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The Power of Reading in the Comic Feminine Middlebrow Novel

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The Power of Reading in the Comic Feminine Middlebrow Novel

Amy Rambo

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Introduction

Among the great events of the early twentieth century—two world wars, a global depression, the rise and fall of fascist regimes—the beginning of the 1930s was a period of flourishing for British novelists. Nevertheless, in *British Writers of the Thirties*, Oxford professor Valentine Cunningham focuses almost exclusively on poets. He places his critical focus upon poetry rather than prose because “the novel, in the 1930s, as in the whole period since the form established itself in Britain, was the classic medium of the woman writer” (26). For Cunningham, this feminine dominance places the novel so far outside of his critical consideration that despite its 500-page length, his chronicle of writers in the 1930s “lacks the space to do full justice” to any women other than Virginia Woolf (27). He concedes, though, that “their place can be marked on the ‘30s map for future reference” (27). Since the 1980s, literary critics have come to the “mark” left by Cunningham and filled in the space with critical discussions of highbrow or Modernist writers such as May Sinclair, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Rebecca West. This thesis, however, goes even further into the feminine literary landscape of the 1930s to analyze the work of comic feminine middlebrow writers: D.E. Stevenson, Stella Gibbons, Nancy Mitford, and E.M. Delafield. Occupying the space between devastating World Wars, class levels, feminist movements, and high and low culture, comic feminine middlebrow novels bring front and center the concerns of ordinary middle-class women during the inter-war period. *Miss Buncler's Book* by D.E. Stevenson, *Cold Comfort Farm* by Stella Gibbons, *Christmas Pudding* by Nancy Mitford, and *Diary of a Provincial Lady* by E.M. Delafield reveal different topics pertinent to the day, but, ultimately, they all elevate reading as a means of female empowerment during times of immense change. When reading these texts, contemporary middle-class women in the 1930s encountered a variety of female characters written to be mirror

images of their readers except for the fact that the fictional women have the power and agency to negotiate or renegotiate their identities as women. Therefore, embedded within the four novels is the message that by reading books, especially middlebrow books, women could become better readers of the real world around them and more attuned to the value of their own voices and opportunities as middle-class women.

Understanding who a typical middle-class woman was in the 1930s is an essential if difficult task for anyone seeking to analyze middlebrow novels. The historical distance between today and the novels' publications preclude any kind of first-hand ethnographic study such as the one conducted by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance*. In the 1980s, Radway sought to find out how women interact with the messages in Romance novels and the ways these "cultural forms are embedded in the social lives of their users" by conducting first-person interviews and surveys (Radway 8). Without similar means at my disposal, I turn instead to the scholarship of cultural historians who have studied the characteristics of the middle class, feminist movements, and reading culture of the 1930s likely to have impacted the middlebrow audience.

A decade of extremes, the 1930s would be remembered by W.H. Auden as a "low, dishonest decade" (Gardiner xiii). Given the long shadow cast by the Great War, the Great Depression, and the rise of Fascism, it seems difficult to dispute Auden's version of the age. However, for the middle class in Great Britain, there were signs of prosperity in the midst of the gloom. Many middle-class areas were only lightly touched by the Depression, and prosperity in the form of "home ownership . . . rapidly multiplying acres of suburban semi-[detached houses] . . . a branch of Woolworths in every town . . . lidos, cinemas, paid holidays," and book ownership were experienced in ever-expanding numbers (xiii). If anything, it was the expansion of the middle class in power and number that caused the most tension between the classes.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, Britain's highly stratified society experienced significant shifts and changes. that increased class awareness in different levels of society. While some of these shifts came from the top as "the upper class lost caste with property and incomes" becoming less and less lucrative, "most significant was the influx from below" (Humble 74). By the 1930s, the numbers of "salaried workers in private employment in the United Kingdom nearly tripled [and] civil servants more than doubled in number," leading to an expansion of the definition of lower-middle class (74-75). In *Forever England*, Alison Light asserts that the very term "Middle Class" included a wide range of people "from the typist to the teacher," including "the florist and the lady doctor, the library assistant and the suburban housewife" (13). Rather than recognize the "mutual attitudes" that would unite the middle class as a whole, many women became increasingly attuned to and vocal about the finer distinctions separating the lower-middle from the upper-middle class.

As a result of class growth, many middle-class women felt uncertain about their class identities, leading to ever-increasing means for measuring and fine-tuning intra-class stratification. Whether or not one fit into the middle class, or where one fell on the spectrum of the amorphous "middle" became highly contestable. Evelyn Waugh recalled that everyone on that spectrum, of course, considered himself a gentleman, and "everyone draws the line of demarcation immediately below his own heels" (83). Where a woman drew that line—or had that line drawn for her—depended upon "subtle calibrations of class" (Gardiner 525). The calibration processes, "measured less by income than by occupation and status, were signalled in numerous ways including accent, domestic situation, and dress" (525). For middle-class women, this process could at once be both destabilizing and freeing. If her place on the spectrum of the

middle class was changeable, then she herself could potentially assert her will and affect that change.

As the outward means for social stratification, particularly dress and domestic situation, became the means for social negotiation, a corresponding social smugness and anxiety often characterized the lives and literature of the 1930s. In *the Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, Nicola Humble discusses the paradox of the age that both created a “sprawling complexity of middle-class identities” and “retained a firm attachment to the binary model of a middle class split into upper and lower sections” (84). Determining upper-middle-class status or lower-middle-class status gave way to a “seductive mode of thinking about class that allowed you to confirm your own status by ruling others out. . . . The meanings of ‘upper-middle-class’ and ‘lower-middle-class’ or their coded equivalents were entirely dependent on who was doing the categorizing” (84-85). As Humble points out, hardly anyone at the time categorized themselves as lower-middle class, but would instead use the less specific “middle class” as a self-determinant. Due to these constant negotiations, “snobberies and smugnesses” were created on all sides, resulting in a great deal of class anxiety that impacted the literature of the time (84). Being middle class themselves, the authors of middlebrow novels reflected the social anxieties and negotiations of their day in such a way that the novels usually either function as a kind of conduct literature or mock the whole enterprise of pretentious social posturing.

Social change and anxiety also extended into the relationships between middle-class and working-class women, creating what became known as “the servant question.” Middlebrow novels “echo the contemporary sense of a domestic sphere in a state of flux” due to the dwindling numbers of women willing to work as domestic help (Humble 109). From 1900 to the 1930s, working women employed in domestic help had fallen by a third due in part to the

changes in the nature of the job (Gardiner 41). Instead of employment within a Victorian or Edwardian country house where women joined forces below stairs with a number of other working-class men and women, the typical domestic help job in 1931 was a “‘cook-general’ . . . accommodated in a poky back bedroom in a middle-class villa” (42). Many working-class women had found domestic help jobs unappealing before this change took place, but adding isolation to the other backbreaking requirements rendered these jobs almost unendurable. Even when facing unemployment, most working-class women refused live-in domestic help posts by the start of the 1930s (42). Correspondingly, for many middle-class women who grew up in a household which employed several domestic servants, their own households were increasingly quite different. Finding servants and keeping servants became a frequent topic of discussion for middle-class women and a source of anxiety for them, an issue that comes up in many middlebrow novels. In response to the changing nature of the middle-class household, a “new commercial culture of ‘home-making’” found increased popularity as the ‘30s continued (Light 10). Nicola Humble estimates that “at least sixty new women’s magazines were started in the years between 1920 and 1945,” many of which worked to convince middle-class women “that housework was stylish” (124). Underlying the marketing strategies of these magazines was the assumption that as full-time domestic help for the middle classes faded into the past, women would be the ones to fill in the gaps whether or not women desired domesticity themselves.

When looking back upon the lives of middle-class women during the 1930s, the clearest consensus is that the time period mixed conservatism and progressivism together. Alison Light argues that while the growing home-making culture “was conservative in assuming this to be a female sphere, it nevertheless put woman and the home, and a whole panoply of connected issues, at the centre of national life” (10). Light argues that the complex nature of women’s

issues during the inter-war period act as a push and pull between tradition and change. While many middle-class women read *Good Housekeeping* and embraced their lives as wives and mothers, a number of others embraced the changes accelerated by the Great War by traveling the world, earning college degrees, or forging new paths within a number of male-dominated professions.

The cataclysmic effects of World War I triggered a gender crisis as expectations for men and women were upended by their differing reactions to the war. Because so many men lost their lives, a myth that all the “right men” had died began to take root in public perception. Given the scale of the deaths, some believed as Vera Brittain did, that “the first-rate were gone from a whole generation,” and that those men who did live were second-rate survivors (Wallace 24). However, that was not the only way in which men began to be perceived differently. Whereas in pre-war society men were seen as stoic, rational, and controlled, the war reversed these assumptions in many cases. In *English Feminism 1780-1980*, Barbara Caine explains that the mental and physical injuries men endured during the war led them to feel “emasculated” because “for the first time, large numbers of men suffered from nervous diseases, especially hysteria—once seen as a specifically female problem” (180). Even deeper than this, though, was the fact that “the war, for all its apparent celebration of masculinity and male bonding, [had] led to death and destruction” (180). The masculinity that the Victorian and Edwardian ages previously so venerated had proven deadly on the one hand and vulnerable to damage on the other. For women, the war had the reverse effect, moving cultural perceptions away from the previous assumptions that women were fragile, emotional, and hysterical. While the war revealed men to be capable of emotional or mental fragility, “the women for whom they fought became increasingly strong and independent” (Caine 180). During the war, many women stepped up as

heads of households, war-work employees, and nurses or ambulance drivers braving close proximity to the battlefield. Their poise and fortitude throughout revealed that “femininity” could include rational thought and controlled emotion previously considered masculine qualities.

For a time, the gender expectations upended by the war created a sense of greater equality and progress for the rights of women. The war, along with the passing of several key pieces of legislation, “increased female emancipation” during the 1920s (Light 8). The “Representation of the People Act” passed in 1918 gave some women the right to vote, and then the “Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act” passed in 1919, granted women the right to work, sit on a jury, and receive a degree (Gardiner 552). Although the acts did not cause a tidal wave of equality to break upon women all at once, they nonetheless opened some doors through which many women walked. Women such as Evelyn Cheesman who “became the first woman curator at the London Zoo” in 1923, or Hilda Matheson who in 1926 was “appointed the BBC’s first-ever Director of Talks,” and Margaret Bondfield” who “became the first woman cabinet member and privy councillor” in 1929, blazed trails through territory previously barred to women (Nicholson 242-243). These were the days of the Flappers and Bright Young Things shortening their skirts and chopping off their hair. In *The Women at Oxford: A Fragment of History*, Vera Brittain recalls that at this time in academia “many posts, prizes, and scholarships were . . . open to women which had been closed before,” and that women undergraduates were excited to don their caps and gowns (158). By the start of the 1930s, enough women had moved into the arenas of politics and employment as to give them a conspicuously visible public presence (Gardiner 551). In 1933, “a British branch . . . of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women” formed because of the growing numbers of British business women (Nicholson 264). While not sweeping or all-encompassing, the strides into the public arena made by women in the inter-war

period were nonetheless significant. As evidenced in many middlebrow novels, some feeling of liberation existed and a variety of opportunities were open that had been closed before the war.

Despite the progress made in women's equality just after the Great War, pushback against these developments gained momentum as the 1920s moved into the 1930s. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf suggests that "the history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself," and one chapter of that opposition could certainly be written about the reactionary backlash against women during the 1930s (55). Vera Brittain refers to this time as an "anti-feminist" move that swept through the intellectuals at Oxford starting in 1927 when university leaders voted to limit the number of women who could be admitted to the University (Brittain 171). The kind of backlash described by Brittain moved out from Oxford and into the wider culture as the flapper gave way to the housewife.

Opposition to the expansion of women out into the public spheres of society came from several different directions. After the expansion of the vote by the "Equal Franchise" Act in 1928, economic factors heavily impacted the legal progress of women's rights. As the Depression broadened into a global event, it "brought to an end the spate of reform legislation and any real commitment to feminist issues . . . within the broad political framework" (Caine 196). Destabilizing economic forces that gave rise to job and food anxieties along with the change in the working class added force to the pushback against women's equality. The backlash often took the form of cultural messaging disseminated to women in the form of the ever-increasing number of women's home magazines, cookbooks, and domestic manuals (Humble 127). Women, such as Virginia Woolf, decried this growing emphasis on domesticity as regressive and oppressive. Again, in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf sarcastically declares that

“Anonymity runs in [women’s] blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them” (50). Behind her statement lies her frustration over the ways dominant culture inhibited women from seeking a place in the public square. Later she explicitly states, “women, like me, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity” (83). For Woolf, the push toward the home and the private sphere represented traditional expectations at best and regressive attitudes at worst as the push toward domesticity became even more sweeping and widespread.

A comprehensive view of the period, however, reveals that leading feminists of the day were often deeply divided over the push towards domestic issues. Critics such as Alison Light have noted that the “more inward-looking, more domestic and more private—and, in terms of pre-war standards, more ‘feminine’” public rhetoric, was not always negative (8). She continues by stating that for some in the period, placing women’s issues at the center of national conversations by extension validated those very issues as significant. Essentially, Light argues that the period reflects a “tension in English social life” that she calls “conservative modernity: Janus-faced, it could simultaneously look backwards and forwards” (10). In other words, to give women’s issues any publicity and attention at all legitimized them as essential topics within larger cultural conversations even if many of these issues were about women and their place in the home. Her assertion reflects the divided nature of feminism in the 1930s where many were simultaneously advocated for different ideas of feminism. While some feminists pushed for greater movement into the public arena and equality with men, others pulled back to argue that fighting for the domestic rights of women was not inherently anti-feminist.

The mixture of conservatism and progressivism, or the Janus-facing priorities as Light put it, fractured the feminist movements of the 1930s after the passage of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act. Many women saw winning the vote as an end to the battle for women’s rights. As

Diana Wallace points out in *Sisters and Rivals in Women's Fiction*, throughout the 1930s, “the first histories of the women’s movements begin to appear” when leaders such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Rose Macaulay turned back to record the history of the Suffragette movement rather than continuing to push for its advancement (Wallace 41). Without the unifying issue of suffrage, deep ideological differences divided women into several different feminist movements working toward a variety of goals, leaving many with the impression that the period was “anti-progressive” (Light 9). For a long time, it was believed that feminist activity disappeared altogether after 1928; in actuality, the women of the period simply divided into different ideological camps (Caine 173).

Ideological differences among feminists tended to fracture along the definition of what it meant to be a feminist. According to Barbara Caine, the deepest divide ran along the “classic division between ‘equality’ and ‘difference’ feminism” (189). Difference feminism was spearheaded by Eleanor Rathbone who considered herself a “social reformer” eager to “secure due recognition, in deed as well as words, for the occupation of motherhood” (188). Most often, this meant advocating for the protection of the rights of women, particularly working-class women, by advocating for “new issues” such as “Family Endowment, Birth Control, [and] Social Insurance” (190). Rathbone’s “new” feminism shifted the focus to a feminism for women as inherently distinct from men. On the other side of the debate were the “old feminists” who saw feminism as the fight for the equality of women with men. They believed their work to be “completing the equality programme established by Victorian feminism and more especially by the suffrage movement” (190). Leaders of the equal rights feminists were Lady Rhondda, of *Time and Tide*, and Winnifred Holtby who stressed “the need for women to be seen as ‘human’ rather than to be categorized in terms of their sex” (189). For Holtby in particular, feminism

meant one thing, political equality. Middle-class feminists most often found themselves aligned with the old feminists because their main concern was for the equal working rights of married middle-class women. Feminists such as Vera Brittain advocated for more flexibility in marriage and more rights for married women so that marriage could stop being synonymous with a burden for women and could instead “symbolize ‘the union of two careers and two sets of ideals and aspirations’” (Caine 189). While debates between the groups did exist, for the most part they divided into their separate camps and worked for the rights of women along their separate fronts, reducing the impact of both sides.

Nowhere does the story of inter-war feminism play out more than on the pages of *Time and Tide* magazine, whose own trajectory mirrors that of the changes in the feminist movement as a whole. Started in 1920 by the independently wealthy Lady Rhondda, the magazine “wore its feminism overtly during its early years, and relied on the support it drew from suffrage networks and other women’s organizations to build its readership base” (Clay “Introduction”). During the 1920s the magazine published many articles debating old and new feminism, and it became a key platform for promoting women’s issues. However, Lady Rhondda intended from the beginning to extend the magazine’s reach beyond a gender-specific audience. As a result, a “rebranding” took place in the early ‘30s which shifted the magazine from a “women’s magazine” to the more gender neutral “journal of opinion” (Clay “Introduction”). Catharine Clay, a researcher out of the University of Edinburgh, argues that although this shift in branding likely contributed to the period’s overall reputation as a time of feminist decline, the women running the magazine would not have regarded the moment this way. For Clay, a study of the periodical itself, as well as of the correspondence between the contributors, points to a strategic decision on the part of the magazine’s editors to push women’s voices into the historically male-dominated spaces of

politics and foreign affairs by downplaying the previously overt feminist rhetoric (Clay “Introduction”). Compromises were made, such as women publishing articles anonymously, raising questions regarding the best means for the best ends; nevertheless, for the women of the period, “*Time and Tide*’s reorientation towards international movements and causes was for its feminist core of collaborators a natural extension of their rights as global as well as national citizens” (Clay “Introduction”). Given the turn in general towards global issues throughout the 1930s, it is not difficult to understand why these women made the editorial decisions they did, never mind the way it would look in retrospect.

In addition to publishing the current “issues” of the day like feminist concerns and foreign policies, *Time and Tide* championed the arts by reviewing and promoting the work of both highbrow and middlebrow authors. As the magazine gave space to works of Modernism as well as works of popular culture, it became an important “publicity vehicle for women writers” (Clay “Introduction”). The list of contributors from the early 1930s is a veritable who’s who of women writers of the day, from the highbrow Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West to the middlebrow E.M. Delafield and Stella Gibbons (Clay “Introduction”). Some of the fiercest battles between the highbrow and middlebrow were waged on the pages of *Time and Tide*, which managed to remain a platform for both styles throughout the period. Working both sides became another strategic move by the editors to widen their audience and maintain the ability to “negotiate their relationship to contemporary culture, both elite and popular” (Hammill 208). By publishing the feminist debates and artistic “brow” debates of the period, *Time and Tide* cemented itself as a historical recorder of women’s issues in the inter-war period.

Unpacking the “battle of the brows” of the 1930s requires a careful examination of the original binary that bookends the whole discussion. According to Nicola Humble, “highbrow”

was a slang term first used in America in 1911 (10). Its opposite, “lowbrow,” is recorded for the first time two years later (10). Their use as distinguishing terms for literature did not gain popularity until the late 1920s when a reviewer in the *Daily Express* wrote of needing a term that could convey the quality of a work between the two polar extremes. Humble sees the date of the review, 1928, as significant because it reflects the implications of larger class trends after the Great War with the “expanded suburban middle class, more affluent, [and] newly leisured” that shifted reading interests (10). The date also corresponds with the height of Modernism. While the term “highbrow” does not refer exclusively to works that would fall within what is now called “Modernism,” there is overlap in that “highbrow” meant works of a particular complexity. The works considered highbrow during the inter-war period were “experimental and avant-garde” for the time and are often the same ones now considered Modern (Hammill 9). On the other end of the spectrum is the “mass-market publishing of types or categories” intended to “induce repetitive consumption,” such as mystery or romance novels (Radway 23). Essential on the lowbrow end is the work’s easy consumption because of its formulaic construction. Distinguishing between highbrow’s “philosophically or formally challenging novel” and lowbrow’s “trashy romance or thriller” created a binary from which the middlebrow emerged.

Occupying the nebulous middle between these two paradigms means the middlebrow novel can be difficult to define on its own terms, and often key features of the genre get misrepresented. To put language around the middlebrow is often to call upon the highbrow and/or lowbrow as Nicola Humble does when she describes the middlebrow as “floating comfortably between the mire of the lowbrow and the lofty difficult peaks of the highbrow” (255). “Floating” is the operative word because novels categorized as middlebrow can be situated differently from one another with some closer to the highbrow side and others to the

lowbrow side. Also, middlebrow novels were often recognized for being particularly light and amusing. Humble also highlights the ways in which a middlebrow novel will contain “both conservative and radical models” of womanhood and offer readers “narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort” (174 and 11). The vast majority of middlebrow readers were middle-class women, and the changes in the form often reflected changes in middle-class concerns. Perhaps because of its “middle-ness” or “parasitic” nature, the middlebrow genre was “ignored by the academy” for most of the twentieth century (Hamill 6). This could also be “because of a misperception that it is so straightforward as to require no analysis, while in fact its witty, polished surfaces frequently conceal unexpected depths and subtleties” (6). Discussions regarding the superficial nature of the middlebrow compared to the complexity of the highbrow were not lost on authors of the time. Middlebrow novels often feature self-referential discussion about the “brows” and a self-deprecating humor towards their reputation as superficial. While these witty and amusing elements of the middlebrow novel were once thought to indicate their inherent shallowness, they are actually one of the genre’s most interesting features.

The growth of the middlebrow as a recognized genre in the inter-war period was driven by the expanding middle class, which shaped the ways books were disseminated. According to Clive Bloom in *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900*, throughout the nineteenth century, “novel reading (as a frivolous pastime) was seen by commentators as typically ‘female’ . . . [readership] being largely made up of middle- and upper-class women anyway,” and post-World War I, “newer groups of middle-class housewives or female office workers needed books to read at home and while commuting” (31). Growth in readership led to growth in demand, and the market adjusted as “two types of literary institutions come to a new national prominence . . .

lending libraries and book clubs” (Humble 36). Humble acknowledges that the private lending library was a well-established institution by the inter-war period; however, the period became a time of “rapid expansion that would lead to a W.H. Smith or Boots Booklovers’ Library in every reasonably-sized town” (36). Private institutions were not the only ones to see growth; “public library provision expanded . . . with an increase of books in stock from 15 million in 1924 to 42 million in 1949” as the number of branches quadrupled (36). Often these institutions offered a variety of subscription levels or membership lists that sent out the latest book based on readers’ interests (38). Alongside the circulating library subscriptions developed “the book club and the ‘Book of the Month’ recommendations of the daily newspapers” (43). Started first in America in 1926 as the Book-Of-The-Month-Club, then in Britain as the Book Society in 1927 and Book Guild in 1930, “selection committees of journalists, novelists, and reviewers would choose the books to be offered each month to the club members, at a significant reduction” (43). Readers benefitted from the clubs’ discounts and recommendations, as they provided members with a regular exposure to new books. As the clubs and subscription schemes grew in popularity, their impact on book sales grew as well.

Book clubs became powerful influencers that greatly impacted a book’s success as they guaranteed exposure to readers and a place in the discussions between the ever-increasing community of readers. Being selected by the Book Society was seen as a way to ensure “the commercial success of certain books” (Hammill 68). According to Nicola Wilson at the University of Reading, “records in publishers’ archives show that a Choice nomination from the Book Society meant a guaranteed additional order of 7,000 copies for the first edition—an enormous amount when typical hardback sales to bookshops and libraries were on average between 3,000 and 5,000 copies” (Wilson). Not only were members of the book clubs’ schemes

exposed to new books, but the book would gain the financial and reputational benefits of becoming a “popular” book. As Nicola Humble indicates, the Book Society’s influence also “guaranteed that [a selected book] became a talking point, [and] a shared cultural reference against which the largely middle-class female readers could define themselves” (46). This communal connection around books, which features in many middlebrow novels, reveals the meaningful place books had in the lives of middle-class women. Books “represented an investment of time, money, and household space,” and for women this investment grew in importance in the 1930s as it offered a way for middle-class women to distinguish themselves from others (Benton 272). Reading for middle-class women in the 1930s was not solely an individual activity, but a means of forging community, identity, and opportunity.

The growing readership of the inter-war period impacted not only the middle-class women reading novels, but the middle-class women writing them, such as D.E. Stevenson, Stella Gibbons, Nancy Mitford, and E.M. Delafield, each of whom this thesis will explore in separate chapters. All four women are a mix of the conservatism and progressivism characteristic of their time in that all four were middle-class housewives, yet they all also had long and successful writing careers. For Delafield, Gibbons, and Mitford, novel writing was preceded by years spent as journalists or columnists for newspapers and magazines, including *Time and Tide*. The stories they created reflect the time in which they lived where class changes necessitated correctly negotiating place and identity in the pecking order. The inter-war period of the middlebrow novel was a time when reading books could provide women with the social capital needed for conversing with people variously situated on the middle-class spectrum. It was a time when new public opportunities opened for women, but the leading feminist forces dispersed across a range of issues. Women were viewed increasingly as capable and rational while a boom in women’s

magazines declared the domestic role of wife and mother to be the most desirable life. Middle-class women writing middlebrow novels each tackled these issues in unique ways, but all four affirmed to their readers the power of reading. In each chapter I will draw upon the author's background to situate her novel's particular approach to women and the power of reading, focusing on the middlebrow aspects of her novel in terms of what it reveals about the nature of possibility and identity or expectation and class.

Chapter One: *Miss Buncler's Book*

Life in an English village goes topsy turvy when the villagers read their lives upon the pages of a novel in D.E. Stevenson's *Miss Buncler's Book*. Playing upon middle-class anxieties regarding identity and class, Stevenson's work reveals the power and possibility of reading through a "book within a book" plotline instigated by the protagonist, the eponymous Barbara Buncler. On the surface are amusing characters whose various reactions to the book within the book drive the plot forward as some are humorously brought down a peg, others realize their selfishness, and still others gain the confidence to draw closer to those around them. By alluding to Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Stevenson's subtext lightly critiques a literary culture that easily dismissed middlebrow novels and women authors. As Austen's work questions the conventional wisdom of her day regarding novel reading, so does Stevenson's novel. Through the changing characters, tongue-in-cheek humor, and allusion to Austen in *Miss Buncler's Book*, Stevenson argues that reading middlebrow novels, while not the means for perfecting life, can be an empowering force for good in the lives of ordinary middle-class women.

Dorothy Emily Stevenson was born in Edinburgh in 1892 where she lived a conventional life as a wife and mother and maintained a long and successful writing career. Growing up she had literary connections through her father's side of the family as he was first cousins with Robert Louis Stevenson. Although detailed information about her early life is limited, she was "educated by a governess" and started to write short fiction at the age of eight ("DE Stevenson"). She married Major James Peploe in 1916, and the couple moved to a small town near Glasgow after World War I where they had three children, two sons and a daughter. She moved only once more in her life when the family relocated to Moffat, Scotland in the lowland area of Dumfries and Galloway at the start of World War II. In the midst of a busy life of raising children, singing

in the church choir, and leading local Girl Guides groups, Stevenson also wrote close to fifty novels, publishing at least one a year right up to her death in 1973 at the age of 81 (Jalics). She was a prolific writer of middlebrow novels; the vast majority of Stevenson's stories are set in small villages in Scotland or England, containing humorous characters and lightly romantic plots.

D. E. Stevenson's novels, including *Miss Buncler's Book*, became popular with audiences in both Great Britain and the United States throughout the mid-twentieth century. In total, she sold "over four million copies of her books in Britain and three million in the USA" ("DE Stevenson"). Reviews of *Miss Buncler's Book* in particular can be found in newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. The *Birmingham Gazette* in 1934 grabs readers' attentions by titling its review of *Miss Buncler's Book*, "Study from Life" and praising Stevenson's "nice light touch" (Adams 8). In the U.S., *The News and Observer* in Raleigh, North Carolina calls Stevenson a "modern Jane Austen" and the novel a "folksy narrative" with "humor that is Puckish" ("Writing and Romance" 35). Articles mentioning the novel can be found among the archives of papers from New Jersey to California. Clearly, Stevenson's light humor and focused attention upon the lives of ordinary, middle-class women appealed to a large number of readers.

Stevenson's first description of the village of Silverstream in *Miss Buncler's Book* embeds within the novel middle-class anxieties regarding status and place along with a middlebrow optimism that change is possible. The novel opens upon a summer's morning as the village baker contemplates how difficult it is to deliver all the breakfast rolls on time given the villagers' differing morning routines (Stevenson 2). Stevenson gives each villager a "place" without explicitly ranking them in terms of finances or social status. Instead, she reveals, through a close third-person narrator, the baker's musings, which contain subtle social cues such as the detail

about Colonel Weatherhead who still rises early despite being retired from the army, or the young widow Mrs. Greensleeves who sleeps past ten, or Mrs. Dick who rents out rooms to paying guests, giving readers a sense of the village's class structure (2-3). Another way class is indicated is through the mention of household servants. Mentioning which characters have a maid or cook also subtly places them along the lower-, middle-, and upper-middle-class spectrum. The anxiety embedded here is the way the baker imagines rearranging everyone so that the "whole of the hill would be early, and Church End would be all late. No need then to buy a bicycle for Tommy" (3). Although couched in a baker's simple desire for an easier delivery schedule, the implication of who is or is not in their "right" place implies an anxiety over the rigidity of class. Stevenson begins the novel by subtly suggesting that a too fixed class structure may not be inherently good or worth maintaining. Alongside the suggestion that people could benefit from a "reordering," though, is the fact that the exact location of the village is never given, implying that the village could be any village. Over the course of the novel, many characters travel to and from London by train in a short amount of time, which implies that while Silverstream is a country village, it is not completely isolated or restricted. A few villagers will not change when prompted by an outside force, but many more will.

The external force that enters the village is the book within the book, *Disturber of the Peace*, that lands like a bombshell upon the characters, especially Mrs. Featherstone Hogg (Mrs. FH), the resident village grand dame who forcefully resists changing in any way (58). Living literally, and metaphorically, at the top of the hill in a large estate with her husband, Mr. Featherstone Hogg, she dictates all of Silverstream below (3). Stevenson further informs readers of Mrs. FH's status in a scene where several ladies have gathered for tea. Through the perspective of Miss Bunce, Stevenson writes, "Barbara knew when she saw the china that Mrs. Featherstone Hogg

was expected” (56). Had it just been any of the other guests to tea, Mrs. Carter the hostess would not have gone to the trouble of bringing out her china. As Barbara wonders how and why Mrs. FH has such a lofty position, Mrs. FH barges in and interrupts the gathering, “‘Filth!’ She cried. ‘Filth!’ And flung it onto the table all among the cakes and china and chrysanthemums. It lay there, half resting upon a dish of cream buns, and half propped up against the damson jam – it was a copy of Barbara Buncle’s book” (58). Mrs. FH furiously announces that everyone is in the book with all their little secrets exposed. She informs one woman that the book reveals she wears a wig and another that she lies about adding pectin to her jam (58). Of course, she does not inform them what secret has been revealed about herself. Instead, she demands they find out who wrote the book. From this point to the end of the novel, Mrs. FH is caught in a loop where she strenuously denies that she is anything like the fictional character, Mrs. Horsley Downs, but then declares she will sue the mysterious author for libel since “it was obviously intended for her, because it was exactly like her” (118). The material point Mrs. FH objects to is the revelation that she had been a chorus girl before her marriage. Previously, when she had entered the village as the new bride of the wealthy Mr. Featherstone Hogg, she kept those details of her past secret in order to affect a superiority over others. At the end, Stevenson leaves Mrs. FH in an ambiguous position where she has lost the respect of most of the village. Having her pride and snobbery laid out so clearly on the pages of the novel does not discourage or change Mrs. FH remains determined to be queen bee of the village, but Barbara Buncle’s book changes the way others see her. Mrs. FH does not change her ways, but her social superiority over the others is lessened.

Unlike Mrs. Featherston Hogg, many of the other villagers who read *Disturber of the Peace* are transformed by it as it gives them a picture of themselves that causes them to either see

the people they love right in front of them, imagine better versions of themselves, or recognize their own faults and foibles. By getting the opportunity to see themselves on the pages of a book, the villagers gain clarity and courage in their “real” lives. Colonel Weatherhead sees his next-door neighbor, Mrs. Bold, in a new light as a delightful companion and elopes with her to Rome. An old maid, Miss King, is persuaded to embrace the adventure of traveling abroad for the health of her friend Miss Pretty. The two old maids head off to Egypt at the end of the novel. A grumpy and selfish husband, Mr. Bulmer, realizes how badly he’s been treating his wife and children. His all-consuming focus upon his own work means he is “blinded by his selfishness and bad temper” and that his wife “was having a pretty poor life of it with him” (84). He is first embarrassed to know that everyone else in the village sees him this way. Then he is ashamed of the way his selfish behavior has been hurting his wife and children. As a result of seeing the ugly impact of his behavior, Mr. Bulmer makes practical changes to his work habits in an effort to be kinder and more considerate of his family. He learns to appreciate them rather than take them for granted. In consequence, his wife’s haggard countenance is restored to a healthier hue.

Disturber of the Peace inspires the villagers because Barbara Buncle is able to read the people around her, write them into a novel, and then send her published—slightly veiled—observations back out to them. Through the process of reading, writing, and sending, the Miss Buncle character reveals the potential and power of reading. At the start of the novel, the villagers look at Barbara “with contempt . . . nobody in Silverstream cared what Barbara Buncle thought” (31-32). In contrast to their dismissive treatment of her, Barbara sees and notices them. While the villagers interact at a tennis match, “Barbara watched it all with interest; it was such fun to watch people and see how they reacted to one another’s personality” (30). As Mrs. FH points out in her tirade against the book, Barbara notices details such as a woman wearing a wig

and doctoring her jam. By transferring her observations to the page, she transforms Silverstream into Copperfield: “they all seemed so smug and settled, I thought it would be fun to wake them up” (16). Through the act of imaginative writing “she had everybody under her thumb,” but Barbara’s control, unlike Mrs. FH’s, leaves everyone better than they started (183). Barbara has seen them as they really are and imagined better for them than they were able to imagine for themselves. However, Stevenson does not portray this as a magical or perfect process; Barbara’s will, while exerted perfectly on her page, is not executed perfectly in “real life.” The plot lines of *Miss Buncler’s Book* and *Disturber of the Peace*, diverge in the details and in the end. Whereas the fictional Major Waterfoot elaborately proposes marriage to his widowed neighbor in the moonlight, the “real” Colonel Weatherhead proposes while sitting in her drawing room by the fire (113). At the end of the sequel to *Disturber of the Peace*, the whole village attends the wedding of Barbara’s fictional proxy, Elizabeth Wade, but at the end of *Miss Buncler’s Book*, Barbara moves away and the villagers find her cottage empty. Even if the process was not exact or perfect, reading the villagers has given Barbara the power to imagine better lives for them, which they are able to read on the pages of her book.

The greatest portrayal of change of any single character in the novel is Barbara Buncler herself whose experience of imagining and then reading a better version of herself builds within her the confidence to start a new life. At the beginning of the novel, the other characters remark that Barbara is frumpy or dull or simple, and her ability to keenly observe human behavior is totally lost on the other villagers (12 and 24). To most of the village, Barbara is simply an idiot, and no one takes the time or effort to really know her (32). Stevenson’s close third person narrator, however, reveals the real Barbara to readers. She is a woman bored by the villagers’ monotonously predictable interactions: “she had lived for so long among these people . . . that

she was able to say the expected thing without thinking about it at all” (57). Barbara Buncle then writes into the story a more dynamic version of herself in the form of Elizabeth Wade: “In Copperfield Barbara herself was just as she wanted to be; she was younger, and prettier, and more attractive. People looked at her as she passed, not because she was a ‘sight,’ but because she was pleasant to behold” (183). As the plot progresses through *Miss Buncle’s Book*, Barbara merges with her fictional self, Elizabeth, causing the village to take notice: ““Goodness, you’re all new!” [Sarah] exclaimed. ‘How nice you look!’” (205). Barbara’s transformation is partly a result of the changes in her financial situation. After becoming a bestselling author, she can now afford new clothes and trips to the hair salon. However, Stevenson takes the transformation deeper into the ways Barbara’s reading and writing her world develops her ability to communicate her desires and enter into social situations with more confidence: “Barbara Buncle had been bidden to lunch at The Berkeley. . . . It was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her,” and she “enjoyed it all tremendously” (259). Stevenson cements Barbara’s transformation with a conventionally comic ending. At the end of the novel, Barbara starts a new life by marrying her editor and leaving Silverstream. Despite the conventionality of the ending in which a man takes her away, the means for her transformation begin when Barbara reads the people around her, picks up her pen, and then sends her novel off in hope of publication.

Although nothing indicates that *Miss Buncle’s Book* is explicitly autobiographical, Stevenson’s own experiences with the publishing world echoes through the novel. Between her first and second novel there was a nine-year gap during which Stevenson did not publish. Her first novel, *Peter West*, was published in 1923 to mixed reviews and minimal attention. The *Western Daily Press*, a newspaper serving the Bristol area of England, published a review on December 28, 1923. The unnamed reviewer notes that her “descriptions of Highland scenery are

true to life,” but then has little else to praise about the story (“The Bookshelf” 7). However, it ends with a call to the author for “further contributions from her pen” (“The Bookshelf” 7).

Perhaps the lack of enthusiasm towards her work was not sufficient encouragement for Stevenson as she left off writing for the rest of the decade. According to biographer Kristi Jalics, Stevenson kept a diary during the 1920s in which she recorded her experiences as an army major’s wife. In the early 1930s a friend, “Mrs. Rupert Ford, whose daughter was about to marry an army officer, borrowed Stevenson’s diary to get a sense of what her daughter’s life was going to be like. She enjoyed it greatly and urged DES to publish it” (Jalics). *Mrs. Tim of the Regiment*, published in 1932, became a surprise hit. A review in *The Guardian* notes in particular Stevenson’s realistic portrayal of the daily struggles and concerns of a military family (“Books of the Day” 5). Given the slightly autobiographical nature of *Mrs. Tim*, it is not surprising that Stevenson’s next novel would be about publishing. *Miss Bunclie’s Book* humorously reflects upon the ideas of life imitating art and art reflecting back upon life alongside the story of a woman publishing a bestselling novel.

Stevenson also lightly mocks the way middlebrow novels were criticized for being commercially successful by writing frankly and explicitly about the transactional nature of publishing. Faye Hammill, in her book *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars*, writes that “middlebrow books, especially those which achieve a wide readership, are often denigrated as commercial products, with the highly questionable implication that only experimental art, addressed to a select audience, can escape the contamination of the marketplace” (6). Stevenson addresses the issue of commercialization in the second chapter of *Miss Bunclie’s Book* by revealing the reasons Barbara’s publisher, Mr. Abbott, decides to publish her book. Readers are informed immediately that he is no-nonsense business man: “years of

publishing had failed to dim his enthusiasm or to turn him into a soured and bitter pessimist. Every new and promising author found favor in his eyes” (7). Mr. Abbott reads Barbara’s manuscript and gets excited because he could see its potential for selling well with readers. He is a man who takes pride in making his publishing business successful, which for him means publishing books that will make money. Stevenson matches his pragmatism in publishing with Barbara’s pragmatic motivation for writing the book in the first place. In their first meeting, Mr. Abbott asks, “Why did you write it?” Barbara responds, “I wanted money” (13). Her short, frank response is met with a laugh from Mr. Abbott, who reflects that most authors usually hide this motive behind a better sounding one such as “they had a message to give the world” (13). Her suggestion is that the other “higher” motivations authors might talk about, while not entirely false, are more likely pretentious covers for the deepest motivation, commercial success. By bringing monetary motivations out into the open from the very beginning, Stevenson humorously addresses the pragmatic realities of writing, especially for women. Stevenson suggests that since all books in the marketplace go through some sort of commercial transaction, middlebrow books should not be denigrated or dismissed simply because their authors wanted or needed money.

Echoing her real-life experience with the marketability of a gendered name, Stevenson satirically lampoons contemporary issues around gender and authorship. On the cover of her first novel, *Peter West*, Stevenson’s name is listed as Dorothy E. Stevenson, but nine years later on her second novel, *Mrs. Tim*, she has the more gender ambiguous D. E. Stevenson. It is unlikely that the difference in success between these two novels came down solely to D.E. versus Dorothy on the byline. Also, there were women during the inter-war period who successfully published under their feminine full names. However, Stevenson pointedly brings up this issue in *Miss Buncler’s Book*. Barbara Buncler publishes under a male pseudonym, John Smith, and

despite the prosaic nature of the name, most of Silverstream's residents assume the book has to be authored by one of the male villagers. Mr. Abbott quickly spots the obvious cover in the name, but is still thrown when Barbara comes to his office: "Miss Buncle—John Smith—why hadn't he thought that it might be a woman?" (12). Why had he not, indeed? Stevenson is addressing the whole notion of gender assumptions when it comes to authorship. Later, the village doctor, Dr. Walker, automatically assumes the author is a woman: "I think it was written by a very simple-minded person—a woman" (158) Stevenson writes his reasoning in a way that is so patronizing, the exaggeration creates a satirical tone. Stevenson's character concludes that this woman must have sat down and simply written the people she knew into characters and then let her imagination run away with her (158). In his reasoning, he dismisses the idea that a woman writer could premeditatively construct a complex plot. Stevenson's tongue-in-cheek scene references the patronizing way women could be seen only as writers of less complex novels. Of course, the plot actually becomes quite complex in *Miss Buncle's Book* with the addition of Barbara's fictional sequel, *The Pen is Mightier*. Mr. Abbott himself gets quite dizzy thinking about the way *The Pen is Mightier* is a "novel about a woman who wrote a novel about a woman who wrote a novel – it was like a recurring decimal . . . or perhaps like a perspective of mirrors . . . in which the woman and her novel were reflected back and forth to infinity" (268). Dorothy Stevenson wrote feminine comic middlebrow novels, but that should not suggest that they were devoid of complexity. While conventional in many respects, Stevenson's distinctly middlebrow novel still asks its readers to consider the unfair assumptions society makes about women authors and the choice many of them made to disguise their gender behind their initials.

Stevenson continues to satirize the notion that middlebrow novels do not have a subtext or deeper meaning by having one of her characters link her novel about novels with Jane

Austen's novel about novel reading, *Northanger Abbey*. When Mr. Abbot finishes reading *Disturber of the Peace* for the first time, he muses, "it was not written by a genius, of course, neither was it the babblings of an imbecile" (8). Again, Stevenson is satirizing the whole notion of a female middlebrow author living in the middle ground between two extremes of artistic genius and formulaic hack. He then wonders "whether the book was a delicate satire (comparable only with the first chapter of *Northanger Abbey*) or merely a chronicle of events seen through the eyes of a simpleton" (8). The allusion to the opening of *Northanger Abbey* is key in this moment. Austen spends the first chapter of that novel convincing readers that "no one who had ever seen Catherine Moreland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine," but then by the end of the novel has Catherine facing her banishment from the Abbey quite heroically (*Northanger Abbey* 5). Of course, underneath the questions about heroines are the larger questions Austen asks about the role of reading in the lives of young ladies. Austen references Shakespeare and Pope as the "works heroines must read," but the rest of the novel is a satirical treatise on the suitability of novels themselves, especially the—essentially—middlebrow novels of her day, "Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda" (7 and 24). Admittedly, Stevenson's work is lighter in satirical substance than Austen's; however, for all its lightness of tone, *Miss Buncl's Book* does contain a subtext that advocates for reading as a means of empowerment because of the ways a book can reflect real life back to a reader. In the literary tradition of Jane Austen, Stevenson's work has elements of social realism that address such issues as the tyranny of class through Mrs. Featherstone Hogg and the tyranny of husbands in Mr. Bulmer. Stevenson concludes that even in a middlebrow novel, "truth is stranger than fiction" (Stevenson 280) just as Austen concludes that it is through novels in which "the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineations of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are

conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (Austen 24). Through her allusion to Austen, Stevenson refutes the contemporary notion that feminine comic middlebrow novels lack subtext.

Underneath its surface of humor and romance, *Miss Buncler's Book* presents readers with the power of the middlebrow novel to address social issues and inspire readers to change for the better. Stevenson's work is conventional in that it does not advocate for a radical overhaul of class or the traditional family, but it does ask for more and better, especially for women. The novel advocates for upper-middle class women to wield their social capital with grace and consideration, for husbands to be kinder to their wives, for neighbors to be more aware of the needs of their neighbors, and for women to be more courageous—whether that means traveling the world or publishing a novel. Through the “book within a book” plot in which the characters make or resist these changes, Stevenson reveals that reading can be a powerful means of inspiring change through imaginative representation. She also suggests that middlebrow novels can inspire just as effectively as any other. By addressing the common misconceptions against the middlebrow, Stevenson's work subtly vindicates their place on the shelves of discerning middle-class readers.

Chapter Two: *Cold Comfort Farm*

When the sukebind blooms, chaos breaks out among the Starkadders at Cold Comfort Farm who live according to unchecked passions and whims. However, *Cold Comfort Farm* is no “loam and lovechild” novel, as Stella Gibbons immediately informs readers through the book’s inscription from Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*: “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery.” Gibbons’ novel presents an optimistic view of life that extols the virtues of the ordinary and sanguine, with reading portrayed as an empowering means of agency and choice. In the world of *Cold Comfort Farm*, figuring out what one wants, finding out how to fit in, and ordering life in the way one wants it to go can be achieved by middle-class women through a discerning commitment to reading. Gibbons creates a fairytale story that is ultimately a muddled mix of progressive and conventional conceptions of what it means to form an identity as a woman. Through Flora Poste, her anti-damsel-in-distress protagonist, Gibbons creates a modern young woman of action, reason, and compassion. Flora enters the wilds of the countryside of Sussex armed with a love of order, a dedicated self-help philosophy, and a keen knowledge of Jane Austen and the Brontës. Throughout the novel, Gibbons advocates for middle-class women to reject passion for reason, Victorian art for modern innovations, and rural sensibilities for urban sense, but the novel does so while staying within conventional middle-class bounds.

The notion that melodrama can be subjected to human will reflects an experience Stella Gibbons had early in life. Born in London in January 1902, her formative years were marked by a difficult family life due to her father’s violent temper. According to her nephew and biographer, Reggie Oliver, Telford Gibbons “drank, and womanized, and occasionally threw knives” (Truss x). Violence seems to have run in the family, as Telford’s father reportedly shot blanks into the ceiling “to quell the noise of his children in the nursery upstairs” (Truss x). Oliver

also writes of a particularly significant moment in Gibbons' life when her father threatened to commit suicide. As Oliver remembers hearing the story from Gibbons, Telford declared his intention to end his life and then smiled as Gibbons' mother, Maudie, begged him not to. A young Stella stood by and watched (x). Lynn Truss in the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Cold Comfort Farm* connects this moment to a later interview in which Gibbons states she "realized that misery could be enjoyed, and used as a tool for family oppression"; however, "she rejected it" (x). The rejection of misery and melodrama is an essential part of the novel from the plot to the character development to its parodic style. The seeds from this moment, when Gibbons saw her father gloat in the misery that he inflicted upon his wife and child, find their fullest expression in the response Gibbons had to the melodramatic nature of some popular post-war literature.

Gibbons had a front-row view of melodrama growing up, and then a front-row view of the melodramatic literature popular in the 1920s in her job as a journalist and book reviewer. Despite the chaos of her home life and the conventional expectations for middle-class women, Gibbons received a quality education that led her to receive a two-year degree in Journalism from University College, London. From her early twenties she supported herself with a career writing articles and poems for publications such as the *Evening Standard*. She moved to write for *The Lady* in 1930 and "controlled the books page," which likely over-exposed her to the fashionable "rural novel" popular at the time (xiii). Early in 1930, Gibbons began writing her own novel, *Cold Comfort Farm*, through which she offered her own answer back to the doom and gloom novels she had read over the years. During an interview in *The Listener* magazine from 1981, Gibbons states as much: "I think, quite without meaning to, I presented a kind of weapon to people against melodrama and the over emphasizing of disorder and disharmony, and

especially the people who rather *enjoy* it” (x). By writing a comedy, she upended the gloomy conventions of the rural novel and offered readers an optimistic book full of agency and choice.

A year after the publication of *Cold Comfort Farm*, Gibbons married a man named Allen Webb and settled down to an—almost—conventional life. *Cold Comfort Farm* was successful with both critics and readers, making Gibbons a minor literary celebrity. However, Gibbons found fame or celebrity distasteful and “remained apart from the literary scene” for most of her life (Hammill 175). Reggie Oliver suggests that “she wanted to be simpler and more ordinary than she actually was. It could be seen in her hatred of publicity: she much preferred being Mrs. Webb to Stella Gibbons” (175). Despite her distaste for celebrity, Gibbons, like Stevenson, continued to mix her conventional life as a wife and mother with a successful writing career. She published many more novels over the next thirty years. Only later in life did she betray any dissatisfaction with the way the success of *Cold Comfort Farm* loomed over her other work. In an essay for *Punch* in 1966, she described the novel as “some unignorable old uncle, to whom you have to be grateful because he makes you a handsome allowance” (Truss xiii). Her ambiguous, mixed attitude toward her most successful work and her subsequent bit of literary fame echo in many ways the ambiguous, mixed nature of the novel itself.

Cold Comfort Farm received a mixed critical reception upon its immediate publication; however, this response did not prevent it from becoming a success. A review from September 8, 1932, in the *Evening Standard*, found the mix of comic frivolity and social satire a bit unsteady, but concludes that “it wobbles uncertainly, but does not crash” (Spring 17). The review is not glowing, but is characteristic of reviews of middlebrow novels. The comic or domestic nature of these novels presents them as more frivolous than they actually always are. Later in 1932, author J.B. Priestley wrote a glowing review of the novel, calling it “a triumph” and “easily the funniest

book of the season,” and the next year, 1933, *Cold Comfort Farm* was awarded the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize for fiction, a French literary prize (Priestley 11). The selection committee of fellow writers started giving the award in 1904 to French novels but had awarded prizes to English novels since 1920. The prize was intended to honor “the best work of imagination in English published during the year by an author, whose work has hitherto, in the opinion of the committee, not received sufficient recognition” (Hammill 174). The novels chosen for the prize were valued for their “pleasure and accessibility” (174). Faye Hammill takes this description as further evidence of the ambiguous reception *Cold Comfort Farm* found. The prize’s reputation in the literary world was for lifting up overlooked authors. Although the work of many winners, such as E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, were highbrow, the vast majority of prize-winning novels had “realist and/or comic narratives, and many would now be classified as middlebrow” (174). Nevertheless, winning the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize cemented *Cold Comfort Farm* as a successful first novel for Gibbons.

While it found an enthusiastic audience in the early 1930s, in terms of readership the parody began to lose popularity quickly after World War II and critical conversations about the novel faded away almost immediately only to be revived in the early twenty-first century. According to Robert McCrum at *The Guardian*, “the book sold very well: 28,000 copies in hardback and 315,000 in paperback in its first 15 years” (McCrum). However, the bestseller numbers faded as time went on. As a work of parody, *Cold Comfort Farm* is tied to a type of novel that fell out of fashion as “the erosion of the relationship between the countryside and English national identity caused a decline in the literary standing of *Cold Comfort Farm* along with other once-popular regional novels” (Hammill 174). Despite drifting from high sales numbers, the novel remained in the cultural imagination. In 1978 the novel was selected to be

part of the British secondary curriculum for the A-level literature exam, and it was adapted into a film by the BBC in 1995 (176-177). Although some interest among audiences and educators continued throughout the years, critical interest did not. Faye Hammill notes that “no published criticism on Gibbons appeared before the end of the twentieth century,” but by the early twenty-first century there was a resurgence in “critical interest” in the novel (177). Hammill argues varied critical interest is due to the fact that “Gibbons locates herself in a literary no-man’s-land, between urban high modernism and pure pastoral, between the experimental and the realist” (178). Renewed critical interest in *Cold Comfort Farm* is linked to the renewed interest in middlebrow novels in general. Regardless, being a novel that occupies space in the middle ground between literary classifications is exactly what makes *Cold Comfort Farm* a middlebrow text.

Gibbons’ novel exemplifies the middlebrow most in its parodic style and depictions of gender, and both of these elements are at play within the overall structure of the novel. *Cold Comfort Farm* is essentially a fairy tale that deflates the pretensions of the romanticized pastoral or rural novel. Using the basics of the Cinderella story structure, Gibbons creates women characters who push the boundaries of convention, but by and large embrace conventional roles in the end. To open the novel, Gibbons wittily sets up the protagonist, Flora Poste, to be the Cinderella of the story. The narrator reveals that Flora’s parents “died within a few weeks of one another during the annual epidemic of the influenza or Spanish Plague which occurred in her twentieth year” (9). Using a blithe reference to the Spanish Influenza, Gibbons kills off Flora’s parents in one sentence, rendering her an orphan. Placing a young woman in a vulnerable position is a typical trope of many stories, and given this inauspicious beginning it would be natural to expect Flora Poste to play the damsel in distress throughout the novel. Gibbons,

however, reworks the story for her protagonist in several key ways by giving Flora an education and agency of will. Although the majority of the references to her education are dubious, revolves around an excessive emphasis on games like lacrosse and the lack of practical instructions that would provide her with a job, Flora still enters the story as an educated woman. She also knows her own mind. She likes “having everything tidy and calm all round me” (12). Later she adds that she “cannot endure messes” (19). Despite this declaration, though, she puts herself in the middle of the mess of the Starkadder family in Sussex. Flora is an orphan, but Gibbons provides her with a patroness in the form of an older, well-off, widowed friend of her mother’s named Mrs. Smiling who offers Flora a home for as long as she needs. This key detail flips the typical Cinderella script. Flora’s trip to Cold Comfort is entirely her own choice. Nothing necessitates Flora’s journey except her own curiosity.

Although a fairytale structure could seem purely conventional, Gibbons uses it to invert the typical narrative for women in the melodramatic rural or pastoral novel of the early twentieth century. Gibbons’ work ends in a midsummer triumph of marriages and proposals that leave the characters in better places than they began whereas the typical rural novel during this period did just the opposite. For a representative sample text, *Precious Bane*, by Mary Webb, can provide some contrast and context for grasping the parody Gibbons effects. Published in 1924, the novel “tells of Prue Sarn, a woman born with a harelip (the eponymous “bane”) and – worse – an avaricious brother called Gideon” who over the course of the novel “loses his humanity in his quest for money” (Millar). Although Prue’s story ends on a positive note, it comes at a cost as she loses just about everyone she loves. Interestingly, the novel won the Femina Vie Heureuse prize about ten years before *Cold Comfort Farm*, suggesting readers’ tastes shifted in the 1930s. An early Modern Library edition of *Precious Bane* features an introduction by British Prime

Minister Stanley Baldwin. A fan of Webb's work, he writes that her novel beautifully captures the English countryside and "interlaced with this natural beauty [is] the tragic drama of a youth whose whole being is bent on toil and thrift and worldly success only to find himself defeated on the morrow of harvest by the firing of the cornricks by the father of his lover" (Baldwin xi).

Gibbons' novel rejects the melodramatic tropes of unbridled passions, tragic compulsions, and unavoidable twists of fate found in Webb's work. Her fairytale rests upon the "magic" of rational thought, common sense, and personal agency.

Baldwin also praises Webb's ability to mix "turns of speech," which are key stylistic features of *Precious Bane* but are also key features that Gibbons uses to satirize the notion of great literature i.e., the highbrow (xii). In a witty foreword to the novel, Gibbons addresses an editor named Anthony Pookworthy, who becomes a kind of fictional proxy for all the authors and editors of the rural novel she will be parodying. Gibbons lays out her reasons for writing the novel by sarcastically discussing what it means to write "literature." She self-deprecatingly degrades the life of a journalist as "poor, nasty, brutish, and short," then turns to discuss the differences between journalistic writing and fiction writing (5). She asserts, "I [had to] learn, if I was to achieve literature and favourable reviews, to write as though I were not quite sure about what I meant but was jolly well going to say something all the same in sentences as long as possible" (5-6). Alluding to a fictional ten-year period in which she struggled to write the novel, she satirically thanks Mr. Pookworthy for publishing books that brought her joy, but continues: "it is just possible that it was not quite the kind of joy you intended them to give" (6). Gibbons' dig at the melodramatic novels' having the opposite effect on her than intended is carried on as she compares the books to "thunderstorms" in their ability to "paint everyday domestic tragedies as vividly as . . . soul cataclysms" (6). The novel that follows, after the foreword to Mr.

Pookworthy, is different because it is intentionally funny rather than unintentionally funny. She asks forgiveness for this imperfection, but tries to amend her shortcomings by revealing that she has provided a guide system for “all those thousands of persons . . . who work in the vulgar and meaningless bustle of offices, shops and homes, and who are not always sure whether a sentence is Literature or whether it is just sheer flapdoodle” (6). Here she gets to the heart of the satirical element of her parody. Throughout the novel, Gibbons references again and again literature and the highbrow, but in ways that poke fun at the pretensions surrounding the discussions of books and types during her day. As much as she is making fun of one book tradition with all of its tropes and types, she is also making fun of the very idea of the criticisms that impose distinctions like literature versus popular fiction or highbrow versus middlebrow upon readers. Her way of doing this borrows from the Baedeker travel guides as several paragraphs in the novel have stars next to them to signal “the finer passages” to readers (6). The stars are meant to guide readers to the “artistic” portions of the novel where her “style” is shown to best effect. When coming across a one-, two-, or three-star paragraph, readers are meant to judge the writing as good, better, or best. Gibbons’ parody humorously deflates the pretensions of critics who first create and then enforce hierarchical distinctions for readers.

Gibbons’ flowery descriptions may serve a satirical purpose, but they are also evocative passages that deftly convey Flora’s success in tidying the lives of the Starkadders, revealing the fact that hierarchical pretention, not necessarily good writing, is being mocked. Gibbons’ first description of Cold Comfort Farm is a bleak three-star section:

Growing with the vicious light that was invading the sky, there came the solemn, tortured-snake voice of the sea, two miles away, falling in sharp folds upon the mirror-expanses of the beach. Under the ominous bowl of the sky a man was

ploughing the sloping field immediately below the farm, where the flints shone bone-sharp and white in the growing light. That ice-cascade of the wind leaped over him, as he guided the plough over the flinty runnels. (33)

The novel begins in the midst of a hard wintery February, and Gibbons sets Flora's first moments at the farm in "darkness only lit by faint winter starlight" (48). Flora must make her way "along a villainous muddy path between hedges" to get to the house (48). Gibbons further uses apt descriptions of the physical environment to symbolize the character's journey with the family. The Starkadders are depicted as being unkempt and dirty; however, they are also muddied and muddled in relation to their inner selves and each other. Gloom is a frequent description of the farm before Flora's "magic" begins to take effect. By the end of the novel, set on a midsummer day, the farm is transformed. Where once there had been cold mud and gloom, now there is a "heat-haze, and the sky grew blue and sunny, the farm buzzed with energy like a hive" (212). In addition to the move from winter to summer, the novel ends with a description of buzzing activity as the family prepares to host a wedding. *Cold Comfort* at the end of the novel radiates with heat, but it is a heat of a respectable, conventional, and natural kind that results from order and productivity. Gibbons' own skill in writing description enhances her work further, suggesting that the notion of good writing is not the issue.

Gibbons deflates the pretensions of highbrow culture or intellectual sets such as the well-known Bloomsbury group of the early twentieth century through the misogynistic Mr. Mybug. Gibbons most often describes Mr. Mybug in a detached manner as an "intellectual." The character is another type, this one of the London literary crowd. He is an example, like Flora, of the town come to the county. He is in Sussex to write a book about Branwell Brontë that in his words is a "psychological study, of course" (101). This insistence on the psychological angle of

his book means his work could be viewed as an example of Modernism. The character describes his work as if it is cutting edge in terms of literary study. He tells Flora that “throughout the book . . . there’s an undercurrent of symbolism,” but adds a pedantic “of course” to this explanation (105). Readers are told that Mr. Mybug is an intellectual, but they are shown that he is pretentious. He is also obsessed with sex and symbolism. Flora points out that when they go for a walk in the countryside, the stems of trees remind him “of phallic symbols” (121). However, if she were to “ask him the name of a tree . . . he never knew” (121). The character exudes an exaggerated intellectualism that reads sexual stimulation and male dominance all around him. On this same walk, Mybug tells Flora they are “walking on seeds which were germinating in the womb of the earth” (121). His tendency to connect nature and sex is presented as over-indulgent, and when he skips this walk one day, “Flora was pleased to have her walk in solitude” (122). Gibbons writes this character as pretentious and overwrought mostly for laughs. By sending up highbrow authors through this pedantic and annoying character, Gibbons asserts some of her own middlebrow snobbishness. Her character, Flora, is skeptical about all this symbolism and would clearly be more impressed if Mr. Mybug simply knew the names of the trees.

Behind this comic dismantling of pretentious intellectualism in male-driven literary criticism is a darker commentary on the misogynistic backlash against women in the early 1930s by leading male intellectuals. Mybug’s work is *A Life of Branwell Brontë* that exposes the “truth” that “it’s his book and not Emily’s. No woman could have written that. It’s male stuff” (102). Mybug’s “great revelation” is that Emily Brontë could not possibly have written *Wuthering Heights*, but his claim does not end there. Mybug’s book will reveal “secretly, he [Branwell] worked twelve hours a day writing ‘Shirley’, and ‘Villette’” as well (102). When Flora asks what evidence he has for these claims, he references “three letters of old Mrs. Prunty,”

an aunt living in Ireland (102). Flora presses him, “but do the letters . . . actually say that he is writing ‘*Wuthering Heights*’?” (103). Mybug responds, “Of course not,” but then dismisses any question of his methods by referring again to his psychological approach (103). He adds, “would you expect him to mention that he was working on ‘*Wuthering Heights*’? ‘Yes,’ said Flora. Mr. Mybug shook his head violently. ‘No – no – no! Of course he wouldn’t” (103). This reasoning makes no sense to Flora, or readers, but then that is the point. Gibbons is alluding to the growing anti-feminist pushback in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Mybug’s claim—that the Brontë sisters hated their brother and stole his work—is exaggerated, but the sentiment behind it—women were not as capable as men—seemed to be having an all-too-prevalent comeback in the 1930s. For Mybug, “a woman’s success could only be estimated by the success of her sexual life” and that sexual life being of the mothering kind (122). Again, in his symbolic reading of the world, “he felt as if he were a partner in some mighty rite of gestation,” as if “he were trampling on the body of a great brown woman” as he walked through the woods (121). Certainly, the character represents an attitude toward women that is trampling. In this critique, Gibbons promotes a feminist eyeroll toward the kind of male pretensions that would limit the number of women scholars at a university and claim their only success is to be found in motherhood. Flora is thoroughly bored by him and his predictable misogyny. After first learning of the subject of his book, Flora’s internal response is “I might have known it. There has been increasing discontent among the male intellectuals for some time at the thought that a woman wrote ‘*Wuthering Heights*’” and her response is to avoid him (77). Gibbons, however, does not avoid the issue of the backlash, but brings it to the fore and reveals that women have a long history of being excellent writers despite the men who fail to be good readers.

Despite the misogyny of bad male readers, Gibbons highlights the progress made by women in the areas of agency and choice by giving Flora options after the death of her parents. Part of the humor in the opening chapters of the novel is the flippant way Gibbons writes about Flora's options now that she is a grown woman without parents to lean upon. Mrs. Smiling advocates that Flora get a job. She assumes that Flora "will want to take up some kind of work some time . . . and earn enough to have a flat" of her own (13). Flora's response that "whereas there still lingers some absurd prejudice against living on one's friends, no limits are set, either by society or by one's own conscience, to the amount one may impose upon one's relative" captures many conventional opinions imposed on women during the Victorian and Edwardian eras (13). Gibbons writes with detached wit, but the truth was that until the 1920s, middle-class women up were expected to live dependent upon family members. For a young woman to go out, get a job, and live in a flat by herself would have been unthinkable. That Flora is choosing to place herself in the confines of life with relatives is undoubtedly part of the comic parody of the novel, because it reinforces the notion that Flora actually does have agency over her own future. She is a young woman with options, and the joke is that she chooses to depend on her relatives. Gibbons left home and successfully earned a living through writing before her marriage, and within her novel she relegates the idea of the sheltered, dependent woman to the past.

Although a static and conventionally minded character, Flora has excellent reading skills that allow her to change the characters around her. She might fly off into the sunset at the end affianced to a respectable young man, but Flora does not fulfill the Cinderella trope during her time with the Starkadders (233). Once she arrives at Cold Comfort, Flora "reads" the state of the farm, interprets that her relatives have not "looked upon a civilized being" before, and she sets about putting the farm in order. At times she doubts her ability to change life at Cold Comfort.

She wonders whether or not it “had been wise to” go, given the “length” and “air of neglect and the intricate convolutions of the corridors” of the house and relationships; nevertheless, she resolves that “her hand was on the handle of the plough, and she would not turn back” (50). She goes to Cold Comfort to turn the Starkadders from “violent folk” in whom “life burned . . . with a fiercer edge” to more civilized beings capable of “having a nice time. And having it in an ordinary human manner” (169, 179, and 217). Gibbons sets up Flora to be Cinderella at the beginning of the novel, but quickly reveals that in many respects she is the fairy godmother in the story. It is her “magic,” i.e., reading skills, that transforms life at the farm.

Gibbons connects the empowering way Flora reads the people around her with a discerning taste in reading material that favors self-help philosophy and the fiction of Jane Austen. Flora’s go-to help when confronting the Starkadders is the fictional *Pensées of the Abbe Fausse-Maigre* and the Abbe’s other work *The Higher Common Sense* that Flora declares to be “the wisest book ever compiled for the guidance of a truly civilized person” (47). Readers are not given many examples of the Abbe’s writing, but the title of the *Pensées* suggests a subtle connection to Blaise Pascal. Regardless of Gibbons’ intended source material, though, the fictional works are meant to suggest that Flora’s study of rational and dispassionate approaches to life have fortified her against the untamed passions at Cold Comfort Farm. Flora describes *The Higher Common Sense* as a “philosophic treatise” that “attempt[s], not to explain the Universe, but to reconcile Man to its inexplicability” (58). It is to these works of philosophy that Flora turns for guidance and fortitude when confronting her wild relatives. In the realm of fiction, Flora declares, “when I am fifty-three or so I would like to write a novel as good as ‘Persuasion’, but with a modern setting, of course” (19). Gibbons’ allusion to *Persuasion* connects readers to one of Austen’s most clever, calm, and collected characters, Anne Elliot. Austen’s character

might not have as much agency as Flora in terms of where she goes in the novel, but Gibbons' choice of *Persuasion* brings to mind Anne's journey of self-discovering and agency that culminates in her refusal of Mr. Elliot's offer of marriage, despite the pressure from her father. Flora defends Emily Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* from the misogyny of Mr. Mybug, but when it comes to composing a novel for her own day, Flora turns to Austen. Flora remarks, "I think I have much in common with Miss Austen. She liked everything to be tidy and pleasant and comfortable about her, and so do I" (19). In *Cold Comfort Farm*, Gibbons rejects the erratic passions found in novels like *Wuthering Heights* in favor of the witty and disciplined style of Jane Austen.

The *Pensées* and Austen might be elevated as discerning reading material; however, Flora's ability to notice "types" or anticipate events "typical" in rural novels also suggests she reads widely. After Flora receives an enigmatic invitation to come to the farm, the narrator notes that "things seemed to go wrong in the country more easily and more frequently, somehow, than they did in Town" (21). Gibbons then has Flora remark, "I think if I find that I have any third cousins living at Cold Comfort Farm who are named Seth, or Reuben, I shall decide not to go . . . because highly-sexed young men living on farms are always called Seth, or Reuben" (22). Of course, her cousins are named Seth and Reuben, but underneath this joke is an assumption of the idea of "types" found in books set on farms. Gibbons uses the word "typical" several times when commenting on other features of the agricultural novel, such as when Flora remarks that she does not expect anyone to meet her at the train because no one ever does in a rural novel (26). Gibbons not only openly draws the reader's attention to the parodic nature of the novel, but she also reminds readers that Flora's greatest asset for maintaining agency and effecting change at Cold Comfort is her understanding of reading.

Flora impacts the lives of everyone at the farm; however, Flora's interactions with three of the women in particular best reveals the ways in which her reading skills empower herself and others. By examining Flora's interactions with the working-class character, Meriam, the young woman of the farm, Elfine, and the head of the house, Aunt Ada Doom, emphasize that Gibbons' work is a product of its time: feminist, yet conventional.

With the character of Meriam, Gibbons advocates changes for women by encouraging the progressive use of birth control. Meriam is the Starkadders' working-class servant girl who frequently becomes the victim of the favorite son, Seth Starkadder, whose lustful passions that Gibbons metaphorically links to a wild flowering vine growing at Cold Comfort called the "sukebind" (41). At the start of the novel, she's already had several of his children and, as Flora learns, is having one more. Gibbons puts Meriam's introduction in the narrative voice of the farm hand Adam. The tone is distant as her imminent labor is described as "her hour near at hand," and puts the shame of the situation on her shoulders. Readers are told, "when April like an over-lustful lover leaped upon the lush flanks of the Downs there would be yet another child in the wretched hut down at Nettle Fitch Field, where Meriam housed the fruits of her shame" (41). In the eyes of the Starkadders, Meriam is a weak, ineffectual woman. As the narrative shifts back to Flora, this perspective changes a bit. Before Flora enters the hut, she reflects that although she had never had a child herself, "she had a lively acquaintance with confinements through the works of women novelists" (67). Flora's reading in this case has provided her with valuable information she can use to prepare herself for potentially walking in on a woman in labor. To Flora's relief, she enters Meriam's hut to find her reading a book, *Olga's Dream* by Norley Chester, and resting post-labor and delivery (68). Chester's work is a Victorian fairytale, which is an appropriate book for a Cold Comfort resident like Meriam to be reading, but Flora,

ironically, walks in to give her a dose of reality in the form of birth control. Flora tells Meriam “how to forestall the disastrous effect of too much sukebind and too many long summer nights upon the female system” (70). While resisting the details or even the use of the words, Gibbons nevertheless explicitly deems birth control a good idea for women, especially working-class women, to know. Meriam’s protest that such a thing “‘tes wickedness” is countered by “nature is all very well in her place, but she must not be allowed to make things untidy” (70). The fact that this conversation takes place between a middle-class and a working-class woman and the working-class woman is encouraged to have “some preparation” before “sukebind and summer evenings” could be read as a dark push to curb the reproduction of the lower classes. However, Gibbons’ tone through Flora’s responses reads much more congenially. This bit of information being passed on to Meriam does not seem to have an agenda other than a way for Flora to help “tidy” Meriam’s life. The machinations of Seth and the overwhelming allure of “the sukebind” leave Meriam in a difficult position. Again, Gibbons resists the rural novel’s acceptance of passion as an unrestrainable and unchangeable force. Meriam has a way to exert some self-will now. At the end of the scene, though insisting that it is still against nature, she says, “all the same, it might be worth trying” (73). Flora’s encounter with Meriam, for which she draws heavily upon her knowledge of books, demonstrates the power of reading for disseminating information to enact changes and give women options.

Within the conversation with Meriam, Gibbons advocates a progressively feminist viewpoint, yet she also maintains conventional class structures. Meriam might now have a way to mitigate the effects of her time with Seth, but there is no hint of any recompense from or recourse against him for what happens at his initiation. Meriam is also described as a type. Flora refers to her as a “primitive woman, a creature” and says her expression is of “the Tortured

Dumb Beast manner” (69). Gibbons’ use of capitalization and dialect here places Meriam in a type as the lower- or working-class help. Nowhere is it ever suggested that Meriam’s status could or should change. At the end of the novel Meriam is married off to a half-crazed Starkadder cousin named Urk. The scene in which he “proposes” marriage essentially by grabbing her and running out the door vacillates between horrifying and hopeful (177). The scene is horrifying in the sense that Urk is obsessed with water-voles, does not bathe, and causes Meriam to shrink “back in terror” from him (175). It is hopeful in the sense that here would be a means for Meriam and her children to find a more substantial place within the Starkadder family. Conventionally, for a woman in Meriam’s time and place, the benefits of becoming a married woman would have been weighty enough to make marrying half-crazed Urk a potential net positive. Despite the dubious nature of the conventional wisdom at play in the scene, Gibbons does offer Meriam some agency and voice. Her mother is watching as Urk suggests he should marry Meriam, and her mother’s response is “Don’t you ‘ave ‘im, ducky, unless you feel like it” (176). In this moment, Meriam is offered a choice. Despite the cottage full of children, despite the possibility of gaining a place a step above a servant in the house, Meriam’s mother insists that it be Meriam’s choice. Yet again, Gibbons insists on choice and agency. If a character is getting hauled off in marriage, she will first give her consent, which Meriam does with, “I don’t mind. I’ll ‘ave him, if ‘un wants me . . . I can always make ‘im wash a bit, if I feels like it” (176). Not a ringing endorsement, but she was given a say. It is tempting to want more from this moment, to want Gibbons to go farther and put down the parody for a moment to fully embrace a more feminist moment in which Meriam is offered a better choice, a way to escape Cold Comfort Farm all together. Instead, this moment is a muddled mix of feminist ideas and conventional class structures. In the earlier scene, Flora tells Meriam about birth control, but then very much

expects her to come and clean the curtains. Gibbons insists on giving her female characters voices and choices, but does not openly question class distinctions—at least, not as something that should be amended or changed when it comes to the working class. The novel seems to accept that someone must clean the curtains if a middle-class woman like Flora is to spend her time tidying up the lives on Cold Comfort Farm.

Gibbons' approach shifts when it comes to the young lady of the farm, Elfine, who is given the means to change her position from lower-middle to upper-middle class because for a young woman like Elfine, the thing to be avoided is an overly bohemian lifestyle. When Flora arrives at the farm, Elfine is one of the last family members she meets because she is shy and spends her days “wanderin’ on the hills” (60). She is described as having “unsteady colt’s legs,” and this unsteadiness causes Flora to take her in hand. True to the fairytale format, Flora becomes Elfine’s godmother, providing her with a makeover, new dress, and even a chance to go to the ball to secure the man she loves.

Gibbons presents Elfine at first as a character vulnerable to being taken advantage of by her family, but then resists a fatalistic narrative by tying Elfine to a more modern and urban sense of agency. The Starkadders, or more specifically Aunt Ada Doom, “mean” for her to marry the previously mentioned Urk Starkadder, despite the fact that, again, he is a half-crazy peeping Tom who watches Elfine as she changes clothes at night (125). When Flora arrives, Elfine seems poised to fall victim to the will of her family who desire a marriage between herself and this man simply because they are both Starkadders. True to the tone of the novel, however, Gibbons has Elfine voice several alternative options she has already thought through. She explains that she could “get a job in an arts and crafts shop . . . or go to Italy and perhaps learn to be a little like St. Francis of Assisi” (124). Gibbons upends the rural novel trope in which the vulnerable young girl

inevitably succumbs to the will of others by allowing her to assume she has options. Elfine's vision of a future life either gainfully employed or pursuing a life of religious devotion aligns with the earlier conversations between Flora and Mrs. Smiling back in London.

However, Elfine's suggestion that she could get a job at an arts and crafts store is rejected by Flora because life as a bohemian or religious single woman is not quite conventional enough. From the first interaction Flora has with Elfine, she remarks that "even if she escapes from this place, she will only go and keep a tea-room in Brighton and go all arty-and-crafty about the feet and waist" (61). Flora's disdain here is for a Bohemian, unconventional life that she captures in phrases like "orange linen jumpers and hand-wrought jewelry" and "shawls in the evening" (124). Gibbons reveals more about Bohemianism by referencing a woman Elfine had befriended two summers before Flora arrived, a Miss Ashford. Flora asks pointed questions about Miss Ashford's attire and correctly guesses that she wore a "smock – embroidered with hollyhocks" and "her hair in shells around her ears" (135). Elfine admits her shock that Flora is able to guess so accurately. Gibbons argues here that conventionality is unavoidable. Flora guesses correctly because she assumes Miss Ashford likely adheres to certain conventions of dress that project a Bohemian "type" of sensibility and identity. The implication is that everyone conforms to some pattern or style of being. Flora asks Elfine if she wanted to be like Miss Ashford. She says, "Oh, yes. . . . She never tried to make me like her, of course, but I did want to be. I used to copy her clothes" (135). Elfine intuits that being like Miss Ashford would mean changing her own style to copy the clothes of the person she wants to emulate. As this moment takes place within the middle of Elfine's makeover by Flora where she is copying the clothes of *Vogue* magazine rather than Miss Ashford, Gibbons is pointing out that young women will inevitably copy someone as

they move out into the world. The question is not *will you conform*, but *what convention will you conform to?*

For Flora, tidying up Elfine's life means giving her the resources to conform to the social conventions of the upper-middle class that will allow her to marry Richard Hawk-Monitor. Flora's response to Elfine's whole situation at the farm is to be "justly indignant" and to "resolve to adopt Elfine and rescue her," and the life she guides Elfine into is that of the upper-middle class wife (125). Offering a social mobility not provided to Meriam, Flora's "magic" as Elfine's godmother is one of social connections and style. Flora takes Elfine to London where she gets her a new haircut and dress for the ball in order to persuade young Hawk-Monitor to not only propose to Elfine, but announce the engagement in front of all his family and friends. This "makeover" is not merely external. Flora instructs Elfine in the conversation points and interests of the upper-middle class. At the same time, she guides Elfine toward good literature and art by exposing her to the works of Jane Austen and Marie Laurencin (135). Once the makeover is finished, Flora concludes "she had made Elfine look groomed and normal, yet had preserved in her personality a suggestion of cool, smoothly-blowing winds and of pine-trees and the smell of wild flowers" (146). Elfine has been tamed into a freshly original young woman within acceptable bounds. Elfine can be unique, but only so much so. Upon her arrival at the ball, "Richard . . . realized, not that Elfine was beautiful but that he loved Elfine" (158). After their engagement is announced, Flora predicts that Elfine's "life would be one of exquisite, sunny natural content" (163). In essence, Elfine now embodies the novel's concept of the highest good—sunny, natural, content, and ordinary. Through Flora's teachings on style, books, and art, Elfine transforms from a vulnerable and wandering child into a loved and accepted young woman.

Elfine is the Cinderella of the novel, and her happy ending comes by way of the “magic” of conforming to the “right” kind of social conventions.

In Aunt Ada Doom, Gibbons dispels the myth of the Victorian mad woman in the attic. Aunt Ada is the matriarch of the Starkadders, but she is also the most “typical” of all the characters in the novel. Gibbons introduces Aunt Ada with a title, “Dominant Grandmother Theme,” and a declaration: “Mrs. Starkadder was the curse of Cold Comfort” (57). It occurs to Flora at once, “if she intended to tidy up life at Cold Comfort, she would find herself opposed at every turn by the influence of Aunt Ada” (57). Aunt Ada is a type of “madwoman in the attic.” She confines herself to her room except twice a year when she descends to the kitchen, gathers all the family around herself, and counts them. She repeats again and again that she “saw something nasty in the woodshed” when she was a little girl that has caused her to avoid going out in the world (113). Gibbons puts the narrative inside Aunt Ada’s head for a few pages early in the novel to simulate the type of conversation Ada presumably would be having with herself day in and day out. She mentions seeing something in the woodshed, never talking about it to anyone, but being made “different” by it (113). Gibbons uses “you” in this scene to reveal the way Ada talks herself into madness. One of her greatest fears is that her family will leave and “go out into the great dirty world where there were cowsheds in which nasty things could happen” (114). What exactly Aunt Ada saw is never revealed. Flora tries to find out several times but fails. However, that detail is less important than the way in which this madness is revealed to be more a method of manipulation than the product of an actual trauma. Even in her own self-talk Aunt Ada gives herself away. She admits, “it was because of that incident that you sat here ruling the roost and having five meals a day brought up to you as regularly as clockwork, it hadn’t been such a bad break for you, that day you saw something nasty in the

woodshed” (115). As time has passed, the troubling event has been increased in significance as it gives her control over her family. Gibbons sets up the idea that for Aunt Ada, constantly referring to her madness has been the means of creating a rather cushy life for herself. Gibbons’ satirical version of the “madwoman in the attic” trope fits with the rest of Gibbons’ novel that rejects fatalistic situations like a mysterious, all-consuming madness in favor of choice and agency. Even Ada can recognize that her situation has given her a great advantage over her family. Flora also picks up on this and declares to herself that “if Aunt Ada was mad, then she, Flora, was one of the Marx Brothers” (171). The question, then, is how to convince Aunt Ada to choose a different kind of existence.

For the novel’s climax, Gibbons takes Aunt Ada out of the attic, out of the past, and puts her on the road to a modern future, cementing the theme that life is more about choices than fate. Flora’s last project is to convince Aunt Ada to leave the attic. In order to achieve this, Flora “slowly, before the fascinated gaze of the Starkadders[,] . . . began to mount the stairs which led to Aunt Ada’s chamber” (208). Armed with some key reading material, Flora enters Ada’s space. Gibbons withholds the conversation from readers by focusing the rest of the scene on the wait the rest of the family endures for the almost twelve hours they spend talking. However, the results are made clear when “a handsome old lady, dressed from head to foot in the smartest flying kit of black leather” welcomes wedding guests to Cold Comfort Farm at the end of the novel (220). The family is astounded by her appearance. Flora surmises that “Aunt Ada had thoroughly realized what a nasty time she had had for twenty years, and had now made up her mind to have a nice one” (222). By presenting Ada with the vision of another way of life, Flora has given her the option to choose to enjoy life rather than stew over the past. Gibbons again gives this character agency. Ada does not have to spend the rest of her life submitting to the

control of fate, man, or her own manipulative methods. As a woman of means, she can exert her will and leave her gloomy attic behind for a new life in Paris.

Gibbons uses allusions in *Cold Comfort Farm* to further distinguish between the kind of novel being parodied and the novel she has written. When Flora first arrives at Cold Comfort, she peruses the bookshelf in her room that holds four Victorian texts. Two of them seem selected because of the humor of their titles when listed next to one another: “Did She Love Him,” by James Grant, and ‘How She Loved Him,’ by Florence Marryat” (54). Both novels were popular with readers, but not critics. Grant’s work is a nineteenth-century yellowback novel (Grant). Yellow-backs were known for their sensational plots that were meant to compete with penny dreadful novels for sales (D’Cruze). *Macaria, or Altered Stars* by A.J. Evans-Wilson and *Home Influence* by Grace Aguilar round out the group of four. The former is actually an American novel written by Georgia-born author Evans-Wilson. It apparently served as propaganda for the cause of the Confederacy and was so effective that it was banned from circulation among the Union soldiers (Whittaker). Though not explicitly rural novels, these would likely contain story elements parodied by Gibbons in *Cold Comfort Farm*. This is evidenced in the response Gibbons gives Flora upon seeing these novels on the shelf. She reflects that she shall read them and “gloat” when she gets the time (54). While Gibbons is parodying sensational or overly-emotional novels, the tone is one of amusement. The four Victorian popular novels in the scene function as a means of characterizing the farm for readers and further emphasizing the differences between the novel being read and those on the shelf.

Creating this distinction is significant because woven into the novel is an underlying commentary on reading as a means of identity negotiation and instruction. Having a character gloat over the novels of the past subtly rejects them as suitable means for these negotiations in

the modern world of the 1930s. The Victorian novels mentioned above have been shelved in the chaotic and arrested world of Cold Comfort Farm. Meriam must put down her fairytale novel to listen to Flora's more practical, modern advice. The central modern text Gibbons uses, particularly in the transformations of Elfine and Aunt Ada, is *Vogue* magazine. Twenty-first century readers may find this allusion a curious choice; however, the magazine had a slightly different reputation in the 1920s and 1930s. From 1923 to 1934, under the editorial guidance of Dorothy Todd, and then Alison Settle, *Vogue* magazine became a champion of Modernism. When Todd took over the magazine in the early 20s, she cultivated relationships with the leading highbrow artists of the day such as Virginia Woolf, Edith Sitwell, Gertrude Stein, and Jean Cocteau (Jana). Her vision for the magazine meant "fashion editorials sat alongside articles devoted to modernist art and literature" (Jana). Her tenure as editor was short. *Vogue's* boss Conde Nast resisted both her literary direction and open relationship with her assistant Madge Garland, and fired her after only three years on the job. However, her replacement, Alison Settle, did not steer the publication too far from the Modernist direction Todd had initiated. She still commissioned work from authors such as Sitwell and Vita Sackville West ("Alison Settle Archive"). *British Vogue's* reputation as mixture of fashion and consumerism with modern art and literature creates layers of implication when Gibbons uses it as the means of identity renegotiation for Elfine and Aunt Ada. It might be a source of information for the latest hairstyles and skirt lengths, but it is also had more to offer. Gibbons' use of *Vogue* suggests that the negotiation of a middle-class identity in the early 1930s included both the outward appearance and inward cultural understanding.

Choice, agency, and determined willful optimism win over passion, fate, and gloom in *Cold Comfort Farm* through the power of reading. A fairytale to the end, *Cold Comfort Farm*

flies Elfine, Flora, and Aunt Ada all off into their new lives and happy endings. At the same time, Meriam and her children remain at Cold Comfort, but gain new status as Starkadder family members. By writing a parody that turns the typical rural novel on its head, Stella Gibbons advocates for reading optimistic novels full of women with dispassionate agency. Through allusions to Jane Austen, Flora's devotion to a book of common sense, and *Vogue* magazine, Gibbons shows the power of reading for constructing new identities. Her work reveals the power of learning. Whether the learning is how to follow social conventions, use birth control, or leave the past behind, reading in *Cold Comfort Farm* is a means of conceiving new possibilities and effecting change.

Chapter Three: *Christmas Pudding*

Christmas Pudding is a country house novel where hijinks and hoodwinks take place against a backdrop of more serious concerns regarding love, class, and identity. Nancy Mitford's novels give readers a glimpse of upper and upper-middle class life and offer a counterpoint to the optimism found in the other three middlebrow novels. By intentionally blurring the lines between reality and fiction, Mitford opens wide the country house doors and invites the reader into her version of life among the upper classes that is both privileged and uncertain. Mitford deals with the anxiety of coming of age among the expectations of a whole social class by adding her own spin – the joke: “everything, however sad, painful or dispiriting, had instantly to be turned . . . into a joke” (Hastings 33). In *Christmas Pudding*, Nancy Mitford presents a world where social expectations are best accepted pragmatically because life is not a fairytale. But she wraps this hard truth in a joke because for Mitford the hard parts of life should provoke the biggest laughs. The light façade of the novel, however, belies Mitford's own experiences growing up as a conventionally-minded woman cognizant of the social expectations of her class within a culturally rebellious and liberated moment. This mix and muddle were ripe for middlebrow expression, and Mitford creates a novel that can be read on two different levels by a 21st century reader: the humorous veneer on top and the anxious subtext underneath. For contemporary middle-class readers though, Mitford's ability to utilize the coded language of the upper class means her work could be used as a guidebook of sorts for the socially ambitious.

Nancy Mitford's career as a writer can be seen as inevitable and at the same time quite remarkable due to her unique upbringing. Mitford was a child of the Edwardian Era who saw the young men just a few years older than her destroyed in the Great War. She came of age in the rebellious post-war backlash of the Bright Young Things of the 1920s. Adding to the fodder for

future novel writing provided by the cultural upheaval during her early years was her own colorful family and unconventional upbringing. Her father, David Mitford, came from a long line of land-owning gentleman with properties in Northumberland and Gloucestershire. His father, Bertie Mitford, Baron Redesdale, was a writer of sorts who published the memoirs of his time in the foreign service (Smiley vii). Nancy's maternal grandfather, Thomas Gibson Bowles, quit the family business of clerking in the Legacy and Succession Duty Office at Somerset House to become a journalist (Hastings 3). He later became one of the founders of *Vanity Fair* and *The Lady* (3). These literary leanings from her grandfathers did not continue on to her parents. In the words of one Mitford biographer, Selina Hastings, "both Nancy's parents were the children of remarkable men, and in both cases the remarkable qualities of their fathers passed them entirely by, to reappear again, at full strength and in a number of strange permutations, in the succeeding generation" (1). Despite the fact that David Mitford worked for his father-in-law at *The Lady*, he was an avid outdoors man who hated paperwork and did not read. As Mitford family lore goes, his wife tried to get him to enjoy a novel by reading out loud *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. He was moved to tears by the story, but upon learning that it was fiction cried, "What! Not the *truth* . . . the damned feller *invented* all that!" (27). He apparently never read another novel until his daughter wrote him into her own work, *The Pursuit of Love*, as the wild and comic character Uncle Matthew. In his own copy of the book, marked in pencil, he wrote, "Beastly lie" next to the disclaimer that the book was a work of fiction and all the characters came from the author's imagination (100). Unlike her father, from an early age Nancy was an avid reader. A nanny recalls being introduced to Nancy, aged six, as she read *Ivanhoe*. Nancy barely looked up to acknowledge the Nanny so engrossed as she was in the story (10). A letter to Nancy from her father who was stationed in Europe during the Great War includes the anecdote, "thank you for

the nice things you sent me. . . . I think very few daughters would give up David Coperfield [sic] in order to purchase delicacies for their brutal father” (19). Part of Nancy’s love of books is attributed to her exposure to her Grandfather Redesdale’s impressive library at Batsford Park. Her family went to live at Batsford when the Great War broke out, and then she had unrestricted access in 1916 when her father inherited the vast estate (19). From Mitford’s biographer, “In the library at Batsford were laid the foundations of her intellectual life. Here she read most of the English classics, as well as French and English biography, history, and *belles lettres*. Tolstoy was her great passion” (24). The Redesdales, again, not being particularly intellectual themselves, did not send Nancy to a formal school. They instead hired a succession of governesses who employed the correspondence curriculum of the Parents’ National Educational Union (36). Despite this lack of formal education, Nancy compulsively read and wrote throughout her life.

In the years between the World Wars, Nancy Mitford was as well known for her writing as she was for being the eldest of the notorious Mitford sisters. Famous for their beauty and social position, notorious for their extreme political views and personal scandals, the Mitfords were much discussed in the gossip columns of the 1930s. Before the end of the decade one sister, Unity, would become a close companion of Hitler; another, Jessica, would secretly run away from home to join her cousin Esmond in the middle of the Spanish Civil War; and a third, Diana, would leave her socially respectable husband for the head of the Fascist party in England. But the ‘30s started on a very different note for the Mitford family. In January 1929, Diana married Bryan Guinness of the Guinness brewing family (67). Young, beautiful, and extremely wealthy, the couple attracted the attention of the public and members of the artistic and literary intelligentsia. Mitford was welcomed by her sister into her newfound freedom as a married woman by often inviting her for long stays at her London home. It was here that Mitford

socialized with the likes of Henry Yorke and Augustus John and continued to deepen her friendship with Evelyn Waugh, who encouraged Mitford to write professionally. She started as an anonymous gossip writer, then moved to named articles, such as “The Shooting Party: Some Hints for the Woman Guest” for the *Tatler* and *Vogue* (69). She wrote to a friend, “I’m making such a lot of money with articles – £22 since Christmas. I’m saving up to be married but Evelyn says don’t save it, dress better & catch a better man. Evelyn is always so full of sound common sense” (69). This love of writing for money means Mitford embodied many of the characteristics of a middlebrow author so despised by Virginia Woolf. Her privileged social and familial connections not only helped to jump-start her career, but they also became the source material for her fiction.

Self-admittedly autobiographical, Nancy Mitford’s novels, either in plot or character, often have easily discernible real-world counterparts (Hastings 70). One of the characters in *Christmas Pudding*, Bobby Bobbin, is a recognizable portrait of the first man Mitford loved, unrequitedly, Hamish St Clair Erskine. The second son of the Earl of Rosslyn, Erskine was “amusing, he was silly and above all he was vain. He lived to be admired; and Mitford thought he was wonderful” (Hastings 61). Hamish was one of many homosexual men in Mitford’s young adult life with whom she felt particularly at ease. With potential suitors Mitford’s sharp wit could be off-putting, but with friends like Hamish, “she was on terms of equality. . . . They found her teasing and high spirits delightful. She was never moody, and there was no danger of any emotional or sexual entanglement” (61). Mitford, however, let her emotions and expectations get involved, and she held out hope for five years that Hamish would move past the “unsatisfactory course of nursery romps punctuated by quarrels” and seriously commit to marriage (72). Why exactly Mitford wanted to marry Hamish is a little unclear. Mitford biographer Selina Hastings

suggests that part of the reason could be that his heavy drinking and boyish demeanor aroused a mothering sensibility in Mitford, which made her want to reform him. Another reason suggested by Hastings is that Hamish's elusive and fickle attitude attracted Mitford because the inconsistency was exciting. *Christmas Pudding* was written in the waning months of their back-and-forth relationship. Given the personal nature of her writing, no doubt this first experience with love colors many of the relationships portrayed in the novel.

Published in November 1932, *Christmas Pudding* splashed onto the literary scene receiving praise from both the critics and those caricatured on its pages; however, for Mitford the success would quickly get subsumed by personal disappointments. The *Sunday Dispatch* calls the novel "engagingly wicked" and "deliciously amusing" ("Books to Read" 12). Many of the reviews at the time referred to the novel as a wicked amusement. The public seemed to take the book much in the way Mitford presented it—an amusing, if not always flattering, portrayal of the upper classes. One reviewer, Christopher Adams, writing for the *Birmingham Gazette*, was not particularly taken by the novel calling it "entirely ridiculous" (Adams 4). He points out the language divide between the older and younger characters: "tendencies of current slang are indicated by the remark that the speech of the old-fashioned Lord Lewes was quite devoid of 'such expressions as 'O.K. Joe,' 'I couldn't be more amused' . . . 'What a poodle-pie.' On the whole, Lord Lewes is to be congratulated" (Adams 12). Clearly, Adams was not taken with Mitford's "of the moment" use of language. Mitford herself called it "jolly good . . . all about Hamish at Eton . . . Betjeman is co-hero" (Hastings 71). Hamish is said to have loved it and from then on signed his letters to her as "Bobby" (72). Although he might not have minded too terribly being fictionalized in Mitford's creation, he very soon after made it clear that the story she wished she could write for their real lives – that he was "basically heterosexual, sowing his wild

oats, but soon to settle down to marriage and a family” – would never come to be (77). He announced his engagement to another woman, effectively forcing Mitford to finally accept that their relationship would never move beyond friendship (79). Perhaps this soured her perception of *Christmas Pudding* because in 1951 when her publishers asked to re-release some of her earlier work, her response was a resounding no. She called them “badly written, facetious, & awful” (208). *Christmas Pudding* is undoubtedly a piece of juvenilia missing some of the emotional development and complexity found in the characters of her later novels. However, the uncensored, half-baked nature of the novel is part of what makes it interesting to read nearly a century later. Mitford brings to the page a young woman’s slow acceptance of the realities of the world around her. She asks what it means to come of age in a swirl of privilege, expectation, pragmatism, and convention.

To read Mitford’s novel on a surface level is to enjoy the amusing veneer of her writing through the hijinks woven into the plot. The novel revolves around the Christmas celebration of the Bobbin family at their country estate, Compton Bobbin. The family consists of Lady Bobbin, her son Bobby, and her daughter Philadelphia. Lord Bobbin died years before in the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Into this familial setting come the various Bobbin relatives, the Earl and Countess Lemington Spa, the Duchess of St. Neots and her daughter Heloise, wealthy cousin Lord Michael Lewes, and several Scottish relatives including the newly elected M.P. Captain Chadlington, his wife Lady Brenda, and their children Christopher Robin and Wendy. One such hijinks over the weekend is the fake bomb Bobby places under the chair of his cousin, the new M.P. Captain Chadlington. Mitford begins the scene by revealing that “Captain Chadlington was in the middle of telling Lady Bobbin what the P.M. had said to him,” but then a “loud whirring noise was heard under his chair” (121). Despite any real concrete evidence to suggest this,

Captain Chadlington stands up and says, “Will the women and children please leave the room immediately?” implying that danger was imminent (121). The Captain then gets declared a hero for remaining calm in the moment. Mitford, however, reveals the politician’s smug vanity: “Captain Chadlington, secretly delighted to think that he was now of such importance politically that attempts were made on his life (he never doubted for a moment that this was the doing of Bolshevik agents) went off to telephone the police” (121). The “bomb” is nothing more than a gadget Bobby had gotten from a school mate. The pompous self-importance of the politician becomes the object of ridicule in the way he immediately concludes that his life would of course be targeted. This example is one of the many ways Mitford deflates the pretensions of the upper class. In general, they are portrayed as egotistical, eccentric, and emotionally stunted, but by bringing these characters into slightly absurd situations with no real consequences, Mitford can deflate their pretentious self-importance in a light-hearted and humorous manner.

Surrounding the family is a cast of upper-middle and middle-class characters who befriend Bobby and Philadelphia, offering them a different perspective of life than they have seen from their aristocratic relatives. The first such character is the protagonist of the novel, misunderstood author Paul Fotheringay. Paul wants to write a biography of a Bobbin ancestor, the Victorian author Lady Maria, but has been denied access to her diaries which are stored at Compton Bobbin. The conceit that gets Paul in is that he must pretend to be Bobby’s tutor for his winter break from Eton. In due course, the entire household learns Paul’s true identity, but all must keep the information from Lady Bobbin. Paul gets connected to the Bobbin family because of the friendship between the older, not quite respectable, but rich Amabelle Fortescue and Bobby Bobbin. Amabelle arranges this mutually beneficial deception between Bobby and Paul because Bobby is only too happy to have Paul come pretend to be tutor. That way, he will not

have to actually study during the break. Amabelle, along with several friends, Sally and Walter and Jerome, rents a cottage next to Compton Bobbin for the winter. In contrast to the large and formal Compton Bobbin, Amabelle's cottage is cozy and relaxed. The friends lie around on sofas playing cards and drinking or they frequently leave to attend parties around the neighborhood. Mitford conveys two different ethos of life by contrasting the structured formality of the aristocratic Bobbin family with the relaxed flexibility of Amabelle's middle-class friends.

The novel's underlying subtext of emotional anxiety comes from the contrasting female characters. Mitford fills *Christmas Pudding* with characters who have contrasting characteristics – country versus city, old versus young, established aristocracy versus the socially mobile middle class – and through them she reveals that despite their differences in position, the expectations for women in the upper and upper-middle classes were remarkably similar. These binaries can be seen in the female characters Lady Maria Bobbin, Lady Gloria Bobbin, and Amabelle Fortescue. These three female characters are foils of each other in terms of position, mobility, personality, and age, but together their expectations when it comes to marriage are remarkably similar. Between them is the young lady who is coming of age in the novel, Philadelphia Bobbin. She spends the majority of the novel bored by her life in the country and pondering what she can expect from the future. The differences in these characters' temperaments and positions allow Mitford to discuss her own doubts and anxieties about romantic love and marriage.

Through Lady Maria Bobbin, Mitford creates an idealized version of a woman both daring and conventional, and she captures a particular strand of Victoriana popular among her friends. Paul decides to write about Lady Maria because “this woman, this poet, brought up amid the conventions and restrictions of the mid-Victorian era . . . found time among her manifold duties to sing in noble, deathless verse” (Mitford 31). Lady Maria functions as an ideal woman

capable of having it all—a loving marriage, many children, and a writing career despite the social criticism that came along with publishing (31). Through this Victorian Lady, Mitford reveals the privilege of place among the ruling aristocratic class. Lady Bobbin's position as a titled lady, the daughter of an Earl, gives her access to an education that allows her to develop her poetic voice and a social position elevated enough to absorb a counter-cultural public publishing career. Mitford writes her as a successful poet who “enjoys an almost world-wide popularity” and a successful mother “of twelve children” (32). One of the last references to Lady Maria reveals her attitude early in her life: “my future must be decided by dearest Mamma and dear Papa” (141). Lady Maria defers her wishes to her parents, but in Mitford's fictional Victorian family those parents both published Maria's poetry and arranged her marriage to a man she loved. Mitford's setting the idealized situation for a woman within the context of the Victorian age works on two levels. Since Lady Maria has no direct link to a real-life historical Victorian woman, Mitford appears to create an inside joke that would appeal to her good friend John Betjeman, known for his obsession with Victorian art and culture (Hastings 71). Mitford explicitly mentions Betjeman as her inspiration for the character Paul Fotheringay; therefore, the character could have been constructed simply to amuse Betjeman. However, within the context of the larger story, Lady Bobbin's Victoriana also works on another level. Lady Maria is the one female character who “has it all” and Mitford relegates her to the past. Mitford's choice suggests that the “ideal” situation for a woman of the aristocratic class has either faded with the past or perhaps it never really existed in the first place. Unlike so many other characters in her novels, Mitford's Lady Maria Bobbin has no clear real-life approximate. Have women ever had it all? Mitford's novel doubts it.

The “current” Lady Bobbin, Lady Gloria, is a plain woman who values preserving the status quo and passing on the established aristocratic power structure through marriage and motherhood. Lady Gloria is not an idealized version of a woman who has it all, but an exaggerated depiction of a horse and hound type of country aristocrat ready to do her duty without asking for anything more. Mitford writes her as content with the birth of her children as the fulfilment of one of her “two main duties” (57). For a lady of her position, she was “to marry well and to produce a son and heir.” Having done that, “it was of no consequence to her whether or not the marriage was a happy one . . . and she had never known much disquietude on the score of her family life” (57). Her son was an heir and she would see her daughter married “as quickly and advantageously as possible.” Beyond the fulfillment of her duty, Lady Gloria Bobbin loves hunting and presiding over life at Compton Bobbin. When a proper suitor asks for her daughter’s hand in marriage, Lady Gloria is perfectly happy to give her consent and tries to squash any misgiving expressed by her daughter by appealing to position and duty. She tells Philadelphia, “Michael has a very proper sense of duty, of the responsibilities attached to his position in the world . . . and in any case, if you don’t marry him you’ll probably remain an old maid” (164). For Lady Bobbin, to end an old maid would be most undesirable, but the real hold she has over her daughter is money. Philadelphia, unlike her brother, will not inherit automatically, and her mother would have the ability to withhold any allowance or inheritance from her should she choose to marry without Lady Gloria’s consent. Lady Gloria Bobbin represents the conventional expectations facing a woman like Nancy Mitford. Women were expected to marry among their class in order to produce an heir who could keep the whole established structure moving forward into the next generation. Bobby Bobbin, Philadelphia’s brother, puts it this way: “we Bobbins never marry, we contract alliances” (134). Young people of the upper classes were not expected

to look for relationships, but alliances that might have the added benefit of a happy relationship attached, but it was not the root of the issue. Through Lady Gloria, Mitford shows that this expectation was firmly in place even in the early 1930s.

While relaxed in demeanor and socially mobile, Amabelle Fortescue's experiences on the fringes of society render in her pragmatic ideas of love and marriage every bit as mercenary as the Ladies Bobbin. The character of Amabelle is fashioned after the actress Tallulah Bankhead (Hastings 61). Mitford never fully reveals the character's background, but insinuates that the character has a similarly professional background. Whether or not that profession is as a courtesan or actress or both is not quite clear. Mitford keeps the details vague, but uses the phrases "demimonde" and "ordinary tart" when having other characters refer to her (170, 187). This early existence on the fringes of society implies that she would not have been born with the same security in terms of material or social position as the Ladies Bobbin. For Amabelle, her point of view would have been shaped by the need to procure a social standing, and Mitford produces that by way of marriage. Mitford expresses some of the same ideas regarding marriage through Amabelle as she does through Lady Gloria, but expands it even further. Amabelle states, "the older I get the more I think it is fatal to marry for love" (139). Her reasoning is that the more love someone feels for another, the more miserable they could possibly become if anything were to happen to that person. Amabelle's views are pragmatic in the way she prioritizes security over everything, but she also expresses a practicality when it comes to what a person should really expect from marriage: "the trouble is . . . people seem to expect happiness in life. I can't imagine why; but they do. They are unhappy before they marry, and they imagine to themselves that the reason of their unhappiness will be removed when they are married. When it isn't they blame the other person, which is clearly absurd" (139). Through Amabelle, Mitford questions the

practicality of placing upon marriage the unrealistic expectation of ultimate fulfillment. The ends are not the same for Amabelle as they are for the Ladies Bobbin. Amabelle does not care about duty to class or the family line, but she does understand the practical reality of all that money can provide. Amabelle uses marriage for practical advancement both socially and materially. Clearly, this is the kind of choice Amabelle made in her first marriage. Through her alliance with Mr. Fortescue, she advanced financially, materially, and socially. The environment Mitford places her in is more relaxed and comfortable than the environment of the large country manor of the Bobbins – she has a house in town and rents a country cottage – but her advice to the younger character Philadelphia aligns with the Ladies Bobbin. Love is an unrealistic expectation or basis for a marriage. When Philadelphia tells her she is engaged to Paul, Amabelle asks, “you don’t expect me to congratulate you or anything like that, do you?” (175). Later, her practicality betrays itself a bit and her more flexible, mobile nature comes through when pressed by Philadelphia and Paul. She provides them some advice for how they might go about breaking the news to Lady Gloria, but Mitford does not allow this moment to pass before revealing that inwardly, the character “was incapable of seeing Philadelphia’s point of view, and thought that the child was being merely obstinate” (178). The only other time Amabelle betrays a bit of her own pragmatism is when she becomes engaged to a country squire for love. There does not seem to be any material advantage to the marriage. However, even as Mitford writes this ending for Amabelle’s story, the character chooses this relationship from a position of material advantage. She has risen to a point of privilege socially and materially that can afford her the luxury of marriage for love. But even in Amabelle’s new relationship, Mitford maintains a note of skepticism because the book ends before readers ever see Amabelle actually married and settled

permanently in the country. Whether or not the marriage brings Amabelle happiness or grief remains a question.

Closest to the real-life Mitford sisters in her frustration with her secluded upbringing in the country, Philadelphia is the young woman coming of age in the novel and for whom Mitford withholds a full happy ending. Philadelphia is frequently depicted in the novel as being silent or “bored and boring” (155). Relegated to the country full time, but having “no love for country pursuits, and no intellectual resources on which” she could draw, she lives “in the clutches of that boredom, too boring even to describe” (191). “Boring” is the overall adjective attributed to Philadelphia’s situation. When Paul is introduced to her, he brings an excitement into her life that she attributes to love. For Philadelphia, the prospect of marriage means “escape from her home, which she regard[s] as a prison, and from her mother, whom she detest[s]” (157). In the end, Philadelphia is given the choice of engagement to Paul or Michael. She turns from her mother to Amabelle and Sally, a friend of Amabelle’s, for advice. They both strongly point her in the direction of Michael, and money is the explicit reason. Sally blurts out, “just think of all that money” (161). Again, there is a sense of practicality in choosing Michael. Paul is presented as a thoroughly unreliable character. His book is mistaken for a comedy and his relationships with women are consistently inconsistent, so Amabelle and Sally’s misgivings are in the best interests of their young friend. Philadelphia makes the respectable and safe choice, accepting Michael’s proposal as much for the “diamond bracelet” he snaps on her wrist as for her disappointment in Paul’s drunken disregard of her presence: “he took one of her hands in his and said with a great effort, ‘Go away, darling, I’m drunk’” (198). Mitford’s narrative voice moves into the perspective of Philadelphia: “That was the end. She must get back to Michael, who would never treat her so” (198). That phrase “get back to” is key here because it implies that she

has been out on a limb with Paul. Mitford, however, does leave Philadelphia's satisfaction in her safe choice a bit ambiguous. In the last scene, Philadelphia tells Sally about Paul's drunken dismissal, and Sally reassures Philadelphia by telling her "you weren't at any time properly in love with Paul" (202). Mitford uses Philadelphia to explore the options and challenges of coming of age in such a cultural moment as she faced in the 1920s. In terms of identity, Mitford reveals that for all the changes in suffrage or education that caused women in the 1920s and 1930s to feel freer than their mothers and grandmothers, the majority of the women of the upper classes still carried the weight of expectation that their womanly duty was to secure a successful marriage alliance. For Mitford, the pragmatic and conventional seems to be inevitable.

Mitford couches the anxious subtext about love, marriage, and expectations within a discussion about the potential for misreading, perhaps distancing herself from any implications that her novel is anything more than an amusing farce. Mitford opens the novel by revealing that Paul's first published novel, *Crazy Capers*, meant to be a melodramatic work, has been grossly misunderstood by the critics, his friends, and the reading public. The narrator reveals that for Paul the novel was "the child of his soul upon which he had expended over a year of labour, pouring forth into it all the bitterness of a bitter nature; describing earnestly, as he thought, and with passion, the subtle shades of a young man's psychology" (8). Unfortunately for Paul, the reviews portray his work as completely different: "a welcome contrast to the unrelieved gloom of Miss Lion's *Tragedy in a Farmyard* is provided by Paul Fotheringay, whose first novel is the most amusing piece of work to be published for many months" (9). The review resembles the reviews Mitford's own actual work had received. The humor is in the pretention of Paul who expected to create a work of profound drama. This joke is echoed a few more times in the novel as Mitford pokes fun at the pretensions around the highbrow/lowbrow (and by implication the

middlebrow) distinctions. Amabelle tells Paul, “it’s no good writing about the upper classes if you hope to be taken seriously. You must have noticed that by now? Station masters, my dear, station masters” (22). The suggestion is that he needs to focus on the lower or working classes to find artistic credibility. Furthering the joke, Paul reveals, “trouble is that I loathe station masters, like hell I do, and lighthouse keepers, too, and women with hare-lips and miners and men on barges and people in circuses” (22). The hare-lip reference seems a direct allusion to Mary Webb’s *Precious Bane*, which Mitford subtly lampoons through Paul’s passionate declaration that he does not want to write about the working classes. The scene goes on to discuss the idea of snobbery and whether or not people understand tragedy. Mitford leaves the discussion of reading and writing behind as the novel progresses, but including it early allows Mitford to present an important idea. This plot point is a slight hedging of her bets against any ill feelings from her family and friends. Her work is thinly biographical, so there were real-life people who could easily read themselves in the pages of her work. Mitford mitigates any real-life disapprobation towards herself by reminding the reader that novels can be misunderstood. If Paul Fotheringay’s best intentions were so grossly misrepresented by the reading public, so could Nancy Mitford’s, so any resentment could be passed off as part of a joke.

Later in life Mitford wrote an article titled “The English Aristocracy” in which she drew upon the work of philologist Alan Ross to describe the distinctions between the classes in terms of language usage. The distinction Ross created was “U and Non-U, denoting Upper-class and Non-Upper-class” (Hastings 223). Mitford expanded, and at times corrected, his work for her article in which she revealed to readers the class codes embedded in language. This article was not written until the 1950s; however, this same kind of coded language can be found in her earlier work like *Christmas Pudding*. Again, Mitford came from a titled family, and associated

with the upper classes all her life. Her biographer makes the case that this U/Non-U article was “all a tremendous joke” in line with the way in which Mitford couched most of her life in a joke, but one “which Mitford herself more than half took seriously. She was not a snob in the sense of looking up to someone solely because he had money or rank; but Mitford was never a member of the public” (224). Mitford’s work presented to that public the world and words of the upper class.

Through *Christmas Pudding*, Mitford shows her reader the eccentricities and pretensions she herself found funny among her set of friends. But her work also reveals the anxiety a young woman, even in the upper class, felt at the prospect of growing up. Beneath the surface of the U/Non-U language and laughs, Mitford challenges her readers with difficult questions regarding choice and identity. On the one hand, her novel could be a kind of manual for upper-class insights if one wanted to find subtle ways to fit in. *Christmas Pudding* entertains, but it also offers a newly middle-class woman an insider’s guide to the slang and social cues taken for granted by Mitford’s class. On the other hand, Nancy Mitford coped with disappointment and uncertainty in her life by wrapping her anxieties in jokes and witticisms, but a deeper reading of the novel reveals the message that the greater the expectations for convention, the greater the pressure to conform whether or not doing so leads to a life of love and happiness.

Chapter Four: *Diary of a Provincial Lady*

Contemporary. Close. Confiding. *Diary of a Provincial Lady* brings readers into the mind of a married middle-class woman living in the English countryside in 1929. E. M. Delafield started the story as a series of articles that were compiled into novel form in late 1930. The first-person diary format has the effect of bringing the reader right into the complicated negotiations the lady performs on a daily basis in terms of class and gender. Delafield lightly satirizes the ways in which women, especially middle-class women, used reading as a tool in those negotiations to project a literary, but not too literary, image. As the Lady balances her role as wife, mother, community member, and middle-class woman, what she is reading and how she can discuss that reading become essential pieces of cultural currency for identity formation and projection. Through the Lady's story of social negotiation, Delafield recommends that middle-class women read for pleasure as well as place.

E. M. Delafield was a prolific writer of fiction and drama as well as a successful journalist. She published close to forty novels and short stories between 1915 and 1939. Born Edmée Elizabeth Monica de la Pasture in 1890, she grew up in a literary household as her mother was a novelist. Elizabeth Lydia Rosabelle published lightly satirical children's stories in the Edwardian period under her married name, Mrs. Henry de la Pasture ("E.M. Delafield"). Delafield's father, Henry Philip Ducarel de la Pasture was descended from French nobility and Edmée grew up bilingual with an upper-middle-class education through a series of governesses (Bloom 54). Whether or not Delafield came out in society when she came of age in 1908, as the other young women in the upper-middle class would have, is unknown. Her father died that same year, and his passing likely impacted the family's social standing for a time. Two years after her father's death, her mother remarried. Delafield's stepfather was a British Colonial Administrator

who was himself a published author, although his work was mainly accounts of his time in various postings in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia and Singapore. Having grown up in a Catholic family, she considered joining a religious order in the years just prior to the outbreak of World War I. However, she spent less than a year at a convent in Belgium and wrote later in life that the experience was “suffocating and unendurable” (54). As war broke out in Europe, she returned to England to “volunteer at the Exeter Voluntary Aid Hospital” (54). It was during her time as a volunteer nurse that Delafield wrote her first novel, *Zella Sees Herself*. Her choice to use a pen name has been a point of speculation due to the fact that her mother was an author, and, according to one biographer, was “said to have been unduly dominant and aggressive in the family home” (Hammill 192). Perhaps the pen name was a pointed choice to distance her own creative output from that of her mother. However, the choice to disguise her gender by using only her initials and a constructed surname could also reflect the lingering conventional idea that there was something suspect about women who published.

After the war Delafield married Paul Dashwood, adding another layer to her identity. Faye Hammill, in *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture*, points out that over her lifetime Delafield’s “identity was thereby symbolically fragmented into her three names: Edmée Elizabeth Monica de la Pasture, E. M. Delafield, and later Mrs. Paul Dashwood” (192). The success of her early publishing career led to opportunities in journalism including time spent as a contributor and director at the feminist magazine *Time and Tide*. She also had several plays produced in the 1930s. Alongside her writing career, Delafield had two children with her husband, and they spent the first few years of their marriage in Malaysia so that Paul could work on the Singapore causeway. Delafield in many ways embodies the middlebrow middle of progress and convention. Her life as the wife of a civil servant and mother of two would have

meant she looked every bit the upper-middle-class English woman of the time. However, the name E. M. Delafield was known widely on both sides of the Atlantic due to the success of *Diary of a Provincial Lady*. Hammill notes that “her status as a contributor to *Punch*, a director of *Time and Tide*, a regular broadcaster on BBC radio, and a respected feminist spokesperson made her an eminent presence on the literary and social scene, whose name – though invented – carried a certain cultural authority for the middlebrow audience” (193-194). Navigating the experience of being an anonymous housewife who constructs a public voice through writing is a theme touched upon in some of Delafield’s novels including *Diary of a Provincial Lady*.

The novel form of *Diary of a Provincial Lady* debuted in 1930; however, the majority of the story had already appeared in *Time and Tide* as a series of short stories. The feminist magazine then took out ads in other newspapers as a method of self-promotion using Delafield’s contributions as a featured selling point. On page nine of the 22 May 1930 edition of the *Evening Standard* newspaper in London, an ad describes the novel thus: “the mirror which E. M. Delafield holds up to English family life in the Country to-day . . . sparkles with polished wit.” Delafield’s charming and often satirical portrayal of contemporary life attracted “wide-spread attention and high praise” (*Time and Tide*). Some of that praise apparently came from other newspapers because another ad in the *Evening Standard*, this time run by the publisher Macmillan and Co., informs readers that if they are looking for a novel with “humour crisp and unforced,” Delafield’s work is what to buy (Macmillan and Co.). *The Observer* ran a profile on Delafield in their November 30, 1930 edition, which did not feature her novel, but her first play *The Way Things Are*. Nevertheless, Delafield does discuss *Diary of a Provincial Lady*. She says her work is “not a novel,” but then compares it to *The Diary of a Nobody*, which was a novel written in diary format in the late Victorian period by two brothers. Despite her hesitancy to

categorize the work as a novel, she describes it as “the life of a wife and mother in the country, with sketches of people and things” (“Miss Delafield’s First Play”). This promotional work was clearly meant to do double duty for both the play and novel as the article points out that the Book Society had selected *Diary of a Provincial Lady* as November’s book. 1930 was clearly a productive year for Delafield. Having a novel selected by the Book Society despite the fact that it was a rather new organization at the time helped sell the book. Although there are not exact sales numbers on record for Delafield’s novel, promotion by the society would have undoubtedly raised the novel’s profile. Not all reviewers embraced the book. *The Observer*’s official review of the novel after publication was not entirely favorable as it stated, Delafield “has abandoned herself to the crudest caricature” (Gould 5). Another point of consternation for the reviewer was the mixed messages regarding the socio-economic status of the woman. For this reviewer it was confusing and distracting trying to work out how a wife and mother who “can send [her] son to a school where he hobnobs with the sons of millionaires . . . has regularly to furtively pawn a ring in order to pay the tradesman’s bills” (Gould 5). This confusion touches on issues of the middlebrow middle-classness of the novel, which are now less distracting and more revealing for readers. Moreover, the reviewer is a man, Gerald Gould, who in many ways dismisses as simply un-understandable some of the more feminine and domestic points of the novel. Gould’s review suggests that a divide in reception of the novel falls along gender lines even from the time of publication. Mr. Gould perhaps could not understand the difficult class negotiations the Lady engaged in, but the middle-class reader of Delafield’s novel could.

Diary of a Provincial Lady is an exemplar middlebrow novel because of the way in which it centralizes the feminine middle-class experience through the diary format. By closely documenting the jumble of thoughts and responses of the Lady to herself and the world around

her, Delafield reveals many of the concerns and interests of the middle class. Delafield sets the novel primarily in the country although the Lady does travel to London and abroad at different times within the year-long span of the diary.

From the first entry, the Lady reveals her middle-classness by drawing attention to both those in her sphere who are above her and below her in class. Within the first paragraph readers learn that a neighbor, Lady Boxe, has come to call, but the “Lady” narrator of the story is not pleased to see her because she reveals that she “untruthfully” told Lady Boxe “how nice [it was] to see her” (Delafield 7). Lady Boxe has entered the Lady narrator’s space, but immediately deems herself the superior by offering unwanted advice. The narrator captures this with a series of “Do I know” statements that affect the pretention of the actual words, “do you know” (7). Lady Boxe offers impertinent information the Provincial Lady already knows, such as where to buy the best bulbs to plant indoors, and that colds in children are merely a habit to kick by the daily use of a saline solution (7-8). Each of Lady Boxe’s references reflect an upper-class *noblesse oblige* that she extends down to the Provincial Lady. Her manner of speaking places the Provincial Lady in a lower rank. Lady Boxe has come to call at the Provincial Lady’s house, but she does not view the Lady as a peer, never asking the Lady for her opinion on any of the subjects discussed.

Delafield also signals the financial divide between the two women by her use of details about flower bulbs. The narrator did not get her bulbs from the more expensive continental source of Haarlem in the Netherlands as Lady Boxe did. The Lady got them at Woolworth’s, a decidedly middle-class establishment known for discounts and deals. Although her diary entries acknowledge these distinctions in rank, the narrator demonstrates a self-deprecating humor and annoyance in these moments. Rather than any sort of reverence or awe for Lady Boxe and her

advice, the Lady mostly placates and tolerates Lady B's visit. She does not openly tell Lady Boxe that her bulbs are from Woolworth's. Instead, this fact is "outed" by an innocently and poorly timed question by her daughter. The narrator had tried to imply that her bulbs came from somewhere just as good as Lady Boxe's, by insinuating that her purchase was in support of "the empire" rather than Europe (7). The impact of these first couple of paragraphs on the reader is to establish that although the narrator is middle class, perhaps even upper-middle class, but still below Lady Boxe, the titled aristocrat, she will be showing polite neighborly attention, but not undue reverence, for her social "better." The narrator is in the middle class, but she is not an aristocrat wannabe.

At the other end of the class spectrum, the Provincial Lady also expresses annoyance and frustration with those in the social class below her. Mixed with the account of Lady Boxe's visit are notes from the narrator to herself regarding the servants. When recounting the moment refreshments were served, she adds, "Bread-and-butter too thick. Speak to Ethel" (7). This again establishes the middle-class status of the narrator. She may not be buying her indoor plants from the Netherlands, but by no means is she fixing refreshments for guests herself. Later, the day's entry ends with one sentence: "Cook says something is wrong with the range" (8). Readers come to learn that a maid, cook, and governess are the total of her household staff. The Lady's lifestyle is decidedly middle class because she lands between these two groups. Again, she's not titled, and she shops at Woolworth's, but neither she nor her husband earn their living and she has servants to perform household tasks for her. However, as readers come to learn, Delafield will use the cultural upheaval between the middle and servant classes that existed within middle-class women's homes as an ongoing plot point within the Lady's story.

Domesticity is a key element of middlebrow novels and a central concern within the *Diary of a Provincial Lady*. The domesticity of these novels often comes out through detailed descriptions of the home. The Lady records some details of her house such as the broken blue candlestick in the guest room and the “inferior dyed mat” in the nursery (12). However, these details are not as plentiful here as they can be in other middlebrow novels because much of the diary’s domestic concerns are devoted to the Lady’s struggle with her domestic help. As Nicola Humble points out in *the Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, this domestic struggle “echoes the contemporary sense of a domestic sphere in a state of flux. In many novels the home is foregrounded, becoming the central concern, an emblem of difficult and disturbing change” (Humble 111). As stated earlier, the change taking place is the growth of the lower-middle class and the deterioration of domestic service as valued employment. Working-class women were growing especially discontent with live-in domestic service jobs. Early in the novel, parlor maid, Ethel, quits and the Lady spends much of the rest of novel trying to replace her. Her struggle to find a replacement leaves the household in a state of flux and strains her relationship with the cook who has stayed. When Cook, no name given, shows a bit of cheek regarding the Lady’s upcoming trip to London, the Lady writes, “Am precluded from making the kind of reply I should *like* to make, owing to grave fears that she should also give notice. Tell her instead that I hope to ‘get settled’ with a house-parlourmaid before my return” (56). The Cook “looks utterly incredulous” in reply (56). The tension between the women shows a growing dissatisfaction on both sides between these classes. The Cook is not afraid to show some level of disdain for her employer because the middle-class woman needs her services. The tension here speaks to the way the competing need for better work on one side, and the desire to keep servants on the other brought these two classes into conflict with each other in the late 1920s. The Lady knows her

position as a middle-class woman spared the drudgery of cooking and cleaning is tenuous. At any moment these women could move on to other employment, rendering the Lady vulnerable to a change of status on the middle-class spectrum. A middle-class woman facing these same issues would realize that the moment the Lady is fixing her own refreshments when Lady Boxe visits is the moment Lady Boxe will likely stop visiting. The Lady will be downgraded socially. She is in fact unsuccessful in finding a maid while she is in London and notes that “several Registry Offices” tell her that “maids do not like the country – which I know already – and that the wages I am offering are low” (60-61). As mentioned before, after the Second World War, in the mid-1950s, most of the middle class would no longer have the benefit of live-in domestic staff. For the Lady of 1929, however, that reality had not quite come to pass, and she is able to benefit from the presence of other women who takes on the daily tasks of cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. As I will discuss later, this plays a large role in the Lady’s identity as a middle-class woman of means. However, her anxiety and fear around her domestic staff and the real changes in society bring a level of stress to her domestic sphere. The home is her realm, but it is not hers alone and that fact opens the door to conflict and stress. The Lady must live with the reality that her domestic situation might not be upper-middle-class enough to retain staff. However, she needs a staff in order to secure a place as a middle-class woman. The domestic tension demonstrated in the diary is just one part of the overall middle-class identity the Lady must maintain.

Reading is used by the Lady as a tool for social negotiation, and she reveals much of her domestic middle-class interests in the interior commentary she gives about the novels or magazines she references. One of her earliest commentaries on contemporary novels of the day reflects the growing divide between the high and middlebrow. In a discussion with some of the

other mothers during an afternoon visit to her son's boarding school, a fellow mom asks the Provincial Lady a question about reading. Later in the diary, the Lady recounts the moment: "Am asked what I think of *Harriet Hume* but am unable to say, as I have not read it" (9). *Harriet Hume* is the third novel by Rebecca West. The more experimental nature of this novel lends it a more intellectual and highbrow status. The Lady even links it to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. She confides to her diary that *Orlando* was a book "about which I was perfectly able to talk most intelligently until I read it, and found myself unfortunately unable to understand any of it" (9). She does not record here how she negotiated a response about *Harriet Hume*; however, within the context of the diary, the Lady clearly distances herself from the highbrow and intellectual. Her admission reveals that a middle-class woman would have been aware of the work of Virginia Woolf, and perhaps would have read it, but she harbors some skepticism toward these works. The average middle-class woman, having acquired only a middling education, did not always connect with or understand well the highbrow modernist writing of the time. However, the Provincial Lady also doubts any upper-class or aristocratic claims to intellectual highbrow superiority. Just a few entries later she reveals that Lady Boxe has invited "distinguished literary friends" to dinner, but Lady Boxe does not know the correct name of the groundbreaking work of her guest. According to Lady Boxe this work is "*Symphony in Three Sexes*," and the Lady "hesitate[s] to write back and say that I have never heard of *Symphony in Three Sexes*" (14). The Lady does not want to admit any ignorance when it comes to intellectual works or recent publications; however, it is Lady Boxe who is ignorant as she has passed along the wrong title. The fact that the real title is never revealed suggests that actually having read a *Harriet Hume* or *Orlando* or the latest publication by some distinguished writer is less important than simply projecting the idea that you had. For both the upper-class woman and the middle-class woman,

the actual text and its content are less relevant than the social cache it gives through association. The Lady also does not seem to be bothered by her inability to know what the actual title is and seems to include these details in her diary as yet another jab at her snobby neighbor. Lady Boxe it can be supposed has not actually read it, but merely enjoys the social cache of hosting a person of distinction. As long as these women could simply convince each other that they knew these texts and then rub elbows with someone of minor celebrity, the real work was done. Any actual engagement with or reading of the work is subordinate to how it can help a woman's reputation. For upper-, upper-middle-, and middle-class women, reading the latest publication and having some knowledge of the intellectual literary world were important aspects to interacting with other people, especially other women of a similar class.

The Provincial Lady and Lady Boxe clash again later when it comes to the question of whether or not being literary is a desirable label to have. Lady Boxe has brought a military friend over to the Lady's house, and he makes a comment about *Bulldog Drummond* after perusing the Lady's bookcase. The Lady records in her diary that Lady Boxe has interjected that "he must not say that kind of thing to *me*, as I am so Very Literary" (77). The crime stories featuring a detective called Bulldog Drummond were lowbrow bestsellers in the 1920s; however, the Lady's record of this interaction is much more antagonistic toward Lady Boxe's slight suggestion that the Lady could be a literary snob. In fact, Lady Boxe's comment puts her at odds with the gentleman who does not speak to her again despite the fact that he is a guest in her home (77). The whole interplay reveals the complex balance a middle-class woman had to strike between being informed and intellectual. To be in the know about literary matters was essential, but being labeled too literary or intellectual was just as undesirable. The Lady seems more eager in this instance to associate and discuss the lowbrow *Bulldog Drummond* than to be labeled too literary.

Despite the Lady's open ambivalence toward being considered literary, she is depicted as a woman for whom reading is a regular part of life. Although the act of reading is not often recorded, the Lady does reveal her motivations for reading a few times. When waiting for a friend's ship to arrive in Portsmouth, the Lady writes, "take fur coat, campstool, and copy of *American Tragedy* as being the longest book I can find, and camp myself on the docks" (19). *American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser is a naturalist novel depicting a crime-riddled 1920s America where the main character commits murder and is sentenced to death ("An American Tragedy"). The Lady makes one comment about the actual novel itself that it is "a little oppressive" and mostly records moving herself, the camp-stool, and the novel from place to place around the docks as she waits for her friend (19). The novel is a prop for passing the time chosen for its length rather than its content. Reading in this instance is only a means of passing the time.

Delafield satirizes the performative motives for "reading" when the Provincial Lady packs for a trip to France. The Lady considers taking some books along for the journey supposedly to pass the time, but once on board it is revealed that her selections are more about impressing her fellow passengers. She debates with her husband whether or not she should take any at all, and her daughter suggests a tragic French children's story. She ends up taking *Little Dorrit*, *The Daisy Chain*, and *Jane Eyre*. These classic Victorian novels get added to the luggage but are not recorded as actually having been read except once. The Lady describes sitting next to a school teacher and his wife on the deck of a boat while crossing the English Channel. She writes, "I take out *Jane Eyre* from coat pocket – partly in faint hope of impressing them, and partly to distract my mind" (109). The reading ends up making her sick and she puts it away. The admission of her motivations for taking the book out in the first place captures this mixed

attitude toward reading. Practically, a book is a source of entertainment for passing the time in the early twentieth century. The Lady notes that the edition of *Jane Eyre* she took was the pocket edition selected for its small portable size. However, when feeling motivated to get the book out, she confides that it was less about actually reading the story. The Lady wants to look good in front of the other passengers as much as she wants to pass the time. In this fragment of a scene, the Lady reveals much of the interplay Delafield gives the character and reading throughout the whole novel. Overall, Delafield satirizes the way books and “reading” could be used less for enjoyment and more for projecting status or providing distraction.

Reading is also portrayed as a necessary part of community in that books are frequently the topic of conversation between women and men across classes. Again, going back to the first few paragraphs, the Lady records topics of conversation with Lady Boxe, one of which is *All Quiet on the Western Front* (7). Later in another conversation with Lady Boxe, *Her Privates We* comes up in conversation. The Lady reflects in her diary that she had not read it, but still “gave her a long and spirited account of [her] reactions to it” (44). Again, when encountering Lady Boxe, the truth of actually reading these Great War novels and memoirs is not as important as saying she has. In the class competition between the two women, shared topics of conversation are shown to be essential. If the Lady cannot discuss Great War novels, she may be dismissed as too middle class or lower-middle class and, therefore, not a desirable member of the village social scene. The Lady is constantly dismissive and annoyed by Lady Boxe in the diary; however, her reactions reflect an awareness of her social need for Lady Boxe’s attentions. Clearly, their literary interests do not align, but since social status within the village is at stake, the Lady lies and fabricates opinions about these books on the spot.

The Lady records a dinner party at Lady Boxe's house where she relays the dinner conversation and reveals that the bulk of the time was spent discussing two books, J. B. Priestley's *The Good Companion* and Richard Hughes' *High Wind in Jamaica* (16). She then breaks down the different opinions people had about these novels in terms of length, readability, and their authors' success. The discussion of the novels weave in and out of other conversations but form the backbone of the topic connecting the group at the table. Similarly, when the Lady visits her widowed friend, Rose, in London, she's taken to a Literary Club meeting. The dinner conversation at the club focuses more on writing novels than reading them; however, after dinner, she records meeting "an acquaintance whose name [she has] forgotten, but [we] connect with literature" (35). Delafield does not have the Lady confess to the fact that she has not read *Harriet Hume*, because, again, the salient point in this is not showing off a particular point of view about a novel, but merely being able to partake in small talk that references authors and novels currently in vogue. Reading also connects the Lady to her children as she records reading to them once she gets back home from London. She "offer[s] to read Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*" but "Vicky says she prefers *Pip, Squeak, and Wilfred*. Robin says that he would like *Gulliver's Travels*. Compromise on *Grimm's Fairy Tales*" (37). In one of the rare moments of reflection upon the content of the texts alluded to in these moments, the Lady remarks that she's not sure the fairy tales are "in accordance with best modern ideals" and that she "feel[s] sure that this must have disastrous effect on both [her children] in years to come" (37). The Lady's records of these moments and the commentary she interjects reveal a mixed interest in reading. There are books she clearly feels she ought to read for herself and her children, but there are then the books she actually seems interested in reading such as *High Wind in Jamaica*. Reading for middle-class women in 1929 is a social event. Books formed the basis for many

points of connection across a range of social events; however, Delafield raises some interesting questions about the disconnect between the literary reputation projected by these women and their actual reading habits.

Two important conversations on reading contained in the diary disclose a particularly detached attitude toward reading and its impact on one's life, the first of which is with an aging middle-class woman. Mrs. Blenkinsop (Mrs. B.) it is noted is 66 years old, making her a product of the Victorian era. Her attitude toward books is one in which the act of reading is companionable and transformative experience. The Lady writes that according to Mrs. B., "She is never alone when she has Her Books. Books, to her, are *Friends*" (55). Delafield's use of capitalization and italicization communicate the Lady's skepticism toward Mrs. B.'s sentimental attachment to reading. The topic of reading has arisen between them in the first place because, when facing a lag in conversation the Lady had commented on the "enormous" book Mrs. B was reading, "rather ostentatiously" (54). Again, reading is a safe go-to topic in social situations, however, Mrs. B.'s emotional investment in reading is a bit too much for the Lady. She also records Mrs. B.'s claim to "Give her Shakespeare or Jane Austen, Meredith or Hardy, and she is Lost – lost in a world of her own" (55). The capitalized "Lost" conveys the source of irritation for the Lady, who writes that after leaving Mrs. B. she had the "strange tendency to snap at everybody" (55). It does not seem to be so much that Mrs. B. reads Austen or Hardy, but that she puts too much emotional weight on her reading. Regarding books as friends is a bit too sentimental an attitude toward reading for the Lady.

The second conversation on the impact of reading upon life comes at the end of the novel when the Lady receives a visit from the avant-garde, intellectual, and unfeminine Miss Pankerton (Miss P.). The Lady notes that Miss P.'s "hand-woven blue jumper" and her mannerism of

“sit[ting] astride the arm of the sofa” were flamboyantly bohemian (123). She then reflects that their conversation was “very, very literary and academic, my own part in it being mostly confined to saying that I haven’t yet read it, and, it’s down on my library list, but hasn’t come, so far” (123). The Lady distances herself from the Modern woman by candidly stating her lapses in reading. Unlike Lady Boxe, Miss P. has nothing to offer the Lady in terms of social capital. Therefore, the Lady does not put up the same pretenses about her reading habits. When Miss P. then suggests her lapses are due to the fact that she’s let herself become a “domestic beast of burden with no interests beyond the nursery and the kitchen,” the Lady replies with what is perhaps the most honest comment about reading that she makes to another character in the whole novel. She records, “What, for instance, she [Miss P.] demands rousingly, have I read within the last two years? To this I reply weakly that I have read *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which is the only thing I seem able to remember” (123). Based on the nearly year-long record of diary entries, Anita Loos’ comic novel, also in diary format, might have been the only book she actually did read. In this moment Delafield confirms that the Lady, despite all her pretensions to the contrary, is a decidedly middlebrow reader. The question to be raised, then, is whether or not Delafield’s novel advocates or critiques the reader of the middlebrow novel, the very kind of text she herself has produced.

The Lady’s admission about *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* looks a lot like a comment a real-life reader of *Diary of a Provincial Lady* could make after reading the novel. It points to a larger conversation the novel has with its own readers about reading. Delafield’s use of allusions within the novel creates a multi-layered discourse between the narrator, author and reader. She frequently references *Time and Tide* magazine, which was the very publication at first printing the story, then later promoting its sale. Often these comments are about the comfort of reading

Time and Tide as opposed to other magazines of the time such as more highbrow *Literary Reviews* (145). One reference to *Time and Tide*, however, lays out the essential thesis of the whole novel:

Read admirable, but profoundly discouraging, article in *Time and Tide* relating to Bernard Shaw's women, but applying to most of us. Realise – not for the first time – that intelligent women can perhaps best perform their duty towards their own sex by devastating process of telling them the truth about themselves.

At the same time, cannot feel that I shall really enjoy hearing it (67).

This is exactly what Delafield does in *Diary of a Provincial Lady*. On one level the novel reveals the pretensions of upper-class and middle-class women to use books as social props to jockey for position and acceptance in other social circles. Perhaps the middle-class woman reading *Diary of Provincial Lady* in the early 1930s cringed a little while they laughed at the Lady's social dance with Lady Boxe over what she has or has not read. Perhaps she laughed out loud when the Lady professes to Miss P. that she enjoys reading Anita Loos. If an intelligent woman should tell women the truth about themselves, then Delafield is telling some of the middle-class women of her day that their performative approach to reading is shallow. Delafield critiques women who put on a façade of highbrow aspirations in order to mask their real middlebrow preferences.

The self-deprecating humor of the Lady and the close first-person diary style give the novel a confessional tone that brings the reader into the moment with the character. Delafield creates a chatty style by incorporating side comments and plural pronouns into the diary entries in order to bring the reader into the discussion along with the Lady. When writing about the “arrival of Book of the Month choice” for November, the lady reveals that she is “disappointed. History of a place I am not interest in, by an author I do not like” (11). The Lady goes to write

that she puts it back in the wrapper, but “finds on reading small literary bulletin enclosed with book, that exactly this course of procedure has been anticipated” (11). Perhaps the reader of the novel has had a similar experience with the relatively new experience of subscription monthly reading clubs. Delafield takes the reader deeper by inserting the Lady’s internal commentary regarding the book of the month business: “Am much annoyed, although not so much at having made (possibly) mistake of a lifetime, as at depressing thought of our all being so much alike that intelligent writers can apparently predict our behaviour with perfect accuracy” (11). Who is the “our” the Lady is referring to? She is referring to middle-class women such as herself, including the reader of the novel. Delafield is being just one such intelligent writer because she herself is predicting that the average reader of her own novel will exhibit some of the same behavioral characteristics as her protagonist. The novel assumes that the Lady is not the only middle-class woman to use books as props for identity projection and social acceptance.

Novels are portrayed as social props in part because, again, reading held important social implications due to the lively discussions about books that are portrayed within different social situations. At Lady Boxe’s dinner party, “everybody . . . talks about books” (16). The mixed gendered and mixed class guests are divided in their acceptance of or incredulity about certain plot points in *High Wind in Jamaica*. The Lady records that

we hated – or, alternatively, adored it, and that it Really *Is* exactly *Like* Children. A small minority here surges into being, and maintains No, they Cannot Believe that any children in the World wouldn’t ever have noticed that John wasn’t there any more. They can swallow everything else, they say, but not *that*. Discussion very active indeed. (16)

In this paragraph, Delafield's use of "we" and "they" constructs the Lady's account of the conversation relays that she adored it and some of the other guests did not. Placing books at the center of conversation at this dinner where upper- and middle-class people meet establishes that reading can be an area of common ground. "Everyone" can talk about the latest books. Delafield also writes about books in way that suggests that a set of titles have the flavor of bestsellers in that "everyone" is reading them, and to miss out on the discussion places one's social inclusion at risk. Later the Lady mentions that "everybody" has read *The Edwardians* by Vita Sackville-West (136). The Lady is behind in her consumption of the book, but remarks that she is "delighted and amused" while reading it. Despite the fact that the Lady does not record a specific discussion around *The Edwardians*, her note to her diary suggests that conversations have taken place. Sackville-West's work has circulated among her social group and the Lady needs to catch up. These details reveal that within the social life of a middle-class woman of this era, book discussions were frequently a part of conversations within groups and between friends. Reading was a socially mediated practice for women in 1930.

Delafield also assumes a certain intellectual engagement with the reader of the novel through implicit and offhand allusions. While staying in a hotel in Plymouth, the Lady describes her room in a way that conveys a veiled allusion to Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. She writes, "Mysterious door in corner which I feel conceals a corpse. Remember all the stories I have read to this effect, and cannot sleep" (19). A number of Gothic titles could serve as the allusion, but Delafield links the moment more to the humorous tone found in *Northanger Abbey* when the Lady reveals, "Finally, open mysterious door and find large cupboard, but no corpse" (19). The moment mirrors Austen's scene when Catherine Moreland finds the mysterious papers in a cabinet at Northanger Abbey, but upon waking up discovers that instead of letters full of dark

secrets, they are simply old washing lists (Austen 124-126). In addition to the subtlety of the allusion, Delafield offhandedly includes titles or authors or both. The diary style of course lends itself to the casual reference, but it also then make the reference casual for the reader. If the reader is in the know, she will know that *Orlando* was written by Virginia Woolf and that James Elroy Flecker was a poet and novelist who died before he turned thirty in 1915 (Delafield 9 and 129). However, if a reader is not in the know about these references or does not quite catch the allusion, she has a handy guide for expanding her reading horizons with *Diary of a Provincial Lady*.

The Lady's use of allusion, both contemporary and classic, makes the novel a cultural resource for the social negotiation of the middle-class women reading it in the early 1930s. For example, if a middle-class woman puts down *Diary of a Provincial Lady* having identified a bit too much with the protagonist's reading behavior, the novel contains a reading list that could be used to help her expand her reading habits. Delafield's allusions compose a varied list of literary offerings including biographies, children's stories, and poetry, but the vast majority of the texts she references are novels. Among these novels are many classic texts. Should the reader use Delafield's work to compile a reading list, authors such as Austen, Hardy, Meredith, Shakespeare, Dickens, Trollope, and Yonge would form the core of the classic section. In terms of more contemporary works, Delafield mentions several Great War novels and memoirs such as *Her Privates We*, *Journey's End*, and *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land*. These texts are often referenced in the context of older women like Lady Boxe, suggesting a slight generational divide in the interest of the literature regarding the war. The Lady protagonist never mentions actually reading any of the war texts, only pretending to have read them. However, by including them in the novel, they are regarded as relevant texts to be included in the literary conversations taking

place in the late twenties and early thirties. As mentioned, the divide between highbrow and middlebrow in terms of the Lady's appreciation of or even willingness to read them forms the basis for much of the humor within the novel. Delafield both deflates the pretensions of the literati as well as the upper- and middle-class pretensions of associating with the intellectuals and leading authors of the day. Yet all this discussion leaves a record of the texts sparking discussion during her day. The novel captures a reading moment when middle-class women were expected to know of Virginia Woolf even if they might not understand her work. By slightly exaggerating the Lady's ineptitude and snobbish rejection of much of the highbrow she is offered, the novel seems to nudge its own readers toward these texts while also letting them know that to appreciate the middlebrow is nothing to be ashamed of—especially when the Lady mostly writes about middlebrow texts like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *High Wind in Jamaica*. Delafield's use of allusions are best seen in the wholesale approval and promotion of the magazine *Time and Tide* which, as previously stated, brought the highbrow and middlebrow together.

Through the protagonist, Delafield paints a picture of a feminine middle-class reader recognizable to the readers of her own novel. She captures a middle-ground attitude toward reading as useful for conversations and necessary for passing the time. In addition, she prefers an entertaining middlebrow novel over an intellectual highbrow novel or emotional Great War text. At the same time, the novel ends with the Lady speculating about whether or not her whole effort to record her diary has been worth it. She writes, "Robert says, Why don't I get into Bed? I say, Because I am writing my Diary. Robert replies, kindly, but quite definitely, that In His Opinion, That is Waste of Time. I get into bed, and am confronted by the Query: Can Robert be right? Can only leave reply to Posterity" (150). Nearly 100 years later, posterity does indeed provide an answer—a resounding *No*. The Roberts of the world would not be right in thinking that a

fictional diary chronicling the foibles, negotiations, conflicts, and pretensions of a middle-class woman is a waste of time. *Diary of a Provincial Lady* offers readers today the same mirror with which to see how life has changed for middle-class women, but also how human nature can be remarkably consistent through the years. It is a narrow slice of life, one that enriches our understanding of middle-class life between the wars.

Delafield's novel engages readers in two main conversations about reading. The humor suggests that there is a pretentious aspect to the way in which middle-class women approach reading. Delafield questions the practice of using books as social currency instead of as objects to actually read and enjoy. Delafield also has a laugh at the shame associated with preferring middlebrow texts. The allusions Delafield includes assume that the average middle-class woman reading the book will be familiar with the highbrow versus middlebrow conversation. The satirical parts of the novel bring the reader into the conversation as an insider, free to laugh at the pretensions on both sides of the divide. The novel advocates reading what one wants for the pleasure of doing so, yet all the while supplying a reading list for expanding one's scope should one so desire. If following the reading guide laid out in Delafield's allusions, one would spend time in lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow texts, neutralizing the snobbery on all sides. Perhaps a book is worth reading simply because one wants to read it.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

While often overlooked in critical conversations due to their domestic settings and light tones, comic feminine middlebrow novels reveal the complex interplay between the conservatism and progressivism of women writer in the early 1930s. *Miss Buncler's Book* by D.E. Stevenson, *Cold Comfort Farm* by Stella Gibbons, *Christmas Pudding* by Nancy Mitford, and *Diary of a Provincial Lady* by E.M. Delafield are middlebrow texts that engage readers in various conversation about reading, class, and identity. Major events like the First World War, global economic depression, enfranchisement for women, and Modernism sent anxiety-producing shock waves rippling through the culture about what it meant to be a good member of the middle class, a good woman, and a good reader. Middlebrow novels recorded these anxieties while also encouraging readers to utilize the power of reading for the good of themselves and others.

Miss Buncler's Book portrays the powerful ability reading has to open a person's eyes, and subtly affirms the benefits of middlebrow novels in particular. From the perspective of her own conventional and middle-class life, D.E. Stevenson populates her fictional villages with settled characters in need of waking up (Stevenson 16). From the husband who mends his selfish ways to the spinster who runs off to Egypt, when the villagers read themselves upon the page, their "eyes are opened and their shackles fall off and they act according to their real natures. They're not shams anymore, they're real" (97). Stevenson's work satirizes the snobbish ways critics could be dismissive of middlebrow novels by instead advocating for the benefit of reading them. Her middlebrow novel offers middle-class women a vision of women, and men, gaining new perspectives and changing their lives through the power of reading.

Within her anti-romantic fairytale, *Cold Comfort Farm*, Stella Gibbons reveals the power of reading for learning life-changing skills. Flora Poste takes her love of rational thinking, philosophy, and Jane Austen to Cold Comfort in order to tidy the lives of the Starkadders. After reading the situations of those around her, she offers Meriam, Elfine, and Aunt Ada the opportunity to “have a nice time. And [have] it in an ordinary human manner” (217). Her primary means of offering this opportunity to them comes by way of reading. Whether the source material is *Vogue* or the philosophical *Pensées* of a fictional Abbe, reading is constructed as the primary way of attaining identity-changing information and life-changing possibilities.

Nancy Mitford’s *Christmas Pudding* does not resolve its own anxieties but offers readers a potentially empowering glimpse of the upper-class life. As a member of the upper-middle class, Mitford expresses doubts about the opportunities for women within her class. In her work, middle-class young women have the ability to combine progressive independence with the conventional expectations of love and marriage, but upper-class young women most likely do not. Class mobility in *Christmas Pudding* is for those lower on the middle-class spectrum than those higher, and to remain upper-middle-class, Mitford suspects it would either be “fatal to marry for love” or unrealistic to expect love and status (Mitford 139). While the anxieties of growing up in the upper class forms the heart of the novel, Mitford’s writing codes her novel with the slang and mannerisms of the upper classes in such a way that it offers contemporary readers cues for upper-class speech.

Everyday middle-class life provides the backdrop onto which E. M. Delafield challenges her middlebrow readers to embrace the power of reading for enjoyment as well as social negotiation. The close first-person diary format unveils for readers the complex feelings of middle-class women simply going about their ordinary lives. Delafield foregrounds the concerns

of ordinary women within the diary and reveals that one primary area is reading. At a time when one's place on the spectrum of the middle class could change, reading became a means of projecting a particular identity. Delafield's novel advocates for a rich reading of life that embraces reading novels across the "brow" divide. Rather than hiding her enjoyment of middlebrow or lowbrow novels, a middle-class woman should embrace the pleasure of reading for fun. Although the ability to discuss novels of all kinds is presented as an essential social skill, *Diary of a Provincial Lady* advocates that books should be a means for authentic identity formation rather than snobbish pretensions or highbrow affectations.

Stevenson, Gibbons, Mitford, and Delafield each address the highbrow/middlebrow debate through satirical or self-referential jokes that ultimately encourage readers to read more middlebrow novels. At the time they were writing, critics and reviewers could be dismissive of middlebrow novels by distinguishing them from the highbrow or intellectual works of the age. In response, middlebrow novelists bring the debate onto the page by directly addressing the highbrow or publishing establishment head on. Barbara Buncle publishes a novel that receives mixed reviews, but she continues writing and publishes a sequel. Flora Poste encounters the literary snob Mr. Mybug who wants to revise the history of *Wuthering Heights* in favor of Branwell Brontë, but she easily dismisses his pretensions as foolish. Paul Fotheringay tried to write a complex highbrow novel, but it is misread as a comedy. Therefore, he moves on to writing biography. The Provincial Lady meets several distinguished authors over the course of the novel, but feels most empowered when she declares her preference for the middlebrow novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The four women authors featured in this thesis refused to let the cultural conversation about what kinds of texts were better than others prevent them from writing novels meant to entertain as well as instruct. Stevenson, Gibbons, Mitford, and Delafield

expanded the reading imaginations of middle-class women by encouraging them to embrace and enjoy middlebrow texts.

Moreover, these four middlebrow novels reveal the divided nature of the feminist movement indicative of the period through the way they mix progressive and conventional ideals. Stevenson, Gibbons, and Mitford all include traditional comic endings by marrying off one or more characters. Delafield's *Provincial Lady* is already married, so her conventional comic ending takes the form of a fancy-dress party at Lady Box's estate. All four novels uphold traditional class and gender expectations with characteristic middlebrow conventionality. However, before coming to their conventional endings, Stevenson, Gibbons, Mitford, and Delafield infuse their female character with the more progressive ideal of personal agency. All four adhere to Catherine Clay's conclusion about middlebrow readers: "they may never have questioned traditional gender roles or envisioned themselves as feminist, but [they] were committed nonetheless to improving the position and status of women in society" (Clay ch. 6). Through Flora in *Cold Comfort Farm* and Barbara Buncle in *Miss Buncle's Book*, Gibbons and Stevenson show women taking charge and shaking up the lives of the people around them as a result of reading. For Mitford and Delafield, the power of reading is in the subtext of the act of novel writing. Mitford openly expresses the anxieties and doubts about the future she and other upper-class young women felt coming of age in the late 1920s, whereas Delafield explicitly and deliberately brings readers into the thoughts of a middle-class woman. Through the *Provincial Lady*, Delafield declares that the cares and concerns of an ordinary middle-class woman in the country are worthy enough to fill the pages of an entire novel. While other stories might engage the larger concerns of the world, Stevenson, Gibbons, Mitford, and Delafield elevate the daily

and ordinary struggles of middle- or upper-middle-class women in ways that advocate for voice and agency for women, but within middle-class conventionality.

The gap Valentine Cunningham left in his tome addressing the literary scene of the 1930s can be filled with *Miss Buncl's Book* by D.E. Stevenson, *Cold Comfort Farm* by Stella Gibbons, *Christmas Pudding* by Nancy Mitford, and *Diary of a Provincial Lady* by E.M. Delafield. All four novels feature ordinary middle-class women acting with agency and voice because of the power of the written word. At times overlooked in favor of their Modernist sisters, middlebrow writers provide a record of the concerns of conventional women. Stevenson's, Gibbons', Mitford's, and Delafield's arguments for female power and agency within conventionality are embedded in the ways their novels celebrate reading—as a practical means for gaining confidence, making changes, expressing anxieties, and voicing the dignity of the ordinary everyday lives of middle-class women.

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