through class and gender, and how these elements are tied to the different responses that reading provokes – namely, rational thought versus emotion.

Lewis describes himself as 'fatherless, always seeking a home among women, reading their books in an effort to love and understand them better' (70), but then talks of the 'distaste' (86) that he later felt towards the women's novels that he read for comfort. His change in attitude is connected, I suggest, to this idea of responses to reading, and arises from the emotions that these books provoked in him at different times. It is the relationship, I argue, between feeling and reading that Lewis finds uncomfortable because as a scholar, it is the effect that his mind has on books that is important to Lewis, as opposed to the affects that they produce in him. His reaction to the library books highlights the opposition between, on the one hand, readers' responses to the characters, plots, and sentiments that the writer conveys with her words; and, on the other, the reader's mastery of literature, a breaking down of it into its constituent parts, and the analysis of its structure and allusions. It is significant that it is women's novels that provoke feelings in Lewis. Feeling and emotional responses to books are associated primarily with the female reader (at whom the woman's novel is aimed). By comparison, the male reader is considered to approach texts with calm rationality and the intention of analysing (and in many respects 'solving') the text as opposed to enjoying it. Indeed, there is a hierarchy of responses in which 'thought' is always positioned above 'feeling' in terms of importance and value. Certainly a book which makes its readers think hard, and which puzzles them, is often perceived to be more worthy and receives more praise than one which makes them 'feel' a particular way.[57] The middlebrow has feminine connotations on account of the pleasure and feelings it provokes in its readers, and it is most likely in light of these associations with femininity – which Lewis himself acknowledges when he comments on his mother's type of library books – that makes him uncomfortable with his immersion in these middlebrow novels at home, and which results in his return to the masculine works upon which his thesis is based.

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[57] To use an example from another medium, we need only think of the differing receptions of romantic comedies as opposed to art house films. Romantic comedies may make the audience – assumed significantly to be primarily female – laugh or cry, or identify themselves with the characters or situations, but it is a film's ability to make an audience think, to alter their perceptions, that is considered by critics and reviewers to be of primary worth. For more on the perception and reception of the romantic comedy and 'chick flicks', with which it is often associated, see Leger Grindon's *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, and Controversy* (2011), Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young's *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies* (2007), and Roberta Garrett's *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film* (2007).

In terms of the relationship between the middlebrow, taste, and cultural kudos, by virtue of its hybrid status the consumption of middlebrow fiction results in different effects depending upon who it is that is doing the reading. For some, readers of popular fiction perhaps, it represents a greater literary challenge, an intellectual upgrade; when read by those who consider themselves 'academic', it is a step down. The middlebrow novel is consequently inextricably linked to debates around the establishment and subsequent maintenance of cultural and intellectual boundaries, and the anxiety provoked by the shifting divisions between 'high' and 'low'; 'us' and 'them'; 'elite' and 'popular'. Brookner's novels explore the relationship between identity – how one imagines oneself and others to be – and the consumption of culture, by highlighting the different ways in which their characters approach books. Through their depiction of the different purposes of reading and the varied ways in which people respond to different types of novel, they illustrate the complex ways in which culture is negotiated and how some responses are considered to be more legitimate than others.

In her discussion of women and reading, Hilary Radner uses the terms 'obsessional' and 'hysterical' (borrowing from Freud) to describe the different pleasures that are provoked through the reading process, which she argues are the result of two different symptom formations ('Extra-Curricular', 254). Reflecting on Radner's work, Clare Hanson explains that 'these two symptom formations define what Radner calls (after Freud and Lyotard) two different "libidinal economies": a pleasure in the symptom, generally associated with hysteria, and a pleasure in repression or deferral, generally associated with obsessional neurosis' (4). Moving away from the Freudian references to focus simply on the different pleasures of reading, Radner's and Hanson's work is useful when thinking about the differing psychic and emotional rewards offered by different texts. Taking the idea of the deferred or instantaneous nature of the reader's gratification into account, the pleasure of popular fiction, such as romance, arguably derives from the reader's minute-by-minute enjoyment of the plot (the formula of which the reader is no doubt already familiar with). The reader engages with the text on a primarily emotional, as opposed to intellectual, level. The pleasure afforded by the literary novel stems from the reader's success in overcoming the intellectual challenges posed by the text. In this respect, literary fiction or highbrow texts:

> offer pleasure as a goal rather than as a process [...] They invite a regime of reading that privileges interpretation, in which the reader is encouraged both to solve the immediate enigma of the plot ('who did it') and to solve the critical enigma in the wider sense, finding out what it all means. (Hanson, 4)

Pleasure in this case arises from mastering the text, often through the reader's employment of her intellectual reading skills. Lewis's relationship with academic books is clearly based

around the pleasure of repression; whilst not appearing to necessarily enjoy the process of reading these books in itself, he derives pleasure from his mastery of them signified by the acquisition of his doctoral thesis. By contrast Helen, in *A Start in Life*, and Julia, in *Brief Lives*, enjoy the very process of consuming their library books. Their pleasure derives from the feelings that these books engender in them, something which is not necessarily even dependent on plot, given that they can happily re-read novels that they have already consumed before.

The middlebrow novel can provoke both forms of reading pleasure, however, and allows readers to indulge in the pleasures of both instant and delayed gratification. As Radner notes, the middlebrow novel

> [s]ays, by and large, what it means to say, refusing to reveal its secrets under the scrutiny of the analyst by displaying these last for all to see, literati and nonliterati alike. Yet the richness of its language, the subtlety of its arguments, and its undeniable intelligence and self-consciousness defy the classification of popular culture. ('Extra-Curricular', 256)

The accomplished style of the middlebrow novel, which is evident in its use of language, combines with a readerly accessibility, to give rise to a pleasurable reading experience. Brookner's novels afford the (primarily female) reader two different kinds of reading experience. They allow her the opportunity to take pleasure in the emotional responses generated by the characters' and the novels' flirtation with romance; or else to experience the deferred pleasure created by the recognition of the high culture references and the reader's mastery of the novel's difficulties. In its hybridity, 'the woman's novel may be read either as popular culture or as literature, challenging the categories of High Modernism, reflecting the ambiguous social position of its preferred reader – the educated woman' (Radner, 'Extra-Curricular', 256). Accordingly it is to the educated woman – a central figure in Brookner's fiction – that I now turn in an analysis of the conflicting aspects of her characters' personalities and desires.

Feeling versus Intellect: The Case of the Intelligent Woman

It is clear that for many of Brookner's female characters, reading is a popular pastime. As Stetz explains,

> Brookner's public assertion that literature is 'the source of everything I know' is as true for her fictional protagonists as for their creator; both she and her characters demonstrate, again and again, that women's literature in particular has taught them indispensable lessons, pointed them toward proper values, given them the best advice upon how to survive. (107)

Examining the close connection between Brookner's characters and what they choose to read, I consider in this section how the nature of the books they consume – what they are about, what situations and characters they depict – affects their outlook and expectations of life. In other words, I discuss what the 'proper values' and 'indispensable lessons', that Stetz describes actually are, and how the heroines' faith in them stems from the fiction they consume. Novels often form a moral compass for Brookner's protagonists, who look to literature for guidance regarding the best way to live. Expected to grow up quickly, Ruth in *A Start in Life*, for example, is given 'sad but improving books' and explains the connection between her reading material and the development of moral fortitude. She notes that 'from Grimm and Hans Anderson she graduated to the works of Charles Dickens. The moral universe was unveiled. For virtue would surely triumph, patience would surely be rewarded' (11). Later in her academic work – the title of her thesis, *Vice and Virtue in Balzac's Novels*, is significantly bound up with morality – she explains that these novels 'teach the supreme effectiveness of bad behaviour, a matter which Ruth was beginning to perceive' (33). She later notes her awareness that 'writing her dissertation on vice and virtue was an easier proposition than working it out in real life. Such matters can be more easily appraised when they are dead […] on the page' (136). In *A Misalliance* (1986), the recently divorced Blanche Vernon, too, 'sought information in books [and] works of fiction which would teach her a little more about society than she was able to work out for herself' (95). Books, in Brookner's novels, are more than a method of passing the time; for Ruth and Blanche they provide a template, almost a code of conduct, for how 'best' to behave, whether that is virtuously or otherwise.

Brookner's bookish, often highly academically qualified, women find it difficult to know how best to act, particularly in relation to people to whom they are attracted. They lack confidence in social scenarios and often appear awkward. Their concern with acting virtuously and in accordance with the expectations of others sees them, I suggest, continuously trying to negotiate the conflicting pulls of two different kinds of inclination: their virtue and preoccupation with behaving well, on one hand, which often manifests in their profound social anxiety, and their secret desires for romance and the excitement of sexuality on the other. Throughout Brookner's novels we witness her female characters caught between their roles as intellectual women and the attraction of the promise of (often physical) pleasure, between their rational intellect and their emotions. In *Hysterical Fictions: The 'Woman's Novel' in the Twentieth Century* (2000), Hanson explores the representation of this conflict in the novels of Lehmann, Bowen, Taylor, Margaret Drabble, A.S. Byatt, and Brookner, and relates this notion of the divided woman caught between emotion and rationality, to the very aesthetic of the middlebrow novel and its liminal position between

the low- and highbrow. Hanson argues that these authors explore the mind/body problem in their work, and that their fiction features female characters who are divided between their intellectual identity and their material identity as embodied subjects.

In a review of *Hysterical Fictions*, Petra Rau argues, however, that Hanson 'never sufficiently explains what the relationship between the divided self and "hysterical fiction" is (the term crops up once in the introduction then disappears)' (88). Rau also questions Hanson's use of 'hysterical', arguing, and I agree, that characters featured in these novels are not hysterics and there is little consideration in Hanson's text of the psychoanalytic discourses of hysteria. Hanson's discussion of the differing pulls of emotion and rationality is interesting, however, in the way that it highlights some of the conflicting aspects of life that many characters in Brookner's novels experience. She argues, for example, that the insecure position of the woman's novel in the space between high- and popular culture reflects that of both its authors and its readers as educated women. Indeed, Radner, upon whose work Hanson's text draws, notes the following about the female intellectual:

> [c]aught between two conversations, one private, the other public, women intellectuals occupy a paradoxical position in our culture. They participate in a public conversation to the extent that they define themselves in terms of their professional role and their educational status; they stand excluded because their identity as feminine is circumscribed by their role in the home, in relation to children, lovers, friends and family. (*Shopping Around*, 105)

Regarding Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927), for example, a novel about the development of protagonist Judith Earle from a girl to a woman, Hanson notes that one of the novel's most significant features 'is the tension between Judith's intellectual and emotional life, or perhaps more accurately the tension between her intellect and her femininity' (27). The same can arguably be said of Brookner's characters, who appear similarly caught in the space between two apparently contradictory worlds. Like the novels in which they feature, characters such as Ruth, Blanche, Kitty, Faye, and Edith occupy an uncomfortably liminal position as they attempt to reconcile their feelings (most notably for men) with their good sense, often controlling and ultimately suppressing the first with the second. Neither wholly one thing nor the other, these characters, like the middlebrow novel, are consequently as Radner describes 'out of category' (*Shopping Around,* 105).

Brookner's second novel, *Providence*, finds its subject matter in the emotional life of an academic woman, and her balancing of her intelligence and her emotion. The protagonist, Kitty Maule, is a Romantic scholar who has a research appointment at 'a small but richly endowed provincial university' (14). The novel focuses on the lead-up to Kitty's lecture on the Romantic tradition, which may secure her a permanent post but for which she is ill-prepared, and on her relationship with her lover Maurice Bishop, Professor of

Mediaeval History, with whom Kitty has been in love for two years. As in so many of Brookner's novels, however, it is clear that Kitty's affection for Maurice is greater than his for her. Like the depiction in *A Start in Life* of Ruth's relationship with love-interest Richard, who keeps her waiting and eats both portions of the dinner she has made (for which he is very late) before taking money from her, the power dynamic between Kitty and Maurice is profoundly unequal. The narrative explains that, 'their brief affair had settled down into a strange comradely routine, which puzzled her but which she accepted. She accepted his random telephone calls, too random for her taste, and his eventual reappearance at her dinner table' (19). When they do manage to meet, Maurice talks about his own work and eats the food she has prepared with little comment. Only when she sees him eat does Kitty also settle down to dinner.

Significantly, although Kitty is a rising star in the department, her academic work does not offer her a great deal of enjoyment. Indeed she positions her intellect and emotions in opposition to one another, as though her work is detrimental to her happiness, presumably in the way that it takes up time that she would prefer to invest in her relationship. 'Professional success', the reader is told, 'seemed to her of little importance compared with the risks she took in trying to please [Maurice]' (53). Kitty worries about what kind of fate awaits her if she fails to become part of a successful couple, particularly when confronted with another member of the department, Pauline, who is single and lives with her elderly mother:

> Pauline was a gifted and honourable teacher but she was admired rather than liked, for years of hiding her feelings had made her sarcastic, unsentimental, in a way that was good for departmental efficiency but bad for students looking for the sort of glamorous governess figure they were prepared to tolerate in a female tutor. (78)

Pauline is an accomplished teacher but it is clear that Kitty holds little regard for the unglamorous life she leads as a spinster. If success can only be had in one department, professional or personal, it is clear that where Pauline has excelled at work Kitty wishes to excel in love. Honouring her feelings for Maurice despite the inconsistencies of his attentions, Kitty even goes to Paris in the hope of spending some time with him whilst he is carrying out research on French cathedrals. Having remained firm in the hope of one day marrying her lover, at the end of the novel Kitty is disappointed in a scene that is crushing in its horror and poignancy. Significantly, however, the pathos of the scene is generated not simply because of the fact of what happens in that moment, but on account of how Kitty reacts to it; it is Kitty's struggle with the force of her emotions and her rationality that is responsible for the poignancy of the final section of the novel.

Maurice has arranged a dinner party in honour of the success of Kitty's lecture and her appointment to the staff at the University, and Kitty is excited to attend. Under the impression that she and Maurice are a couple, and that they are giving the party together, Kitty is mortified to learn two pieces of important information when she arrives at his house. Unbeknownst to Kitty, Maurice is in fact in a relationship with one of her students, Miss Fairchild, with whom she has found it difficult to interact during seminars, and it is with this girl that he is hosting the evening. Maurice is also moving to Oxford to take up another post – something which he has, up until this point, seemed reluctant to do. This information is revealed just as Kitty sits down to dinner with the other guests:

> They took their places at the table, Maurice and Miss Fairchild at either end. I lacked the information, thought Kitty, trying to control her trembling hands. Quite simply, I lacked the information. She had the impression of having been sent right back to the beginning of a game she thought she had been playing according to the rules. And there was the rest of the evening to be got through. (182)

Kitty hides her disappointment for the sake of the success of the dinner party; she privileges her sense of propriety over her feelings and it is with her making polite conversation with another guest that the novel ends. *Providence* is just one of several of Brookner's novels in which the heroine must negotiate the often conflicting demands of emotionality and rationality. In *A Start in Life*, Ruth gives up her love affair with an older, married professor in Paris in order to return to England to look after her ailing parents. She ends up marrying Roddy, the son of her father's lover, out of pragmatism as opposed to romance. The narrative tellingly explains that, 'she married him without a great deal of emotion, but in recognition of the fact that he had paid her the compliment of asking her to be his wife' (172). Roddy is subsequently killed in a motor accident and Ruth recommences her work on Balzac, her life very different presumably than if she had remained in Paris with her lover.

Where rationality overrules emotion in *A Start in Life* and *Providence*, *Hotel du Lac* depicts the consequences of privileging romance over apparent 'good sense'. Edith's hope of romance is what prevents her from entering into what will surely be, given his behaviour, an unsatisfactory marriage with Mr Neville, a fellow resident at the hotel. Mr Neville tells Edith, in a moment devoid of emotion, that 'what you need […] is not love. What you need is a social position. What you need is marriage' (101). He tells her that he has 'a small estate and a very fine house' (164) and indicates that she will be well provided

for,[58] and Edith can see some sense in his proposal. She connects marriage with maturity and respectability, thinking to herself that 'she was about to enter a world which she had instinctively recognised as belonging to others, in which she had no claim, a world among other things, of investments, roof repairs, visitors for the weekend' (174). When Mr Neville tells her that if she agrees to marry him she 'will be popular with one and all, and have so much more to talk about. And never have to wait by the telephone again' (101), Edith recognises the truth in this and agrees to his proposal. Yet, at the end of the novel she changes her mind. Having written a letter to her lover, David, explaining her plans to marry Mr Neville, and the reasons for her decision – the infrequency of her meetings with David, her suspicions that other women also aroused his interest, as well as the simple fact that 'one does not receive proposals of marriage everyday in this enlightened age' (181) – she encounters Mr Neville leaving the room of another female guest at the hotel, having clearly engaged in an amorous encounter. She returns to her room, tears up the letter, and goes down to the hotel reception:

> I should like you to get me a ticket on the next flight to London,' she said, in a clear voice. 'And I should like to send a telegram.' When the requisite form had been found, she sat down at a small glass table in the lobby. 'Simmonds, Chiltern Street, London W1,' she wrote. 'Coming home.' But after a moment, she thought that this was not entirely accurate and, crossing out the words 'Coming home,' wrote simply, 'Returning'. (184)

Although she has always been aware that theirs would be a union born out of convenience rather than love – 'I do not love Mr Neville, nor does he love me' (179), she explains – the reality of what their marriage would be like is made clear to Edith when she sees her husband-to-be emerge from the other woman's bedroom.

Edith's substitution of 'coming home' with the word 'returning' suggests that she is under no illusion that she will be going back home to the pleasures of domesticity with David that she desires. Yet, Edith still appears to be not quite ready to give up on the idea of romantic love that forms the basis of her own novels. She writes in her letter that

> [y]ou thought, perhaps, like my publisher, and my agent […] that I wrote my stories with that mixture of satire and cynical detachment that is thought to become the modern writer in this field. You were wrong. I believed every word I wrote. And I still do. (181)

Returning to the question of the relationship between reading and the assessment of how to live life, here Edith highlights the connection between writing (her own in this case) and romantic expectation and demonstrates her unwillingness to renounce her notion of

[58] This interaction between Edith and Mr Neville references that between Du Maurier's nameless protagonist and Maxim de Winter in *Rebecca*. *Hotel du Lac* has obvious overlaps with this novel given its depiction of the hotel, the young woman and older man, and the allure of the grand house.

romance which both feeds and is fed by her novels. Exploring the relationship between literature and romance, Niamh Baker notes that Taylor's novel, and Brookner's I would add, show

> [h]ow books can influence our expectations about life itself, and even the way we behave. Would Cassandra ever have fallen for Marion Vanbrugh if she had not read *Jane Eyre* or been influenced by Gothic novels to see something as romantic rather than depressing?' (171)

It is clear that romantic fiction has had a marked influence on the expectations of love that Brookner's heroines share, and on occasion leaves them disappointed as their lives fail to replicate the novels that they enjoy.

In *A Start in Life* Ruth declares that 'her life had been ruined by literature' (7) and traces the beginning of this ruination to her introduction to romance when she was a child, when, 'at an unremembered moment in her extreme infancy, she had fallen asleep, enraptured, as her nurse breathed the words, "Cinderella shall go to the ball." The ball had never materialised'(7).[59] Rachel, the protagonist of Brookner's seventh novel, *A Friend from England*, also notes her feeling that 'romantic love is usually fatal, and not for the reason given by the heroine on stage. And if one embarks on it one must be prepared for a state which is very nearly all loss' (173). As Edith explains, however, regarding the readers of her romance novels, the myth of the tortoise and the hare continues to appeal to the modern woman despite its falsity. In her study of women's fiction in the postwar period, Baker explores the role of the lover in novels such as Elizabeth Jane Howard's *The Long View* (1956), and Nancy Mitford's *The Blessing* (1951) and *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), noting the function of the male protagonist as 'the lover as death', 'the dream lover' and 'the unattainable lover'. She highlights the heroines' difficulty in identifying what kind of lover the men they are connected to actually are, and significantly notes that literature and its 'gallery of fictional lovers' (30) often proves to be their only guide – something which the experiences of many of Brookner's characters show to be the case. Highlighting the divided nature of Brookner's women, and returning to the theme of vice and virtue, what is striking about her characters is the way in which they grapple with how best to act – in accordance with what is expected of them or in line with their own desires? It is Edith who articulates

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[59] In a 2011 article for the *Guardian*, entitled 'Girls, pick your bedtime reading with care', Samantha Ellis discusses how their reading material can affect girls' expectations of life. In an effort to see whether the characters she had read about in her childhood had been appropriate role models, Ellis 'reread the books I'd read as a girl, the books that shaped my ideas of how to be a woman, to see if I'd always chosen the wrong role models. To see what I'd learned from the books, to see whether they'd misled me' (par. 2). Her selection included L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) – 'directly responsible for me feeding my sandwiches to ducks in the hope of getting Scarlett's 17-inch waist' (par. 4), Ellis explains – and Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* (1948).

the question that runs through many of Brookner's novels: 'what kind of behaviour most becomes a woman?' (40).

In *Hotel du Lac*, Edith explains to her editor the nature of the romantic power dynamic that her writing depicts. It is the 'mouse-like unassuming girl' (27) who gets the hero in her novels, not the 'scornful temptress' with whom he has had an affair but ultimately 'retreats baffled from the fray, never to return' (27). In the race of romance, to use an analogy that Edith herself employs, it is the tortoise who wins in Edith's novels, not the hare.[60] The simple reason for this, she explains, is that it is the 'mouse-like' girl who actually reads Edith's novels – the temptresses do not have the time – and who is in need of consolation because in reality, the tortoise always loses to the hare:

> The hare is always convinced of his own superiority; he simply does not recognise the tortoise as a worthy adversary. That is why the hare wins […] in life, I mean. Never in fiction. At least not in mine. The facts of life are too terrible to go into in my kind of fiction. And my readers are essentially virtuous. And as far as they are concerned – as far as I am concerned – those multi-orgasmic girls with the executive briefcases can go elsewhere. They will be adequately catered for. (28)

Whilst the figures of the tortoise and hare are only spoken of directly in *Hotel du Lac*, they are present metaphorically in the majority of Brookner's novels, as her quiet, largely unassuming female protagonists are pitted against strident 'go-getters'. Contrary to the format of Edith's novels and her insistence that the hare never wins in fiction, however, as the reader consumes Brookner's novels they witness the repeated disappointments of her mouse-like characters as they are thwarted regularly, and with surprisingly little effort, by harder and more savvy, less romantic or idealistic, women.

We are told in the opening paragraph of *A Misalliance* that Blanche Vernon's husband of twenty years, Bertie, has left her 'for a young woman with a degree in computer sciences' (5). The novel portrays Blanche's attempts to fill her time and restructure her life in the aftermath of her divorce, as she lingers in the mornings, trying to use up some of the time that stretches before her; 'she calculated that she could spend up to an unwanted hour every morning by simply putting herself to rights, and producing a pleasing effect to lavish on the empty day' (7). She goes to the National Gallery two and sometimes three times per week, and addresses herself 'to the business of shopping, or buying an evening newspaper' (9). Blanche is described as a 'woman who bore no malice' (17), and her lack of resentment

[60] Brookner's use of the tortoise and the hare fable as a metaphor for two different kinds of women is perhaps a reference to Elizabeth Jenkins's novel *The Tortoise and the Hare* (1954; reprinted by Virago in 1983). Beauman, who wrote Jenkins's obituary in September 2010, says that this book is one of the 'outstanding novels of the postwar period' and explains that 'it is about a gentle, submissive, gullible woman whose arrogant, worldly husband leaves her for someone strong and manipulative, but otherwise perfectly unprepossessing' (par. 5). The thematic overlap between Jenkins's novel and those such as *A Misalliance* by Brookner is clear.

towards her unfaithful husband extends not only to taking responsibility for the separation, but also to volunteering to move out of the home they shared. Even after they have been separated for a year Blanche continues to organise her day around Bertie's activities – 'she still thought in terms of Bertie's calling in, as sometimes he did' (15) – and tries to assuage any difficulty or unease he might feel. Blanche supposes that her husband 'got bored with my being sensible all the time' (17), and indeed it seems to be Mousie's (the girl whom Bertie left Blanche for) emotional indulgence to which Bertie is attracted. The novel explains that 'Bertie, used to the calm unemotional woman whom Blanche had become, had been enchanted by the petulance, the self-assurance, and the shamelessness of Mousie' (27). Blanche volunteers at the hospital whilst Mousie lunches in wine bars; like the tortoise and the hare, they are positioned in opposition to each other, and it is the hare who has won the man.

Although for the reader, characters like Mousie are greatly unappealing in their arrogance and selfishness, taking advantage of others who are less confident or more moral than themselves, Brookner's quiet female protagonists are often attracted to their 'glamorous' badly behaved counterparts and, on occasions, go to great lengths to be with them. Whilst volunteering at the hospital, Blanche meets Sally Beamish and her stepdaughter Elinor ('Nellie'). Sally displays few admirable qualities from that first meeting onwards – her attitude is casual and her body languid, she will take anything that is offered and always thinks that she deserves more – but Blanche is still drawn to her, comparing her to the nymphs that she sees in paintings at the National Gallery: those nymphs 'with their pearls and their golden hair, their patrician smiles […] had mocked her own exclusion from their world of love and pleasure' (10). Yet, the time that she spends looking after Nellie, Sally's stepdaughter, and the money that she leaves for the pair in the kitchen go largely unacknowledged. Similarly, in *A Start in Life* Ruth pays for coffees and lunches for Jill and Hugh, the English couple whom she meets in the Louvre in Paris. After Hugh takes her shopping for new clothes, overhauling her timid look, the reader is told that:

> [h]e was usually short of [money] and quite happy to let her pay for the coffees or lunches they would have to conclude the purchase of yet another improvement. Feeling that she was being disloyal to Jill by spending so much time with Hugh, Ruth would insist on taking them both out to dinner or to an enormous lunch that occupied most of Sunday afternoon. (98)

Ruth spends her money on this couple in exchange for being allowed to be close to them, to be influenced by what she regards as their glamour and good taste. In reality it is this couple's opportunism that allows them to overcome their ultimate indifference towards her.

In *Look at Me*, too, Fanny knows that she would have to pay for the company of the glamorous and obnoxious couple Alix and Nick Fraser 'with the surrender of all my time' (71) and 'salved' her consciousness regarding wanting to spend so much time with Alix 'by doing bits of shopping for her, and of course I insisted on paying when we went to the restaurant' (52). Whilst Alix is cruel to Fanny – dismissing her friend Olivia as a cripple, and intentionally complicating the relationship between Fanny and another character, James, which she had initially encouraged – it is surprising not only that Fanny wants to be near Alix (as being with the Frasers becomes all-consuming) but actually wants to be more like her and to replicate her behaviour. She describes their 'self interest, their appetite' as desirable qualities that she wants desperately to 'cultivate'. 'I must be near those people, I must be like them', she explains, 'they had everything to teach me' (41). Again and again Brookner's mouse-like women – the tortoises of the fable – articulate the disadvantages of being 'good' and their desire to be less virtuous. In *Providence*, Kitty Maule asserts, for example, that

> I do not want to be trustworthy, and safe, and discreet. I do not want to be the one who understands and sympathizes and soothes. I do not want to be reliable […] I do not want to be good at pleasing everybody […] I want to be totally unreasonable, totally unfair, very demanding and very beautiful. (59)

Fanny echoes the connection that Kitty makes here between beauty and unreasonableness in her analysis of Nick's behaviour. Nick, a doctor who passes through the medical library in which Fanny works, makes promises to the people around him that Fanny is aware he has no intention of keeping, and can on occasion be quite rude. Curiously, however, Fanny admits to herself that she is not offended by his behaviour although she is normally 'sensitive to bad manners' (14). This dismissal of the unpleasant aspects of Nick's personality is the result of the glamorous aura that he possesses, and to which, although she recognises its divisiveness, Fanny cannot help but be attracted.

People like Nick have 'admirers, adherents, followers' (14) and Fanny acknowledges that she herself is one of them. She explains:

> Very occasionally, one meets someone who is so markedly a contrast with the general run of people that one's instinctive reaction is one of admiration, indulgence, and, no doubt […] of supplication […] I have noticed that extremely handsome men and extremely beautiful women exercise a power over others which they themselves have no need, or indeed no time, to analyse. (14)

She describes people like Nick and his wife Alix as having a 'sovereignty', and the fortune to behave as they wish, because their appearance absolves them of any obligation to be moral: '[m]atters like worth or merit rarely receive much of their attention, for, with the power of choice which their looks bestow on them, they can change their minds whenever

they care to do so' (14). As the plainer girls, Brookner's characters feel obliged to conform to people's expectations of them and are consumed both by questions of social propriety and the display of good manners, which ironically they simultaneously hold in the greatest regard and rail against, wishing continuously for the luxury of being able to behave badly and the protection against criticism. 'Sometimes I wish it were different', Fanny tells the reader, 'I wish I were beautiful and lazy and spoiled and not to be trusted. I wish, in short, that I had it easier' (19). Like the majority of Brookner's heroines, Fanny is intelligent and accomplished, but it is clear that she would exchange her academic success – for which she appears to have little regard – for the benefits that she considers to accompany being beautiful. The pursuit of scholarship by Brookner's women, and their striving to behave well, appear only to result from their plain appearances. The implication in these novels is that if they were beautiful, as Fanny suggests, they would have no reason to read or to be good at all. They would just enjoy their beauty and the freedom to behave, not as they feel obliged to, but as they would like.

Kitty, Fanny, Blanche, Faye, Ruth and nearly all of the lonely heroines of these novels are in pursuit of love and the comforts that marriage and domesticity appear to yield. Given that it is women like Mousie, Sally, and Alix to whom the male characters are attracted, and who enjoy the lives for which Brookner's protagonists long, it is perhaps unsurprising that behaving well seems so unappealing. It is, after all, the monstrous Alix, not Fanny, who has won Nick and to whom men – including James with whom Fanny has been developing a romantic relationship – are attracted. Writing about the significance of love in the writing of women in the immediate postwar period, Baker notes that the female characters in these novels attach great importance to love, less because of the particulars of the man with whom they are involved, but because of the effect that being in love has on the woman herself; being in love realises a woman's 'full potential'. It can admittedly lead, Baker writes, to her downfall, but 'this does not mean that it is not an ecstatically transforming experience. The writers may be critical of men as lovers, but the emotion of love itself is treated as one of the highlights in a woman's life' (26).

Baker is writing about the novels of Pym and Mitford amongst other authors, but the same can be said of Brookner's fiction in which the search for love, and the acquisition of a partner – often any partner – with whom the heroine can share her life, is a recurring theme. In actual fact, the male characters are largely unappealing – arrogant, dismissive of the protagonists' feelings, inconsiderate – yet ensuring the love of a man still remains the ultimate aim for women like Fanny, over whom the image of the hero of romantic fiction continues to exert a significant influence. Richard, Ruth's initial love interest in *A Start in Life*, is described as 'a prize beyond the expectations of most women […] whose violent

presence makes other men, however superior, look makeshift' (37). Nick in *Look at Me* is portrayed in a similar fashion, as 'everybody's favourite [...] tall and fair, an athlete, a socialite, good-looking, charming: everything you could wish for in a man' (11). And in *Providence* the reader is told that 'although anyone who saw Maurice and Kitty together would have thought them a charming couple, she would have been remarked upon as the luckier of the two, lucky to attract such a man as Maurice' (22). Whilst these men are repeatedly described in ideal terms, it is not the men themselves who are important, but what they represent.

Kitty, for example, thinks 'I simply want to live with someone so that I can begin my life' (58) and Rachel in *A Friend from England* explains, regarding her friend Heather's remarriage, that

> [s]he would, once again, have the status of a married woman [and] eventually she would have children, would bring them home for a visit, and be acclaimed, simply for the fact of having passed the essential test. For that is the test, make no doubt about it. (200)

For Brookner's single women, men symbolise the possibility of the domestic happiness and the social status that comes from being part of a couple, and which continues to elude them. In these novels women's success remains inextricably linked, not to having a career or to living independently, but to the acquisition of a partner and marriage, as I explore further in the next section.

Lonely in London: Freedom, Independence, and the Middle-Class Woman

Rachel is one of the few women in Brookner's novels who actively renounce romance. She describes romantic love as being either 'for the very gullible or the very brave' (173). On her own since the death of her parents, *A Friend from England* details Rachel's increasing embroilment in the dynamics of her accountant Oscar's family who have recently won the lottery. Living alone above a bookshop in which she both works and has a financial share, Rachel enjoys her regular visits to Oscar and his wife Dorrie for dinner, and the couple soon ask her to act as a friend and mentor for their twenty-seven-year-old, overly-indulged, daughter Heather. It is the desire of the whole family, but Dorrie in particular, that Heather should marry and so there is cause for celebration when she becomes engaged to a man called Michael Sandberg. However, after a short marriage Heather and Michael divorce with the suggestion that Michael is homosexual. There are marked differences between the two women. Rachel, the elder of the pair at thirty-two, is an orphan; Heather is the only daughter of two extremely doting parents, who is still asked at twenty-seven whether she is

eating properly. Being by herself, however, has given Rachel maturity and it is this that Oscar and Dorrie hope will rub off on their girlish daughter. 'I was quite aware that Dorrie looked to me, as a true adult, to induct Heather into the finer mysteries of life,' Rachel explains:

> I suppose she thought I might make her a little less amiably incurious, that I might be the cause of her ascending to a self-awareness that would protect her from the wickedness of the world, for they knew that she was still too much of their child. (19)

When Heather fails to return from a trip to Venice because she has fallen in love with an Italian, Rachel agrees to go to Italy and attempt to bring her back to England in a section of the novel reminiscent of E.M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905).[61] The novel concludes with Heather refusing to return home with Rachel; 'Goodbye, Rachel,' she says, 'I'm sorry you've had such a wasted journey' (203). Rachel must return to England and the life that she has chosen, leaving Heather to pursue her relationship.

Where Heather enjoys the apparent pleasures of romance, choosing to embark on a second relationship not long after her divorce, Rachel's home life is a solitary one. However, whilst she acknowledges that there is no one to ask her what she had for lunch, she tells the reader that she is largely happy in the way that she lives her life. With regard to Heather's wedding to Michael, for example, she explains that 'I had no romantic views about marriage, or marriages, nor was I consumed with envy. As far as I was concerned, my life was perfectly balanced and satisfying' (50). She does not romanticise her life as a single woman by implying that it is always exciting – 'life was not all fun, of course; in fact sometimes it was not much fun at all' (50) – but explains that 'it suited me' (50). It is after all, she reminds the reader, the kind of life that she has chosen for herself, one devoid of entanglement or commitments, and where friendships and relationships are largely superficial. Significantly, however, there are suggestions throughout the novel that Rachel's circumstances are the result not only of her choosing, but of her *choice as a feminist*, and that what is perceived to be her 'independence' is nothing other than loneliness.

Whilst appearing to admire Rachel's ability to live alone, and hoping that some of her skills will be transferred to Heather, Dorrie in particular is sure that this independence will ultimately result in profound loneliness for Rachel. '"Rachel is a feminist," Dorrie had once said proudly, introducing me to one of the aunts,' Rachel explains, 'I think she thought me very brave. I think they all did' (68). Dorrie hopes that Heather can learn something from the manner in which Rachel lives, but does not want her to replicate it

[61] The narrative of Forster's first novel is divided between England and Italy. After the death of her husband, Lilia Herriton travels to Italy, under the supervision of Caroline Abbott, a good, quiet girl. Whilst in the town of Monteriano, Lilia becomes engaged to Gino Carella. A member of her husband's family is sent to retrieve Lilia from Italy, but she has already married her fiancé.

because it is considered to be devoid of any romantic relationships. Brookner's heroine explains, for example, regarding what she suspects is Oscar and Dorrie's assumption that she will take care of Heather should anything happen to them:

> My secret life, and what Dorrie referred to as my feminism, cannot have struck them with anything but with pity. They dealt in euphemisms, and while describing me as brave, felt on my behalf all the deprivations of which I was hardly conscious […] This did not bother me. But the idea behind the assumption did. It was as if they knew my emancipation would lead inevitably to lifelong spinsterhood, and that in this capacity […] I would be available for, no, grateful for, any function that would give me a purpose in life. (78)

For Oscar and Dorrie, Rachel's 'emancipation' is not bound up with freedom to act, to make her own decisions, or to earn her own money, but with the failure to have made a successful match and ultimately to live a purposeful life which, it would seem for a woman, is bound up with having a husband and family.

In reality the relationship between Rachel and Heather does not actually exist in any significant way – there is no real sense of friendship between the two – and Rachel is closer to Oscar and Dorrie than to their daughter. Broadly speaking, Rachel and Heather are positioned in opposition to each other throughout the novel, and Rachel herself explains that they 'had nothing in common' (28). Whilst Heather's parents may consider Rachel to be a suitable friend for their daughter, throughout *A Friend from England* Rachel is in fact quite intolerant of this girl, thinking her sheltered, spoiled, and dismissive of the lengths that her parents go to in order to please her. For Rachel, Heather falls into the category of cosseted women who 'do not venture out at night unless suitably accompanied' and are always 'delivered safely to their door afterwards, their escort checking, at their request, the window locks and burglar alarms' (171). As someone who lives alone and takes care of herself – arguably the epitome of the modern girl – Rachel finds such a scenario unthinkable, and those who enjoy such a life 'idle'. She remarks:

> I actually know a woman who lives like this. What is extraordinary is that she is the same age as I am [thirty two], and yet she lives in this time warp, as if she had no idea that this kind of existence is reserved for a dying breed, for women in their late middle or old age. (171)

Rachel is contemptuous of Heather because she feels that her decision to get married is just an excuse for not doing anything else and a refusal to consider other options which would most likely have lead to a greater level of maturity. By getting married, Heather has simply exchanged one guardian (her parents) for another (her husband). She regards marriage and romantic entanglements as Heather's 'abandonment of a self that might have matured into just the sort of independence that the self reliant woman must attain. After all, we are all committed to this now' (172). Marriage is equated here with protection for women, and Rachel makes it clear that as a single woman she relies on nobody other than herself,

fulfilling the criteria for the emancipated woman as set out by feminism. 'I had cut my losses early,' she tells the reader. 'I had made myself invulnerable and found that I was free' (105). Free, however, from what? Free, it would appear, from both the demands and pleasures of domestic life.

In Brookner's fiction, feminism is presented as inherently anti-domestic. Aside from Brookner's quiet romantic heroines, such as Kitty, Blanche, and Fanny, her novels depict a number of other women whose inclinations are more towards work than the home and who are depicted as enjoying the spoils of feminism and dismissing the pleasures of the home in favour of the thrill of the city. Blanche in *A Misalliance* ponders the nature of Mousie, the young woman who has stolen her husband, and thinks about their differing attitudes to marriage and domesticity:

> It was all the more puzzling in that the baby whom she knew Mousie to be was disguised as a young adult woman who earned her living in an adult way and lunched in wine bars with her young upwardly mobile female friends […] Marriage they scorned, thinking of it as the shackle that kept women at home, or at best tired out with being too successful all round […] The talk would be excited, the briefcases parked on an empty chair. (29)

The briefcase features on several occasions throughout Brookner's novels, not simply as a reflection of the high-finance-big-business nature of the 1980s during which she began writing, but as emblematic of a new kind of woman – the *Cosmopolitan* reader as Edith describes her in *Hotel du Lac* – whose priorities are making money and enjoying a luxurious lifestyle, not keeping a house and looking after a family. To return to Edith's metaphor, the power-suited young woman is the hare who stands in opposition to the studiously-dressed tortoises on whom Brookner's fiction centres. However the briefcase is also, I suggest, a symbol of the consequences of feminism in these texts, and the new attitudes to women that were finding expression in the figure of the career woman, who was ubiquitous in this decade. Blanche thinks about what Mousie might say about her. She imagines the girl sitting in a wine bar, saying to her friends, whilst 'flushed with anger', that 'these houseproud women wouldn't be so houseproud if they had to do a day's work' (32). Against these ambitious 'upwardly mobile' women, Brookner's heroines appear old-fashioned and unnecessarily focused on the home when there are a multitude of other opportunities available to women.

Brookner's single characters may have jobs, and the option of enjoying the apparent benefits of the independence that feminism has afforded them, but they are repeatedly shown to be living alone and unhappily in rented flats and hotels, devoid of the comfort that they experience in the homes of others. In *A Start in Life*, Ruth's lodgings in Paris are basic. Her bedsit has an electric kettle, and there is a lavatory next door (though

this is largely used as storage for her landlord's wine collection), and her bathing facilities consist of a bath in the flat below which she can only use if she goes down at six o'clock for a quarter of an hour. When Rachel, in *A Friend from England*, is ill, her flat above the bookshop is described in equally depressing terms. Lying in bed with flu she explains that

> I remember spending obscure and submissive afternoons in my small living-room, conscious of the dust I was too weak to displace, feeling subdued and sad as I contemplated the unlovely corners of what had always seemed to me to be a perfectly adequate flat. The iron smell of the over-efficient central heating was in my nostrils as I sat all day, waiting for darkness to fall so that I could prepare for bed. (96)

Rachel later describes her lodgings as 'a flat to get out of rather than one to stay in' (123). It is unsurprising, therefore, that she enjoys spending time having dinner in the comfort of Oscar and Dorrie's home.

Feminism in Brookner's novels is something that, whilst admirable in theory, fails to take into account the need of many women – significantly whether they consciously recognise it or not – for domesticity. Whilst advocating the independent life, and looking witheringly at Heather's childish dependence on her parents and her inclination towards marriage and domesticity, Rachel does admit that she looked forward to a time when she would have her own house and hints at her attraction to Oscar and Dorrie's homely setup, noting how she was able to 'regress comfortably and safely in their welcoming presence' (63) – a relief to her after being 'grown up' all week (63). It is during her confinement to the flat that Rachel begins to recognise the gaps in her existence and she explains that 'recovery from this little illness filled me suddenly with a distaste for my life. It was all unsatisfactory: my home, my work, my "prospects"' (96). Rachel does not reveal what she considers her prospects to be, but presumably she begins to share Dorrie's opinion at this point that she is likely to end up as a lonely spinster, and that she should perhaps look more favourably at a comfortable and secure domestic scenario: 'I looked forward to a time when I would occupy a little house with a garden and have people to tea' (34). Indeed it is suggested that even the briefcase-wielding city girls – 'who are to be found on the city streets early in the morning, tapping their way along the pavement in the sort of high-heeled shoes that are supposed to go with attainment' (*A Friend from England*, 171) – harbour a secret desire for domesticity which they feel, arguably because of feminism, unable to express. Rachel explains:

> Among my friends I have noticed one or two wilting under the strain, however brave and resolute they are in pursuit of their own form of fulfilment, the kind we are told to value these days. These are the ones who would secretly have been happier sitting at home listening to *Woman's Hour* [...] For such women I would decree a dear little house, in some established suburb, and a leisurely walk to the shops with a basket over one arm, and an afternoon with one's feet

up on the sofa, reading a magazine. (171)

Rachel presents her own (and her friends') apparent rejection of domesticity in favour of feminism, as a choice, but there are hints that it has in fact been made out of obligation. She talks of work as the type of independence that 'we are *told* to value these days' [emphasis mine] and talks of independence as something that 'we are *all committed to* […] now' [emphasis mine] (172). This independence is not presented as something that is particularly enjoyable either. It is not the freedom to go wherever you like, or to dictate your own timetable, or to be free of the obligation to compromise. Rather, it constitutes the ability to deal with the unpleasant aspects of life alone, and Rachel acknowledges that this seems 'a high price to pay' (139). She explains that women can now 'open the door cheerfully to strangers at any hour, deal with obscene telephone calls, and mend fuses. It has never occurred to me to wish that someone else would do the locking up, leaving me free to water the plants or make a last hot drink' (139). Contrary to what she implies, the path that Rachel has taken through life does not seem to be one that she has chosen, but one which she has felt obliged to pursue. She lives alone and is independent not because this is what she wants to do, but because it is what she feels is expected of the modern woman living in the wake of the second wave of feminism.

Throughout the novel, Rachel's position on marriage and homemaking appears largely consistent. On closer inspection, however, there are a few very brief references to an event in Rachel's past that raises doubt about the authenticity of her belief in female independence and her disdain for women who succumb to the romance of men and marriage. She hints that there are parts of her life of which even the reader is unaware, that there are things that have occurred off-page. She comments about the ease with which she can cut ties with others, 'as many people have found out in their time' (*A Friend from England*, 78), and mentions early in the novel that there are 'affairs that I keep quiet about' (62). As the novel begins to draw to an end, however, the reason why Rachel lives alone is revealed, and she is shown to be, not an unreliable narrator, but one with hidden motives in terms of her pronouncements about women's lives and their relationships with men. She does not live alone because of a commitment to the idea of women's independence. She has been disappointed in love. 'I wanted to get married once,' she explains to Heather as she tries to persuade her to return to England, 'of course I did. But he was married, and nobody made it easy for me. Yes, I thought like you once. I wanted the same things. But since then […] well, he taught me a lot' (157). Rachel's comments here raise some very important points, the first of which relates to Brookner's heroines more broadly. I noted earlier that Brookner's protagonists are generally quiet women. Whilst this is largely the case – her heroines rarely do anything untoward – there are occasions in some of her

novels, including *A Start in Life*, *Brief Lives*, *A Friend from England*, and most obviously *Hotel du Lac*, where it is suggested that, contrary to their reputations as respectable women, there are aspects of the characters that the reader is only allowed to glimpse, and that they have sometimes behaved in a non-virtuous fashion – primarily in terms of their relationships with men. So, for example, Edith is at the Swiss hotel after having an affair with a married man; in *Brief Lives* Faye has an affair with her friend Julia's husband after her own has been killed in a car crash; and in *A Start in Life* Ruth has an affair with a married lecturer as well as Hugh, whom she meets with his wife in the Louvre.

Rachel's comments also suggest that what she professes to feel, both to those around her and to the reader – ambivalence to romance, verging on a complete dismissal – is at odds with her true feelings, and that her reasons for living alone are perhaps based primarily round a fear of loss rather than any commitment to feminism. By the end of the novel Rachel has almost entirely renounced her resistance to domesticity and her commitment to the single life. Not only does she fail to bring Heather home from Venice, leaving her with the Italian man with whom she has fallen in love, but it is Heather who has a profound effect on Rachel, drawing her attention to the pleasures of sharing life with someone:

> Without a face opposite mine the world was empty; without another voice it was silent. I foresaw a future in which I would always eat too early, the first guest in empty restaurants, after which I would go to bed too early and get up too early, anxious to begin another day in order that it might soon be ended. I lacked the patience or the confidence to invent a life for myself, and would always be dependent on the lives of others. (204)

Independence is portrayed here not as a positive facet of life – as freedom from the unpleasant nature of obligation – but as something which will, ironically, lead to a dependence on others, and a hopeful reliance on the fact that somebody will take them in. At the end of the novel readers are left to assume that, like Ruth, Faye, and Edith – who changes the words 'coming home' on a telegram simply to 'returning', in acknowledgement of the lonely domestic scenario to which she is going back – Rachel continues to live her life alone.

In many respects, Brookner's heroines are the beneficiaries of second-wave feminism. Like their author, they are all educated (often to the highest degree), employed, and consequently able to earn their own income. They can afford to live alone and travel, and they are free to come and go as they please. Yet, for these women this freedom seems to be an unwanted burden of which, they imply, they would like to be free. Whilst independence from men may be desirable according to feminism, for Brookner's heroines the consequence of being independent is having to continually find things to fill one's own

life and the void that is left when a man or possibly a family is removed. Pondering her new position as a divorced woman in *A Misalliance*, Blanche Vernon explains:

> This is what they call freedom, these days, thought Blanche, as she grilled her sole. Freedom to please myself, to go anywhere, do anything. Freedom from the demands of family, husband, employer; freedom not to pay social calls; freedom not to play any sort of role. And I dare say some people might want it, since it is supposed to be the highest good. That is they may want it theoretically, but […] if one is not very careful, freedom can come to mean there being no good reason for getting up in the morning, becoming ridiculously dependent on the weather, developing odd little habits, talking to oneself, and not having interesting conversations with anyone else. (20)

An academic career, a job in the library, a flat to oneself, or the option to eat out at will, are poor substitutes, Brookner's novels imply, for the company afforded by marriage or the comforts of a pleasant, well-ordered home. In Brookner's fiction, feminism does not result in liberation from oppression or restriction, but in an undesirable freedom from what her heroines regard as the most positive aspects of life – close connections with other people, responsibility, and (primarily male) companionship. The solidarity of other single women is considered little consolation, and is often regarded with disdain by Brookner's women who continuously reiterate their preference for male company.[62] In fact, other women are treated with little sympathy indeed.

It is strange, therefore, that in light of their dismal depiction of the single life, Brookner's novels repeatedly show the radical extent to which the reality of marriage and life at home for women departs from the ideal that in other respects the novels simultaneously endorse. In *Hotel du Lac* Edith refuses to give up on romance and the hope that she will find someone with whom to spend her life, but the man in whom she continues to place her confidence – David – is far from the image of the romantic hero. If anything, the inclusion of his character successfully undermines the entire notion of the happy ending and the bliss of togetherness because he is after all being unfaithful to his wife by having an affair with Edith in the first place. In *Brief Lives*, Faye's husband Owen fails to fully appreciate the domestic comforts she provides, and she acknowledges regarding the extreme love she felt for him at the beginning of their marriage that

> [l]ove of this calibre is not easy to sustain or to prolong, largely because it is unrealistic, and in a sense inauthentic. Love is not the awesome prize I once thought it was but a much more daily commodity, penny plain rather than tuppence coloured (56).

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[62] The lack of female solidarity between Brookner's heroines is widely recognised. In *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness* (2010), for example, author Candia McWilliam uses Brookner's characters as a reference point when discussing relationships between women. She writes: 'I didn't subscribe to the Anita Brookner theory that no woman is loyal to other women when it comes to men, and I still don't; though I do believe that female institutions are nastier than male ones, very possibly on account of something like the Brookner-drag.' (246)

The sanctity of marriage is undermined further when Fay begins an affair with Julia's husband, Charlie.

Returning to the theme of love, and the overlap between Brookner's novels and romance fiction which I noted earlier, success for Brookner's women is inextricably linked to acquiring a home, and finding someone with whom to share it. Yet, whilst on the one hand these texts advocate a belief in romance, and resist the notion that women are better alone, the portraits of domesticity that they depict are ironically bleak and far from ideal. This idea of the ambiguous nature of Brookner's writing as neither wholly one thing nor another ultimately brings this discussion of her novels in terms of the middlebrow back to where it began at the start of this chapter. It is perhaps the conflicting nature of these texts in terms of their themes – what appears to be their inherent contradictions as neither feminist, nor anti-feminist, neither romantic, nor cynical – that has made it difficult to establish their position and engage with them critically. In *Art and Life in the Novels of Anita Brookner* (2004) Williams-Wanquet argues that Brookner's fiction may be more feminist than has been acknowledged, precisely because of the contradictions that it displays. Brookner's 'fundamentally ambivalent heroine rejects the way of life both of women of the fifties and of the eighties, refusing to be a victim either of "inordinate license" or of stifling "good manners"' (57). On the surfaces of their lives, her characters enjoy many of the successes of feminism, yet they have an apparently unshakeable internal belief in the importance of femininity as opposed to feminism, resulting in a gap between how they think they are supposed to feel as liberated women, and how they feel in reality; between how they want to live and how they actually do. It is with how this gap is to be bridged, I suggest, that her novels are ultimately concerned. In many respects they charge feminism with the task of altering women's internal lives – the inclinations towards romance that Brookner's women have absorbed, and bring to bear on their everyday lives almost unknowingly.

Brookner's own relationship with feminism is somewhat fraught. She does not identify herself as a feminist and famously argued in an interview with John Haffenden that one would have to 'be crouching in [a] burrow' to see her novels as feminist (70). Yet, it is clear that these novels do engage with issues that are of central importance to feminism and contain discussions of the changing nature of women's roles, and their attitudes to them, which are pertinent to the analysis and subsequent development of feminist thought. Stetz argues that

> [w]hile Brookner shows confidence in her audience as a whole, she repeatedly excludes one category of woman reader from her good will. 'Feminists', she appears to believe, must be hostile to her work and she must be hostile in return, throwing down the gauntlet to them both in her published remarks to

journalists and in her fiction. (98)

Unlike Stetz, however, I argue that rather than excluding feminist readers, Brookner's novels are important because of their ambiguous attitude towards feminism and its relative successes and failures. This is an attitude which, I contend, is central to the relationship between feminism and the contemporary middlebrow novel.

Conclusion

Both Brookner's work and the perception of her as an author are highly pertinent both to any discussion of the contemporary middlebrow novel, and to debates about how notions of literary worth and value circulate in contemporary culture. Her simultaneous position as the (unsatisfactory) winner of the Booker Prize and an author of romantic fiction, for example, makes Brookner an invaluable figure when considering how the middlebrow exists in relation to the categories of the literary and the popular. The criticism generated by *Hotel du Lac* winning the Booker deftly illustrates the way in which the middlebrow novel destabilises cultural boundaries and can provoke anxiety in literary critics, reviewers, and other arbiters of taste alike. Not only do her novels fail to adhere to the expected standards of literary fiction – their perceived similarity, their focus on romance, and the regularity of production have aligned them with genre fiction – but they are similarly inconsistent in relation to the usual characteristics of romantic fiction, in their rejection of the traditional happy ending. As a result Brookner occupies a significantly liminal position in the literary matrix, neither absorbed fully into the literary canon nor considered solely in relation to popular genre fiction.

Brookner's writing reveals the contemporary middlebrow novel to be a highly self conscious form, and one infused with a profound level of metafictional references. Through their depiction of authors such as Edith in *Hotel du Lac*, Brookner's novels explore the relationship between the writer and her work, paying attention to the influence of the marketplace, and the status of different kinds of writing on a hierarchy of respectability, and exploring the creative act of writing itself. In doing so, however, they simultaneously demonstrate an awareness of and comment on how Brookner's own work has been perceived. Her fiction is acutely aware of its own position in relation to other kinds of literature and within the broader cultural marketplace – a key characteristic of the contemporary middlebrow novel. These novels depict not only the relationship between the novel and its author, but also between fiction and its readers. Readers and reading institutions feature frequently within these narratives, and the novels' metafictional status is

reflected in the regularity with which the reader of Brookner's novels finds herself reading about a character who is also enjoying a novel. Highlighting the position of the middlebrow novel as a form with several different reading positions inscribed within it, Brookner's writing provides extensive commentary on the process and purpose of reading.

The novels considered in this chapter acknowledge the role of reading as part of a process of acquiring and displaying cultural capital, and as the focus of academic study. Significantly, however, they also explore the importance of reading for pleasure, which has been regarded as being of secondary importance to the consumption of literature for self-improvement. Depicting readers enjoying genre fiction in particular, to which Brookner's writing has itself been likened, these novels acknowledge concerns about the effects of different kinds of fiction on its readers, and the connection between reading and the construction and maintenance of an individual's identity – an identity that is often inextricably linked to issues such as class, profession, and intellect. In *Lewis Percy*, the solace Lewis finds in his mother's library books after her death is quickly replaced by discomfort about what he considers to be the dissonance between his reading material and his role as an academic. Similarly, in *Brief Lives*, Julia's enjoyment of popular fiction is inconsistent with Faye's perception of what an upper-middle-class woman should be reading. Of course, it is the maintenance of strict cultural boundaries in terms of both the relationship between different kinds of literature and different types of reader that the contemporary middlebrow novel problematises. The reader of the middlebrow novel is one whose enjoyment of literature encompasses a variety of different kinds of writing, and the middlebrow novel, as Brookner's fiction illustrates, partakes of a range of different reference points which have their origin in both high- and popular culture.

In terms of characters, Brookner's women display both a profound concern about the changing nature of society and the role of women. They are apprehensive about feminism's influence on the modern woman, and the effect that it has had on women's relationship with men and the home. These women are educated, middle class, and often financially independent. Yet, whilst they recognise that a status such as theirs is desirable in the 1980s, in the aftermath of second-wave feminism, their desire remains for the love of a partner and the stability and status of marriage and domesticity. Novels including *A Friend from England* and *Providence* display a cynicism about the extent to which feminism is compatible with women's emotional lives, and suggest that a gap exists between what women are encouraged to value – their independence – and their inner desire for romance and domesticity. This questioning of how the tenets of feminism are consistent with the reality of women's everyday lives is a recurring feature of women's middlebrow writing of

the past thirty years, and will be discussed further in the next chapter on the fiction of Joanna Trollope.

Chapter Two

'There is a huge difference between being good and being great': Joanna Trollope and the Aga-saga

The Aga-saga: Popular Phenomenon and Quality Product

In this chapter I build on the previous discussion of genre fiction to consider the work of Joanna Trollope in relation to the contemporary middlebrow novel. Trollope's literary career began in the early 1980s when she published a series of historical novels under the pseudonym Caroline Harvey. It is her later novels, however, which include *The Choir* (1988), *A Village Affair* (1989), and *A Passionate Man* (1990), for which she is most noted, and with which this chapter is concerned. Often set in the country and focused on family life amongst the middle classes, these novels have attracted the label 'Aga-saga' and Trollope is commonly regarded as the 'doyenne' of this genre (Craig, 'Second Honeymoon', par. 1). Author and journalist Terence Blacker claims to have invented the label when discussing Trollope's fiction in a column in *Publishing News*, after which the term entered popular consciousness and became widely used.[63] Colin Bulman describes the Aga-saga as a 'spin-off' from the family saga which commonly chronicles events in the lives of a family over several generations. He explains that the Aga-saga

> [t]ends to cover a shorter period in the life of its characters and rather than being about distinctive families, the Aga-saga may concern itself with a cross section of a community, usually a rural community. The name 'Aga-saga' refers to the fact that the characters are usually middle class, reasonably affluent, and may well have an Aga cooker. (94)[64]

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[63] Blacker notes, regarding his column, that 'I had passed comment on this new kind of fiction which Trollope was writing […] A few days later, someone in the national press picked up on the phrase and soon, by the mysterious process by which the modern media works, the phrase "Aga-saga" was being used by publishers, bookshops and journalists' (par. 5-6).

[64] The Aga is a stored-heat stove and cooker, invented by Nobel Prize-winning physicist Gustaf Dalen in 1929. Ironically for a product that has become synonymous with English domesticity, and is a consistent feature of country houses, Dalen was in fact Swedish. The Aga costs thousands of pounds to purchase and has remained consistently popular amongst the middle- and upper classes. The 2008 recession did have an impact on the company's profits, which saw orders fall by 15% on the previous year despite an advertising campaign aimed at making the Aga popular amongst a young, urban demographic (Jones, par. 2). In 2009 it was reported that their profits had halved ('Aga feels the heat', par. 1). The Aga was also at the centre of a row in 2009 about climate change as George Monbiot waged a war on the stove on environmental grounds. He said that arguments from primarily middle-class groups that patio heaters and cheap flights (used, it was purported, primarily by working-class consumers) were to blame for rising levels of CO2 failed to account for the CO2 output of a product like the Aga which is bought primarily by the middle classes. In fact, Monbiot states, an Aga produces 35% more than the total CO2 production of the average UK home. He maintained therefore that arguments about climate change consequently had their roots in class divisions as opposed to facts.

A female protagonist, of early middle age, is often at the centre of the Aga-saga, the narrative of which tends to revolve around her feelings and experiences of family life. The Aga-saga is focused almost exclusively on traditional feminine preoccupations and activities – homemaking, cooking, taking care of husband and children – and is as a consequence regarded as a woman's genre.

My reason for including Trollope in this study of the contemporary middlebrow novel is that her work uncomfortably straddles the categories of popular and middlebrow fiction, and with the publication of each novel has come a significant amount of discussion about the literary nature of her writing. Whilst Trollope's fiction contains romantic elements, and has achieved bestseller status in some instances, it is not regarded as lowbrow in the sense of the Mills & Boon novels. Instead, it occupies a complex position, traversing the upper end of the lowbrow and blurring into the middlebrow; in this respect, to refer back to the Introduction of this thesis, my consideration of Trollope's writing constitutes a bottom-up approach to the middlebrow from the popular. The novels considered in this chapter have a clear affiliation with romance fiction, but, unlike Anita Brookner, Trollope's image as a romantic novelist has not been mitigated by any formal recognition of other literary qualities. Trollope has won neither the Booker Prize nor any of the other major literary prizes.[65] Her work shares some common ground with genre fiction, and has been perceived as somewhat formulaic. Equally, Trollope's style of writing and use of dialogue in particular have been criticised. In a review of *Other People's Children* (1998), one of Trollope's later novels, Sylvia Brownrigg, for example, comments on the author's use of cliché – 'this is a prose in which people "cry buckets" and "shoot quick glances"' – and notes that the novel contains 'slack passages' (par. 6).[66] In an *Observer* review of *Marrying the Mistress* (2000), in which she describes Trollope's work as 'banal', 'anodyne' and 'platitudinous', Stephanie Merritt asks 'what is the point of Joanna Trollope novels? The plot of her latest involves [...] extra-marital liaisons, fraught filial relationships and the

[65] Trollope won Romantic Novel of the Year in 1980 for *Parson Harding's Daughter* (1980). The award recognises 'the very highest standards of romantic fiction and each year attracts bestselling authors from around the world [...] The Romantic Novel of the Year Award was inaugurated in 1960 to recognise excellence in romantic novels and enhance the standing of the genre. Any novel that is first published in the UK (or simultaneously with other countries) during the year is eligible.' Trollope was also awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Romantic Novelists Association in 2011. The Romantic Novelists Association states that 'in the world of literary prizes there are precious few that are given out to the backroom staff [...] Equally, there are few prizes for books whose sole purpose is to entertain. Genre fiction, which does this unashamedly, tends to get more brickbats than gongs – although the sales figures for crime, romance and other popular genres remain satisfyingly large. With the RNA's Lifetime Achievement Awards we can formally and publicly honour these people who have done their best to promote romantic fiction through their writing, or by supporting the RNA and our authors' ('RNA Awards').

[66] Brownrigg is an American author who has written four novels and a collection of short stories. Her fourth novel, *The Delivery Room* (2006), won the 2009 Northern California Book Award in fiction.

minutiae of family life, renders them utterly banal and manages to stretch this banality to fill 311 pages' (par. 1).

Yet, in spite of this kind of criticism, Trollope's oeuvre has acquired a level of literary respectability that has nudged her novels into the middlebrow and served to position them above their other popular romantic counterparts. It is the achievement of this respectability that I focus on in this chapter. She has been a judge on literary prize panels, and has recently been appointed chair of the Orange Prize in 2012.[67] Her work has been praised by literary authors and she appears regularly at literary festivals.[68] Indeed, in 2005 Salman Rushdie spoke of his affection for Trollope during an interview with *The Times*:

> 'Joanna's very cool,' Rushdie says, 'and so smart, and I thought, "I'm going to go away and read all her books." [He's just bought *Other People's Children*]. She for me was the great discovery of the festival because we had so much fun together'. (Dougray, par. 7)

Her writing is reviewed in broadsheet newspapers, and as Deborah Philips observes, a number of Trollope's novels have been 'televised for the BBC, with all the production values of a "classic serial" and costs of established actors' (*Women's Fiction*, 100).[69] Much has also been made in interviews of both her Oxford education and the family connection between Trollope and the Victorian author Anthony Trollope, whose series of novels, including the *Chronicles of Barsetshire*, were extremely popular in the mid-nineteenth century.[70] Whilst the connection between Joanna and Anthony is in fact distant – she is a fifth-generation niece – their writing does share an interest in cathedral towns, the

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[67] In 2003, Trollope was a judge for the Whitbread first novel prize. In June 2011, she also presented cheques worth £76,000 for prizes awarded by the Society of Authors.

[68] The literary festival, a postwar phenomenon, was established in Cheltenham in 1949, and Robert McCrum asserts 'really boomed after the launch of Hay in 1988' ('Talk is Cheap', par. 2). McCrum argues that, although estimates vary, 'there are some 250 arts and book festivals in the UK promoting the buzz of live authorship' ('Talk is Cheap', par. 3).

[69] A feature-length adaptation of *A Village Affair* (starring Claire Bloom, Sophie Ward and Kerry Fox) was shown on ITV, in addition to a five-part BBC serialisation of *The Choir*, written by Trollope's husband Ian Curtis featuring Jane Asher and James Fox. These adaptations are consistent in many respects with the production values and thematic concerns of what has become known as the 'heritage film' – exemplified by the work of the Merchant Ivory team – whose popularity had been increasing at a rapid rate since the 1980s. The heritage film often depicts a particular vision of England and Englishness which is bound up with class, landscape, and nostalgia for simpler times. The heritage film is targeted at a largely middle-class audience, and is considered to be a 'quality' cinematic product. It is for the same audience, and with the same hope of producing a quality product, that I argue adaptations of Trollope's novels were intended.

[70] The *Chronicles of Barsetshire* is a series of six novels which focus on the clergy and gentry. They include *The Warden* (1855), *Barchester Towers* (1857), *Doctor Thorne* (1858), *Framley Parsonage* (1861), *The Small House at Allington* (1864), and *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867). Significantly, Anthony experienced some of the same sorts of criticism as Joanna with regard to subject matter, the domestic topics of the Barset series, and publishing too quickly. He was often held up as inferior to the 'real' novelists of the time such as Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins.

behaviour of the clergy, and social observation, and the comparison with her ancestor's work has served to bolster her reputation as a more literary author.

Trollope herself – who has interjected in debates about her own writing and has been quoted as having a 'keen sense of her own place in the body of English literature' (Dickinson, par. 21) – simply describes her novels as 'good' and as successful capturing of the zeitgeist. In a conversation with author Will Self in 2002, she explained that

> I think [the novels are] good, with distinct weaknesses, and sometimes I think I have a flash of insight. But there's a huge difference between being good and being great. It's very difficult to know, isn't it, looking at our contemporaries, who will emerge as great […] I think the odd John Fowles will. Penelope Fitzgerald I think will, but I'm under absolutely no illusion about where I fit. I'm right for these times; I've got a kind of acuteness about contemporary relationships that's right for now, but it's not going to be right for ever. (Self, par. 7)

Trollope does not make a claim for 'literariness' on behalf of her novels. With regard to comparisons between herself and other female authors, such as Jane Austen, she again invokes the language of value, and once more draws attention to the good/great distinction. She explained that, 'there is a huge gulf between being great and being good. I know exactly which category I fall into and which she falls into' ('You Ask the Questions', par. 6). Trollope never explicitly addresses what the requisite characteristics are for a novel to be either 'good' or great'. She describes her writing as 'contemporary accessible fiction' but notes that 'it really isn't for me to add the qualifying adjectives' ('You Ask the Questions', par. 6). There is no indication here as to who should be applying the adjectives, but her comments about the literary awards and establishment, examined below, suggest that it is her readers, not reviewers or critics, who should be doing so. I contend that her delineation between 'good' and 'great' is also connected to audience judgement, and that she sees the worth (or 'goodness') of her novels in terms of reader satisfaction (good) as opposed to the 'greatness' of recognised literary merit.

Regarding this question of reader response, Trollope has commented on what she has identified as the disparagement of reading for pleasure. Commenting on her role as a judge for the Whitbread first novel prize in 2003, she remarked that many of the 'literary' submissions, which critics seemed to favour, were of a type 'that make you want to slash your wrists' (Gibbons, par. 4). 'I read 142 novels in three months', she explained, 'it was enough to put you off reading for life' (Gibbons, par. 5). Trollope cites this 'inherent puritanical strain in the British psyche' which privileges 'worthiness' and self-improvement over pleasure and leads to a guilt about enjoying things, as being responsible for the prejudice against popular fiction: 'Reading shouldn't be this much fun, we think,' she argues, 'Naturally, we are hung up on this, we distrust anything that is readable and fun'

(Gibbons, 'Queens', par. 7). Talking at the *Guardian* Hay Festival in the same year, Trollope inferred that it was the conflation of 'pleasurable' and 'enjoyable' with 'bad' in terms of literature that had led to her novels to be viewed with derision by some literary critics and reviewers.

In this chapter I negotiate these different accounts of Trollope's work – romantic, accomplished or, as Self describes, written by 'a lower middlebrow novelist who has just enough sophistication to be able to convince her readership that they may be getting an upper-middlebrow product' (par. 1). I begin by outlining the context and trends in publishing out of which Trollope's novels emerged, before considering Trollope's fluctuating literary currency in more detail, examining her writing in relation to romance novels, women's magazines, and, most significantly, the novel of manners. I propose that it is on account of the overlap between much of Trollope's writing and the novel of manners – a genre which I connect to the middlebrow – that it has accrued a literary respectability, and in turn has moved her novels beyond the category of popular romantic fiction. Subsequent sections examine the social and political context in which Trollope's novels are embedded, reflecting on conservatism and the nostalgic turn towards country life in the 1980s and 1990s. The final sections of this chapter analyse the representation of gender politics in Trollope's fiction, and consider how these texts are to be received by their readers.

Rarefied Romances: Publishing the Aga-saga and Documenting Domesticity

As noted in my chapter on Brookner's writing, women's commercial fiction in the 1980s was characterised by the 'bonkbuster' or sex and shopping novel. Depicting career-orientated women, with large salaries and a shrewd approach to business, these novels – which often featured 'sexy', provocative images on their gold-foiled covers – spoke to the capitalist and status-driven society of the decade. Fanny Blake notes that

> [t]hroughout this period, publishing lists expanded as they competed for valuable bookshop shelf-space. Women's fiction was booming and now its marketing and, in particular, the cover design began to preoccupy publishers. Each type of fiction had its own quite distinctive look - glamour photography for sex-and-shopping. (par. 9)

Mid-decade, however, as publishing lists became overwhelmed with novels about sexually accomplished and business-minded women, the market dictated that a new kind of fictional genre should emerge. The Aga-saga was this next publishing success, and throughout the 1990s increasing numbers of novels about women's domestic lives in rural contexts

became popular. Blake explains, regarding the trends in women's fiction, that for the last years of the 1990s, it was

> [h]ard to move in a bookshop without falling over a white-bordered B-format novel with watercolour views of the village green – if not a Joanna Trollope, then a convincing lookalike. These novels took us away from the frenzied consumerism of the late '70s and early '80s and reverted to the basics of family life. (par. 10)

The Aga-saga became a huge publishing success. Trollope sold around 500,000 copies per title, and *The Choir*, *A Passionate Man*, *A Village Affair*, *The Men and the Girls* (1992), and *A Spanish Lover* (1993) have been UK bestsellers and translated into 15 languages (Loudon, par. 6). At a time of dwindling hardback sales readers were purchasing two paperbacks from this genre for every single hardback sold (Harris, par. 11). Many publishing houses at this time featured an author writing in the vein of Trollope, and this was a phrase often used on the covers of their novels to assure the reader of a parity of style. David Sexton speaks, in *The Daily Mail*, to Trollope's image as the most successful author in this genre, and the value of her endorsement of a novel:

> [a] few especially favoured scions can actually boast an imprimateur from one of the living traditions herself – Marika Cobbold's *Guppies for Tea* for example has an enthusiastic quote from Joanna Trollope on front and back covers, in case the casual browser should only inspect one side. (par. 3)

Other authors whose novels were marketed in a similar way to Trollope's at that time – arguably on account of their exploration of English country life – included Mary Wesley, Titia Sutherland, Kathleen Rowntree, and Angela Huth.[71]

In terms of genre, Trollope's Aga-saga novels are most often connected to romance. The primary motivating factor of her plots tends to be the heroine's longing for love, according to the traditional structure of romance fiction, but also for a close family; for some recognition of her qualities; for contented domesticity; and even for houses in themselves. A lover is often present, and references to sex are sometimes included, but the main purpose of relationships is to satisfy characters' emotional desires for happiness and self-actualisation, and this is largely achieved through love, as opposed to sexual gratification. Providing an important alternative to Mills and Boon romance novels, for example, the heroines of Trollope's fiction are not single women searching for husbands and the promise of lasting love, but wives and mothers in their thirties, forties and fifties. It

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[71] Trollope has identified the way in which her fiction opened up an alternative type of novel to that which had been on offer in prior decades, noting significantly not only trends in popular fiction but in literary fiction as well. She says of her own novels that 'I think the reason why they're doing so gratifyingly well is that, for the last 25 years, Britain has lacked traditional fiction. During that time, we've probably had some of the best experimental and literary fiction in the history of the novel. We've had some awful, but also some frightfully good, blockbusting fiction, which I think was a product of the 1980s. But what we haven't had is the traditional narrative that diverts, instructs and moves the reader. I suppose I see myself as a [sic] picking up where Galsworthy and Maugham left off' (Dickson, par. 22).

is the space that Trollope's novels allow for the exploration of the life of the mature woman – the wife and mother as opposed to single woman or lover – and consequently their appeal to the middle-aged reader in particular that can also account for their popularity in this period. Jane Shilling notes in *The Stranger in the Mirror* (2011), her memoir of middle age, that

> until the mid-twentieth century [middle-aged women] are an indispensable part of literature. Fiction swarms with them. Plots revolve around them. Younger characters tell them their secrets, court them for the legacies they might bestow, pity them, dread turning into them – and sometimes even marry them. (79)

Yet, she writes, there is a dearth of older women in contemporary fiction. In the aftermath of second-wave feminism, and, Shilling explains, at 'a point in literary history at which women's writing about their lives became richer and bolder' (80), depictions of young, sexually-liberated women were 'not accompanied by an equivalent portrait of a rejuvenated and invigorated generation of middle-aged women' (80). In the 1990s, however, the Aga-saga did something to rectify the absence of older women by including women of several generations – mothers in their forties, grandmothers, widows and spinsters – alongside younger counterparts.[72] Indeed, highlighting the mature focus of these novels, Philips argues that the Aga-saga can be read as 'a form of post-marriage romance, a fiction that promises, unlike the standardised plots of Mills and Boon and Silhouette romance, that marriage need not mean the end of courtship and romance, nor of an independent identity for the heroine' (*Women's Fiction*, 98). Whilst I am unconvinced by the assertion that the heroine is able to pursue her independence once married – I later examine, in fact, how independence is portrayed as incompatible with the responsibilities that come with marriage and children – Philips correctly identifies the emergence in the 1990s of a genre that focused on the more mature woman.

The little research that has been carried out on Trollope emerges out of a renewed interest by feminist critics in romance and other popular 'women's genres'. In *The Progress of Romance* (1986), for example, Jean Radford outlines the 'contempt' felt towards romantic fiction by male literary critics who fail to identify with the novels' female readers, and 'mistaking the thing on the page for the experience itself, they see popular romance as a packaged commodity relaying false consciousness to an essentially passive and foolish reader' (14). Scholars have challenged this perception of the duped female reader, and work

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[72] Significantly Shilling cites Trollope and Brookner as examples of authors who have depicted characters in middle age, though is critical of their portrayal. She cites Brookner's 'fastidious perpetual spinsters' and Edie Boyd, the protagonist of Trollope's *Second Honeymoon*, 'who is driven to the point of madness by empty nest syndrome' (82) and notes that 'the world-view of these women is disturbingly browbeaten: powerlessness is their leitmotif…Nothing in the experience of these defeated or deluded fictional forty- and fiftysomething heroines interested me' (82).

on the romance has considered how readers interact and actively engage with this kind of popular fiction; the enjoyment of the escapism that it can yield; the different sub-genres contained within this broad category; how these novels reflect women's changing status; and whether they always reinforce patriarchy or can be seen to challenge it.[73] Both Philips's (2007) and Janine Liladhar's (2008) work on Trollope is indebted to this reconsideration of popular fiction. Philips places her novels in the genre of 'domestic romance' (a category discussed in the Introduction to this thesis), and Liladhar considers Trollope's fiction in relation to the melodrama. Trollope makes humorous self-reflexive reference to the recognisable nature of the Aga-saga, and its connection with popular romance, in her eighth novel, *Next of Kin* (1996):

> She read a novel that had come bound with a plastic cummerbund to a woman's magazine, a pretty-looking novel, with a white shiny cover showing a bright water-colour of an idealised country kitchen with the door open to a garden beyond and spires of delphiniums and a beehive. The story concerned an unhappy woman moving from the city to the country and finding self-fulfilment there. And a lover. Of course […] a lover. (111)

Not only does this quotation poke fun at the perception that these novels – with their white covers and tasteful watercolour scenes – are interchangeable, it also attests to the perceived connection between the Aga-saga and romance fiction, as well as to its affiliation with women's magazines, particularly those focusing on lifestyle, crafts, homes and gardens.

Certainly many of the reviews of Trollope's fiction are from women's publications (such as *She*, *Woman's Own*, and *Good Housekeeping*) and the details of the houses their middle-class heroines inhabit are extensively described, as if to enable the reader to envisage the type of interior photographs featured in lifestyle magazines and as though the house itself is the object of romantic desire. The houses and their interiors are explicitly middle-class in their arrangements, however, inline with the subject positions of many of their readers. Philips notes that Aga-sagas tend, tellingly, 'to focus on the tastes and concerns of the more upmarket monthly women's magazines […] rather than the more widely selling women's weekly popular magazines' (*Women's Fiction*, 97) The narrator of her second novel, *A Village Affair*, for example, describes the heroine's decorating plans for her new home:

> Pale yellow walls, she had settled on that, white woodwork, strip, sand and polish the floor, scented geraniums along the windowsills, dried hops along the ceiling beams, jars of pulses and spices on the dresser, a rocking chair, patchwork cushions, a cat. (13)

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[73] For more on romance and the female reader see, Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1984) and Jean Radford's *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction* (1986).

In *The Men and the Girls*, Trollope's fifth novel, Julia's preoccupation with interior design is similarly revealed to be bound up with markers of the middle-class tastes of the time:

> They found Church Cottage standing in its acre of orchard and garden, a sixties conversion of a seventeenth-century cottage in which some dated echoes remained, the odd wall of hessian wallpaper, or a stray abandoned curtain after a design by William Morris. Julia was orderly, a planner. The house was reorganized to eighties standards with a careful nod to its seventeenth-century origins, in two years. (30)

The novels share an affiliation with these magazines in that they can be consumed by readers in an aspirational way – with the intention of replicating the domestic styles they depict – or else as a means of escaping the 'mundane' nature of the everyday in favour of a more glamorous version of it presented within the pages of a novel or magazine. I propose, however, that it is this connection to women's magazines (in addition to their affiliation with romance) that has often led these texts to be regarded as being as popular and disposable as the monthly publications, for which their authors often began their careers by writing.

Like some of the material published in these magazines, Trollope's language can take on a confessional quality, and arguably become overly personal at times. Characters' feelings are often intimately described, and while this could be understood as an attempt to engage with the reader, it often results in the privileging of emotional provocation, and ensuring that the feelings of characters are clearly transposed, over literary language or sentence structure. Trollope has commented herself that 'I'm no lyrical stylist, you wouldn't pick me for a perfect sentence, and I certainly wouldn't describe my novels as intellectual' (Allardice, par. 1). Whilst these narratives are often complicated and feature a large cast of characters, their plot devices can be transparent, employed either to drive the story forward or else bring it neatly to an end. As Helen Clare Taylor comments, Trollope has been criticised for the *deus ex machina* solutions she provides in her novels (635). In her fourth novel, *The Rector's Wife*, for example, she resolves Anna Bouverie's marriage difficulties by killing off her husband in a car crash and thus absolving her of any responsibility either to remain with him or to seek a controversial divorce given her role as the rector's wife. Similarly, the woman with whom Archie Logan is having an affair in *A Passionate Man* is conveniently dispatched back to America, thus preventing him from having to choose between his wife and mistress.

Yet, despite their lowbrow association with romantic fiction and magazines, Trollope's novels have gained a level of literary respectability which has separated them from popular women's fiction. The first reason for this, I suggest, is the impression created by their covers and physical format, and the perception of these novels as sufficiently

literary. As noted earlier, the ubiquity of the Aga-saga during the 1990s meant that their covers became instantly recognisable to readers. Trollope's novels were produced in line with the stereotypical Aga-saga image that she references in *Next of Kin*: white covers featuring 'tasteful' watercolour images of domestic scenes, often with a woman at the centre of them, and the name of the author and title of the novel printed in clear conservative type – often in a primary colour to complement the cover design – on the cover and spine. Far removed from the gold-foil covers of the sex and shopping novels, which featured photographs posed for by models, the covers of the Aga-saga, and Trollope's fiction in turn, were intended to reflect – or perhaps to be suggestive of – the cultural weight of the words that they contained. The watercolour paintings on their covers were arguably chosen to appeal to the middle-class reader, for whom painting watercolours was perhaps a favourite past time and who possessed a general knowledge of art. The houses and domestic scenes depicted on the front were decorated in a style reminiscent of the kind of interior design desirable at the time, and featured coveted items of furniture – the rocking chair, the French dresser, the pine kitchen table. In addition to reviews by magazines, the novels' covers also featured endorsements and notes of acclaim by other authors and broadsheet newspapers. When combined to form one product, all of these factors created the impression for consumers that the narratives enclosed within these covers were culturally legitimate, and reflected the class-based interests of the audience at whom they were aimed. These novels looked like cultural products. As the editorial director of Hodder and Stoughton, Sue Fletcher, commented in 1998, 'people don't want to be seen reading something that's rubbish, but neither do they want to read anything that's hugely intellectually challenging, experimental or difficult' (Blake, par. 10). Trollope's novels do not look like lowbrow novels, despite their popularity, and therefore give their readers greater claim to being more cultured and intellectual consumers.

Fletcher introduces an important factor regarding the ways in which people read and consume literature. She notes that people often prefer to be seen reading certain kinds of books as opposed to others, and in doing so refers to the ways that the visual and aesthetic qualities of books serve to separate one novel from another. Literature in this respect functions as a symbol of cultural capital – a *public display* of a person's taste and discernment – in addition to being part of the *private pastime* of reading at home and out of sight of others.[74] The visual nature of Trollope's novels and their role as material objects is

[74] In light of the increasing popularity of e-readers, such as Amazon's Kindle, onto which readers can download novels straight to the device, the role of the cover as a symbol of cultural capital and the reader's taste may not hold in the future. Writing about the role of books as 'vehicles of aspiration and self-promotion', Robert McCrum asserts that 'the e-reader is the electronic equivalent of the brown paper wrapper: digital equals discreet.' ('It Doesn't Matter', par. 2) It is impossible to discern what someone using

important, because the way in which the Aga-saga has been packaged has served to reflect and simultaneously construct it as a more 'quality' cultural product. The publisher with which a novel is placed has a significant effect on the material form that it will take – what the cover and size of the novel will be, for example– and in turn how it is marketed and subsequently viewed and received by readers and critics. As Claire Squires notes, the relationship between publishing imprint and the format of a novel is extremely important, and whilst the generic content of a novel can influence which imprint it is placed with, equally the imprint can determine both the material format that the novel will take and how that novel will be regarded. An author's brand identity is not only created, therefore, via the material that she produces (the plot and characters she creates), but also the house with which her work is published, and how that material – and in turn the author who has created it – is presented and marketed as a concrete product. An author's brand is an essential part of both the marketability and literary status of her novels, and can affect, as Fletcher's comments suggest, whether a reader is comfortable to be seen reading a particular text.

Although varied in their content, Trollope's novels were all marketed in the same way and assisted in her achievement of a respectable brand identity. Squires notes, regarding the consistency of author and novel images, that 'branding delivered through design can be crucial in the establishment of the writer's oeuvre, rather than a perception of their work as a collection of disparate titles – a factor which arguably contributes to the author's (potential) canonisation' (88). In a piece discussing the significance of book format, Peter Straus comments that changes can be made to the format of an author's work in order to signal a change in that author's career – a move to her becoming a more established author perhaps as opposed to one just beginning her career, or else a move towards a different genre. He notes that Trollope, whom he describes as 'the B-format sensation of 1992' (69), is one such author whose novels have undergone changes in format and presentation, and were repackaged in order to alter the way that they were sold by retailers and how they were subsequently perceived and bought by different consumers. Further exploring the relationship between format and imprint, Squires explains the approach imprint Black Swan took to the marketing of its authors. She notes that

> Black Swan [with whom many of Trollope's novels have been published] rethought the packaging of [Trollope's] front and backlist, bringing the paperbacks of her novels out in B rather than A format, thereafter achieving commercial success and also, in the longer term, critical acclaim. (Squires, 93)

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an e-reader is consuming; the download facility means that the self-conscious or intellectual reader is able to avoid the embarrassment of being seen reading a lowbrow novel.

Black Swan was synonymous with the white covers of the Aga-saga, and published novels by Cobbold, Rowntree, and Wesley, in addition to Trollope. In a significant illustration of how the material form of a novel is inextricably linked to its literary status, Alex Hamilton notes that the formats can be distinguished thus: 'A: smaller-size paperbacks, usually "mass-market". B: larger-sized paperbacks, usually "middle- to highbrow" and following hardback or C-format publication' ('Fastsellers').[75] According to Hamilton's definitions, the B format of Trollope's novels consequently positions them in the category of 'middle- to highbrow'.[76] Trollope's novels have also been published through Bloomsbury in hardback, and as part of their Bloomsbury Classics range with black-and-white artistic covers and a portrait photograph of the author. These developments in the production of Trollope's novels and the conscious changes in format show how her writing has negotiated the fine line between commercial success in the mass market and literary success in the cultural market of value and literariness, and illustrate the way in which the perceived literariness of her work has altered over time.

Moving away from the physical nature of Trollope's novels, and the manner in which they have been produced and published as products, I suggest that the second reason for Trollope's claim to literary respectability is connected to the plots of the novels themselves. Contrary to their perception as stories of 'unhappy women moving from the city to the country and finding self-fulfilment there' (Trollope, *Next of Kin*, 111), these novels do not adhere to the standardised plot structure of the romance, in which the heroine's romantic or other personal problems, established at the beginning of the novel, are happily resolved by the end. Trollope's writing is not formulaic. I argue that the meta-fictional reference in *Next of Kin* (noted earlier) to the homogeneity of these white-covered books is an intentionally ironic inclusion by Trollope, utilised to highlight her novels' departure from critical expectations that they are all interchangeable. In *Next of Kin*, Lyndsay – who is reading a 'pretty-looking novel, with a white shiny cover showing a bright water-colour of an idealised country kitchen', and is of course a heroine in such a novel herself – is in fact at the centre of a narrative which includes suicide and debt as opposed to romantic union. I suggest that this countering of expectation, and avoidance of an overtly formulaic plot, has given Trollope's fiction the respectability amongst both readers and critics that lowbrow romances, such as Mills and Boon novels, have lacked.

The third factor that positions Trollope's writing in the category of the contemporary middlebrow novel, is its focus on class and, more specifically, with small,

[75] The dimensions of A format paperbacks are 178mm x 111mm; for B format they are 198mm x 129 mm.

[76] Black Swan, established in 1983, is an imprint of Transworld publishers.

specifically English, and primarily rural middle- and upper-middle class communities. Nicci Gerrard has commented that there is ‘a certain kind of book that’s perfect […] familiar without being dull, intelligent without being challenging, always accessible, never shocking […] The “English Novel”: poached eggs for the soul’ (par. 2). Such novels are characterised by an ‘innocence in the modern world’ and a ‘deep-seated conservatism’ (par. 3) and, as Gerrard’s description of them being ‘intelligent without being challenging’ implies, are characteristically middlebrow. Pushing Gerrard’s account further, I argue that the type of novel about which she is talking can be described not simply as the ‘English novel’ but more specifically as the English ‘novel of manners’. In contrast to both Philips’s and Liladhar’s reading of Trollope’s fiction through the lens of romance, I contend that, with its focus on small worlds, personal relationships, and social observations, it is with this fictional genre that Trollope’s writing shares the greatest affiliation. Her novels in this respect can be considered akin to the fiction of Barbara Pym and Elizabeth Taylor in the mid-twentieth century, and extending back to Austen in the nineteenth century. It is this overlap with the novel of manners that accounts for the arguable literary respectability of her writing.

The Novel of Manners: Customs and Conventions in the Aga-saga

As with the middlebrow, and as to be expected when referring to often unstable literary categories, there has been much debate about how the novel of manners can be defined. In the introduction to the collection *Reading and Writing Women’s Lives: A Study of the Novel of Manners* (1990), Bege K. Bowers and Barbara Brothers map the variations in its definition.[77] They question, for example, whether a novel of manners is a study of character as well as society, or a depiction of society alone at a particular point in time. In addition, is the presence of upper-class characters essential to the novel of manners?[78] And is the focus on the domestic world, and the process of finding a husband essential? These questions arise

[77] This collection contains essays on the relationship between the novel of manners and the works of Austen, Virginia Woolf, George Eliot and Dorothy L. Sayers, amongst others.

[78] It is on the question of whether upper-class characters are present that Bowers and Brothers argue the *novel* of manners can be separated from the *comedy* of manners. The former is sometimes considered to be a derivative of the latter, or else the two are presented as synonymous. Gordon Milne’s conception of the relationship between the novel of manners and comedy of manners, for example, is that ‘both offer a balanced, chiselled polished style; and both are written in the vein of urbane, sophisticated humour. They evoke the same upper-class world as well, carefully describing its handsome drawing rooms’ (13). Examples of the comedy of manners include E.F. Benson’s *Mapp and Lucia* novels and P.G. Wodehouse’s *Jeeves and Wooster* series. Upper-class characters are an essential facet of these novels, Milne suggests, but Brothers and Bowers disagree. They argue that ‘neither in manner nor in setting and class depicted, we contend, does the novel of manner correspond to the comedy of manner, with its “chiselled polished style” and aristocratic drawing rooms. What links the two traditions is simply the word *manners*’ [emphasis in original] (3).

from the fact that the description 'novel of manners' has been applied to the work of a number of authors ranging from Austen and Fanny Burney to Henry Fielding and Anthony Trollope. Annette Weld admits that, by and large, any novel that deals with the interaction and relationships between people and their social surroundings could be considered a novel of manners, but attempts to outline the limits of this novelistic sub-genre by quoting a definition by James Tuttleton:

> [b]y a novel of manners I mean a novel in which the manners, social customs, folkways, conventions, traditions and mores of a given social group at a given time and place play a dominant role in the lives of fictional characters, exert control over their thought and behaviour, and constitute a determinant upon the actions in which they are engaged, and in which these manners and customs are detailed realistically – with, in fact, a premium upon the exactness of their representation. (10)

The definition that Tuttleton proffers here is concerned with American fiction in particular. Yet, it is with the English literary landscape, and the nineteenth-century novel in particular, that the novel of manners is most often associated. The exemplars of the English novel of manners are the works of Austen (to whom, as previously noted, Trollope has been compared), including *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Persuasion* (1817). The class dynamics that so often lie behind the main thrust of such novels are notably absent from Tuttleton's account of the novel of manners, but are essential to any consideration of this genre in an English context. Indeed, Weld notes that references to an 'established class system, geographic insularity, and a thousand years of cultural history' (8) are essential constituents of the novel of manners as produced by English authors. The influences of these factors further affect the ways in which the communities at the centre of the novel of manners are organised and how characters behave in response to the expectations of their fictional community.

Whilst the definitions proposed by Tuttleton and Weld do much to identify the primary characteristics of the novel of manners, Bowers and Brothers rightly highlight the importance not just of the society represented in these novels but of the self that exists within that society. They write that the novel of manners focuses on the individual *in relation to* society:

> It is not more about one than about the other; it does not take as its subject merely the particular manners and customs of a specific social class at a given place and point in time. Instead, the novel of manners offers a perspective on the nature of the self as shaped but not necessarily in accord with, the values of a society embodied in outward conventions […] The novel of manners examines *both* the psyche of the individual and the social world in which the individual lives [emphasis in original]. (4)

Put more simply, in the novel of manners the social context in which the individual lives does not necessarily exert an inescapable hold on that individual – who is theoretically able

to ignore social expectations if she desires – but there exists nonetheless a tangible pressure to adhere to the values and protocols of the society in which the character operates. The novel of manners is thus concerned with 'selfhood and morality within a cultural context', and so depicts 'the inevitable conflict between private and public personas and between illusion (imagination and desire) and the actualities of daily existence' (4). When social demands and personal desire conflict, the social order of the novels of manners is disturbed and it is here that the driving force of the novel can be found.

I propose that the novel of manners can be subsumed within the broader category of the middlebrow novel because of its thematic concerns (a focus on class, the domestic lives of primarily middle- and upper-class characters, and an almost anthropological concern with social behaviour) and its formal characteristics (stylistically conservative and written in an unchallenging, realist style). Referring back to the definitions of the middlebrow novel I offered in the Introduction to this thesis – notably a preoccupation with the changing nature and development of middle-class domesticity, and a concern with class structures – the ways in which the novel of manners relates to the broader category of middlebrow fiction is clear. Significantly the middlebrow novel and the novel of manners have received similar critical evaluation. Brothers and Bowers note that novels of manners are 'so concerned with the details of everyday life that some critics have dismissed them as "trivial", "unimaginative", or "dull"' (4). The diminishing of the novel of manners emerges out of the same literary value system as the dismissal of the contemporary middlebrow novel – a system that attaches little worth to writing focused on domestic themes, social observations, 'littleness', and feminine concerns. Noting the popularity of the novel of manners amongst female authors, Brothers and Bowers argue that

> [s]ubtly but surely, a number of factors – the gender of many of the novelists plus their focus on domestic concerns, the posture on the part of some that social novels should be concerned with large (masculine) problems of class, materialism, and ethics, […] developing concepts of 'canon' – all conspired to give the novel of manners a passing nod. (10)

Bowers and Brothers's collection emerges out of the contemporary revaluation of women's writing outlined earlier, and attempts to complicate notions of literary value in order to reposition the novel of manners as a genre worthy of more detailed consideration.

Like the novel of manners, Trollope's novels centre around villages and tales of small-town life, featuring clusters of houses in a relatively isolated location, 'familiar enough to envision at a glance and preferably encompassable in the course of an after-dinner stroll' as Weld suggests (11). Much of her writing focuses on the country, and depicts characters whose lives are strongly influenced by traditional notions of Englishness and pastoral life as

portrayed in literature.[79] The narrator of *A Passionate Man*, for example, explains regarding one inhabitant of her village:

> Mrs Betts had brought to Stoke Stratton a very clear idea of what English village life should be like and a strong determination to impose this vision on the few hundred people who came to buy stamps at one end of her shop and throat lozenges, birthday cards and potting compost at the other. (39)

Trollope's community of characters occupy very definite positions in a social hierarchy that is greatly influenced by class and relations within established English cultural institutions, such as the local church, women's institute, school, or farm. Her first novel, *A Village Affair*, contains members of the aristocracy who live in a large country house, in addition to the select group of middle-class families living in the immediate surrounding area, who are the main focus of her later work.

Country locals who staff the shops and post offices and provide services such as housekeeping, gardening, and cleaning for their wealthier neighbours do also feature. Unlike their middle-class employers, who tend to move from outside of the area to purchase the most expensive houses, these characters have often lived in the towns or villages from birth. Trollope's indication of the class differences between characters using their accents is overly employed at times, but is arguably effective in the clarity with which it delineates one person from another for the benefit of the reader. The speech patterns of the country locals and working classes are characterised by a use of strong dialects, a dropping of 'h's', incorrect grammar, and colloquialisms. Phrases such as 'who's 'er?' (*A Village Affair*, 63), 'miserable 'ouse that is' (*A Village Affair*, 63), and 'I don't want no more molly-coddling' (*Next of Kin* 222) all stand in comparison to the formality of the middle- and upper classes – 'My dear fellow, I can't tell you how sorry I am' (*The Choir*, 57), 'we are faced with an ineluctable decision' (*The Choir*, 175), and 'my dear! What luck! […] When can you dine with us?' (*A Village Affair*, 70). Working-class characters are represented either as 'salt-of-the-earth' who respect and revere their employers, and other important figures in the area such as the vicar, or else as delighting in their downfall. The result is a somewhat basic, and elementary, portrayal of working-class figures, who are used primarily as strategic plot devices, either to further the action of the novel or else to provide an alternative voice to those middle-class characters upon whom the narratives are focused. Trollope's novels do not attempt to provide an insight into other kinds of class consciousness. There is rarely

[79] In addition to her novels, Trollope had edited and written an introduction to an anthology of writings about the pleasures of country life. *The Country Habit* (1993) features extracts from authors including Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy and Virginia Woolf amongst others. A review in the December 1993 issue of *Country Living* magazine explains that the title of the anthology is taken from Vita Sackville-West's comment in 1926 that 'the country habit has me by the heart'.

any significant inter-class social interaction; conversations are limited to encounters in the local shop (over the counter), during an exchange of services, or at village fetes.

Trollope's novels document the clothes, accents, appearances and other personal details of characters. Their eating habits are detailed as well as their 'shelter, occupations, leisure activities, religious practices, and social traditions', all of which, as is consistent with the novel of manners, determine the way that they behave (Weld, 8). The roles of the residents are clearly demarcated (who runs the cake stall, who arranges the church flowers, who calls public meetings), deviations from which are rarely accepted, and official social occasions are tightly scheduled. As one character explains regarding the stock of the local shop: 'Absolutely set in their ways. Same stuff every week, same quantities. See that jar of Mint Imperials? We get through one a fortnight, regular as clockwork. Same with cream crackers' (*A Village Affair*, 65). The resulting impression is of a civilised world built on the order that a reliance on politeness, responsibility, and a respect for English institutions creates; one where routine is encouraged and where an adherence to social expectation is prioritised. There is a shift in the later novels (*Marrying the Mistress*, *Other People's Children*, *The Men and the Girls*, for example) away from the pastoral towards a more urban setting, of life in towns and cities such as Oxford. The focus of these texts is on the middle-classes, with upper-class characters rarely making an appearance, but even in these novels published later in the 1990s the same formula persists. The village may be replaced by the town but the geography remains small with only a few streets mentioned (characters do not tend to venture beyond their locale), and interaction with working-class characters continues to be largely limited to discussions between employers and employees. Accurately detailing personal relationships and daily life continues to be the narratives' priority, and the maintenance of the status quo is paramount. The insularity of the community, and the geographical isolation of the novel's town or village, means that any mishap or misadventure, any breaching of the behaviour that has been deemed by that group as 'proper' (the under/overpaying of staff, the coveting of someone else's partner, the state of a neighbour's home or garden and the unruliness of their children) quickly becomes common knowledge. It is the threat of being at the centre of local discussion that affects characters' actions and contributes to maintaining social order. Women in particular are repeatedly called upon to overcome their own frustrations and desires, and not to make any demands, in favour of honouring the expectations that others place on them.

The temporary disruption of order that drives the narrative forward provokes the reader's amusement, as characters endeavour to accommodate the complications that arise when a person or event upsets the familiarity of their surroundings. The comedy is subtle however – 'seldom will the novel of manners contain broad gestures of farce or the

grotesque exaggerations of more raucous comedy' (Weld, 9) – relying on irony and the reader's understanding of what constitutes a breach of social expectation within the novel's community. Humour in Trollope's fiction is derived primarily from class conflicts, a surprising lack of political correctness, or the breach of what may appear to be a minor rule but in fact constitutes a significant error in judgement. It is important to note, however, that although Trollope's novels are occasionally infused with humour, they often have a much darker undercurrent. Members of the clergy deal with the suicides of local farmers, for example, and counsel victims of domestic violence. Disruptions to the status quo can still be categorised as domestic (rarely monumental and usually a result of the introduction of a rogue person), but this troublesome element is often more controversial than is usual in the novel of manners of the early- or mid-twentieth century: a lesbian lover, an unstable mother, and the tricking of men into having children. Although by the end of the novel social order is restored to the wider community, the price of this resolution for the (female) protagonist is often high and the conclusion to the novels is regularly open ended with the success of future plans left in question.

The reader's empathetic response to characters' situations is also suspended.[80] Weld writes that 'appreciation of and sympathy for the human condition lie at the heart of comedy, especially in a genre so closely concerned with group behaviour as the novel of manners' (10) and Lionel Trilling argues that this is 'the literary form to which the emotions of understanding and forgiveness were indigenous' (222). Yet, many of Trollope's novels conclude not with understanding or forgiveness, but with a lack of empathy and the reprimanding of characters who rebel against convention. Novels such as *Next of Kin*, *The Men and the Girls* and *A Passionate Man* do not proffer any understanding of the characters' behaviour, but rather are critical of it. I posit that Trollope's novels combine many of the key features of the novel of manners – class, small communities, a preoccupation with social propriety, and a rogue element which interrupts the order of things – with a combination of a more serious observation of social issues pertinent to life in the 1980s and '90s and an often harsh judgement of human behaviour. The next section consequently outlines the social and political context in which Trollope's novels were produced, and explores the ways in which her writing captured the climate of the times.

[80] Weld argues that empathy, alongside a sense of superiority derived from an association with the narrative's elite and exclusive community, is one of the primary reader reactions provoked by the novel of manners (10).

Trollope in Context: Domesticity, Consumption and Conservatism in the Country

In her analysis of domestic romances in the 1990s, Philips connects the emergence of the Aga-saga and the success of women writers such as Trollope to the rejection of the conservatism, consumerism and Thatcherism of the 1980s, in favour of more 'caring' values. This shift, she suggests, ultimately culminated in the election of New Labour. For women this rejection of the mores of the previous decade meant the eschewal of independence imagined through consumption, which had been the priority of their counterparts ten years earlier, and the pursuit of a more 'natural' domestic femininity which was not based necessarily on employment or ruthless ambition. Philips argues that

> [t]here was an identifiable shift in popular fiction against the celebration of unabashed consumerism that had marked the sex and shopping novel, and a move towards a search for 'authenticity'. In British and American fiction, the 'authentic' came to be signified by the country, and by village or small-town life. (*Women's Fiction*, 96)

I agree that fiction such as Trollope's emerges out of, and is opposed to, the excesses of the 1980s, encapsulated by the 'bonkbuster' and the sex and shopping novels of Jackie Collins and Shirley Conran in Britain, and Danielle Steele in America. These novels depicted large numbers of women entering the workplace and progressing up the corporate ladder. Their heroines enjoyed the status of being in powerful positions in large companies. Domestic life was of little interest in the sex and shopping novel and its characters' primary indulgences were men and consumption.

The Aga-saga of the 1990s provided an antidote to the previous decade's preoccupation with money and ambition, exchanging the fast pace of the city for the slow relaxation of the country, business-savvy 'get ahead' mentality for values such as respectability and honesty, and significantly replacing the office with the home. Consumption is still present in these novels – houses are frequently bought and sold and are skilfully decorated with items selected by the heroine – but purchases are for the benefit of the family as a whole, not the individual. Any descriptions of consumption within these texts contain references to stores, modes of shopping, and types of commodity that were popular at the time of writing and were part of the process of creating the comfortable, and often pastoral, domestic style of the 1990s. When, for example, in *The Choir*, Nicholas, a returning chorister, ponders the changes in the headmaster's sitting room, the narrative's description indicates the ironic connection between consumption, imitation and authenticity. The 'authentic', rustic look of an English domesticity unaffected by modern consumption, can often only be achieved, it would seem, by purchasing the right products from stores that intentionally replicate this way of living. The narrative explains:

They were in the Headmaster's sitting room which Nicholas remembered for its three-piece suite covered in fawn cut moquette and a triangular fifties table whose legs ended in yellow plastic bobbles. Now the room looked like the cover of a Laura Ashley catalogue [a very popular store in the 1990s], a rustic, cluttered realization of the Anglo-Saxon idyll, where long sprigged curtains crumpled on to the polished boards of the floor and every corner contained an object of battered charm. (*The Choir*, 24)

Great pains are taken to achieve the right domestic setting, and stores such as Laura Ashley catered for this developing taste. It is not the living room, but the country kitchen, however, that is most frequently described in these novels of middle-class life and which became emblematic of the '90s aesthetic.

A section in *The Men and the Girls* highlights the effort behind interior design, and the desired effect that the home owner intends her choices to create. Authenticity and understated style are what the middle-class home owner desires:

The kitchen had been made perfect by Julia, who had an unerring eye for not overdoing things. It was a long, low room with white walls and a cork floor and just the right kind of wooden furniture and jars and racks of practical kitchen things. There were terracotta pitchers and cracked blue-and-white plates and old copper pans, but not too many and not obviously displayed. (23)[81]

Julia's kitchen is filled with items that are intended to signify the English country style that was favoured in all aspects of middle-class design and decoration during the decade. In *Theatres of Memory* (1994) – published at the peak of the Aga-saga phenomenon – Raphael Samuel documents a trend which he terms 'retrofitting'. This concept is helpful when analysing the dominant fashion of the 1990s. In a section entitled 'Retrochic', Samuel uses the term 'retrofitting' to describe the preference for the old over the new in housing and interior decoration, and the tensions around tradition and modernity. As a consequence of retrofitting, he explains that the house became a platform for the display of modernity on the one hand – embodied by new kitchen gadgets and lighting – and heritage, nostalgia, a recognition of the enduring 'timelessness' of certain 'classic' styles of living on the other. In the 1950s and '60s, modern styles were favoured in home decoration. This was illustrated by the use of transparent, flexible, and notably man-made materials and the introduction of 'wipe-clean' and more hygienic surfaces including plastic (as opposed to wooden) toilet seats, and glass tables. Period features such as picture rails were removed, cornicing hidden behind false ceilings, and doors were 'hardboarded to cover up dust-collecting panels and

[81] For more on the significance of the kitchen in relation to class aspirations and social categories see Dale Southerton, 'Consuming Kitchens: Taste, Context and Identity Formation', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1 (2) (2001), 179-204

give them a streamlined look' (Samuel, 52).[82] Victorian houses and country piles were considered old-fashioned, inefficient and in desperate need of modernisation. From the 1970s, however, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s in particular, there was a move away from this 'masculine' style of decoration to a softer and more 'feminine' approach to the domestic space (Samuel, 59). Samuel explains that designers

> adopted an altogether more English palette, exchanging Mediterranean and modernist primaries – the hard, bright colours of the 'contemporary look' – for more rustic shades […] Homes took on a mellow look, as stripped pine made its way from the floorboards via the kitchen dresser to the dining-room table. (59)

The main area of the house in which the everyday has been re-imagined in this way has been the kitchen, with the introduction of the extremely popular country-style kitchen thirty-years ago.

In an article on the intersection of home interiors and class, Joe Moran argues that the country kitchen 'is another instance of the long standing ability of the professional classes to use the house as a way of negotiating modernity, combining the comforts of mass consumption with older ideals of homeliness and craftsmanship' ('Houses', 37). He notes that the country kitchen is surprisingly innovative in the way that it successfully combines the benefits of modern technology (with its appliances and utensils) and 'nostalgic signifiers' included stripped wood floors, flagstones, and earthenware ('Houses', 37)[83] It allowed 'the suburban middle classes to embrace a comfortable version of the below-stairs lifestyle of the servants they would have employed in a previous era' (Moran, 'Houses', 37). The country kitchen did not become popular simply on account of its visual appeal – that it was more aesthetic than other styles available at that time – but because of the classed history that it represented. It was symbolic, as Moran highlights, of a nostalgic yearning for family values, class stability, and clear social demarcations. Returning to the idea of the Aga-saga and the appliance after which it was named, the industrial and functional appearance of the Aga cooker (suggestive of working kitchens in the nineteenth

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[82] Samuel notes that in the 1950s this preoccupation with modernisation was reflected in all aspects of everyday life and was 'a mainspring of popular consumerism' (56). He explains, for example, that 'washing powders, intensely competitive products, and pioneers of the TV commercial, advertised themselves as soapless detergents, substituting chemicals for the greasiness of old soap [and] there was a real excitement about the appearance of new synthetics' (56).

[83] This intersection of modernity and tradition that is a feature of the country kitchen is highlighted in Sophia Watson's novel *Strange and Wellbred* (1996). In a section describing the morning routine in a couple's Pimlico house, the kitchen, where modern appliances are combined with rustic signifiers, is the focus of attention: 'the basement was mostly taken up with a huge kitchen, aping its country cousins as closely as possible. There was the dark green Aga (and also the state of the art convector oven), the scrubbed wooden table […] Expensive stainless steel pans hung from butchers' hooks along a wall, dried herbs and garlic hung from the ceiling […] The china matched rather more consistently than any real farmer's wood (14). Watson published several novels during the 1990s that focused on middle-class domesticity, including *Her Husband's Children* (1995) and *The Perfect Treasure* (1998).

century) lends it a similarly authentic and rustic appeal.[84] Its consistent presence in the middle-class kitchen can be connected as much to this fashion for tradition and country-style living, and the fact that it has become symbolic of middle-class life, as to any practical capacity.[85] Like the country kitchen, the success of Trollope's narratives stemmed from their response to this increasing nostalgia in the 1990s for a simpler and less competitive time, represented by the pleasures of gardening, baking and domestic arts that they depict.[86]

To return to Philips's reading of Trollope's fiction, with which this section started, whilst I agree with her assessment of the novels' focus on the search for authenticity and homeliness, my reading of these novels departs from Philips's in two ways; firstly, in regard to the political climate to which she tethers Trollope's novels, and secondly, in her analysis of the novels' narrative arcs. Philips connects the prevalence of novels such as *A Village Affair* to the turn towards narratives of 'caring' in the '90s, and 'an emergent espousal of ecological and spiritual movements' (*Women's Fiction*, 96) that was characteristic of New Labour. Yet, the logic of this argument is flawed. Trollope published her first novel in 1988, almost a decade before the introduction of the Blair government in 1997, and had enormous success with four other novels published before the middle of the 1990s. I suggest, instead, that this fiction emerges out of a Conservative government presiding over a largely conservative England.[87]

Trollope's novels are set almost entirely in the south of England, in affluent communities away from the struggles of the industrial north. They focus on elite institutions including private schools, universities and law firms. They are populated

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[84] R.M. Dashwood writes about the appeal of the Aga, twenty years prior to the fashion for country chic, in *Provincial Daughter* (1961). In one diary entry she dreams what she will do with the money from selling the walnut tree in the garden for wood. After telephoning the local timber merchant, who agrees to look at the tree that afternoon, she thinks about the Aga she will buy. Unfortunately, her hopes are dashed when the merchant inspects the tree: 'He looks at it in silence for some time and I wonder how I am going to persuade him up to three hundred if he only offers two, and then he utters to the effect that it will be a very valuable tree in a hundred years time. Bitterly disappointed, Aga, Bendix, new car, television set and all fly away in dissolving dream' (49).

[85] *Guardian* columnist Zoe Williams has written about the Aga as a symbol of class. She notes, regarding the debate about the product's environmental impact, and the celebrity endorsements on the company's website, that 'the stated message of these cookers is of comfort, homeliness, tradition, structure, an unassuming warm bath of fellowship and love. But there's more to it than that […] What else does an Aga represent to the people who think it's worth something? Why else might they covet an Aga, love one? And who actually reads Aga sagas? It's pretty straightforward that they convey wealth – expensive in themselves (around £6,000), Agas require a lot of expensive accoutrements. For instance, a huge house, with a reinforced concrete floor, with plenty of room for a huge thing' (par. 3-4).

[86] This kind of country-style chic became available in stores such as the increasingly popular Laura Ashley, and was represented in interior magazines such as *Country Living*, *Country Homes and Interiors*, and *Homes and Gardens*. Samuel writes that 'in furnishing fabrics, textures went from hard to soft, and patterns from the sharp, clear lines of modernism to the decorative borders and floral motifs of more traditional design [and] Laura Ashley wallpapers reflected the colours of "Victorian" chairs and sofas' (60).

[87] The natural conservative stance of Trollope's characters is highlighted in *A Village Affair* when one lady from the village is astonished at Alice Jordan's political indecision: '"I don't think I really am a conservative, but my husband –" "Not?" said Miss Pimm, swivelling her gaze back' (58). 'Miss Pimm' is possibly a reference to Barbara Pym, whose work also falls within the category of the novel of manners.

primarily by upper- and middle-class professional characters (in keeping with the images at the time of the 'Sloane Ranger'); are largely oblivious to wider concerns about social welfare; and are preoccupied with issues including inheritance, social capital (the creation and sustenance of different social networks), and land. In keeping with the Thatcherite idea that 'society does not exist', a theme of individual responsibility runs throughout the narratives, with the fault for problems both in the community and at home, and the responsibility for solving them, lying with the individual. Most significantly the gender relations described in these narratives are conservative in both the aesthetic and political senses of the word. They stress the importance of the nuclear family (although extended families do feature), promote an ideology of gendered separate spheres of home and workplace, and advocate traditionally gendered behaviour, which was similarly promoted by the first female prime minister at the time. In addition to her role as the head of government, Margaret Thatcher marketed herself as being a traditional housewife (speaking often about making breakfast every morning for her husband), and likened the country's finances to a housewife's purse. Frequently pictured wearing an apron or rubber gloves, she maintained a traditional feminine image by never wearing trousers and always carrying a handbag. Whilst Thatcher was herself a working wife and mother, she was critical of women who combined a career with family, and there is certainly an affiliation between Trollope's treatment of mothers, and Thatcher's criticism of working mothers as 'condemning a generation of children to the "chaos" of workplace crèches […] and, by implication, to an adult life of vice and violence' (Wolf, 81).[88] The importance of maintaining traditional gender roles runs throughout Trollope, and is consistent with the Thatcherite approach of the 1980s.

My second objection to Philip's argument is connected to her interpretation of these novels as reassuring narratives. Trollope has stated that

> what exasperates me most about my public image are the words 'cosy' and 'smug' applied to my novels, because I think they're rather bleak, and about the pain and destructiveness caused by self-fulfilment of a not particularly outrageous kind. (Loudon, par. 14)

Despite this repeated assertion, critics including Liladhar and Philips have continued to assert the 'comforting' nature of Trollope's fiction. Referring to the familial warmth that the Aga represents, and suggesting that Trollope's fiction does the same, Philips, for

[88] Wolf is similarly critical of Thatcher's dismissal of feminism, and identifies a connection between Thatcher's rise to power and her distance from women's issues. Wolf notes that 'for the eleven years of her premiership she kept able women away from the higher echelons of government; she froze child benefit; she insisted "I owe nothing to women's lib" […] Ironically, throughout the 1980s every other woman in Britain had to suffer the constant reminder that feminism was redundant and that unparalleled opportunities were open to women: if a woman could occupy 10 Downing Street, she could do anything' (81).

example, argues that 'these novels may be bleak in their depiction of a marriage that has lost any heart, but the Aga-saga did not acquire its generic nickname for nothing' (*Women's Fiction*, 102). Both Liladhar and Philips, however, have overlooked the negative attitudes towards women's behaviour that run beneath the celebration of domesticity and images of hearth, home and family unity (which are, in fact, relatively infrequent despite what reviews and critical readings of these texts suggest). I maintain that at the heart of these novels is the suggestion that the price of the pursuit of female self-empowerment is damage to children, the emasculation of husbands, and the dissolution of relationships.

Philips writes that 'the heroine's frustrations and search for fulfilment might initially appear to be [a] dissent from the demands of the feminine role' (*Women's Fiction*, 103), but as the narrative arc of the Aga-saga is always composed of variations on the elements of 'frustration, escape and return', traditional gender stereotypes are ultimately left unchallenged (*Women's Fiction*, 99). I argue, however, that Philips's summary of the standard plot of the Aga-saga genre, and implicitly Trollope's novels, fails to mention another important component – female punishment. The presence of what I identify here as a recurring trope of the condemnation of women poses a significant challenge to existing interpretations of this author's fiction as presenting a 'reassuring image of the domestic that is invariably coded as feminine' (Philips, *Women's Fiction*, 103). Far from being narratives which assert a 'becalmed image of cosy domesticity, in a celebration of the warmth and comfort of the family' (Philips, *Women's Fiction*, 102), Trollope's contemporary Aga-saga novels emerge out of a backlash against second-wave feminism, in their punishment of those who reject domestic femininity, and their construction of female characters who seek fulfilment outside of the family home as bad mothers and neglectful wives.

These tropes have clear overlaps with backlash images of women that were prevalent in the 1980s, the decade at the end of which Trollope's novels and other examples of the Aga-saga began to appear. Susan Faludi argues that it was during the time of the Thatcher government (and the Reagan years in America) that a backlash against feminism began. Philips maintains, however, that the majority of these texts conclude by returning the heroine happily to domestic life once some familial issues have been resolved. In the next section I highlight instead the way in which many female characters only resume their traditionally feminine roles because of pressure from their families, after having been seen to have caused great distress to their children, or else after having been punished or humiliated for questioning traditional gender expectations. These novels do not simply celebrate 'steadfast dailyness' (Philips, *Women's Fiction*, 3), tinged with romantic nostalgia, or acknowledge the indispensable presence of women in the home. Trollope's

work emerges instead out of backlash politics, which cited feminism as responsible for the majority of society's ills, particularly with regard to the family.

'Beyond the Bad Man, Good Woman Stereotype': Trollope's Novels as Backlash

In *Backlash* (1992) Faludi asserts that there was a marked effort in the 1980s to discredit feminism's credibility and to negate the gains that women had made. Many of the anxieties circulating during this decade, particularly regarding the purported damage to male identity, discrimination against men, economic difficulties and unemployment, became attached to women's progress. 'The economic victims of the era are men who know someone has made off with their future', Faludi writes, 'and they suspect the thief is a woman' (89). Feminism was also held responsible for many problems that women themselves were facing – particularly working women – including emotional and physical 'burnout' from trying to combine work and domestic responsibilities, their declining fertility, and their inability to be happy. These issues all appear as themes in Trollope's fiction, where problems with children are linked to mothers' absence from the home, selfish wives are portrayed as rejecting and emasculating their husbands or else driving them to find solace in an affair, and women's liberation is often referred to in quotation marks in an accusatory or untrusting manner.

Trollope does not identify herself as a feminist writer and her responses in interviews and public readings contain an antagonism towards both feminism and towards her female characters. She has highlighted the role that the women's movement has played in the breakdown of the family. Trollope has questioned whether people of that generation make 'very careless and selfish parents?' ('Interview with Joanna Trollope', par. 7) and has stated her desire to 'put the reader beyond the "bad man, good woman" stereotype' [to] show how destructive […] selfish little women can be' ('Penguin Reading Guides'). She has commented, for example, regarding a character in her tenth novel, *Marrying the Mistress*, whose husband has left her for his much younger mistress, that 'if women become the victims in their lives, they have jolly well colluded with it' ('Penguin Reading Guides'). When asked at a public reading about her attitude to feminism she responded with a contradictory answer in which she claimed that sexual equality had been achieved, that feminism was incompatible with the everyday lives of women, and that women have 'to earn their place in the sun like everyone else' ('Public Reading').

Nonetheless, analyses of Trollope's writing have included some assessment of its relationship with feminism, and Trollope's novels do, unavoidably in the postfeminist

social context in which she is writing, contain references to feminist concerns. Significantly, however, feminism is both invoked and rebuked throughout the narratives, which in turn makes it difficult to identify the political stance of Trollope's fiction. It is the ambiguous position of these novels in relationship to feminism that has facilitated its positive interpretation; until now critics have only considered its apparently pro-feminist stance, which actually accounts for a very small aspect of her writing. The positive effects of the changes in gender relations brought about by feminism are acknowledged by Beatrice in *The Men and the Girls*, for example, an elderly lady who argues 'you are a person in your own right […] you don't necessarily – not necessarily at all – need a man to complete the equation' (300). Anna's daughter in *The Rector's Wife* is similarly insistent that 'women are no longer victims of circumstance' (133). The contexts in which the narratives are set are also ones that are clearly influenced by feminism. *A Village Affair*, for example opens with Alice listening to a discussion on *Woman's Hour* about self-examination, and includes scenes of female masturbation and sexuality between women as well as themes of domestic distress which have clear links to texts such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

In the majority of Trollope's novels the 'negative' aspects of feminism are, however, depicted in different ways. In one respect feminism is portrayed as overly-demanding and incompatible with women's everyday lives. In *Next of Kin* a father voices his concerns about his recently widowed daughter: 'how unfitted for this age when women seemed to have taken their own lives over to such effect, their own and anyone else's they could lay their hands on […] she wasn't made for modern womanhood' (252). Here feminism is thought to have made women ruthless and overpowering. In *The Choir*, Sally Ashworth has similar doubts about feminism's compatibility with the everywoman. She explains that feminists 'haven't a clue how ordinary women live so they despise them and brand them as disloyal. They are a separate sex from ordinary women' (125). On other occasions feminism is portrayed as something relevant to other people, concerned with battered wives, alcoholics and the working classes, not the Trollope woman – the feminine, middle-class wife and mother. I suggest that the reason for invoking feminism, whilst not always appearing to agree with it, is that by drawing on feminist language and issues these narratives acquire an air of controversy and rebellion. It also functions to position the novels in contemporary culture and clearly indicates that they are dealing with modern issues facing women, tapping into women's concerns about their roles and identity, and providing a language with which to articulate them. By then denying a feminist agenda, however – and insisting that whilst these characters are questioning the status quo they are not acting out of a feminist consciousness – the novels and the conclusions that they reach

cannot be judged by feminist standards. They cannot, in other words, be criticised for being insufficiently feminist.

When considering the feminist stance of Trollope's works it is her third novel, *The Rector's Wife*, to which critics have most often turned. The novel centres on Anna Bouverie, who is disillusioned with her life at home with her children and husband, Peter. She takes a part-time job at a local supermarket both so that she can send her youngest daughter to a private school and for her own satisfaction. Difficulties between Anna and her husband escalate when Peter accuses his wife of neglecting her domestic role and then, unbeknownst to Anna, tells her employer that she will not be returning to work. Meanwhile, increasing romantic interest is being paid to Anna by a newcomer to the village, Patrick O'Sullivan (whom she spurns), and by Jonathan Byrne, the brother of the newly appointed Archdeacon (with whom she begins an affair). The difficulties that Anna's desire for independence creates in her marriage are resolved when Peter is killed in a car accident, leaving Anna to legitimately pursue her own fulfilment away from the restrictions of both the church and her marriage. The dual pull of self-realisation and family responsibility for women is one of the narrative's primary themes, and I would agree illustrates the novel's engagement with issues pertinent to feminism.

In an examination of *The Rector's Wife*, Philips argues that the Aga-saga explores the tensions around 'femininity' and different expectations facing women in the 1990s, in terms of work and home life, and how they are to be resolved. Philips maintains that fiction can allow for the complexities and contradictions that surround the impact of feminism on women's lives to be explored in a way that 'feminism, as a political project, can only allow for […] to a limited degree' (14). Yet, she recognises that whilst the feminist project is acknowledged, and the desire for female independence recognised, they are expressed in limited terms with the heroine's difficulties being resolved not through any major conflict or by striking out alone, but within 'the terms of the family' (113). In the case of *The Rector's Wife*, Anna enacts a form of post-mortem reconciliation with her husband – she tells her son 'now that he's dead I feel I can be fond of him in peace' (250) – and remarks at Peter's graveside that 'It's lovely now […] I can love you in peace, I can remember things without bitterness' (284). She goes on to re-establish a relationship with members of the community who had previously found her behaviour unacceptable. By removing Peter, the narrative renders any need for divorce or any long-term conflict unnecessary, although the implication is that Anna had decided to leave her husband before the accident. She explains towards the end of the novel that 'I've been given freedom, but I would have left' (245), but her commitment to this plan of action never has to be tested. In addition, Peter's preoccupation with his work is also depicted as a form of affair, which makes Anna's

actions more understandable. She asks, 'is that morally worse than having an affair with duty? The withdrawing of the essence of yourself, of your emotional and imaginative generosity, is what kills relationships. I never withdrew mine' (244).

In her analysis of the novel, Liladhar agrees with Philips's argument that it largely upholds a traditional view of womanhood 'by reinstating Anna within the family and by re-establishing a new rector's wife, this exemplar of the Aga-saga serves to hold up one particular traditional kind of femininity' (8). Yet, she goes on to argue that the novel also contains a more subversive element which subtly undermines the highly idealised domestic femininity that it seems to support. Her conclusion stems from the way that the novel connects Anna's dissatisfaction to a wider issue regarding the difficult experiences of other wives, and she suggests that a project be set up within the diocese to support clergy wives.[89] Thus, in the language of the second wave, her personal difficulties become a political issue. Anna also refuses to marry her lover, Jonathan, deciding instead to retain her newfound independence. Liladhar argues that

> [b]y disclosing the dissatisfaction that many women, not just Anna, feel with such a role; by ultimately positioning Anna in a moderated familial role, one which allows her to no longer be the rector's wife but an independent woman in her own right; and by suggesting that the status quo will not be re-established in the rectory, this Aga-saga serves to challenge the very form of femininity which it simultaneously bolsters. (8)

The novel presents two modes of femininity for its readers to consider and 'to draw on in constructing and reconstructing their feminine identities' (Liladhar 5).

I agree with aspects of both Philips's and Liladhar's analysis. Anna's difficulties are expressed, and whilst they are resolved within the confines of the family unit, she does not move from one marriage to another, choosing instead to remain single. Whilst this conclusion is not 'subversive' – it does not represent a radical destabilisation of the accepted status quo – it does allow for a loosening of the normative masculine and feminine roles upon which the English novel often relies. Yet, these largely positive interpretations of the relationship between feminism and Trollope's fiction can only be achieved by focusing on this novel alone, and not the other numerous examples of her work. Trollope's unsympathetic portrayal of Peter (the reader is rarely given access to Peter's private thoughts so he is judged on his actions alone) increases readers' empathy for Anna, and she is 'rewarded' at end of the novel for attempting to overcome her problems with what is assumed to be a happy and stable domestic situation. As a widow, Anna's

[89] There are autobiographical accounts of being married to a church figure. Jane Williams, wife of Rowan William, Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote *Marriage, Mitres and Being Myself* (2008) in which she discusses the conflicting aspects of being a bishop's wife. Other examples include *Public People, Private Lives: Tackling Stress in Clergy Families* (2009) by Jean Burton and Chris Burton.

status as a single woman is the result of tragedy as opposed to failure as a wife, and so, free from blame within the narrative, she is able to proceed with her life. By focusing on this novel – Philips on its arc of 'frustration, escape and return' (*Women's Fiction*, 99) and reinstallation of Anna in the home at the end, and Liladhar on the heroine's rejection of a second marriage – and using it as a representative of the Aga-saga genre with which Trollope is considered to be synonymous, these analyses privilege the novels' celebration of domesticity and avoid recognising the more problematic messages her novels contain about women's roles and their relationships with the family and the home. The rest of this chapter explores further any claim to feminism Trollope's fiction has by examining the novels' problematic depiction of domesticity and the relationship between women and the home. In doing so, it connects the contemporary middlebrow novel of the 1990s to conservatism and backlash politics. It begins with a consideration of the heroines' unhappiness and the factors that drive them to pursue alternative ways of being.

Choosing, Not Chosen: Dissatisfaction, Female Frustration, and the Desire for Personal Fulfilment in Trollope

The ideal woman in the world of Trollope's heroines is polite, feminine, and often replete in pearls and conservative clothes. As one character in *A Passionate Man* observes, for example, regarding a woman in the village, 'Mrs Betts liked Liza. She approved of her clean, pretty appearance, the deference she showed to senior Women's Institute members, and her suitable, socially responsible job' (45). The ideal Trollope woman is always domestic and caring, and mindful of the expectations that are placed on her by others. It is with the heroine's dissatisfaction with this proscribed image and the circumstances of her home life in particular that the narratives often begin. The domestic difficulties that they experience stem largely from three issues. They can arise, firstly, from a resentment at the way in which they are always in relation to someone else who is 'more important', and looking after the needs of others prevents the heroine from fulfilling her own desires; secondly, from the lack of control that the heroine feels she has over her own existence, whether financially or in terms of having the terms of her life dictated by someone else; thirdly, from the lack of recognition that women's work at home is afforded. The novels depict their attempts (some more socially acceptable than others) to overcome these issues in order to find happiness, sometimes in the home and sometimes outside of it. I consider the source of this dissatisfaction is this section.

Throughout these novels women repeatedly articulate a frustration at being always in relation to their husbands or families and at being on the fringes of someone else's life as opposed to being at the centre of their own. In *The Choir*, Sally's reluctance to carry on in her failing marriage is connected to her frustration about what she considers to be the unequal nature of their relationship: 'I can't live like this any more, on the coat tails of someone else's life. We hardly know each other any more and I don't think I'm interested either' (200). Kate, in *The Men and the Girls*, who leaves her long-term partner for a small place of her own, expresses her relief at living alone and away from the demands of other people, thinking to herself that 'she loved walking to work, she loved walking, she loved the feeling that what she earned was hers to administer so that she that she seemed to inhabit and to rule a little kingdom of her own' (152). The feeling of being 'in relation to' is most explicitly expressed however by Liza in *A Passionate Man*. Whilst her future mother-in-law enjoys her new independent life after the death of her previous husband – 'it was eleven now and she was still in the bath, independent rather than dependent, choosing not chosen, a possessor rather than possessed' (90) – Liza ponders her relationship with her own husband, Archie:

> How to tell him, how to reach his true understanding and tell him that she had come to the end of a particular road on the map of their marriage, the road along which he had so far led her – by the hand [...] She wanted to step off the road for a moment and be alone. And she wanted him to recognise this, to recognise that things did not always stay as they had been, that needs changed and so did abilities. Liza wanted Archie to recognise *her* [emphasis in original]. (69)

Liza's thoughts here contain a number of important features about the development of many of Trollope's heroines. In the style of a *Bildungsroman*, or even the consciousness raising novels of the 1970s, they suggest that the heroine has undergone an important change, particularly in her perception of herself and her capabilities, which is the result of years of personal growth since meeting her husband.

The frustrations of Liza, Kate, and Alice stem from being treated as if they were the same girls who met their partners a decade before, and not as the women that they have subsequently become. Liza acknowledges the assistance of her husband (the distress Trollope's heroines express regarding their marriages is never so extreme that they wish that they had never met their partners), but, having quietly developed her confidence and talents alongside him, now wishes to put them to use. This desire to be seen in her own right often manifests in the heroine's decision to take up an old interest, something that used to form a significant part of her identity: in *A Village Affair*, for example, Alice returns to painting. It can lead the protagonist to undertake additional responsibility, which Anna does in *The Rector's Wife*. Alternatively, the heroine may seek external recognition from a

new person: Sally's relationship with Leo changes her perspective in *The Choir*, as does Alice's relationship with Clodagh, a new woman in the village, in *A Village Affair*. Finally, the desire to be seen as an individual may lead the heroine to separate herself from her partner altogether by moving out: Kate leaves James in *The Men and the Girls*, for example, in order to establish a new way of being. For Liza in *A Passionate Man*, it is a new job at a local school, and a flirtation with a younger colleague, that gives her the recognition she needs and satisfies her desire to 'spread [the] fledgling wings' (22) of her power and to 'move from the outer circle of their life, where she presently wheeled gently with the children, into the steering, driving heart of it' (22). Explicitly articulating the connection between recognition and her new job, she thinks to herself: 'I deserve this […] I deserve to be recognised for myself at last. Archie doesn't see me for what I am, he only sees me in relation to himself' (104). The heroine's desire to be independent is something that unites all of Trollope's novels.

In an extension of their discussion of the often unacknowledged effort that women put into family life, Trollope's novels also consider the denigration of women's domestic skills. The motivation for the female protagonists to seek recognition *outside* of the home often stems from the lack of recognition that they receive for their labours *within* the home, primarily from their husbands whose own public labours take priority. This both conscious and unconscious dismissal of 'women's work' is something that many of Trollope's female characters struggle with, and this issue is central to the representation of Bluey in *The Men and the Girls*. Where Liza and Anna look to paid employment for acknowledgement of their worth, this character looks to someone else's home for appreciation of her domestic talents that go unnoticed by her own husband. Bluey is a 'lapsed' academic, a marine biologist who has exchanged her interest in science, time spent in the laboratory, and academic writing for 'recipe books and clothes catalogues' (235). Her husband, Randolph, who spends his days in the lab of his Oxford college and goes on lecture tours, cannot understand this move towards domesticity and is bemused that she is unashamed of acknowledging her interest in 'baking, and people, and parties' (235).

Bluey's enjoyment of domesticity began after the birth of her son when 'she had turned, as a refuge, to domestic things, simple things, that seemed to represent a warm reality beside what now appeared to her the cold sterility of science' (236), but she knows that her husband 'despised her for making patchwork cushions and reading cookery books' (237).[90] When Bluey's son introduces her to James – whose younger partner Kate has recently left him – she begins to spend time at his house, Richmond Villas, with James,

[90] Bluey has, in many respects, embarked on an early form of 'retreatism' – the process of working women choosing to re-embrace domesticity. I explore this further in my chapter on Cusk.

Kate's daughter, Joss, and James's elderly Uncle Leonard. It is here that she finds an outlet for her hitherto unacknowledged domestic talents, and also for her loneliness. She spends her afternoons baking muffins in James's kitchen, sewing stray buttons back onto shirts, putting posies of pansies on the desk and making a Waldorf salad for supper. Not only do James and Leonard appreciate and admire her efforts, but they are also interested in them, and she describes spending an afternoon engaged in such activities 'while people spoke to her with gratitude and imagination' as being 'like coming out into the sunlight after a long time in the cold and rain' (237). Randolph is pleased that his wife has found a new group of friends – 'she was by nature gregarious but at the same time hadn't seemed able to get the hang of Oxford socially' (235) – and is happy that the result for him is that Bluey continues to launder his clothes, supply the cold oranges for him to juice, and look after the home. The only difference was that his wife 'didn't beg Randolph to take her to the movies or out to supper or to London' (236). This section of the novel highlights the need for domestic work for the pleasant running of everyday life, and for the comfort of all members of the household, but the reluctance to acknowledge that fact and make a gesture of appreciation in return.

The pursuit of employment for Anna in *The Rector's Wife* and Liza in *A Passionate Man* is indicative of the heroine's need for something of her own, independent of her husband and family, but also on a practical level her desire for her own income and consequently an increased control over her existence. Liza appreciates how her job gives her a role in the public sphere. She likes 'her new authority as teacher of the children of so many people who were not only [her husband Archie's] patients […] but guests at the same parties' (20), and refers to how her pursuit of a job was provoked by a desire to 'claw back some part of herself […] that was not devoted to Archie and the children' (15). But significantly she also expresses the importance of acquiring some financial independence:

> She always thought she would like some money of her own. Archie was as open as the day about money and perfectly prepared to give her anything she asked for, provided he had it, but oddly this very generosity put a constraint upon her capacity to ask for much. (15)

Here Liza articulates the difficulties facing women regarding finance (which were identified by second-wave feminists), which centre primarily around always having to ask their husband for money, and rarely having immediate access to it in order to finance any decisions or changes that they want to make.

It is Anna's desire for her bullied daughter to go to a private school (a change that her husband's income as a rector would be unable to finance) that provides her initial motivation to get a job in the local supermarket, whilst in *The Men and the Girls* it is by increasing her waitressing hours that Kate gains enough money to leave James and support

herself. Yet, whilst providing their heroines with opportunities in the public sphere, these novels return continually to a celebration of domesticity and the notion that, despite their brief absence, the home is where these women belong and where they will find happiness. Anna has been troubled by the career successes of old friends and is reminded when she walks past the bookstore in the window of which one of their novels is displayed that she has not achieved as much as she would have liked. Yet, when she goes to visit one of them she is struck by how unhappy her friend's marriage is. In *Other People's Children*, the professional Elizabeth also acknowledges her desire for contented domesticity despite her successes at work. Whilst she sits in her lover, Tom's, kitchen, which is also soon to be hers, Elizabeth:

> [c]ould acknowledge to herself at last, and with almost confessional relief, that it wasn't just wanting Tom that had overtaken her so powerfully [it was] the desire, from the position of being a single, professional woman, for the peculiar domestic power of the married female: the presiding, the organising, the quiet, subliminal dictatorship of laundry and Christmas turkeys and frequency of guests. (141)

Elizabeth feels that her attraction to domesticity is somewhat illicit, something that she must 'confess' presumably because, as a career woman, it is a feeling that she should not possess. The implication in this and other Trollope novels, however, is that a desire for domesticity is a positive thing, and in many cases a re-engagement with the private sphere, not the public, is what ultimately makes women happy. Taking charge of the home becomes equated with taking charge of their lives.

In addition to feeling that their worth goes unacknowledged Trollope's heroines are also preoccupied with what they consider to be their lack of agency, and in the novels this manifests primarily in them feeling that they do not have proper control over their own homes. In *Other People's Children*, Elizabeth's feelings of powerlessness in the house she shares with her new partner Tom – and the sense that her place with him is not secure that this represents – ultimately results in the dissolution of their relationship. These feelings are provoked by two main elements. Firstly, by the continuing presence of Tom's daughter Dale in the house, who, despite having moved out, refuses to acknowledge Elizabeth's position as Tom's partner and her authority within the home; and secondly, by the memory of Tom's dead wife (and Dale's mother) which, in a manner reminiscent of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), is repeatedly invoked as Elizabeth looks around her new home at the furniture and decoration this woman chose before her death.[91] This connection between women and houses is stressed again by one character in *Next of Kin*, who explains

[91] A recent article in praise of Du Maurier notes that this 'middlebrow writer is now more highly rated as a psychological realist' ('In Praise') on account of such unnerving inclusions as the lingering presence of dead wives.

that women always left 'their mark on houses, even houses they didn't like' (227). The only woman whose presence does not linger is Josie, Tom's second wife, who is engaged in a separate domestic dispute with her husband's ex-wife. In *Other People's Children* the house becomes conflated with Tom himself, and the right that each woman has to be close to him, as Elizabeth and Dale in particular compete for domestic territory and to protect their stakes in Tom. When Dale moves back into the house, Elizabeth decides that it is time for her to leave, and her relationship with Tom ends.

A similar loss of domestic control occurs in *The Rector's Wife* when the local church women think that Anna is neglecting her domestic duties in favour of her newly acquired supermarket job and decide to clean the house for her. In an earlier passage, when the women have offered their services and Anna has declined, she thinks about telling her daughter, Charlotte, why she has found their offer to do the chores so offensive, and even depressing:

> [t]hey were chores which, in a curious way, gave her an identity, and at the moment she was truly afraid of having no identity at all. She tried to explain this to Charlotte, to explain her sense of isolation and of losing what little control was left to her. (131)

After years at home raising children, Anna considers any authority that she might have to be bound up with her house. Consequently, she is dismayed when she arrives home to find not only that the carpets have been brushed, the bed made 'with hotel-like precision' (164) and her husband's pyjamas folded, but that Peter has sanctioned this domestic interference and violation of her privacy. At the end of the novel, happiness for Anna comes in the form of a house that she chooses for herself (as opposed to being given to her by the diocese) and in which she and her children can live without a man.

The move to this new property marks another move towards independence and a stronger sense of identity that being without Peter – and therefore no longer an adjunct to someone else's life – has given her. As she views the house, the narrative explains:

> [The new house] waited. It allowed her to open doors and windows and climb the staircase and investigate cupboards and trap doors. It let her look into the bathroom (very bad) and the kitchen (worse) and observe the discouraging boarding-house décor […] The fireplaces and mantelpieces were still original, there were proper cornices and deep skirting boards, and, above all, an unmistakable atmosphere of profound benevolence. (267)

The poor condition of the house does not affect Anna's desire for it, and it is clear that her attraction to it is based on the new and more independent life that it represents, not its facilities. *A Village Affair* concludes in a similar fashion, with Alice's move to a cottage after the breakdown of her marriage. Like Anna, Alice has also chosen a rundown house – 'uncompromising as well as ugly' (263) – over a more comfortable

version, a pretty stone cottage, elsewhere: 'Alice had been adamant. She had been adamant about a lot of things and choosing East Cottage rather than the pretty stone one was one of them' (263).

Taking the relationship between domestic space and self-governance further, I argue that choosing these houses represents a rejection of the expectations placed on these women, and a commitment to their own idea of what constitutes happiness, as opposed to what is imagined as happiness by others on their behalf. As Alice explains when one of the village women asks whether the ugly cottage is 'a hair shirt' – a form of self-punishment for having a lesbian affair with Clodagh – Alice says:

> It isn't horrible. It's real. You wait until I'm finished with it. You see – oddly enough – it's easier to bear things here. It feels mine. Partly because it isn't what's expected of me, I suppose. That isn't defiance, just the best way to go forward. (266)

These rundown houses also seem to promise a more authentic domestic experience for Trollope's heroines – one which they determine and which will in turn come to represent an identity that they have created themselves. Alice is excited at the prospect of renovating East Cottage and the changes she makes to it become representative of her progress in her new life apart from her husband. She promises her daughter, Natasha, that her small bedroom which 'smelled of mushrooms' (264) would be 'absolutely transformed' (264) and that the sitting room at East Cottage which had no carpet, just a piece of matting, 'was going to be wonderful too, just you wait' (264). Talking to Natasha about her dislike of the new house, Alice explicitly articulates the connection between the cottage and its future transformations with their progress as a family and the necessity of change:

> 'I know it's hard to feel it, but everyday we are going forward.'
> 'But I want to go *back*.'
> 'That's the saddest thing to do. Nothing is ever as good as you thought it was. Because *you* change. You see the old things with changed eyes and they *aren't* the same.' [emphasis in original] (264)

Like Alice and Anne, Liza in *A Passionate Man* takes delight in decorating Beeches House, the first house of her own (14). In *The Choir* too, Sally Ashworth's renewed energy and sense that 'she could do anything' manifests in an enthusiasm for domesticity, cooking 'complicated food' (156) and cleaning the house throughout. Whilst at the beginning of the novels the heroine's unhappiness is often connected to their domestic circumstances, by the end domesticity and contentment are reconnected and self development is articulated here as still being possible through an alternative approach to life in the home. Their consciousness has been raised but they still remain within the domestic sphere where, the novels imply, they belong.

The Limits of Independence: Bohemianism as Conservative Rebellion

As noted earlier, Trollope's novels do explore many of the same themes as feminist criticism including the power relations between men and women, the benefits for women of being financially independent, and the lack of recognition of domestic work. Yet, whilst Trollope's fiction and feminism consider similar issues regarding the role of women, feminism as an ideology is repeatedly rejected in these novels. In fact, in novels such as *The Choir* the overriding sentiment becomes explicitly antifeminist, and surprisingly for fiction written and consumed by women, is on occasion misogynistic. Trollope acknowledges her heroines' unhappiness but her novels are quite explicit about the way in which it can be legitimately expressed and the extent to which they can enact their rebellion. Trollope's fiction clearly indicates how this dissatisfaction should be expressed and it is largely in a conservative fashion. Within the confines of the small communities in which the women live, their small changes in behaviour may appear radical, can provoke significant dramatic interest in their neighbours and give the novels an air of controversy. In reality, however, there is a conservatism to their rebellion which allows only those who do not stray far from propriety to opt back into polite society.

I agree with Philips that 'female ambition is expressed only in very limited terms in these novels' (*Women's Fiction*, 101), and her point that the work these heroines undertake is rarely full-time or career-based (as I noted in the last section) but rather an extension of a hobby or a kitchen-table endeavour: 'the heroines often do have some employment or a creative skill, but these often take the form of a "feminine" accomplishment: writing poetry, watercolour painting, an ability with languages, an interest in church architecture or singing' (101). In addition to hobbies and activities, Trollope's characters also gesture towards defying expectation through their appearance. Clothes and jewellery often signify a heroine's bohemian, free-spirited nature, which separates her from other women. In *A Village Affair* Alice wears 'boots and shawls and clothes from India and Peru, while the wives of [her husband] Martin's colleagues wore navy blue loafers and striped shirts and pearl earrings' (50). Her separation from the other neat-haired mothers at her daughter's school is suggested by her long plait which drapes over her shoulder, whilst Felicity in *The Choir* wears 'swirling skirts and shawls [and walks] with her feet bare and her hair loose' (14) as if to reflect her esotericism. Activities and interests function in a similar way. The poems Felicity writes highlight her creative nature and 'elusive and remarkable mind' (14), as does Alice's painting and artistic decorating style – 'she painted borders round the rooms

of the cottage, and pictures on the cupboard doors' (50).[92] Alice and Martin get married in 1977, in a climate pervaded by the thinking of second-wave feminism, but the novel couches rebellion for Alice in the safe form of sleeping in a hammock whilst her partner is away on business, taking midnight swims and eating 'voluptuous cheese sandwiches' (40) whilst lying naked on the sofa. Whilst the narratives do leave room for dissent, it is clear that it must be contained in some manageable form.

The bohemian woman, who appears frequently in the middlebrow women's novel and whom many of Trollope's heroines can be regarded as, has a very specific function. She provides an antidote to middle-class expectations, but significantly is not compelled to be overtly radical by rejecting them outright, and often functions, I argue, as the renegade element of the narrative, upsetting the status quo or providing an alternative voice to the conservative majority of which the rest of the novel is often comprised.[93] With its cultural ties with modernism, art and the avant garde, bohemia offers a legitimate form of cultured rebellion for these women, though it is a rebellion that is largely reserved for middle- and upper-middle class women who are often able to pursue this kind of artistic lifestyle without any concern for money. Significantly, it is also a lifestyle that allows for a certain freedom of self-expression but does not necessitate that women abandon the family unit or domestic responsibilities completely. With its freeing-up of gender roles, bohemia provides a setting in which the female characters of the contemporary middlebrow novel can side-step conventional lives as wives and mothers, and, I suggest, simultaneously allows its readers to escape from their own domestic roles by enjoying the creative exploits of their fictional counterparts.

Whilst bohemianism provides an arena in which the women in these novels can express frustrations or act out against social expectations, I argue that any claim for the

[92] This description of Alice's approach to decoration is reminiscent of the interior of Charleston, the home and meeting place of many members of the Bloomsbury Group. Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant decorated the interior, and, inspired by Italian frescoes, painted the walls, doors, and fireplaces, amongst other things, using their distinctive, colourful style.

[93] In terms of other contemporary middlebrow authors, the bohemian woman is a feature of Rosamund Pilcher's *The Carousel* (1982), which depicts the story of Prue Shackleton, an independent girl who leaves London to visit her 'eccentric and bohemian' Aunt Phoebe. Phoebe is 'a true rebel', Prue explains, 'an artist and an accomplished painter, she was a character of such originality, with such careless regard of day-to-day conventions, that my mother had a hard time coming to terms with her sister-in-law' (5). Again, rebellion here is imagined as possessing creativity and dispensing with concerns about social expectation which, as is suggested by the cohabiting of Phoebe and her partner, includes marriage. Continuing with the disregarding of conventional relationships, the heroine of Mary Wesley's *Harnessing Peacocks* (1985), Hebe, has an even more relaxed view of sexuality and relationships. Hebe is brought up by her grandparents after her parents are killed in an air crash, but when she finds at the beginning of the novel that she is pregnant with the illegitimate child of a man she met at a festival in Venice, and learns of her family's plan for her to have an abortion, she runs away. The narrative rejoins Hebe a decade later when she is living in a small village, and paying for her son's boarding-school education by cooking for elderly ladies and offering her services to the local men as a prostitute – a lifestyle that Hebe enjoys but which contradicts her conservative upper-class background.

depiction of a significant controversy or rebellion that these novels could make is limited by the fact that they so often return their heroines to a normative situation.[94] In Trollope's fiction, this disbanding of an unconventional lifestyle in favour of conservatism is expressed in *A Village Affair* when Alice ends her lesbian relationship with Clodagh in favour of a more typical domestic scenario, as well as in many of her other novels through a return to a traditional family dynamic. I argue, therefore, that whilst these novels challenge the social expectations through an appeal to bohemianism, they ultimately conclude by reinforcing the view that, whilst other types of relationships may exist, heterosexual marriage and family life are what is most desirable. As highlighted by the return to domesticity with which *The Choir*, *A Village Affair*, and *A Passionate Man*, amongst others, conclude, a long-term rejection of the accepted – and expected – image of domestic femininity is never presented as an option. Liladhar argues regarding *The Rector's Wife* that 'within this particular exemplar of the genre, traditional femininity co-exists alongside an additional, contradictory femininity' (7), suggesting that the novel provides an alternative to traditional domestic femininity that both the heroine and the novel's readers can choose from. I argue that in fact an alternative is never really available within the social context of the novels, because when the protagonists go beyond what is considered to be an acceptable rebellion – i.e. one that does not cause any major disruption, whether by writing poems, painting, taking charge of their homes, or dressing in a bohemian style – they are cast out of society. Whilst superficially the novels may appear to offer both a traditional and alternative form of femininity, ultimately it is only to the traditionally feminine woman that the other characters, the narratives, and arguably the author herself, lend their support. Those who express sentiments more extreme than a mild dissatisfaction, by leaving their homes for good, or having an affair, are continuously reminded that they must reconcile their own happiness with the upset and disruption that they are leaving behind, which many of the women ultimately feel unable to do.

In many of Trollope's novels the protagonists' unhappiness and decision to reject social expectation are never presented as legitimate. When Kate, in *The Men and the Girls*,

[94] Halfway through Pilcher's novel, for example, it is revealed that Aunt Phoebe's unmarried status has not come about through choice but unavoidable necessity, and that a more conservative position as husband and wife is what she would actually have preferred. Prue explains to another character regarding the situation between her aunt and uncle: 'what's so bad about getting married? […] You know, they would have been married, years ago, if only Chips could have gotten a divorce. But he couldn't. So they compromised, and made the very best of their life together' (72). Although the reason Prue has come to visit Phoebe is in order to escape her mother's pressure to get married, we find her here talking positively about marriage and implicitly about the conventions of the nuclear family that accompany it. Similarly in Wesley's *Harnessing Peacocks*, the novel's apparent liberal attitude to female sexuality, and its depiction of Hebe as free-spirited and independent, is undermined at the end when the narrative restores order and the father of her son surprisingly reappears and Hebe agrees to marry him.

chooses to move out of her partner James's house and into a small flat by herself, the narrative describes how her cleaning lady, Mrs. Cheng, thinks to herself that 'given the circumstance of Kate's life, her misery was incomprehensible' (112). Although the sentence ends with 'but that in no way invalidated it [for Mrs Cheng]', in light of the frequency with which this woman tells Kate of the familial misery she has left behind, there is a sense that this is almost a politically correct afterthought, and an attempt to validate all women's experiences. Whilst critics, including Liladhar, have applauded Trollope for portraying female dissatisfaction and dealing with contemporary problems facing women, I suggest that many of her novels actually challenge the idea that they have any cause for complaint at all, and question whether in fact the problems they experience are not simply of their own making or imagination. When asked in reference to *Marrying the Mistress*, for example, in which Guy leaves his wife Laura for a younger mistress, whether her portrait of the wife figure is 'unforgiving', Trollope responds that 'women, you know, can so easily collude with the victim's view of themselves, almost encourage it in fact' ('Penguin Reading Guides'). The author's comments suggest that women's unhappiness does not have its roots in any real problems or difficult circumstances, but is instead often a product of their perception of themselves as disadvantaged or simply an inherent dissatisfaction.

This underlying principle of Trollope's fiction has overlaps with a view circulating in the 1990s, explored by Naomi Wolf, that feminism has led women to cast themselves as victims. In *Fire with Fire* (1993), Wolf labels this idea as 'victim feminism'. She defines it as being when 'a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness' and explains that it 'is by no means confined to the women's movement; it is what all of us do whenever we retreat into appealing for status on the basis of feminine specialness instead of human worth, and fight underhandedly rather than honourably' (147). She explains that whilst there 'is nothing wrong with identifying one's victimisation' (148), it important that it does not become part of one's identity.[95] Unlike Wolf, however, Trollope's novels do not encourage women to recognise their capacity to change things for the better, given that the consequences for those characters who do so are rarely positive or long-lasting. Instead, whilst they appear to recognise their heroines' frustrations, the novels often contain an underlying message which asks whether there is any real reason for women to complain at all. Alternating back and forth between sympathy and condemnation in their attitudes to these women's situations, the novels invoke a sense of understanding regarding the

[95] Wolf, however, differentiates her argument from those of other feminists, such as Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe, whom she argues take the challenge to women's victimhood too far – for example by portraying date-rape victims as hysterical and arguing that women's fear of sexual assault is excessive – with the result that the real difference in power between men and women (such as men's superior strength) are erased.

women's actions – often giving other characters sympathetic speeches about their appreciation of the protagonist's circumstances – and ostensibly present themselves as supportive narratives, but then negate this support by delivering upon them some form of punishment, whether in terms of terrible guilt, social isolation, or at the extreme, domestic violence.

In *The Men and the Girls* the narrative describes how guilty Kate feels about leaving James – what 'troubled her was the knowledge […] that she had left behind her a misery as profound as her own new delight' (151) – and whilst both her friend Helen and the elderly Beatrice reassure her that her decision is legitimate, the novel's conclusion suggests otherwise. Helen explains to Kate that she is wrong to feel guilty about pursuing her own decisions, and tells her that 'he hasn't thumped you or raped you or persecuted you mentally, so you are falling back into the old stereotyped thinking of being afraid that you have no good reason for leaving, therefore you are the guilty party' (114). Beatrice criticises the refusal of some men to adapt to changes in gender roles: 'there are still men around who cannot accept that society has moved on in its attitude to a woman's place' (299). Yet, despite these expressions of understanding and support about adopting an 'alternative' femininity, by the end of the novel Kate has been the victim of a violent assault by a spurned boyfriend, her daughter has chosen to remain with Kate's ex-partner rather than join her mother, and when Kate decides that she wants to return to the house and the family that she has left she is turned away:

> 'I've come to ask,' Kate said, 'if you will marry me.' […] She leaned forward. 'James,' she said, 'James.' He looked up at her. She tried a smile. She said, 'I've left it too late. Haven't I?' and then she waited for his confirming nod. (319)

The words spoken by those who are unsupportive of the protagonist's actions actually seem closer to the truth of the narratives themselves. Trollope's novels suggest that women can pursue this alternative image, but ultimately it will make them and everyone else around them – particularly husbands and children – unhappy. The best solution therefore is to quietly suffer your dissatisfaction, or to find an acceptable outlet for it, as the thrill of escape will only be temporary.

For the Love of a Good Man: Bad Wives and Hurt Husbands

Imelda Whelehan writes in *The Feminist Bestseller* (2005) that

> women with careers would continue to be seen as oddities, and in the late 1980s they were often portrayed as selfishly putting their own needs before that of their family [and] that their success had cost them dear in personal

terms. (141)

Whilst career women are rarely a feature of Trollope's fiction, her novels do continually imply that the happiness of her heroines comes at the expense of their family's welfare. One anonymous critic of *Marrying the Mistress* remarked that, given that the author herself has not only been divorced on two occasions owing in some part, it has been suggested, to her success as a novelist, it is surprising that the reader's sympathy is repeatedly directed at long-suffering husbands:

> For a woman with two marriages behind her, Joanna Trollope is unexpectedly indulgent to men. Indeed, the main unreality of this novel is her attribution of complicated emotions to her male characters. Men who take off with girls half their age could quite often give you a robustly simple explanation of their actions – one that never features here. (*The Book Club Bible*, 206)[96]

Whilst Trollope's own marital status is irrelevant, I agree that there exists a continual bias in the narratives towards their male characters, which undermines any claim to being supportive of women's pursuit of self-realisation that these novels could have. It is not that the male characters are always portrayed as good and moral in contrast to their badly behaved wives. In fact the men in these novels can be violent, unfaithful, unforgiving and uncompromising. It is explained, for example, that one character in *The Spanish Lover* 'reflected, and not for the first time, that it was a great pity he suffered from a middle-class male reluctance to thump his wife' (219). Whenever these characteristics are displayed, however, the narrative defuses the situation and limits the extent of its impact, thus containing the degree of blame that is placed on its male characters and mitigating against their poor reception by the reader. This diffusion is primarily achieved in three ways – by providing extensive insight into how the male characters feel about their situations; by showing how their bad behaviour has been provoked by their wives as opposed to being a product of their own agency; and by having violence depicted off-page.

In *A Village Affair* Alice's husband Martin is devastated by the news of his wife's illicit relationship with Clodagh, but contains his emotions by opting instead for politeness. The narrative describes him sympathetically, and explains how, after 'weeping', he 'had been polite all evening. Alice wondered if she had ever found him as lovable as she did now' (185). Alice thinks her husband is 'being wonderful' and is 'full of admiration' for him (185) and Martin's devastation and quiet acceptance of the impending dissolution of their marriage is clearly outlined. '"Don't worry", he said, forcing a little bark of laughter. "I'll do

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[96] In an interview for the *Guardian*, Trollope refers obliquely to a tension that exists between writers when they live together, echoing reports that Trollope's bestselling status was a source of difficulty between her and her husband: 'Writing in an empty house for the first time was hard, she admits, "but if you are living with someone, particularly another writer, there are different tensions, so you are only swapping one set of thorns for another. At least these are of my choosing and making"' (Allardice, par. 13).

the decent thing. I'll sleep in the spare room" […] And then he went softly across the dark room and opened the door' (187). In the next chapter, however, when the narrative moves to the next day, the reader is told that that Alice has gone to the vicar, Peter Morris, the night before to tell him that Martin has tried to rape her. She outlines to him what has happened in a telling exchange:

> 'He kept roaring at me, "You're a lesbian, do you hear me, you're a lesbian"
> 'But you are. If what you tell me of you and Clodagh is true, you are.'
> 'And is that so wrong?'
> 'Yes,' Peter Morris said. 'It is very wrong'. (191)

Rather than condemning Martin's action, the discussion becomes instead about the validity of what Martin has said to his wife (the vicar insists that Martin is correct in his observations of her), and about the propriety of Alice's behaviour not that of her husband. It is Alice's guilt that is foregrounded, and the novel implies that her actions have driven Martin to violence. She is told that her happiness with Clodagh is an 'illusion' and a 'selfish, short-term pleasure' (191). The vicar condemns the women's relationship and explains that 'there is nothing good in a pleasure which inevitably creates innocent victims' (191) and when Alice asks if she was not a victim of her circumstances she is told that she had 'free will' and that there was 'always a choice, all of your life' (192). The suggestion here is not only that Alice has brought about her initial unhappiness, but is arguably also responsible for her attempted rape, as well as the damage done to her family.

The fact that Martin's actions have happened off-page, as opposed to being described as they are happening, means that the violent details of the encounter are never revealed to the reader, and the primary impression of him that remains is one of a man who has been devastated by his wife's betrayal. Yet, whilst his violent side is hidden from view, the full extent of his distress is unequivocally outlined. Staying with his parents, he ponders his mother's advice that he should emotionally 'let go':

> If only she knew! He suspected that if he let go entirely, he would die, and most days, for a spell at least, he wished for that. He imagined the cool, quiet, dark state of nothingness […] he could not bear the thought of any further existence, in whatever form. The most desirable state was nothingness, just not to be. That seemed to him the only state in which there could be no torment. (215)

The narrative provides extensive access here to Martin's mental dialogue and suicidal thoughts, and in doing so provides the rationale behind his actions – he was emotionally overwrought – and reduces the negative reading of his character which would otherwise have taken place. In fact, the narrative seems to encourage sympathy to be redirected from Alice to the suicidal Martin, and the blame to be placed with Alice because of that to which she has reduced her husband. With regard to the 'decline in manhood' and the

emasculation of men by feminism Faludi notes that 'in a prominent *Sunday Times* magazine article in autumn 1990, Neil Lyndon dismissed feminist complaints about women's positions – 'it is hard to think of one example of systemic and institutionalised discrimination against women today' – and asserted that men are the new 'second-class citizens' (Faludi, 85). Lyndon asserted that not only are men 'suffering from systematic disadvantages themselves, but also the trivialisation of their manhood' (Faludi, 85). When faced with the two characters – Alice who is upset, and the trivialised Martin who is distraught and suicidal – the narrative almost asks the reader to judge which is worse: attempted rape, or the emasculation of a husband by his wife's actions.

The severity of domestic violence is similarly mitigated against in *A Passionate Man*, by the inclusion of the emotional thoughts of the male character after an offence. Archie Logan becomes aggressive whilst in bed with his wife Liza and post-coitus has a desire to hit her when she comments that he often makes their lives 'awkward' (98). This is followed in the next section, however, by a description of Archie's regret at his behaviour. This is in a paragraph in which he makes a connection between sex and violence, and which, in a departure from middle-class propriety, is written in a style almost reminiscent of a bodice-ripper: 'I must go back, he thought. I must go back and apologise properly. For behaving like a brute. I felt fierce and hungry. Liza seemed too small, too sweet for what I wanted. What happened?' (99). This combination of violence and remorse is similarly played out in *The Men and the Girls*, in which domestic abuse is a main preoccupation and a women's refuge provides one of the settings. In a scene which is more graphic than is usual in Trollope's work, Kate's new boyfriend throws her against the wall and bangs her head, leaving her with black eyes and a swollen face. This is followed the next day by a delivery of flowers and a note. Unlike in *A Village Affair* the violent scene is described for the reader, and the remorse expressed by the perpetrator is not as explicit as in *A Passionate Man*, which would suggest that this man's actions are less condoned than in other examples of Trollope's fiction. However, the description of Kate's experience of the women in the refuge undermines any significant condemnation of the actions of these violent men; Kate suggests that the assault of the woman with whom she is sharing a room, but whom Kate finds irritating, by her husband might have been warranted. She says, 'I can't stand Sonia much longer; I'm even beginning to feel a twinge of sympathy for her dead husband' (297). Even in light of serious examples of violence, Trollope's novels are still reluctant to condemn men who behave violently, proffering instead a description of their regret and emotional turmoil, or else implying that their female victims have, to some extent, been to blame.

In *A Passionate Man* there is a display of emotion, as well as a description of a male character's thoughts, in which – unlike for Alice in *A Village Affair* – Archie's infidelity is interpreted almost positively as a sign of the depth of his feeling as opposed to as an act of betrayal. His affair with his new stepmother, Marina, becomes an admirable act of rebellion against the stereotype of the unfeeling man as he accuses women of reserving emotions for themselves. Entirely inverting the expected emotional gender dynamic of sensitive women and unemotional men, he says to Marina that

> [W]omen have the monopoly in feelings, don't they? Women are the ones whose lives are limited by frustration, burdened by society's refusal to let them fulfil themselves, women are the ones trapped by stereotype. Right? That's it, isn't it? I'm not allowed inside that sacred personal life, am I, because I'm a man. I've got my work, I'm the breadwinner, that must satisfy me. (173)

I argue that the implication here is that it is not Archie's wife Liza, who aims to escape the feeling of being 'trapped in littleness' (208) by finding self-fulfilment in her teaching job, with whom we should sympathise. The reader's sympathy and understanding should instead lie with Archie himself, who is looking for greater emotional connection than his wife allows him. Highlighting the novel's contradictory position regarding the actions of men and women, Liza's flirtation with a younger co-worker, driven by her desire to be seen afresh as the woman she is now, is portrayed instead as an embarrassing error in judgement when she finds that he has had a partner all along. Her husband's affair, however, is portrayed within the novel as emerging from a positive desire for intimacy and feeling that he feels men are denied.

Throughout Trollope's fiction, women who pursue their own interests are portrayed as bad wives, but it is those who explicitly identify themselves as feminists, and are unapologetic in their actions and opinions, that are considered to make the worst partners. In *The Choir*, Leo's first wife Judith is portrayed as uncompromising, as making 'no concessions to a shared life at all' (77). All she wants is to sing and play her flute and, most significantly, 'to work, increasingly, for the women's movement' (78). Her dedication to feminism is prioritised over domestic tasks and so the couple lived 'in squalor and acrimony' when Judith 'took to going to Greenham Common for weekends' (78). Her feminism results both in her being arrested – 'Leo went to try and prevent her from going to jail [but] she told him to go to hell' (78) – and in the couple's divorce. Judith and Leo's new partner, Sally Ashworth, are compared to one another, and it is clear that Sally's decision to sacrifice everything (including her son from her previous marriage) is what makes her succeed in her relationship with Leo where Judith failed. Feminist 'selfishness', and a refusal to adhere to the traditional expectations of a wife, similarly comprise the main aspects of Nadine's character in *Other People's Children*. Matthew is initially attracted to

Nadine's bohemian free-spiritedness. The narrative notes that, on meeting her, it 'had seemed like someone flinging open a window to let great gales of wild, salty air into the confined stuffiness of Matthew's life' (15). Her unconventional approach to life goes beyond the acceptable, conservative rebellion offered by bohemia, however, to encompass strong beliefs about gender politics and the role of women. As in *The Choir* this female rebelliousness is portrayed as incompatible with the desired domestic calm that wives in Trollope's novels are required to create, and Nadine eventually drives her husband away. As in Judith's case, the demise of the marriage is explicitly linked to Nadine's feminism:

> It had started when Nadine had gone off to join a women's camp at the gates of a military base in Suffolk almost eight years ago, and even though she came home again, she couldn't stop. She fell in love with being anti things – anti-motherhood, anti-marriage […] anti any kind of order. (15)

Feminism – represented in both Nadine's and Judith's cases by a women's camp – is portrayed here once again as contrary to marriage and motherhood, and it is Nadine's privileging of her politics over her family that is presented as the reason behind Matthew's affair with Josie, whom he eventually marries. Once again, infidelity by a man is excused here as Nadine is blamed for driving her husband away because she has failed to be a good wife.

These examples from Trollope's fiction suggest that women's privileging of themselves over their husbands is regarded as damaging, and that their 'un-wifely' behaviour can cause their partners to leave them or to act in a way that they would not ordinarily do – often violently. The implication therefore is that to be a traditional wife is good. However, I suggest that whilst this is true in most cases, in *A Village Affair* and *Marrying the Mistress* this message is complicated as the usual dynamic of Trollope's novels is reversed, implying that women are to blame for the unhappiness of others regardless of how they behave. Where in other novels it is the wife's *failure* to be traditionally domestic and observant of the needs of others that is the problem, in these books women who are *too* wifely are also demonised – this time for being too preoccupied with their domestic role. In *A Village Affair* Alice discusses with her father why he has left her mother, Elizabeth, after so many years of him his infidelity:

> 'I haven't been a *faithful* husband.'
> 'That's awful. I couldn't stand it.'
> […]
> 'I wasn't unfaithful in order to hurt your mother.'
> 'I know that. It's just that she has nothing else' [emphasis in original]. (46)

Peculiarly, Elizabeth's focus on her role as a wife is cited as the reason for the breakdown of her marriage. A tension and problematic contradiction consequently emerges around what kind of behaviour it is that Trollope's work does advocate for women. When

combined with other accounts of the consequences of women's behaviour in Trollope's fiction, it appears from this novel that, in the majority of instances, female characters are to blame for any difficulties that emerge, regardless of how 'well' they have behaved. Elizabeth says to her daughter that

> I know he won't come back. I have to face having dedicated myself to a man who is quite able simply to remove himself and leave me with the ashes of our life together. My life was his. Now I don't have one. (46)

Alice's response, highlighting Elizabeth's apparent culpability, is simply 'perhaps […] he didn't *want* all that dedication' [emphasis in original] (46). If dedication is desired in some instances and rejected in others, it is difficult to see exactly what kind of women Trollope novels expect their characters to be.

Similarly, in *Marrying the Mistress* Laura's reluctance to leave the house and garden, in which she has invested so much of her time, as part of a divorce settlement is considered unreasonable. She explains to a friend regarding her home, 'sometimes I think this is all I've done, all I've achieved. When I think of myself, Hill Cottage and the garden is how I think of myself […] If I go […] I'll vanish' (157). Yet despite her ensuing existential crisis, Laura receives little sympathy particularly from Trollope herself who remarked in an interview that, 'right through their marriage Laura had always told Guy that she wasn't really good enough for him, but, nonetheless, left him with the feeling that he's got something fundamentally wrong, that he still owed her something' ('Penguin Reading Guides'). These examples contradict the celebration of domesticity in many of her other novels, and their appreciation of women who construct their lives around the home, as well as their advocation of traditional gender roles.

Trollope acknowledges the difficulties of running a home – 'no one should belittle how hard it is to keep house and bring up a family' she has commented in interview – but she clearly asserts that 'what you must never say is that it is a sacrifice. Laura has used it as an excuse and she is quite manipulative' ('Penguin Reading Guides'). I argue however that, judging from the experiences of many of her female characters, the maintenance of a stable domesticity often does involve significant sacrifices, which novels including *A Village Affair* and *The Men and the Girls* imply that women should always be ready to make. The negative treatment of the 'manipulative' Laura consequently suggests that in Trollope's fiction women are always to blame – either for sacrificing too little, or else for complaining that they are making sacrifice at all. By contrast, Laura's husband Guy, who has been carrying on an affair for seven years with a younger woman whom he met on train, is positively construed as someone who, unlike many of Trollope's women, is right to seize his chance of happiness. I contend that in these novels women are consistently blamed for their

husbands' negative actions and are repeatedly regarded as the primary cause of the majority of the domestic dramas that feature.

'A Good Mother Makes a Happy Home': Women's Fulfilment and Damaged Children

In *A Passionate Man* Liza is preparing a Sunday lunch of glazed lamb whilst wearing an apron which says 'A Good Mother Makes a Happy Home' across its front. Her husband, a doctor, is still asleep in bed after making a late-night call. Not only does this scene represent the ideal domestic scenario in Trollope's fiction but it also stresses the inextricable link between mothering and domesticity that runs throughout these novels. The importance of mothers is referred to continuously – as Kate tells her daughter in *The Men and Girls*, 'households without mothers […] just aren't [households]' (138) – and women who sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of their children are portrayed positively. Yet, despite this advocation of mothering, the narratives continually call the maternal skills of the majority of their heroines into question, and are littered with examples of absent or apparently bad mothers. Maternal absence takes many forms. In *Other People's Children* and *Next of Kin*, for example, women die and their children struggle to deal with their grief. One character has difficulties controlling her emotions after the death of her mother and regularly sabotages her father's relationships, whilst another is left isolated from the rest of her family. Some, such as Alice's mother Elizabeth in *A Village Affair* are absent emotionally, whilst others including Alice's mother-in-law are too domineering. The implication, therefore, is that whilst a good mother can make a happy home, any failure in this regard can result in serious domestic difficulty. It also becomes clear within these novels that the source of many of the characters difficulties can be traced back to a flaw in their mothers.

Fathers, on the other hand, are largely portrayed positively and in many cases are the ultimate saviours of their children. Where mothers are distant, Trollope's fathers are often emotionally engaged with their offspring and offer better emotional support than their female counterparts. Despite Alice's disdain for her philandering father at the beginning of *A Village Affair*, it is to him and not her mother Elizabeth that she turns at the end of the novel for support and advice after leaving Martin. The narrative explains that 'Alice, who had never been a demonstrative child in the least, seemed to want Sam to hold her; so he did' (253). There is a similar turn towards the father in *Marrying the Mistress*, when it is their unfaithful father whom the children are inclined to support in the separation, not

their mother. Elizabeth is presented as an emotionally cold and unaffectionate character throughout *A Village Affair* (Alice's children cannot believe that she is their grandmother) and it seems that in the search for security the morally reprehensible Sam is a safer prospect than this mother. However, whilst this portrayal is indicative of Trollope's sympathetic handling of fathers, it also has implications for how the controversial aspects of *A Village Affair* – most notably with regard to the heroine's move towards taking greater control of her life – should be read.

Alice's rejection of both Clodagh and Martin in favour of life with just her and the children seems to ostensibly mark an embracing of independence and an eschewing of expectation. Liladhar remarks that the heroine of *The Rector's Wife* chooses not to marry or cohabit with her new lover because all she is 'interested in just now is independence' (Trollope, *The Rector's Wife*, 277) and the same can arguably be said of Alice's decision. I suggest instead that, whilst the narrative may superficially appear to support female independence, it in fact argues for the benefits of the obverse by having Alice rekindle her relationship with her father. Her father comes to replace the male authority that she has rejected in both her husband and in her father-in-law, whose offer to support her financially she declines. Unlike her mother, who visits for two days after Alice has moved into her own home, Sam comes to the new cottage most weekends and the narrative describes him as 'an enormous asset, not only emotionally, but also because he proved to be very capable with tools. He was delighted with himself over this' (266). He is described as giving the house 'a solidity' and his presence is considered to be essential to the daily running of the family as 'rituals had formed at once around him, as grandfather and as man, little tendrils of the instinct for security reaching out to cling to him' (261). He becomes not simply a help, but a vital part of the household, and it is suggested that the family are much better for having this male figure in place. As Alice looks increasingly to her father both for support and his assistance with DIY ('men's' work), traditional gender dynamics are re-established with Sam virtually taking over the role of the husband, and any disruption to the social and familial order that her affair with Clodagh has had is resolved.

The caring and supportive father figure, who stands in contrast to the 'selfish' or ineffective mother, features in other Trollope novels. When Sally Ashworth decides to move away with her new partner in *The Choir*, it is with his grandfather Frank that her son Henry decides he wants to live; it is Frank who provides a stable home for the boy when his mother's actions disrupt their lives. He sets about making the child comfortable, in contrast to the house that Henry used to share with his mother which now stands empty. The narrative explains:

> They went shopping together for curtains and posters and an imitation art-nouveau bedside lamp with a pink petalled glass shade that Henry much admired […] Frank insisted on collecting him from Blakeney Street and driving him up to the Cathedral, which Sally found at once touching and irritating and Henry thought was wonderful because it saved him an uphill walk. (309)

Frank's love for Henry is clearly indicated through the changes he makes to his house, and his efforts to incorporate his grandson into his life – virtually stepping into the maternal role – by which Henry is 'entranced' (309). Similarly it is with James, and not her mother Kate, that Joss decides to stay in *The Men and the Girls*, even though he is not her biological father. She explains, 'it's more like a family there' (241). In *Other People's Children* Matthew is the stable presence in his children's lives, 'a necessary presence making tea, yawning in the kitchen' (119) the morning after he and Nadine quarrelled or 'Nadine went off somewhere and left Matthew to cope' (119). Whilst domestic life is ostensibly what these novels suggest women are best suited to, it is often the male characters who interject in difficult situations to provide the best home for their children. Any prior displays of domestic ineptitude are forgotten. The question of why fathers, husbands and grandfathers have failed to assist women on previous occasions (which has often contributed to women's increased resentment and the subsequent breakdown of a marriage or other relationship) is also never raised. When this is combined with their condemnation of women's actions and inability to continue in their proscribed roles, it becomes clear that there is a continual censuring of women in these novels, and a celebration of men which is at odds with previous interpretations of Trollope's work.

The failure of feminists to be good wives is accompanied most notably in *Other People's Children* and *A Spanish Lover* by their failure to be good mothers. Feminists are presented in Trollope's work as being against motherhood, and consequently as damaging to their children. Philips writes, regarding the depiction of children in the Aga-saga, that 'child characters are rarely sentimentalised, just frequently not there, conveniently stowed away in schools, colleges, and untidy bedrooms, the better to allow the heroine an unencumbered space in which to find "herself"' (102). I disagree, however, and argue instead that in Trollope's fiction the inclusion of children, and accompanying extended descriptions of their feelings, play an important role in how the heroine's act of self-discovery to which Philips refers here has a detrimental effect on those around her. Becky, Rufus and Clare are portrayed as being traumatised by the consequences of Nadine's actions, and implicitly her feminism, in *Other People's Children*. Clare is falling behind at school because there is nowhere to do her homework in the rundown cottage Nadine has insisted on buying after the divorce, her lack of domestic skill means that they live in squalor, and the children are offered breakfasts of 'cereal softened with long-life orange

juice out of a carton, because there was no bread or butter or milk' (51). It is on account of these things that Matthew's new wife Josie considers Nadine to be a 'rotten mother' (77) and it is in contrast to this image of parenting that Josie plans to mother her new stepchildren by providing them with 'meals at regular intervals and a clean, cheerful house and no rows' (76). Nadine's emotional volatility has a negative effect on her children, and the narrative describes how Becky, who is compelled to defend her mother whilst simultaneously feeling obliged to take responsibility for her, really feels about her mother's parenting:

> Nadine was a mother, a mother three times over, but she wasn't what you thought of when you said the word 'mother' to yourself. She was more, Becky was coming to realise, like someone who needed a mother herself, a higher authority who'd help her get her act together. (157)

Here Nadine's 'spirited' nature is understood to represent both a lack of maturity and a lack of concern for her children's welfare, which means that they feel obliged to parent both themselves and their own mother. Nadine's preoccupation with undermining stereotypes and being politically engaged is presented as being incompatible with her maternal obligations. The desire for women – whether mother or wife – to have an identity outside of the domestic space is always implicitly condemned in Trollope's novels.

The consequences of women pursuing their own self-fulfilment when they have children, is explored in *The Spanish Lover* through the character of Barbara. In the 1960s Barbara leaves her ten-year-old twins, Frances and Lizzie, with her husband for ten months when she goes to Morocco and exchanges 'tweaking chair covers' (35) and planning her daughters' educations for the 'hippie trail' (35). In a speech reminiscent of the arguments of second-wave feminism, she tells her husband that 'I'm breaking out […] Living here is like living in a straight-jacket. I'm forty. If I don't break out now I never will and I'll break down instead' (35). On her return she announces that she is glad to be back, but the narrative describes what she had missed whilst she had been away, including the girls changing school, and how her commitment to feminism affects how her daughters grow up. Whilst Barbara allows them more freedom and independence, Lizzie is 'discouraged from domesticity for which she showed such aptitude, and Frances from the wayward introspection which was her natural inclination and which wasn't, in Barbara's view, positive enough' (38). Barbara's politics continue to have an effect on her relationship with her daughters once they have grown up as Lizzie disappoints her by getting married, and she frowns at Frances reading English Literature at university 'instead of something with a purposeful application, like sociology' (38). Frances later understands Barbara's actions as a 'bid for freedom' (172) but Lizzie cannot accept it. Regarding Frances's defence of their mother, Lizzie thinks: 'Barbara had left them, as ten years olds, for almost a year. Lizzie

would rather have her hands cut off than contemplate doing anything so selfish and unmaternal' (105). Barbara's actions remain unforgivable for Lizzie, given her role as a mother.

Trollope continues to ponder the relationship between feminism and motherhood, although in a more indirect way than in *The Spanish Lover* for example, in her later novels published in the 2000s, including *The Girl from the South* (2002) and *Second Honeymoon* (2006). Taking inspiration from Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* these novels turn their attention to the role of the singleton and consider the difficulties experienced by adults now in their late twenties and thirties, namely those children who have grown up in the aftermath of second-wave feminism. Discussing in an interview her focus on the generation whom she considers to 'have so much, yet to be […] so unhappy and lost', she explains that 'I've been thinking about this ever since *Bridget Jones* – that novel would never have touched such a universal nerve that hadn't been raw in the first place, I'm sure' ('Interview with Joanna Trollope', par. 5) With regards to the relationship problems experienced by many of the single characters in these later novels, as well as the difficulties that many of the female characters experience trying to juggle different demands, Trollope explains that she wanted to explore questions such as:

> Did the Sixties Swingers make, actually, very careless and selfish parents? […] Does the breakdown of family life make the young turn to each other for support instead – i.e. to those as inexperienced as themselves? Has the woman's movement a part to play? ('Interview with Joanna Trollope', par. 7).

Trollope has said that all of her novels focus on the consequences of choice – both for the person choosing and those around them – and the sacrifices that have to be made when making a choice. I argue, therefore, that what runs through all of her fiction, particularly those novels published in the 1990s, is a preoccupation with the damage that women's pursuit of self-fulfilment, as encouraged by feminism, can do to their own families, and the effects it can have on later generations.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the role played by marketing – the function of covers, format, and imprint – and the presentation of a novel as a tangible commodity in the creation, and subsequent perception, of a novel as a 'quality' product. It also notes the way in which the professional image of an author is created not only through her writing, but also her appearances at literary festivals, affiliations with literary bodies, and whether she has

received an award for her work, amongst a range of other things. It is factors such as these, I argue, that have served to position Trollope as a more middlebrow, as opposed to popular, author, despite her bestselling status. I suggest that her work has provoked a range of conflicting responses because of the difficulty critics and reviewers have experienced in their attempts to identify with any certainty or clarity what kind of fiction Trollope is producing and what kind of author she is. Whilst some critics have praised her writing, others, such as Self, have suspected that the image and impression of Trollope's novels is inconsistent with their reality – that, to reiterate Self's comments, Trollope is a 'lower middlebrow novelist who has just enough sophistication to be able to convince her readership that they may be getting an upper-middlebrow product' (par. 1). As with Brookner, Trollope's novels illustrate concerns about the middlebrow's ability to pass as highbrow, and equally for it to enable the lowbrow to masquerade as something qualitatively superior. The concern about the middlebrow novel is, in other words, that the reader is duped into thinking that they are consuming one kind of novel, and that the middlebrow is somehow deceiving them.

Where Trollope's fiction has on previous occasions been analysed in terms of romance and popular culture, I argue here that discussions of her novels in newspapers and reviews reveal a preoccupation with the instability of cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic boundaries, which is a key aspect of any exploration of the middlebrow novel. In addition, Trollope's fiction is also thematically consistent with the definition of the middlebrow novel offered in the introduction to this thesis: it demonstrates a concern with gender, nation, and domesticity, and documents the fashions and changes in middle-class existence. This chapter also notes the factors that have served to afford Trollope's work a literary respectability, including its overlap with the novel of manners. I would like to add, as a final note, that Trollope's longevity as an author has also contributed to her position as a relatively respected writer with a credible body of work. Writing for over twenty years, Trollope has produced sixteen contemporary novels, the most recent of which, *Daughters-in-Law*, was published in 2011. She is an author whose work has captured the zeitgeist of the twentieth century, and she continues to produce novels that document the changing nature of society. In doing so, she has become both a form of cultural commentator and an established literary voice.

I focus upon Trollope's earlier works in this chapter because it is with regard to novels such as *The Choir*, *A Village Affair*, and *The Rector's Wife* that the most interesting and significant responses have been generated by readers, critics, and reviewers. It is also for these novels that Trollope is most noted, and which have the greatest overlap with middlebrow culture. Her later novels, including *A Girl from the South* and *Friday Nights*

(2009) share a greater affiliation with chick lit in their focus on single women living and working in cities, and, with the addition *The Other Family* (2010), part of which is set in Newcastle, characterise a departure from her examination of small-town life. The current Conservative political climate, however, shares many similarities with the period of Conservative governance in the 1980s and 1990s from which, I contend, Trollope's earlier novels emerged. The idea that society does not exist in the 1980s has been replaced with the Conservative notion of the Big Society in 2010,[97] and recent remarks made by politicians from the right are reminiscent of the backlash against feminism that characterised the Thatcher years.[98] If authors' responses to the climate of the times are what drive the literary market, it is likely that this new era of conservatism will soon begin to feed into literature. This chapter consequently ends by asking whether Trollope will return to the form – the Aga-saga – for which she has been most noted. Her most recent novel, *Daughters-in-Law*, which once again depicts a middle-class couple who have raised their children in the gentility of a house in Suffolk, suggests that this may be the case. There remains a significant possibility that the Aga-saga will be reborn in the next decade.

[97] The aim of the Big Society is to transfer power from central government to the citizenry. Its moves include the establishment of a Big Society Bank; giving more power and control to local communities to give them greater control of their lives; to support charities, and social enterprises. The scheme has been met with negativity from some politicians and commentators, including Ed Milliband, leader of the opposition, who argued that the government was seeking to dignify the cuts made to services, and privatisation by appealing to a language of citizen empowerment and the devolution of control (Watt, par. 28).

[98] In 2011, for example, British Conservative Party politician and University Minister David Willets argued that the stagnation of social mobility was due to feminism. When asked what was to blame for the lack of social mobility amongst working-class men in particular, Willets stated that 'the feminist revolution in its first round effects was probably the key factor. Feminism trumped egalitarianism. It is not that I am against feminism, it's just that is probably the single biggest factor' (Prince, par. 4). The effects of feminism, he argued, meant that more women took places at university and in the job market that could have gone to ambitious working-class men.

Chapter Three

'Subject matter is the area where popularity most obscures art and where scale is most confused with significance': The Fiction of Rachel Cusk

'A High-Minded Novelist': Cusk's Position in the Contemporary Literary Matrix

Rachel Cusk is the author of seven novels (and two works of non-fiction). Her debut novel, *Saving Agnes* (1993), about life after university for a female graduate, won the Whitbread First Novel Award in 1993, and *The Country Life* (1997) – a pastoral novel of manners – won the Somerset Maugham Prize.[99] Listed as one of twenty of *Granta*'s Best British Novelists in 2003, her fifth novel *In the Fold* (2005) was longlisted for the Booker Prize and her sixth novel *Arlington Park* (2006) was shortlisted for the 2007 Orange Prize. Although she has never won a major literary award, Cusk's work has been recognised by literary authorities, and I acknowledge that critics may argue that this positive critical reception in fact characterises her as a literary novelist. Whilst I agree with many assessments of Cusk's writing – her novels are carefully constructed and the language of which they are composed is sophisticated – I argue in this chapter for the relevance of this author and her body of work as a whole to discussions of contemporary middlebrow fiction. Firstly, the fact that Cusk's novels have been praised for their style and composition does not exempt them from occupying a middlebrow position. The contemporary middlebrow novel, as noted in the Introduction to this thesis, whilst not experimental or overtly innovative, does demonstrate a keen awareness of questions of form and language. Middlebrow fiction is not badly written fiction; being well written does not exclude a novel from being middlebrow. Secondly, I suggest that in addition to its middlebrow thematic concerns (the anatomising of the English middle classes) Cusk's writing is fully embedded in the middlebrow literary culture of the twentieth century. It draws on middlebrow genres including the country house novel; includes references to middlebrow authors such as Nancy Mitford and Stella Gibbons; and displays an awareness of questions of literariness and its relationship with other kinds of writing – particularly the domestic novel – which is characteristic of the contemporary middlebrow novel. Finally, I argue that the terms in which Cusk's work has been discussed – particularly in relation to her use of language –

[99] In 1947 W. Somerset Maugham set up a fund 'to enable young writers to enrich their work by gaining experience of foreign countries. Prize money totalling £1,000 is awarded annually to British authors under the age of 35 for a published work of fiction, non-fiction or poetry. The prize money must be used for foreign travel' (The Somerset Maugham Awards).

and Cusk's own much-publicised (and often criticised) interjections into discussions of literary value and readers, and the role of the 'woman writer', are inherently connected to debates about middlebrow culture.

In 2007, echoing the criticisms of the prize made previously by Lola Young about the 'parochial' nature of women's writing, Orange Prize judge Muriel Gray commented disparagingly on the domestic focus of that year's nominations. She spoke about 'the sheer volume of thinly disguised autobiographical writing from women on small-scale domestic themes such as motherhood, boyfriend troubles and tiny family dramas' and encouraged female authors to 'drop domestic themes' and engage once again with 'the fundamental imperative of fiction writing. It's called making stuff up' ('Women Authors', par. 2). Cusk's sixth novel, *Arlington Park*, was shortlisted for that year's prize, and in light of its focus on the domestic lives of a group of middleclass women, ostensibly occupied the category of fiction that Gray was criticising. In an interview with the Faber and Faber Book Club, Cusk defended the domestic as a suitable topic for fiction, remarking not only on the extent to which domesticity has formed the backbone of some the accepted great works of literature – 'a large proportion of the world's greatest novels have drawn on [middleclass domesticity] to furnish their narrative world' – but on the importance of having an intimate knowledge of things that one writes about ('An Interview with Rachel Cusk'). 'My central aim as a writer is to tell the truth,' she commented, 'and to tell the truth you have to know your subject like the back of your hand' ('An Interview with Rachel Cusk').[100] If a novel is good, Cusk maintains, it will be so irrespective of its subject matter, and an author's intimate knowledge of what they are exploring in their fiction is the key to good writing.

I argue that Cusk touches in her comments here on some of the central concerns of this thesis regarding the perception of domestic fiction and the ways in which value is attributed to different kinds of writing. Noting the conflation of domestic with limited, and large-scale with worthy and important, she argued in 2005 that

[100] *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001) – the piece of writing for which is she is perhaps most well known – is the culmination of Cusk's efforts to 'tell the truth' about her experience of maternity. The memoir documented the stages of Cusk's pregnancy, the birth of her first child, and her daughter's early years, and most significantly the range of emotions (primarily negative it appeared) that she experienced throughout these things. *A Life's Work*, and Cusk's commitment to truth-telling that it reflected, provoked a high level of controversy however amongst readers and reviewers, many of whom criticised the author's approach to motherhood and questioned her love for her children. Cusk explained in an article about the deluge of responses her book attracted: 'As writers go, I have a skin of average thickness. I am pleased by a good review, disappointed by a bad. None of it penetrates far enough to influence the thing I write next. This time, it was different. Again and again people judged the book not as readers but as mothers, and it was judgement of a sanctimoniousness whose like I had never experienced' ('I Was Only Being Honest', par. 21). Significantly, whilst the majority of negative criticism was focused on Cusk's capacity to mother, one review still focused on her writing style and questioned its overly verbose quality. Cusk explains, somewhat perplexed, 'one curious article questioned the length of my sentences: how had I, a mother, been able to write such long and complicated sentences?' ('I Was Only Being Honest', par. 20). Her next publication, an excerpt of which appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of *Granta*, will be Cusk's memoir of divorce.

> the question of subject matter is […] the place in which a good writer is most likely to be mistaken for a bad one and a bad writer for the latest wonder. It is the area where popularity most obscures art and where scale is most confused with significance. ('The Outsider', par. 18)

She remarks on the importance of domestic fiction that it documents the details of some of the most significant aspects of everyday existence, and goes on to criticise the way in which many male British authors in particular fail to fully delve into the domestic lives of their characters. In doing so, Cusk suggests, they imply that such characters exist separately from the everyday concerns of living in houses, eating and sleeping. Using the example of John Updike, whose characters she argues are always set in the context of the conventions of everyday life, Cusk compares British and American male authors, arguing that

> [t]hough the American canon is indisputably male, it is saturated with the admission so absent from the works of the contemporary male English novelist: that men live in houses, in communities, that they live with women, that they father children, that they sleep and wake and love and loathe and suffer. Here in Britain, in literature as in life, the domestic world is subjugated, or furbished up like a painted backdrop for the reader to glimpse on occasion. ('The Outsider', par. 21)

Using Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) (published the same year as *In the Fold*) as an example, Cusk notes that the main character, Henry Perowne, whilst being a focal point around which 'technical, political and sociological information' is arranged in a post-9/11 novel, appears removed from the quotidian nature of life to the extent that he 'seems never to have taken a living breath' ('The Outsider', par. 21).

Whilst, however, Cusk has responded to comments made by others about the worth of fiction, her own remarks and attitudes to literature and the role of the reader have also provoked controversy. The opinions generated by readers and reviewers in response to Cusk's novels differ considerably, and her writing style is variously reported to be either literary and intelligent, or highly pretentious. In 2005 she provoked a debate about the relationship between authors and their readers when she wrote an article for the *Guardian* detailing her reaction to joining a book club. The dissatisfaction she expressed at how the group was organised, and her apparent disparagement of what they read and how they discussed it, attracted criticism from both readers and other authors. The article has also been referred to on many occasions subsequently by reviewers of her work, to highlight her literary arrogance and pretension. In addition to the middlebrow concerns of her novels – which will be explored in the sections to follow – I argue that it is her presence in such debates, and her problematic reputation amongst readers and other authors, that make both her work and Cusk herself relevant to an examination of contemporary middlebrow culture.

Reviewers have frequently questioned the 'goodness' and 'badness' of Cusk's writing style and her use of language, in much the same way as they have with Brookner. Her novels have been praised for their narrative style and accomplished use of language, which give rise to detailed portraits of human emotion, urban landscapes, and domestic interiors, which as Hilary Mantel notes 'whisper and shiver, as if Virginia Woolf had flitted through' (par. 2). In a review of *In the Fold* Carol Birch argues that 'Cusk's creations are never trite. Everything is multi-layered: character, landscape, relationships. The effect is a density which sometimes defies easy analysis' (par. 5). Amanda Craig, who describes Cusk as a 'high-minded novelist', similarly notes that Cusk's work 'radiates a fine intelligence and the writer's equivalent to an exquisite singing voice', praising the author's literary style (par. 5). Yet, where Mantel praised Cusk's detailed used of description, other authors have regarded it as tedious and unnecessary. In a review of Cusk's second novel, *The Temporary*, Kate Kellaway implies that Cusk's work suffers from a pomposity and affectation, and writes that Cusk 'never uses a short word where a long one would do. This applies even to the title of her second novel, *The Temporary*. *The Temp* would have been another novel entirely; she could not have written it' (par. 1). Kellaway's review suggests that Cusk actively strives to complicate elements of the everyday – using 'temporary' instead of the more popular abbreviation – in an effort to give her novels an air of literariness which, Kellaway implies, simply appears awkward and contrived. Her review of the novel itself is generally positive – once her style has been 'overcome […] gradually "against the odds" the novel takes hold' – but what Kellaway, and others, have identified as Cusk's awkwardly elaborate style is referred to at length. In a revealing section of the review, Kellaway writes:

> Reading her prose is like watching someone who, though she possesses fingers, has mysteriously elected to perform all her tasks with unnecessarily trained, adroit feet. If this is an overly elaborate simile, Cusk may be to blame; she uses similes liberally; they spot her pages like plagues of ladybirds. (par. 3)

In a discussion of *Arlington Park*, James Lasdun similarly describes the 'exhaustive clarification, elaborate metaphors and distinctly bitter aroma' of Cusk's writing, which he suggests 'may not be everybody's cup of tea', and notes how *In the Fold* 'drew criticism for a certain obtuseness in its prose' (par. 1). In a review of Cusk's travel memoir, *The Last Supper* (2009), which documents her escape from suburban life in Bristol to Italy, Alexander Chancellor comments: 'I enjoyed her efforts to learn Italian and her entertaining mockery of her Italian language books, but she peppers her text with rather more Italian words than is usually advisable' (par. 7). He says that he found her 'flashy use of English' striking – 'pine woods are "soughing", hills are "pelted", bodies are "nacreous", billionaires are "neurasthenic"' (par.8) – but concludes that while many of the passages in this book are

delightful and perceptive, 'I sometimes wish that Cusk would hide her cleverness a little' (par. 9). The criticism that Cusk most often attracts is one of condescension – that she has an uneasy relationship with the reading public – and the feeling of annoyance that this provokes in readers is frequently mentioned in reviews of her work.

My concern here is not with Cusk's style, but with the fact that Cusk's writing has been the focus of debates about what constitutes literary condescension – as opposed to simply the highbrow – and what the relationship between an author and her readers is expected to be. Comments like Chancellor's raise questions, I suggest, about the line between the literary and the pseudo-literary. It is this line that Cusk – like many authors associated with the middlebrow, including Brookner – seems to blur, and this has provoked a tangible form of cultural anxiety. As Craig remarks (referring to what she describes as Cusk's 'snootiness') 'one is made to feel a variety of strong emotions when reading [her work]' ('Review', par. 5). From the varied ways in which her novels are received and reviewed it is clear that Cusk occupies a troublesome position in the literary hierarchy, sometimes regarded as 'literary', at other times pretentious. This is a factor which could account for the uneven pattern of nominations and awards that Cusk's work has received with regards to literary prizes. Whilst she was awarded the Whitbread First Novel Award and the Somerset Maugham Award for her early work, in the eighteen years since her first novel was published, she is yet to win one of the most sought after literary prizes. Shortlisted for the Orange Prize and longlisted for the Booker, the question arises as to what it is about Cusk's writing that means that whilst it garners critical praise it still does not warrant some of the highest accolades.[101] I suggest that this may be on account of the perceived literary instability of her writing, as highlighted by reviewers above, and the fact that her writing to date is exclusively on middle-class domestic life.[102] In other words, I propose that Cusk's novels have been unevenly received because of their undeniable connections with the middlebrow.

Significantly, and somewhat ironically, however, Cusk's own comments have contributed to the disparagement of the middlebrow, and in turn to that of her own work. To return to Cusk's reported perspective on literary value, whilst, as noted above she has publicly defended domestic fiction, she appears to possess an unfavourable attitude towards middlebrow culture. This became evident in her open criticism of a significant

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[101] The shortlist for the 2005 Booker Prize featured Julian Barnes' *Arthur and George* (2005), Ali Smith's *The Accidental* (2005), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Sebastian Barry's *A Long, Long Way* (2005), and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005). The winner was John Banville's *The Sea* (2005).

[102] Significantly, aside from Cusk's *Arlington Park*, the shortlist for the 2007 Orange Prize was dominated by what may be broadly described as postcolonial literature, including Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Xiaolu Guo *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), Anne Tyler's *Digging to America* (2006), and the winner of the prize, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006).

aspect of that culture: the reading group. In the article describing her experiences of being a member, Cusk asserted that 'the book group is the one place where I yearn to be present both physically and artistically, both as a reader and a writer' ('The Outsider', par. 1). Yet, her comments revealed a distaste and intellectual dissatisfaction with almost the entire experience of belonging to such a community. In terms of organisation, she disliked the gendered nature of the reading group, for example, noting that 'all book groups were single sex, apparently […] I asked if there was anything preventing a man joining, and it was explained that if men wanted that much to join a book group they could form their own' ('The Outsider', par. 3). She noted, derisively, their ubiquity ('everyone belonged to a book group; some people even belonged to two' ['The Outsider', par. 1]); as well as the different kinds of group on offer ('a woman I met had one book group she attended for the purposes of frivolity, and another for the meditated consideration of the literature du jour' ['The Outsider', par. 1]). After due consideration, Cusk decided to join a 'serious' book group, i.e. one that read 'the prizewinners and the short lists, and the books polled by the nation as the greatest' ('The Outsider', par. 1-2).[103]

Cusk details her disappointment, however, at the group's approach to literature and reading. She notes the ways in which the readers categorised what they were reading not only according to content, but also how the members experienced the books, how much enjoyment they yielded, or how difficult they were to consume. They used terms, she explained, such as 'pure entertainment' ('books you could read non-stop without feeling that your intelligence had been insulted'), 'freak literature' (Cusk notes that this 'encompassed all works of fiction whose central character is a one-off, usually narrating the book him or herself') or 'heavy going' ('The Outsider', par. 7). Remarking further on how they interacted with the books, Cusk comments with implicit contempt on the way they read 'as though reading were a mystery they hoped one day to resolve' – and how their approach to discussing the novels often began with an assessment of how difficult each member found reading it, or whether the author had rendered the voice of the character successfully, simultaneously conflating accuracy with literary merit.[104]

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[103] Cusk highlights here the way in which literary prizes influence readers' choices, and the extent to which 'prize-winning' is conflated with 'serious'. In contrast to the 'serious' book group, as Cusk describes it, stood the 'frivolous' book group which 'convened late and drunkenly'. The distinctions made here between the groups illustrates I suggest the apparent strict delineation between different purposes of reading – for improvement/intellectual stimulation represented by the serious group and for pleasure as embodied by the frivolous group. It is the rigidity of these delineations, I argue, that middlebrow fiction undermines.

[104] Cusk writes that the group's insistence on the connection between literary merit and accuracy became most explicit when they discussed Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). Winner of the Whitbread Book of the Year in 2003, the novel is narrated by a 15 year old boy who, it is inferred, has Asperger's syndrome. Cusk writes regarding the group's analysis and reception of this novel: 'the question was: did this accurately portray the character of an autistic child? Dossiers were produced. Articles on autism had been photocopied. People knew people who had autistic children, and these people

The suggestion here is that Cusk considers the group's reading to be flawed, that it is insufficiently insightful and lacking in depth or analysis. Ironically given the primarily feminine subject matter of her own novels, she also questions the sophistication of female readers, commenting on the way in which they processed their chosen novels 'with the application of an all-female decoding centre appointed by a cultural ministry of war' ('The Outsider', par. 4). Cusk's own suggestion for the book group was Anton Chekhov, but this was not a success. The readers complained that his writing was depressing and difficult, and Cusk explained at length to the group why they were wrong: 'for 10 minutes or more I descanted on the point about Chekhov. No one interrupted me. No one said anything at all' ('The Outsider', par. 12). After two of the group's founding members decide that they are going to leave the group – 'the whole point of the book group, for them, was that it was pleasurable. Lately it had become stressful and serious. They felt awkward expressing their opinions' – Cusk left instead ('The Outsider', par. 14).

The book-group reader, with whom the contemporary middlebrow reader can be readily connected, is not one with whom Cusk identifies or who she thinks will enjoy the novel that she is writing at the time. The suggestion was that these readers were not the ones that Cusk envisaged reading her novels. She explains:

> As I wrote my novel I thought of [the book club]: I wanted to woo them, and yet I couldn't. I don't believe I could ever have explained to them how difficult it is to make things life-like: they would ask me why I bothered. ('The Outsider', par. 23)

What Cusk's article displays I suggest, is an anxiety around two issues: firstly, readers, and in particular what happens to a novel when it is published and moves from being in the hands of the author to the hands of a reader (who may not approach it in the manner that was originally intended); and secondly, the fear that a novel may become associated with the middlebrow. Indeed, in a written response to Cusk's article one member of the group that Cusk had attended, argued that Cusk had 'projected her own literary insecurities on to the group and then browbeat us with eulogies of safe (i.e. long-dead) authors' (Hooper, par. 2). The letter concluded by asking: 'aren't unpretentious book groups like ours the backbone of fiction sales these days? Rachel Cusk should be more careful of biting the hands that feed her' (par. 4).[105] What the article and subsequent response highlighted was a

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had said that yes, the book was accurate. Some had found it almost unbearable, how close to the bone it came. That's all very well, I said, but shouldn't the question be, is it beautiful? No one seemed sure whether that should be the question. One lady became quite indignant, and referred me again to her photocopied article, as though beauty and accuracy were two opposing forces; or as though accuracy, unknown to me, had won, and was the new, democratised version of literary merit.' ('The Outsider', par. 9)

[105] Indeed Cusk's work has been read by book groups. *In the Fold* for example was the Daily Mail Book Club's September choice in 2005 and was chosen for the *Guardian* Book Club in 2006. A book club guide to *Arlington Park* can be found on Readinggroupguides.com – an online community for reading groups

tension around the reader/author relationship, both in terms of how novels are consumed and by whom. However, it is the view of middlebrow culture as insufficiently literary or serious, to which Cusk contributes in her dissection of the book club, that I suggest is arguably the same view that has been brought to bear on women's writing generally, including Cusk's.

Moving away from the contextual debates surrounding Cusk's writing that are relevant to discussions of the middlebrow, the rest of this chapter considers the novels themselves. This begins in the next section with an examination of the intertextual nature of Cusk's writing, and its relationship with a number of middlebrow novels. Alongside this discussion is an exploration of the metafictional aspect of the novels and the way in which it reveals the contemporary middlebrow novel, once again, to be a highly self-conscious form.

Rewarding the Reader: Intertextuality, Metafiction and Literary Reference Points

In interviews Cusk has said that she has been influenced by authors including American author William Maxwell and Chekhov, yet it is the work of twentieth-century English authors, I suggest, to which her novels are most clearly affiliated. Positioning them in a tradition of English writing, particularly about class and gender, her novels contain references to a range of texts by some of the most notable novelists of the past century. These include Woolf and many recognisable middlebrow authors such as Stella Benson, Gibbons, Mitford, Evelyn Waugh, and P.G. Wodehouse. Cusk is undoubtedly referencing a middlebrow tradition in her work, although her comments about those authors who influence her suggest a refusal to admit to its influences or attractions. The optimum reader of Cusk's novels is consequently implied to be someone who is familiar with this English literary tradition, and such canonical novels as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). The intended result, I suggest, is that the readers' understanding and appreciation of these novels will be enriched, and that they will gain pleasure from using their prior knowledge to identify these references.

As with Brookner, and in keeping with the middlebrow's flirtation with modernism in the first half of the twentieth century, we once again see in Cusk's novels references to Woolf. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is the primary influence for Cusk's later novel *Arlington Park*. Like Woolf's novel, it is set over the course of one day as six women prepare for a dinner

– and Faber (who published *Arlington Park*) also provide a book club guide to Cusk's fiction. The Farrar, Straus and Giroux site features a similar guide.

party to be held that evening. Clarissa Dalloway is reincarnated as Christine Langham who struggles with the thought that her party, and life in Arlington Park generally, are neither as important nor desirable as she has imagined them, and the novel sporadically documents her attempts to convince herself otherwise. Although it is a study of suburban domesticity and *ennui*, *Arlington Park* also explores issues including loneliness and isolation, existential anxiety and personal relationships, and reflects on the importance of beauty and truth. As Cusk explains, the novel 'began as – it remains – a book about mortality [which shows] a group of people who are profoundly imprisoned by time and bound by their material existence, and whose concern with things that are fundamental to human life is mirrored by their spiritual bewilderment or blankness' ('*Arlington Park* Reading Guide'). Cusk's seventh novel, *The Bradshaw Variations*, which is set over the course of a year from September to September, also takes its inspiration from Woolf's novel. Subtle reference is made to Woolf's image of the flowers – yellow roses – that Clarissa buys on the morning of her party: 'In a jug on the kitchen table there are yellow roses. Thomas put them there. They catch his eye every time he passes' (*The Bradshaw Variations*, 116). Again, as in Brookner's writing, I suggest that the inclusion of Woolfean references functions as a gesture not just towards the highbrow, but specifically to a familiar and popular highbrow figure.

Indeed, it is significant that Cusk has chosen to use *Mrs Dalloway* – perhaps the most well-known of Woolf's works – as opposed to *To the Lighthouse* (1927) or *The Waves* (1931) which would be less familiar to a contemporary audience. There has been a film adaptation of *Mrs Dalloway*, and *Arlington Park* and *The Bradshaw Variations* feature amongst other novels, including most notably Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (2000), that have been based in varying degrees on *Mrs Dalloway*. Cunningham's novel – which was made into a film in 2003 in which Woolf was played by Hollywood actress Nicole Kidman – is often sold as a package alongside Woolf's, and the phrase 'the novel that inspired *The Hours*' often features on the covers of new editions of *Mrs Dalloway*. Whilst the incorporation of references to Woolf's texts functions as a stamp of literariness – an assurance of the literary calibre of the novel in which they are included – it is not so obscure an allusion as to be lost on the general reader. Like Brookner's tributes to Woolf in *Hotel du Lac*, these references are reassuring to the reader of the middlebrow novel – proof that in identifying the allusions they are in possession of the requisite cultural capital – and not alienating.

Intertextual references and the use of textual models do not only function as intellectual markers, or as a form of intellectual hide-and-seek. Pleasure for Cusk's readers, and for those of many middlebrow novels, stems from being sufficiently familiar with particular plots and classic conventions that – like readers of romance or other examples of

genre fiction – they are often able to identify what is about to happen in the novel before it has occurred. The reader is then rewarded with a sense of satisfaction when they discover that they have used their knowledge correctly. Any reader familiar with Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*, for example, or even the highly successful television adaptation of the same name, will see its influence on Cusk's fifth novel *In the Fold*. They will most likely be able to predict that the main character Michael's initial impression of his friend's upper-class existence will prove to be flawed. The patterns and conventions of *Arlington Park* and *In the Fold* are not as clear or formulaic as typical examples of genre fiction, and they do not overlap exactly with the novels that inform them, but the functions of their reference points are still the same. They are there to guide the reader through the novel – often allowing them to predict aspects of the action – and to reward the reader for possessing a good literary knowledge.

Cusk's third novel, *The Country Life* – a pastoral novel of manners which centres upon an eccentric farm family in Sussex and their new *au pair* from the city – is ultimately about this very idea of drawing on an awareness of literature, and bringing prior reading experience to bear on a situation. Significantly, this utilisation of literary knowledge features in two different ways in this narrative – by the reader of Cusk's novel and by the main character herself who both use what they know about books and stories to negotiate the unfolding events of the novel. In its depiction of a young woman's new life with an eccentric family, *The Country Life* is reminiscent of Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* (1945). It borrows most heavily, however, from Gibbon's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) (which in turn parodies stories of rural life such as those of Mary Webb) and it is an awareness of this novel, I suggest, that forms a key part in readers' negotiation of Cusk's text. The novel plays on the character stereotypes of pastoral novels at large (featuring simple-minded country folk and a village misfit) and references many of the same events, plot devices and motifs (unlikely romances, murder, and farce) as Gibbons's novel.

As in *Cold Comfort Farm*, the novel opens with its heroine, a young woman called Stella (arguably a reference to Gibbons herself), writing letters. Gibbon's heroine Flora Poste writes to distant relatives after the death of her parents to ask whether she can live with them. It is the Starkadders – relations of her father – who agree to take Flora in. In *The Country Life* Stella writes to her employer, parents, and someone called Edward whose relationship to Stella is unknown at the start of the novel. She informs them, somewhat cryptically, in these letters that she is going away and that she is fine, but that they will not be seeing her again. The reader is informed that Stella is going to catch the four o'clock train from Charing Cross to Buckley – a small village not far from the place for which she is destined – the village of Hilltop. The reader is unaware at this point of why Stella is

bound for Hilltop (it is later revealed that she is taking up a job as an *au pair* for a disabled teenage boy called Martin). Stella shares Flora's naivety about what she is about to embark on, as well as her excitement about starting a new life. 'It was normal, of course,' she explains in this first-person narrative, 'that I should feel some anxiety about my departure. Not only was I setting out to a place I had never been before; I was also embarking on a kind of life about which I knew nothing' (1). A sense of both mystery and comedy is established from the novel's outset, and, with a model of the pastoral novel encapsulated by *Cold Comfort Farm* in mind, the reader awaits the inevitable surprises and amusing complications that both Stella's hasty departure and lack of preparation guarantees, and which are recurring features of this fictional genre.

Like *Cold Comfort Farm* it is the desire to uncover the mystery set out in the early stages of the novel that is the driving force behind the narrative of *The Country Life*. In Gibbons's novel it is to discover what 'nasty' thing Grandmother Starkadder has seen in the woodshed, and what injustice the Starkadders have done to Flora's father which has in turn led them to take her in. In *The Country Life* the mystery is why Stella has left London, her job, flat and family behind in such a hurry, as well as what secrets the Maddens – the eccentric upper-class family with whom Stella is staying – possess in their own right. The reasons for Stella's departure and the nature of her relationship with Edward are fully revealed at the end of the novel – she is a newlywed solicitor who has absconded from her honeymoon in Rome – but the primary clue comes early in the novel. In a section that highlights the importance of literature in Cusk's fiction and reflects the intertextuality of the middlebrow novel, Stella selects a book from the Maddens's shelves written by someone who shares her name:

> I blinked, thinking that I must be mistaken, and indeed lost it for a second or two; but there it was again. Stella Benson. Quivering and somewhat afraid, I drew it from the shelf. It was quite an old book, with a hard mildew-green cover. In gold script on the front line was the title: *The Runaway Bride*. (82)

The book that Stella finds is a real novel written by English author, travel writer and feminist Stella Benson and published as *The Far-Away Bride* (1930) in America and *Tobit Transplanted* (1931) in Britain. I argue that this intertextual reference serves to draw the reader's attention to the nature of Stella's predicament – that she, too, is a far-away bride.

Stella uses her own literary knowledge to predict what will happen when she arrives at Franchise Farm by comparing herself to heroines she has read about in other novels, in the same way that Brookner's heroines wonder whether their lives will resemble those of the heroines they read about in romance novels or as a child. Stella explains:

> My story so far could be regarded, indeed, as a history of oppression, one of those old-fashioned stories in which a poor, plain heroine endures all the misfortunes that social and material disadvantage can devise for her, but lives to be triumphantly rewarded at the last moment for her forbearance. (93)

Stella's comparison of her own experiences with those of her fictional counterparts does, however, raise questions about her reliability as a narrator, and whether her own experiences are overly influenced and coloured by what she has read previously. For example, it is unclear whether Stella's reports, and those of the villagers, of encounters with the Maddens are valid, or whether they are derived from literature and are the stuff of novels. A teacher at Martin Madden's school, for example, postulates that the villagers' impressions of the Madden family, and the rumours of Mrs Madden's affairs, have their basis more in fiction than reality. 'I wouldn't be surprised if they got it all from books' (263), she explains. Certainly Stella's presuppositions about village life, which are influenced by literature, inform her interpretation of what she sees and experiences. They give her clues about how to operate in her new rural setting of the Maddens's Franchise Farm. Equally, the reader's understanding of how tales of rural life transpire, and what usually happens to plain heroines, guides her through the text.

The distinction between the tale that Stella is telling us and the literature on which it is based is so unclear, however, that Cusk's heroine seriously entertains the possibility that the novel by Stella Benson that she discovers on the shelf actually tells the story of her life:

> What could it mean? Was it a joke, or magic, or something more sinister; an inexplicable collision of worlds? […] Trembling, I began to turn its dry, yellowed pages where I sat […] In the end it wasn't about me at all, but about people far away […] My namesake had evidently been a woman of some substance, well-travelled, independent, compassionate; and kind too; for she had thought, all those years ago, to set down this interesting tale, so that I would find it in my hour of loneliness and despair and be comforted. (83)

To take this further, if that was indeed the novel of Stella's life then the book that she selects from the shelf could be the novel that we as the readers are currently consuming. The reference to the *author* Stella Benson by the *character* Stella Benson has a dual function, therefore; its reference operates firstly to embed Cusk's novel in a tradition of English women's writing, and secondly as a convenient play on Stella's status as both the protagonist and author of the novel we are reading. Reality is momentarily dislocated and time interrupted for both Stella and the reader as her discovery of the novel poses the possibility that she is in a parallel universe where she could be about to read a novel, which she does not yet know she has written, which relates events at Franchise Farm which she has not yet even experienced, but which we as the reader could turn to the last page to discover before her. The 'inexplicable collision of worlds' to which Stella refers is the

collision between fiction and reality, neither of which at that moment appear particularly stable.

This is an extreme example of the intertextuality and self-awareness that are characteristic of the middlebrow novel. In a similar manner to Brookner's referencing of the perception of romance fiction and romantic novelists, and Trollope's references to those white-coloured novels (such as her own) with a watercolour on their covers, *The Country Life* draws attention to its status as a fictional text. Cusk's novel highlights the importance played both by the process of reading and by the figure of the reader herself in consumption of the contemporary middlebrow novel. In *The Country Life* the female author (in the form of Stella Benson), the female reader (Cusk's heroine), and a popular middlebrow text (Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*) are all invoked, positioning Cusk's novel securely in a middlebrow tradition. Drawing out further the connection between Cusk's work and middlebrow fiction, in the next section I explore the relationship between another of Cusk's novels, *In the Fold*, and a genre which shares great affiliations with the middlebrow – the country house novel.

Englishness, Class, and the Country House Novel

In *Brave New Causes: Women in Postwar British Fiction* (1998), Deborah Philips and Ian Haywood describe the country house novel as a category of fiction in which 'the central character, the focus of romance, is neither a hero nor a heroine but a house' (41). It can be considered a sub-genre within romance fiction because, like the romance, the narrative of the country house novel is concerned with longing and desire. The difference is that the object of desire is not a lover, but a house. Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* – to which I connect Cusk's *In the Fold* – is perhaps most synonymous with narratives concerned with the attraction of property. However, the country house novel – or country house romance as it is sometimes called – is a genre that has been greatly explored by female authors. Philips and Haywood describe these novels as being written largely by and for women, and note how female characters are regularly at the centre of these novels which are often about attempts to save the house from ruin or being sold. The heroine of the novel is portrayed not only as the saviour of the property, but of all the things with which the house is associated – the upper classes, and a traditional vision of England. Nicola Humble notes that the country house novel was a 'recognisable generic category' in the early twentieth century, and came into being after the Great War 'in response to the perceived destruction

of the aristocracy' (62).[106] Citing the example of Helen Ashton's novel *The Half Crown House* (1956), as well as popular novels such as Vera May's *A Path There Is* (1956) from the Mills and Boon series, Philips and Haywood also note that the country house romance 'is a genre that persists through the 1950s and focuses [on] a wide range of discourses around national identity, working women and a contemporary cultural hegemony' (56).

The subject of the English country house has also proven to be fertile ground for many contemporary authors of both genders. Blake Morrison notes that 'novels with an English country house setting are amongst the most acclaimed written in recent years, among them Kashuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009)' (par. 4), as well as Alan Hollinghurst's Booker-Prize winning novel *The Line of Beauty* (2004), and his new novel *The Stranger's Child* (2011). Morrison explains that the country house is an attractive setting for the contemporary novelist because of 'the space they afford for gathering a group of diverse characters – servants as well as masters – under one roof, so as to watch how tensions develop, love affairs begin and catastrophes unfold. In this, they're also engaging with a tradition that runs from Pope, Fielding and Austen to Forster, Wodehouse and Waugh' (par. 5). Female middlebrow authors have also engaged with the genre of the country house novel, including Mary Wesley and Rosamunde Pilcher. Consistent with Philip and Haywood's description of the absent male inheritor, Pilcher's *Coming Home* (1995) and Wesley's *The Vacillations of Poppy Carrew* (1986) both feature female protagonists who inherit and find themselves responsible for large houses.[107] Given the rules of primogeniture it would be more typical for a male heir to be in receipt of the property. Consequently, in these female-centred novels, in order for a woman to inherit, a number of plot devices are often used to create a scenario in which the heroine can inherit, including the deaths of fathers and brothers. Philips and Haywood explain that:

> the absent patriarch raises the question of who is appropriate to take over the stewardship of the house and the heritage that it represents. The recurrent narrative device allows for an articulation of the disruption of primogeniture; because there is no 'natural' inheritor, there is an awareness that new configurations are necessary in order for the upper classes to maintain their position in a postwar world. (47)

[106] Humble notes that WWI had a dire effect on the Edwardian aristocracy. Many of its young men and heirs were killed and death duties and increased taxation put great strain on its wealth. The growth of the middle classes in this period, and its accompanying rise in power, also meant that 'some of its members rose above their own class altogether. The old aristocracy was to an extent replaced by a new plutocracy which had profited by the war, consisting mostly of businessmen and manufacturers, who intermarried with the old aristocracy and turned themselves into copies of the class they displaced in power' (61-62).

[107] There has also been a recent proliferation of memoirs such as Miranda Seymour's *In My Father's House* (2007), Julia Blackburn's *The Three of Us* (2008), and Charlotte Moore's *Hancox: A House and a Family* (2010) written by women which have explored family life in the context of the large home.

The heroines are not only charged with the task of rescuing the house from its demise, but also of securing the continuation of the class structures, traditional values, social order, and vision of Englishness that the house represents.[108]

Cusk tackles the country house genre in her fifth novel *In the Fold*, but unlike Wesley and Pilcher she features a male heir (choosing instead to highlight the outmoded nature of primogeniture), with *Brideshead Revisited* forming the basis of Cusk's only male-narrated novel. *In the Fold* documents changes in the English class system as well the importance of property and like Waugh's novel uses the character of a naïve outsider to reveal the sinister side of privilege. The novel focuses on the relationship between the narrator, Michael, and his upper-class friend Adam Hanbury, whom he meets in university halls of residence. Michael is invited to the Hanbury family home – 'Egypt' – by Adam's sister, Caris, for her eighteenth birthday party, and is struck on arrival by the eccentricity of Adam's family, the beauty of the farmhouse and its surroundings, as well as Caris herself. Ten years after the party, Michael is married to Rebecca, a girl whose family strongly resembles the Hanburys – loud, eccentric and self-assured – and they have a child together, Hamish. Despite living relatively nearby, Michael and Adam have lost touch, but when the balcony falls from Michael's house in Bath (given to them by Rebecca's parents) and nearly kills him, he calls Adam (now a chartered surveyor) to discuss the damage. Accepting Adam's invitation to help with the lambing at Egypt, Michael leaves Rebecca behind and takes his son to visit his old friend. He is disappointed, however, to find that his memories of the Hanburys differ from the reality. Like the relationship between Charles Ryder and Sebastian Flyte, Michael's friendship with Adam does not only provide him with an opportunity to see how the upper-classes live. It also allows him to experience something that shapes and affects the rest of his life as Charles's fascination with Julia Flyte is reimagined in Michael's first encounter with Caris, who is part of the reason that he returns to Egypt a decade later. The primary overlap between Waugh's and Cusk's narratives, however, and of course a central theme of the country house novel, is their representations of England as a country preoccupied with property and class.[109]

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[108] Significantly in other middlebrow women's novels such as Pilcher's *Coming Home* and Mary Wesley's *The Vascillations of Poppy Carew* it is the daughter who inherits the large house. In *Coming Home*, however, whilst it is Loveday who inherits the house, this is only because her brother has been killed in the war, and by the end of the novel it is her husband who has to find the money to pay for it.

[109] In interviews Cusk makes frequent references to what she perceives to be particularly English quirks and qualities and her novels pay great attention to questions of Englishness and to the landscape of England. One of these quirks includes families who are obsessed with their own significance. 'I view this as a particularly English phenomenon,' Cusk explains, 'a ghost or bastard of our dead aristocracy' (Rothenberg Gritz, par. 12). She links the frequency of these observations about English life and behaviour to her upbringing in Canada and Los Angeles. She explains that, 'I was born abroad but my parents were both English. Still those few years of separation, and then coming back to England as an outsider, did give me an

There is a consistent concern in contemporary middlebrow writing not just with the notion of home and homeliness, but more specifically with the concrete, physical structure of domestic spaces and houses themselves. Indeed, the centrality of the house is reflected by the multitude of middlebrow novels which feature houses in their title alone – Esther Freud's *The Sea House* (2003), Penelope Lively's *A House Unlocked* (2001), Marcia Willett's *The Summer House* (2010) – as well as those, such as Lively's *Family Album* (2009), that have houses printed on their covers. Houses are of major importance in Cusk's novels, and the period, style, design, novelty, or state of disrepair of houses are minutely documented in her work.[110] Narrow Georgian houses – 'spindly like a doll's house' (*The Bradshaw Variations*, 102) – square suburban boxes in broad avenues, red-brick Victorian terraces, large 'white and flat fronted' (*In the Fold*, 7) country houses, old cottages with thatched roofs, and tower blocks all feature in her work, simultaneously documenting the changing architectural face of England and revealing it to be a nation obsessed with housing.

Gerry Smyth comments that, in Britain:

> we live and breathe houses: we talk about them all the time; we watch television programmes about them; we read magazines about them; we spend large amounts of money buying and doing them up; some of us even self-consciously try to ignore them, thereby confirming the absolute centrality of the home to the culture at large. (11)

Cusk's characters spend a great deal of time choosing their houses, reflecting on which style of building would suit them best and determining what the house they eventually decide upon will say about them. For the reader too, houses are used to provide information about the characters that live there, and descriptions of people are often quickly followed by details of the living environment. Personality and houses are strongly intertwined, with one as a reflection of the other. Michael's description of his in-laws, for example, in *In the Fold* is elucidated when he relates the type of home that they live in, and it is clear that his attraction to his wife and her family has as much to do with the house they own as the people they are:

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ability to see the country in a slightly detached way. I suppose I was made aware of what Englishness actually is because I only became immersed in it later in life' (Rothenberg Gritz, par. 8).

[110] Cusk has noted the centrality of houses and the domestic space to her writing process, and has referred explicitly to the importance of houses as concrete, physical structures to the creative act itself. She talks of writing a novel in a rented house on Exmoor while trying to find somewhere permanent to live, as well as working in the 'attic of another, earlier house whose stairs were so narrow for my increasingly pregnant body that it seemed possible that I might one day get permanently stuck up there' ('I was only being honest', par. 4). Like Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Cusk's interviews reveal the importance of having a space in which to write and stress the significance of houses as sites of creativity. In writing from a domestic space of and about houses themselves, Cusk establishes a four way system of domestic relations whereby text, house, character and author all interconnect. The house is not only the subject matter, its decoration, layout, and function as the stage set for everyday life being central to the plot, but is also the space from which it originated.

> The Alexanders liked to exist in a condition of sustained embroilment […] it was this quality that attracted me to them, as it had attracted me to the Hanburys […] They lived in a big house up the hill in Lansdown, which gave out views of the city that appeared to have been expropriated by conquest, and which was so beautiful and original inside that from the moment I saw it, it could not help but become a factor in my feeling for the Alexanders. (29)

The Alexanders's flamboyancy is reflected in their house and its decoration; their artistic nature is signalled by the piles of paintings that lean against their walls, and the family's particularity, and their status as an 'acquired' taste, is reflected in the three cheese plants that they have growing up the kitchen walls – a feature which, like the Alexanders themselves, Michael says it is impossible to feel neutral about.

Documenting her experience of growing up on a council estate, journalist Lynsey Hanley explains that

> much of the stubborn rigidity of the British class system is down to the fact that class is built into the physical landscape [and] it seemed to me that we are divided not only by income and occupation, but by the types of homes in which we live. (18)

This relationship between property and class is important, as it is clear that Michael is attracted to the Alexanders's house for the same reason as he was to the Hanburys's – because it represents a particular form of upper-class domesticity which, I suggest, is intimately bound up with a sense of eccentricity and bohemianism. For both the Hanburys and the Alexanders their houses provide a stage set and dramatic backdrop against which they can act out their eccentric lifestyles. Humble argues that the bohemian family is central to the middlebrow novels of the interwar years. She notes that

> repeatedly, a particular sort of family is foregrounded and emerges, under the spotlight […] The families in these novels are depicted as other than the society outside their front doors – they are eccentric, self-conscious units, establishing a familial identity through private games and invented language. (149)

The bohemian family was dramatically unlike the increasingly popular nuclear family of the post-war years, and it was perhaps precisely because of this that it held such fascination for middle-class readers, who were able to safely exercise their secret desires to flaunt social convention and respectability by reading about characters who did so on their behalf. These families were large and sprawling, often consisting of a number of unconventional sisters, and their houses were spaces in which the expected propriety of the outside world was challenged and artistic proclivities were celebrated. Margaret Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* (1924), Rachel Ferguson's *The Brontes Went to Woolworths* (1931), and Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* (1949) are just three examples of a multitude of middlebrow novels of this period which centre round the eccentric family.

The unconventional family is also a primary feature of the contemporary middlebrow woman's novel. Esther Freud and Rafaella Barker in particular both feature the eccentric upper-class family in their writing. Freud's (semi-autobiographical) *Hideous Kinky* (1992) chronicles a bohemian mother's attempt to find fulfilment by travelling to Morocco with her two young daughters in the 1960s, and *The Wild* (2000) depicts a girl's unconventional childhood on a farm.[111] Like *The Wild*, Barker's *Come and Tell Me Some Lies* (1994) is also semi-autobiographical and is written from a child's perspective, and later that of a young woman, as she grows up in an isolated house with her three siblings, glamorously undomesticated mother and older poet father.[112] The persistence of the eccentric family into contemporary fiction may, as in the case of interwar fiction, be linked to class, with such portraits of the unconventional family offering a fictional alternative to the everyday lives of many contemporary middle-class readers. In the same way as the bohemian woman, to whom I referred in my chapter on Trollope's fiction, the portrait of the eccentric family is characterised by a sense of conservative rebellion, in which characters' actions rarely damage their privileged class status and defiance is always safely contained. The result, I argue, is a sense of glamorous disobedience which proves highly attractive particularly to those from outside of the family.

When Michael first arrives at the Hanburys's large farmhouse he describes it as being 'like another world'. 'The muddle of the countryside along the coast had given way to a landscape of great, unfamiliar splendour,' he explains, 'it was as though we had risen through the clouds up into the roots of another world' (6). His description of the area around the house as being 'like a painting', 'shimmering' in 'little auras of sunlight' (6) gives the Hanburys's home an esoteric air, but the exoticism of this house – and by association the family who reside in it – is confirmed by its name: Egypt. On initially being asked to the house for Caris's birthday, Michael is confused by the invitation which simply says: 'Caris Hanbury invites you to celebrate her eighteenth birthday at Egypt on Saturday 21 July at 8pm' (1). Unclear as to what, or where, 'Egypt' is, and as to how he is to get there given that there is no map, directions or phone number, Michael asks Adam what the invitation means. He is told that 'Egypt' is the house where the Hanburys live, that it has always been called that, and that he does not know how it got its name. There is no need for directions, he explains, because 'everyone *knows* where it is' [emphasis in original] (1). I suggest that the invitation and short initial interaction between Michael and Adam highlights some of the key qualities of the Hanburys and provides important information around which the

[111] Freud is the daughter of artist Lucian Freud and Bernadine Coverley.
[112] Barker's parents are the novelist Elspeth Barker and the poet George Barker.

rest of the narrative is constructed: they are privileged, unusual, exclusive, and like to entertain.

The fact that the house is simply called 'Egypt' as opposed to 'Egypt Farm' or 'Egypt House' suggests that the Hanburys live almost in another country, or an imagined place of their own making, which only desirable guests know how to reach. Their arrogance and outlandish behaviour also suggests an exclusivity, and the family's belief in their special status. Upon arriving at Egypt Michael witnesses an argument about what kind of alcohol to serve at the party (Paul, Adam's father, has bought kegs of bitter but his daughter Caris wants to make kir) and having barely been introduced to the family is then thrown a set of car keys to take Paul's Jaguar to the village to pick up some crème de cassis. Michael soon discovers that such disregard for social convention (they barely acknowledge his presence), and noisy interaction, is characteristic of the Hanburys. He is astounded to find that the women sitting around the kitchen table are a mixture of current and ex-wives, and the children of a number of different marriages, but when he asks Adam about this breach of unwritten social conventions – 'I can't believe they all sit around the table together […] People's feelings usually prevent it' (17) – Adam simply replies 'do they? how boring' (17).

A disregard for middle-class social convention – and particularly the stress on the contained family unit – is the mark of the bohemian family in the middlebrow novel. As Virginia Nicholson explains in *Among the Bohemians* (2002), experimental attitudes to sex and free love were characteristic of the bohemian way of life in the early twentieth century, and many of the writers and artists of the time enjoyed unconventional relationships, rarely observing the codes of the traditional family unit of mother, father and children. Cusk also suggests that this focus on the dynamics of family, of familial clans and the myths that often surround them, is a particularly English – and upper-class – characteristic. The narrator of Barker's novel explains that her parents were involved in a 'tangled relationship' with her father's ex-wife and children from a previous marriage, and the Hanburys and Alexanders enjoy a similar complexity. Both families are involved in unusually complicated sexual relationships that position them outside of the conventional suburban family image, the knowledge of which gives them great pleasure. Where ex-wives sit happily around the table at Egypt, the implication is that Ali and Rick Alexander have an open marriage and that Rick enjoys sexual relationships with the girls who work in his art gallery. This rebellion against bourgeois attitudes to sexuality is similarly reflected in Caris's relationship with an older sculptor who lives in the shed, which significantly is condoned by her parents.

The throwing of wild parties is a popular pastime for the fictional bohemian family. In Barker's *Come and Tell me Some Lies*, Gabriella's parents regularly entertain their creative friends, drinking late into the evening. 'There were always people at Mildney' she explains, 'people milled in the kitchen – ''Eleanor, do let me help' – and then stood smoking, talking […] no toothbrushing or face-washing on Drinking Evenings. Straight upstairs' (120). Cusk uses the Hanburys's parties in a similar way to Barker. The novel notably contains almost exactly the same line, 'there have always been people at Egypt' (108) to express the openness of their home, the relaxed nature of their friendships, and their inclination towards excess. Caris wants her gathering to be like the ones her parents used to throw – 'I remember you used to stay up all night' (16) – and the party depicted at the novel's opening provides an opportunity for the family to perform in front of an audience. Caris appears dressed as if acting in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – wearing a simple white dress, her head adorned with a wreath of ivy – whilst her parents dance and flirt with the guests. Indeed during Michael's first encounter with the family, he explains that he 'formed an impression of the drama, almost the theatricality of their grouping' (8) and Caris talks about her parents moving the furniture from inside out into the garden, as if it formed part of a stage set. Their large house in the country is not a place of gentle domesticity but of drama and theatricality and the concrete form of the house itself is at the centre of the Hanburys's performance; without the house, it is suggested, the family would not be able to live as they do. The house is at the centre of the Hanbury family as opposed to the other way around.

The bohemian house in Cusk's novels is consistent with popular representations throughout the twentieth century: very large, cold, and artistically arranged. Adam draws attention to the lack of physical comfort offered by Egypt, and its cold flagstone floor, and simultaneously highlights the relationship between class and domesticity, when he tells Michael about going to a friend's council house after school. It was 'cosy', he explains, and 'compared to Egypt it was so small! I couldn't believe how small it was' (117). The size of Egypt is a factor in its exceptional status, as if its enormity is a reflection of its larger-than-life inhabitants, and the contents of the house are similarly oversized. Michael describes the kitchen table around which the boisterous family sit as being 'like a big door plinthed on thick wooden legs' (8) and the black hearth is 'tall enough for an adult to stand in and twice as wide' (8). The walls of the house are described as though they are canvases, adorned with *objets d'art*, jelly moulds, jars and weights, and 'things stacked or hanging or made to stand in lines, all different and densely patterned with light and orderly, convened, so that the place had an atmosphere of an eccentric sort of museum' (8). The primary stress in the Hanburys's house is on the aesthetic value of objects, and not on their function or use. This privileging of art over the everyday – the focus on how things look as opposed to

what can be done with them – means, however, that the basic needs of the family are often positioned as secondary to those of the house itself. The result, I suggest, is a contrived form of domesticity that seems to have little relation to the ordinary process of living. A bowl of fruit becomes something to be looked at, a still life, as opposed to be something eaten and enjoyed, and Michael wonders whether the cookery books on the shelf have even been taken down since the last time he came to visit, or whether they are simply part of a domestic tableau that has more to do with producing an impression of creativity than cooking for the family.

The privileging of the house over the people who live there, – 'this is our home. It's the place that matters, not the people in it,' Adam says (17) – and the primacy of how it looks to the outside observer, as opposed to how it operates internally, has a dire effect on relations between the Hanburys. By the end of the narrative, the casual and relaxed air of upper-class eccentricity that initially attracted Michael to Egypt is stripped away to reveal a selfish family built on lies, deception and an over-investment in tradition. The unconventional extended family of ex-wives and stepchildren does not really exist as Vivien – Adam's step-mother – reveals that Paul and Audrey (Adam's mother) have extorted money out of her to save the farm from financial ruin. Paul Hanbury's marriage to Vivien is a sham based around money rather than love, and Audrey is able to sit happily around the family table with her ex-husband – something which strikes Michael as incredible – because she is still involved in a relationship with him. Paul is revealed as a patriarchal tyrant who maintains the charade that the house and farm are successful in order to control his children and maintain the security of Egypt. On discovering the true state of affairs and Paul's financial arrangement with Vivien, Adam expostulates:

> I don't understand why he didn't tell me! […] All these years it's been, you know, when Adam takes over the farm, when I hand over the reins to Adam, Adam the son and heir – and in fact there's nothing to hand over! There's just Egypt, where he lives, and which he'll only leave, as he's fond of saying, in a wooden box. (152)

Far from the epitome of relaxed, upper-class domesticity, the Hanburys are shown to be a highly dysfunctional family, obsessed with tradition and dominated by a patriarch.[113]

Through its portrayal of the family's tussle over the house, *In the Fold* depicts England as a nation caught between the allure of privilege and posterity, and the inevitable

[113] The same theme of patriarchal dominance runs through Barker's *Come and Tell Me Some Lies*. A noted poet, Gabriella's father is greatly admired by those around him, but can display violent and abusive behaviour. On one occasion Gabriella's parents have a violent argument and her father goes drunkenly to find his gun. In the morning she is told that her mother has gone to hospital because she fell down the stairs. The young Gabriella explains, 'I knew she hadn't fallen down the stairs and I wanted Daddy to know that I knew. So I refused to make him a cup of tea or any breakfast. He had a front tooth missing and a swollen face. It served him right' (25).

onward progress of modernity, as Paul's insistence on preserving this particular way of life is ultimately what leads to Egypt's downfall. Examining the country house novel of the postwar period Philips and Haywood argue that such novels 'articulate an anxiety about the possibility of sustaining the traditions embodied in the country house, which was widely perceived to be threatened by the onslaughts of the war and of taxation, bureaucracy and death duties imposed by an unsympathetic postwar Labour government' (42). The country house romance they suggest depicts both the need for the upper classes to adapt and adjust to the new social, political and economic circumstances in the post war period, and the assurance that they can maintain class continuity and ensure the survival of their estates, privilege, and tradition. The same battle between tradition, and the changing class dynamics and demands of modernity, is depicted in this novel. Instead of the effects of war, however, the concern in this novel is about the threat posed to the traditional class structures and the position of the upper class (symbolised by the large house) by increased social mobility in the late twentieth century. This issue of social mobility will be explored further in the next section. Fiercely opposed to change, Paul refuses to allow access through the farm for electricity companies, and although the house is in financial difficulty he will not sell of any of the land to housing developers who are representative of the newly wealthy middle class.[114] Talking with disdain about the new suburban development – and making a connection between housing and class – he harks back to a time when agriculture was the mainstay of the economy and the upper classes had more power:

> Most people want to sit in their little red-brick boxes on their little estates watching television, or drive around going nowhere in their cars, or stuff their faces with junk, or go shopping – and I'm not saying that's any worse than what people have always wanted to do. The difference is that now they've got everything laid on for them. The world's been wrecked, laying on their houses and their cars and their cheap holidays and their cheap food – and a hundred years ago, most of them would have been pushing a plough with not a thought in their heads, and be none the worse off for it! (142)

Paul's dismay at the failing status of Egypt, and resistance to selling part of his estate in order to ensure the continuation of the Hanburys's role as upper-class landowners, is inextricably linked to contempt for the aspiring suburbanites of the middle class and the same concerns about social mobility that was circulating in the postwar period. *The Country Life* plays on stereotypes of the upper classes as bumbling and self-involved in its depiction of the Madden family. *In the Fold*, however, takes a much more unforgiving approach, showing its privileged characters to be ruthless, calculating, immoral, and most significantly

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[114] *In the Fold* references Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) in this section of the novel. Paul's refusal to sell the land to developers echoes Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevskaya's refusal to auction off the orchard (to allow for the building of summer cottages) in order to save the estate. An extract from *The Cherry Orchard* forms the epigraph to Cusk's novel.

hanging onto a tradition of Englishness that is connected to the maintenance of class divisions.

Cusk's fiction explores the turn away in the first decade of the new millennium from the political conservatism and firm class structures of the 1980s and 1990s, as highlighted in Brookner and Trollope's work, towards increasing meritocracy, social mobility, and individualism. In keeping with the notion of the middlebrow novel as a reflector of the evolution of middle-class domestic life, her fiction questions what it means to be middle class in the new millennium, and significantly considers the effects that this political and ideological shift had on gender roles. Where Cusk's first novels consider life in the city, and her third and fourth explored life for the upper-classes in the country, her most recent novels – *Arlington Park* and *The Bradshaw Variations* – examine life in the suburbs for the English middle classes. It is to this theme that the next section turns.

Moving on Up: The Middle Classes, Meritocracy and Suburban Domesticity

Attempts are frequently made to cross social boundaries, and class intimidation is a recurring theme in Cusk's fiction, as a sense of inferiority frequently motivates her characters to move house or to remain in difficult marriages.[115] Class markers are noted throughout – clothes, jewellery, accents, cars and houses are all used to distinguish people from each other. Ostensibly, depictions of working-class life are largely absent from Cusk's writing, as would be expected of the middlebrow novel. Not portrayed in any depth, it is instead situated at the periphery of the novels, glimpsed by characters from a distance out of car windows or in shopping centres.[116] Whilst depictions of working class domesticity in Cusk's writing are almost negligible, I argue however that those that do feature play an important role. I suggest that they function as a reminder of where many of Cusk's newly middle-class characters originally came from – and strive to distance themselves from – as

[115] In *The Country Life*, for example, Stella's parents are greatly intimidated by the boarding school that their children attend, to the extent that when their thirteen year old son is killed on the sports field by a wayward javelin, they do not even enquire as to how the accident has happened: 'They didn't dare; as if by questioning the sport they would have betrayed their inferiority, the public discovery of which they feared more than all the private sorrow in the world' (9).

[116] Driving through parts of London that she has not heard of, past 'battered strings of shops and houses nestling in motorway intersections', on the way to her parent's cottage Agnes looks at the vast tower blocks and wonders 'what one had to do to end up behind one of their slit-eyed apertures' (79). On the way to the out-of-town shopping centre, Merrywood, Christine considers the nearby estates of Redbourne and Firley, whose houses have caravans parked in their front drives, and which are populated by boys in baseball caps and teenaged mothers, and worries that she too might have to live there. 'Generally she only went there on her way to Merrywood, looking at its residents from the safety of her car and despising them the more for her sense of how near she was to being one of them' (81).

well as a point of comparison for how the middle classes operate.[117] The tower blocks and council estates are contrasted starkly with middle-class suburbia, and the theme of social mobility runs through all of Cusk's work in one way or another. It is in *Arlington Park* and *The Bradshaw Variations*, however, which are set in affluent suburbs, that it is explored most intimately. The reason that these novels explore this theme in more depth stems, I suggest, from the political context in which they were published. As noted earlier, the period in which Cusk is writing is contemporaneous with the New Labour years and the move away from Conservatism – one critic described *In the Fold* as being a 'New Labour version of *Brideshead Revisited*' (Lytal, par. 1) – and I suggest that this is key to understanding her representation of middle-class life. It is Cusk's final novels I argue – published in 2006 and 2009 respectively – which are immersed in this more left-wing political climate. *Arlington Park* and *The Bradshaw Variations* take the changing nature of the middle classes as their subject matter, and reflect on both the desire for and anxiety around social mobility.

Eighty four per cent of the British population currently live in suburbia (Barker, 15). It is consequently unsurprising that Cusk's accounts of contemporary middle-class life are set in a suburban context. *Arlington Park* opens with a five page description of the landscape surrounding the southern suburb from which the novel takes its name. Even late on a rainy night the city is still busy, but whilst people queue outside nightclubs in the city centre where girls hold their handbags over their heads, and men in t-shirts sit with cans of lager, the residents on Arlington Rise are already asleep. The difference between the suburbs and its urban other becomes clear as the narrative moves to a description of suburbia. The boarded-up shops of the city centre are replaced by large houses set back amongst 'dripping trees' (4), the pubs with union jacks in the window and fast food restaurants are succeeded by florists and antique shops. The streets are tidy, the hedges well pruned, and the 'little two-storey houses' are 'painted pretty colours' (5). *The Bradshaw Variations* contains a similar description of the urban landscape: Montague Street, like

[117] There are few representations of the suburban lower middle classes in the middlebrow women's novel of the early twentieth century but Humble notes that there is 'a thinly disguised loathing and fear of the encroaching lower middle classes' (77). When hate mail is being sent to an Oxford Women's College, in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935), for example, it is Annie – the lower middle-class daughter of a boarding house keeper – who is found to be responsible. In Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* (1938), the Heccombs' house is depicted as overflowing with lower middle-class signifiers – the modern tiled fireplace, the locked show bookcase, shop bought cakes. Humble explains what is interesting about this description 'is the degree to which it also captures the pleasure and comfort of this lifestyle; the room is full of the devices of leisure: the wireless, the gramophone (startlingly modern in its scarlet casing), magazines, and hobbies' (79). Yet, whilst this novel represents lower middle-class culture in its own terms, it still depicts relations between the upper and lower middle-classes as fraught.

Arlington Park, is raised up above the city centre, and Laurier Park is made up of similarly snaking streets like its earlier counterpart.[118]

The inhabitants of Cusk's suburbia are numerous and very different, both in terms of careers, tastes, and attitudes to life. Many occupy a traditionally middle-class position – they are educated, aspirational, financially comfortable and largely professional. In *Arlington Park* Juliet Randall and her husband, for example, are both teachers (Juliet at a girls' high school and Benedict at a comprehensive) whilst in *The Bradshaw Variations* Tonie Bradshaw is a university lecturer and her husband has an office job. They enjoy typically middle-class pursuits; they listen to classical music, play instruments, paint, and read 'great literature'. Amongst these characters, however, whom we would expect to find in a novel of this kind, there are many others who do not sit as comfortably amongst the securely middle class, most notably, the self-made man. In *In the Fold* Adam's father-in-law has made his money from selling Jacuzzis, the Randalls's neighbour Matthew Milford 'sells photocopiers to secretaries' (10) and Tonie's brother-in-law buys large numbers of new gadgets and sells them on to consumers, making a substantial profit in the process. The novels suggest that these characters have found themselves in the ranks of the middle-classes, not through the traditional routes of background, inherited class position or education, but by being business-savvy, taking advantage of opportunities, and living in a climate that rewards self-advancement. The circumstances of these characters encapsulate the kind of social mobility that characterised the political period from the late 1990s onwards. They have progressed through the ranks of class on their own merit, often through identifying a gap in the market and buying and selling products, which is made increasingly possible through globalisation and improvements in technology and communication.

I connect the appearance of these characters in Cusk's novels, and their depiction of increased social mobility, to the rise of New Labour, and particularly to the adoption of the Third Way. This is a political philosophy articulated by Anthony Giddens and adopted by many centre-left governments including that in the UK, at the end of the twentieth century. At its heart was a revaluation of leftist politics, a rejection of the left and right which, it argued, was no longer applicable, and the ushering in of a middle way which was

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[118] These descriptions are consistent with popular representations of suburbia, and indeed the novels themselves make explicit reference to an earlier form of English life amongst descriptions of the modern landscape, as if to suggest an inescapable continuity between then and now. Making reference to the Blitz, shopping centres are built on 'big bombed streets' (3), and one character, Juliet Randall, provides a description of life in Arlington Park that is reminiscent of a scene from an early twentieth-century women's novel, where 'women drank coffee all day and pushed prams around the grey, orderly streets, and men went to work, went there and came back, like there was a war on' (22). Through its reference to the war, the novel draws attention here to the persistence of some aspects of English middle-class life – particularly the gendered structure of the day – over the past century and, perhaps unsurprisingly in light of its source text *Mrs Dalloway*, many of the descriptions are reminiscent of the work of earlier women writers such as Woolf.

characterised by an embracing of globalisation and microeconomic flexibility. It was based on a meritocratic ethic, which suggested that all citizens are able to transcend the positions of their birth by becoming successful in the market economy. Individual achievement is important, not inherited status. The Third Way has much in common with the concept of individualisation.[119] As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernscheim note, this

> consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task [in this case being financially and socially successful] and for the consequences (also the side effects) of their performance. (xv)

This means that individuals acquire their identities, shaping and building them themselves, as opposed to being born into them. The implication of this therefore is that gender and class 'no longer play a key role in structuring everyday life, including domestic life' (Giddens, 79).

Governments subscribing to the Third Way seek to promote an energised entrepreneurial spirit in their citizens, and to create an environment in which established businesses can continue to do well while new businesses could be launched and flourish. With its key premises being efficiency and competition, the state is said to provide the climate for employment but it is up to the individual to take advantage of it and to become successful through merging his interests with the market. In *The Bradshaw Variations*, it is Howard who embodies this kind of entrepreneurial know-how and the spirit of the Third Way. Whilst at university he spent an entire term's grant on 'strange looking bicycles' (31) which he has shipped over from America, and after borrowing money from his father, he manages to repay his debt with interest having sold every item before the term is over. Now with a business that is 'successful enough by most standards' (31), he has remortgaged his house and bought a container of mini-motorbikes which are being stored in a warehouse. Looking at the toy, Howard's brother Thomas knows that 'by Christmas a miniature electric motorbike will have made its inevitable way into the province of childhood desire' (33). Although Howard's business mind is somewhat unsophisticated – 'he risks everything and he profits but [over time] the scale has not, fundamentally, enlarged' (31) – it has provided him with enough money to live in Laurier Park, whose streets are lined with floodlit gravel driveways and gardens with topiary.

In this political and economic climate the house becomes one of the primary ways in which financial success and social mobility is displayed. Judy Giles writes that at the beginning of the twentieth century 'a pleasant house in a leafy suburb […] was of course, a mark of social status: its location, furnishings, and style were a visual embodiment of social

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[119] For more information on individualisation see the work of sociologists such as Giddens (1991), Beck (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernscheim (2001) and Bauman (2000, 2001).

achievement' (19), but the same can be said of the past twenty years. In the 1990s and 2000s the house has become one of the greatest reflections of the status, wealth and position that can now be freshly acquired as opposed to inherited. In *Arlington Park*, Amanda Clapp and her husband tracked the housing market, gathering information and gleaning the reputation of different properties and streets before moving to the area. Their 'compendious knowledge' (49) includes the direction of sunlight for each side of every street, garden size, ceiling height and how restrictive the planning regulations are. Amanda explains that they knew so much that they could automatically 'conjure up from a bare address a picture of the life that was lived there, and its limitations' (49). The Clapps's approach to buying a house is based on one main guiding principle – one which has become particularly popular since the rise in house prices that began again in the early 1990s – and that is the primacy of location. They are not the only couple who are aware of the importance of the right address. In *The Bradshaw Variations* Tonie's desire for their Georgian house is overwhelming and in *Arlington Park* the Randalls know that their house is positioned unfavourably in relation to the Milfords who live in the most expensive street in the area. This preoccupation with price, location and particularly interior decoration which is a feature of these novels is consistent with the fetishisation of the home that was reaching its peak at the beginning of the twenty first century.[120]

In her study of the contemporary preoccupation with houses, Marjorie Garber (2000) uses Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) to explore the relationship between houses and desire. She writes that the househunter's greatest wish is to find 'the Cinderella house – or the beast that becomes a beauty when looked upon with the eye of love […] a neglected, falling-down property that needs to be nursed back to health and beauty – to be, in short, understood' (12). Garber describes the housing market as being charged with eroticism, and characterises the buying, decorating and selling of houses as a form of 'yuppie pornography' (1). Indeed the Clapps begin the process of refurbishment as soon as they have secured the house in Western Gardens which they have identified as the best – or 'least flawed' (49) – option. Amanda talks about their belief in the 'science of property' in which 'knocking things "through" was the tenet in which they most passionately believed' (54), to the extent that by the time they had moved in, their discussions about this process had become so energetic that 'the walls seemed almost to

[120] The property market has altered radically since the onset of recession in 2008 (co-terminous with the publication of Cusk's last novel), and the resulting reduction in mortgage lending. As one *Guardian* article explained, 'we've had the boom: welcome to the bust. House prices have fallen for seven successive months. Over the past six months, prices have dropped at an annual rate of 11.4%' (Elliot, par. 1-2).

fall down by themselves' (54).[121] In an effort to achieve the 'wow factor' (a popular phrase at the time) they remove the downstairs bathroom to create a vast kitchen, and the workmen take the rubble outside to the skip, which indicates to passers by that the owners are in the process of renovation. Tonie also shares Amanda's enthusiasm for redecorating and is unnerved by her neighbours' indifference to interior design, especially her friend Elsa whose house still has an air of unoccupation despite her having lived there for years:

> In the hall there was a strip of wallpaper hanging loose, which Elsa admitted having torn off one day to see what is underneath – blood-coloured flowers and creeping foliage, better not to have known – and which hangs there still. Tonie would have had the whole lot off in an evening, would not have rested until it was all gone and something new and good put in its place. (14)

And when Christine Langham sees Amanda's new home she tells her how when they were having their house renovated the children's duvets had to have the nails shaken out of them every night, so drastic was the building work.

The description of the Clapps's home with its open-plan rooms, oak floors, beige carpets and ceiling-to-floor windows is reminiscent of images from interiors and style magazines that became increasingly popular from the 1990s onwards, and is consistent with a particular kind of lifestyle – made up of contemporary furniture, including glass tables, leather sofas, wall canvases, laminate flooring – on display in shows houses, in highstreet stores such as Barker and Stonehouse, and notably replicated on television. Indeed the past fifteen years have witnessed a marked rise in the number of lifestyle programmes devoted to health, fashion and beauty, but also, most significantly, to home decoration and makeovers. In some respects these shows are not a new development. DIY became particularly popular in the 1970s and '80s, and there were already programmes that dealt with home improvement. There is a notable difference, however, in how the multitude of home programmes currently on offer are consumed by their audiences. *Home Front* (1992-2000), *Grand Designs* (1999-), *Location, Location, Location* (2001-) and *Property Ladder* (2001-) differ from their predecessors in the respect that their purpose is to provide the audience with pleasure and enjoyment, as opposed to simply offering practical help and advice about how to perform odd-jobs. A lot of this enjoyment stems from the fact that where DIY and home improvement was once a solitary experience, television shows have transformed it

[121] For a history of 'knocking-through' and its relationship with middle-class lifestyle, see Joe Moran's article 'Early Cultures of Gentrification in London, 1955-1980', *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 34 No. 1, (2007), 101-121. Moran argues that knocking through was part of what became a recognisable mode of refurbishment for the middleclasses from the 1960s onwards, as they moved into poorer areas of London (such as Notting Hill, Camden and Primrose Hill) and sought to gentrify their surroundings and differentiate their houses from those of their lower income or working-class neighbours. Moran writes that 'for the gentrifiers, renovation was not simply a case of repointing bulging brickwork, touching up the paintwork, and retiling the roof. It was a statement about a new kind of lifestyle that was recognizably but not ostentatiously middle-class' (103).

into a shared activity in which the public at large can participate and be involved simply by sitting in front of their screens, and the programmes become a point of conversation the following day. They follow the transformations together each week, and take pleasure simply in comparing the before and after pictures without necessarily having to make use of the advice in their own homes.

In Cusk's novels, however, we see how this preoccupation with design and the influence of lifestyle programming on daily life is now reflected in literature. Characters such as the Clapps illustrate the importance of property and home ownership to the English middle-classes in particular, who bring an unprecedented amount of knowledge to bear on the purchase and subsequent refurbishment of their homes. I suggest that at the centre of both property television and English domestic life as represented in Cusk's fiction is the relationship between consumption, the home, and homemaking practices. Joanne Hollows explains that as the majority of people buy, as opposed to build, their houses, 'the concept of consumption is crucial in understanding our relationships to the places we live [...] and our primary relationship to the places we rent or buy is established through consumption rather than production' (74). This is reflected in the fact that the domestic interiors on lifestyle programmes can easily be replicated in homes across the country, because their ingredients – particularly sofas, lamps, styles of wallpaper – can now be found and bought on the high street. On a shopping trip, for example, the women of Arlington Park find themselves in a furniture department containing the sort of items depicted in magazines, and simulating the lifestyles that the consumer hopes to obtain through their purchases:

> Extravagantly padded white leather sofas were arranged around a chrome and white glass coffee table the size of a pond, and numerous sterile arrangements of dining room furniture hosted their invisible meals for four and six and eight. (92)

Since the move towards a consumerist economy that Giles argues began in the 1880s and securely established itself between 1900 and 1960, the home has functioned as an important site of consumption, and this is something that the contemporary middlebrow novel adroitly depicts.[122]

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[122] Giles notes that this is particularly true of women. This new consumer culture played an important role in the reformation of the housewife figure as a 'professional' who was responsible for exercising her skill and judgement in matters concerning the purchase of the newly available labour saving devices. The housewife's needs became central to advertising campaigns as it was she who made the majority of purchases – 'shopping for the home and family became one of the key tasks for the twentieth century housewife' (Giles, 138). Social status also became inextricably linked to consumption practices and it was the job of middle class women 'to create the "ideal" homes that demonstrated this "cultural capital"' (138).

As a site for the display of purchases and lifestyle choices, the home has also become increasingly important in the fashioning of identities. Consumer culture promotes the notion that individuals can shape their own identity, particularly through the products and services that they buy. As Mike Featherstone argues, it 'encourages us to make self-conscious choices to construct distinctive lifestyles through an assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions' (86). If, as Giddens suggests, identity is no longer dictated by class and gender, individuals are now able to style their own lives as they wish, sometimes with the assistance of expert advice or self-help manuals. As part of this detraditionalisation of identity and the project of self-determination, the home, and the items on display there which can be continually changed and updated, has consequently become an integral part of the fashioning of new and flexible selves.

The supplanting of classed identities by those that are self-constructed, and the important relationship between consumption and the domestic space, is illustrated by the relationship that Adam's wife Lisa has with her suburban home in *In the Fold* and her privileging of the new over the old. Unlike Michael, who is enamoured by the Hanburys's upper-class domestic arrangement in the farmhouse, she sees little of worth at Egypt which she simply considers cold and uncomfortable. Lisa considers having fireplaces in a centrally-heated home to be 'pretentious' and has little time for the Hanburys's 'arty farty' (83) stuff and the antique objects that Michael finds so appealing. Talking about the likelihood that she and Adam will move into Egypt if they inherit it, she explains: 'I can't really see myself living up [t]here, can you, miles away from anywhere with all those sheep and no proper driveway' (126). Lisa's disinterest in the Hanburys's upper-class social position is reflected in her disdain for their home which is a symbol of their inherited class position and the identities that they are determined to preserve. Instead, as the daughter of a self-made man, she is content with the blank canvas that the house at 22 The Meadows offers, and where she has 'decided to concern herself with the morality of inanimate objects' (83) and furnish it with new cream carpets, electric appliances and modern conveniences. 'Everything is so efficient in this house' she tells Michael, 'everything works. You can just get on with your life' (82). In *Arlington Park*, Amanda's home is similarly full of newly purchased items including a coffee machine and the ultimate in luxurious domesticity, a white sofa which sits centre stage in the living room.

The representation of consumption and the individualised lifestyle varies between Cusk's novels. In *In the Fold* Lisa's preoccupation with efficiency and the benefits of modernity provides a refreshing departure, I suggest, from the other characters' obsession with inherited privilege and the maintenance of what is represented in the novel as an

outmoded status quo. She is the foil for the Hanburys, providing an alternative voice – literally with her northern vowels – to those of the upper classes. In *Arlington Park* and *The Bradshaw Variations*, however, middle-class consumption in particular, and the individualised approach to life are portrayed as serious social ills and Cusk is critical of the detrimental effects they have on society in a larger context. Tony Judt writes that

> [h]owever legitimate the claims of individuals and the importance of their rights, emphasizing these carries an unavoidable cost: the decline of a shared sense of purpose. Once upon a time one looked to society […] for one's normative vocabulary: what was good for everyone was by definition good for anyone. But the converse does not hold. What is good for one person may or may not be of value or interest to another. (88)

The focus on the individual contains the potential to lead to an indifference to or scepticism towards the 'common good', or 'just society', because society's common interest would become each individual's right to pursue simply what is right for themselves; the common interest would be freedom from community and precisely *from having a common interest*. In this respect, as Beck explains, 'the individual is the citizen's worst enemy' (xvii). In *Arlington Park* Cusk describes the process of consumption as being like a life source: in the mall 'people were carried upwards by the escalators eventually to re-emerge oxygenated from shopping' (87). Cars are driven out of the wealthy suburb like armoured vehicles, housing individuals and protecting those inside from being contaminated by the world of the public outside and spurting out pollution in the process. Indeed references to cars are made throughout the novel, as symbols of a privatised and individualised culture and its harmful consequences. Juliet Randall thinks to herself how the 'wanting' and 'getting' of her neighbours has taken the place of beauty and art:

> the relentless warlike assertion of one thing over another. It was civilisation, and yet to Juliet it seemed uncivilised to the core […] it was just getting and having – look at them all, backed up in their cars all the way to the park, jostling, fighting to get and to have! (33).

Later, her neighbour, Maisie Carrington, is infuriated when a woman driving a 4x4 and talking on her phone, engrossed in her own actions, nearly knocks a child over.

Cusk's novels are consistent with the discourse of possibility – both social and economic – that characterised the late 1990s and 2000s in their depiction of the possibilities of self determination and social mobility. Yet, contained within these narratives is also the doubt that longstanding delineations and markers have faded at all, as the image of the waning powers of the aristocracy would suggest, and a profound suspicion of the ability to truly transcend social categories. It is significant, for example, that despite the purported wealth of possibilities on offer to the individual who has been divorced from her original class position, and the opportunity for her to create an identity entirely of her own

choosing, the choices she makes in Cusk's novels are typically highly conservative. The style to which many of Cusk's suburban inhabitants aspire is highly informed by traditional class markers. It is ironic that in an apparently increasingly classless environment, where personal merit is purportedly more highly valued than inherited class positions, that in Arlington Park the primary aim of Matthew Milford is to emulate the lifestyle of the aristocracy. Juliet refers to Matthew Milford as 'the lord of the manor' (9) and describes the Milfords's 'ridiculous' home as residing in a 'little aristocracy of houses' on a street 'that existed at a pitch of striking ostentation' (12). The interior of their house also reflects their aspirations for a traditionally aristocratic life – one that is inextricably bound up with the markers of the class system that is no longer thought to pertain. Their kitchen is 'like a ballroom' centred around 'a heavy, square dining table with carved feet' (13) in the style of some of the great houses of England, and the reader is invited to judge this couple unfavourably with Juliet when she exclaims, 'all those hunting prints – and the antlers in the loo! Who do they think they are – the aristocracy?' (10) It appears that they do.

I argue, though, that whilst the depiction of the Milfords in *Arlington Park* is not positive – Matthew Milford is rude and arrogant – it is not entirely clear what the couple are being judged for. This ambiguity regarding the metaphorical charges made against them in the narrative (by Juliet in particular), in turn affects the message that the novel – and indeed all of Cusk's fiction, given its depiction of social change – sends about class. One possibility is that Matthew has been successful, despite his bigotry and oafishness which the novel clearly depicts. It is perhaps to this that Juliet, and potentially the reader, objects. 'How can people who are so idiotic be so successful?' Juliet asks, later enquiring 'what's so important about a business, it's just selling things for your own personal profit' (10). The Milfords are described in sinister terms; their expensive cars are 'armoured', their Mercedes has 'ogreish eyes', and when looking at their house Juliet is filled with an 'oceanic sense of malevolence, of a great diffuse evil' (12). Given the conflation of the Milfords with social mobility, the suggestion is that the process is as unfortunate as the people who embody it. Mobility, in this respect, simply equals greed.

If it is their poor taste, however, that Juliet and Cusk's other traditionally middle-class characters find offensive, it is clear that the longstanding class-based standard of aesthetic acceptability persists. This is a standard against which people continue to be judged – notably by those who occupy higher class positions by virtue of birth – regardless of the success that their personal merits have yielded. In *The Bradshaw Variations* Cusk similarly describes Howard and Claudia's disdain for their newly wealthy neighbours:

> [They] liked to regale their visitors with stories of the new heights of tastelessness – the outdoor Jacuzzis, the obscene statuary, the Hawaiian-themed cocktail bar that has recently been erected in next-door's garden – to which each month their neighbourhood ascends. (28)

Interestingly Howard and Claudia mock their neighbours' taste despite the fact that they themselves live on Laurier Drive and park a BMW – a clear symbol of affluence – on their drive. The implication of this is that although they live beside these people, they are not like them, and they believe that their displays of wealth and success are somehow different, or else more knowing and ironic. The relationship between class and taste is a theme which runs throughout Cusk's fiction. What is important about this, however, is not just the connection between patterns of consumption, aesthetics, and social categories, but, more interestingly, *the feelings* that surround the process of attempting to affect a classed identity through the display and purchase of the appropriate style. Whilst the Milfords appear confident that their choice of home and furnishings reflect their success, and that their taste is consistent with the upper classes (with whom they share an affiliation, they imply), many of Cusk's other socially-mobile characters display a profound anxiety about displaying the 'right' taste. In the next section I consider how Cusk's depiction of this social anxiety highlights the persistence of a classed based aestheticism which, because of its shifting and abstract nature, means that some of her characters never feel comfortable with their choices. They worry that a failure to do everything 'right' will result in their exposure as frauds. *Arlington Park* in particular depicts sympathetically, I argue, the feelings of intimidation and anxiety that can remain even after an apparently successful attempt at social mobility. The novel illustrates how the position of birth can still leave a mark, and how gaining social acceptability requires more than wealth and a large house in the right postcode.

Faking It: Anxiety, Acceptability, and a Crisis of Taste

Although many of Cusk's characters appear to enjoy the benefits of the move towards a meritocracy in the late 1990s and 2000s, her novels pose significant questions about the reality of the individualised society and whether one's position at birth can truly be transcended. As noted earlier, the concept of lifestyle suggests that the home, and arguably the self, are blank canvases onto which any desired image can be projected, thus transforming what was there before. In her analysis of the lifestyle narrative however, Hollows notes that 'research demonstrates that class identities and differences still exert a considerable influence on domestic consumption practices' (8) and, I would argue,

everyday living at large. In *Arlington Park*, Amanda's home is a symbol of her success; it represents her skill at mastering the property market, her eye for design and most significantly her move away from her old working-class identity. The narrative explains to the reader that before her marriage to James, Amanda – or Mandy as she was known then – was someone who liked ready meals and red carnations from petrol stations, and wore red fingernails and an ankle chain. Yet, despite her move to this affluent suburb, her previous identity continues to hover in the background of her new life, and is accompanied by a class-based intimidation which affects her interaction with others and her attitude to herself. 'Like a settler in a new, unchartered country' (56), the narrative explains, she feels peripheral and unable to bridge the gap between herself and the other women of Arlington Park. Her home is newly refurbished, but nobody comes to visit. She explains that 'she began to suspect some inadequacy in herself and James, a lack of substance that made redundant all her knowledge of what she had' (49). Determined that someone should witness the products of her labour, she invites two couples over for dinner, where – highlighting her concern with getting things 'right' – she serves 'lasagne, chocolate mousse, coffee and *a quantity of wine that fell somewhere between modesty and correctness*' [emphasis mine] (56). Despite her planning and concern for social correctness she suspects that the evening was not as successful as she had hoped. This is confirmed when she meets one of her guests again later who tells her that they carried the evening on after they left, dancing and drinking whisky until the early hours of the morning without Amanda. On the surface the dinner party has gone well, but after this Amanda knows that she still has not been accepted into the social group.

The same sense that she has made a mistake, or failed one of the tests laid out by her new neighbours, occurs one rainy day, when she manages to entice the mothers at her daughter's school to come for coffee. She shows them round her newly renovated home:

> '*What* an enormous kitchen!' cried Sally Gibson [and] in that moment Amanda knew that her kitchen was too large. She would not have thought such a thing was possible but entering it now she knew that it was true. They had knocked through until they had created not space but emptiness. They had gone too far, nobody had told them to stop [emphasis in original]. (63-64)

Amanda is plagued by thoughts that she is unsuited to living in the suburb, and try as she might she cannot acquire the knowledge that is seemingly necessary to live there successfully. She feels that her sense of what is 'correct' is always misjudged, as though the other – significantly longstanding, and, I suggest, more securely middle-class – inhabitants of this suburb have their own rules of social acceptability. The Fearnleys, for example, the upper-middle-class family who live next door to Amanda, embody the social ease of which

she is in pursuit, but they provoke in her a sense of confusion and inferiority which is inextricably linked to her perception and interpretation of class markers.

Where Amanda thinks it essential to be tidy and controlled, and is focused on presenting a respectable and correct image, adhering strictly to the standards that she thinks her environment expects, the Fearnleys display a total disregard for them. Like the Hanburys in *In the Fold* and the Maddens in *The Country Life*, their voices are loud and their violent family arguments – 'sound of slamming doors and full-throated screams' (50) – can easily be heard through the walls. Unbelievably for Amanda, their houses are shabby and their gardens untidy despite what they have cost to buy. Yet, for all her effort, it is clear that the Fearnleys's social position is far more certain than Amanda's; whilst she struggles to get people to visit, 'at the weekends their drive was packed with cars, their house and garden filled with a riotous, secretive commotion' (50). In fact the implication is that it is because their class position is so certain that they can afford for their behaviour to be potentially anti-social. They are loud because their voices are aristocratic, and whilst Jocasta Fearnley does not wear any makeup and has dirty-looking hair, her rough gardening hands bear 'a ring with a huge diamond in its tarnished claw' (51) as if to signal both her wealth and her disregard for it. Significantly, unlike Amanda for whom a house on Arlington Park is the result of hard work and strenuous effort, the Fearnleys gave the impression that 'no ordinary transaction had brought them to Western Gardens: that they had somehow received it, or that they had always been there' (48). Amanda's interaction with families such as this one – whom she describes as being a 'race' who spoke in 'a language unfamiliar to her' but which she knew was 'the sovereign tongue of the well-appointed principality' in which they live (48) – suggests not only that class continues to be a primary factor in the organisation of social groups, but that it is still regarded as something which is inherited. Whilst social mobility and the individualised society, signalled through financial success or the acquisition of a house in a middle-class area, is promoted as a possibility for everyone, the narrative suggests that inherited class positions still persist and come with a language that, whilst it is perhaps possible to imitate, cannot be fully understood by those who come to it late.

Cusk's fiction suggests the continuation of class judgement and restrictions and is pessimistic about the potential for true mobility – good in theory but not practically viable – almost in the same manner as Brookner views feminism. In her discussion of the relationship between class and respectability, Beverly Skeggs puts forward the idea of 'passing', and the anxiety this often provokes. 'Passing' is the desire to successfully integrate oneself into a different class, by altering clothes and accent for example, without being detected by those who were themselves born into it. To pass, it is necessary to make these

changes and proceed without detection. She explains: 'trying to pass as middle class, to be accepted into another group, to know how to be accepted, generates considerable anxieties for those who hope to pass […] The problem with passing is that someone may catch you out' (86). I suggest that Amanda's discomfort when talking to Jocasta, and her concerns about 'getting it right', stem from her attempts to successfully pass as securely middle class and her fear that she will be revealed as an impostor.

Returning to the connection between consumption and the creation of the self, the discourse of individualisation implies that individuals can purchase the majority of the things needed to create their desired identity and style their lives. Through her choice of home and interiors, therefore, Amanda should be able to create an identity of her own choosing. And yet she is unable to do so successfully. The novel suggests, I argue, in line with Skeggs's discussion of 'passing', that the capacity to shape one's own identity, whilst opening up the possibility of transcending the position of one's birth, is always accompanied by the anxiety that the truth of one's original position will be revealed. With regard to the relationship between identity and domesticity, Hollows explains that

> [w]hile ideas about lifestyle often promise that our homes can operate as a blank canvas upon which we can create and inscribe individual identities, research demonstrates that class identities and differences still exert a considerable influence on domestic consumption practices. (82)

Although Cusk's characters are financially successful, they remain concerned that their choices of furniture, interior decoration and garden design will reveal their original class position. They worry that they will make a mistake and choose unwisely. The result as, Angela McRobbie, argues is that

> the individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices. By these means new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are responsive to the regime of personal responsibility and those who fail miserably. (119)

The fact that many people choose to decorate their homes in neutral and inoffensive colours, despite the varieties of patterns and colours available suggests a concern about, as opposed to an enjoyment of, this freedom of choice. Whilst as Hollows explains, people who want to paint their homes are not only faced with choices about what kind of colour and finish they want, but also what kind of lifestyle association they want to construct through their choice of paint, Christine's response to seeing Amanda's home reveals a reticence to take advantage of these options: 'You can't go wrong with neutrals, really, can you?' (64).

In *Distinction* (1984), Pierre Bourdieu discusses the connection between the choices people make and their 'deep-rooted and longstanding dispositions' (77) which originate from their backgrounds and class positions in a way that they are not even aware of. Whilst

an individual may strive to eschew their beginnings, and make every effort to overcome inclinations which they know are indicative of these beginnings, the decisions they make about what to buy, eat, and wear, and how to decorate their homes, reveals something of not just their current tastes but also their original subject position. Bourdieu asserts that

> [e]very interior expresses, in its own language, the present and even the past state of its occupants […] The effect of mode of acquisition is most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence […] which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and longstanding dispositions because, lying outside the scope of the educational system, they have to be confronted, as it were, by naked taste, without any explicit prescription of proscription, other than from semi-legitimate legitimizing agencies such as women's weeklies or 'ideal home' magazines. (77)

He astutely observes the ways in which the influences and predilections that an individual has previously experienced (as a child or before entering a professional institution for example) threaten to reveal and exert themselves on choices made by the individual in the present because of his or her tendency to return to the default position of the past. Whilst able to persevere with the style of a newly adopted position with the guidance of someone or something in possession of the requisite knowledge, when that assistance is removed, and the individual must make their own assessment of what is 'right', they are often unable to do so. They instead use the knowledge that they have always had at their disposal – arising from their original class status for example – and use it to make a decision. In doing so, the true nature of their origins is revealed. Amanda's concern is that in being forced to make her own decisions about the interior of her house she will reveal her working-class roots. The only option, therefore, seems to be 'neutrals' which may not, in their blandness, it is hoped, reveal anything at all.

Bourdieu posits a connection between class and aesthetic taste, and articulates a model of class based on the way in which social groups differentiate themselves from one another using four different types of capital which, as Skeggs explains, 'are capable of conferring strength, power and consequently profit on their holders' (8). Economic capital includes wealth and other financial assets. Managers and business owners tend to have access to significant amounts of economic capital as their work is designed to yield substantial profit, and it is often accompanied by a high level of conspicuous consumption in which expensive purchases are made in order to reflect access to money. Cultural capital can exist in the form of physical and psychological dispositions, cultural goods and objects, or else from experience and qualifications gathered through institutional affiliations. It is clear that characters such as Amanda, the Milfords, Lisa Hanbury and the Bradshaws's neighbours on Laurier Drive, are in possession of a significant level of economic capital, (often accrued as a result of the business-minded exploits favoured by the period in which

Cusk was writing). Yet, they are repeatedly shown to lack the cultural and social capital (successful relationships with others and memberships of groups) to succeed in their new environments. In the way that it depicts the changing formation of middle-class culture, Cusk's fiction is consistent with the conception of the middlebrow novel not only as a middle-class form in terms of its readership and subject matter, but specifically in its documentation of the reformations and contradictions of this social class. The middlebrow novel played a key role in the project of acquiring cultural capital and taste for the newly middle-class population (in the first half of the twentieth century in particular). Cusk's writing suggests however that the possibility of this project being successful is slim.

Time to Go Home: Domesticity and the New Housewife

Over the past fifteen years, domesticity and the housewife in particular have been re-imagined in postfeminist discussions. During the second wave of feminism the housewife was regarded as a subject position from which to escape, and which rendered the individual a prisoner and a passive dupe of patriarchy and someone who, as Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd describe, was perceived to be 'sentenced to everyday life' (viii). In the 1990s, however, the meaning of the housewife and the associations surrounding her underwent a reinterpretation as an increasing number of women were portrayed as choosing to return home and to re-embrace domestic femininity, in an act that has become known as 'retreatism'. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra explain that retreatism (or 'downsizing' as it is also known) has become:

> one of the most persistent themes of postfeminist representation [whereupon] a well-educated white female professional displays her 'empowerment' and caring nature by withdrawing from the workforce (and symbolically from the public sphere) to devote herself to husband and family. ('Postfeminism', 108)

This return to domesticity has frequently been depicted in popular films in which heroines find happiness in domestic life; the reimagined glamorous housewife with new utensils was featured on television and magazines; and newspapers described housework in fashionable and erotic terms as 'the new sex'. In women's popular fiction middle-class women were often portrayed as resolving the stress of long hours at work (which they perceived second-wave feminism to have encouraged), and their inability to find happiness despite their professional success, by adopting the domestic identities which feminism had kept from them. Anne Kingston explains that during the rise of what she describes as 'mystique chic', 'housework – an endeavour reviled for decades as drudgery, as the source of women's psychiatric problems, as the very root of female oppression – was presented as both

fashionable and […] a surefire route to female satisfaction' (65). The forgotten virtues of domesticity were extolled, and feminism's objections were overruled.[123] Women's often problematic experiences of being housewives in the past, and the politics of domesticity particularly in terms of women's access to finance, were set aside in favour of a portrayal of the home as a haven of femininity and the 'natural' place of women.

Cusk's later novels were published during the peak of this reinvention, and *The Lucky Ones* (2003) (a collection of interlinked stories) and *Arlington Park* in particular focus almost exclusively on the experiences of both full-time and working mothers in their thirties. A number of postfeminist tropes of domesticity run through these novels and the housewife figure is a primary focus. In *The Country Life* Stella leaves her career as a solicitor to become an *au pair*, in *Arlington Park* Amanda has given up her job to be a housewife, and Serena Porter in *The Lucky Ones* and Maisie Carrington in *Arlington Park* have both left London for a quieter family life – acts which are all, I contend, illustrative of the fashion of retreatism. The novels do not, however, reinforce postfeminism's portrait of the new housewife figure as someone who has unproblematically embraced a domestic identity. I argue instead that they complicate this overtly positive image of domesticity (as the solution for example to the conflicting demands of work and home that resulted from women's increased participation in the workplace) whilst ensuring not to diminish the value of the home to both the individual and society. They address the romanticised image of domesticity as a haven of femininity and self-fulfilment, and note the role of the media and popular culture in its exacerbation.

In *The Lucky Ones*, for example, Serena Porter, a mother of small children, writes a very popular weekly newspaper column entitled 'Life lines' in which she documents the quotidian details of family life. Another character, Lucy, who is an avid reader of the column, highlights, however, the way in which her attraction to the column is based not so much on the accuracy or realistic nature of what Serena writes, but on her ability to glamorise life at home with children. Lucy observes the following:

> As I understood it, Serena Porter's success lay in her ability to depict the travails of ordinary women in a glamorous manner. She made them feel that they wanted to be as they already were. She insinuated herself beneath the carapace of female doubt and constructed a fiction of domestic glory there. (84)

Lucy likes reading the column because she thinks that its author is like her – that they both inhabit this 'glamorous' domestic space – or at least as the narrative suggests that by

[123] The rise of 'mystique chic', as Kingston describes it, was accompanied by an increase in vintage-style domestic household products synonymous with British brands such as Cath Kidston. Popular products ranged from 50s inspired aprons and baking sets, to kitchen utensils in pastel shades to floral laundry bags.

reading the piece Lucy's own domestic scenario assumes a more attractive form. Yet, in reality her home is not glorious at all. It is filled with 'rows of unwashed beakers and moulded plastic bowls [and] crumb-strewn surfaces' (85), as more significantly is Serena's, for whom the reality of being at home bears little resemblance to the fiction of her writing. The kitchen 'looked like somewhere where a violent scene had just occurred. Toys lay on their side all over the floor. Dirty dishes, nappies and newspapers covered every surface' (174). As another woman notes, 'the Porter's house was not what [she] had been expecting' (174). In their depiction of the dissonance between how domesticity is characterised in popular culture, and how her characters experience it themselves, Cusk's novels expose the more complex reality behind popular representations of being at home in the twenty-first century.

In one of a plethora of newspaper articles published since 2000 on the fashion for reclaiming a domestic femininity, Joan Smith cites the recent proliferation of household manuals both in the UK and US, which promote the pleasure of housework, as an example of the glamorisation of domesticity.[124] Smith notes that one example – Cheryl Mendelson's *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House* (1999) – includes 'an astonishing 56 entries for laundering and laundry [in its index] and entire chapters on ironing and vacuuming.'[125] Smith argues that

> [t]he new housewife, as we might call her, is nothing to do with real life and everything to do with fantasy […] What is going on here is an outburst of nostalgia, which would be harmless enough if it did not contain subliminal messages about femininity and what women ought to be like. Less benignly, it also suggests that we live in cultures which have recognised the inefficacy of bullying women back into the kitchen and have consequently adopted a new method – seduction. (par. 8)

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[124] In the *Guardian* and *Observer* articles include 'Spit and Polish' by Angela Neustatter (*Guardian*, 14 March 2000) on why women are reclaiming cleaning, and 'Who Wants to Be a Scrubber?' by Kathryn Hughes (*Observer*, 23 April 2000) on whether the fashion for the New Domesticity in the US will spread to the UK. 'Trendspotting: Why You Should Clean Up to Get Dirty' by Sandra Smith (*Guardian*, 10 December 2003) considers the relationship between housework and sex. Others include 'Cleaning is the New Clubbing' by Liz Hoggart (*Observer*, 4 April 2004), and 'Domestic divas want freedom not to work – and that means housework, too' by Jenny Booth (*Guardian*, 11 May 2004). In *The Times*, articles included 'It's Fashionable to Be an Old-fashioned Housewife Again' by Corrine Abrams (*Times*, 10 October 2007). In 'Let Them Bake Cakes' (*Times*, 4 October 2003) Kate Carr 'renounces her inner domestic goddess' and refuses 'to be excited by limescale'. In 'Turn Back the Clock?' (*Times*, 16 October 2004), Caitlin Moran argues against what she describes, in a reference to Mrs Beeton, as 'Beeton-mania'. Articles in *The Telegraph* included 'Happiness is a Feather Duster' by Rachel Simhon (*Telegraph*, 2 April 2004).

[125] There has been a burgeoning market of household manuals over the past decade both in the US and the UK. Examples in Britain include Rachel Simhon's *The Housewife's Handbook: How to Run the Modern Home* (2007), Anthea Turner's *How to be the Perfect Housewife: Lessons in the Art of Modern Household Management* (2007), Fleur Barrington's *1001 Little Housekeeping Miracles* (2007), as well as recent reissues of the famous guide to running a Victorian home *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861), and Florence Jack's *The Woman's Book of Household Management* (1911). More recently Mendelson published a book entitled *Laundry: The Home Comforts Book of Caring for Clothes and Linens* (2005).

Smith argues, rightly, that there is a removal of the politics of housework and childrearing in these texts, which emphasise only the potential for pleasure afforded by domestic activities and never the chance of tedium. There is a notable absence within the popular rhetoric of domestic femininity of the history of women's varied and often highly problematic relationships with the domestic space, which has been inextricably linked in much feminist writing with the oppression of women and their exclusion from the public sphere. There is a problematic lack of interrogation of the differences between the opportunity to enjoy domestic crafts, for example, or simply the chance to be at home as and when one desires, and the lived experience of cleaning, cooking and looking after children on a daily basis. Homemaking is instead presented as an attractive way of resolving the difficulties, for example, of combining a multitude of conflicting commitments, or else as a preferable alternative to paid employment.

Cusk's novels undermine the wholesome, idealistic view of contemporary domestic life as it is often portrayed in chick lit, via the suggestion that the reality of being at home is in fact carrying out largely solitary activities that are under-valued and often unseen. Whilst the rhetoric of retreatism suggests that women who choose to go home full-time will be more relaxed and fulfilled, Cusk's fiction suggests that buying into these traditional images of domestic femininity often leaves women socially isolated and financially dependent on their salaried husbands. They suggest that the problems with being at home that second-wave feminism perceived continue to exist, only now they are disguised using media-friendly images of celebrity housewives, retro cookware and nostalgia for vintage prints. In *Arlington Park* Maisie, a former television-researcher, is driven to distraction whilst at home all day, at one point throwing one of her children's lunchboxes up the wall 'where it burst like a firework' (172) and shouts at her young daughters that they are 'ruining' her life (173). Fellow resident of Arlington Park, Amanda, spends her time manically cleaning and 'master[ing] the weekly disciplines of shopping and cooking' (57), and in *The Bradshaw Variations* for both Claudia and Juliet being at home is likened to being enslaved.

It should be noted that domesticity is not always characterised as limiting or oppressive in Cusk's fiction. Maisie's outburst in the kitchen, for example, is proceeded by a scene in which she considers the disorder in her daughters' bedroom to have 'a sort of grace [...] a certain natural beauty that arises out of things moving and falling and being left undisturbed where they lie' (185). One character in particular in *The Lucky Ones*, Vanessa, enjoys being at home with her children with whom, she explains, she shares 'good moments, the gold' (161). The novels are clear in their representation of the home, however, as a space that can be negatively charged. Whilst Vanessa enjoys her role as a full-time wife and mother, the importance of her domestic role and contribution to the

household are continuously undermined by her husband, Colin. He considers his wife's life (as Vanessa herself begins to think over the course of the narrative) as 'the ultimate leisure […] something that he, Colin, had purchased for her' (120). In *Arlington Park* Matthew Milford also echoes this idea of domestic work being of little value because of its lack of financial reward, when he explains to Juliet over dinner: 'I'm not saying I don't value all the wonderful work you women do […] what I do say is that sometimes you don't think about how it's all going to get paid for' (17). Vanessa likes her full-time role as a wife and mother – she had more independence than she would at an office, she explains to Serena – but the narrative repeatedly draws attention to the precarious financial position of the housewife. Referencing the wages for housework debate, for example, Vanessa and Serena Porter discuss being paid for being at home. Whilst Vanessa is unconvinced, her comments that her husband is 'my house, my car, my table' (199) highlight the financial implications of occupying a domestic role, and the power dynamics that can develop within a family as a result, that are rarely, if ever, mentioned in popular accounts of domesticity.

In Cusk's most recent novel, *The Bradshaw Variations*, the traditional gender roles are reversed for one couple, although the results are not positive. Thomas Bradshaw stays at home, whilst his wife Tonie goes out to work at her new job. Tonie's experience highlights the extent to which 'work' and participation in civil life are still defined in terms of the public sphere – again, something which is largely absent from depictions of retreatism. Having stayed at home for many years to take care of her daughter, Tonie is invigorated by being back in the world of work. Sitting on the commuter train she thinks to herself, 'so! This is what people are up to, while women care for babies in wholesome rooms while they push strollers through the slow afternoon' and remembers what it used to 'feel like, being alive' (9). Yet, whilst Tonie easily reintegrates herself into the working day, afraid of being washed up again on the shores of domesticity, Thomas does not take over her role at home. Rather than doing the housework he plays the piano and lies on the sofa reading, whilst 'the kitchen is full of terrible sights and smells, flies buzzing around the dirty plates, the unswept floor crunching underfoot, pans with burnt food at the bottom left sitting there for days' (78). The dirt and disorder gather to the extent that Tonie, on returning home early from work one day, begins the housework herself, performing what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild describes, in her book of the same name, as 'the second shift'. For many working women, the second shift – doing hours of housework after returning home from work – has become the norm as a method of resolving home/work conflicts. Regardless of whether housework can be understood as a feminist activity, it still has to be done by someone and as Thomas neglects to step in, Tonie must perform both roles outside and inside the home.

Thomas's reluctance to engage with the domestic space suggests that the home remains a gendered – and notably feminine – space. Indeed the persistence of traditional views of masculinity and femininity is posited throughout the novels as one of the primary stumbling blocks to the reduction of the unequal division of domestic labour and the resignification of the home as a neutral area. Tonie's mother articulates an ostensibly old-fashioned view of marriage and gender when, on hearing that Thomas is a 'househusband', she declares that 'a man isn't a man if he's in the house all day' (109), but other characters – both male and female – seem to feel the same way. Even in light of Colin's behaviour in *The Lucky Ones* Vanessa thinks that she would not respect her husband if he stayed at home to look after the children, and even Juliet in *Arlington Park*, who recognises the gender trap that she is falling into, still continues to do more than her share of the work at home. In an article entitled 'Bringing it all back home', which aims to highlight the reality behind the new domesticity, Natasha Walter states that 'the kitchen is not – and never will be an apolitical world', and argues that

> [i]f women are going to spend more time there without feeling trapped again, then we have to talk politics and dull policy issues. We will have to press on with the debate about how to reform the workplace, and how to increase the availability and the take-up of flexible working and short term leave, so that women will be able to move more easily from one sphere to the other – and even be joined by men. (par. 8)

The Lucky Ones, *Arlington Park* and *The Bradshaw Variations* imply, however, that irrespective of the arrangement of working hours, it is a reassessment of what it means to be a man and a woman that is required before the two will come together in the home. Significantly, middle-class life is presented as particularly gendered in these novels, where men go out to work and women, even if they have jobs, are defined in terms of the home.

There is an insistence in postfeminism's preoccupation with domesticity that women are freely choosing to return to domestic roles and to re-embrace a form of femininity that is inextricably linked to the home. Kingston argues, however, that this movement back home carries more disturbing implications. In the same way as the backlash against feminism in the 1980s (as evinced by Trollope's fiction), which sought to reinstate women to the home by connecting their absence from it to social ills, Kingston suggests that the popular depiction of this new domesticity rests on the idea that it is better for everyone if women return to their domestic duties. According to Kingston, the implication behind this revival of domesticity is that 'all is not well inside the modern home. Chaos lurks under the unkempt surfaces; the modern family is in disarray, lacking cohesion, order, contentment' (70). *The Bradshaw Variations* references this perceived connection between women's absences and family downfall, as well as the emotional

division that mothers can experience regarding leaving their children – something which stems from dominant opinions about the importance of mothering. After Tonie's daughter nearly dies from meningitis whilst Tonie is away at a conference, traditional roles are re-established. Thomas goes back to work and Tonie immediately resigns from her job to return home, as if her enjoyment of work has somehow brought her daughter's illness about. The reader is told that, 'she did not return to work, not even for a day' (249). The effect of the narrative around maternal absence on Tonie is clear; although Thomas has ignored their daughter's symptoms, it is she who feels responsible. The message about 'selfish' mothers which runs through Trollope's fiction (that the price of self-fulfilment is their children) is gestured towards in this novel as well. Tonie suspects that she is being punished for stepping outside of her 'proper' role as a stay-at-home mother, and fears that her daughter has suffered the consequences of her mother's actions.

To return to the idea with which this section on the new housewife began, postfeminist discussions since the 1990s have reopened the debate about the relationship between feminism, femininity and domesticity, and have sought to prevent women 'from objectifying and pathologising their domestic personas' (Genz, *Postfemininities*, 110). I argue that many of Cusk's novels feature references to second-wave feminist texts within their depictions of postfeminist culture in an effort to negotiate the complex relationship between postfeminism and second-wave feminism, and explore their attitudes to domesticity. In *Arlington Park*, for example, Amanda's impending sense of her own mortality that dawns on her whilst cleaning in her large kitchen clearly overlaps with the sentiment of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Juliet's talk of transcendence (an opera singer's voice 'made [her] think she could transcend it all, this little house with its stained carpets [...] transcend, even, her own body' [31]) has clear links with Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of immanence and transcendence in *The Second Sex* (1949). I suggest that these references function as a reminder of the disadvantages of domesticity highlighted by second-wave feminism, and of the politics of labour in which women's experiences of the home continue to be embedded. The boredom and isolation that Friedan and de Beauvoir posited as significant features of domesticity are largely overlooked in popular representations of homelife. Whilst the postfeminist housewife 'is no longer easily categorised as an emblem of female oppression' (Genz, 'I Am Not a Housewife', 50), and seeks to carve out a place for domestic pleasures, Cusk's fiction underlines the continuing complexities of contemporary domestic life.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the ways in which the debates around Cusk's work are consistent with concerns about middlebrow fiction – that it is pseudo-literary (as was suggested regarding Brookner's work) and that it blurs the line between the categories of high/middle/low. I argue that the relationship between Cusk's novels and other twentieth-century middlebrow texts, as well as the overlap between her work and genres such as the country house novel, embeds Cusk's writing in a tradition that is explicitly middlebrow. In addition to her novels, as an author Cusk herself is an important figure in contemporary discussions of literary value and culture on account of her interjections in debates about reading groups, domestic fiction, and the purpose of reading. In terms of the dominant thematic concerns of Cusk's novels we see again in this chapter – particularly in relation to the effects of social mobility and feminism – how the contemporary middlebrow maps the changing nature of society and personal identity. Like the work of Brookner and Trollope, Cusk's fiction is similarly suspicious of the true extent to which individuals are able to change and transgress their proscribed roles, whether in terms of gender or social position. Written in an era dominated by discourses of individualism, and postfeminism's focus on choice, Cusk's work exposes the continuing restrictions that are placed on people simply as a fact of everyday life. Whether on account of family, finance, or social anxiety, the characters in these novels remain unable to escape fully the positions into which they were born – positions which are so often dictated by gender and class.

Britain's entrance into the recession in 2008 has put an end to the culture of economic risk-taking that has occurred up until now, and which, as noted earlier, has comprised a theme in Cusk's fiction. Cultural commentators have questioned how this change in the country's circumstances will be reflected in literature.[126] With regard to popular fiction, for example, there have been concerns about the demise of chick lit, given its focus on consumption and high salaries. Chick-lit author Sarah Bilston has argued that the success of the genre in its current incarnation has passed. She explains: 'in the next months and years, expect to see plots that turn on overcoming repossession and job loss, not shopping and sex' (Flood, 'Chick Lit Novel', par. 8). Chick lit may be replaced by 'recession lit'. Similarly, in 2009 Alexandra Pringle, editor in chief at Bloomsbury publishing group, published a collection of novels entitled 'The Bloomsbury Group', that she has referred to as 'recession-busting nostalgia' (Keenan, par. 2). These are novels that have

[126] The effects of the recession have recently been documented in some male-authored fiction, including Paul Torday's *The Hopeless Life of Charlie Summers* (2010), and Justin Cartwright's *Other People's Money* (2011).

been published before, but were out of print. Significantly, the novels chosen by Pringle for republication were middlebrow novels from the early-twentieth century, including E.F. Benson's *Mrs Ames* (1912) and Rachel Ferguson's *The Bronte's Went to Woolworths* (1931), D.E. Stevenson's *Mrs Tim of the Regiment* (1932) and Frank Baker's *Miss Hargreaves* (1940). Whilst Bloomsbury has returned to the early examples of the middlebrow novel, it is unclear how the contemporary middlebrow novel will respond to this social change. As noted in the previous chapter, there is a possibility that, as in the case of Bloomsbury, there will be a literary turn towards nostalgia as represented by the Aga-saga. Alternatively, the middlebrow novel may provide some commentary on the current state of the nation. In terms of Cusk's writing, her last novel was published in 2009 at the beginning of the economic downturn and the subject of her next novel is unknown, although she is soon to publish her memoir of divorce. In their depictions of middle-class affluence and the beneficiaries of the free market such as Howard Bradshaw and Matthew Milford, her later novels do, however, provide a retrospective account of how the financial crisis came into being. In doing so, they attest to the ability of the contemporary middlebrow novel to depict the rise and fall of the middle classes, and to track social change.

Conclusion

In terms of the perception of literary worth, both in terms of private reading choices and as the subject of academic scholarship, this thesis remedies the conception of the middlebrow as being of little worth to contemporary literary criticism. Speaking broadly, the contemporary middlebrow novel is neither literary nor overtly popular or bestselling, but it remains vital to any discussion of how questions of value, canonicity, popularity and literariness circulate in contemporary culture. In 2011, such concerns have been highlighted once again in discussions of British literary prizes and award-winning authors, as disputes have arisen about the definition of 'great literature'. This fraught relationship between the gender of an author and the literary worth of their writing continues to be an important factor in the way literature is discussed and perceived both critically and in the popular press. In June 2011, Nobel Laureate V.S. Naipaul made his attitude to women writers clear, noting that no female author was his literary equal. In an interview at the Royal Geographic Society, in which he was asked about how he rated female authors against himself, he explained that he could detect whether a piece of writing was produced by a woman and that literature by women was 'unequal' to him because of women's 'sentimentality, the narrow view of the world' (Fallon, par. 4). He said that he could not possibly share the 'sentimental ambitions' of Jane Austen and noted that as a female author could not be 'a complete master of a house', this also comes over in her writing (Fallon, par. 4).[127] He illustrated his point with an anecdote about his publisher, award-winning author Diana Athill, maintaining that whilst Athill was 'so good as a taster and editor, when she became a writer, lo and behold, it was all this feminine tosh' (Fallon, par. 5).[128] Naipaul's comments provoked outrage in many female authors, including American author Francine Prose who remarked that

> [t]he notion of women's inferiority apparently won't go away. Of course, the idea that Naipaul imagines he is a better writer than Jane Austen would be simply hilarious if the prejudice it reveals weren't still so common and didn't have such a damaging effect on what some of us have chosen to do with our lives. (quoted in Flood, 'Women Writers', par. 7)

To return to the issue of the role of women in the literary market place, with which this thesis began, I argue that the importance of women as authors, readers, publishers, and

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[127] Naipaul is known for his long-running disputes with other authors, including Paul Theroux and Derek Walcott.

[128] Athill won the Costa Biography Award for her memoir of old age, *Somewhere towards the End* (2009). She was awarded an OBE for services to literature in 2008. She dismissed his comments about women's writing and his perceptions of her work, remarking that 'I was a "sensitive editor" because I liked his work, I was admiring it. When I stopped admiring him so much I started being "feminine tosh"'. She went on to comment that, 'I can't say it made me feel very bad. It just made me laugh […] I think one should just ignore it, take no notice really' (Flood, 'VS Naipaul's Attack, par. 5).

consumers of literature stands in strong opposition to views such as Naipaul's. The value of women's writing in the contemporary canon and the significance of domestic writing must be reassessed by literary critics in order to counter such opinions and, as I have shown, the contemporary middlebrow novel has an essential part to play in such discussions.

In the preceding chapters I have explored the ways in which the changing social and political climates of the past thirty years have altered the composition of the middle classes, and the nation's experiences of and attitudes towards the home. The contemporary middlebrow novel has been of prime importance in the documentation of these changes and has been an invaluable part of both the reflection and construction of middle-class existence. As noted in the concluding section of my chapter on the fiction of Rachel Cusk, there has been another recent change in the politics of contemporary Britain – the formation of the coalition government between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties in 2010. The election of a Conservative Prime Minister, and politicians educated at prestigious public schools and Oxbridge, has provoked considerable debate about the rigidity of Britain's class system. It has raised serious concerns about social elitism, and the extent to which there has been a return to traditional values of inheritance, and the use of old boy networks and social position, as represented by the 'Chipping Norton Set', a group of some of the most powerful people in the country.[129] As the pine kitchen and Aga were seen to arise from the Conservatism of the 1990s, this most recent political change has brought about a change in consumer trends. More specifically, it has been accompanied by a nostalgic turn in popular culture towards a vision of England from the first half of the twentieth century. Morale posters from WWII branded with the words 'Keep Calm and Carry On' and bearing the crown of the monarch have been reprinted in their thousands, reaching an apotheosis in 2009 when the words were featured on merchandise ranging from cups to beach towels. A preoccupation with the monarchy came to the fore once again when the country celebrated the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton in 2011, which was also accompanied by increasing sales of commemorative memorabilia reminiscent of that produced in honour of the Queen's coronation and marriage.[130] A 'make do and mend' approach to lifestyle has become popular, ironically

[129] Chipping Norton in the Cotswolds is home to highly influential figures including media moguls and the Eton and Oxford-educated Prime Minister, David Cameron. The *Independent* reported that this area was where the power lies in Britain, remarking that 'anyone who wanted to claim that democracies are a sham could do worse than start here' (Hanning par. 4).

[130] The Royal Wedding has been cited as a reflection of the return to conservative values and a rigid class hierarchy. Rosalind Coward notes that the media's repeated assertion that Catherine Middleton is 'a commoner', and not aristocratic, makes 'the hereditary monarchy, with all its ancient privileges, look democratic and accessible' when in reality it remains the greatest symbol of the inherited wealth, power and

promoted by television personality and member of the aristocracy The Honourable Kirstie Allsop, as a fashion for crafts and practical domesticity has developed.[131] These examples alone have become indicative of a wider preoccupation with a nostalgia for a vision of England as a nation of resilient citizens – increasingly important after the onset of the recession in 2008 – and reflective of a return to the traditional hierarchies of class that the new government has come to represent.

In an article on the Royal Wedding, Suzanne Moore argues that class is revealed not only through political leaning, but also through decisions about how people live, and notably about what they consume and aspire to, and it is 'in these areas that the conservative sensibility is rising to the fore' (par. 8). She writes of current British culture:

> We have given up and stepped back from the more minimalist, brutalist lines of 90s decor in our homes. Yes, we like it clean and airy but we also like a bit of clutter. If you are very rich you have a few antiques mixed in with the modernism. If not you can buy new stuff that's been pre-distressed. Crafts are making a comeback, hardly surprising in a recession, but also to do with a vision of homeliness.

Moore notes here how a return to a cosy form of domesticity is part of this return to conservatism, a move away from modernity and experimental design towards a more traditional aesthetic.[132] Moore strongly asserts that this consumption of domestic charm – buying Cath Kidston tablecloths and Emma Bridgewater cups, both bound up with ideas of Englishness, being the examples that she uses – is 'not fashion [or] actual taste' (par. 13). She maintains instead that such acts of consumption constitute 'buying into a vision of classlessness that has been defined entirely by the upper-middle class as just the way things are […] These signs and rituals are part of the dominant consensus' (par. 13). Moore is right in her analysis of the current cultural turn and its implications for the dynamics of

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status of the few, and also, as Coward explains, patriarchy ('Kate Middleton', par. 5). The recent return of political conservatism has been accompanied by the restoration and celebration of traditional gender roles, as embodied by the female Royals. As Coward notes in an article lamenting the return of the 'myth of the perfect princess' 'a female royal can represent power that is politically unthreatening, embodying ideals such as family stability and continuity' ('Kate Middleton', par. 5). Inherited status and traditional gender roles are similarly embodied by the Prime Minister's wife, Samantha Cameron, who is the daughter of Sir Reginald Adrian Berkeley Sheffield, 8th Baronet and descendant of King Charles II.

[131] This trend is reflected in the surging number of guides to enjoying a thrifty lifestyle. Books such as India Knight's *The Thrift Book: Live Well and Spend Less* (2008), Lettice Wilkinson and Rebecca Gillieron's *Charity Shopping and the Thrift Lifestyle* (2008), Patricia Nicol's *Sucking Eggs: What Your Wartime Granny Could Teach You about Diet, Thrift and Going Green* (2009) have gained particular relevance since the onset of the 2008 recession. Reproductions of official Ministry of Information leaflets have also been published with new forewords by Jill Norman, including *Make Do and Mend: Keeping Family and Home Afloat on War Rations* (2007) and *Eating for Victory: Healthy Home Front Cooking on War Rations* (2007). For the middle-class consumer, at whom these lifestyle manuals are aimed, however, the decision to pursue this fashionable way of being is made out of choice as opposed to necessity.

[132] Consumers are able to purchase a variety of recently published books dedicated to the creation of this kind of cosy domesticity, including Jane Brocket's series *The Gentle Art of Domesticity: Stitching, Baking, Nature, Art & the Comforts of Home* (2008), *The Gentle Art of Quilt Making* (2010), and *The Gentle Art of Knitting* (2011), as well as Ros Badger and Elspeth Thompson's *Homemade: Gorgeous Things to Make with Love* (2009).

class. The ubiquity and affordability of products associated not only with a bygone era but with upper-class taste suggests that all citizens can enjoy a shared affiliation with those of greater privilege and that the gap between different strata of class has diminished. In reality, however, what remains true is that the lifestyle that these items represent remains outside the reach of the majority of people. The availability of these products and aesthetics is an exercise in hegemony, whereupon the majority is occasionally invited to participate in a culture from which they are ultimately excluded. Traditional class and social dynamics remain intact whilst appearing to dissolve through consumer choice.

What is most significant about Moore's argument for the purposes of this thesis, however, and where I disagree with her assessment, is that she describes this 'blanding' of culture (par. 10), as representing 'a real lurch to the middlebrow right across culture' (par. 8). To return to the definitions of the middlebrow outlined in my Introduction, Moore uses the term in a pejorative way to highlight the bland nature of culture today, whether on television, or in music or art. She conflates the middlebrow with mediocrity and conservatism, and with a failure to demonstrate integrity of taste. The arguments contained in the preceding chapters have sought to undermine such images of the middlebrow and to highlight instead the plethora of ways in which it shows itself to be a dynamic category of culture. The 'middling' nature of the middlebrow – its position as neither high nor low, neither art nor entertainment – has led to it being understood as homogenous, pseudo-cultural, and mediocre. Yet, as I have argued, the middlebrow is in fact a form which highlights the inherent instability and constructed nature of cultural delineations. It illustrates the ways in which the boundaries between the categories of high/low, authentic/inauthentic, academic/general are continuously in the process of being redefined. In terms of the literary middlebrow, the authors and novels I examine here have been the focus of several much-publicised discussions about literary work and categorisation, precisely because of the ways in which they refuse to observe the boundaries that are expected to exist between different kinds of culture. The work and public images of Anita Brookner, Trollope, and Cusk highlight the need to look more closely at how value is attributed to different kinds of writing, and the complex ways in which cultural products become regarded as being of worth (through the acquisition of a prize, the endorsement of another writer, a review in a literary supplement) or not (because it is written by a woman, has a domestic focus, is insufficiently experimental or challenging, is consumed by a reading group).

The connection Moore makes between the middlebrow and conservatism does hold true, to some extent, in terms of the thematic concerns of the novels I have examined here, given the options and imagined scenarios with which they present their characters.

Returning to the main thrust of the thesis, I argue that the contemporary middlebrow novel reflects changes in both experiences of and attitudes towards feminism, class and domesticity. It documents the evolution of the English middle class and explores the effects of the cultural and political climate on women's relationship with the home. The contemporary middlebrow novel registers the difficulties and dissatisfactions that women experience in relation to the home and workplace, and particularly as wives and mothers. The work of Brookner, Trollope and Cusk explores many of the issues raised by second-wave feminism, ranging from the unequal distribution of housework and the role of women as the primary carers of children, to cultural perceptions of 'women's work' as being without value. However, whilst these novels clearly examine popular discourses around class, femininity and domesticity that have been dominant over the past thirty years, and depict the desire of their female characters to rebel against expectations, the solutions that these narratives offer can be highly conservative in their scope. In Brookner's fiction domestic stability remains most desirable for academic women. Despite being educated and often financially independent, the narratives return them to the home. In the final scene of *Brief Encounter*, Laura Jesson's husband says to her that 'you've been a long way away, thank you for coming back to me'. But whilst he may be relieved that his wife – like Brookner's Edith Hope – has 'returned' home to him, the audience knows that Laura does not feel the same way. Her disappointment at the continuation of her domestic circumstances is clear, and the same sense of resignation pervades the ending of these novels. Steps taken by these women to reject or destabilise the status quo are rendered futile and relatively little has changed by the end of the narrative. Unlike chick lit, however, which also has a tendency to draw the events of the novel to a close in a conservative manner – primarily with the heroine in a relationship or happy in her domestic role – the resolution offered by these novels is rarely positive, their heroines rarely happy. In this respect the contemporary middlebrow novel could be regarded as a cautionary tale for its female readers, suggesting that the chance of successfully vanquishing social pressures and finding fulfilment are highly remote.

It is on account of this conservatism that novels of this kind have been largely ignored by feminist literary critics in favour of texts which push the depiction of changes in women's roles further, and proffer some form of hope or solution to the difficulties they face. The conservative stance of the middlebrow novel – as opposed to the more radical position of explicitly feminist texts – and their realist approach – which does not allow for great imaginary leaps, experimentation, or the projection of a utopian future – means that their importance has been overlooked by many. I contend, however, that fiction such as that of Brookner, Trollope, and Cusk provides an invaluable account of how feminism has

affected the everyday lives of women, and depicts many areas of female experience and thought that feminism has yet to successfully unpack, and the contradictions that remain between how feminism is presented theoretically and how it is experienced and lived as a reality. Alison Light notes, regarding her consideration of literature and conservatism in the interwar years, that 'on the whole feminists have preferred to believe that feminism and conservatism are mutually exclusive' (*Forever England*, 14). She explains with reference to the work of Daphne du Maurier and Agatha Christie amongst others that none of these writers 'can be made sense of unless we admit that feminist work must deal with the conservative as well as the radical imagination' (*Forever England*, 13). It is precisely because of its conservatism that the contemporary middlebrow novel is an essential resource in the process of identifying the ways in which feminist thought has to develop further in order to account for these differences. To suggest that these novels are irrelevant to discussions of the relationship between literature and feminism would be to render the account of the inextricable link between the novel and women's experiences incomplete.

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